Learning to work together: The challenge of collaborative arrangements for strategic projects within HE in Scotland

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Abstract

Government policy for economic development across Scotland and the UK is driving an increasing number of strategic alliances in higher education to achieve economies of scale and economies of experience. Higher education institutions have been encouraged through strategic funding to further develop externally facing university-business engagement. Effective collaboration could theoretically produce the advantage of a better student experience and, at the same time, make the market for higher education more competitive. Collaborative structures are complex including the interaction between the people or agents who work within and between them. The challenge is how such collaboration can best be organised to deliver across organisation boundaries.

The purpose of the study was to explore and report on a causal story of collaborative practice by examining the insider perspectives of the people engaged in collaborative strategic projects in higher education. Collaboration is defined as a relationship which is mutually beneficial to organisations to achieve common aims, including the structure, roles and relationships within collaborations. The study considered one such strategic project, the Scottish HE Employability Forum,in particular, the lived experience of the members of its project management group and was informed by the evidence based literature. The interpretivist qualitative approach to the study, with semi-structured interviews, represented one specific time interval of the participant voice considering the set-up, implementation and evaluation of the strategic project.

The data analysis and findings confirmed a priori themes, for example, the need for trust building, effective leadership and strategic planning. A principle emergent theme was that the notions of agency and reciprocity were not mutually exclusive and impacted on the causal mechanisms and explanation of observed behaviours and relationships of the participant members.

A conceptual framework from the current study is presented suggesting themes of collaborative activity being comprised of a broader pattern requiring relational behaviour, expert and champion roles for successful collaboration. A series of recommendations is given for collaborative practice; for project management, effectiveness and sustainability along with key messages of knowledge transfer and learning.

List of Abbreviations

AGCAS	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service
DBA	Doctorate in Business Administration
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEP	Higher Education Partner
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
LTW	Learning to Work (including phases 1 & 2[1])
NUS	National Union of Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland)
SCQF	Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework
SIE	Scottish Institute for Enterprise
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SHEEF	Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum
SHEEN	Scottish Higher Education Employability Network and Employability Coordinators' Network
US	Universities Scotland

Note on references:

Harvard referencing is used throughout the thesis for citation purposes. In addition, footnotes are included where specific agencies, policy or initiatives are mentioned to provide further context for the reader.

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[1] LTW2 included student placement projects (e-Placement Scotland, Making the Most of Masters, Third Sector Internships, Enterprise in Education)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to identify, explore and evaluate the context in which higher education institutions (HEIs) operate and examine the key issues that underpin and influence core business activity. The chapter begins with setting the scene for the research activity by exploring the context of HEIs and the drivers which influence the strategic environment. The study of the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) is then introduced and the concept of collaborative practice and, in particular, where such practice is taking place.

This chapter sets the scene for the study and considers the shape and scope of higher education in Scotland. Higher education (HE) in the UK is an optional tertiary stage of education following on from a core secondary school curriculum. It can be delivered through a variety of means, such as colleges, universities and independent agencies. However, the term higher education institutions (HEIs) tends to refer to HE delivered in universities or colleges.

HE provision in Scotland comprises 19 universities and 25 colleges [2] offering HE provision. Scotland's Colleges, offer a range of programmes at Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 7-12, including Higher National Qualifications and professional development programmes. All are funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Funding Council (SFC),

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[2] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/funding.aspx,
Scotland's Rural College and the University of the Highlands and Islands are tertiary institutions

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which is responsible for distributing funding to individual institutions for teaching and learning activity, research and associated activities. In addition, the SFC also provides funding to support discrete strategic initiatives including the Scottish HE Employability Forum (SHEEF).

Those institutions (HEIs) function in an increasingly complex operating environment, in part due to the number of stakeholders involved in the actual design and delivery of the curriculum to reflect government policy.

There has been increasing importance placed on graduate employability over the past 10 years, reflecting government policy, and a drive to achieve institutional targets around developing the graduate role in the workplace and hence contribution to the national economy.

The operating climate, post the 2008 economic recession, of continued reduction in core funding for HEIs has necessitated innovation and partnership working to achieve both economies of scale and economies of experience. The challenge is how such collaboration is organised to deliver across the individual boundaries of the HEIs in Scotland. This study aims to consider the structure of one such collaboration.

Whereas the setting and arrangements for strategic projects is one structural response to policies of employer engagement, it does not necessarily make explicit the concomitant roles of people and relationships in business-university collaboration.

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This thesis considers one such case of a strategic project – the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) - which was established to support the delivery of the Scottish Government's employability strategy (2010-2014), Learning to Work 2.

1.1 Background

Scottish universities are significant contributors to the economy, directly employing 41,995 full-time equivalent staff in 2013/14 and generating a total income of £3.2 billion (HESA, 2015a). In 2013/14, there were 230,805 students in Scotland's HEIs: 36,385 students achieved first level degrees, up 3% on 2012/2013: and 24,150 at postgraduate taught level, up 7% on the previous year (HESA, 2015b).

Alongside the growth in graduate numbers there is the concomitant requirement for graduates to demonstrate a range of skills, competencies and attributes, demonstrating an appropriate level of work-readiness for graduate level work. This demand for graduate level competencies was the underpinning driver for the SFC funded Learning to Work strategic project. The remainder of this chapter provides further context to this work and explains the interest in researching the strategic partnership of the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF).

1.2 The Researcher

I have worked in job roles that engage with the skills agenda for many years, most recently leading strategic projects based in the education sector (higher education in Scotland's colleges and universities). Denzin and Lincoln (2000)

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are of the opinion that it is important to define and distinguish the epistemological issue (the relationship between the enquirer and the knowledge) from the methodological process by which new knowledge is acquired.

The selection of the topic reflects my axiology (experience, values, and previous experiences). This research project itself arose from a 'pracademic' role (Posner, 2009; Volpe and Chandler, 2001) viewing the co-ordination of a strategic project through an academic lens. As a practitioner, I have the perspective of an insider within the study, co-ordinating the Scottish Government's Learning to Work (LTW2) partnership strategic project - the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF).

Engagement with the SHEEF commenced when I was employed to co-ordinate activities in the final year of operation for the project. In reality the tenure extended beyond this period and subsequently I took on several project roles delivering on graduate employability for higher education partnerships (HEPs) across the UK, with an interest in understanding the complexity of this work. This is the background to my undertaking the research topic, and aims to bring together several strands in the business environment that impacts on curriculum development and student attainment of graduate employment.

The structured design of the DBA programme provided a 'space' for reflective practice (Kolb, 2014) and this active review (Silberman, 1996) process over a number of years provided a structured approach to developing a personal

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epistemological stance which aligned with an interest in the environment and context in which the learning (about collaborative working) is facilitated.

Learning takes place within organisational structures and these structures are populated by complex social dynamics that influence learning and performance outcomes. A critical realist perspective suggests that there may be full understanding of the relationships between the individual (agents) and the organisations (structures) (Bray, 2000). In this study a critical interpretivist lens is used to focus on collaborative practice and the nature of managing aims within a collaborative piece of work and the complexity in the structure of collaboration. Personal axiology supports a critical interpretivist approach to manage research with multiple stakeholders and agents within a social structure and provides clarity to the research design elements of the case.

1.3 Socio-political and economic drivers impacting on the shape and scope of HEI activity.

There are a number of drivers which influence the shape and scope of HEI activity within Scotland. The predominant external drivers are the political, economic and educational factors that are shaping the learning HEI environment within the UK. There have been a number of key reports with regard to graduate employability commissioned by the Scottish and UK government that shape the educational provision offered.

The Leitch Report (2006) focused on the skills profile within Britain. It identified a skills gap for business to remain competitive and a need for higher order

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skills to be addressed both in the workplace but also through the graduate attributes of entrants into the workplace.

HEIs have been encouraged through strategic project funding to further develop externally facing university-business engagement. This was considered through differing business strategies, however with limited success (Lambert, 2003; Leitch, 2006; Wilson, 2012). In line with the UK economic recession (2008 onwards) and slow economic upturn, universities have been faced with stringent budget cuts with resulting internal structural re-organisation. In the external job market, with fewer graduate level positions available and a service level economy, competition for graduate employment is stronger than ever (Wolf, 2002, 2011).

Higher education now faces multiple challenges as a result of budget cuts, a service led economy, the demand for qualified and skilled graduates and recent Scottish Government policy of consolidation within the sector. Given these constraints, HEIs seek engagement with business that will develop graduate employability and economic growth (Tomlinson, 2007, 2008).

The Scottish Government Economic Strategy 2007-11 (GES) states that: *'Scotland's strong performance on skills and qualifications does not feed through effectively enough to productivity. It is essential that we empower our current and future workforce to use their skills creatively and innovatively in our economy. This can be achieved by focusing on a range of higher level core skills such as enterprise and controlled risk taking, collaborative skills, conceptual and creative thinking skills and research skills. This can make a decisive difference in driving productivity growth and transforming how our businesses operate. This is a key challenge to our schools, colleges, universities and employers' (Scottish Government, 2007:14).* This message is reinforced through the skills agenda.

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The key report, Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth (Nov 2010:10) reports that 'learning, skills and well-being are strategic priorities in the Government Economic Strategy. Skilled leaders, managers and employees create value in the workplace, stimulating the improved profitability and growth of firms and generating higher wages for workers'. It continues, 'even within this period of fiscal austerity the education and skills base in Scotland will continue to provide a platform for new employment opportunities, helping Scotland to generate high value-added jobs and pulling us ahead of competitors' (ibid p13).

The work place learning proposition is consistent with external priorities, as a response to developing new income streams for HEIs, while meeting the needs of the 'skills agenda' and providing a means to build capacity and capability through workforce development.

Throughout the past 5-10 years, universities have been pro-active in realigning themselves with the recovering economy: developing and marketing curriculum development and targeted embedding of employability into the curriculum ie the development and delivery of skills necessary for graduates to attain specific industry related jobs, particularly through student work placements. The desired effect was to create more scope for Government funding and theoretically produce better results for the students and institution as a whole making the market place even more competitive (Boud and Solomon, 2001).

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1.3.1 Enhancement through university-business engagement

Scotland's HEIs are well positioned to respond to the needs of the changing global market, and can demonstrate experience and knowledge to meet demand led commercial development. However, to demonstrate real impact and scalability for commercial activity, elements of activity must be seamless across the university, underpinned by clear lines of communication.

The Scottish Government Paper (2011:4) *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for post-16 Education* outlines proposals to better link the learning systems between schools, colleges, universities, skills and training as 'an enormously powerful force in delivering the capability that employers and the economy needs'. From a HE perspective it builds on the earlier *Building a Smarter Future* (2010a) paper and considers routes which bring learning closer to economic markets.

The Scottish Government aims to enhance the quality of employer engagement in particular with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Universities continue to be key in research, knowledge transfer and innovation to support economic development with a proposed re-structure of funding and support mechanisms. The Scottish Government Economic Strategy (2011:39) proposes that innovation in the type of CPD provision, scalability of activity and delivery mechanisms is essential so that 'Scotland's Universities will continue to provide higher level skills training through degree programmes ….create an academic infrastructure which encourages scientific and

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technological inward investment; and stimulate innovation and growth through the creation of new knowledge and its application'.

In 2011, the report on the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Flexible Learning Summit identified collaborative and strategic alliances between HEIs and employers as enabling closer linkages between university and business. Both the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) report by Dr T Wilson, 'Review of Business-University Collaboration' (2012) and 'Following up the Wilson Review' (2012) emphasise the resulting benefits to student employability of such engagement.

The National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) was set up as result of the Wilson Review in 2012 to promote and support university-business collaboration. It has been working with universities, government and businesses to explore how work experience and student placements can close the gap between employer expectations and university experience. However, this remains a significant challenge given the scope and scale of the student market (Allford and Tibby, 2014).

How are HEIs to respond to the impact of the significant changes happening in the business environment in which they operate? As the government reviews suggest, working more closely together with colleges and further business engagement aligns well with the challenges of competitiveness arising from the multi-dimensions of the structure, people and politics of organisations. Key themes arising from these policy developments include the development of graduate skills levels to ensure effective graduate work-

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readiness and transitions into work. Additionally, graduate employability, enterprise education and entrepreneurship should be integral to the HE curriculum and recorded to show strategic fit with university strategic objectives and the student experience.

1.3.2 Graduate employability in a Scotland HE context

Government strategy across the UK is designed to support the development of employability skills in the undergraduate student curriculum and HEI key performance indicators (KPIs) have been introduced to reflect levels of graduate employment and further study. UK and Scotland Government policy has focused on the development of a sustainable workforce and this is reflected in core funding that higher education institutions receive to support curriculum development informed by work-based learning.

The specific focus of the study is around complex structures within the operating environment, that of strategic projects, and also the interaction between the people or agents who work within and between these environments. Collaborative partnerships in HE are not, in many instances, the preferred mechanism to achieve project outcomes due to the complexity of operational arrangements and inherent competition between organisations. However, it may be that successful project outcomes do indeed emerge as a result of the collaborative practice of relevant members of working together (Huxham,1996, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2004). This axiology means that identifying with a particular underpinning philosophical approach should also

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take cognisance of both the structure of the organisation and the working environment in which the activity takes place between individual agents.

1.3.3 The Scottish Funding Council: Learning to Work

In response to the UK economic recession, and the need to enhance education industry links for future economic recovery, there was significant reporting from employers relating to the perceived skills deficit of new graduates. How this recovery was to be achieved, and the rhetoric of learning in the workplace, work-based learning, skills training, partnerships and collaborative working (Lambert, 2003; Leitch, 2006; Wilson, 2012; Witty, 2013, Young, 2014; Wood, 2014) underpinned the UK government education strategy. In Scotland, the response was the Learning to Work (LTW) initiative 2004-2013. Learning to Work (SFC, 2004) was the SFC's employability strategy for supporting college and universities build capacity and good practice to enhance student transitioning from education into employment and further study.

The programme of work carried out between 2007-08 and 2010-11, included: £4 million to develop and embed employability in learning and teaching provision in the university sector; the creation of the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network (SHEEN); support for the Aiming University Learning @ Work (AuL@W) project and continued support of the Scottish Institute for Enterprise (SIE). The focus of the SFC's employability strategy on behalf of the Scottish government was to support Scotland's colleges and universities to work to continue building on good practice in order to enhance student

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employability and employment. Learning to Work (LTW) ran in 2 phases, Learning to Work (2004-2009) and LTW2 (2010-2014).

1.3.4 Learning to Work 2 (2010-14)

Learning to Work 2 (LTW2) was a continuation of activity on the part of Scottish HEIs in pursuit of developing graduate employability. A key objective of the SFC Corporate plan 2009-12 was to enhance the relevance of skills and the employability of graduates wishing to enter the workforce.

The SFC refreshed its employability strategy to take account of an increased emphasis on employability and skills in Scottish Government priorities and the introduction of the New Horizons Fund[3] (for research and innovation) for universities. Following consultation with the sector and major stakeholders the continuation initiative, Learning to Work 2 – developing the Council's employability strategy: consultation outcomes, action plan and invitation to develop proposals was launched[4].

The strategy consisted of work in the following key areas:

1. 4 student work placement projects (e-Placement Scotland, Making the Most of Masters, Third Sector Internships, Enterprise into Education);

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[3] Scottish Government (2013), Horizon 2020 SME Engagement Scheme, Accessed at:
http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Business-Industry/support/Horizon2020

[4]
http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100411230708/http://www.sfc.ac.uk/news_eve
nts_circulars/Circulars/2009/SFC4109.aspx

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2. Development of employability support: £200,000 over 4 years to support the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF):

3. Foster and support institutional collaboration to develop and share good practice across the sector; and

4. Promote effective dialogue at a strategic level with student and employer bodies.

1.3.5 The Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF)

The Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) was developed to promote, support and enhance the strategic development and integration of employability policy and practices across the Scottish HE sector.

SHEEF was managed through a strategic partnership between the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), QAA Scotland (QAA), Universities Scotland (US), LTW2 student placement programmes, Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and NUS Scotland and funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) through the *Learning to Work* 2 strategic funding programme.

SHEEF's work was to build upon and extend employability knowledge and practices developed through the SFC *Learning to Work* funded initiatives and practices undertaken through the previous Scottish Higher Education Employability Network and Employability Coordinators' Network (SHEEN) to enhance employability and enterprise in Scottish further and higher education. SHEEN promoted a variety of work placements and work-related learning

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opportunities; awareness-raising events for students and academic staff; enhanced careers guidance; staff development; employability toolkits and e-learning materials; student awards and commissioned research. SHEEF continued to draw upon, and contribute to, national work undertaken by the HEA to develop and promote Employability and Enterprise in HE, and the QAA Scotland's enhancement theme *Graduates for the 21st Century* (2011)[5]. The SHEEF project formally completed in February 2014, and was part of the SFC evaluation of the learning to work initiative. The details pertaining to the membership of the Scottish (HE) Employability Forum management group are provided in Appendix A.

1.4 Conclusion: working together

How are HEIs to respond to the impact of the significant changes happening in the business environment in which they operate? And most importantly respond to the needs of the learners wherever they are situated? As the government reviews suggest, working more closely together with colleges and further business engagement aligns well with the questions arising from the structure, people, and politics of the context of work-based learning.

At this point it is anticipated that collaborative working will provide deeper understanding to meeting learner needs through pragmatic epistemologies.

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[5] QAA Scotland, Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes (2011), Accessed at: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/publications/graduates-for-the-21st-century-institutional-activities.PDF

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1.4.1 Structure of the thesis

The literature review in chapter 2 provides a context for the research and is supported by pre-existing publications. The research question for the study is derived from this literature review.

Chapter 3 is concerned with methodology and presents the research design, and underpinning philosophy. This chapter presents a rationale for the research design, axiology, approach to the data collection and the analytical process.

The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4, with the participant voice signposting to development of the major research themes. The findings are presented through the lens of the themes highlighted from the literature review and the emergent themes from the analysis study itself.

Chapter 5 goes on to discuss the findings of the study in the context of the research question and the literature review and considers points of commonality and identifies issues that have emerged from the research, and a conceptual framework from the findings of the current study is proposed.

Chapter 6 considers the contribution of this thesis to practice and recommendations are made for consideration, including further research.

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Chapter 2: The Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter is an exploration of effective collaboration in higher education in the Scottish context and is informed by consideration of both evidence-based literature and the grey literature around the implementation of government policy. The first section considers the drivers impacting on collaborative working, the political context and the nature of policy directives from the Scottish Government. There are questions that arise from the grey literature, for example, with an increasingly political context within higher education, what is meant by 'employability', and how can that be achieved? (Yorke, 2006). The importance of graduate employability within the role of HE context is also considered and discussed.

Following on, the challenge of how should business and curricular activity be organised to deliver graduate employability is addressed. In addition, collaboration as the means by which to deliver the agenda of more-for-less is reviewed to consider what we already know about collaborative practice to satisfy individual and organisational objectives.

An exploration of the efficiency of embedding graduate employability through work-based learning and work-related learning at national level informed the selection of topics in the literature review. Firstly, the political context to the implementation of government led employability policy from a UK and Scottish perspective is considered. Then the development of the role of HE from a UK

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and Scottish perspective is explored and, finally, collaborative practice as a means of implementing policy in HE is reviewed.

The chapter is divided into 3 principal sections loosely structured to consider the main a priori themes related to the setting up and implementation of strategic projects within higher education.

Section 1: The role of higher education, its purpose and as a mechanism to deliver government policy is explored. Consideration is given to higher education within the Scottish Context, employability strategy in relation to the Scottish Government and Scotland's history of delivering learning in the workplace.

Section 2 is a consideration of the mechanism/structures required to deliver on Scotland's employability policy through HE, exploring the purpose and goals of alliances. There then follows a consideration of the relationships between social actors within strategic projects and the role of aims and objectives in collaborations.

Finally, in Section 3 the implementation of strategic projects is considered by defining collaborative practice and the consideration of trust and the role of leading strategic projects

The search method for this review was desk-based including, for example the use of Scopus and the British Educational Index (both online bibliographic electronic databases containing abstracts and citations for peer-reviewed academic journals), Google Scholar and organisational customised websites.

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Key search terms included *collaboration, collaborative practice, role of HE,*

employability, graduate attributes, work-based learning, trust, leadership. Grey

literature was used to provide the most recent policy data, research and policy.

2.1 Work-based and work-related learning within tertiary education

Work-based and work-related learning within tertiary education have been

found to support graduates transition into the workplace (Raelin, 2008). From

the academic academy perspective, work-related learning, work-based

learning and lifelong learning were often associated with differing mission and

strategic objectives from mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate

curricula (Heaton et al, 2008).

The prominence of the widening access and participation agenda within higher

education started to re-focus learning in the workplace initiatives to meet the

employability needs of graduates. Work-based projects and student

placements did not provide the level of graduate skills imagined by

government policy (Raelin, 2008). The policies for embedding employability

within the tertiary curriculum also required academic engagement with

employers, students and other stakeholders (Wilson, 2011, 2012).

However, with the development of the issues of 'graduateness' (Hounsell,

2011), the identification of graduate attributes (Nicol, 2010) and transferable

skills for job-readiness (Leitch, 2006), there was a mainstreaming of what had

previously been categorised as belonging to a vocational curriculum. This

mainstreaming was found to have enhanced the student experience (Watts,

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2006; Ramsden, 2008), extending the traditional undergraduate curriculum, and encouraging entrepreneurial traits and enterprise through the core curriculum. And more recently, there has been a move from the undergraduate enhancement to include post-graduate programmes also (Bamber, 2015; QAA, 2013).

2.2 Section 1 : The role of higher education as a mechanism to deliver on government policy

This section considers the context of higher education within the UK and then more specifically within the context of a devolved Scotland. Firstly, the political operating environment of higher education is reviewed and the role of higher education to deliver economic growth through the development of graduate capability. Following this, the context of higher education in Scotland is introduced with a focus on historical elements of learning in the workplace. Finally, graduate employability is considered through the SFC employability strategy, how this has been implemented in Scotland's HEIs and specifically consideration of 'Learning to Work' as a means to embed employability graduate attributes within the graduate curriculum.

2.2.1 A political driver

The UK government policy and economic drivers presupposes the proportional growth of graduates from higher education, and their access to the labour market. This growth in the UK knowledge economy would be fuelled by the growth in the number of students at graduate level and obtaining 'graduate level' jobs post-university and the concomitant higher levels of income. While it is supposed that higher qualifications lead to an increased

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level of graduate employability, the effect may be offset by the greater competition for graduate level jobs from the higher numbers of graduates (Tomlinson, 2008). In addition the mass development of the higher education offer (Baker, 2009) to grow the numbers of individuals accessing higher education also increases demand for graduate level employment.

In the early 2000s, institutions were pro-active in realigning themselves with the recovering economy, developing and marketing niche degree opportunities with specific industry-related jobs, particularly through placement and work-based learning. The effect of this created more scope for Government funding and theoretically could produce better results for the students, and institution as a whole, making the graduate employment market place even more competitive (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Phelan et al, 2004).

There has been extensive discourse about globalisation, the creation of societies based on education and knowledge generated (Trow, 2000). With the resultant increase in competition within labour markets and underpinning higher education policy, governments focused on education and training to augment the highly skilled workforce labour market and drive the economy (Brennan and Tang, 2008; Little, 2010; Marginson, 2004).

Post 2000, HEIs operated to a diverse set of missions and size. Following the opportunity proffered through mass education in the UK, and globally, the structure and role of universities shifted to try to accommodate the range of activity and needs of a wider range of students. The role of higher education has extended within the knowledge based economies where governments

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identify higher education as a means to deliver on government policy (BIS, 2012; Barnett, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2011, 2013). In the UK this may include research and innovation, entrepreneurial and enterprise activity, in addition to scholarly work. Higher education is seen to include the development and contribution of social and human capital (Bordieu, 1986; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Morrison et al, 2004) and hence to the economy of the UK and globally (Marginson, 2010a, 2010b). The development of the knowledge economy therefore requires a social environment whereby there are 'flexible professionals' (Brennan and Tang, 2008).

Traditionally, universities in the UK have not focused on vocational education but research and more recently professional education, towards some aspects of training students for the workplace but maintaining an indirect fit with the graduate skills needs of the labour market (Wolf, 2002, 2011). In order to respond to the human capital needs of society for 'flexible professionals', UK HE is increasingly called on to understand the nature of the relationship that it has with the labour market.

The increasing fee levels in England and the cap on student numbers in Scotland have led to HEIs being in competition and needing to clearly articulate their offer. The drive for a knowledge economy has resulted in the traditional HE offer of research and scholarly activity being part of a wider mission. This marketisation of education to a knowledge based economy promotes activity supporting graduate employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education, resulting in a much broader mission for universities.

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2.2.2 The Scottish context

In 2013, Universities Scotland were able to state that: 'Scotland's higher education institutions (HEIs) make a direct and significant contribution to Scotland's sustainable economic growth …..HEIs in Scotland are working together to maximise their impact and achieve value for money for the Scottish Government, and their direct customers: students, tax payers and industry' (Universities Scotland, 2013:2).

Scotland's HEIs are well positioned to respond to the needs of the market, and can demonstrate experience and knowledge to meet demand led commercial development. However, to demonstrate real impact and scalability for external stakeholder engagement, elements of activity must be seamless across the university, underpinned by clear lines of communication. Processes tend to cross over departmental boundaries and need to be effectively managed at the boundaries.

Within a devolved Scottish economic and political landscape, Scotland's political and economic agenda differs from the rest of the UK (for example, the retention of fee-free tuition for home and European students at Scotland's universities). Scotland has seen political input at national level, for example issues around governance and the further development of work-related and work-based learning (Glass et al, 2008; Scottish Government, 2010a, 2010c). However, Scotland's funding mechanisms favours universities to understand the opportunities for collaborative working, across the HE sector and with other key economic sectors.

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The Scottish Government Paper (2011:6) *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for post-16 Education* outlines proposals to better link the learning systems between schools, colleges, universities, skills and training as 'an enormously powerful force in delivering the capability that employers and the economy needs'. From a HE perspective it builds on the earlier *Building a Smarter Future* (2010a) paper and considers routes which bring learning closer to economic markets. Proposals include concepts such as 'graduate apprenticeships' and the use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)[6] to develop widening access opportunities and a common language for the discussion of the value of learning.

The Scottish Government aims to enhance the quality of employer engagement in particular with SMEs (Scottish Government, 2013). Universities will continue to be key in research, knowledge transfer and innovation to support economic development with a proposed re-structure of funding and support mechanisms. The Scottish Government Economic Strategy (2013:39) proposes that innovation in the type of CPD provision, scalability of activity and delivery mechanisms is essential so that 'Scotland's Universities will continue to provide higher level skills training through degree programmes ….create an academic infrastructure which encourages scientific and technological inward investment; and stimulate innovation and growth through the creation of new knowledge and its application'.

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[6] http://scqf.org.uk/

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2.2.3 Employability, employer engagement and enterprise education in Scotland

Graduate employability has been a major focus of UK government and associated agencies for more than 10 years. It has increased in importance over this time, as part of the government's economic agenda for recovery from recession (post 2008), the associated government policy and its implementation within universities and HEIs. The manner in which the policy was to be implemented and embedded within the curriculum has evolved over time and is reflected in curriculum design and co-curricular activity of the present student experience. The scope of this literature review is to consider graduate employability within the context of work-based learning and addressing the skills agenda through collaboration, rather than to consider the substantial amount of data generated around the broader graduate employability theme. This is because The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has funded and acts as a repository for many resources and research papers relating to graduate employability. Much of this extensive body of work was undertaken by Yorke and Knight (2006), and it is their research that underpins much of the current thinking around graduate employability in HE in the UK.

2.2.4 Employability – towards a definition

In higher education there has been an incremental shift towards a focus on graduate employability. As more education professionals, individuals, groups, agencies, policy groups and media engage with learning in the workplace, the language around the term employability becomes more complex. In this thesis the terminology around employability in an academic context, and the

embedding of employability within the curriculum is drawn from the work of

Knight and Yorke (Knight and Yorke, 2002; Knight and Yorke, 2003; Knight

and Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; York and Knight, 2006). It is essential therefore

to consider one definition of employability and one which supports the model

of HE as a driver of the UK economy:

'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that
makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their
chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community
and the economy.' (Knight and Yorke, 2004:7)

The SFC truncates this definition for Learning to Work (2004:9) to 'A set of

achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes

graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen

occupations.'

Employability, employer engagement and enterprise education has been

championed in Scotland for more than 15 years through collaboration with

learning and teaching agencies such as Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and

the Higher Education Academy (HEA). During this time the Council for Industry

and HE (CIHE), later re-structured to form the National Centre for Universities

and Business (NCUB), and the HEA produced the 'student employability

profiles' (Foyle et al, 2006). They were published to provide a discipline-led

guide to specific skills required and developed across 50 cognate areas. In

2004, the Scottish Government launched its employability strategy in which

they stated:

'Learners are the main stakeholders in further and higher education and most
learners have employability as one of their objectives. So it follows that one of

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the primary objectives of colleges and HEIs must be to help learners enhance their employability, building on their previous experience, and to give learners opportunities to develop enterprising skills and attitudes.' (SFC Learning to Work LTW, 2004:4)

As the notions of what it means to be a graduate, graduateness, and graduate employability gained momentum, the QAA Scotland responded to the needs of the HE sector through 10 years of enhancement activities, 2004- 2014.

The SFC published the policy document *Learning to Work*, and in the same year the HE sector in Scotland agreed Employability as its (QAA) Enhancement Theme: Employability[7] 2004-06, stating that 'employability, academic values and good learning are all interconnected and entirely compatible with one another' (2006:5).

The main aims of the QAA Employability Enhancement Theme were to:

- raise the profile of employability, including its benefits to students, employers and academic staff;

- create a clearer understanding of what was meant by the term 'employability';

- encourage and provide assistance for the Scottish HE sector in developing institutional employability strategies;

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[7] QAA Scotland, Employability: an Overview of the work of the employability enhancement theme (2006), Accessed at:
http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/publications/employability-overview-of-the-work-of-the-employability-enhancement-theme.pdf?sfvrsn=18

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- aide the embedding of employability within the curriculum.

A second tranche of engagement, the QAA Enhancement Theme: Graduates for the 21st Century (2008-2011), was developed in the context of developing 'graduate attributes', including the previous Employability Theme. The enhancement theme addresses the notions of graduate attributes and how the achievement of these attributes could best be supported across the sector.

The third tranche, the QAA Enhancement Theme: Developing and Supporting the Curriculum[8] (2011-2014) then considered students transitioning from HE into work and what attributes and competencies graduates should have at this point: How is the curriculum, in its broadest sense, shaped and delivered? Secondly, how is the student body changing? And then finally, what support is required for staff to deliver the curriculum?

In 2009 the SFC refreshed its employability strategy to take account of an increased emphasis on employability and skills in Scottish Government priorities and the introduction of the New Horizons Fund for universities. Following extensive consultation and discussion with key stakeholders it published Learning to Work 2 – developing the SFC's employability strategy: consultation outcomes, action plan and invitation to develop proposals.

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[8] QAA Scotland, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Employability (2014), Accessed at: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/publications/developing-and-supporting-the-curriculum-summary-report.pdf?sfvrsn=10

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There was increasing discussion about the relationship between higher education, employability and work with substantial discourse around the role of HE in skills development, training and the preparation of graduates for the world of work (Huisman et al, 2012).

One measure of university education in the UK is that of student destinations into work. This is classed as a 'positive destination' and reporting on statistics is a requirement through the Higher Education Statistics Agency[9] (HESA). This Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) measurement itself is controversial as it emphasises student engagement for completion, providing graduate information on employment; work roles and income 6 months after graduation (Evans and Wilson, 2016).

The skills agenda within HE and preparing students for transitions into work is a complex one aimed at meeting employer needs for a skilled knowledgeable workforce, and one whereby the role of HE is to prepare individuals for the workplace and upskilling to support opportunities for lifelong learning.

Work and learning research is traditionally generally located within pedagogies considering research into learning and the learner. And that place where the learning occurs can be through distance learning methodologies or skills and competency development enhanced through normal activity in the work environment.

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[9] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/

One of the outputs from the QAA Scotland enhancement themes has been students as partners for co-production of the curriculum and also that of collaboration, and collaborative practice across the sector. In order that the policy around employability is to be effective, and fulfil the government's agenda for economic impact, it is argued that there should be a more proactive approach to management of graduate employability and less ad hoc emergent approaches (Green et al, 2009; Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Scheeres et al, 2010; Trim, 2003). Knight and Yorke (2003:9) contend that learning employability skills is a complex matter that requires whole system thinking. Support for employability should be embedded at programme, not study-unit, level. Importantly, they maintain that good teaching and good curriculum design should 'include engagement with the creation of learning environments that stimulate students to develop well-founded, evidence-based claims to employability'.

2.2.5 Employability, graduate skills and attributes

There is an argument put forward that work-based learning (WBL) contributes to the skills required of graduates to enhance employability (CBI, 2015). There is also the rhetoric around the notion that the lack of such generic skills can hinder and prevent graduates attaining positions when applying for employment and also demonstrating essential skills for work within first graduate jobs (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

The complex issues around terminology, meaning and language of employability remain and specific terms such as core skills, attributes,

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graduate skills, transferable skills, soft skills are all used almost interchangeably and, to these, in recent years, has been added employability skills (Cottrell, 2003) as a means of gaining and retaining work (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; McQuaid et al, 2005; Lindsay et al, 2007).

One of the challenges is to identify with whom this work around employability, skills and graduate competencies lies. There is a tendency for an internal organisational focus, with directed research involving HEI managers (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), career planning and employment professionals, academic staff (Pegg *et al*, 2012), students (Cottrell, 2003) and employers (Wilson, 2012). The texts discuss the essential need for multi-stakeholder engagement and collaborative practice but there remains a need to capture the student voice and their views on employability and skills development.

Discussion continues around employability skills being one element only of the rounded graduate; that graduateness comprises a range of skills, academic and soft credentials (Tomlinson, 2007). The researcher concluded that the degree is not enough, but that graduate attributes are needed to be embedded within the curriculum and this is achieved through structural (technical process) but 'employers are looking for evidence of initiative and motivation in what graduates have done aside from their degrees' (ibid p 58). It is this additionality that generates social and human capital leading to the achievement of economic policy implementation.

'What are these things that universities call generic graduate attributes? This is a more fundamental question than what combination of skills, attributes and knowledge should be included on the graduate 'shopping-list', it is about the

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nature of the things on the list, and the nature of the list itself' (Barrie, 2006:215).

<u>Section conclusion</u>:

It has been argued here that employability skills are highlighted as the panacea of *graduateness*, but are indeed only one element of graduate success and work-readiness. Another of the challenges of the employability area is that, similar to work-based and work-related learning, there is a school of thought which focusses on the underpinning character traits, in addition to the academic discipline skills and generic skills enhancing individual ability to manage and direct one's own career management, and individual self-management (Bridgstock, 2009). There is also the value of reflection on the skills and development within the context of a company's human resource and training strategy or an individual's personal development plan.

The separation of skills identification and recording, distinct from discipline-specific academic practice is an issue that could cause most challenge to 2020 and also risks 'clumping' attributes in certain areas. However, it could be argued that this view consolidates the political drive for closer links between HE and graduate level employment.

Such an approach supports the view of developing graduates as human capital, hence supporting the government policy on graduate employment and economic impact.

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2.3 Section 2 : A consideration of the mechanism/structures required to deliver on Scotland's employability policy through HE

This section reviews the organisational structures that are possible or preferential within HE for the delivery of policy, with a focus on employability policy. The benefits of alliances are considered as the stated preferred mechanism for SFC. The concepts relating to inter-relationships between actors within these structures are introduced and finally, trust within inter-relationships is explored as a factor for the successful delivery of agreed goals.

In order to prepare and organise for the implementation of policy change, HE institutions may undertake strategic structural changes. Saarinen and Ursin (2012:145) review structural approaches to implementation of policy. The discussion focuses on both the role of structures as a 'socially constructed entity in which similar patterns and relationships interact'. In such a structural approach people/ actors shape structures and these in turn determine/cause what people do. It is suggested that structural approaches are most common as it is a practical format and understandable for a range of audiences but yet, if self-sustaining, could be perceived as subscribing to the view of seeing HE as an 'entity shaped by nation-state policy goals' (ibid p153).

Both the strategic and practical goals of a structured approach may support a superficial descriptive means of generating new knowledge and support decision making within a pre-existing structure. In contrast a more explanatory approach could result in explaining and analysing the structure itself in the delivery of policy.

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Geerthuis et al (2002) postulate that learning does not and cannot take place in a social vacuum. There is a significant role for collaborative working in work-based-learning to achieve more (impact of output) with less (single source resource). This, as discussed, is a key and much repeated principal from the Scottish Government Skills for Scotland Strategy (2010). In this societal context, work-based learning is one means to deliver on the Government Skills Agenda (policy) for economic recovery (defined output) and to meet the higher level skills need of business workforce development and capacity building. The political economy and financial well-being shapes structures operating within the world through policy, laws (or tendencies) and strategy (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Hence, where HE providers, with similar hierarchical structures (Mintzberg, 1987), are challenged to deliver the same or similar outcomes around student success, economies of scale may be achieved through collaboration.

2.3.1 Strategic projects –delivery mechanisms

The SFC supported joint working and partnerships to implement Learning to Work policy and so when Learning to Work 2 was to be implemented, there was a preference for the student placement projects and the SHEEF to be structured as strategic partnerships. Cravens et al (2000) argues that the growth of alliances (joint ventures, strategic partnerships), reflecting the compelling logic of collaboration, has been inevitable with benefits to support the decisions for not always suitably matched partner organisations to work together towards common outcomes. This concurs with the resource-based approach of Das and Teng (2000:40) defining strategic alliances as 'voluntary

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co-operative inter-firm agreements aimed at achieving competitive advantage for the partners', a means of resource integration between firms that enable a common purpose to be achieved. How do we know that an alliance will deliver? Alliances rely on the confidence levels (Das and Teng, 1998:493) of the partners involved to deliver and work together as partner stakeholders have indicated that they would to achieve 'mutually compatible' interests. They define partner co-operation as 'the willingness of a partner firm to pursue mutually compatible interests in the alliance rather than act opportunistically'. Whether these opportunities are exploited is dependent on the level of trust and control within the alliance partnership and structure (Krishnan et al, 2006).

Higher education funding often supports the development of strategic alliances in order to obtain funding for projects. This presents an opportunity for differing HEIs to tender for work and deliver outcomes to best meet the need of the HE sector and the knowledge base of the HEI alliance partners (Freeman, 2000). These alliances can be formed by research cluster groups, geographical clusters, discipline groupings, or through personal inter-relationships on a national and international basis. What is seldom formally considered at the formation of the alliance is a level of mutual compatibility, and the management of risk within the preferred groupings. Where this is not deliberately managed there is potential for a growing lack of confidence in the alliance, an erosion in the trust between partners and overall control of the alliance outputs itself.

There are benefits to alliance structures to deliver on policy within an environment with limited resources: Inter-organisational relationships are

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sought to access and make best use of limited resources. Such alliances may benefit from shared knowledge to complement capabilities (Baum, 2000; Elmuti et al, 2005) where partners work together. This may happen quite successfully where there is no conflict in knowledge but where there is a potential for duplicate knowledge this may create rivalry among the actors within the alliance. Within the HE sector this could be between institutions and agencies perceived to have similar remits or overlap with duplicate roles relating to organisational goals.

A strategic intent, such as the delivery of the Scottish Government's employability strategy, may support the drive towards (structures for) partnership alliances, where participants may share skills and seek to bridge a skills gap or bring together limited resources. In this structure there is sharing of the risk associated with a new or substantially different venture or project (Cravens et al, 2000). When the notion of relationship risk is introduced it arises from the sharing of resources and skills, in the case of higher education, the resource is that of knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer.

A focus on resource can create an imbalance between partners dependent on the level of (knowledge) resource being contributed, with the resultant shift in the balance of the control of the resource itself and in turn the level of decision making. Das and Teng (1998:506) relate this level of control to levels of trust and within a framework identifying managerial, physical and technological types of resources. It is suggested that managerial resources should be evaluated, not in term of financial control systems only but by more qualitative

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measures, encouraging flows of information, and 'establishing process for performance evaluation due to difficulties in integration and co-ordination'.

Thoughts around strategic intent are developed (Hamel and Prahalad, 2005:153) alongside the challenge of working together and how it becomes personal to the actor, including training to provide employees with the skills required to work together effectively. It is also suggested that the organisation is given time to digest one challenge before launching another, and to establish clear milestones and set effective monitoring. This may well be levied at current initiatives in higher education where multi-initiatives are launched if not simultaneously, but on a two/three year project funding cycle (for example, QAA enhancement themes, SFC strategic Horizon funding), in line with annual funding cycles and annual monitoring and reporting. Educational managers may well suffer from 'initiative fatigue' and the potential to miss the importance of specific policy driven initiatives under the auspices of "let's wait and see if they are serious this time".

Hamel and Prahalad (2005) go on to discuss the notions of equality in levels of engagement from senior managers and argue that there is often an imbalance in the input to strategic challenges between workers and senior staff, colleagues being asked to commit to common goals without overt concomitant commitment from senior staff to support challenges. They propose a reciprocal responsibility – where there is shared gain and shared pain.

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Diamond (2006:279) questions the 'fitness of purpose' of partnerships as a pancea for meeting strategic challenges, suggesting that partnerships are most effective where there is an element of local responsiveness to address specific strategic issues. He continues to discuss how innovation through effective partnership working can indeed be a generative device and an effective method of knowledge transfer, learning and reflection. McQuaid (2000) also comments that partnerships can be seen to be an ambiguous concept, whilst definitions around partnership, collaboration and networks remain slippery (Glatter, 2003:18). For the purposes of this thesis the working definition for collaboration is used:

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well defined relationship entered into by two or more organisations to achieve common goals.

The relationship includes commitment to defining a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility and mutual authority and accountability for success.

(after Mattessich and Monsey, 1992:11)

The creation of strategic partnerships to support resourcing arrangements tend not to identify the specific structure of working together to achieve common goals. This can be add to the complexity of collaborative working alongside the need for organisational capacity to build interrelationships (Diamond, 2002).

2.3.2 Objectives, goals and aims

Research by Cravens (2000) proposes that ongoing evaluation and impact assessment is one means to secure the success of the partnership. It is suggested that the devising of strategic objectives fulfils a role to benchmark

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the collaboration and aide the evaluation of the success or otherwise of the project. This is in line with Hamel and Prahalad (2005:149), who acknowledge the potential for strategic drift, the modification of strategic objectives but with a caveat that objectives must be fit for the shared purpose and evaluated on an ongoing basis as there are 'dangers inherent in appraising and rewarding managers on the basis of outdated criteria'.

There are many reasons why objectives may not fit a shared purpose, resulting in an unsuccessful partnership; lack of fit in terms of culture, purpose, goals, structures, processes, strategic fit, power, and the actual desire to succeed in achieving partnership working. Although processes may be designed and structured for achieving strategic objectives and implemented with appropriate governance arrangements for project management, there remains the intangible nature of collaboration. Strategic projects delivered through partnerships require an element of reciprocity, whereby partner organisations and individuals work together for a shared purpose, to deliver jointly to a strategic project or otherwise. These strategic projects provide a context in which to build relationships between partners based on mutual respect, trust, understanding and problem solving capability.

Research findings by Eden and Huxham (2001) discuss strategic purpose (collectively working 'theory in use' views about objectives, goals, aims) in relation to partner organisations with individuals working together for a shared purpose. They see 3 levels of goal ownership, developing reciprocity and comprising:

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1. Organisations that make up the organisation

2. Individual group members

3. The group as a whole

The goals associated with collaborative purpose are achieved through the mix of the stated defined goals of an organisation, these may be linked to KPIs (for example the negotiated SFC Outcome Agreements for universities and colleges) and guide negotiations. Importantly, it is the knowledge that the individual group members bring to the negotiation of goals that may shape discussion and are often part of a hidden agenda. Such negotiation of goals brings together individual agendas based on personal values and attributes and ultimately also shapes the delivery of the strategic project. In addition, these relationships for negotiation may also result in emergent goals, not relating to formally stated purpose but recognisable and kept internal to the individual members of the group.

Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen have for many years researched the exploration of the practice of collaboration and the 'multidimensional' aspects of working to develop 'collaborative advantage'. This is reflected in an extensive body of work published over 20+ years (Huxham and Vangen, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2005) to consider a pragmatic practitioner approach to delivering on collaborative projects. This is drawn together in a text 'Managing to Collaborate' (2005), including a section Themes in Collaborative Practice with chapters including Managing Aims, Negotiating Purpose, Membership

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Structures and Dynamics, Coping with Trust, Using Power, and The Meaning of Leadership.

They conceptualised a 'categorisation of aims' (2005:94) around which the complexity of aims and objectives could be considered and the differing elements disaggregated. This 'summary of the aims categories' (Appendix B) provides a process by which the motivations for those individuals, groups, organisations and other stakeholders could be considered and evaluated with regard to contribution to competitive advantage. This supported previous work on the purpose of negotiation for collaborative working (Eden and Huxham, 2001; Huxham and Vangen, 2000c).

Huxham and Vangen's (2005:104) categorisation breaks down the multidimensional aspects of aims to include individual, organisational and collaborative aims that may be internal or external to the organisation. A multi-dimensional aims framework suggests that those involved in collaborative working represent aims belonging to themselves, 'individual' aims, 'organisational' aims and joint 'collaboration' aims. The layering of internal and external ownership of these aims creates a hierarchy and structure of aims and sub-aims (Eden and Ackerman, 2013) and therefore recognises the complexity of collaborative practice. These sub aims also represent explicit, genuine and collaboration aims expressed by the individual or through an organisation. Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe explicit, unstated and hidden aims that may be achieved through collaboration. Collaborations are socially constructed, the social actors bring opinions, views and perceptions

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based on individual experience from within, as a member, or outwith the collaboration. The collaboration is seen as socially constructed with each organisation or individual bringing their own set of aims.

In order to have a greater understanding of the motivations around collaborative projects and alliances, the Huxham and Vangen (2005) aims framework is a tool to consider the process and increase awareness of the aims of individuals and organisations. It is not possible to fully understand the motivations and actions of social actors but it may be possible to 'disentangle' elements to gain insight into the collaborative practice.

2.3.3 Confidence and trust in collaborative practice

This section considers individual interests, mutual interests and notions of trust when groups come together. In this review it is argued that some form of alliance is one way to ensure effective delivery of shared goals and objectives. The theory of working together, of partnerships, alliances (Chung et al, 2000), of networks (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005), of collaborative practice (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) suggests that the members whether individual representatives or groups need to work together *effectively.* These inter-organisational relationships tend to be extremely difficult to manage, and performance sub-optimal or failing (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

Strategic alliances create an arena whereby there is often a lack of confidence in partners due to opportunistic behaviours that do not support effective collaborative practice (Das and Teng, 1998). Trust and control are not synergistic but arise from differing sources impacting greatly on confidence

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building within alliances. Control is described as arising from a structural approach and relates to the outputs of a project. Where those control mechanisms are in place from the onset of the alliance, there is a greater opportunity that outputs can be measured leading to an enhanced confidence in their attainment.

An alternative is also suggested by Das and Teng (1998) who present a model with trust and control elements. To develop trust the following elements are required: risk taking, equity preservation, communication and interfirm adaptation. The control elements include techniques for: goal setting, structural specifications and organisation culture blending. Working together across organisational boundaries has been found to result in a number of issues for participants and project managers alike.

In order that a strategic project reaches the start-up stage, there requires to be some control element of trust between representatives otherwise the project would not get off the ground. Trust itself is not the only necessary precondition to a successful alliance though, there are multiple behaviours and attitudes that if not displayed will set an alliance off course to drift. Similarly, an element of control through the alliance structure is required (Das and Teng, 1998; Vangen and Huxham, 2003b). Das and Teng (1998:499) express it as 'when partners trust each other they are in a better position to appreciate the benefits of contractual flexibility, which includes faster response and more efficient environmental and interfirm adaptation'.

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Reed (2001:221) argued from a realist perspective, where the separation of agents and structure place trust/power relations within the structural complexity of universities (as hierarchical organisations). He pointed to 'similar structural change evident in higher education organisation where the re combination of trust/power relations… associated with the practices of new managerialism'…have generated a restructure of trust/control systems in favour of 'managerial control systems', leaving HE organisations to intrusion and over-surveillance mechanisms.

Vangen and Huxham (2003a) considered the management of trust in inter-organisational collaboration, and put forward a theory that the presence of trust is not essential for successful collaboration. This may appear counter-intuitive to those who suggest that trust is essential, that trust must be given opportunity to grow slowly over time and with a concomitant decrease in levels of risk. Trust within collaborations is also viewed as a social construct and emergent, for example in working within a collaboration, *I trust you* and *you trust me* and this grows in a cyclical way as the collaboration progresses (Das and Teng, 1998), giving voice to the notion of reciprocity within collaborations. Somehow, trust, reciprocity and risk are connected, in addition to power and control structures. This adds to the complexity of management of collaborative practice.

The literature around trust is substantial but does not provide one clear narrative for the many situations whereby time is limited and solutions focused on small gains strategy. Within a collaboration, where the small gains relate to

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solutions, success is often therefore measured against the collaborative goals and objectives. Where there has been limited time to build up trust also, then it may be possible that the goals set then reflect the overall performance measure of the collaboration itself.

Seijts and Latham (2005) argued that such performance or outcome goals can produce an adverse effect on performance. Considering goal setting they propose that where collaborative situations exist in a learning situation, primarily with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, that a learning goal rather than an outcome goal or objective would be preferred. However, this focuses on process itself in working towards a (collaborative) goal rather than final output.

Section conclusion:

Organising to deliver policy within HEIs is complex and needs to take account of the challenges within business organisations. It is multi-dimensional and a perspective on the delivery mechanism and multiple layers of organisational structure has the potential to reveal both powers and structures and observed individual goals. To this end the purpose of the collaboration, the learning aims and project objectives must be clearly defined, if that is possible. Alliances are considered as one mechanism to achieve complex goals. The following section explores implementation and the opportunities for collaborative practice.

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2.4 Section 3: The implementation of strategic projects through collaborative practice

This third section focuses on a review of matters relating to the implementation of strategic projects. In particular, the practical issues of how actors work together to deliver agreed goals and objectives. This is explored through a consideration of the Scottish drive for economic growth through universities. Following on, is the consideration of the role of leadership within strategic alliances.

Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) describe a four-stage partnership life cycle model. Each of the differing stages overlap each other in development

- pre-partnership collaboration; based on informality, trust and a common sense of purpose

- partnership creation; based upon structures supporting status, authority and formalisation of procedures

- partnership programme delivery; based on markets, with low levels of co-operation between actors

- partnership termination or succession characterised by a network governance model to maintain agency commitment, resourcing and community engagement

At each stage a differing approach to governance and relationship with stakeholders was observed. 'The key challenge for partnerships lies in managing the interaction of different modes of governance, which at some

points will generate competition and at other points, collaboration' (Lowndes and Skelcher (1998:313).

In this review the collaborative practice is located as embedded in the practice of the Learning to Work employability projects. Collaboration is seen as central to the objectives of the project, but observed within organisations where the goals and objectives are to deliver graduate employability through a mix of academic research, student placements, work-related and work-based activity. Although the focus on partnerships, stakeholders and collaboration is reported in the media and sits well with the language of policy and business, joint working has taken place as part of the core university role (Diamond and Rush, 2011).

Collaboration and partnership working has been at the heart of education through the concepts of knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer. Garrick et al (2004:330) links this to how institutions prepare people for their working lives in relation to how knowledge is produced and legitimised 'from the perspective of many employers, the ultimate value to the organisation of an employee is their ability to apply their knowledge'.

In Scotland, there has been a major focus on delivering outputs through ring-fenced strategic partnerships to achieve economies of scale and value for money in public programmes. Within the HE sector, funded projects are often designed such that groups of institutions, business and agencies form partnerships to secure funding for development work. Alongside such partnerships is a governance structure (a programme board) to manage such

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funded projects within complex and often bureaucratic hierarchies. Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) researched the complexity of such organisations and used networking terminology to describe the complexity of these stakeholder relationships. The notions of 'mutual benefit, trust and reciprocity' between actors are not automatic in the social environments, but do belong to the theories of networks, whereas partnerships per se were perceived to deal also with markets and hierarchies. (Huxham, 1996; Huxham and Vangen, 2005) proposes that such collaborative advantage comes from the intangibles of working together to generate opportunities in a collaborative manner sharing knowledge, resources and risk.

Universities have been working with employers to develop organisational and workforce capacity; in part to increase commercial opportunity for the university but also the academic possibility of the generative activity of the creation of knowledge. Hence the Knowledge Centre, the development of SFC funded Articulation Hubs (2008-2016) to address issues around student widening access and participation[10] and most recently in schools through the national policy Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) - Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy (Scottish Government, 2014).

These strategies are designed to be successfully delivered through stakeholder engagement with funded projects designed to bring together agencies and organisations to work across primary, secondary, tertiary and higher education (curriculum for excellence, DYW, Learning to Work). Higher

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[10] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/Priorities/Access/Articulation/Articulation.aspx

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education institutions have been engaged in these and other collaborative partnerships working with Scotland's colleges, other HEIs, local councils, employers, agencies (for example QAA, SCQF Partnership), Technology Innovation Centres, third sector organisations, charities, geographical communities (targeted though Scottish Enterprise). Increasingly, this is the preferred mechanism to deliver on institutional and workforce development in Scotland.

There has been a number of examples of the drive for collaborative working in HE in Scotland to deliver of work-based initiatives but even 20 years ago in 1996, "the particular focus and balance of these relationships in Scotland is significantly different from elsewhere" (Abramson,1996: 87).

This view sits with Barnett's (2000, 2003) role of the university as being part of the knowledge society and there no longer being room for education institutions to adopt the role of an ivory tower, as such apart from the culture and values of the external workplace.

The Scottish government's employability strategy in Scotland encourages and supports collaborative partnerships between partners in schools, colleges and universities, across multi-sectors and multiple agencies. It encourages stakeholders to work together to seek solutions to shared challenges and deliver value across economic sectors, and has been a feature of major strategy for 10+ years.

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2.4.1 Collaboration as a mechanism for delivering organisational objectives

As a mechanism for delivering organisational objectives within increasingly complex regulatory operating environments, collaboration and partnership working has become increasingly more frequent. Collaboration and partnership working is increasingly being perceived to be the panacea for responding with solutions to high levels of complexity, low levels of direct resourcing, identifying and working towards common goals (Austin, 2004). Within higher education, multiple ongoing projects are using collaboration as a mechanism to achieve goals within the institution and inter-institution.

Research by Huxham and Hibbert (2008) explored the 'attitudes of partners in collaboration' to learn from the collaboration in contrast to a focus on the process of the learning or its outcome/goals only. They argued that a focus on knowledge exchange between partners is a route to collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996, 2000) in addition to achieving outcomes.

Attitudes to learning through collaboration - "selfish", "shared" and "sidelined" - are identified. For practitioners, it is suggested that these observed attitudes impact on collaborative project outcomes whether learning per se and knowledge exchange is an identified key objective or not.

This offers a leaning towards a transaction cost rationale/ relationship in contrast to a resource-based rationale whereby 'collaborations are a useful vehicle for enhancing knowledge in critical areas of functioning where the requisite level of knowledge is lacking and cannot be developed within an

acceptable timescale or cost' (Madhok, 1997:43). Here the resource may be kept within one partner organisation and not shared as a means to retain capability within one organisation only for future gain rather that realise benefits of that capability in the present collaborative relationship (Das and Teng, 2000).

Inkpen and Beamish (1997) observe that alliances are often used as a 'cover' to obtain knowledge-based resources, for example intellectual property. Within the context of higher education, with knowledge as one output, this use of alliances is therefore a high risk activity because of the potential for exchange of competitive information and ought to be managed carefully within any project context. Although knowledge may be created or enhanced within a collaborative partnership, the associated risk is an inequitable sharing of knowledge-based resources or a deliberate holding of knowledge (in a resource model) for future gain.

An earlier construction of meta-strategy considered the balance and opportunity cost of working as an individual organisation versus the supposed benefits of working collaboratively (Huxham and McDonald, 1992). This included the potential of loss of control, loss of flexibility, loss of glory, and associated direct resource cost of the collaboration itself whether it achieve commons goals or not. Huxham and McDonald concluded that there should be conscious and continuous evaluation of the nature and benefits of the collaboration. Their work on collaborative advantage at this time focused on meta-strategy and not projects or programmes of work. Over the past two

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decades the shift has been at micro-level, collaborative projects and increasingly the influence of government and politics and intra-organisational collaboration to deliver on external drivers and regulatory frameworks.

Where is this knowledge used in the workplace? From the perspective of the role of higher education in the 'knowledge society' to boost economic development, the value of collaboration is to apply knowledge in the workplace. Inkpen and Tsang (2005) suggest the need to consider how social capital is developed in differing contexts and the concomitant effect on knowledge transfer on differing networks (collaborative situations). Specific to the HE situation is the role to enhance the employability of graduates transitioning into work themselves. The role of the partnership in the creation of knowledge (Garrick et al, 2004) through building relationships is deemed to be of greater significance than the delivery of the project alone.

2.5 Research question, aims and objectives

The primary goal of this study is to investigate the gap in current research on collaborative projects, and present qualitative findings related to both strategic and operational level activity of one such project impacting on graduate employability. Moore (2007) suggests that the expanding partnerships and synergy between practice and academia is evolving, but needs organisational support. This gap is all the more relevant as government initiatives are driving 'more for less' approaches to achieve sustainable change within HE.

The research is situated in several interdisciplinary areas and draws from many areas including education, policy, strategy and management and

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leadership studies. This study first addresses the political context and the policy that shapes the context in which the research has been undertaken, the behaviours and dynamics of the participants in the shaping of the case study.

The **research question** emerges from the literature and policy drivers:

Within the context of Scottish HE, what are the success factors for collaborative working within strategic projects?

Following on from the research question, the **aim of the research** is :

to undertake an exploratory study into the strategic partnership of the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) project and;

the consideration of collaborative relationships to gain a deeper understanding of how such structures (to deliver project aims and objectives) affect the delivery of policy on employability.

The **research objectives** are to:

1. Investigate partner perceptions of the SHEEF Programme, its design (set-up), operationalisation (implementation) and evaluation through in-depth interviews and an open space workshop.

2. Identify factors that shaped the implementation of collaborative practice in HE (employability) from the insider perspective of the SHEEF MG.

3. Develop a conceptual framework and a set of recommendations from the analysis of the data from the current study to inform collaborative practice in future projects within UK higher education settings.

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2.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted that successful implementation of educational policy through collaboration is fraught with difficulty. The rhetoric around partnership, alliances and strategic projects cannot provide a complete narrative of the problems of implementation and generation of knowledge through working with others in higher education across organisations.

Extant research suggests a number of identified stances on giving knowledge to collaborating partners which considers selfish and sharing attitudes (Huxham and Hibbert, 2008). Defensive approaches, protectionist stances, positioning stances all affect the flow of knowledge and are characterised by the level of interaction between the social actors within the group or network. These observed stances to giving and sharing knowledge seem dependent on levels of trust and manipulation in addition to competitive positioning. Hence this chapter provided an opportunity to understand the complexity of the relationships between collaborative practice and academia.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the approach and design of the research project with a focus on collaborative working in a higher education context. Research may be undertaken using a qualitative or a quantitative approach (Bryman, 2001). Both approaches will have a philosophical underpinning that influences and provides a best fit for the research objective and in the research design.

In this study a critical interpretivist lens is used to focus on collaborative practice and the nature of managing aims within a strategic project and the complexity in the structure of joint working. Given the nature of this structure and the number of extended stakeholders an inductive design may yield a significant amount of data from which to develop knowledge at a suitable level and contribute to theoretical development.

For clarity, Figure 1 provides an overview of the research methodology. This chapter begins with a discussion of the research design for the study and the underlying philosophical approach within the research design proposed. It then moves to identify, explore and evaluate the research methods, associated data collection tools and managing the ethical considerations for the study. The findings of the study conducted using this research design are presented in chapter 4.

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Figure 1 Details the process flow for the approach to study

Flow Diagram for Research Project

1. Turning idea into a Research Question	→	Problematise the issue/idea Place within a Practitioner context

2. Literature Review

Ethical Framework
Informed consent
Approval through ENUBS Ethics Committee

3. Research Design

- Critical Realist ontological perspective underpinning the study
- Research Methodology: Phenomenology

Approach – study deals with individual and their lived experience of events

Qualitative Approaches ←→ Quantitative Approaches

Produces in-depth explanatory data
Understand how STEPL Factors influence HE
Understanding the lived experiences of social actors
Understanding how actors in social world interact with each other

4. Data Collection
Evaluation of Aims and Objectives

What?/Activity
Semi-Structured Interviews
Workshop

How?/Approach

One-one interviews (qualitative approaches)
Open Space Technologies (Owen Harrison)

5. Data Analysis Method

Thematic Analysis (Miles & Huberman)
Thematic Framework

Themes
Ordinary themes
Unexpected themes
Hard-to-classify themes
Major themes
Sub themes
A Priori themes

Outputs/ Datasets
Transcripts
Framework
Causal diagrams

Inductive Evidence Base-Practice

Collaborative Practice Framework

Inductive Approach

Observation
Pattern
Theory
Concepts

6. Conceptualisation

Impact Analysis
Increase Awareness
Contribution to Knowledge
Change in Policy and Practice

Iterative Processes (1-6)

The Reflective Practitioner

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3.1 Section 1: The research design

In selecting the research approach, and consequently design, the researcher must consider the context in which the study will be conducted and the traditions and cultures which exist within that practice within that environment. For the purpose of this research the interest is in the environment and context in which the 'learning' (about collaborative working) is facilitated. Learning takes place within organisational structures and these structures are populated by complex social dynamics that influence learning and performance outcomes (Bray, 2000).

It is essential in considering collaborative practice in HE to accept both the complex structures within the learning environment and also the interaction between the people or agents who work within and between these environments. This perspective means that identifying with a particular underpinning philosophical approach should also take account of both the structure of the organisation and the working environment in which the learning activity takes place between individual agents. Tilly and Tilly (1998:71,73) attempt to synthesise 'key units of work relationships', such as transactions, contracts, roles, networks and organisations, by telling a 'causal story' about the relationship between history, past relations, culture, bargains, objectives and labour mechanisms – i.e. incentives, embeddedness, contracting, autonomy, matching, mobility and training (Fleetwood, 2011). In addition, it should also take cognisance of both the structure of the organisation and the

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working environment in which the activity takes place between individual agents.

3.2 A consideration of alternative research philosophies and views of knowledge and reality

There are a number of ways in which knowledge may be acquired, constructed, tested or justified (Goulding, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) are of the opinion that it is important to define and distinguish the epistemological issue (the relationship between the enquirer and the knowledge) from the methodological process by which new knowledge is acquired. Traditional philosophical viewpoints, with their underpinning epistemologies and ontologies, perceive differing approaches as perspectives along a continuum (Saunders et al, 2009).

Much of the literature on collaborative practice focuses on the discrete elements of collaboration, for example design, reporting, delivery mechanisms (Gray, 2001). However, there is little evidence to suggest that studies have examined differing perspectives and views of collaborative working that consider mechanisms and outcomes for success.

3.2.1 A critical realist epistemology

The realist position is to seek explanatory knowledge (Easton, 2000). 'The task of explanation in social science is to penetrate behind the surface of experiences and perception and to account for what occurs in terms of an understanding of connections at the levels of structures' (Ackroyd et al, 2000:13). The individual gives meaning and

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understanding to research and therefore the underpinning knowledge or epistemological position. From a critical realist perspective, the objective of research is to explain and provide a causal account of what is happening. The research is conducted within terms of 'sets of agents' and the causal mechanisms that they draw upon and reproduce or transform (Fleetwood, 2011:23), 'a causal-explanatory account, typically, takes the form of a bundle of ideas, stories, concepts, theories, observations and empirical data that, together, explain how and why the phenomena under investigation do what they do'.

The interpretivist stance through a realist lens seeks causal explanation and asks the questions 'so what'? to gain deeper and insightful perspectives. The philosophy of critical realism aligns with the research questions to be investigated, arising from the structure, people, and politics of the context of collaborative practice. It was anticipated that the study would provide a deeper understanding through a phenomenological design for an insider perspective of the study. This explanation will demonstrate how factors and attributes interact to produce effective collaborative working in the HE context.

A qualitative approach through the realist lens may be better able to provide the scrutiny required for causal explanation and the understanding of individual behaviour. This explanation will hopefully demonstrate how factors and attributes interact to produce effective collaborative working.

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3.2.2 Ontology

An interpretivist philosophy is characterised as an ontological stance that views the researcher and the world as interacting, and not as separate entities. Knowledge is constructed through experience and interaction with social actors (Bryman, 2001). Researchers influenced by the rhetoric of the interpretivist paradigm design research from a constructivist ontology, with differing methods being used for data. Data can be collected in the form of words which may be tape recorded, transcribed and then analysed thematically. Such an interpretivist approach is also in keeping with the methodology of critical realism (Sayer, 1992, 2000).

3.2.3 Ontological perspective and data collection methods

Critical Realism is compatible with a wide range of data collection techniques, but their selection depends on the object being studied and what one wishes to learn about it. The data collection tools must also be fit for the purpose of understanding the motivations of people and the mechanisms they operate within. Abstraction of the key concepts contained in any research object is therefore important; inappropriate techniques may not lead to meaningful explanation of the object in question (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism assumes the existence of emergence, that there is knowledge to be gained not solely from a reductionist approach to theory building, but that there are emergent factors from research into entities. 'The social world is only understood through the connections between the people that comprise a society not by studying the individual in isolation…the properties of organisations

stem, in part from the connections among the individuals and the groups they contain' (Easton, 2000:121).

Such an underpinning philosophy embraces the concept of emergence in research, for example the emergence of new working approaches to collaboration as a result of separate entities (structure and agents) working together in practice. This study aimed to understand the connections between the various stakeholders. A critical realist approach seeks to understand the relationships between the individual (agents) and the organisations (structures).

Organisations are complex and have *messy problems* (Ackoff, 1974) and so also tend to need complex and messy solutions to those problems. Strategic partnership and collaborative working is one example of a complex and messy solution for what may be an ill-defined problem at this stage. Given the potential complexity of working with multiple organisations and with people with multiple roles, the study was undertaken through the use of phenomenological design in order to gain an understanding of the depth of meaning of collaborative practice to the individual agents.

In the study, the key entities (or objects) involved are the organisations, stakeholders, relationships or attitudes. They are complex structured organisations and the people interact within the social, political, economic and technological environment. The critical realist approach suggests that these entities sit within other entities and structures and are part of complex sub structures. The people (objects) within these complex

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substructures similarly have particular characteristics for example, age, gender, experience of the organisation and of learning within the organisation (Fleetwood, 2011).

Sayer (2000) suggests that intensive research methods focus on individual agents in context using interviews and qualitative analysis, and ask the question 'what produces change'?. Qualitative methods for data collection may provide the best fit as the most appropriate method for understanding the complex realities of complex environments.

A qualitative approach enables an approach to unpack issues in order to explain elements within a social phenomenon (Ritchie et al, 2014). For the study of the SHEEF this means in practice a consideration of the context in which the research took place and enables modelling for collaborative working. An alternative deductive approach with quantitative methods was unlikely to fulfil the research objectives for an understanding of factors for a successful collaborative model nor explain the operational context for looking at aims and objectives.

Qualitative approaches in social research may be a preferred approach for complex subject matter where there is a need to understand the subject in order to address research problems. This research method was selected for the consideration of the SHEEF, to generate an understanding of the focus within the organisation and to understand the process that generated the level of complexity within the organisation.

The choice of a qualitative approach and the associated methods and data collection tools is likely to impact on the techniques used for analysis also. For qualitative approaches, explanation is sought through analysis and may tend towards a thematic approach to data handling and analysis in contrast to a statistical approach of data handling tools for quantitative approaches (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Core to the critical realist perspectives is the notion of agency and structure. 'People (agents) are born into a pre-existing world replete not only with socio-economic phenomena in general, but with the social structures and discourses of gender in particular' (Fleetwood, 2011:19). Agents have causal powers but they do not control all the events they are involved in. The agents engage with this pre-existing world, they *reproduce* these worlds or *transform* them and then, at the same time the agents reproduce or transform themselves. This transformational process enables the agent and the structure or social phenomenon to continue to a new/different phase of development.

Within the context of organisations, individual agents act within partnerships to draw upon laws, rules and discourses 'in order to engage in actions they think (consciously or unconsciously) will meet their employment-related needs' (Fleetwood 2011:19). Similarly, the researcher, from a critical realist perspective, being a human, must necessarily be part of the research. This is partially where the 'critical' part of the critical realism comes from – the researcher must be aware of the possibility that their presence will in some way affect the outcome of

the research and they should critically assess this as part of their research (Benton and Craib, 2011).

3.2.4 Phenomenology

In seeking to understand some of the key characteristics of collaborative working within the current HE learning context it is necessary to explore the social, political and economic dynamics and their relations within the structures of collaborations. This necessitates an approach which can consider the combination and interaction of these dynamics within collaborative partnerships.

A key facet of a qualitative research design is that explanation is underpinned by the understanding of social interactions in contrast to the empirical evidence and rigorous statistical process of alternative quantitative designs with their associated positivist philosophies. The research questions of this research study are 'essence questions – about what is the essence that all persons experience about a phenomenon' (Creswell et al 2007:239). In this study, the researcher collects the view of several participants of the SHEEF MG, seeking to understand the lived experience of those participants.

Specifically, phenomenological research is an interpretivist qualitative design where the 'lived experience' of individuals about a 'phenomenon' is described by the study participants. The analysis of research data is structured, using thematic approaches to produce meaning, the 'essence' of the participant voice (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenology reflects the theoretical work of Husserl (1859 - 1938) but as a research

design approach has been developed within many discipline areas since, with two principal approaches by Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology (Manen, 1990) enables the interpretation of the 'texts' of life and interplay between the differing stages of research activity. Phenomenological research is also appropriate for management research (Anosike et al, 2012:21) and can provide a 'deep and rich insight into the nature of management practices …questions directed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday human and management experiences and which address the complex and ambiguous inner realities of management can benefit from a phenomenological research approach'. Such a phenomenological research praxis (Giorgi, 1985) developed to generate understanding and specific meanings and essences of management experiences in organisations.

Phenomenology was deemed an appropriate fit for examining the lived experiences of the participants, and the data collected generates an understanding of the essence of the collaborative activity and management of the SHEEF.

Through this internal and people-centred lens it was anticipated that the research participants would help explain the socially constructed, realist nature of collaborative practice within the context of higher education. In addition it was anticipated that they, directly or indirectly, would point out practice engaged in future collaborative activity, the opportunities to enhance practice through underlying skills, attitudes and beliefs.

The design of this study is through an interpretive phenomenological design, being influenced by the perspective of Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology (Heidegger, 1996) to interpret and describe the human experience within the SHEEF management group. The insider perspective of the study sought greater understanding and meaning from participants without setting aside prior understanding ('bracketing') of the research environment (Reiner, 2012).

3.3 The process of conducting the study

The complexity of strategic partnerships and collaborative working suggests what may be an ill-defined problem at this stage. Given the potential complexity of working with multiple organisations and with people with multiple roles, the study was undertaken through the use of a interpretive phenomenological design in order to gain an understanding of the depth of meaning of collaborative practice to the individual agents. This research approach was collaborative itself and was a suitable methodology for transforming practice and the creation and transferability of knowledge (Huxham and Vangen, 2003). The researcher practitioner has the role as participant yet remains an objective collector of data and evaluator to develop theory (Whitehead, 2003).

The qualitative approach and associated data collection methods provided a source of rich data to help the understanding, explanation and hopefully give meaning to the research findings and hence meet the aims and objectives of the study.

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3.3.1 Data collection and analysis process

Data collection tools

Realist perspectives and phenomenological designs are compatible with a wide range of data collection techniques, but their selection depends on the object being studied and what one wishes to learn about it. Abstraction of the key concepts contained in any research object is therefore very important; inappropriate techniques may not lead to meaningful explanation of the object in question.

The preferred data collection tools for the study:

1. Semi-structured interviews

2. Participant workshop

These data collection methods will now be discussed in turn.

Semi-structured interviewing

The nature of the interview style is influenced by the insider researcher and is a softer 'responsive interviewer' approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2012:36) which is non-confrontational where the existing relationship of the interviewer and interviewee informs the approach to the research. It was anticipated that the 2-way conversation would elicit further depth of research data but bearing in mind the need for professional approaches and the imperative to limit any influence, or values and assumptions about the nature of the social phenomenon.

Interviewing methods offer several benefits to attaining the study research aims and objectives. Firstly, a loose, semi-structured approach combines the structured approach of an interview schedule along with the flexibility to ask follow-up additional probes. This is underpinned by the relationship of the interviewer and the interviewee and has the potential to impact on the depth of response gained during the interview.

Silverman (2011:185) notes such an 'emotionalist approach' as impacting on the robustness of the research method. This risk was managed for this study through the research aims and objectives which focused on organisation tangibles for example, the inclusion of tangible aims and objectives and the organisational structure of the SHEEF. The qualitative interview aligns well with the questions arising from the structure, people, and politics of the context of collaborative practice.

The 'insider perspective' arises from being a practitioner within a particular environment (SHEEF) and research interest in gaining a greater understanding and meaning from participants. This role was managed by trying to make the researcher approach as 'outsider' as possible, standing back from the normal capacity of the job role. When undertaking the interviews, I clarified with participants that I was working in a research capacity at that time and adopted a processual approach to explain the study and sense-check with participants, articulating understanding through a 2-way process so ensuring *informed* consent.

Huxham and Vangen (2004, 2005) identify perspectives or themes in collaborative practice – these are identified as aims; ambiguity and

complexity; collaborative dynamics, trust; power; leadership and identity. This study draws on two of these suggested themes from the Huxham and Vangen for collaborative advantage- that is setting and managing aims and the complexity in the structure of collaboration (Huxham and Beech, 2003a, 2003b) for strategic projects.

Huxham and Vangen's conceptual aims framework (Huxham and Vangen, 2005), discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), explicitly considers the multi-dimensional nature of the aims of collaboration. The Huxham and Vangen aims framework (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) influenced this current study by informing the design of the questions for the semi-structured interviews. The detail is shown in Appendix C. Their model attempts to synthesise 'dimensions of aims' for individuals, organisations, external stakeholders by telling a 'causal story' about the relationship between history, past relations, culture, the explicit, unstated and hidden objectives i.e. incentives, embeddedness, contracting, autonomy, matching, and mobility (Fleetwood, 2011).

The use of the Huxham and Vangen aims framework (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) was to confirm the quality of theoretical framework and the emergent themes and categories that generates new contributions to knowledge from the current study. The contribution from the pilot study also reaffirmed that the first order themes were in line with the Huxham and Vangen aims framework and therefore an appropriate conceptual framework to use in the main study and inform the semi-structured interviews.

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Part of the function of the SHEEF was to establish a repository for resources and case studies around employability in HE in Scotland. This resulted in many documents being held on the SHEEF website or the server of the managing partner, the HEA. The documentation, in particular, aspects of the operational plan 2011-2014 was used in the semi-structured interview process to help remind participants of the documentation and a project activity.

Workshops
In this workshop format, the facilitator takes on the role as participant observer (Vinten, 1994). In this instance, the facilitator thus allowing them to be free to move about in the 'Open Space', to contribute and participate in discussions with an overarching theme as deemed appropriate:

- data is gathered by participants themselves guided by their own questions (Open Space method);

- participants decide the issues to be investigated;

- *there is an equality of power, not defined by hierarchical ways of working or role or positional authority;

- there is collaboration among participants; and

- reflection which supports the idea of the (self-)reflective practitioner.

Open space technology (Owen, 2008; Lightfoot et al, 2003) is an approach whereby a problem or theme may be considered with a meeting, a workshop, a conference or other events. It is suitable for small

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or large numbers of respondents and is task focused. The benefit of this model is that individuals participate in the non-hierarchical manner, are self -managed and the discussions are free-flowing and recorded with post-its. This method suggests that emergent order occurs in the open space when conditions of self-organisation are met. It was hoped that the participants of the workshop, a small number of respondents managing student placement projects would engage with this data collection method.

Owen (2008) and also Bushe and Marshak (2009) explain that the conditions most favourable for open space methods are where there is a high level of complexity around the problem or situation, and where it is not possible that one individual may have an overview of the whole situation. In addition, the scope of the problem is wide and sits in multiple areas of the business, and where there is a high level of engagement and passion around the critical issues.

The SHEEF reflects these multiple and complex conditions for the use of an open space methods to unpack key issues around collaborative practice and to try to create a solution. The method would not be appropriate if the individuals did not demonstrate a high level of passion and seek to find a solution or way forward to enhancing the setup and management of potential future collaborative projects.

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3.4 Section 2: The data collection process

Sampling procedure

The study sample were selected for study from the SHEEF management group (MG), which drew up the strategic aims and objectives of the SHEEF.

The SHEEF Management group comprised individuals who were representative from senior managers of an HE or college, employability coordinators from the SHEEN project (the previous LTW1 initiative), careers professionals (AGCAS), student representatives (NUS), LTW2 student placement projects, agency representatives and the Scottish Funding Council.

The study used purposive sampling to select the participants (Bryman, 2001). The choice of purposive sampling was underpinned by the relatively high level of accessibility that the researcher had in the role of interrogator to potential respondents drawn from the SHEEF Management Group (MG).

The MG provided a fixed population sample (n=17) drawn from the representative key stakeholder organisations. The sample criteria was prescribed (Ritchie et al, 2014:144) with known characteristics, in this case the purposive sample (n=9) was drawn from the total population of the MG with a criterion that the individuals represent 'double' roles. This was possible because during the SHEEF Project, there was a change in participant job roles, some individuals no longer being representatives on the MG but still working as part of the represented agency group.

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Prior to the main study, a pilot study (n=2) was carried out to identify the limitations of the research design. Therefore, if the tools used in the pilot study did not yield the quality of data anticipated, remedial action could be taken without 'losing' key respondents' data. Similarly, if there had been a non-response from a potential participant within the convenience sample from the pilot, there were other potential respondents to approach from the total population that would fit the same role criterion.

Respondents were selected from those with job roles most involved with the setting of the SHEEF's aims and objectives, and a proportion of the participants now work for other HEIs or agencies. Access to the participants was facilitated by working relationships between the researcher and potential respondents, who contacted respondents initially by sending emails, explaining the nature of informed consent in line with stated ethical protocol. When agreement to participate was given by an individual it was then followed up by an email, and where necessary telephone discussion to explain the nature of the research, and its purpose. Assurance was given to participants that responses would be anonymous and remain confidential. The participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to following reflection on our discussions.

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Table 1: Participant Sample below highlights the construction of the study

including pilot study participants.

Table 1 Participant Sample

Data Source	MG Representative Member Role	Designation
Interview No 1*	An Agency Manager (HE)	Alex
Interview No 2*	A Project Co-ordinator	Billy
Interview No 3	An Agency Manager (Learning and Teaching)	Charlie
Interview No 4	An Employability Co-ordinator (SHEEN)	Dee
Interview No 5	A Careers Representative (HE)	Eddie
Interview No 6	A Manager (HE)	Fran
Interview No 7	An Agency Manager (Funding)	Gerri
Workshop	LTW2 Project Directors	Hillary and Indi

Note: * Interviews 1 & 2 from the pilot study

3.5 Ethical considerations

In conducting research into the SHEEF, cognisance needs to be given to the sensitive nature of the research and ethical considerations of undertaking the study. As a reflective practitioner, it is important to consider the interactions with individuals through the qualitative research process and to take time to consider the management of risk through explanatory research. It is not possible to predict the outcomes of qualitative research and as such it is important to be sensitive to the needs and responses to those involved in participation (Mauthner et al, 2002). Permission was obtained to examine documents associated with SHEEF, the strategic plan, website content, and annual reports. This study followed a number of principles (Winter, 1996):

In advance of the research, the relevant governance was considered through the approval processes of the University Ethics Research Committee. Both the pilot and principal study were underpinned by the governance arrangements and processes put in place by Edinburgh Napier University's Code of Practice on research enquiry including the devolved ethics approval process of the Business School.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Research Committee in advance of the start of the study and approaching potential respondents. This qualitative study gave due consideration to ethical codes and practice around informed consent, confidentiality, and risk and harm (Liamputtong, 2009; Mauthner et al, 2012).

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Informed consent was given by the respondents. Each participant was asked to sign a written informed consent or 'process' consent (Silverman, 2010:159) allowing participants to withdraw consent at any point. The consent form was issued to the participant prior to the commencement of the scheduled interview, and obtained a signature on the research consent form. This consent was also recorded as part of the digital file and stored as part of the recording of the data collection activities. Participants had previously received, an email disclosing the nature of the research, including purpose, data collection method and confidentiality. Although this may have taken up some time in the interview schedule, it was also an opportunity for interviewer-interviewee to establish or re-establish a working relationship and clarify any potential issues with the participant.

Consideration was applied as to how the history in dealings with potential interviewees could shape the interview and its content. This included whether any potential interviewee may feel obliged to participate. The wishes of those who did not want to participate were respected. From the total sample group, there was only one potential respondent who did respond to the request and follow-up and this was interpreted as a wish not to participate. There was no reason given for non-participation. The researcher respected this choice and did not use personal relationships or future working to seek a reason for this non-response. In this way, the research remains sensitive to the relationship with the individual and not causing embarrassment or affecting future interaction.

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In qualitative research design, it is possible that participants may share personal or sensitive information: participants need to be assured that confidentiality will be maintained to protect them as an individual or the organisation integrity. It is not possible to guarantee absolute anonymity however confidentiality may be retained to protect the identity of participants by not releasing the name, their address or their workplace.

Confidentiality can be maintained to some extent by not naming individuals and using a pseudonym for example identifying Respondent No 1 (code name Alex), Respondent No 2 (code name Billy), in alphabetical order. The researcher provided 'names' for the respondents to lend personalisation (agency) to the data findings. As the participants were selected for their role on the SHEEF Management Group (MG) it was not necessary to name their employer organisation or agency. Indeed a majority of MG members are now in differing job roles with their employer organisation or agency.

One impact of having been fully engaged with the SHEEF MG was that I had an understanding of the reporting on confidential matters and a certain level of trust between myself and the participants based on previous and extant working relationships. There was no intention to create any invasion of privacy and the questions on the semi-structured interview schedule could be described as being process oriented. The depth of discussion comes from the participant voluntary contribution and level of self-disclosure.

Although the names of the participants have been changed for the purpose of anonymity and the job roles generalised, there is a risk that individual participants may be specifically identified through the transcripts if read as a single document. This risk was managed by the restricted access to the transcript data and only shared with the DBA supervision team. The researcher has sole access to the digital recording which would identify individual voices, and it was agreed with participants that these recordings will be deleted on completion of the DBA examination process.

3.6 Conducting the research interviews

The project was designed to be carried out using recorded, loosely (semi-) structured interviews on a one-one basis. As a qualitative research tool for the analysis of the collaborative practice in the SHEEF, the formal interview schedule was designed listing three questions only but it was hoped to produce some in-depth meaningful responses (Liamputtong, 2009).

As designed, the respondents were selected through a purposive sampling procedure. Each of the respondents had been a member of the SHEEF Management group, each of the respondents currently work for differing organisations or in differing roles to that which they held when part of the SHEEF management group.

The interviews were completed within a nine-month period. The interview schedule was purposive and subject to the availability of the respondents. The interviews were carried out at agreed venues selected by the

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participants that was hoped would create a safe and supportive environment. All but one of the interviews took place in the participant's workplace and one of the interviews took place in the home setting. The interviews lasted between fifty minutes and one and a half hours. Consent was given from participants to digitally record the interviews and these recordings were later transcribed by the researcher. In addition, diagramming techniques (relationship diagrams) were used during the interview to take notes as an aide memoir.

3.6.1 Interview questions

The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (Appendix C) which was drawn from the literature including the categorisation of aims (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

The interview schedule aimed to set the scene for the interviews as some of the respondents no longer work with the organisation considered in the pilot study, and it was useful to identify the role the participant took within the SHEEF MG.

The research also utilised documents from the SHEEF MG meetings including the strategic plan as prompts when discussing strategy and aims and objectives.

Although the SHEEF project had formally completed and been evaluated, there were legacy relationships that supported the quality of the data collection methods in the pilot study. These were formal colleague working relationships based on roles that the researcher and interviewees had previously worked together through the SHEEF

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management group. The nature of these relationships is that of professional practice and not informal friendships.

The researcher formally defined the research role in the interview process clarifying the interviewer-interviewee relationship and it was necessary to use some of the interview time at the start to cover the objectives for the interview. Throughout the interview a 'conversational' interviewing style was adopted, but the interviewer was careful to allow the participant to fully respond before asking a new or follow-up question (Silverman, 2010). Overall, it was observed that respondents relaxed over the period of the interview and appeared to fully respond to the questions asked. The professional practice relationship has benefited the study. The research elements around the pilot study where informed by an 'openness' and level of frank conversation that enabled the data collection process to be facilitated and suitable for purpose for the collection of explanatory data from the main study.

The notions around the handling of sensitive data in qualitative research were also evident in the pilot study that was undertaken. Therefore, when the issues of confidentiality and trust appeared throughout the main study, this was an emergent theme and could be used constructively to engage with the respondent. In writing up the thesis, consideration was given to providing the overarching theme of trust and openness as part of the context of the study so providing part of the 'thread' through main study.

As the interview schedule progressed, participants raised additional issues for discussion, often providing context for responses and the researcher asked additional follow-up questions for clarification or explanatory purpose. The content of the responses was often sensitive in nature. The quality of the data is considered to be high, collecting a significant amount of data from the target group, respondents contributing for the invited period of time, and the openness of the responses suggests the respondents felt they were in a safe environment. Several of the respondents openly commented that they had *enjoyed* the interview experience or found the experience to be *cathartic* and noted my role in that process. These details were included in the transcriptions for analysis and the narrative story discussed in the Findings section of this Chapter 4.

3.7 Carrying out the workshop

The workshop was designed to be carried out using a very loosely structured open space technologies format (Owen, 2008). As designed, the respondents were selected through a purposive sampling procedure. Each of the respondents had been a member of the SHEEF Management group, each of the respondents having responsibility for the Learning to Work 2 student placement projects. Each of the respondents currently work for differing organisations or in differing roles but form a sub-group of the SHEEF Management group.

The respondents were initially contacted by email or in person, by telephone by the researcher. No potential respondent failed to reply to

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the request to participate in the workshop, however not all of the targeted respondents were available on the date scheduled. This may have impacted slightly on the data quality as data from all four student project representatives was not collected and therefore a particular perspective may have been under-represented.

The workshop was carried out at an agreed venue, selected by and mutually convenient to the participants that was thought to create a safe and supportive environment and lasted approximately 2 ½ hours.

The participants were reminded that the purpose of the workshop was to inform research studies, and participants completed consent forms including consent to record the workshop and to publish any printouts or diagrams that may form data display from the research.

The researcher took the role of the facilitator and participant, introduced the workshop and described how it would be would be self-organised with the aim to address 2 specific tasks to work on:

- task 1 seeking data around aims and objectives,

- task 2 seeking data around structure and strategy for partnership working.

The nature of the open space technology workshop was to use post-it notes to highlight significant issues, and this was one of the outputs of the workshop discussed in Chapter 4.

No further explanatory 'rules' were given out. Participants then brought key words and phrases onto the post-it notes provided and stuck them both onto the wall and then onto the large sheets of paper provided. There was a lot of open discussion between the participants, some casual comments, some questioning. Participants then created an order and flow from the words written on the post-its, discussing and reordering until reaching a level of joint satisfaction that a suitable order had been established. The participants used the terminology of *framework*, and this may be due to the nature of the participants experience in working in academic development activities.

Throughout the 2 ½ hours of the open space activity, participants chatted and worked in a busy productive manner with a sense of purpose and fully engaged in the activity.

Observer as participant

The research role during the workshop was that of the *observer as participant* (Gold, 1958). In this situation, the observer has only minimal involvement in the social setting being studied. There is some connection to the setting, and close physical presence with the observer sitting in the room, but the observer was not naturally and normally part of the social setting ie involved with LTW2 student placement projects. The workshop detail was recorded and transcribed, diagrams prepared in the workshop were photographed (see Appendix F), and background field notes of the workshop written up.

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3.8 Section 3: Analysing the data
A Qualitative Framework for Process Data Analysis

There are multiple layers of analysis from the sorting, coding and sense-making of the initial raw data content collected through to the understanding, relevance, meaning and thematic analysis (Herr and Anderson, 2005). It is possible to benefit from the use of computer assisted qualitative data analytics software eg NVIVO however, there is a benefit to be had from gaining an in-depth familiarity with the data and for this study there is a relatively small sample size. For the analysis of this study an analytical 'concurrent streams of activity' was used as described by Miles and Huberman (1994:10) following the data collection: Firstly, the *Data Reduction/Condensing* phase, with appropriate *Data Display* and then phase 2, the drawing and verification of *Conclusions.* This overall process is shown diagrammatically in Table 2 below showing the 5 stages used in the planning and the processes of data analysis in this study.

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Table 2 Stages and process of data analysis

Stages of Analysis	Data Set	Process for data analysis	Deliverables	Output
1	Tapes & Transcripts, organisation documents, diagrams	Data review: Preparation of transcripts, listening to tapes.	Diagramming, generation of thoughts around material	Overview and Familiarity with data.
2	Transcripts	Test theoretical framework (a priori themes): Coding transcript exemplars against pre-existing a priori themes/ and coding for other seemingly significant concepts across the data sets	Mapping individual exemplars against the theoretical framework. Identify examples	Mapping of aims and identification of template of codes and 'chunking' of data
3	Coding	Data Reduction: Primary coding combining theoretical framework with emergent pattern codes	Combining Codes Generate secondary coding for relevant data	Analysis template of codes for combined data set
4	Thematising Template, From codes to themes	Create a hierarchy of themes and categorisation of codes into key themes	Data Display:Finding a structural order from the generated conceptual themes	Theme template constructed from key themes
5	Explanatory Account	Collaborative Practice Review: observations, patterns and behaviours	Conclusion: Generate explanation for the dynamics, mechanisms and Structure of collaboration in SHEEF MG	Causal mechanism Conceptual Framework

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3.9 Processing, coding and analysis of the data

Coding is analysis (Saldana, 2009), and the reviewing of transcriptions and the creation of themes and layering of data to create some form of meaning is dealt with in Chapter 4 (Findings) and Chapters 5 and 6 (Analysis and Discussion). However, it is worth explaining the techniques used in organising and processing the data for analysis.

In collecting the data, both through the workshop and in the data analysis a 'post-it' method was used to organise and link responses, funnelling the different responses for the consideration of possible emergent themes. Following the transcription of the interviews (undertaken by the researcher for completeness and increasing familiarity of data for understanding) it was hoped that there would be an emergence (data reduction) of explanatory core themes making it possible to map areas of commonality using visual representation (data display), for example colour coding, framework mapping and diagramming. This method fits with the researcher's personal approach around professional practice (process and method) and a project management methodology, and represents a preferred learning style (Honey and Mumford, 1986).

The collected data consisted of a mix of digital recordings, relating to the operationalisation of the project, inception documents and influence relationship diagrams from field notes in paper format from both the workshop and as a result of the workshop.

The digital recordings of the one-to-one interviews and workshop were transcribed, notated and marked for coding. One part of a transcribed

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interview is shown as an example in Appendix E. Similarly, an example

of a diagram produced as a result of the workshop is shown in

Appendix F.

3.9.1 Transcribing the Interviews

This process began by listening to the digital tapes, starting with

Interview 1 (in part to check that it had recorded, was audible and clear

enough to be transcribed!). The transcript was typed from the tape,

focussing on getting the words on file. The transcription took about 6

hours to complete for a 50 minute interview. In total, there was

approximately 11 hours of recording to be transcribed. Once the draft

transcript was 'completed' for the first time, the tape was re-listened to

and any corrections made for word order and sense, and the differences

between the sense of the spoken word and written formats. At this stage

there wasn't listening for specific language or vocabulary used, however,

any breaks in the 'story' were noted as respondents appeared to seek to

clarify their thought processes or re-telling of events in a chronological

order.

When the recorded file for the second interview was complete, the

transcription process was repeated as for interview 1 and this lexical

action was repeated until all interviews and workshop had been

transcribed. Speech recognition software (Nuance Dragon Naturally

Speaking 13) was used in the process. This was advantageous in that it

cut down the hours used to transcribe the actual words, but also the

process required re-listening and repeating of the actual words and the

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pattern of the words for it to be transcribed by the software. The effect of this was that the subtle intonation of language and its patterns and the consideration of the questions was highlighted.

All the transcripts were marked giving alphabetic names for example, Alex, Billy, Charlie, Dee, Eddie et cetera irrespective of gender of the actual participant. It was decided to do this to make the data handling more personalised for the research but in addition for the data to be gender neutral.

3.10 Thematic analysis of text
First cycle data coding

Once the transcription was completed, the participant statements relating to research questions were assigned a first-order code (shown in Table 3). The aim of this was 'Data Condensing' to refine and transform the data in an iterative coding process. This was achieved using an exploratory approach to coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994), drawing out 'chunks' of language/words used and phrases used by the participants. This was to identify topics within the data. The researcher used a 'post-it' method to organise and link responses, 'funnelling' different areas of commonality and consideration of possible emergent themes using visual representation to display the data for example colour coding, use of post-its and diagramming (Figure 2).

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Figure 2 Data display of the First Order coding

There was provisional coding relating to the a priori themes of the aims

framework (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) and these were included as part

of the deductive first order data analysis when coding the data. In

addition, there were other pre-defined codes drawn from the research

question relating to the set-up, implementation and evaluation of SHEEF

(Table 3).

Table 3 resultant first order data codes

OBJECTIVES		ABBREVIATION
	Participants (individual)	
EXPLICIT		OP-EXP
UNSTATED		OP-UNST
HIDDEN		OP-HID
	Organisation (SHEEF)	
EXPLICIT		OO-EXP
UNSTATED		OO-UNST
HIDDEN		OO-HID
INTERNAL STRUCTURE		ABBREVIATION
MEMBERSHIP		IS-MEM
GOVERNANCE		IS-GOV
MG PROCEDURES		IS-MG PRO
COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY		
Explicit		COLL-EXP
Unstated		COLL-UNST
Hidden		COLL-HID

The codes were then noted and codes/key words were combined to create a more general coding. At this stage data was displayed by drawing diagrams. This is part of the analysis, part of the thought process for organising and processing the data. Furthermore, at this stage in the open coding process, the transcripts were re-read in relation to the objectives of the study and realised another way to arrange the data to produce a more meaningful means of combining data.

Further data analysis as part of the iterative process yielded 3 second order themes: strategic planning; structure of SHEEF and role. A further 2 emergent themes appear about leadership and 'voice' or agency.

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These 2 themes appear to be over-arching themes and emergent across

the data analysis (Figure 3).

Figure 3 First Emergent Themes

		Secondary Themes
Overarching Theme	Leadership	
Overarching Theme	'Voice'/Agency	Trust, Reciprocity
Primary Theme	Role	Complexity, Conflict
Primary Theme	Structure	Governance, Hierarchy
Primary Theme	Strategic Planning	Implementation, Planning, Resourcing, Purpose

3.10.1 Emergent themes

New codes emerged during this data collection and management, so

were recoded and re-categorised in a further review of the data (Saldana,

2009). In order to avoid possible confirmation bias from the researcher

role as an agent within the study, the researcher re-arranged all the post-

its to check the validity of the initial coding and build a more

comprehensive exploratory picture.

Firstly, these new emergent codes were applied to the full data set

(Crabtree and Miller, 1999). From this approach, further themes emerged

supporting the aims of the research project to consider relationships and

gain a deeper understanding of how structures of collaborative

relationships affect the delivery of employability policy. Secondly, to

sense check the themes and as a measure of the trust-worthiness and

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credibility of the data, each interview was then re-evaluated using the derived first order and second order emergent themes.

Finally, the data set was disaggregated and the findings mapped for each of the codes, themes and sub-themes. The diagram presenting these stages of analysis is given in Appendix G.

The following chapter presents these and emergent findings from the qualitative research process.

3.11 Conclusion:

This chapter considered the research methodology for the proposed study. It is necessary to adopt a research design to fully meet the stated aims of the study. This includes a substantive narrative or 'thread' that forms a research pathway drawing together the research question, the aims, research methods and analytical approaches. Ethical considerations are considered underpinning the research tools proposed. The analysis of the data involved bringing together a theoretic conceptual framework, a priori themes from identified literature and emergent themes.

A summary of the research design is shown in Table 4 illustrating design, methods and rationale.

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Table 4 Designing the Research

	Generative method	Rationale
Philosophical ontology	Critical Realism	A structured approach to determine causal explanation, meaning produced by social interaction of social actors
Design	Phenomenology Interpretivist	A practical, outcome focused approach. Personal, observed experiences, focus on events and meaning
Ethical approval	Ethics Committee	Consideration of research context and management of risk working with sample populations Informed consent
Methods	Qualitative research strategy	Interpretivist paradigm
Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews	A conceptual framework – the validation of a pre-existing framework (Huxham, 2005) Rich data meaning and explanatory
	Workshop	Open Space (Owen, 2008) Add to a priori themes
Data Analysis	Thematic approaches, Template analysis	Data reduction, coding, inductive
	Data Display	diagramming techniques and transcripts crafting a conceptual framework

Table 4 Designing the Research

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Chapter 4: Research findings

Introduction

This chapter considers the participant voice and its contribution to address the research questions. The data is presented in the context and stages of the project ie setting up, implementation and transformation in addition to the causal themes emergent from the data interpretation. The chapter starts with an introduction to the research participants in the context of the research project (as stated before all names have been changed). The themes are presented with the participant perspective speech including the diagrams from the open space workshop.

4.1 An introduction to the participant group:

The SHEEF MG was formed by representatives from the HE sector and who had been invited to join the MG due to responsibilities associated with their existing job role or professional interest. There are three participants remaining in the same job position at the time of the research interviews as at the time of their representation on the SHEEF MG. Details of MG participants, designations, MG roles and interview numbers have been provided in Table 1 (p 81).

Alex is an agency manager who is experienced in the development of strategic projects and stakeholder engagement but for whom graduate employability was not a core discipline area of the job remit. Alex has previously worked in job roles with all other participants. Billy on the other hand, was a specialist in graduate employability and partnership working, and whose role was as a

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project co-ordinator. Billy had left that job role before the end of the SHEEF project lifecycle.

Charlie and Gerri are both agency managers with responsibility for policy (learning and teaching). It was in this role that both Charlie and Gerri are members of the MG. As an agency manager, both Charlie and Gerri work with the parent organisations of the MG representatives. Dee is an HE academic with a professional interest in graduate employability. Dee is a former member of the SHEEN and was a funded employability co-ordinator and it is through the continuity with the SHEEN that Dee is a MG representative. Likewise, Eddie was part of the SHEEN, as a professional careers representative for the AGCAS.

Fran is a HE manager, and although not a role with executive responsibility for graduate employability, Fran has a leadership position within the SHEEF.

Hillary and Indi are directors of employability projects. Both are academics working at different HEIs, and LTW2 brings them together to work in partnership alongside other key stakeholders. Indi changed job role before the end of the project.

Participants spoke freely, several of them using the terms 'therapeutic' and 'cathartic' to describe the experience of discussing their role within the SHEEF.

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4.2 Level 1 themes for setting up the project

Strategic Planning emerges as a 1st order theme from the study (Appendix G

provides hierarchical detail of coding and analysis). All participants were asked

to describe their role in SHEEF and how this role informed the setting up and

running of the SHEEF project. Alex describes how SHEEF MG was set up and

structured from his stakeholder perspective:

Well, SHEEF as you have seen in this model (referring to diagram in Appendix B), there were a number of representatives on SHEEF management group and this was effectively a steering committee with all the key stakeholders on it, there was a feeling that we did need our own.. and although there was a terms of reference we felt that (as the management group) we should develop, and I think that the leadership for this was the Chair, the idea to plan and articulate, that there was added value in that (sigh), ……..so how was that developed?

This background and context to the development of the management group

was provided by Billy who described how SHEEF MG evolved from the

transition of a previous strategic project:

Well SHEEN was very much for practitioners. There had been quite a lot of successful projects, a lot of bitty stuff going on, looked quite good, there had been some innovative stuff, it was just that, in understanding and appreciating the work done, they were now trying to understand how to make it bedded in…..and we had the partners made up of the (LTW) Projects, where as in SHEEN the (LTW) Projects had the dominant role. In the partnership arrangement was at a higher strategic (level), we had because elements of employability were in all these organisations and they had taken a lot of interest in little projects going on, and raise the profile of the core, and discussions with the Agency A, part of that agenda was coming from. It was also coming from em, NUS, (student destinations) and Agency B ….

Gerri continues from the perspective of another stakeholder about the role and

development of SHEEF. It is evident in the passage below that there was to

be a shift from a practitioner focus to a strategic focus and that stakeholders

were viewing that change from their own organisational perspective:

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The theory within the funding agency was that SHEEN had been a practitioner network but they wanted more strategic engagement and higher level within universities with the issue of employability - that the employability practitioners had done what they could at the level but that perhaps there was still a lack of engagement at senior level at universities and SHEEF was created to try to pull back together and get engagement from them …and it was also linking, as I recall, that was supposed to be somebody from industry and the director of the XYZ Agency which was an SFC funded student business start-up and AGCAS, and possibly a recruiter, trying to bring together all the people with a locus on employability and get them to pull together to raise employability as a strategic issue for universities.

The level of stakeholder engagement with the strategic project varies from the

set-up phase; some participants were part of the steering committee because

of their job role within a stakeholder organisation. Take for example this from

Gerri:

That's how I came to be involved ….that I was a senior member of staff with responsibility for that policy area and as a consequence I was part of the management group.

Others were keen to be invited to the SHEEF MG but did have a formal

representative role there:

EDDIE*: possibly(I was there) from two angles- first was from the SHEEN employability network and having represented University X and what has institutional representative at one of the SHEEN meetings- I wasn't the official Rep so there was a sort of continuation from that set. The other angle was on behalf of the University Careers Service because there was sense in making sure that continuation from the (QAA) employability enhancement (theme), and that would make sense, and arrangements with the careers service learning and teaching and employability coordinators at the various institutions and so I kind of ended up being like a Scotland representative on SHEEF because I wasn't the (AGCAS) convener at the time.*

And in contrast the placement Project Directors felt that they had a place at

the SHEEF MG but were not welcome at the table. Indi perceived that there

was 'an air of exclusivity'.

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I remember asking and I brought up with SFC….Should be all four of us which is what happened in the end, but this is right at the start going back to 2011 probably and I was told it was very strategic, and inference..it might have been a be a straight telling of .. 'Project Managers….you are not strategic enough, not grown up to be part of this thing'.

And the rationale for the membership of the MG is considered by Gerri, again:

so one of them (Project Directors) sat at the meeting but not all four of them, and they wanted,… to bring reports to every meeting and see how well the projects were doing, but we (MG) wanted them to go away because that wasn't the purpose of this group as we saw it but that was about individual personalities and their desire to get 'badges'.

Gerri's narrative illuminates the lack of clarity and understanding in the setting

up of the MG. However, Dee has a more inclusive and pragmatic approach to

the rationale for strategic partner inclusion.

I think it is quite obvious why these different bodies would need to be involved. I have no idea how that was chosen in fact we were trying to challenge that, and have representation on SHEEF, so I think it makes sense to have (all) these bodies involved, so if you look at them again – SIE, the placement projects, and yes they were continuation of learning to work one so that was another reason why we felt,- the projects really came out of the learning to work one initiatives so it was bizarre not to have is represented because some of the staff with the same.

So I don't know how people were decided - I think it makes sense to have these agencies involved. I think they're all relevant agencies that need to be heard in this debate.

Both Billy and Alex, commented on the role and ownership in the setting up of

the SHEEF project. This appeared to be complex and with political elements

and although there was mention of process around the SHEEF strategy but

little focus on the actual outcomes. Billy commented that there was still some

kind of 'a haze, that ….they had actually thought about partnership

management group strategy work'.

4.2.1 Employability

The setting up of SHEEF had been the response to implementing the Scottish

Government Learning to Work 2 and developing the SFC's employability

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strategy. As a SFC-funded strategic project, the SHEEF operated in a context to deliver Scottish Government's policy around graduate employability and to develop joint working in the sector. This happened at a time when negotiated outcome agreements were being introduced across the HE sector. Gerri questioned, 'How do you work policy in a context where we have national policies and individual outcome agreements?' and Charlie noted, 'they were moving to a new world of colleges and employability and all the policy was about to go out the window and come back in a different way'.

As it is clear from these viewpoints about employability, SHEEF was being set up in a context that was fast-changing and perhaps not fully formed at the time the SHEEF was set up to support LTW initiatives.

Strategic planning is core to successful implementation of a project following on from the set-up phase. Billy observed that 'however once SHEEF got established, there was quite a lot of bad feeling, because of the way SHEEF had been set up*!'* Billy attended a strategy planning meeting, 'it was em, a meeting with selective members of the MG involved in writing the strategy'. So how was the strategic planning sessions structured and planned for?

The planning actually started off quite well as, maybe an agenda item, there would be a working group, and there was to be an away day and identified this (strategy) and then …. The discussion threw up in the sector what would be presented, what was going to be involved….

…it did stimulate a down to earth (discussion) , slightly more strategic things, and from these notes we identified maybe 4 or 5 areas. From that meeting I came away and wrote it up and put structure into a scheme, …… it was circulated in such a way, that although I would say this was the scheme, and the direction, actually what happened was at the subsequent board meeting. There was feedback from them, there were issues, wanting to clarify it role, and it was useful from the particular point, because there were different people

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on the group, and a different relationship, but it was changing, and I think that it created extra work.

This suggests little formalised arrangements around whose MG role it was to

establish the strategy, structure and direction of the SHEEF.

4.2.2 Aims and objectives

Evidencing strategic aims and objectives being agreed upon before

operationalisation was difficult. This lack of clarity provides a good fit with a

priori themes (Huxham and Vangen, 2005:104) and the notion of 'pseudo

aims' whereby aims are not expressly stated. Individuals acting on behalf of

organisation do not appear to act for the collaboration but rather as a 'voice'

for their 'home' organisation and the notion of agency. (Paroutis and Pettigrew,

2007).

Take for example, this passage from Dee who reflects on the rationale of

setting up the SHEEF?

to think about what was the first, the chicken and the egg ? I have the impression that people decided first who should be on the group then came out with objectives…. so my impression was always that they came out with whoever is somebody influential in something in Scotland first and then they looked at it and set up the objectives - it should really be the other way round…..
so in terms of if you look at like this - we have the objectives set - who are in the right positions to achieve them?

This MG make-up appears to be an important component of transformational

change also, a project director commenting,

If you bring all these important people in employability to the table, they are they are to talk about their employability work and then they go away again because they have their jobs, so you don't get the combination of all the single or two hours that they are meeting together amounting to anything because they just come and go.

Objective setting is a core function of project planning and part of the structure

for delivering successful projects. These explicit objectives when written within

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the governance of the project then become core to the success of the project.

It is clear from the following excerpt that Alex perceived the SHEEF to fulfil

certain stated objectives.

…the concept of developing a strategic plan was absolutely sound, the process of coming up with the plan was appropriate, I think that some of the content was perhaps more controversial than others, I think the least controversial objective was the brokerage and information exchange. So that was something everyone was in agreement with, you know… we would be the information hub,   acting as a broker, provide some glue as it were, ..with the LTW2, I think that..SHEEF was also recognised as a champion of employability, policy and practice.

The role of clear aims and objectives and link to the success of project outputs

appears critical to the success of collaborative working. Linking this, Gerri

viewed the SHEEF as a 'disastrous attempt at strategic partnership working.

Because there were no clear goals, there was no clear, nobody knew what the

input was meant to be…'

The MG Chair also 'wanted to have a mission, vision and a set of guiding

principles and I think we are successful in setting that up, and they were simple

and understandable by everyone and they were also ambitious'

When asked about the suitability of the objectives and whether fit for purpose,

not everyone agrees with the reality of these objectives - Indi:

I do remember a long time ago looking at these and I think the experience bore it out, but that doesn't mean to say that SHEEF was without value. If we take into account strictly to these five objectives it paints an unrealistic picture of what SHEEF was.

Dee had looked at the objectives before the interview, 'I think that they are

very good of course…you know how they panned out in practice is a different

story, but I don't remember actually planning them'.

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Hillary supported Indi's comments and provided an example of the structural change (through project relationship management) and also membership change when the directors of the LTW2 student projects were invited to participate in the SHEEF MG in their own role positions rather than as a third party representative reporting to the MG,

'It didn't feel at all to me successful for example in the early days, so in a kind of way pre-R arriving, post-R arriving ......I don't want it to look as if nothing ever happened but that was my feeling before we all started going to meetings...... by which time we (LTW2 student projects) were all very well-established, ...I think it was clearer that the projects were delivering, had a story to tell and people were listening to what that story was'

Again, the specific nature and lack of understanding of the SHEEF's purpose and objectives was highlighted,

'it wasn't unique and the terms of the strategic objectives, the leadership, did the conferences provide additional leadership across the sector on employability?... did they affect the development of strategy and change? Not at sector level but very possibly and probably and hopefully participants went back with something changed and developed practice within the institution but that's not what SHEEF said they were going to be doing' (Eddie).

Hence, evaluation of the level of success of the collaboration is difficult to generate when there were trust issues, the project was again bounded by the synchronicity of planning and academic calendars, and with unrecognised goals. Not surprising then, the perception was 'I don't think the SHEEF partnerships added value' (Alex).

Gerri's narrative excerpt highlights a conflict between the stated planned for objectives and what was starting to emerge as unstated objectives. (Huxham, 1995)

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And some people I heard some people say to me ….they weren't able to contribute, they saw him (Chair) pushing his vision to become an authoritative representative voice.
I didn't think this was about (SHEEF as) an authoritative representative voice …this was about community of practice at a senior strategic level but they wanted to be if anyone's ever asking about employability in higher education it will be us that they come to…….so there wasn't any kind of shared goal……it is was quite absurd, a waste of time and effort.
Other stakeholder groups also perceive the MG as a means to achieve

unstated aims, Dee:

You know our voice would be heard, would be taken to a much higher for strategic level - that's why it was also good to have the stakeholders on the management group because all of that said this is important, we can't have all these different little initiatives going on at ground level, we have to run with that and give it some leadership.
It is clear in the following excerpt that such unstated aims were recognised by

members of the MG, again GERRI:

a lot of people refused seem to put projects forward because they didn't agree that projects were going to be in any way helpful in embedding behaviours across the nation em so these people, these projects, …brought to the table a whole lot of painful baggage. It made it quite difficult to say 'look that group was great but it's not the right level and this is what we're trying to do now'.
….it stuck me nobody knew what they were playing at, there were 15 people, always different agendas.

The third of the Huxham and Vangen (2005) aims categories is that of the

hidden aim. Here for example in this passage from Eddie (who was quite

emotive by this point in the interview), it is clear that as the SHEEF project

continued it developed outwith of its stated aims with the potential to lead to

conflict with other stakeholder agencies.

With voices that are not just academic it was also the positioning of SHEEF as a standalone committee that didn't help because it did then lead it to say it did want to be a 'big gun' and that wasn't what was needed, and it could have been a good big gun but there was a whole lot of work wrapped up in that first lot. But then wanting to be the big gun it (SHEEF) was still coming up against

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the big guns in Agency A, Agency B and Agency C, Agency D - all of whom want to be leaders in the field….. everybody wants to be leader.

4.3 Implementation

The implementation stage of a strategic project includes the management and leadership of the project as a project begins to operate and work toward fulfilling its aims and objectives. The implementation stage looks at ways of doing things, structures and authorities to achieve a shared vision. In particular, 'role' was identified as a 2nd level theme from the data analysis. The role aspect of the MG is considered in this section, both leadership and representative MG stakeholders.

4.3.1 Leadership

In the set up phase of the SHEEF project, Fran was appointed to Chair the MG but this appeared problematic from the start. Billy, the project co-ordinator highlights the difficulties of working with multiple stakeholders:

The other thing, and conflicting, was how (SHEEF Chair) … saw this kind of working was not the same as Agency C, to a point where he was getting directives straight from Agency C but that my role was paid by Agency B and they were my employers, and because of this is was difficult to get clear aims, they (Agency B) wanted the money, they stuck in a way that that would happen…

Agency B's response to a potential loss of control through the lack of access to funding was to create an academic-related role for the project co-ordinator. The previous role had been administrative and by generating an academic development role, Agency B sought to leverage influence on the employability agenda though learning and teaching.

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The graduate employability agenda is very complex and as Government policy

to be delivered through HE, very difficult. Indi is clear that this is a significant

challenge that, 'there would be one version of employability and you would be

able to discover it, …Good Luck to you, we've been trying since the 1970s and

haven't been able to come up with it'.

In addition to the complexity, the Chair took an instrumental view of

employability in HE substantially different to the policy of economic

development through graduate employability. Fran:

*I was the wrong person for the job because I didn't then and still don't take an
instrumental view of employability in HE em, I don't think that we exist to make
students employable I think a good higher esystem for by its very nature allow
people to make people employable not by giving them good CV's or putting
them in touch with employers or by giving them what placements- they can do
all of that thing -All good things.*
*I happen to think it's a very old fashioned view - I already knew clearly the
creation of an enquiring mind and how would give students those mental
motivation skills by the way we treat HE rather than necessarily explicitly
embedding employability into the higher education.*
This stance about the role of employability within HE brought conflict amongst

the MG, DEE:

*I have no idea how was the Chair was appointed, we were always wondering
how?*
*I don't think it was ever made clear, because again the Chair had not really
been involved in any discussions about employability in the sector before - it
was a surprise to us.*
*I always wondered how much interest and passion he had for that particular
cause (employability) and that of course was very dependent on the individual,
people and personalities etc*
It may be that these are indeed quasi-political appointments, but there is

certainly a lack of transparency around the governance arrangements of the

SHEEF at set-up stage. Eddie concludes when asked about the appointment

of the Chair:

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I'm not quite sure how that came about and I continue not to be sure how these appointments come about. There is always, like we have to go round the various universities, University Z has got so and so on this committee and the deputy or assistant vice chancellor and I don't know if it's kind of somebody's turn, ……..oh dear all the committees seem to be chaired by people from the West (of Scotland), so we had better have someone from (East) … So I think that's another thing that gets taken into consideration, is that it's always got to be somebody from an academic background and when it came to this particular (employability) agenda that wasn't necessarily a good decision.

The leadership role itself and fitness for purpose in determining the strategic

direction for the SHEEF was questioned. Indi, also a LTW2 project director

observed this challenge of managing a strategic project on a national level, 'I

suppose the Chair was under some pressure to be a leader rather than a

coordinator, so rather than facilitating a forum it was more like direct an

organisation or something like that…'. This also questions the scope of the

SHEEF and the span of influence of the employability project.

Clarity of direction and shared objectives are required for successful

collaboration within the context of changing environmental drivers. Take for

example in this passage from Eddie who provides a narrative bringing together

notions of changing policy, strategy and leadership.

So it (SHEEF) hadn't sat down and said we are we? Who are all the players? What have we got here? 100 piece jigsaw here-how many of the pieces to be already have fitted together? And that is a very big job to do and it was a particularly big job to do at the end of the enhancement employability theme and the end of the funding for the employability coordinators and the start of SHEEF.

There were discussions about this is what we should do, however my view or my memory of that, is that that didn't get a warm response, … In my view that was what was needed to precede the next stage of leadership and strategy. I think I come back again to the personalities who wanted to be leading.

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4.3.2 Voice/agency

The apparent tensions between the role of the SHEEF, the voice of the MG in

the sector and leadership again become apparent. Alex talks about the SHEEF

as a lead voice to the Scottish Government with regard to employability. This

appears to be an important component as this notion of role is inconsistent

with other member agencies of the SHEEF MG.

Where that role was slightly more controversy…about, the leadership (role) was less disputed but when we talk about being able to influence policy, that is where, there was some sensitivities, whether it would have a lobbying role and impact upon political agendas and roles of the various constituent stakeholders and members of the MG and that's where we got into some sticky territory – having its own particular stance on policy, a champion for employability fine, but a stance on policy, not.
This standpoint was also observed by Gerri:

All the agencies I would say were probably in a state of flux one way or another- some of the biggies and some of them like the Agency D were just cross, they thought they were doing this perfectly well there was no need, and any anyone who put a toe over the edge of their bit, they would snap and the same with Agency B to a certain extent. The idea that the government would phone anybody other than them for information about employability and Scottish universities they (Agency B) found pretty challenging.
One of the major outputs of the SHEEF project was a series of national

Conferences to enhance the awareness of embedding employability in the HE

student experience. In the following passage the impact of agency is

illuminated where Hillary talks of the project outputs:

you know the conference was really important in getting everyone together and talking about it (employability) but the process by which it emerged, the stakeholders all had their own agendas and it wasn't all the group coming together as they talk about it here, to promote the way to inform and influence… and joint working, establishing sector wide.
Indi concurred, 'I had a sense and it goes with what Hillary was saying, there

were either big players or people representing big players around the table

and this seemed as if they often had conflicting agendas'. Indi associated this

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agency with similar behaviours he observed on project work he had been

involved with:

I've seen it before a little in previous works I've done but not in the same way, …… you hear 'Oh I'm doing this' and then, 'I'm doing this' and someone else 'I'm doing this', which has got nothing to do with the project and then people getting credit for the fora.
This would apparently also bear out for success of SHEEF and its project outputs.
…the University X event, I think, obviously I wasn't involved ….rejuvenated it (SHEEF), there was a bit of buzz to see that - actually a lot of activity from a lot of people from different institutions, and almost ran despite the management group.
Reflecting on the level of success of the partnership, Billy cites agency as a

critical factor which could be directly addressed 'so what I would adopt was a

more successful recognised attitude to agency'. This finding highlights the

nature of these interrelationships as collaborative working.

4.3.3 Reciprocity
Gerri……………

these people all hated each other from 15 years ago and they were all fighting like cats in a sack over the same thruppence. Talk about a poisoned chalice. How on earth was this ever supposed to be anything other than a car crash in slow motion?
The interrelationship between agency and reciprocity appears stronger when

considered as a means to achieving shared aims and objectives as is clear in

the following excerpt from Fran:

We certainly didn't speak as one voice. When people left meetings, they went and spoke with the other voices about issues, and disunity is too strong a word, but self-interest allowed other groups such as a Committee at Agency B to effectively, usurped is not the right word, but to take some of our vision and work and not recognise our vision - we weren't able to do what we wanted to do and it might be because we identified our guiding principles and mission and vision too late.
The agencies represented on the SHEEF MG are networked and connected,

and this enabled institutions if they chose to represent a '*skewed perspective'*

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or not, for example AGCAS which is an agency which offers an overarching

viewpoint of statistics and graduateness.

Gerri: So again there was a turf war, a secret turf war, between Agency B and Agency A, so if 'anyone is telling a great story to government that's our job….It's not going to be you, so back in your box.'

4.3.4 Trust

These interrelationships also highlighted the participant roles and their voices

within the structure of the SHEEF, giving emergence to the level of trust

between the participating stakeholders. Take for example in the following

passage, where Gerri explains the structure of the SHEEF partnership in terms

of 'nodes'.

I felt that it (SHEEF) was a node that wasn't required on the (HE) network, that didn't function effectively and it was hard for me to see how it could. There were other nodes,(pointing to diagram)- they are and you could see it was trying to be a nodes that brought together lots of other nodes and that was great and a nice idea but the fact was that the so many of those nodes that didn't want to be there and certainly didn't want to concede one jot of their power and influence to a central coordinating function.

The state of trust and trust building in the strategic arrangement again appears

to depend on the relationships between member agencies. Note however, that

the language is that of structure, of 'nodes' within a network.

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4.4 Structure for collaboration

The relationship between structure and strategy is often driven by the nature

of a bounded context and environment and drives the means by which

organisational goals may be achieved. In terms of competitive advantage it is

a common theoretical model whereby structure drives strategy. To what

extent is the structure of the collaboration important for the success of the

collaboration itself and the means by which decisions are taken? When asked

about the appropriateness of the structure of the SHEEF, Eddie commented,

(SHEEF) was launched as a management forum without me being really convinced that a management forum was required in the sector. Eddie went on to comment on the communication within MG, 'communication things that were not quite sharp enough and there wasn't enough discussion ……. But I do accept that also, in and around the sector, sometimes we discuss things ad nauseam and nothing ever gets decided, you know…'

The effectiveness structure, strategy and partnership is considered by Billy,

tasked with managing the project, who commented, 'I think in terms of

partnership this was all fine, I would have more neutral structuring such that

there wasn't this hostility' (between MG members).

The LTW2 Project Directors also questioned the appropriateness of the

governance arrangements, Indi considering the set-up of SHEEF MG in

comparison to the LTW2 student placement project:

I actually don't know if that was something intended because each (LTW2) project had its own steering group as well, so there were all these layers and I think because there were all these layers they wanted somehow to say, 'We're in charge, we are going to make ourselves the leading body but just because you say that doesn't make it happen'.

Alex did not agree with this view however, when asked about the organisation

of the SHEEF, Alex confirmed that:

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…again, SHEEF was conceptually, let's put aside what it actually is, is a good model because it allows much more freedom of information. And also, to actually have a centre body there is one point which adds value for money…

The format of the set-up of the SHEEF and the structure informed individual

perception of the collaborative activity itself. Billy, again expressed that the

role of agency and individual agenda affected the collaborative practice,

'I kind of feel everyone had their individual agendas, nobody didn't want SHEEF to work, but I feel what had happened was already set up the year previously, and I think that frustrated, without the vision and the structure'.
It appears that the aims and objectives set for the SHEEF are overly ambitious,

Alex confirming this view when asked by the interviewer,

'Yes.. I think they were..I think we had visions of us being in the independent 'think tank' type model em, but of course , I think that the voices, the independent constituent parts of SHEEF, were quite strong voices, personalities, agendas'.
However as expressly stated the interrelationships between the MG members,

persistently comes to the fore in relation to the success of the potential for

collaborative practice, adding further complexity to the structure for

successfully meeting the stated aims.

There wasn't enough cohesion for a think tank, it was more a collection of voices, not the cohesion necessary to get to where (we needed to be). But while there is value in such a thing, the value of an employability think tank…, I don't think SHEEF could meet that remit. That's separate from a network.

4.4.1 The nature of collaboration
Gerri expressed the view that;

SHEEF was indeed set up as a strategic partnership, but the nature of that partnership should have been structured differently and perhaps a differing shared vision and working practice 'collaboration wasn't really the partnership working they were looking for ..'. but did not clarify what the partnership is or is not.
This stance around collaboration is of interest, as the structural arrangements

for the SHEEF are not codified. This is in contrast to the perception of the

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LTW1 predecessor, SHEEN, and its evolution as a collaborative partnership.

In the following passage, Dee expresses a strong voice as to the collaborative

practice:

as a result of this (SHEEN) funding initiative we all felt that we needed to collaborate with each other on embedding employability at our respective institutions and what happened quite naturally was that we got together to share practice to exchange experiences et cetera and it was a spontaneous decision for us to meet regularly.
This lack of structure around the partnership arrangements resulted in a lack

of assurance, 'that there was a real contradictory standing where there was an

opportunity to get everything sorted, with all the Project and everything, the

question of where partnerships got to wasn't really worked out'.(Billy*)*

Again, there is further confusion around the set-up and structure of the

SHEEF, and communication of the structural arrangements. Some of the

participant voices do indeed highlight the complexity of collaborative practices.

Eddie acknowledges the collaborative element of the structural arrangements:

I had always felt that SHEEF was set up as a collaborative body and to help to lead collaboration from the sector itself, but right from the outset, was not collaborative.
And the management element of the structural arrangements gave rise to

stakeholder frustration and perhaps lack of understanding of the governance

of the SHEEF. Billy:

Just in terms of, and this is one of the things that gave frustration to me was I think it's almost, for a true collaboration, it's hard almost more difficult than team work/ partnership…There is a fine balance for collaboration and if time is taken to set the collaboration up right, that wasn't helped by them.. as the existing partners came with some engrained ways..
The notions of structure, strategy and achieving organisational aims and

objectives are drawn here through the perspective of managing a strategic

LTW2 project, that 'there was a massive power imbalance, say and part of that was the structure, but part of it was implementation of the structures and the personalities and so on which meant it could never achieve all these things' (Charlie).

In contrast, those participants compared the outputs of the SHEEF to their involvement and success of the SHEEN. Here Dee compares the sharing of knowledge within the practitioner employability network,

it was all very good to sort of encourage, it's all about shared knowledge and resources, which we had done spontaneously before without being asked to do it and possibly worked better (than SHEEN).
These feelings around the level of stakeholder engagement were reinforced by Hilary, 'those people are not going to own these objectives'. The concomitant lack of collegiality and collaborative practice is illuminated by Dee and in the following passage,

and we felt very often that effort was spent on reinventing the wheel, not taking into account what had been achieved before and one of our major stands was this collaborative, collegiate approach was being lost in SHEEF.

4.5 Transformational change

Whereas, the emergent themes of the research illustrate the findings when considering the success and nature of the collaboration of the SHEEF project, it is also important to consider the transformational change effected from the partnership project per se. Transformation and the sharing and dissemination of knowledge also emerged as a 1st level theme in the data analysis process. Employability is often discussed as a core theme itself but here the impact on graduate employability is considered as an output and the research findings

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takes cognisance of this as transformational change. In the passage below,

Alex opines a differing model for effecting change.

I would do it differently…I think I would probably be more minded to do ……2 ventures, one this sort of independent think tank, an independent, self-selecting (group), whereas these people (MG) were actually brought the table, I think a think tank to be a self-selecting group.
And my focus for SHEEF to be about bringing practitioners together, to share practice, lead developments etc. perhaps for agendas for SHEEF meetings to be done better, and then could be done as something with all the key agencies
However, the key issues remain as to, 'How do we bring together particular

the HE practitioners? These are the key and distinct. Eddie also drew a

distinction between implementing policy and the transformational change and

a practitioner element,

Did they affect the development of strategy and change? Not at sector level but very possibly and probably and hopefully participants went back with something changed and developed practice within the institution, but that's not what SHEEF said they were going to be doing.
And in a more reflective tone, commenting on learning from successes and

mistakes, 'I don't necessarily thing (SHEEF) was a big mistake, but it just didn't

hit the nail on the head'.

Notions of lack of trust between members of the SHEEF MG for a combined

vision certainly impacted on the ability to collaborate. In this excerpt, the level

of transformational change is related to interrelationships and shared vision,

Indi:

So, it's kind of developing an agenda for the collaborative group whoever happens to be so they can all feel part of that……… doesn't mean they have to feel they have to keep fighting their own, external to the group, personal whatever that is, to enable them to have some sort of equal focus.
Where the task is the implementation of employability policy, and a

combination of agencies displaying agency and reciprocity, 'maybe in fairness

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this was a genuine attempt to lift it up from practitioners involved in the day-to-

day and trying to have more influence over policy etc..' (Indi)

The structure and role of individuals within the SHEEF MG necessary to

achieve the scope of state objectives is difficult to put together through

arbitrary representation. Indi:

when you start to consider the level of resourcing you had, some of those politely put a rather ambitious. Others much more, you could argue like that (pointing) should be put together for the specific purpose of realising the objectives, so rather than think we need these people to do this thing… How do we find the people to support the thing (objective).
Here the achievement of the shared objective is core to the design of the MG

participants and mode for collaboration.

When asked about alternative approaches to implementing policy through

SHEEF, the notion of actually building individual relationships with the partner

institutions emerged. Gerri suggested a more directive approach,

so what we should have done is got a bunch of strategic people in a room and said what would you like? Tell me about University A's approach? And then, Tell me about University B's approach? Tell me about what's University C doing? ….what is the actual story? How can we (Agency A) help? We understand you're angry, we understand you are upset, we understand you are really not happy with this, we (Agency A) are not thrilled either, but it is what it is, what can we do to make you happier?.....
But in summing up, the participant voice regarded almost some inevitability

about the ability to succeed in the collaboration, 'talk about a poisoned chalice.

How on earth was this ever supposed to be anything other than a car crash in

slow motion?'

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4.6 Conclusion:

Chapter 4 presented the data in the context of setting up, the implementation and transformation stages of the SHEEF strategic project following the data handling process as outlined in the previous chapter (3). The themes identified include the a priori themes of aims and objectives, leadership, agency and trust. In addition, causal themes of interrelationships of reciprocity, 'voice' and (leadership) role emerged from the data interpretation. These relationship data findings are presented in a cluster diagram and workshop outputs. The data is evaluated and discussed in Chapter 5 from the perspectives of the literature to inform models for collaborative practice.

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Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to develop the discussion about the research findings and to present an approach and design for collaborative working in a higher education (HE) context. The study aimed to identify the factors for successful strategic projects through an in-depth understanding of the causal mechanisms of the SHEEF. This chapter explores the causal themes, re-contextualised them and then presents them through narratives and diagrams.

Firstly, in Section 1, the research findings are considered through the critical realist perspective as a philosophical ontology for studies related to sociological conditions. The findings and causal relationships, 'mechanisms', are discussed through this lens. The thematic outcomes of the data analysis are presented and examined in respect of answering the research questions of the study and generating the contribution to knowledge. There is a summary of the findings relating the findings from the study to the literature, and then finally the development of a conceptual framework from the findings of the current study: Collaborative arrangements for strategic projects: a conceptual framework.

In Section 2, the conceptual framework from the findings of the current study is explained to support collaborative arrangements of strategic projects. Finally, in Section 3, the research objectives are revisited, the contribution to knowledge from the study is offered and the conclusion to the discussion of the findings. Chapter 6 then reviews the study considering the limitations of the research project and presents a series of recommendations for future

research and for practitioners. An evaluation of the study is presented considering the limitations of the study.

5.1 Section 1: The nature of collaborative projects

In a funding and policy environment of HE in Scotland that seeks organic growth in collaborative working between organisations it is increasingly difficult to deliver on agreed outcomes and add value. Often 'imposed partnerships' bring HEIs and agencies together to deliver on issues of economies of scope but there are tensions between the best approaches. Even when individual agents seek to work collaboratively, there is difficulty in managing across boundaries and the development of an integrated project structure. Agency and historical experience of working relationships inform existing and future working. The drive and energy of initiating a collaborative project and defining the problem can result in a processual solution with the passion of the initial engagement dissipated. This study considers the success factors for collaborative working on strategic projects.

There is no script for the critical moves of setting up, implementing and evaluating collaborative projects. Tools and frameworks are required to support collaboration and the lack of these tends to create a tension with the internal organisational structures of the collaborative partners. For meaningful explanatory accounts of collaborative projects in the Scottish HE context there is a need for co-creation of new models of collaboration and the impact on collaborative partners. The SHEEF is seen as a partnership to be an ambiguous concept (McQuaid, 2000). The effectiveness of the collaboration is considered in the following sections.

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5.2 Role of power and structure within organisations

Central to critical realism is the separation of ontology and epistemology. The critical realist ontological model defines three distinct *layers of reality* domains. These are differentiated as the real, the actual and the empirical domains (Bhaskar, 1978).

The *real* layer, or as sometimes termed the deep layer (Fleetwood, 2011), of reality is the world as an entity, which exists whether it is observed or not. This is an important ontological distinction for critical realists, who hold that the world can exist separate from their knowledge of it. The real layer cannot be directly seen but its effects may be experienced. By this realist ontology, organisations can have structures and power as a result of this layering, that exist whether observed or not. Mechanisms, events and experiences may all exist within this real domain and have particular causal power or susceptibilities (Bhaskar, 1978). Research at this layer will identify if causal powers act at this level and in what way.

This research study aimed to identify what causal powers exist within strategic projects (structure and agency) that result in or cause collaborative activity. This is likely to consider the power relationships between the individual agents operating within the partner institutions.

The second described *actual* layer of reality is that which is observable and refers to what happens when causal powers of objects are activated (Sayer, 2000). The layers or strata have events and actions associated with them and it is possible to observe behaviours and events caused by events occurring in

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the real layer. Research underpinned by a critical realist ontology is able to examine the cause of an event or a series of actions. Detailed and iterative approaches to research through the questions *how?* and *why?* help to identify causal effects. For example, how did collaborative working impact on collaborative objectives? How did these objectives enable (cause) effective collaboration in the workplace? This creates the layering and depth of critical realism that provides the rigour and creativity of the epistemology.

Realists argue the *empirical* layer of reality is that which can be experienced and which relies on our senses to perceive the world. For example, research into the number of graduate employability initiatives launched or dissemination events attended gives a measurable indication of experience of collaborative working. The empirical layer refers to the position of the observer, who can sense or, based on experience, can observe the events at this level.

Critical realism separates itself from true empiricism to allow a causal criterion where the existence of unobservable entities can be made by reference to observable effects, which can be explained as products of these entities (Sayer, 2000).

Whereas, the 'real concepts may be induced from the data', it is not necessarily the case that actions are not occurring within this strata, but that the causal mechanisms may not be as yet observable (Easton, 2000:212).

Organisations have structures that exist outside of observable, independent empiricist approaches. These structures can influence outcomes of events for

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example the structures of the partner organisations working within the SHEEF strategic project gives rise to observable effects in collaborative working.

Figure 4 presents in diagrammatic form how these mechanisms (Sayer, 1992) could occur within the strategic projects. It offers one way of explaining the causal relationships within a project open system; that is, a project which is not bounded by its environmental context.

The members of the SHEEF MG as agents are co-present with other stakeholders as representatives of their organisations on the MG. These agents exist in a social world but may be characterised by a lack of unity and a social disorganisation. Agents operating separately and distinct from one another may generate a structure which seeks to create further disorganisation through political representation (Bhaskar, 2010). Through the nature of the relationship of the agents, there is a mechanism which results in an end event, in this example, the (lack of) achievement of project objectives. This means of undertaking an explanatory account is not a hierarchical relationship, it is causal relationship. In Section 2 a conceptual framework from the current study is introduced which is underpinned by these causal relationships identified through the research study.

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Figure 4 Explanations in a collaborative project open system

Entities
- Multiple stakeholders
- Social agents

Power Structure
- Attitude towards structure (Chair)
- Influence on agencies
- Political representations
- Constraining impact of previous initiative (SHEEN)
- Seeking own 'voice' to be heard

Mechanism
- Through interrelationships
- Constraining impact of reciprocity (between agents)

Event
- Aims, goals, set objectives not ageed, not achieved

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5.3 Setting up the project

As a result of the findings, it is possible to consider the nature of the SHEEF

as a collaborative event as defined by Mattessich and Monsey (1992:11)

a mutually beneficial and well defined relationship entered into by two or more
organisations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes
commitment to defining a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility
and mutual authority and accountability for success.

5.3.1 Strategic planning and structure

Strategic planning emerges as a primary theme from the study. The structure

to effectively deliver on strategy is essential (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b;

Mintzberg, 1992). The research findings highlight that little consideration was

really given to the structure of SHEEF to deliver on ill-defined aims and

objectives resulting in 'a lot of tactical manoevering to be worked out' (Billy).

Moreover, from Alex: 'The model for SHEEF was developed …. and we simply

had the ultimate say and then we put out……., we also advertised for a Chair

of SHEEF'.

The findings suggest that the positioning of the stakeholders and their

relationship with each other was anything but simple. Appendix A shows the

complexity of the relationships between the stakeholders (after Huxham,

2005) and is representative of Mintzberg's (1992, 2009) divisional structure

with a pull for professional stakeholders to collaborate but represent their own

multi- agency structure.

Both Mintzberg (1979, 1992, 2009) and Chandler (1962, 2003) argue the

positive co-relation between strategy and structure. Chandler (1962, 2003)

concluded that an organization's strategy tends to influence its structure. This

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study into factors for successful collaborative projects considers that the strategic project structure accords with the structural elements of an organisation. And suggests that the project strategy indirectly determines factors such as the project objectives, governance arrangements and environmental context, and each of these in turn influences the structure of the organisation.

Mintzberg's model of professional bureaucracy (1992) describes an organisational structure with often hierarchical structures, providing complex services through highly trained (autonomous) professionals but in an environment of loose, ill-defined structures. When applied to the multi-organisational strategic project of the SHEEF, this links to the professional bureaucracy model. There may well be relative isolation from colleagues within the project per se but relatively close contact with those in other identity groups. Hence the influence of SHEEN, a predecessor practitioner network with individuals reluctant to 'let go' of previous affiliations. Indeed, Dee stated that 'that the University's careers service became servants of the LTW agendas rather than partners in the agendas. So that was that kind of protecting, motivation to be in SHEEF as well as we genuinely have something to offer and to hope that that's how we could move on'. This was not the perception that was brought to the SHEEF structural arrangement, 'SHEEN who were all the wounded soldiers and lost their jobs' (Gerri).

The impact of this is model of professional bureaucracy (Mintzberg,1992) is that HEI professionals tended to identify with their professional job roles and associations rather than the project organisation.

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What may be more appropriate for a strategic project is what is described as Mintzberg's (1992) *adhocracy* structure with stakeholders engaging in non-routine tasks. The shared objective of the adhocracy is innovation (in this instance it would be innovation in employability) and effective adaptation to changes in the environmental context (across the HE sector in Scotland). There is a tendency for a large number of stakeholders at both strategic and operational levels working across the devolved strategic project supporting the changes in the operating environment/context.

Adhocracies are very effective in the use of limited resource and this would support the supposed structure of SHEEF 'when you start to consider the level of resourcing (SHEEF) had, some of those politely put are rather ambitious' (Indi). It is possible that this level of resource did indeed create 'relationship risk' (Cravens et al, 2000) and limit the sharing of resources and skills. Given the HE context of knowledge transfer, the limited sharing and rivalry between actors may well have occurred at the 'real level' of the project organisation, the unobserved level impacting on the operational aspects of the SHEEF structure.

These findings suggest that the expectation and experience of staff participating in strategic projects within HE would follow that of a professional bureaucracy model. However, the data suggests an adhocracy structural model is a more accurate explanation of the event. The impact of this is that a change in practice at project level in setting up an adhocracy model could cause strategic project objectives and shared purpose to be achieved. This

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did not appear to happen with the members of the SHEEF MG as there was no formal recognition of role within the MG and contribution to the project.

This notion of preparation and organisation of the implementation of policy change by undertaking strategic structural changes fits with Saarinen and Ursin's (2015) notion of the role of structures. It suggests that in a structural approach the stakeholders of the SHEEF would indeed shape structures and these in turn determine the actions of people within the practical format of the strategic project.

Structure also plays an important part in the leadership role, as the purpose and collaborative agenda can be influenced (Huxham and Vangen, 2003). In this study, there does not appear to be a directly observed correlation between leadership and structure. The emergent structure theme incorporates secondary themes of governance, hierarchy and purpose, whereas the emergent leadership theme has associated second order themes of dominance and focus. 'My perception was that the Chair wanted to be the Chair, and was an opportunity ..to gain a platform .. to do good amazing stuff and be recognised as a leader' (Gerri).

The research findings highlight that little consideration was really given to the structure of SHEEF to deliver on that aims and objectives resulting in 'quite a lot of bad feeling' (Indi), 'that they came out with whoever is somebody influential in something in Scotland first, and then they looked at it and set up the objectives' (Dee). Hence the importance of, when setting up a strategic project, ensuring that the *project* objectives and structure fit with both the agent

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and the operating environment. However, the data from the study suggests that in this case, priority was given to the objectives of the *agent* and loosely connected to the structuring and objective setting of the project. These interrelationships are considered in the following sections.

5.4 Implementation

The implementation of the SHEEF strategic project reflects the purpose of and relationships of individuals within SHEEF. The notion of interrelationships is considered as the primary theme associated with the implementation phase of the SHEEF. Again, this provides evidence of a fit with Eden and Huxham's (2001) 'episodes framework' whereby the purpose of the collaborative practice is given through group roles/activities, for example episodes are described as a 'spying organisation' or 'sceptical group'. It is suggested that working with these differing groups can be a good way of managing collaboration. A workshop for generating the SHEEF strategy did take place with members of the MG but it appears not to have moved successfully to the implementation phase and a tension was apparent here. Billy highlights the conflict, 'actually it started off quite well but….there were issues, wanting to clarify roles, and it was useful from the particular point, because there were different people on the group, and a different relationship, but it was changing , and I think that it created extra work'.

The representative members of the SHEEF MG were a mix of 'individuals operating at executive level in their own organisations and then you had people operating at much lower levels, very competent people but it wasn't a good mix' (Fran). However, the MG members were not 'sent' to be

organisational representatives as a 'sceptical group' is described (Eden and Huxham, 2001), but MG members had a leadership role in determining the success of the SHEEF and its aims for the collaboration and delivering on employability policy.

'Universities value their autonomy greatly and they don't particularly like anything imposed on them, unless there is money involved, that they can access, so people don't like being told that for example that SHEEF is the authoritative voice for employability. It might be University X saying "that might be the case but I'm going to do what I want to do in terms of employability in my institution". That's absolutely fine but we have to accept that that's the case, I operate like that in many respects as well' (Fran). This data supports a causal mechanism described as an 'imposed-upon organisation' where collaborations are externally constructed (Eden and Huxham, 2001), although in this instance through the actual organisations represented on the MG.

Leadership roles in the strategic project

Given this situation of multiple agents and agendas, it could be argued that the Chair of the SHEEF MG had the positional leadership role of convening the MG and driving direction towards implementation -'it probably contributed to him feeling that he had to be the expert, because he was a vice chancellor' (Hillary). This brought a set of issues as others felt that 'he should know stuff, but he could have said, "*I'm only the Chair, I don't need to, but I need to facilitate the discussion*". For some reason I think he felt pressure sometimes to act like he knew things about a lot of stuff ….about employability. It's okay

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not to get it, but he is only the Chair, it *is* his job to facilitate the discussion' (Indi).

This low level of co-operation between actors and partnerships, based on structures supporting status and authority, fits with Lowndes and Skelcher's (1998:321) four-stage partnership model. Considering the 'partnership programme delivery' (implementation) stage, the model describes little co-operation between members of the MG. However, data from this study suggested that SHEEF was at what has been described as an 'overlapping developmental stage'. This is a complex stakeholder network characterised by issues of mutual benefit, trust and reciprocity towards the implementation of partnership model.

Vangen and Huxham (2003b:65) describe what they term, 'collaborative thuggery' as a means to realise collaborative advantage through an integration of 'manipulative and political activity'. They acknowledge the relational roles of managers of collaborations but suggest that for successful partnerships more than successful relationships are required. The data suggests that for SHEEF success required more than the structural positional roles of project manager and Chair of the MG. Indeed, the data collected from the study suggests that the role of an expert and that of a champion was also important for collaboration within the SHEEF strategic project. The tasks associated with maintaining meaningful relationships with stakeholders are essential to all stakeholders, not only the project manager. The point at which this happens, or which stakeholders are engaged in the relational task, is dependent on the context of the project.

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The study highlights the expectation from within the strategic partnership that the expert status on employability, policy, theory and practice sits with the organiser (Cherry and Shefner, 2004), in this case the Chair of the MG and Agency A (the organising agency). There was a lack of understanding about what 'her/his (the Chair) specialist background was, or expertise that s/he could suddenly have had a title, this Scotland-wide leader on employability' (Dee).

The role of the expert may also be 'provided' by the organiser, 'an independent consultant, a third party consultant who was brought in to help facilitate the development, and we had several meetings of this working group' (Alex). Additionally, there was a feeling that specialist agencies are required to be part of the strategic partnership with an expert role, that, 'you do need to have some of the big names for credibility, if you go and have a project in employability you need to have AGCAS for example' (Hillary).

The leadership role of 'champion' was also emergent from the study, whereby the champion undertook the relational task of supporting SHEEF, of promoting its activities, and engaging with external markets, for example, 'AGCAS for employers naturally' (Dee).

Some of the work of the SHEEF fed positively into the work of Agency B 'not least because Alex and the Chair at the Agency B Committee were able to do that'. (Fran). In both examples above, the relational role of the project manager was to provide briefings to inform the champion and the role of the champion engaging with stakeholders. This support from the project manager was

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welcomed in the champion role, and the 'political problems associated with being a subordinate' did not 'play out' (Huxham and Vangen, 2005:226).

5.4.1 Interrelationships

This section considers the finding and themes of agency and reciprocity and the interrelationship of these themes. The findings from the iterative data analysis suggested a connection between the members (social agents) of the SHEEF MG and the other stakeholders. The concept of stakeholder or member voice was an overarching theme and the representatives from the MG gave voice to the agency of the stakeholders. This appears a powerful hygiene factor (Herzberg, 1987), motivating and defining group dynamics.
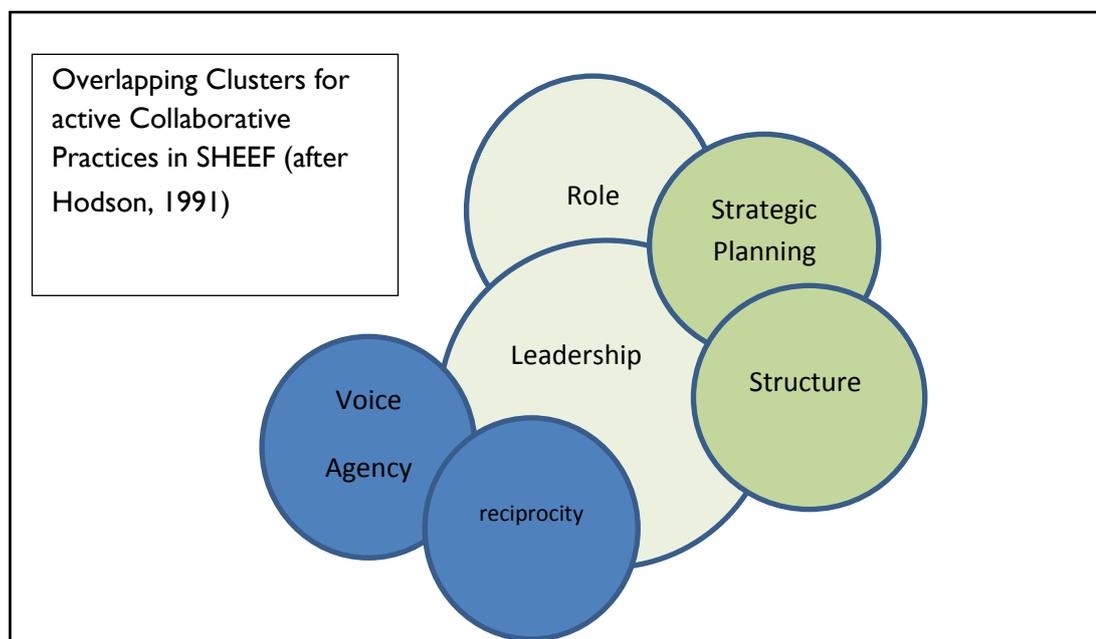
In the cluster diagram (figure 5), the collaborative practices of the social agents are shown as a thematic model of interrelationships. The theme of voice/agency is depicted overlapping the leadership theme. This clustered pattern of 'voice' and 'leadership' suggested integrated merged themes (Hodson, 1991) rather than a causal relationship. Voice impacts on leadership and vice-versa and not a causal relationship. Mintzberg (1987) and Mintzberg and Waters (1985) considers strategy as a perspective whereby strategy is a result of an organisation's perception of the world with a paradigm influencing the stance, the 'voice' or agency that an organisation espouses. Billy commented that (Agency B) 'regarded themselves as the main partner, with Agency A, Agency C at the core, there was a hierarchy, I think there was a real contradictory standing…'

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This notion of agency impacted on effective working practices where an overlap in perceived operations caused friction, although Indi observed this was not the mechanism in all cases, 'some people are more able to equally contribute collegiately and represent their own loyalties than others'.

This way of looking at the world also links with a realist philosophical perspective whereby the reality does indeed emerge from the organisation's structure, its way of doing business. Due to this inter-relatedness, 'voice' or agency may be regarded as a generative device both of the organisation and impacting 'on' the organisation. And therefore, in this study represented merged with reciprocity theme.

Agency and reciprocity are consequently presented as 2nd order themes from the data analysis, these are emergent from the 1st order inter-agency relationships and inter-personal relationships. The data from the study provides a fit with the literature around these historical, political and knowledge aspects of interrelationships.

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Figure 5 A Thematic Model for Interrelationships

Overlapping Clusters for active Collaborative Practices in SHEEF (after Hodson, 1991)

Role
Strategic Planning
Leadership
Structure
Voice
Agency
reciprocity

Generating knowledge through collaboration

Despite the strategic intent to support and provide funding for collaborative strategic projects from central policy makers, the stakeholder (agents) may not seek to bridge skills gaps and manage limited shared resource but, instead, increase the 'relationship risk' (Cravens et al, 2000) through deterring knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer. Pre-existing relationships impacted on the SHEEF MG, 'it would feel that you were in an Agency B (national) meeting and it was not conducive to the relationship' (Billy). Alex identified that the roles of skills and knowledge should be independent, and mutually exclusive when applied to strategic projects, 'one (group) this sort of independent think tank, ..self-selecting (group), and the focus for SHEEF to be about bringing practitioners (a second group) together, to share practice, lead developments et cetera. …These are the key and distinct'.

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In Chapter 2, the literature suggested that in extant research there is a number of identified stances on sharing knowledge with collaborating partners (Huxham and Hibbert, 2008; Diamond, 2006). In the following example from the study data, Fran's description identifies the defensive approaches, protectionist stances characterised and observable through the interaction of the social actors (members of the SHEEF MG). 'We certainly didn't speak as one voice. When people left meetings, they went and spoke with the other voices about issues, and disunity is too strong a word, but self-interest allowed other groups such as Agency C to effectively, usurped is not the right word, but to take some of our vision and work and not recognise our vision - we weren't able to do what we wanted to do'. This reflects Huxham and Hibbert's (2008) description of a 'starving' stance on sharing knowledge with partners, whereby stakeholders withhold knowledge unless deemed to benefit their own organisation.

The need for effective interrelationships and the enhancement of knowledge is essential where resource-limited projects seek to achieve more with less. And the argument towards a transition cost rationale (Madhok, 1997) is therefore supported, and exemplified by the SHEEN practitioner network whereby 'it's all about shared knowledge and resources, which we had done spontaneously before (as part of SHEEN) without being asked to do it and possibly worked better' (Dee). This perspective of the practitioner generating new knowledge through sharing and engaging with the external operating environment accords with the government policy, and that of universities being part of the knowledge economy (Barnett; 2000, 2003; Diamond, 2006).

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Inkpen and Beamish (1997) argue that knowledge-based resources are at risk through collaborative activity, while Das and Teng (2000) argue that knowledge may be used in some way to achieve future gain rather than a focus on the actual collaborative arrangement of the present project. Gerri described this situation observed in the SHEEF arrangement, 'some of the biggies (organisations) they thought they were doing this (employability) perfectly well - there was no need, and anyone who put a toe over the edge of their bit, they would snap…. The idea that the government would phone anybody other than them for information about employability and Scottish universities they (Agency B) found pretty challenging'.

Although trust may not be essential for successful collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) and the achievement of project outputs, the growth of trust as a collaboration progresses (Das and Teng, 1998) may be observable through the behaviours of the social agents. In the examples above, the focus on agency and reciprocity suggests that there was little growth in the trust between the members of the SHEEF MG even as the project progressed through start-up and implementation.

Under these circumstances, and as a result of the limited amount of time to build up this cycle of trust within the collaborative project, success is most likely to be measured against collaborative goals and objectives. There had been limited time for new knowledge to be emergent from the SHEEF project itself, and given that, the collaborative goals that were set are taken as the measure for overall performance of the collaboration itself. The situation around SHEEF is unclear. When asked what do you think the outcomes of SHEEF were?

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What did they deliver?, EDDIE replied, 'sadly I don't think they delivered anything. The conferences?…'. Other participants perhaps having developed greater levels of collaborative trust through the student placement projects, also mentioned events as a positive outcome, 'It (SHEEF) lacked certain collegiality some of the time, not all of the time – certain things like the events I think'… that was a turnaround for LTW2 I thought, that event. (Indi)' This step change perhaps identifies the 'small wins' approach of a trust building cycle (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) whereby actors can start to build trust through structural and membership changes (Diamond and Rush, 2012). This evidence would support the view that to develop interrelationships and to achieve the creation of knowledge through those interrelationships is of greater significance that the achievement of the project outputs alone (Garrick et al, 2004). From a realist perspective, trust is not directly observable, only the behaviours of actors may be observed through interactions. The creation of knowledge may be more successful where there is the ongoing development of interrelationships and the potential for trust building between stakeholders. However, respect for, and commitment to, the collaboration is essential. This is further demonstrated in the conceptual framework from the findings of the current study, derived from these emergent themes and presented in section 2.

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5.5 Evaluation

There is little evidence of any formal evaluation activity of the SHEEF strategic projects being undertaken through the project itself due to resource constraints, time and bounded project funding. However, an evaluation of LTW2 including SHEEF was carried out by external consultants, commissioned by the funding agency (SFC, 2014).

The findings of this study concurred with elements of the SFC (2014:12) summary report, that 'the leadership agenda (around graduate employability) proved quite hard to pursue successfully, in part because of the autonomy of HEIs, in part because of the range of organisations and groupings around related topics, and in part because the multi-agency structure of the Forum brought together a number of different interests and agendas'. The evidence presented in this thesis is supported by this external evaluation; that the themes of objectives, agency and structure are core to collaborative success for strategic projects (HE).

5.6 Section 2:

A conceptual framework for collaborative arrangements of strategic projects

Introduction

In this section, a conceptual framework from the findings of the current study is presented. The function of the conceptual framework is to provide the outline of what has emerged from the investigation and to consider the relationships between the differing key factors of the framework itself.

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Ravitch and Riggan (2012) argue that conceptual frameworks are comprised of three essential elements: personal interests, topical research and theoretical frameworks and are present in degrees of influence in any study.

The proposed conceptual framework from the findings of the current study, '*Collaborative Arrangements for Strategic Projects*' (Section 2, Figure 6) seeks to offer a graphical form to understand the relationship between the key factors of the study and its emergent themes. The conceptual framework explains graphically and with a narrative the key factors that were studies, the variables and the causal relationships amongst them (Miles and Huberman, 1994:18).

The framework from the current study has been informed by the participant voice and the in-depth perceptions of their experiences as part of the SHEEF MG. The framework has roots in critical realist philosophy with levels that are emergent from a greater understanding of the meanings and causal relationships of the collaborative strategic project. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are represented within the differing levels of the structural mechanism of the framework itself.

The key variables of the framework from the current study seek to be explanatory and to elicit further questions about the design of strategic projects and consideration to be given to the structure and power that are embedded within the structure of the project itself. This includes relationships with other strategic projects, for example through strategic alliances or joint policy initiatives.

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Likewise, the context in which one specific strategic project operates may well be similar to the context in which other collaborative projects operate, and this may be a directly competing relationship. Hence understanding the detail of the strategic project is most likely to present opportunities for collaborative advantage (Huxham, 1996).

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Figure 6 A Conceptual Framework for Collaborative Arrangements of Strategic Projects
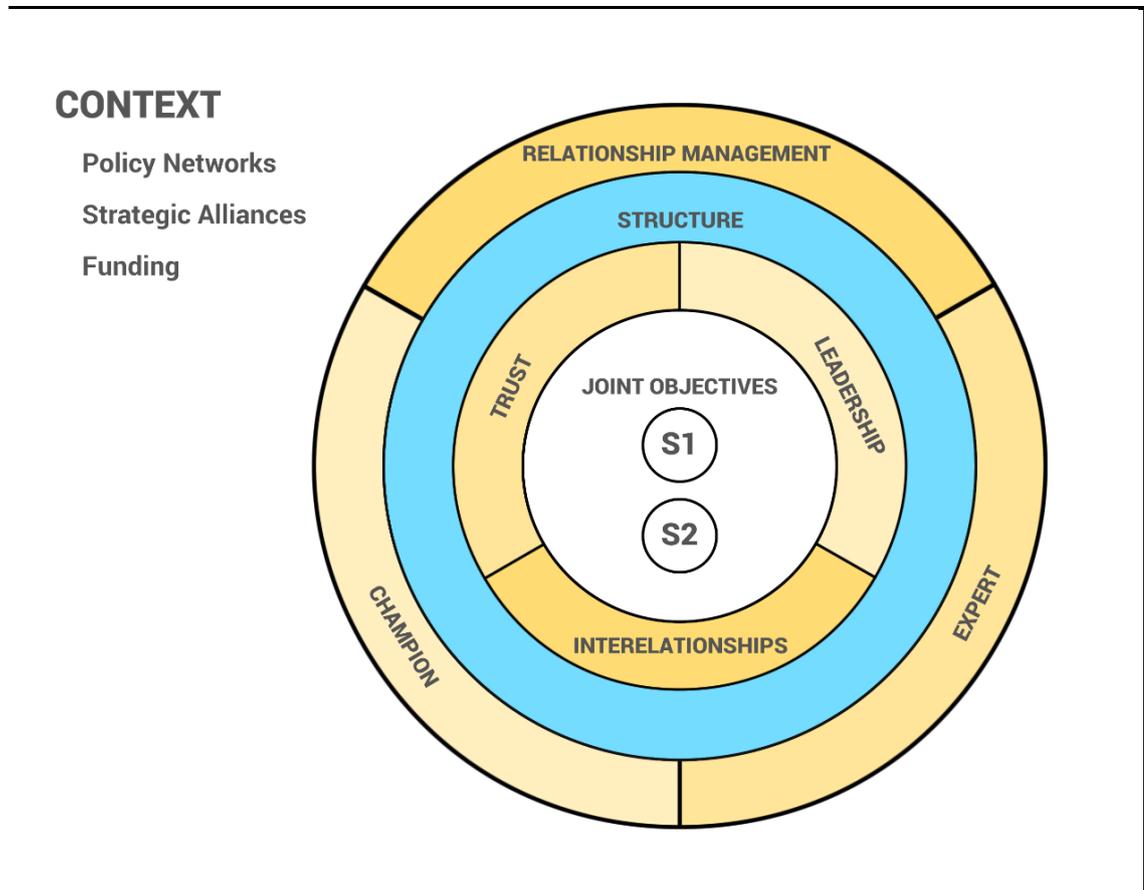
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The *conceptual framework for collaborative arrangements for strategic projects* provides a model for practitioners participating and/or managing collaborative projects operating within an HE context. It is presented in a graphical form as four concentric circles with a central core within an open system environment. This central core denotes the key events ie what it is that the collaborative project is actually trying to achieve. The core is surrounded by a further three concentric circles which are arranged in a non-hierarchical manner. These form layers/strata which inform these 'relationship circles'.

The following section considers each of these layers and the relationship between them. The framework from the findings of the current study is described through the critical realist perspective and causal relationships, 'mechanisms', are discussed through this lens.

5.6.1 Key factors: a joint objectives core

This is the *what?* level, for example, What is the output of the strategic project? The core has events associated with it, namely the achievement of joint stakeholder (S1-S2) objectives required for successful collaborative projects. The joint objectives core includes interdependent linkages for stakeholders/ entities (S1, S2, or many) involved as part of the strategic project.

This represents the *event* layer of causal mechanism and is that which is observable and is directly relatable to what happens when causal powers of objects are activated (Sayer, 2000) in the other strata of the organisation. Successful collaboration requires a commitment to the strength of those

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linkages and maintaining common joint objectives:- hidden, explicit, or unstated (Huxham,1995).

5.6.2 'How' is the project structured?

The second circle out from the centre is the *project structure* level. It shapes *how* a collaborative project will be set up and structured for successful achievement of the core objectives. It includes a coherent and formal set of processes, systems and structural elements that inform the organisation of the strategic project, including governance arrangements, the language necessary for the collaborative activity, project planning and decision making.

This level is the *actual* layer of reality from the critical realist perspective, it is that which can be observed, the behaviours, for example the arrangements around the setting up of the project, the decision making, the governance arrangements, all of which can observe the behaviours and events caused by entities in the real layer. For example, research into the project planning and roles within the collaboration give a measurable indication of the experience of collaborative working.

Collaborative projects also have structures that exist outside of these observable factors. Within these structures, entities, agents, people may be cut off from each other and not interact in a positive meaningful way toward achieving positive project outcomes. These 'hidden' elements of structures can influence outcomes of events in both a positive or negative manner.

In this conceptual framework the 'real'/ 'deep' layer (Fleetwood, 2011), is depicted graphically in the first circle out from the core and this layer within the

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organisation of the strategic project exists whether it is observed or not. The elements of 'trust', 'leadership' and 'interrelationships' within this level may not necessarily be readily observable, just as human nature itself may also not be directly seen. These are the hidden elements of the collaborative structure and exist, have structures and power to create 'causal' relationships whether observed or not (Bhaskar, 1978). For critical realists, this real level can exist separate from knowledge of it.

5.7 Causal powers

There are 3 key themes emergent from the research findings of the current study that sit within the conceptual framework.

Trust:

Trust is highly complex within collaborations and is situationally specific to the context. Trust operating within one collaboration or between agents may not occur within another separate project in the same operating context. Collaborations may be more successful where there is the ongoing building of trust between stakeholders. However, respect for and commitment to the collaboration is essential.

Leadership:

There may be positional and authoritative leadership within a formal collaborative project structure, for example through the role of the Chair or Director. Essential to the success of the project is an understanding of the value of that leadership and what value it brings to the collaboration. At the real, deeper layer leadership may not necessarily be formalised but evident

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through observation, in particular, of the interrelationships between social agents. This leadership may be identified by the expert, champion or relationship management role within a collaborative project.

Interrelationships:

It takes time to engage with and to leverage the relationships between the individuals and groups that make up the collaboration. Understanding the nature of the new and pre-existing relationships between the stakeholders enables the notion of agency and reciprocity to inform collaborative practice. The relationship between agency and reciprocity may in turn be informed by historical, political and knowledge-based issues.

5.8 Managing for the success of the project

The outside circle is the *who?* level, for example, Who manages to ensure the success of the project? Which roles are required for successful collaborative projects?

This outer circle represents the *empirical* layer of the critical realist perspective and ontology. This refers to the events that can be experienced and which rely on our senses to perceive the world. It is here whereby the existence of unobservable entities, for example leadership, trust and interrelationships can be manifested by observable effects (Sayer, 2000). The Observer role refers to the position of the observer, based on their experience. There are 3 key observer elements:

The Expert: At some point in the setting up, implementation and evaluation of the strategic project, differing levels and types of expertise will be required to

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provide specialist knowledge. The source may not be internal to the project or have a long-term affiliation but provides an essential expert voice.
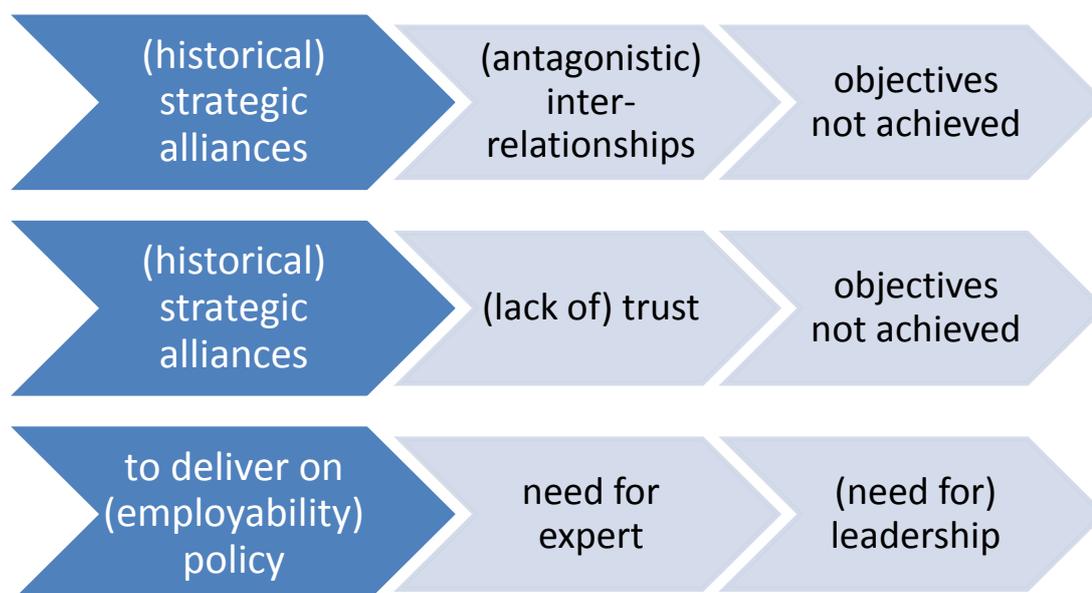
Project Relationship Management: Strategic projects need to navigate through a variety of processes and people and systems interactions. In order to manage the relationships between and by stakeholders, relational management needs to be inculcated within the complexity of the strategic project. This includes reinforcement of the values and overview of the project aims.

Champion: An individual or individuals, often a senior member of staff, who is an advocate, driving activity and behaviours that support the strategic project.

5.9 The external context

Collaboration takes place in a particular context, relating to its environment. There may be multiple projects operating within the same environmental context. The context of the strategic project includes the external elements that can impact on the collaboration including policy, other strategic alliances including project stakeholders, new or pre-existing networks and funding streams. Consider the following examples of context and causal mechanisms, drawn from the findings of the current study, shown diagrammatically with a narrative in Figure 7 below.

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Figure 7 Consideration of causal mechanisms

(historical) strategic alliances	(antagonistic) inter-relationships	objectives not achieved
(historical) strategic alliances	(lack of) trust	objectives not achieved
to deliver on (employability) policy	need for expert	(need for) leadership

1. Historical strategic alliances between organisations (agents), formed as a response to policy drivers (improving the UK economy) act within the strategic environment (graduate employability), impacting on the interrelationships of new strategic project alliances (in this example, the SHEEF). Under these circumstances, the level of reciprocity between agents cannot be directly seen yet cause a level of collaboration such that joint objectives for the strategic project are not attained.

2. Similarly, these same historical strategic alliances, give rise to (cause) an experience of collaboration where the level of trust between the agents generates the potential for disunity. Under these circumstances joint objectives for the strategic project are not attained.

3. Again, to deliver on policy imperatives (improving the UK economy) within HE (graduate employability), there is the need for an expert within the strategic project who is able to observe events, make sense of them based on experience and lead on the contribution to knowledge transfer.

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5.10 Revisiting the research question

The study set out to investigate what are the success factors for collaborative working within strategic projects in the context of Scottish HE? Following on from the crafting of the research question, the research aim of the study was developed,

Research Aim:

The aim of the research was to undertake an exploratory study into the strategic partnership of the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) project in order to consider collaborative relationships and gain a deeper understanding of how structures (to deliver project aims and objectives) affect the delivery of policy on employability.

5.10.1 Towards meeting research objective 1

To investigate partner perceptions of the SHEEF Programme, its design (set-up), operationalisation (implementation) and evaluation through in-depth interviews and an open space workshop.

Through the multiple stages of this qualitative study, the aim was to seek in-depth explanatory accounts from the participants about their experience within the SHEEF. In this study, the researcher collected the views of participants of the SHEEF MG, seeking to understand the essence of experience about a phenomenon (Creswell et al, 2007). Respondents to the qualitative loosely structured interviews provided data that supported investigation into the design, implementation and evaluation of the SHEEF collaborative activity. The findings (Chapter 4) from the data handling and analysis were informed by the pre-existing literature and a systematic process (after Miles and

Huberman, 1994) was used to generate (induction) meaning and align with the stages of the strategic project. From the insight of the strategic partnership, a conceptual framework was developed from the findings of the study to provide explanatory meaning to the structure, set up, implementation and evaluation of the strategic partnership.

5.10.2 Towards meeting research objective 2

To identify factors that shaped the implementation of collaborative practice in HE (employability) from the insider perspective of the SHEEF MG.

The study produced emergent themes from the analysis of the data. Although these themes appeared as a priori themes (Huxham and Vangen, 1996, 2000a, 200b, 2003, 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Das and Teng, 1998; Reed, 2001; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Garrick et al 2004), the study did confirm themes and their interrelationships. These themes were explanatory when considering one specific project, the SHEEF, within an academic context in Scotland. The key themes, interrelationships, voice/agency, reciprocity and trust support the notion that agents with a political agenda established themselves within the structure of the strategic project (Reed, 2001). From the critical realist perspective this has revealed new (internal) structures from which new expert power relationships can position themselves and flourish, impacting on the parallel control (strategic planning) mechanisms within the organisational structure required for successful collaboration.

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The generative elements have been presented fully in sections 5.7 and 5.8 of the thesis and considered within the context of the SHEEF. The thematic model for interrelationships is presented diagrammatically (Figure 5, p140) showing the relationship between the themes and shaping the key factors of the implementation stage of collaborative practice.

5.10.3 Towards meeting research objective 3

To develop a conceptual framework and a set of recommendations from the analysis of the data from the current study to inform collaborative practice in future projects within UK higher education settings.

A conceptual framework from the findings of the current study was presented to support strategic projects that would be likely to benefit from collaborative approaches throughout the project lifecycle. The framework is evidenced and supported by the emergent themes from the study and provides explanation for strategic projects operating within an HE environmental context. The role and rationale of such a model was described first, then the description of the conceptual framework with examples of research application and practice provided.

The conceptual model contributes to achieving and sustaining 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham, 1996) by:

- Identifying interrelationships between the differing key factors

- Emphasising the external context in which the strategic project operations

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- Emphasising the relationship between power mechanisms and structures in fruitful collaborative practice.

The Conceptual Framework for Collaborative Arrangements of Strategic Projects was developed to help those practitioners who are engaged with strategic projects whether at start-up, implementation or even evaluation phases to understand the challenges that a collaborative arrangement may present. This is not to advise groups or individuals to work or not to work collaboratively, but to raise an awareness of the scope of strategic projects through the lens of collaborative practice. A set of recommendations for future research consideration and for practitioners including reflective considerations are presented in Chapter 6.

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5.11 Section 3: Research contribution to knowledge

Within higher education there is an underlying assumption that collaborative working involves generation of knowledge (Tsoukas and Vladimiriou, 2001) and that this is an emergent outcome of the inter-institutional relationship. Tsoukas and Vladimiriou propose that knowledge is generated, not through the management of information generated by working across organisations with differing members but instead through reflective activity; by organising information in a reflective manner, knowledge is generated (Diamond and Liddle, 2012). The impact of this approach should therefore be an increased awareness of reflective practice in the management of information within a collaborative activity.

The Conceptual Framework for Collaborative Arrangements of Strategic Projects contributes to the knowledge of achieving and sustaining collaborative project working by:

- Identifying interrelationships between the differing key factors of agency and reciprocity.

- Emphasising the external context in which the strategic project operations. In this study, the context was graduate employability in Scotland's HE.

- Emphasising the relationship between power mechanisms and structures in fruitful collaborative practice.

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5.12 Conclusion

The study highlighted the complexity of collaborative working and the range of themes that emerged as a result of the study associated with collaborative practice. These themes were considered and modelled as potential causal mechanisms that impact on the social world of the SHEEF and its success as a strategic project, and presented in a structural form. A number of relational roles were identified that support the structural organisation of the strategic project. The study findings suggest a lack of coherence around prioritisation of the phases of set-up, implementation and evaluation. It is suggested that there is a gap in evaluative activity which would support and inform any future collaborative activity. Further research would benefit the development of explanatory models of partnership focusing on the context in which the partnership is taking place.

The Conceptual Framework for Collaborative Arrangements of Strategic Projects was detailed, providing a model for practitioners participating and/or managing collaborative projects operating within an HE context.

In the following chapter, the study is drawn together as a whole and recommendations are presented for future research and for practice.

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Chapter 6: Practice outcomes

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the overall research study and to produce a series of recommendations as a result of the research findings.

Firstly, an overview of the research study is presented in the context of the research questions, considering all major elements of the study with recommendations for future research directions.

Then, substantive and reflective recommendations are given for collaborative practice and the specific contribution to practice afforded by this study. Finally, the key message from the research study and the contribution to participating and leading on successful collaborative strategic projects within HE is articulated.

6.1 Summary of research project

Government policy for economic development across Scotland and the UK is driving the increasing numbers of strategic alliances in higher education institutions. The purpose of the study was to investigate one strategic employability project in HE, to seek an explanatory account of the functioning of its MG over the life of the project, and gain an insider perspective of the arrangements for collaborative practice. The study considered the structure of the SHEEF and how it was organised (set-up, implementation and evaluation) to decide and achieve a common purpose through joint objectives. The internal structures of the SHEEF MG enabled multiple agencies to position themselves

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and exert powerful causal mechanisms on the implementation and impact on the success of the project.

6.1.1 Methods

This study was undertaken through a phenomenological interpretivist design, being influenced by the perspective, set of beliefs and practical experience and involvement within the SHEEF management group. Through this internal and people-centred lens it was hoped that the research participants (a sample drawn from the MG) would help explain the socially constructed, realist nature of collaborative practice within the context of higher education. The data collection tools for the study were a series of semi-structured interviews and a participant workshop.

A critical interpretivist lens was used to focus on collaborative practice, in particular, to tell a 'causal story' by considering the relationship between the people and the structure of an organisation. By examining the differing insider perspectives of the SHEEF MG and views of collaboration, an essential story emerged that considered mechanisms and outcomes so generating explanatory knowledge about the success factors for a strategic project.

The collected data was analysed by coding, thematic analysis and presented using colour coding, mapping and diagramming techniques.

6.1.2 Results

This research is important because as HEIs and associated agencies are increasingly required to demonstrate added value and the impact on graduate employability and meeting funding efficiencies through measurable outcome

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agreements, there will be further pressures to work to achieve further economies of scale across the sector. Hence the strategic importance of the context in which the project or programme of work is undertaken. Under these circumstances, there is an increased awareness of collaborative practice to address political demands, but not necessarily an understanding of how to do and manage this.

The results did confirm expectations of a priori themes, for example, the consideration of trust building, effective leadership and strategic planning. A principle emergent theme was that of the nature of interrelationships between the actors in this social world – that notions of agency and reciprocity were not mutually exclusive and impacted on the observed behaviours and relationships of the agents. Similarly, data findings suggested themes of leadership activities being comprised of a broader pattern requiring relational behaviour, expert and champion roles for successful collaboration.

The short-term implications of the findings are the potential for change in collaborative practice and a greater understanding of the power mechanisms to achieve this successfully. The conceptual framework from the findings of this current study identified the key factors for 'collaborative advantage' (Huxham, 1996), a series of recommendations for application to practice and the development of the conceptual framework itself through experiential learning. The longer-term implications of the findings are the potential for policy change on a national level to formalise collaborative arrangements within HE.

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6.2 Limitations of the study

The SHEEF project has formally completed and been evaluated by the project funders, however there are legacy relationships that supported the quality of the data collection methods in the study. As the researcher, I was explicit about the research process from the beginning including all personal rights and interests.

The difficulties of gaining access to potential participants and the impact on the reliability of qualitative studies may be a limitation to a study. In this study however, the interviewer had relative ease of access and the invitation of potential interviewees through direct working within the SHEEF. This relationship was a professional working relationship and benefited the study including giving access to potential participants. The quality of the data collected may also be impacted by the former working relationships based on roles: I have previously worked with potential interviewees through the SHEEF management group. The research elements around the study are informed by an 'openness' and level of frank conversation that enable the data collection process to be facilitated. I worked with respondents to maximise the opportunities for involvement and to support the participants. In advance of asking for participation in this study, the context and rationale of the study was discussed with the participants, noted and received comments around opportunities for involvement of themselves and other stakeholders.

This study is socially constructed from the insider perspective of one strategic organisation and informed by the literature pertaining to other strategic projects. The key themes presented through this study are therefore from one

project and analysis. In addition, the qualitative approaches of the semi-structured interviews represent a snapshot of the participant voice at one point in time only. This is a limitation of the study however any risk was managed though the robustness of the process and research methods of the study. Hence the findings and the guiding principles of the conceptual framework from the findings of the current study are applicable to other strategic projects within the HE context as the study used processes to ensure trustworthy and credible results.

The study was bounded by the defined time period of the research activity. If there was more time available to the study, it would have included a documentary analysis of key documents informing the set-up, implementation and evaluation of the SHEEF strategic project.

6.3 Recommendations for future research directions

Research into organisational is challenging given the complexity of structures and especially when collaborative structures span across multiple organisations.

Further research is required for the development of methods to investigate long-term outcomes of collaborative practice.

Many initiatives receive discrete project funding and the tendency is that knowledge and human capital is lost before the end of the life-cycle of a project. And alongside, the learning associated with collaboration. The timing of evaluative activity may not produce new knowledge which is transferred into the sector, often coming after the end of the main funded project. Hence, there

is a need for the development of methods to investigate effective long-term outcomes with the benefit of capturing and embedding the findings into collaborative structure.

More research on the effects and effectiveness of actual project structures implemented for collaborative working.

Structural elements of projects can be observed, evaluated and replicated. This is possibly a means to sustainability of collaborative practice. Further research into the nature of structure, codifying the processes associated with the set-up and implementation of strategic collaborative projects may inform the embedding of the essence of collaborative practice.

Further investigation is required of the interrelationships between collaborative themes.

Some studies considered the role of separate themes of collaboration. Within the specific context of HE, examination of the interrelationships between multiple themes may provide a more in-depth understanding of the relationships driving collaboration. This study considers the observed relationship between agency and reciprocity, however it did not examine interrelationships between multiple themes. Further investigation is required to address how issues of unproductive interrelationships may be balanced or avoided.

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6.4 Recommendations for practice

The substantive recommendations reflect a clear line of guidance based on the research evidence presented here and would suggest a strong case for implementation in any future strategic collaborative projects within an HE context. A further set of recommendations have been made that require further reflection by the project managers and senior stakeholders involving issues that would benefit from being revisited and re-examined.

6.4.1 Substantive recommendations

For collaborative project management,

it is recommended that:

1. The project should be set up with specific objectives, meeting the needs and objectives of partners. Objectives may differ between HEIs. Planning of targeted objectives should be negotiated with strategic partners. Increased partner engagement is more likely where the strategic project provides a good fit with the Institutional outcomes.

2. The governance arrangements of the projects include a timely evaluation and impact assessment of the project.

3. The management of the collaborative project incorporates planned dissemination of outputs, exploiting the benefits of any key brands.

For collaborative project implementation, impact and evaluation

it is recommended that:

1. Externally facing projects should be supported and championed by senior staff of the university and partners to ensure both strategic fit and operationalisation of initiatives.   It is recommended that there is a 'champion' from the senior staff to support resourcing and promotion of the project activity.

2. There is an operations manager role for each partner to ensuring roll out of the project and 'liaison'/brokering.

3. The emergent outputs of the project are evaluated with a view to impact informing future practice.

For collaborative project effectiveness

4. The governance of the project must be explicit including an independent Chair of any project board/steering group. The Chair need not be an expert voice for but needs to understand the context in which the collaboration is being undertaken. The Chair, as observer, needs to have excellent relationship management competencies, and based on experience, be able to make sense of events occurring that not directly seen.

5. In addition, there must be agents (identified and self-selected) who are able to provide solutions for potential alienation in the social world of the collaborative strategic project.

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6.4.2 Reflective recommendations
For collaborative project sustainability

Consideration should be given to:

6. How the development of the learning gained from the collaborative projects is to be made sustainable.

7. Ensuring that appropriate stakeholder systems are in place to mitigate the risk of staff role changes, often associated with discretely funded projects, and that processes are in place to facilitate knowledge transfer. Manage the expectation of stakeholders, the need for flexibility and the time commitment for effective collaborative practice.

8. Establishing quantitative and qualitative measures to assess the impact of collaborative partnerships on the teaching and learning offer and the benefits to the HE sector.

9. Partner participation in the project is greater where there has been a prior positive experience of staff working together.

10. Unstated/hidden objectives are probably known to at least some of the partners. Developing effective relationships with partners including through knowledge exchange and championing joint purpose may increase the visibility of these objectives.

6.5 Researcher contribution to practice

I have held collaborative working job roles that engage with the skills agenda and work-based learning for many years, most recently, leading strategic projects, co-ordinating programmes of work across Scotland's colleges, universities and agencies.

As a practitioner, I have the perspective of an insider within the research study, co-ordinating the SHEEF and contributing to the external evaluation of the LTW2 programme[11]. This research has been undertaken through the lens of the pracademic (Posner, 2009; Volpe and Chandler, 2001) as both an academic and as management practitioner.

Throughout this study, I reflected on the practice element alongside the associated literature, theory and applied theory within other contexts and organisational structures. At each stage of conducting the study, the interest and understanding of the context in which the learning (about collaborative working) has been enhanced to further understand the meanings of interactions within organisations.

The learning and reflection element for myself has indeed occurred within organisational structures, populated by complex social dynamics that influence learning and (collaborative) performance outcomes (Bray, 2001).

As a result of this experience and seeking meaning within organisation structures, I applied the conceptual framework model for the collaborative arrangements for strategic projects in setting up and implementing a new

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[11] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/ReportsandPublications/Learning_to_Work_2_Final_Report.pdf

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strategic project[12]. Given that the funders, HE environment and policy drivers are the same as the SHEEF study, this second project may be taken as a similar comparison for collaborative practice. The contribution to practice is indeed the application of the conceptual framework from the findings of the current study to the different strategic project.

Significant to the study is the high level of inter-organisational relationships between the large numbers of partner institutions. This level of collaboration is producing competitive advantage in delivering on student placements. This impact is evidenced by:

- The level of collaborative practice across discipline and geographical areas across Scotland for example the formation of new networks and 'cluster groups' across the organisations of the Highlands and Islands formally included within the governance arrangements of the project structure.

- High levels of trust within the collaboration including a sharing of sourced student project resource where applicable.

- Establishing communities of practice to provide staff development across partner HEIs and inform professional practice in the design and delivery of the work-based curriculum. Agency and reciprocity are observed to be lessened to the achievement of jointly held goals.

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[12] Making the Most of Masters Legacy Project

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- Increased awareness of the project brand across the HE sector; the generation of 'umbrella' branding and adoption of 'open source' toolkit resources to support work-based activity. This initiative has been 'championed' and supported through both positional and emergent leaders within the strategic project.

- Increasing capacity in the HE sector through sharing knowledge re processes around the set up and implementation stage of the project workstreams.   Under these circumstances it is suggested that the formalisation of the project structure is presenting a solution to the partisan interrelationships operating within the strategic project whether evidenced or not.

- Sharing a negotiated purpose and vision across Scotland: the achievement of negotiated and emergent project objectives.

6.6 Key message

Strategic alliances as a legal entity are relatively straightforward and processual. Effective collaboration on the other hand is very difficult. This is readily acknowledged in literature and in practice.

For effective and successful collaborative projects there is a need to understand the situational context within which the collaborative practice will take place. Social agents act differently in similarly constructed strategic partnerships for differing strategic projects whether observed or not. This is due to differing joint objectives, whether fully negotiated and agreed or not. To counter this, cluster groups can be formed as a solution to the potential for

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disunity. Bringing the cluster groups together can limit adverse interrelationships - for example by geographical area or a through a sectoral focus.

Do not expect stakeholder trust. Build trust where necessary through practitioner relationship management and appropriate project structures including formalised governance procedures. Allow for a language of collaboration to evolve and build a common understanding of project objectives.
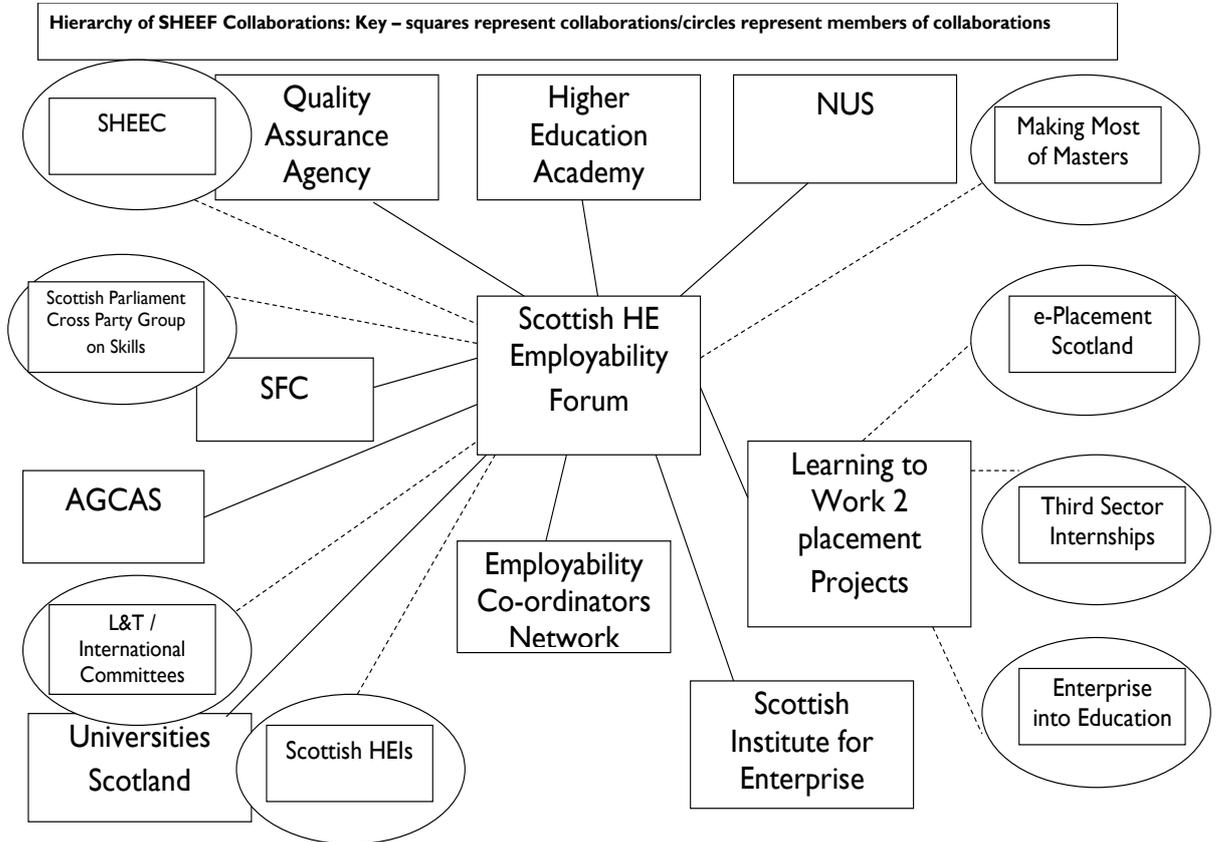
Be proactive where a one-size approach will not fit all – focus on output, assured by high levels of individual HEI's quality enhancement.

Actively review and disseminate the knowledge generated from the experience of collaborative strategic projects.

Champion that learning.

Appendices

Appendix A: Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum: a Context for Collaborative Management (after Huxham and Vengen, 2005)

Hierarchy of SHEEF Collaborations: Key – squares represent collaborations/circles represent members of collaborations

SHEEC

Quality Assurance Agency

Higher Education Academy

NUS

Making Most of Masters

Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Skills

SFC

Scottish HE Employability Forum

e-Placement Scotland

AGCAS

Learning to Work 2 placement Projects

Third Sector Internships

L&T / International Committees

Employability Co-ordinators Network

Universities Scotland

Scottish HEIs

Scottish Institute for Enterprise

Enterprise into Education

Appendix B: a summary of the aims categories relating to the aims framework

Aims that may be achieved through the collaboration

		Explicit	Unstated	Hidden
for each member organization	Genuine Collborative Aims	substantive aims process aims	substantive aims process aims	perceptions of joint aims cannot be hidden
	Pseudo Collaboration Aims	substantive aims process aims	pseudo-aims cannot be unstated	perceptions of joint aims cannot be hidden
for each member organization	Genuine Organization Aims	substantive aims process aims	for each representative substantive aims process aims	may be hidden to its own representative substantive aims process aims
for each member organization	Pseudo Organization Aims	substantive aims process aims	pseudo-aims cannot be unstated	pseudo-aims cannot be hidden
for each participating individual	Genuine Individual Aims	substantive aims process aims	substantive aims process aims	substantive aims process aims
for each participating individual	Pseudo Individual Aims	substantive aims process aims	pseudo-aims cannot be unstated	pseudo-aims cannot be hidden
for each external stakeholder	External Collaborative Aims	substantive aims process aims	unlikely to be subscribed to if unstated	cannot be subscribed to if hidden
for each interested individual	Non-member Individual Aims	substantive aims process aims	unlikely to be subscribed to if unstated	cannot be subscribed to if hidden

Related aims that should be or are being addressed by an individual or organizational member or through another collaboration

Huxham, C., & Vangen, S. (2005), Managing to collaborate: The theory and practice of collaborative advantage, (1st ed., p. 94), London: Routledge

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Appendix C : Interview Schedule

(Researcher will provide the context for the research interview including:

1. Who I am, my name, that I am a doctoral level research student at Edinburgh Napier University.

2. That I am conducting research in my doctoral research project on the topic of collaborative working with a focus on the SHEEF.

3. That the interview will last no more than 70 mins.

4. That all responses will be stored in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act. That the participants's name will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.

5. That if at any time during the <u>meeting</u> the participant feels unable or unwilling to continue, he/she free to leave. That is, the participation in this study is completely voluntary, and that the participant may withdraw from it without negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymised or after publication of results it will not be possible for data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.

6. That should the participant not wish to answer any particular question or questions, he/she is free to decline.

7. That the participant has been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the <u>meeting</u> and that any questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

8. I shall then ask the participant to read the consent form, and by signing consent to participate in this study.

Preamble:

The broad goal of this research study is to explore the setting up of SHEEF, its aims and objectives and the operational structure of SHEEF. Specifically, that the participant has been selected to discuss my role as a member of the SHEEF management group.

Questions: Loosely structured interview

1. You have been a member of the SHEEF management group. When did you become involved in the management group? How long were you a member of the management group for?

2. How did you become involved with SHEEF, and what did you understand to be your role?

Show Prompt if required (organisational diagram, Appendix C)

3. What did you understand the role of SHEEF to be? Show Prompt (aims and objectives from strategic plan). What did you understand was the role of management group to be?

Appendix D: Edinburgh Napier University Research Consent Form

Edinburgh Napier University requires that all persons who participate in research studies give their written consent to do so. Please read the following and sign it if you agree with what it says.

1. I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant in the research project on the topic of <u>collaborative working: SHEEF</u> to be conducted by <u>Rosemary Allford</u> who is the doctoral level research student at Edinburgh Napier University, and is also employed by the Higher Education Academy.

2. The broad goal of this research study is to explore the setting up of SHEEF, its aims and objectives and the structure of SHEEF to meet those aims. Specifically, I have been asked to meet with Rosemary to discuss my role as a member of the SHEEF management group and this meeting should not last any longer than 70 minutes.

3. I have been told that my response will be stored in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act. My name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in any report subsequently produced by the researcher.

4. I also understand that if at any time during the <u>meeting</u> I feel unable or unwilling to continue, I am free to leave. That is, my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw from it without negative consequences. However, after data has been anonymised or after publication of results it will not be possible for my data to be removed as it would be untraceable at this point.

5. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

6. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the <u>meeting</u> and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

7. I have read and understand the above and consent to participate in this study. My signature is not a waiver of any legal rights. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to keep a copy of the informed consent form for my records.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the respondent has consented to participate. Furthermore, I will retain one copy of the informed consent form for my records.

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature   Date

Appendix E: Example of transcription and coding of the research data

25. INTERVIEWER: How would like to do it use post-its, write it down separately, together, just on the flipcharts
26. INDI: talk about it first of all and need something to write with
27. HILARY: we'll jot some notes down
28. INTERVIEWER: yip, stickies what would you like?
29. HILARY: the big issue for me is that we went on it at the start
30. INDI: yip
31. HILARY: we weren't invited on and then when we were invited on we had to decide which of our projects were going to be represented, so then when I went for my first meeting I didn't know who was round the table, they didn't introduce themselves and I didn't know what they were doing there, what their particular interests were, and so on and it felt very strange to me..
32. And I was reporting on the four projects which was also difficult because apart from having a little bit text which were meant to provide each time, there was a huge amount more than that, so I think in terms of leadership….
33. INDI: I remember asking and I brought up with SFC.. Should be all four of us which is what happened in the end, but this is right at the start going back to 2011 probably and I was told it was very strategic, and inference..it might have been a be a straight telling of .. project managers….you are not strategic enough, not grown up to be part of this thing.
34. I think by the time I got to go, I was the last individual trying to represent all of the projects, meetings were going on, it was Karen's last meeting so before your first so I think that

2

Handwritten margin notes: 2.5.2 / 2.3.1/3 / 2.2.4 / 2.4.3

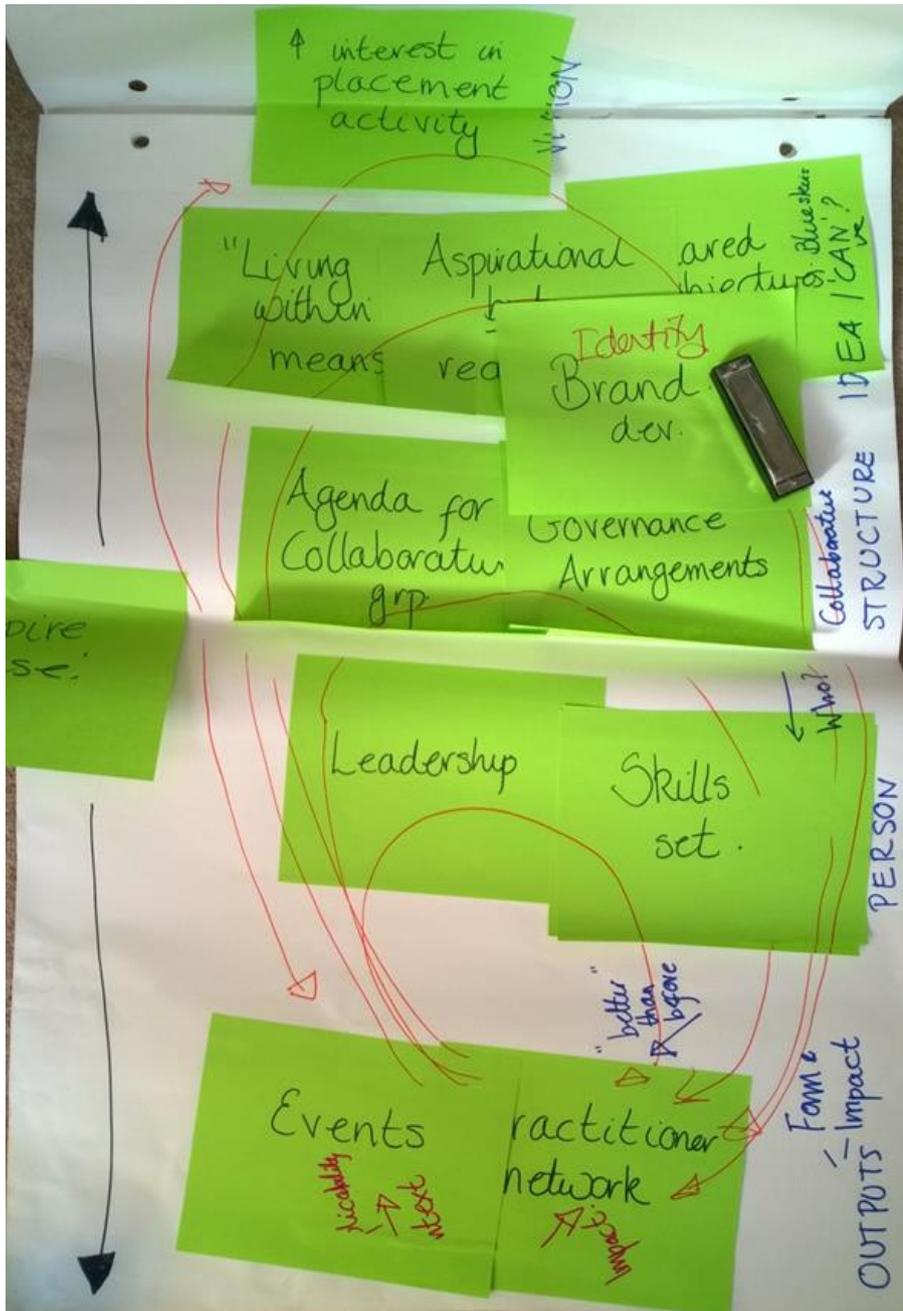*Handwritten right-margin notes:* governance & membership / stakeholders inter-relationships / role of Chair / Trust & role of project mngr

Appendix F: Collecting the data outputs from the workshop

Appendix G: Thematic Template showing hierarchical detail of coding and analysis

Coding Template

Hierarchy of Coding

Reference	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4
1	**SET UP/INITIATION**			
1.1		BACKGROUND HISTORY		
1.1.1			Employability	
1.1.1a				importance of?
1.1.1b				previous initiatives/projects?
1.2		AIMS AND OBJECTIVES		
1.2.1			Explicit	
1.2.2			Unstated	
1.2.3			Hidden	
2	**IMPLEMENTATION**			
2.1		GOVERNANCE		
2.1.1			recording and monitoring	
2.1.2			evaluation and reporting	

2.2	**LEADERSHIP**	
2.2.1		Strategic Direction
2.2.2		Decision Making
2.2.3		Role of MG Chair
2.3	**INTER-AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS**	
2.3.1		history
2.3.2		reciprocity
2.4	**INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**	
2.4.1		agency
2.4.2		reciprocity
2.4.3		trust
2.5	**ENGAGEMENT**	
2.5.1		sector
2.5.1a		motivation
2.5.1a(i)		role and responsibility
2.5.2		individual
2.5.2a		motivation
2.5.2a(i)		role and responsibility
3	**TRANSFORMATION**	
3.1	Dissemination	

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