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TABLE OF CONTENT

APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND BIG DATA IN THE FIELDS OF FINANCE, ACCOUNTING AND AUDITING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

BANK RUN AND SILICON VALLEY BANK 1

Lam Dang Xuan Hoa, Ho Minh Khoa, Huynh Vo Nhat Linh 1

BIG DATA AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS 14

Le Thi Minh, Vo Trung Hau 14

THE EFFICIENCY OF THE INTERNAL CONTROL SYSTEM IN RISK MANAGEMENT AT THE NAM A COMMERCIAL JOINT STOCK BANK 23

Truong Thanh Loc, Tran Ngoc Thanh 23

VIETNAM - AUSTRALIA ECONOMIC AND TRADE COOPERATION IN THE NEW NORMAL: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAMESE INVESTORS 30

Nhu Nguyen Phuc Quynh*, Anh Nguyen Thi Nguyet, Duy Nguyen Anh 30

IMPACTS OF CREDIT GROWTH AND CREDIT RISK ON THE PROFIT OF VIETNAM JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS 43

Dao Le Kieu Oanh*, Tran Thi Huong Ngan 43

FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMERS' DECISIONS TO USE E-BANKING AT JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY 57

Nguyen Duy Khanh[1], Pham Quoc Tham[2] 57

HOW CHINA_USA POLITICAL TENSIONS AFFECT STOCK MARKET RETURN OF CHINA AND THE USA? A QUANTILE VAR CONNECTEDNESS APPROACH 70

Hao Wen Chang[1], Tsangyao Chang[2]and Mei-Chih Wang[3] 70

BANKING HUMAN RESOURCES BEFORE THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AI 92

Nguyen Huynh Chi 92

IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TRAINING THROUGH IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT TESTING AND ASSESSMENT – CASE IN ACCOUNTING BRANCH, UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE 102

Thuy Thi Ha 102

ACTIVITIES OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN VIETNAMESE COMMERCIAL BANKS: AN OVERVIEW DURING THE COVID-19 RECOVERY PERIOD 109

Nguyễn Thị Quỳnh Châu, Đào Lê Kiều Oanh 109

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAM IN ATTRACTIVE FDI IN GLOBAL MINIMUM CORPORATE TAX IMPLEMENTATION 117

Ngo Hoang Thong 117

DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM, TRENDS AND POTENTIABILITY

DEVELOPING SMART HOME MODEL FOR APARTMENTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY BASED ON INTERNET OF THINGS (IoT) TECHNOLOGY 182

Dang Thanh Thuy[1], Nguyen Thanh Dien[2] 182

TRANSPARENCY OF ACCOUNTING INFORMATION OF CONSTRUCTION ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY – CASE STUDY OF APPLICATION OF ACCRUAL ACCOUNTING....193

Truong Thanh Loc[1]*, Pham Thi Yen Nhi[2]....193

FACTORS AFFECTING THE QUALITY OF FINANCIAL STATEMENTS OF MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY 207

Truong Thanh Loc*, Dang Nguyen Tuong Han, Nguyen Ngoc Mai Phuong, Nguyen Thi Quynh Huong....207

THE CRITICAL FACTORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' INTENTION TO USE METAVERSE TECHNOLOGY FOR SUBJECTS RELATED TO IMPORT-EXPORT LEARNING....221

Van Thuy Nguyen Ho, Chau The Huu, Luan Thanh Nguyen*....221

CONSUMER PERCEPTION ABOUT THE SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENT OF LUXURY BRANDS IN VIETNAM AND CHINA MARKETS....233

Tran Minh Tu[1]....233

INFLUENCE OF WOM AND EWOM IN MAKING DECISION BUYING GOODS 247

Doan Anh Tu[1], Kim Phi Rum[2], Nguyen Pham Hai Ha[3]....247

DIGITAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL IN VIETNAM....257

Hoang Thi Chinh, Nguyen Hoang Phan 257

BLOCKCHAIN APPLICATION IN MODERN LOGISTICS: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM 266

Nguyen Nu Tuong Vi....266

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IN VIETNAM 272

Vo Tien Si 272

LEGAL FRAME FOR THE OPERATION OF THE REAL ESTATE BUSINESS UTILIZING THE BLOCKCHAIN PLATFORM IN VIETNAM....284

Le Thi Khanh Linh....284

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION – COOPERATION – GLOBAL INTEGRATION IN BUSINESS

FACTORS INFLUENCING BUSINESS ACCEPTANCE OF INDUSTRY 4.0 TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS IN DONG NAI PROVINCE 291

Thanh-Thu Vo*, Minh-Huong Tang 291

DIGITAL ORIENTATION, INNOVATION CAPABILITY AND FIRM PERFORMANCE: A PROPOSAL RESEARCH MODEL 298

Nguyen Van Hau 298

PREDICTION OF STUDENT'S BEHAVIORAL INTENTION TO USE SMART LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A COMBINED MODEL OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE 309

Nguyen Thi Hai Binh[1], Dao Y Nhi[2], Nguyen Thanh Luan[3], Dang Quan Tri[4] 309

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF GRAMMARLY ON EFL WRITING COMPETENCY: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT. 323

Nguyen Thi Hong Lien[1], Nguyen Truong Gia Minh[2], Nguyen Ngoc Vu[3]* 323

FACTORS AFFECTING PURCHASING DECISION OF THE YOUTH ON TIKTOK 336

Ngoc Pham[1], Thanh Cong Tran* 336

FACTORS AFFECTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY BEHAVIORS OF WORKERS DIRECT PRODUCTION AT CU CHI POWER COMPANY 345

Minh Luan Le, Thi Trang Tran 345

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEES' ORGANIZATIONAL CITIZENSHOP BEHAVIOUR 355

Nguyen Xuan Hung[1], Ha Le Thu Hoai[1], Nguyen Huu My Truc[2&3], Pham Tan Nhat[2&3] 355

THE INNOVATION CAPACITY - THE ROLE OF LEADERS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM 365

Huynh Nhut Nghia 365

PEOPLE'S THOUGHTS ON THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON BUSINESS 376

Ton Nguyen Trong Hien, Bui Tuyet Anh 376

FACTORS AFFECTING BRAND SWITCHING INTENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM 382

Ly Dan Thanh, Nguyen Phu Quoi, Tran Hoang Nam, Vo Hong Son, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy Tien 382

ENHANCE THE DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS 398

Tran Quang Canh, Hoang Thi Chinh 398

ASSESSING PATIENT SATISFACTION (BRAND) AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AT THU DUC CITY HOSPITAL.....408

Nguyen Hoang Dung [1*], Nguyen Huynh Bao An [2], Van Phuong Trang [2] 408

INDUSTRIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES FORM THE FOUNDATION FOR BINH DUONG'S SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.....408

Hoang-An Nguyen 417

IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL FAIRNESS ON THE EMPLOYEES' KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM ENTERPRISES IN HO CHI MINH CITY 426

Le Thi Nhu Quynh[1,2], Le Thi Giang[2], Truong Quang Dung[1] 426

THE EFFECT OF PERSONAL MOTIVATION ON THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOR OF 5-STAR HOTELS' EMPLOYEES IN HO CHI MINH CITY.....440

Le Thi Giang, Nguyen Bach Hoang Phung.....440

DIGITAL COMPETITIVENESS AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY OF ENTERPRISES IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE CASE OF VIETNAMESE ENTERPRISES 453

Diep Nguyen Thi Ngoc[1*], Canh Quang Tran[2], Anh Bach Hoang Ngoc[1].....453

FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS' SELECTION OF PRIVATE PRESCHOOLS IN THU DUC CITY 466

Thi-Trang Tran[1], Thi-My-Dung Pham[2], Thi-Bich-Diep Le[1*] 466

RECOVERY COMMUNICATIONS IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DEVELOPING A SPIRITUAL TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE MEASUREMENT SCALE OF AN GIANG 474

Nguyen Vuong Hoai Thao[1], Nguyen Quyet Thang[2] 474

PROSPECTS OF VIRTUAL REALITY TOURISM APPLICATION IN VIETNAM TOURISM PROMOTION 487

Nguyen Thi Hong Ha, Pham Thi Huong Giang 487

PERSONALIZATION TRAVEL TRENDING IN HO CHI MINH CITY IN THE CONTEXT OF POST COVID-19 497

Duong Bao Trung 497

IMPACTS OF MEDIA ON CUSTOMERS' DECISION TO CHOOSE FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICES POST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC 511

Nguyen Thi Bich Van 511

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION APPLICATION TO PROMOTE THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT OF INBOUND TOURISM IN HO CHI MINH CITY 521

Tran Trong Thanh 521

VIETNAM TOURISM AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC 527

Nguyen Hoang Phan[1], Hoang Thi Chinh[2] 527

NAVIGATING THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DATA MINING AND PRIVACY 537

Pham Thai Hien 537

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENT SELF-REPORTED GENERAL WELL-BEING AND PERCEIVED SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS, TEACHERS, AND UNIVERSITY 545

Virginia Kelsey[1], Đặng Thị Mai Ly[2*], Nguyễn Anh Khoa[2], Nguyễn Văn Tường[2] 545

DIGITAL VERSUS NON- DIGITAL

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE TO CUSTOMERS IN THE DIGITAL MARKETING ERA: OBSERVATIONS FROM COMMERCIAL BANKS IN HO CHI MINH CITY 556

Nguyen Quang Trung 556

VIRTUAL REALITY: AN INNOVATIVE TOOL IN TOURISM EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING 564

Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le[1], Khuong Thanh Nguyen[2] 564

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF STRATEGIC POSITIONING FOR PLACE BRANDING: A CASE STUDY OF DONG THAP PROVINCE 580

Phan Bao Giang.....580

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON VIETNAM'S SMALL AND THE MEDIUM BUSINESS ENTERPRISES (SMEs) 587

Lê Kim Nguyên[*] 587

CHALLENGES FACED BY TEACHERS IN NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

PROPOSE AN ONLINE TEACHING COMPETENCE SCALE FOR UNIVERSITY LECTURERS 596

Duong Thi Kim Oanh*, Dang Thi Dieu Hien 596

EXAMINE USAGE OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (LMSS) BY FACULTY STAFF AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS (UEF) AND FINANCE WITH EXPANDED TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM).....608

Ha Truong Minh Hieu, Ngo Minh Hai*, Mach Tran Huy.....608

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION
AN INDISPENSABLE EVOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATES

FACTORS AFFECTING THE APPLICATION OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTING AT MANUFACTURING ENTERPRISES IN BINH DUONG PROVINCE 618

Truong Thanh Loc[1]*, Nguyen Thi Thanh Truc[2] 618

HRM DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: TAKING A ROAD OF SUCCESSION PLANNING ..629

Trương Phan Hoàng Anh, Giang Ngọc Anh.....629

THE IMPLICATION OF CONTACLESS SERVICE AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION 640

Linh, Nguyen Duy Yen*.....640

TOURISM BRAND LOVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF ONLINE TOURIST EXPERIENCES, TOURIST-BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY 651

Thanh Nguyen Ngoc Le 651

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS IN CROSS-CULTURAL SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SoTL): A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY 662

Punithan Moganathas[1], Jenny Hill[2], Andy V.-M. Kok[2], Matt Barr[2], Ruffin Relja[2]*, Philippa Ward[2], Duong Tran Quang Hoang[3], Quynh Phuong Tran[3] 662

LEVERAGING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATE EVOLUTION IN VIETNAM 677

Nguyen,Tan Dat[1], Le,Dinh Thang[2].....677

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND APPLICATIONS

FB-PROPHET MODEL FOR TIME SERIES FORECASTING IN SALES 691
Thanh Cong Tran 691
USING AI CODE IN C# PROGRAMMING 698
Nguyen Ha Giang 698
DETERMINANTS OF CONTINUANCE USAGE INTENTION OF MOBILE FOOD ORDERING APPLICATIONS (MFOAS) AMONG VIETNAMESE USERS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF E-SATISFACTION 705
Lam Hoang Phuong[1*], Nguyen Thi Kim Lien[2], Tien Hung Nguyen[3], Vinh Long Nguyen[4] 705
DECODING MARKETING INSIGHT: INSIGHT FROM OUTSIDE 718
Hoàng Thị Hằng, Trần Thành Công[*] 718
DIGITAL DISRUPTION AND DATA SECURITY: HOW FINTECH IS RESHAPING BANKING ... 724
Hoàng Văn Hiếu, Trần Ngọc Thiên Ngân 724

TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNICATIVE GAME-BASED GRAMMAR TEACHING 736

Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 736

APPROACHES TO TEACHING L2 LISTENING: 749

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN REAL-LIFE AND CLASSROOM-BASED LISTENING 749

Luu Thi Mai Vy 749

DEFINING ROLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM 755

Ho Xuan Tien, Duong My Tham 755

EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND LEARNING INVESTMENT IN PORTFOLIO - BASED ENGLISH WRITING LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW 763

Ly Gia Huy[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 763

EXPLORING EFL LEARNER IDENTITIES IN PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A HIGH SCHOOL IN AN GIANG PROVINCE 774

Nguyen Hong Thien[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 774

THE VALUES OF SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A LITERATURE REVIEW 791

THE ISSUE OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 801

Nguyen Dinh Tuan 801

RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING 812

Huynh Thanh Nhon[1], Tran Quoc Thao[2] 812

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF WRITING ANXIETY ON VIETNAMESE ESL UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING PERFORMANCE: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY 821

Nguyen Ngoc Nguyen, Nguyen Hoang Phan 821

THE APPLICATION OF THE "FLIPPED CLASSROOM" MODEL IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE VIETNAMESE UNIVIVERSITY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT 838

THE USE OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN EFLFLIPPED CLASSROOMS 847

Nguyen Quynh Thao Vy[1,*], Duong My Tham[2] 847

INSIGHTS INTO ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ACADEMIC WRITING 860

Do Thi Thanh Thuy, Tran Quoc Thao 860

LAW IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

LEGALISING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY INFRINGEMENTS IN RUSSIA – A WAR TACTIC IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE 869

Bui Thi Hong Ninh* 869

MODEL OF ASSET REGISTRATION WORLDWIDE AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM IN IMPROVING ASSET REGISTRATION LAWS 880

Vu Anh Sao[1,2], Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai[2] 880

LEGAL ISSUES ARISING FROM THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION, AND USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) - INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS FOR VIETNAM 887

Le Hoang Minh Huy*, Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Dao Trong Duc, Ky Dieu Linh, Bui Thi Thuy Linh, Nguyen Nam Trung 887

SOUTH KOREA'S EXPERIENCES ON PROPERTY REGISTRATION LAW - LESSONS FOR VIETNAM 896

Vu Anh Sao, Pham Huynh Bao Oanh 896

THE RISE OF REMOTE WORK: LEGAL CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT LAW IN VIETNAM 903

Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai[1], Nguyen Thi Ngoc Loan[2] 903

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE EMERGING AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE 910

Nguyen Thi Thu Trang 910

THE IMPACTS OF GLOBAL MINIMUM TAX ON FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI) CORPORATIONS IN VIETNAM 921

Trần Ngọc Thanh[1] 921

CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES AND TAX MANAGEMENT ISSUES 933

Le Huynh Phuong Chinh, Ngo Thi Khanh Linh, Pham Ngoc Lan Anh 933

EXPERIENCE IN KOREA AND CHINA ON TAX MANAGEMENT FOR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE ACTIVITIES 941

Duong Anh Son[1], Tran Vang Phu[2] 941

LEGAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGULATIONS RALATED TO PERSONAL INCOME TAX WHEN EARNING INCOME THROUGH E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN VIETNAM, TAKING THE CASE OF INDIVIDUALS DOING BUSINESS THROUGH TIKTOK APPLICATION 946

Nguyen Duc Tri [1], Hoang Minh Châu[2] 946

THE COMPATIBILITY ON THE SCOPE OF MUTUAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE (MLA) IN CRIMINAL MATTERS AND THE CONDITIONS OF REFUSAL MLA IN CRIMINAL MATTERS BETWEEN VIETNAMESE LAW AND INTERNATIONAL TREATIES WHICH VIETNAM HAS SIGNED. 956

Pham Huynh Bao Oanh 956

TAX POLICY FOR E-COMMERCE OF COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO VIETNAM 967

Nguyen Thanh Minh Chanh, Ha Thi Van Anh, Pham Lam Tam Nhu 967

LEGAL REGULATIONS FOR ENTERPRISE OBLIGATIONS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ON E-COMMERCE PLATFORM 974

Truong Kim Phung*, Nguyen Hoang Chuong 974

"ROBOT TAX" – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VIETNAM 981

Gian Thi Le Na, Pham Phuong Doanh 981

WTO APPELLATE BODY REFORM IN THE CONTEXT OF ESCALATING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS 988

Nguyen Nam Trung 988

IMPACTS OF STATE OWNERSHIP AND BUSINESS CHARACTERISTICS ON TAX AVOIDANCE: EVIDENCE IN VIETNAM....128
Huyen Ngoc Nguyen, Thanh Dan Bui 128
RUSSIA'S IMPACTS AND SCENES ON BEING BANNED FROM SWIFT....143
Lam Dang Xuan Hoa [1] , Phan Ngoc Anh [2] 143
THE ROLE OF ACCESS TO FINANCE AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION OF YOUNGERS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN PROVINCE, VIETNAM....151
Vu Truc Phuc*, Nguyen Dang Hat, Nguyen An Phu, Dao Le Kieu Oanh 151

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS IN CROSS-CULTURAL SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING (SoTL): A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

Punithan Moganathas[1], Jenny Hill[2], Andy V.-M. Kok[2], Matt Barr[2], Ruffin Relja[2]*, Philippa Ward[2], Duong Tran Quang Hoang[3], Quynh Phuong Tran[3]

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Abstract

Scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) entails the application of rigorous inquiry and research methods to the systematic investigation of teaching practices, curriculum design, assessment strategies, and the overall learning environment. Academics are increasingly acknowledging its potential to transform students (e.g. agency), staff (e.g. efficacy) and institutions (e.g. policies). An international collaborative research project was designed to engage students and staff from varied universities in cross-cultural SoTL. The aim was to enhance student and staff experience in transnational education (TNE) by co-creating a new curriculum for a shared second-year undergraduate business and marketing module taught in English. This methodological paper describes the development, application, and outcomes of two focus groups that were moderated by students and facilitated by staff. Focus groups were conducted face-to-face and online in three countries (United Kingdom, Vietnam and Malaysia) using different techniques. The first combined discussions with a projective technique (word association task) to generate deep insights. The second was more collaborative in nature. It involved active participation and collaboration by employing the Six Thinking Hats, which provide a structured framework for producing and exploring different perspectives and ideas. Preliminary results are shared, outlining implications for academics who are interested in undertaking cross-cultural SoTL and working with students as partners (SaP).

Keywords: *Cross-cultural scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL); participatory action research; multimethod approach; students as partners (SaP); service ecosystems*

1. Introduction

Transnational education (TNE) has seen an exponential growth in the past three decades (Tran et al., 2023). Traditionally taught in English (Wilkins & Urbanovič, 2014), TNE subsumes "all types of higher education [HE] study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services … in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based" (Council of Europe, 2002). As such, TNE comprises collaborative (e.g. franchised) provisions like those between

the University of Gloucestershire (UoG) in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF) in Vietnam, as well as between the UoG and Peninsula College (PEN) in Malaysia.

Recent data published by Universities UK International (UUKi) indicate that collaborative provisions represented the biggest share (39.1%) of the UK TNE student body in 2020/2021 (UUKi, 2022). Most UK TNE students were hosted in Asia (49.5%), with China being the principal host of UK TNE undergraduate students (52,645), followed by Malaysia (40,395) and Sri Lanka (24,340) (UUKi, 2022). Vietnam occupied rank 17 with just 4,295 UK TNE undergraduate students (UUKi, 2022). These numbers highlight Vietnam's potential for developing TNE, which, ultimately, is a social change agent and, therefore, a fundamental constituent not only of the Vietnamese HE system (Nguyen et al., 2016), but also of the UK (Department for Education & Department for International Trade, 2021) and Malaysian HE systems (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

This paper adopts a service-ecosystems perspective, moving the focus away from the dyadic relationship between UoG and its respective collaborative partners (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). It acknowledges that all actors are part of a larger network and strive concomitantly for individual survival and collective wellbeing (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). In this sense, higher education institutions (HEIs) – and systems more generally – engage in "… co-opetition, i.e. simultaneous cooperation and competition, as a strategy for dynamic development and competitive advantage" (Bengtsson et al., 2010, p. 194). Through shared provision of course programmes at HEIs in all three countries (UK, Vietnam, Malaysia), an invisible web is spun that interconnects involved actors (UoG, UEF, PEN), creating institutional arrangements that facilitate and limit collaborative efforts to co-create value through coordinating mechanisms like regulations and symbols (Vargo et al., 2023).

Within this frame, any enhancement of a system's well-being is considered 'value', and can be measured in terms of a system's capacity to adapt or integrate effectively with its environment (Vargo et al., 2008). Value, according to Vargo et al. (2017), is always: (a) phenomenological and as such it bears idiosyncratic meaning; (b) co-created (and co-destroyed) between actors, including the beneficiary; (c) multidimensional, comprising different levels (micro, meso and macro); and (d) emergent, that is value cannot be defined in advance (only value propositions can) but arises from the interaction between actors and/or systems.

Vargo (2008) stresses the importance of distinguishing between value co-production (e.g. co-designing curricula) and value co-creation (e.g. actor-determined benefits) achieved through the integration of resources (e.g. knowledge) and exchange of services (Vargo et al., 2023). These ideas provide the foundation for this paper and are brought together using the Advance HE (2016) partnership framework. As is frequent practice in HE literature, this paper applies "the terms, students as partners [SaP], partnership, and co-creation of learning and teaching … interchangeably" (Bovill, 2020, p. 1024). This simplification allows for a more focused treatment of relevant concepts and offers a sharper scaffold for their discussion.

The purpose of this paper is to offer insights into an international collaborative research project that was designed to engage students and staff from the UoG, UEF and PEN in cross-cultural scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). This methodological paper describes the development, application and outcomes of two focus groups (FGs) that were moderated by students (student partners) and facilitated by staff (staff partners). It, principally, offers recommendations for researchers interested in undertaking similar cross-cultural SoTL.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. In the second section, we briefly review the literature on student partnerships with a particular emphasis on SoTL – a subcategory of partnership in

the enhancement of learning and teaching. The third section outlines the research design and methods, while the fourth section illustrates and discusses the results. Conclusions are presented in section five.

2. Literature review

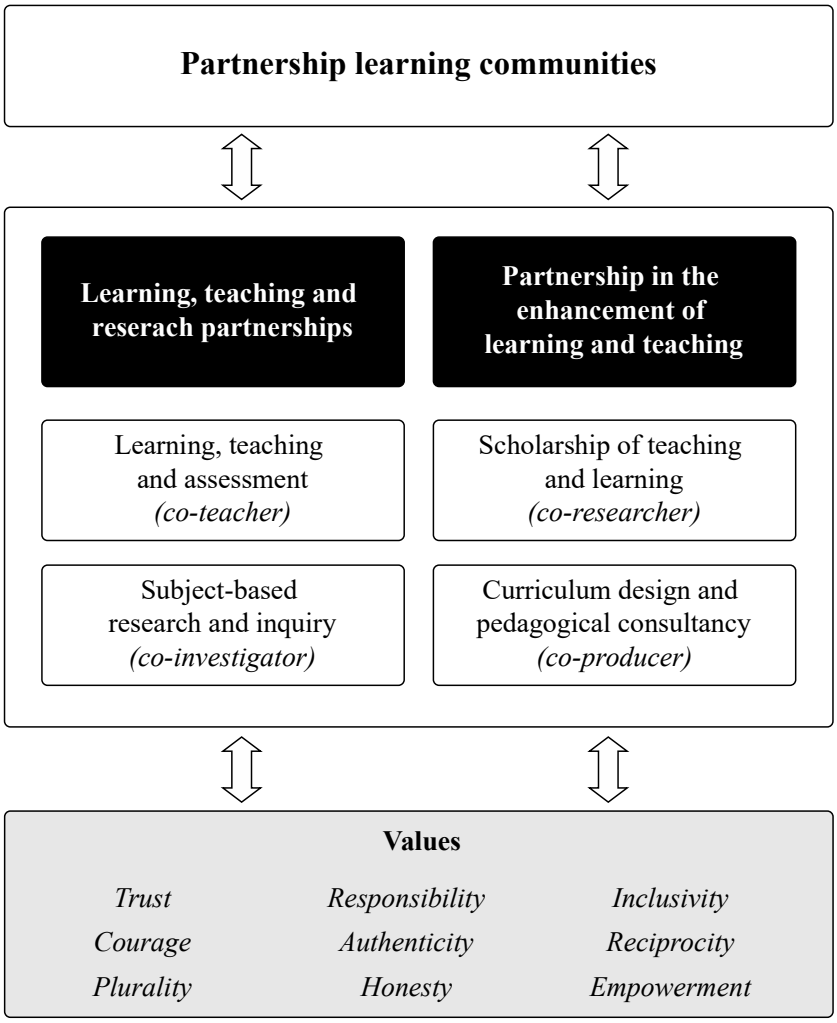
2.1. Student partnerships

Universities worldwide are increasingly focusing on the concept of students as partners (SaP), embracing a collaborative mindset of partnership to rethink pedagogical practices (Dai & Matthews, 2023). Although student partnerships in Asia have been relatively limited, there is a noticeable expansion of literature – with the majority of publications emerging recently – highlighting and exploring specific cultural and contextual factors, such as Confucianism (an ethical and philosophical system based on the teachings of Confucius); power distance (as a result of hierarchical structures); and face issues (a phenomenon that leads to the avoidance of actions that could be perceived disrespectful, cause embarrassment, or result in the loss of face in public perception) (Liang & Matthews, 2021). These notions are considered in later sections to justify methodological choices and to contextualize findings.

Advance HE (2016, p. 2) operationalize "… partnership as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together." While this meaning has its merit as overarching principle, we adopt Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) definition because it offers a more nuanced view of partnership contributions. They delineate "student-faculty partnership as a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (pp. 6-7). Partnerships are, thus, considered as catalysts for transforming institutional cultures by creating 'egalitarian' learning communities where students and staff collaborate to influence the university's research and teaching development (well-being) (Matthews, Dwyer, et al., 2019). Ultimately, student partnerships have the capacity to change not only individuals and HEIs (actors), but the HE sector at large (institutional arrangements), that constitutes the whole ecosystem (Healey et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2017).

Students as partners can take four non-mutually exclusive roles (Healey et al., 2014; Matthews, Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2019): (a) *co-teachers* by engaging in teaching, learning and assessment; (b) co-*investigators* in subject-based inquiries; (c) *co-producers* of curricula; and (d) *co-researchers* in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The former two roles can be subsumed under the category 'learning, teaching and research partnerships', whereas the latter fall under 'partnership in the enhancement of learning and teaching' (Advance HE, 2016). As highlighted in Figure 1, both categories have the potential to foster engagement by creating a sense of community (belonging), which is nurtured by values such as inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, courage and trust (Healey et al., 2016). The nine partnership values provide a helpful framework for contextualizing results (for an example see Foran et al., 2020). As the focus of this methodological paper is on SoTL, the concept is elaborated next.

Fig. 1 Partnerships in higher education



Note: Based on Advance HE (2016); Healey et al. (2014, 2016); Matthews, Mercer-Mapstone, et al. (2019)

2.2. Scholarship of teaching and learning

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has been described as "an important international movement in higher education" (Webb, 2020, p. 1). Although it originated more than 30 years ago (Boyer, 1990; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999), a universal definition of SoTL remains absent (Canning & Masika, 2022; Fanghanel et al., 2015). We define SoTL as "faculty (sometimes in partnership with their students) undertaking systematic inquiry about student learning – informed by prior scholarship on teaching and learning – and going public with the results" (Center for Engaged Learning, n.d., para 1).

We acknowledge that engaging students in SoTL aligns with the tenets of value co-creation (see Section 1), and is, therefore, considered good practice (Felten, 2013). Fundamentally, we believe that "both student and teacher, each in their own way, have an important contribution to make to the production of knowledge and meaning, as well as understanding and representing the world to itself and to others." (Neary, as cited in Healey et al., 2015, p. 168). For this reason, our project has been designed as partnership involving students and staff from all three HEIs (UoG, UEF, PEN), creating a cross-cultural context for SoTL. We are mindful that, in cross-cultural partnerships, the interaction between learners and staff

becomes an intricate relational experience, that is influenced by their respective cultures, and requires additional considerations with regards to power distributions (Zhang et al., 2022).

SoTL has been thematized in many subject areas, highlighting the broad application and acceptance of the concept. Disciplines include, for example, marketing (e.g. McIntyre & Tanner, 2004); business (e.g. McIntyre et al., 2008); management (e.g. Bilimoria, 2000); entrepreneurship (e.g. Neck & Corbett, 2018); hospitality and tourism (e.g. Deale, 2019); engineering (e.g. Jaffri et al., 2014); health (e.g. McBride & Kanekar, 2015); religion (e.g. Mosurinjohn, 2021); psychology (e.g. Gurung et al., 2019); biology (e.g. deBraga et al., 2015); pharmacy (e.g. Forrest et al., 2022); social work (e.g. Grise-Owens et al., 2016); construction management (e.g. Posillico et al., 2022); and apparel design (e.g. McKinney et al., 2022). Authors are predominantly based in the West (e.g. North America and Europe), with emerging publications in e.g. South Africa, Singapore, and Malaysia (for a review see e.g. Tight, 2018).

Scholars have, furthermore, produced recommendations for searching and reviewing SoTL literature (Healey & Healey, 2023a, 2023b); analysed methodological designs and procedures (Hubball & Clarke, 2010; Tight, 2018); and created frameworks for maintaining quality (Felten, 2013; Wilson-Doenges et al., 2016) as well as for publishing SoTL (Healey et al., 2019). Others (e.g. Barradell & Bell, 2021; Bell, 2016) offered summaries of the impact student partnerships have on actors (micro: individual level/meso: group level) and institutional arrangements (macro level), including policies and course programmes. Such potential outcomes are central to this research and help shape recommendations for researchers interested in undertaking similar cross-cultural SoTL.

The next section explains our methodological approach to student partnerships, before detailing the outcomes of the project.

3. Design and procedure

3.1. Background and participant selection

This paper is part of a larger project aimed at enhancing student and staff experience by systematically co-researching the co-production and implementation of a new curriculum for a shared second-year undergraduate business and marketing module taught in English (intervention). Staff and students at the UoG in the UK, UEF in Vietnam, and PEN in Malaysia engage in collaborative SoTL to co-create value by decolonizing the curriculum and reducing inequalities (e.g. access to resources). On- and offline focus groups (FG) are the principal method of investigation presented here and have been successfully used in previous SoTL studies, including in Malaysia (e.g. Walden, 2021; Yusof et al., 2020; Zain et al., 2023). FGs are an appropriate methodological choice as they emphasize social interactions between participants (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009). To restore power-balance, student partners moderated FGs with student participants and were assisted by a member of staff (facilitator). A purposeful sampling strategy was chosen and combined with snowballing to recruit students as partners as well as participants (Delpish et al., 2010; Patton, 2002). In total, six FGs were conducted, two in each country, with 5-12 students participating in the FGs (see Table 1).

Table 1 Number of participants by country and focus group (FG)

	UK		Vietnam		Malaysia	
	FG1[a]	FG2[a]	FG1[a]	FG2[b]	FG1[b]	FG2[a]
Number of student participants	5	12	6	6	9	9
Number of student moderators	1	1	1	1	1	2
Number of staff facilitators	1	1	1	1	1	1

Note. Two sequential focus groups (FG1 → FG2) were conducted in each country.
[a] face-to-face
[b] online

3.2. Design

Designed as comparative case study (Yin, 2018), we are able to "… compare two or more data points ('cases') obtained through use of … [this] method" (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999, p. 372). The application of a longitudinal multimethod qualitative research design allows for different configurations of cases. In this paper, we explore three configurations. First, we compare two forms of FG that were employed sequentially, namely discussions (FG1) versus participatory action research (FG2). In this context, we also comment on the modality (face-to-face versus online). Second, we look at outcomes on a country-level. Finally, we examine if a specific style of FG is better suited than the other in a particular location.

3.3. Procedure for data generation and analysis

In the first stage (FG1), we explored participants' lived experiences with marketing education in general and the second-year module 'Marketing Management' more specifically, using a discussion-based FG. Example questions and prompts included: *"How do you like your course?"*; *"What should we stop, start, continue doing?"*; *"What does Marketing (Management) mean for you?"*. We also employed projective techniques such as word associations tasks (e.g. *"Please write down the first three words that come to your mind when you think of Marketing (Management)."*) and circular questions (e.g. *"What would Marketing (Management) look like for queer people?"*) as well as reflective questions (e.g. *"What would be the single most important thing that we could do to make learning about Marketing (Management) better for you?")* to elicit deeper understandings of participant experiences and stimulate metacognition (Donoghue, 2000; Tanner, 2012). Finally, we sought to review current and generate new module learning outcomes by asking questions such as: *"Given what you've just said about Marketing (Management), what should a student passing this module be able to demonstrate?"*.

All FGs were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and eventually analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Insights were purposefully fed into stage 2. For instance, the research team developed new module learning outcomes taking into account students' lived experiences articulated in all three countries. Participants in FG2 were then asked to share their initial responses (thoughts, feelings, etc.) and to explain to what extent the new learning outcomes reflected their feedback provided in stage 1.

Essentially, however, the purpose of the second FG (stage 2) was to co-produce a new curriculum (including session plan and assessment) for the second-year module Marketing Management using participatory action research. The latter helps "… a group to help themselves through the research. The aim is to empower the respondents to 'research themselves and their situation' and on this basis to take responsibility for their own situation, make recommendations, possibly implement those recommendations, and perhaps even evaluate the implementation" (Hart, 1998, p. 46). Given the productive nature of the task,

we used De Bono's (1985/2000) Six Thinking Hats® to facilitate curriculum co-development. It is a creative technique involving six metaphorical 'hats', each representing a different thinking style. By wearing these hats, participants can mentally explore ideas from different vantage points (e.g. caution, emotions, innovation) to stimulate creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking (Kenny, 2003). This method encourages diverse perspectives and fosters innovative solutions through structured yet imaginative thinking (Vernon & Hocking, 2014).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Partnership values as operant resources

Through the lens of service-ecosystems, partnership values can be considered as *potential* resources for contributing to a system's well-being and develop into *actual* resources if institutionalized and integrated with other resources (Vargo et al., 2008; Vargo et al., 2023). Inspired by Foran et al. (2020), we used the nine partnership values from the Advance HE (2016) 'framework for student engagement through partnership in higher education' as an organizing device for student partners' experiences. As shown in Table 2, all nine values manifested in this project, suggesting that the approach used has the capacity to create and nurture student partnerships.

Table 2 Manifestation of partnership values

Value	Illustrative quotes
Authenticity	• "feel like I am doing something important"
Honesty	• "being a student myself made the focus group participants more … honest"
	• "[it is important to] reign certain ideas in to make sure that they do not become completely unachievable and unrealistic"
Empowerment	• "[students] feel equal to their lecturers"
Plurality	• "each individual provided the group with their own views"
Reciprocity	• "[students] discover that they are not alone in [the] way they perceive tasks"
Responsibility	• "changing the curriculum for myself and my course mates but also the students who will come after me"
Trust	• "creates a safe environment for all pupils and creates a space for new ideas"
Courage	• "get out of my comfort zone"
Inclusivity	• "making the curriculum feel a lot more personal"

Note. Quotes from student partner feedback. We are grateful for their contribution.

Particularly striking was the appreciation of honesty in the process of value co-creation. The following illustrates how honesty interacts with other partnership values (potential resources) and is integrated by actors to shape the system's adaptability (well-being). By restoring the power-balance between actors (empowerment), a space is created in which trust can move between actors. This, in turn, affords honesty and plurality, because individuals feel that they can freely express their subjective views. It is, then, the responsibility of all actors to be honest with each other and to negotiate what is feasible (beneficial) and what not (value co-production).

4.2. Overcoming spatial, virtual, metaphorical and temporal boundaries

Both modes of FGs (on- and offline) yielded valuable insights confirming previous results (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003), whereas the face-to-face FGs may have been more aligned with traditional expectations for richness of data (Abrams et al., 2015). This is because they offer a better opportunity to interpret non-verbal cues and consider additional prompts which may have led to further elucidation on a topic or theme being discussed. While online FGs made it easier to overcome geographical distances, they created virtual

boundaries behind which participants could both hide and shift their attention, adding complexity to the management of participants in the online space. As a result, dominant voices might have been amplified.

A clear advantage of face-to-face FGs is their potential to foster a sense of identity and belonging. For example, a UK student partner mentioned that "these focus groups … allowed the participants and I to feel more connected to the university." This feeling was even more pertinent in Asia, where UK staff partners worked with local student partners and participants. A Vietnamese student partner highlighted the significance of providing feedback "… directly to you guys." This could be explained by the fact that learners in collaborative partner institutions do not usually interact with members from the franchising institution, evoking a sense of disconnectedness and isolation. We believe that through personal interactions between all actors in the service ecosystem, power distances and hierarchical structures in TNE could be reduced and relationships were imbued with meaning. As a consequence, institutional arrangements took a more vivid and tangible shape (gestalt).

Partners and students unanimously agreed that discussions (FG1) were more accessible than De Bono's (1985/2000) Six Thinking Hats® exercise in FG2. For example, one of the staff partners said that…

> the activity was more time consuming and more difficult to explain and elicit responses even under timed activities. In the Six Hats Exercise, when students were asked to take on the persona of the white hat and red hat, students were more loquacious and the moderator had a more challenging time moving on from these hats.

This experience seems to confirm Childs' (2012, Section 6: Conclusions) claim that "although use of the tool can be learned quickly, it has been shown that it is important to learn the subtleties of the tool within facilitated sessions to ensure that the principles are adhered to." Reflecting on our experiences, we see at least two interrelated issues that also emerged as limitations in other student partnerships (e.g. Millmore, 2021): Lack of formal training and time constraints. We see the benefit of providing formal trainings to student partners and participants. However, we perceive time constraints as an important barrier for higher levels of engagement in student partnerships. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that commitment to partnerships increases as the collaborative project progresses because actors and institutions continue to integrate resources. This fosters their symbiotic relationships and keeps the ecosystem alive. The latter is, effectively, more than the sum of its individual parts (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). We are also mindful that De Bono's (1985/2000) Six Thinking Hats® could have been experienced as 'too transactional', leaving less space for the exchange of resources and the forging of relationships (Vargo et al., 2008).

4.3. Reflections on the unexpected

In this subsection, we reflect on several unexpected observations. First, we noticed that staff partners risk becoming gatekeepers in student partnerships. They have specific perceptions of their learners' skills, knowledge and behaviours, which ultimately affects their assessment of learners and the latter's readiness to act as student partners. Gatekeeping can be both, a positive and negative force. This is because gatekeepers are "… 'in power' for making the decision between 'in' and 'out'" (Lewin, 1947, p. 145). On the one hand, it can empower students to take on new roles on their academic journeys, which fosters academic, professional and personal growth. On the other hand, it can disempower students by excluding them from this experience, which creates inequalities. However, we feel that authentic partnerships must celebrate diversity and consider ways to become more inclusive and enable participants (e.g. through scaffolding and individualized support). This embraces our espoused understanding of student partnerships presented in Section 2, according to which "… all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways …" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7).

Second, we notice that student partners take ownership of their roles as co-researchers and depending on their level of maturity, are happy to develop it further and engage more deeply with staff participants. For example, one student partner pro-actively proposed ideas on how to improve the second FG based on their experiences made in the first FG. Another student participant explained how some of the resources learnt in the FGs could be integrated and institutionalized in other contexts (e.g. course evaluations) to improve student experiences and engagement. This highlights that student partnerships are not contained to specific projects. Instead, they have the potential to shape 'the culture and ethos' of the ecosystem (Advance HE, 2016).

Third, and in line with previous research (for an overview see e.g. Barradell & Bell, 2021; Bell, 2016), we notice that actors participating in student partnerships start to see education differently, which leads to a transformed consumption behaviour of education. We argue that this would not have been possible if learners had not participated in this project, be it in their capacity as co-producers or co-researchers.

Finally, we acknowledge the role that our cultural lenses have on our SoTL practice. As highlighted above, Asian partners appreciated the active collaboration with UK partners. Through the face-to-face FGs in particular, we were able to create a sense of identity and belonging. With student co-researchers moderating the FGs, we are able to respond positively to aspects of the Asian cultural context, such as power distance (Liang & Matthews, 2021). However, we recognize that it is impossible to fully escape cultural norms. In an attempt to do so, we created new stumbling blocks. For example, we conducted a FG in Asia with two UK student moderators. The student co-researchers were familiar with each other, but neither had much experience in moderating FGs. Working in a pair, they might have drawn on their familiarity and boosted each other's confidence, which caused them to rely on each other and to develop a 'blind eye' to the needs of Asian student participants (e.g. language adaptation). If students are less proficient in a second langue (e.g. English) and are not familiar with the linguistic patterns of the moderators, they might feel excluded and ignorant because they do not understand the moderators. This effect might be reinforced by Asian's need to save face (Liang & Matthews, 2021). We, therefore, recommend being mindful of such aspects, investing in cross-cultural trainings and providing additional learner support to empower them in their role as student partners.

5. Conclusion

This cross-cultural partnership, with its specific methodological approach has, therefore, the potential for a higher level of student engagement than more traditional forms of academic engagement. The methodological approach adopted has equally generated a co-productive means of bolstering the rigour evident in SoTL research, whilst seeking to exemplify its intent as a transformational force (for an overview see e.g. Barradell & Bell, 2021; Bell, 2016). This is made evident by the willingness and engagement of the SaP to rethink pedagogical practices (Dai & Matthews, 2023) and the display of all the values required to foster partnership learning communities (Advance HE, 2016; Healey et al., 2014, 2016; Matthews, Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2019).

The use of FGs moderated by student co-researchers, particularly those based on participatory action research and conducted face-to-face, also more fully enable an 'egalitarian' and mature partnership of contributions that seeks to influence both research and teaching development (Matthews, Dwyer, et al., 2019). This has the potential for value co-creation at the individual staff and student level (micro) and at the group level (course, HEI) – platformed on empowerment and the building of trust. Additionally, by seeking to do so across multiple collaborating international HEIs, this research approach begins to offer macro level outcomes across the whole ecosystem (Healey et al., 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). As such,

this research approach, importantly, augments the system's capacity to adapt to its environment (Vargo et al., 2008) and hence foster its well-being.

However, the use of tools such as De Bono's (1985/2000) Six Thinking Hats® to support participatory action research FGs can generate issues – perhaps even leading to value co-destruction – as it can engender an experience that becomes overly transactional disabling the development of relationships and partnerships. Here too other disabling factors can manifest, for instance the power of the staff partners or the impossibility of escaping cultural norms, and there is a need to consider such possibilities in the development and execution of SoTL research – particularly when working across diverse international HEIs.

Whilst such sensitivities need to be considered, the potential for this methodological approach – and perhaps even more so the resulting outcomes – is significant. Both the research and the teaching and learning gains are well worth the challenges and may renew, reinvigorate and reinforce the well-being of the ecosystem and its actors. "Scholars of teaching and learning [must, therefore, be] prepared to mess with the world even more boldly than their colleagues who are satisfied to teach well and leave it at that" (Shulman, 2002, p. viii).

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