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# Interinstitutional examination of partnership structures and tools

*A collaborative practitioner-scholar inquiry*

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## **Interinstitutional examination of partnership structures and tools**

### *A collaborative practitioner-scholar inquiry*

Andy Coppins, Harriet Raby, Becca Berkey, and Patti H. Clayton

#### **Abstract**

Two universities (in the United Kingdom and the United States) collaboratively examined community-campus partnership practices adapting elements of the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale II (TRES; Kniffin et al., 2020) to analyze and reflect on the others' partnership processes and to help create and refine approaches to partnership development. This article describes our interinstitutional practitioner-scholar inquiry and shares the approaches taken to understand and advance community-campus partnership practices by administrators within higher education structures. We present how the work on TRES influenced the process, share some of what we learned through it, and present some of the concrete products from it, including specific ways in which our work has been changed by this inquiry. The project described herein can be applied to other contexts, offering support to community engagement administrators as they seek to continually improve their partnership practices and to generate their own practitioner-scholarship to move the field forward.

**Keywords:** *community-campus partnerships, community engagement, practitioner scholar, transformational relationships*

## **Una examinación interinstitucional de las estructuras y herramientas de las relaciones comunitarias**

### *Investigación colaborativa entre profesionales y académicos*

Andy Coppins, Harriet Raby, Becca Berkey y Patti H. Clayton

#### **Resumen**

Dos universidades (en el Reino Unido y Estados Unidos) examinaron de manera colaborativa las relaciones entre los socios comunitarios y la universidad adaptando elementos de la Escala de Evaluación de Relaciones Transformacionales II (TRES; Kniffin et al., 2020) para analizar y reflexionar sobre los procesos de dichas relaciones de la otra universidad y así ayudar a crear y perfeccionar enfoques para el desarrollo de estas. Este artículo describe nuestra investigación interinstitucional entre profesionales e investigadores y comparte los enfoques adoptados para comprender y promover las prácticas de las relaciones entre la comunidad y el campus universitario por parte de los administradores dentro de las estructuras de las instituciones de educación superior. Presentamos cómo el trabajo usando TRES influyó en el proceso, compartimos lo que aprendimos a través de él y presentamos algunos de los productos concretos del mismo, incluidas formas específicas en las que esta investigación ha cambiado nuestro trabajo. El proyecto descrito aquí se puede aplicar en otros contextos, ofreciendo apoyo a los administradores de proyectos de vinculación comunitaria en su búsqueda de mejorar continuamente sus prácticas en estas relaciones y así generar sus propias destrezas académicas y prácticas para seguir avanzando en este campo.

**Palabras clave:** *relaciones entre comunidad y campus universitario, vinculación comunitaria, profesional-investigador, relaciones transformacionales*

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While organizations such as the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) give opportunities to professionals in the field of community-campus engagement to come together in communities of inquiry and practice, such gatherings are often episodic in nature and spark interest that is difficult to sustain beyond the particular conference or workshop context. In this article, we share an exception to this pattern: a sustained, multiyear partnership between two institutions with an ocean separating them, aimed at collaborative inquiry into partnership practice from a practitioner-scholar perspective. The co-authors represent the collaborative work of the teams at our two institutions—Nottingham Trent University and Northeastern University—as well as work with the research team responsible for creating and iterating the framework we used for this practitioner-scholar inquiry (Kniffin et al., 2020, 2023). Both institutional teams are composed of people who serve in predominantly administrative community engagement roles.

We approached our work collaboratively, committing to regular check-ins, input, and co-creation of our guiding questions as well as the methods through which we interrogated them. Our initial (and ongoing) overarching question was: If we aspire to create programs and community-campus partnerships that are more transformational than not, what are our roles and agency as administrators in doing so? We posited that approaching this work at two different institutions would provide an opportunity to strengthen the validity, depth, and rigor of both our partnership practice and scholarship related to service-learning and community engagement (SLCE), offering ways other institutions can conduct similar adaptation, application, and testing while advancing an approach to practitioner-scholar inquiry.

This article examines our work together, through which we adapted and tested the application of a framework and associated tool central to examining partnerships in SLCE: the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES). We will describe the inquiry practice, exploring the relationship formed between two universities and the processes explored to investigate the practice, including the underpinning frameworks of inquiry. Following this, there is a detailed description of the phases of the project and the link to the guiding questions, drawing out the outcomes from the partnership, looking at campus-specific products. Finally, we include a reflection on the key takeaways and applications of the inquiry for other practitioner-scholars.

## **Institutional Contexts**

Nottingham Trent University (NTU), located in Nottingham, England, has more than 40,000 students, faculty, and staff spanning five campuses. The university is committed to driving forward meaningful change and has received a wide range of prestigious awards for research, dynamism, and innovation. As noted on our website:

We are proud to be recognised as a university that opens its arms to all. We were the first university to sign up to the Government's social mobility pledge, demonstrating our commitment to improving the prospects of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Nottingham Trent University (NTU), n.d.a)

The NTU Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) is dedicated to ensuring equality of opportunity for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. CenSCE takes a whole student life cycle approach by using meaningful data and research at each stage of education—from primary school through to college and university—to promote access, participation, and progression to higher education. In adopting systemic thinking and action, the Centre aims to challenge and address the impact of structural inequality on student outcomes, collaborating with stakeholders and working toward equitable systems that benefit young people, faculty, students, staff, communities, and society. The CenSCE teams hold relationships with external partners for three purposes: (a) to better understand the needs, interests and challenges facing Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organizations and the local education sector; (b) to offer attainment-raising and developmental opportunities for the staff and pupils at local schools and colleges, and (c) to develop mutually beneficial relationships with VCSEs to offer curricular and co-curricular opportunities for NTU students, faculty, and staff.

Northeastern University (Northeastern) has 14 campus locations; the oldest campus is in Boston, Massachusetts, which is where the Community-Engaged Teaching and Research (CETR) team that participated in this partnership is located. It has approximately 25,000 undergraduate students and approximately 15,000 graduate students and is a private, Research I university. The institution received the elective Community Engagement classification from Carnegie in 2015 and will go up for consideration for renewal in 2026. The institutional profile has changed over time, shifting from what was historically a commuter school for Bostonians to a residential campus with students from across the globe.

CETR supports work across the entire multicampus system; however, as it is based in Boston, its infrastructure is most well-developed in that local context. This infrastructure includes a centralized partnership process for faculty and community partners as well as a Teaching Assistant (TA) program that trains and supports student TAs assigned to community-engaged courses. There are a number of other entities across the university that interface with the community. CETR considers itself part of a vibrant ecosystem committed to community-engaged work and to interrogating the role the university plays in communities.

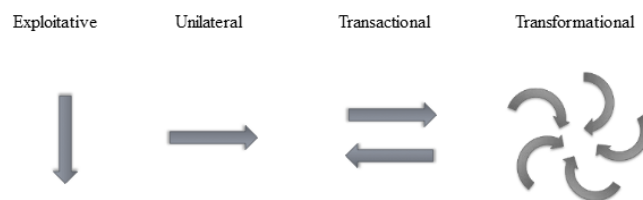
## Conceptual Frameworks

Service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) are catalysts for partnerships at both NTU and Northeastern. Both teams recognize the importance of building strong relationships in this space, acknowledging them as the bedrock of the work we do. Accordingly, we explored the work of Clayton and colleagues on TRES (Clayton et al., 2010; Kniffin et al., 2020) because of its ability to help us better understand the quality and characteristics of our partnerships and thereby to inform enhancements to our partnership practice. TRES has evolved through several iterations, most notably, the TRES I and TRES II (version 1 and 2) scales. We will use the term “TRES” (pronounced “trees”) in reference to the ongoing body of work that includes TRES I, TRES II, and the work-in-progress on TRES III.

The conceptual framework underlying TRES includes four sets of relationship characteristics that fall along a continuum: Exploitative, Unilateral, Transactional, and Transformational (EUTT; Clayton et al., 2022).

**Figure 1.**

*EUTT Continuum (Clayton et al., 2022)*



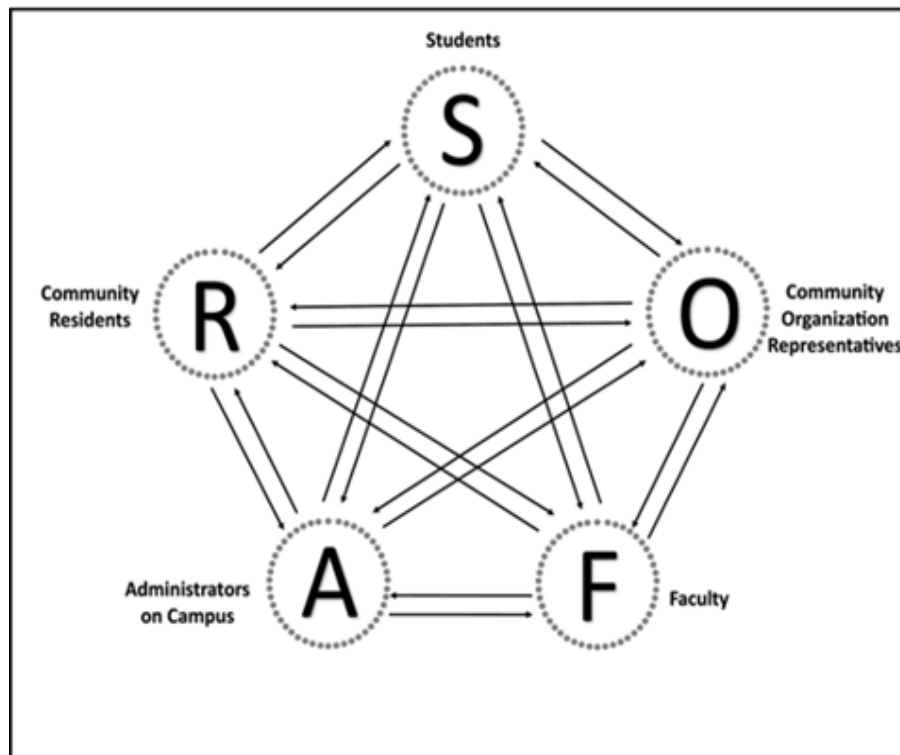
Transformational relationships are generally fully collaborative and co-created, leading to fundamental changes in the partners, the partnership, and the systems around them. TRES incorporates 10 domains: goals, conflict, decision-making, resources, role of partners in the partnership, role of partnership in

developing sense of self, extent and nature of interactions, power, outcomes, and satisfaction. For each domain, the scale provides a means to evaluate a partnership's current state as well as its desired state on descriptors aligned with the scale's underlying EUTT framework (see Kniffin et al., 2020 for the complete TRES II scale). For example, descriptors from which to choose in the domain of "Goals" include "The goals of some of the partners are not known and are hampered, and this causes harm" (for exploitative), "Only some of the partners' goals are acted on, but that is not harmful to anybody" (for unilateral), "The distinct goals of all the partners are important to and nurtured by the partnership" (for transactional), and "We share common, integrated, and expanding goals that are "our" goals (not "mine" and "yours" separately)" (for transformational).

The body of work on TRES is also grounded in a model of partnerships called SOFAR. SOFAR names five of the common categories of partners in SLCE—Students, community Organization representatives, Faculty, campus Administrators, and community Residents (see Figure 2)—and invites us to think of each as potential co-creative partners. SOFAR helps inform the question of who uses TRES in any given instance, including dyads (e.g., F-O, S-R), triads, (e.g., F-O-S), a network, or a partnership entity (Kniffin et al., 2020). Within NTU and Northeastern, the inquiry teams represent the "A" element of the SOFAR model—community engagement Administrators—on the two campuses. Although administrators have been included in partnership research using TRES to date (see Kniffin et al., 2020 for examples), we are unaware of any work that explicitly uses the scale to inquire into the roles and perspectives of administrators—specifically, how they contribute (or not) to the facilitation of partnerships along the EUTT continuum through their administrative roles and structures.

**Figure 2.**

*SOFAR partnership model (Bringle et al., 2009; Kniffin et al., 2020)*



The TRES framework resonated deeply with both teams when we began our work together. Not only is it an assessment tool that can be used by all partners, therefore involving our stakeholders in the process

but it also can indicate where a relationship exists along a continuum of quality and depth within each of the 10 domains it measures. Importantly, TRES encouraged us to think, plan, and reflect on how to involve partners in the process in a way that was democratic, authentic, and sustainable (Dostilio, 2014); it provided language to describe high-quality partnerships and an evaluative framework that partners could use to provide feedback and help ensure accountability. This goal became even more important as the project evolved, along with the relationships between the two institutions and with our respective partners, as a result of this scholarly inquiry. Dempsey's (2010) assertions rang true for us as we worked together and made us more determined to combat power inequalities:

Unequal access to decision-making and the disproportionate division of labor creates harmful power imbalances that undermine the goals of community engagement. Campus-based participants must address these critical concerns if community engagement is to have the transformative effects suggested by its many proponents. (p. 360)

### **Approach to Inquiry**

NTU and Northeastern created an informal, mutually supportive partnership of peer learning to better understand how to develop, validate, document, evaluate, and enhance effective stakeholder relationships from the point of view of experienced SLCE practitioner-scholars (i.e., administrators or "A"s in the SOFAR model) within each university. A foundation of our work together is distinguishing between transactional and transformational partnerships, as operationalized in TRES (Kniffin et al., 2020). We also pulled from the expansive work on community-campus partnerships (e.g., Boyle et al., 2011; Dostilio & Welch, 2019; Sandy, 2007; Kuttner et al., 2019) to articulate our overarching question for this interinstitutional practitioner-scholar inquiry: If we aspire to create programs and community-campus partnerships that are more transformational than not, what are our roles and agency as administrators in doing so?

The following questions guided the collaborative inquiry:

- How well are we doing this work at our respective institutions?
- What does it mean for a community-campus partnership to be responsible, ethical, and transformative, and what infrastructure best supports such partnerships?
- How do we view community-campus partnerships in SLCE on our campuses, with reference to the TRES framework?
- What is our role and agency as administrators ("A"s in the SOFAR model), and what opportunities do we have to influence these partnerships?

Each program undertook a practitioner-scholar inquiry approach (Green, 2023) informed by the "critical friends" model (Costa, 1993), Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2003), and Developmental Evaluation (Patton, 2011). This approach offered an opportunity to understand our partnership infrastructures from a perspective rooted in the research on responsible, ethical, and transformative partnerships (i.e., TRES) and informed by the perspectives of external colleagues.

As stated by Costa (1993), a critical friend "is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers a critique of a person's work as a friend" (p. 49). Although there are complex applications of critical friendship, we sought simply to create a "mutually reciprocal critical friend relationship" (MacPhail et al., 2021, p. 3) between colleagues at NTU and Northeastern. As university administrators, often working in isolation, it is easy to neglect the practice of reflection (Costa, 1993). Through this project, each team aimed to function as a critical friend to the other, ensuring that colleagues were able to use time together to understand our work as practitioner-scholars and to offer critique on goals and outcomes where appropriate. We also collaborated with a member of the TRES research team throughout the process, keeping that team apprised of our work, soliciting their review and comment, and disseminating our work at conferences in collaboration with them.

As teams, we wanted to approach our work together from an asset-based perspective, and as such Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was an appropriate frame:

The choice to use the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has often resulted from limitations encountered in using problem-focused or deficit approaches. The problem-focused approach was generally very effective in solving existing problems and “fixing” them, but often less effective in identifying what is going “right” and taking it to the next level (MacCoy, 2014, p. 106).

The four stages of AI are Discovery/Appreciating, Dream/Envisioning, Design/Co-Constructing, and Destiny/Sustaining (Cooperrider et al., 2003). The point of AI is not to disregard challenges but rather to balance an understanding of them with a recognition of the positive and through naming the tension between the two in ways that lead to generativity (MacCoy, 2014). As both an inquiry process and a philosophy, AI aligns well with both developmental evaluation and our practitioner-scholar inquiry as rooted in practice, experience, and context. Specifically, AI informed our inquiry in multiple ways, but most impactful was the opportunity not to pick apart what we were doing to find flaws, but to clarify the goals we had as teams in facilitating partnerships and then to examine current structures and approaches to ensure alignment with those goals.

For this collaborative project, we drew upon the tenets of Developmental Evaluation (DE), which incorporates “evaluative thinking” into the process:

Judgments of merit, worth, significance, meaningfulness, innovativeness, and effectiveness (or such other criteria as are negotiated) inform ongoing adaptive innovation. Such evaluative judgments don’t just come at the end of some fixed period (e.g., a 3-year grant); rather, they are ongoing and timely (Patton, 2021, p. 24).

Patton (2011, 2016) initially identified five tenets/applications of DE, including ongoing innovation, scaling principles for adaptations to new locations, preformative evaluation, systems change, and humanitarian aid. More recent applications of DE (e.g., Patton, 2021) include adapting to crisis; supporting systems transformation; developing networks, alliances, and collaborations; supporting capacity building; and guiding research and evaluation. DE “provides evaluative information and feedback to social innovators to inform adaptive development in complex dynamic environments” (Patton, 2016, p. 253). For the purposes of our work together, we focused on preformative evaluation and systems change, as well as supporting our capacity building, research, and evaluation work at our respective institutions through our collaboration with one another.

The Guiding Principles of Developmental Evaluation for Social Justice as summarized and adapted by the Developmental Evaluation Institute are: (1) co-creation, (2) innovation niche, (3) systems thinking, (4) complexity concepts, (5) utilization-focused evaluation, (6) DE for social justice purpose, (7) timely and culturally appropriate feedback, and (8) evaluation rigor (Patton, n.d.). DE drove our collaborative work by ensuring that it was focused on learning *together, from, and with* one another during this process, illuminating new insights and possibilities and igniting our imaginations about what is possible in our own contexts.

Our process used the expertise of colleagues—specifically, the community engagement professionals responsible for cultivating high-quality partnerships within our institutions (one of the six functional areas of competencies identified in Dostilio, 2017). Green’s imperative challenged us as practitioner-scholars, “to think and act differently, anchoring our context, experience, and practices as a source of knowledge that we must explore and interrogate to shape the future of higher education” (Green, 2023, p. 99). We worked together to align emergent practice, described in the next section and centered in our experiences, to theoretical understanding, to develop a better understanding of the contextual nature of knowledge in order to improve practice.

We as practitioner-scholars were the “instruments for data collection” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186), as well as intimately connected to the “data” itself. Our approach to inquiry offered strategies to explore community-campus partnerships in real time, generating evidence for our strategies as well as mechanisms to assess their validity and reliability.

As will become evident, early in the inquiry, the process was inward facing; the second stage focused more on the discussions about TRES, applying it to our contexts and work and generating the matrix. In the

final phase, the results from the first two phases contributed to more rigorous work with partners to generate a range of context-specific products (e.g., sets of values/principles shared on websites, surveys, reports).

### Three Phases of Interinstitutional Examination of Partnership Structures

Drawing on the four approaches to inquiry, our collaboration consisted of relationship building and planning between 2018 and 2020 among the directors of our two units, which then led to implementing the three phases of this inquiry, as depicted in Figure 3. This section details the process and what resulted from our interinstitutional partnership, both collectively and for NTU and Northeastern individually.

**Figure 3.**

*Three Phases of Interinstitutional Examination of Partnership Structures*

|                                   | <b>Phase 1: Relationship Building</b>                                | <b>Phase 2: Partnership Assessment</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Phase 3: Contextualized Implementation</b>                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Time frame</b>                 | Dec 2020–Dec 2021                                                    | Jan 2022–July 2022                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Aug 2022–Jan 2023                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Primary mode(s) of inquiry</b> | - Critical friendship<br>- Appreciative inquiry                      | - Appreciative inquiry<br>- Developmental evaluation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | - Practitioner scholar<br>- Appreciative inquiry                                                                                               |
| <b>Guiding Question(s)</b>        | 1. How well are we doing this work at our respective institutions?   | 1. What does it mean for a community-campus partnership to be responsible, ethical, and transformative, and what infrastructure best supports such partnerships?<br><br>2. How do we view community-campus partnerships in SLCE on our campuses, with reference to the TRES framework? | 3. What is our role and agency as administrators (“A”s in the SOFAR model), and what opportunities do we have to influence these partnerships? |
| <b>Key Activities</b>             | - Shared vignettes<br>- Review of websites<br>- Meetings to feedback | - Review of EUTT / TRES framework                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | - Application of lessons learned to partnerships                                                                                               |
| <b>Outcomes</b>                   | ➤ Developed processes for critical friendship                        | ➤ Matrix                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | ➤ Partnership values<br>➤ Engagement report<br>➤ Survey<br>➤ Fellows program                                                                   |

As illustrated, each phase took time and required the directors to meet regularly to determine the structure of meetings, the roles and responsibilities of individual team members, and the work needed to take place in between meetings to ensure forward progress.

Throughout the three phases, both universities were developing and piloting approaches to partnership development, using TRES as relevant to their contexts, which fed into our collaborative work. This individual work and perspective brought alternative viewpoints and extra learning in an iterative process throughout all the phases.

### *Phase 1: Relationship building*

In Phase 1—“Relationship Building”—we focused predominantly on relationship development and trust-building between the staff at our two institutions through a series of exercises, outlined below, which allowed us to learn about and provide feedback on one another’s partnership processes. This enabled us to delve into the guiding question for this section, as outlined in Figure 3 above, to intentionally assess our work at our respective institutions through critical friendship and Appreciative Inquiry, focusing mostly on the Discovery/Appreciating phase of the latter.

We also developed a set of partnership-related vignettes (see Appendix 1 for an example) for the other unit to read and digest. Each unit reviewed the program website of the other institution, as well, adopting the perspective of the community partner outlined in the vignette, and looking at the partnership-related content to identify examples of good practice, navigability, evidence of opportunities they could make use of, etc. We then came together to discuss the vignettes and websites, using TRES as an evaluative framework, asking questions to help one another think through the nature of our relationships with partners, focusing on what is positive and reinforcing that, while also helping us think through what we could do to make those relationships move more toward Transformational on the EUTT continuum. These vignettes and subsequent discussions formed the data collected in Phase 1 which, as mentioned previously, was quite inward looking, helping all participants to reflect on and review personal positions within institutions and our new interinstitutional partnership. The discussions about the websites in particular identified ways to potentially build on existing content and opportunities for further development. The process allowed the units to learn from each other, in an appreciative inquiry approach, both appreciating and building on the assets that were in place while co-constructing improvements based on the other team’s expertise and unbiased observations.

The process of becoming critical friends enabled each team to understand our practice from an external, independent perspective. This also built up a level of trust and a safe space—a key consideration within critical friendships (MacPhail et al., 2021)—which provided a foundation for the rest of the work we completed together. This mutual trust enabled both parties to be open and honest about our processes, to view each other and our institutional community engagement work as assets and to start from that position, and then ask how we could learn from each other to improve them.

### *Phase 2: “Partnership Assessment”*

In Phase 2—“Partnership Assessment”—we used Appreciative Inquiry as our primary mode of inquiry, underpinned by one of the key principles of Developmental Evaluation—co-creation (Patton, 2016)—which led to the construction of a rubric for evaluating community partnerships, referred to herein as “the matrix” (see Appendix 2).

Phase 2 was characterized by a structured activity through which our teams collaboratively developed criteria for applying and assessing the TRES domains across the EUTT continuum. TRES was useful at a surface level for identifying where aspects of a relationship may be (e.g., Exploitative goals, Unilateral decision-making, Transactional interactions or Transformational outcomes). However, the framework lacked a set of norms or criteria that signified what constituted a relationship at each of the EUTT levels for each of the TRES domains. We sought to unearth evidence that would allow us to “know” where our partnerships fell on the continuum for each of the domains.

Through an iterative process across several workshops, we systematically reviewed each of the domains, reflecting in small groups about what each looked like, drawing from our own experiences and observations. For example, for the “decision-making” domain, we considered what exploitative, unilateral, transactional, and transformational decision-making looked like in practice, as well as the impact of each on partnerships. Using AI as a framework, we “appreciated” the wisdom inherent in our own experience, and where we found few examples, we “dreamed” or imagined what it might look like (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Returning to the large group, we collated our ideas and identified common activities and outcomes for the TRES areas and EUTT phases. This was then refined into a final, more succinct matrix—a co-created rubric for evaluating community partnerships, illustrated in full in Appendix 2. The single exception

was the TRES domain for the “role of partnership in developing a sense of self”; the two teams, and their respective community partners, struggled to identify criteria for this area so it was excluded from the final matrix.

The matrix serves as a tool for assessing and moving relationships with partners from transactional to transformational, identifying some of the signals that could indicate when one party is exploiting the other, or when the relationship is very one-sided. It also describes aspirational partnership characteristics at the transformational end of the continuum, providing examples of co-created, collaborative work in partnerships. The process of developing the matrix has helped members of both teams in their roles as Administrators (A) in the SOFAR model, serving as a reminder when working with partners to think about relationships and offering a tool for assessing and developing particular aspects of a relationship to move along the continuum.

The NTU and Northeastern teams presented the matrix to the TRES team, explaining the process involved in developing the rubric and seeking feedback about the matrix and its use as an evaluation tool. The TRES team recognized the benefit of the matrix for practitioner-scholars and were pleased to see how the TRES framework was being adapted and expanded upon. We shared the matrix so they could use it in their ongoing development of the TRES framework as well as to inform their ongoing work with practitioner-scholars. The matrix, in conjunction with the TRES framework, can be used in a similar way by other practitioner-scholars, to think about their own partnerships, and to help them implement activities aimed at developing more transformational relationships with partners.

### *Phase 3: Contextualized implementation*

Finally, in Phase 3—“Contextualized Implementation”—both teams used a Practitioner Scholar approach to independently implement changes and apply the lessons learned from Phases 1 and 2. The inquiry, influenced by TRES, led both universities to reflect on the values or principles that underpin how we view our community-campus partnerships, demonstrating evidence of the sustaining phase of the Appreciative Inquiry phases also.

At NTU, this project led to the development of the CenSCE Partnership Values, which are documented on the CenSCE website for all partners to see and explore in full transparency (NTU, n.d.b). The values themselves were co-created with stakeholders and colleagues and demonstrate how NTU is working toward those transformational relationships referred to in the TRES framework. Additionally, during this critical friendship, CETR at Northeastern was developing the Principles of Anti-Oppressive Community Engagement for University Educators and Researchers with the institution’s Social Impact Lab and Library Archives (Riccio et al., 2022) which—much like the CenSCE Partnership Values—publicly proclaims Northeastern’s aspirations for community engagement.

Drawing heavily on TRES, CenSCE has developed a “Working in Partnership with CenSCE” survey, another outcome of the relationship with Northeastern and the TRES team. Once the survey is completed by both a partner organization and a member of the CenSCE staff, a contextualized “Engagement Report” is created, providing a picture of the relationship between the partners. The Engagement Report documents the survey results and co-created plans or strategies for achieving the desired outcomes.

CETR began a Community-Engaged Teaching Fellows program many years ago, with the eventual hope of expanding the program beyond Northeastern’s faculty to include community partner educators as fellows, as well. The partnership with NTU, along with other considerations and shifts on the CETR team, helped make this a reality for the first time in the 2022–2023 academic year.

Finally, a change in how both teams approach partnerships as administrators has developed since taking part in this inquiry. At NTU, most relationships would previously sit on the continuum between unilateral and transactional, where partnership advances were based on the needs of one or more partners, but not all. This space in the continuum is a broad area covering multiple examples of relationships; including many that are highly valued by all partners. Even with committed partners and strong relationships, it has become clear through our scholarly inquiry that transformational relationships are difficult to achieve. This is due to a range of factors, from institutional barriers (such as multiple points of contact, changing priorities,

funding, staff turnover), to ongoing questions about how to distinguish truly collaborative relationships from transactional ones. At Northeastern, the collaborative inquiry with NTU motivated a change in the alignment of timelines for the semester setup, bringing the “asks” of both community partners and faculty into alignment with one another, time-wise, rather than starting the whole process based on what our faculty stakeholders were planning and asking our partners to simply respond to that.

How our staff approaches working with partners, and the infrastructure we are partly responsible for, have been directly influenced by this change in approach. This, in turn, will have an influence over the quality of the partnerships we hold.

## Discussion

This section explores how the modes of inquiry and guiding questions (see Figure 3) relate to the engagement between NTU and Northeastern and the outcomes that emerged. We focus on what was learned throughout the process, reflecting on how the TRES framework and approaches to inquiry informed this work, including how to evaluate community partnerships using the matrix.

Both university teams garnered several benefits from the relationship over the different phases of this practitioner-scholar inquiry, both for the professional development of the individual staff involved, and for our departments regarding the advancement of high-quality relationships with partners. Both teams changed how we view and manage relationships with partners. In alignment with the DE approach, many of the developmental evaluation guiding principles are evident in this work; as we were discussing and evaluating while working through each phase, the co-creation along with the approach of utilization-focused evaluation had an impact on practice (Patton, 2016). The work led to both teams deepening our understanding of the importance of concentrating on relationships themselves (e.g., their quality, their dynamics), as opposed to only the outputs of those relationships. We were able to break down the complexity of community-campus relationships, discussing and wrestling with them along with colleagues in a different context, in a way that could not be done individually.

Not only did the partnership between NTU and Northeastern move our thinking and practice forward in new ways but it also modeled ways of enacting and practicing critical friendships to strengthen deeply held values and create accountability around community-campus partnerships. Relying on the elements of Critical Friendship throughout the inquiry, we were able to prioritize reflection at each phase and offer critique, both on processes and products, from a place of understanding as “A”s in the SOFAR model.

The inquiry led us through all four stages of AI; Discovery/Appreciating, Dream/Envisioning, Design/Co-Constructing, and Destiny/Sustaining (Cooperrider et al., 2003), encouraging both practitioner-scholars and our community partners to address any tension and challenges to achieve desired goals and outcomes. At NTU, this resulted in the creation of the Partnership Survey and Engagement report with the aim to not only identify where the partnership is now and where it is desired to be but also to unearth common goals or challenges that may act as barriers.

Using the TRES framework as a reference point for the ongoing discussions between NTU and Northeastern enabled our understanding of community-campus partnerships to become much deeper and richer; it allowed for conversations that stretched our thinking beyond what may have happened without such a reference point.

These interactions resulted in practical improvements, for example, CenSCE’s webpages for community partners at NTU, and changes to CETR’s Community-Engaged Teaching Fellows program. Aside from some of the more tangible outputs from this experience, there have been some initial, intangible outcomes, too. There has been a change in the behavior of staff in how they approach relationship development, and how they communicate this with partners. This will take time to fully develop and become integral to the process. The language used to describe partnerships, and the commitment required to think about the “relationship” itself, instead of the “outputs” of the relationship, are new and challenging to discuss. Continued engagement in relationship development takes universal commitment and is a continuing priority.

The involvement of the TRES team has been useful to sense-check and guide our thinking as we have progressed through the different phases of the inquiry. In this space, we shared intentions of how we planned to use the matrix, in addition to the TRES, to evaluate our partnerships. Not only are we able to use the matrix to evaluate current community partnerships and where they sit on the continuum, it aids us in further developing relationships by providing practical examples of outcomes and activities associated with transformational community partnerships. With this, we hope the matrix is a useful tool for other practitioner-scholars to consider and embed into evaluating their community partnerships.

## **Limitations**

We hope this is a helpful guide and illustration of lessons learned for anyone looking to collaborate to apply existing theory to their work as practitioner-scholars. Although this specific case describes two institutions applying one framework (TRES) from a particular vantage point (Administrators in the SOFAR model), it showcases opportunities for a collaborative partnership to illuminate how theory can strengthen practice, and alternatively, how practice can inform future evolution of theory (in this case, our work with the TRES team).

This work is not without its limitations, however. Having a clear evaluative framework is challenging when you are in the middle of the work, as authors and administrators. Using Developmental Evaluation was helpful to guide the process. However, there were challenges to our endeavor, as we were not external evaluators; rather, we were participants and leaders of the work as well as inquirers. From an ethnographic sense, this is natural, and it lends itself to the evolving, complex nature of DE, but there is a tension between the roles that should be noted for others considering similar types of inquiries.

Secondly, as discussed earlier, the “data” collected were collaboratively generated, captured, and analyzed throughout the process. The phases were not fully planned at the outset but evolved based on continued findings and insights, always with the ultimate goal of our shared inquiry in mind. Although this precise process may not be replicable, the spirit of this process, the development of shared goals, and the formal processes used to document and analyze the project have led to general takeaways and outputs that are applicable and replicable for other practitioner-scholars.

Last, this project is specific to two locations in the United States and the United Kingdom and focused on using a framework for working with particular community partners, which might limit generalizability. However, we do feel the principles of our practitioner-scholar inquiry, along with some of the approaches taken, could be replicated in other contexts relatively easily, and some of the conclusions about partner relations are relevant to the community engagement field more widely.

## **Conclusion**

This practitioner-scholar inquiry provides an example of how teams facilitating work with community partnerships, on different campuses, can use common frameworks and tools to better align infrastructure with the philosophical values they hold about partnerships. Through a process guided by critical friendship, appreciative inquiry, and developmental evaluation, NTU and Northeastern both committed to developing their relationships with community partners and have been able to apply the TRES framework to develop their own professional and boundary-spanning competencies, as well as developing institutional tools to further this work.

The complexity and variety of community-campus partnerships were a recurring theme during the discussions, and, while the desire for transformational partnerships was the driver for both universities, there was also the realization that these ideal partnerships are difficult to achieve and maintain because of various internal and external pressures. However, TRES pushes us to strive for this goal and to seek the best outcomes for all partners. The matrix developed by the two universities in this inquiry has given us a mechanism to work toward this goal. The EUTT continuum also allows us to see the fluidity of relationships and understand that there is not, for example, a sharp distinction between transactional or transformational relationships. This helped our teams to see that relationships develop at different paces and that some

partners are satisfied with less than “transformational” relationships. The most important factor in this work is that the relationship and its characteristics are discussed and that each partner is an important contributor to those discussions.

The partnership also demonstrated the agency that administrators in the SOFAR model have to understand and improve community-campus partnerships. By creating equitable infrastructure and processes, as well as by collaboratively creating and communicating the values that underpin the work we do, “A”s can influence practice across the institution and with partners. “A”s can also respond to Green’s imperative “to think and act differently, anchoring our context, experience, and practices as a source of knowledge that we must explore and interrogate to shape the future of higher education” (Green, 2023, p. 99). As the partnership between NTU and Northeastern demonstrates, administrators can implement changes in their approaches, ways of working, and the tools they use to not only improve their practice but improve others’ too, resulting in enhanced campus–community relationships across many institutions.

This inquiry also demonstrates how practitioners may work together to use, adapt, critique, and contribute to SLCE scholarship. The TRES team has been a fundamental part of our partnership, offering feedback and support for our work to develop the TRES framework for broader use and application. Practitioner-scholars have an important role to play in building the field, contributing to scholarly inquiry to build on and use their critical experience and practice.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Sample Vignette Used by NTU and NU in Phase 1**

The Z Trust has a number of schools spread across the region. We do not have the resources to work in partnership with them all, so we focus our resources on working with five schools located in the county. Of these, we are focusing our efforts this year on trying to deepen engagement with one school. The school is located in an ex-mining community and has a large number of pupils, with approximately a third of these being eligible for Pupil Premium funding. We have categorized this school as a transactional relationship which is moving toward being transformational. Through a process of consultancy and negotiation, there has been some promising co-creation in recent times. The school also demonstrates a willingness to pilot and be part of innovative new work, research, and evaluation. The challenge (and risk), however, is that much of this is dependent on a single point of contact. We want to get to a place where this approach and good practice are embedded in school culture/policy.

## Appendix 2

### Matrix Developed by NTU and Northeastern University

| TRES Area | Exploitative                                                                                                  |                                                                                                      | Unilateral                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                           | Transactional                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                     | Transformational                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | Activities                                                                                                    | Outcomes                                                                                             | Activities                                                                                                                                        | Outcomes                                                                                  | Activities                                                                                                                      | Outcomes                                                                                                                            | Activities                                                                                                                                                                              | Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| GOALS     | 1. Goals are in opposition<br><br>2. All partners are aiming to achieve own goals without reference to others | 1. Breakdown in relationship<br><br>2. Lack of response                                              | 1. Knowledge of each other's priorities<br><br>2. Goals sit within the same theme, but don't rely on each partner and are achievable individually | 1. Commonalities are demonstrated<br><br>2. Output data is requested                      | 1. Recognition that the partnership benefits each other's goals<br><br>2. Goals are agreed and shared but achieved individually | 1. Conversation/briefing form with partners about goals<br><br>2. Output data is exchanged<br><br>3. Goals shared via communication | 1. Goals that are co-created and agreed in collaboration<br><br>2. Co-created goals fit within each partner's priorities<br><br>3. Strategic support for goals and partnership          | 1. Visible agreement of goals (e.g., SLA)<br><br>2. Shared measurement framework for outputs<br><br>3. Continuous communication                                                                                  |
| CONFLICT  | 1. Disagreements that don't get resolved<br><br>2. Issues are ignored and left to build                       | 1. Breakdown in relationship<br><br>2. Lack of respect<br><br>3. Reputational damage for all parties | 1. Frustrations are managed internally (one-sided)<br><br>2. Processes/scope of work are amended to manage issues but only by one partner         | 1. Lack of communication - conflicts are not discussed<br><br>2. Conflict is not recorded | 1. Conflict is discussed as and when it occurs<br><br>2. A resolution has been put in place to benefit both parties             | 1. Two-way communication<br><br>2. Conflict is recorded, and actions assigned to all parties                                        | 1. Address how conflict can be resolved at partnership setting stage<br><br>2. Jointly decide on resolutions<br><br>3. Both parties recognizing that conflict could provide opportunity | 1. Visible agreement of conflict management (e.g., partnership agreement)<br><br>2. Clear, continuous communication<br><br>3. Partners will share and learn from prior conflict and view it as an area of growth |

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DECISION-MAKING | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decisions are made without involving all parties</li> <li>2. The topic of decision-making is avoided and left unaddressed</li> </ul>                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Breakdown in relationship</li> <li>2. One or more parties could be negatively impacted by decision made</li> <li>3. Reputational damage for one or more parties</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Work is directed by one partner</li> <li>2. Usually centered on one partner's timescales, priorities, or themes</li> </ul>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pre-determined service/provision is offered</li> <li>2. One-sided communication (e.g., offer page on website)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All partners are involved in decision-making but one partner may lead</li> <li>2. Communication is functional and task orientated (e.g., actions are distributed individually)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decision-making process is documented (e.g., partnership agreement)</li> <li>2. Decisions are recorded, and actions are assigned/distributed to all parties</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continuous conversation - open discussions</li> <li>2. Clear process of accountability \</li> <li>3. All parties contribute to discussions and benefit from decisions made</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Decisions are made jointly</li> <li>2. Visible agreement (e.g., partnership agreement)</li> </ul>                                                                          |
| RESOURCES       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Not seeing through on a commitment</li> <li>2. Unproportionate expectations of resource sharing</li> <li>3. Raising unrealistic expectations for what you can offer (e.g., promising the world and unable to deliver)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Breakdown in relationship</li> <li>2. One partner being at a distinct disadvantage</li> <li>3. Misunderstanding of each other's resources/ offer</li> </ul>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resources are usually provided by one partner</li> <li>2. Resources to be shared are determined by lead partner who has resources to share</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Loss of power/input from the other partner</li> </ul>                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resources to be shared are discussed</li> <li>2. Different types of resources are recognized to be mutually beneficial</li> </ul>                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Shared resources are documented (e.g., partnership agreement)</li> <li>2. All parties recognize both traditional and non-traditional resource</li> </ul>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Shared ownership of all resources</li> <li>2. Resources are proportional to the means of partners involved</li> </ul>                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. An open and honest discussion of where, when, and how resources are used</li> <li>2. Visible agreement of resource sharing (e.g., partnership agreement or SLA)</li> </ul> |

| ROLE OF PARTNERS IN THE PARTNERSHIP                                            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Slow, misleading, vague or a lack of communication</li> <li>2. Inflexible approach</li> <li>3. No agreement of roles</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Breakdown in relationship</li> <li>2. Lack of response</li> </ol>         | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Annual meeting</li> <li>2. Minimum commitment and expectations expressed</li> <li>3. One partner has imparted expectation</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Functional agreement completed to achieve an end goal (e.g., to advertise roles, gain places, etc.)</li> <li>2. One partner's needs met (e.g., reporting or evaluation)</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion of roles takes place and is recorded</li> <li>2. Each side takes responsibility to hold their side of the partnership up</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Partnership agreement with roles specified</li> <li>2. Records of meetings, data sharing agreements, etc.</li> <li>3. Agreements around marketing benefits for all partners</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion of roles is agreed, and partners are jointly accountable</li> <li>2. Partners meet regularly to discuss and negotiate work and roles in the work</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Co-created partnership agreement which is explicit to the partnership</li> <li>2. Webpages highlighting work that involved partners co-creating work</li> <li>3. Co-created evaluation frameworks</li> </ol>                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP IN DEVELOPING SENSE OF SELF (excluded in current analysis) |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| EXTENT AND NATURE OF INTERACTIONS                                              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No contact or response</li> <li>2. If communication occurs, it is hostile</li> </ol>                                            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Breakdown in relationship</li> <li>2. Unanswered communication</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited contact</li> <li>2. Often is one partner chasing for a response</li> </ol>                                                   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A response occurs only when one partner can benefit</li> <li>2. They may identify a named partner at this stage</li> </ol>                                                         | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interactions are agreed between all partners</li> <li>2. Regular response and acknowledgment from all involved</li> </ol>                      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Several named contacts</li> <li>2. A visible agreement of how best to communicate (e.g., a communication plan)</li> </ol>                                                              | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interactions are welcomed and consistent</li> <li>2. There is a clear line of communication and excellent rapport built</li> </ol>                                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Regular communication across multiple platforms (e.g., emails, MS Teams, and face to face)</li> <li>2. Visible agreement of how the partners will work together and how often communication will occur (e.g., partnership agreement)</li> </ol> |

|          |                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| POWER    | <p>1. Partner with the least power is taken advantage of and disregarded</p> <p>2. Lack of recognition of systemic mistreatment of marginalized groups</p> | <p>1. Mistrust in relationship leading to breakdown</p> <p>2. Might cause harm</p>                | <p>1. Partners use their power to decide what is going to happen (often with good intentions) but without consultation or community voice</p> <p>2. Limited accountability to each other</p> | <p>1. Solutions created by one partner (savior complex/lack of recognition of privilege)</p>                    | <p>1. Power is acknowledged and addressed (what will be done to mitigate power imbalances)</p>                                              | <p>1. Power is documented in partnership summary document</p>                                                                                                                                   | <p>1. Recognizing how power across all partners can benefit each other</p> <p>2. Those with more structural/systemic power will complete more of the 'leg work' and encourage the other partner to be more visible (flipping the narrative)</p> <p>3. Willingness to learn and listen</p> | <p>1. Power is documented, and plan is put in place to counteract an imbalance of power (i.e., if co-publishing, partner with least power is listed first)</p> |
| OUTCOMES | <p>1. Misunderstanding of outcomes leads to unintended consequences for one partner</p>                                                                    | <p>1. Breakdown in relationship</p> <p>2. Unintended repercussions/harm caused to one partner</p> | <p>1. Outcomes are measured and recorded individually</p>                                                                                                                                    | <p>1. Individual performance targets</p> <p>2. Evidence of one perspective of outcomes (i.e., case studies)</p> | <p>1. Desired outcomes/deliverables are identified by each partner and then shared</p> <p>2. Outcomes may differ but are all achievable</p> | <p>1. Shared communication about outcomes/deliverables (i.e., partnership summary document)</p> <p>2. Shared evidence that used by both partners (i.e., a case study from all perspectives)</p> | <p>1. Outcomes/deliverables are co-created and agreed</p> <p>2. Continued conversation around outcomes to ensure all are achievable and prioritized</p>                                                                                                                                   | <p>1. Visible agreement of outcomes (i.e., SLA)</p> <p>2. Shared measurement framework for outcomes</p>                                                        |

|              |                                                                                                |                                                     |                                                                                                              |                                                                                              |                                                                      |                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                   |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SATISFACTION | 1. Evaluation is completed for one partner's gain/needs, with no regard for the second partner | 1. Breakdown in relationship<br>2. Lack of response | 1. Evaluation is done by the side with more power, with some thought for the experience of the other partner | 1. The needs/objectives of one partner are prioritized (usually the partner with more power) | 1. All partners are getting what they want/need from the partnership | 1. Objectives of both partners are met<br>2. Responses to evaluations are collected and shared but not used to create future changes | 1. Expectations are agreed at contracting stage and then met/exceeded<br>2. Evaluation process is shared and co-created<br>3. Both partners are satisfied with the partnership, not just the results/outcomes | 1. Joint impact measure<br>2. List of agreed expectations<br>3. Continued/developing relationship |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

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