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Boundary-Spanning Beyond Widening Participation: Exploring Collaborative Leadership Practices in an English Schools–University Partnership

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Abstract

Widening participation policy in England is increasingly collaborative. Since 2018, higher education (HE) institutions charging above the basic tuition fee limit are required to set out strategies to mitigate 'risks to equality of opportunity' for people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and their ability to access and progress through and from higher education'. Universities are encouraged to work with schools to implement outreach initiatives such as supporting raising attainment—stimulating prospects for strategic collaboration and leadership across organisational boundaries. While the majority of leadership studies in the educational research literature showcase individual settings or sectors, our study of a schools–university partnership investigates collaborative leadership practices across institutional and sector borders. Drawing ethnomethodological insights from rich qualitative data compiled 15 months into the partnership—comprising semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers, meeting observations, and researcher field notes—we present a unique school stakeholders' perspective of a boundary-spanning partnership focused on university outreach and educational improvement. Venturing across institutional borders revealed pathways to develop more diffuse forms of coordinated action around a common goal—activating increased leadership-based collaboration and creativity among school stakeholders alongside a need for greater shared understanding to avoid potential misalignments. Facilitated by 'knowledge brokering' between school and university stakeholders, features of collaborative leadership manifested as a blended phenomenon—with teachers and leaders signalling pragmatic shifts in attainment-raising framing and practice. Implications for both schools and HE sectors are offered, distinctively at the intersection of school leadership and widening participation.

Keywords: collaborative leadership; school improvement; widening participation; raising attainment; boundary-spanning

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1. Introduction

This article explores the role of collaborative leadership practices and their features in multi-institutional partnership contexts in education. While collaborative leadership has been studied extensively in individual settings such as schools (e.g., Jameson, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a, 2010b; Coleman, 2012; Jäppinen & Ciussi, 2016; Woods & Roberts, 2019), much less is known about how leadership is conceptualised across or between settings with distinct organisational structures such as in schools–university relationships.

We investigate the characteristics of leadership using rich qualitative data from a case study of a schools–university partnership co-founded in 2019 between a multi-academy trust[1] in the North West of England and a research-intensive university in the South East. The collaboration focused on widening participation and supporting raising attainment among students from more socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances—a prominent policy area in which greater coordinated working between schools and higher education institutions has long been advocated by the UK's universities regulator, the Office for Students (OfS)—both since its formation in 2018 and as its former iteration, the Office for Fair Access set up in 2004 (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). Collaboration continues to inform the OfS' current strategic framing around ameliorating 'risks to equality of opportunity' (Blake, 2023; OfS, 2024), matching the spirit of multi-sector cooperation that firmly underscored universities' responses to promoting access and participation imperatives at the time this schools partnership was initiated (Millward, 2019; OfS, 2019, 2022).

First, we present a synthesis of literature on collaborative leadership and similar configurations such as distributed leadership and shared leadership, and the array of behaviours and practices among school practitioners and leaders in the space (Gu et al., 2018; Day et al., 2020), including in the context of policy enactment (J. Spillane et al., 2002). This is followed by an overview of the school–university partnership landscape and existing literature on leadership models in those settings. We also contrast features of shared or more dispersed models of leadership *across* institutions to those *within* institutions. Lastly, we explore a specific case study of a Russell Group[2] university (referred to here as 'South East University' or 'SEU' from this point forward) and its five-year collaboration with an academy trust comprising a further education college, five secondary schools and four primary schools (anonymised here as 'North West Trust' or 'NWT'). Particular attention is paid to the features of collaborative leadership that supported the partnership's engagement and achievements across the different institutions, staff roles and teaching and learning settings. We examine findings from this case of schools–university partnership specifically from a *school stakeholders' perspective* and *school improvement lens*—i.e., NWT academy teacher and leader participants' perceptions on the enactment, processes, and their experiences of the partnership with SEU, as well as challenges affecting those involved in this initiative. We also explore future collaborative leadership developments across school and university sectors and school improvement partnerships.

2. Rationale for the Collaboration and Policy Context

In addition to the formation of the new Office for Students (a merger between the previous Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England[3] (HEFCE)), 2018 also saw the advent of a new widening participation policy in the UK that introduced 'Access and Participation Plans' (APPs). APPs offer universities the means to charge higher tuition fees while setting out the steps they are taking to enable greater proportions of more disadvantaged groups to access HE. One suggested approach is the initiation of collaborative partnerships between universities and schools to address inequities in learners' prior attainment (OfS, 2018). Leaders in these spaces, fused together by policy, circumstance and in some instances, shared values, are increasingly challenged to take on alternate forms of decision-making that align with multi-organisational structures (Skoglund, 2022; Coburn et al., 2013). Leadership identities are said to be 'constructed and reconstructed as 'hybrid', as a response to the specific context in question but also because of reciprocity within relationships' (Christophersen et al., 2024, p. 2). The hybrid nature of cross-sector leadership roles can render them especially fragile to changing strategic, policy and operational contexts. In contrast to single institutions and sectors where baseline understandings may be more readily accessible, aspects such as legiti-

macy, trust and accountability across sectors may need regular defining, re-defining and negotiation—necessitating extra time, effort and resource—assets often in short supply. Power differentials between partners can also result in misalignment and conflict. Bryson et al. (2006) and Keast et al. (2004) advocate levelling the playing field early on in collaborative arrangements, so that partners expend their resources to co-develop shared understandings of concepts, data and tools that are key to each party's work. In the immediate term, Huxham and Vangen (2005) emphasise the value of partners recognising and achieving 'small wins' together. However, as acknowledged by Bryson et al. (2006, p. 48), collaboration is underpinned not only by the sharing of information and knowledge, but crucially by

> 'demonstrating competency, good intentions, and follow-through; conversely, failure to follow through and unilateral action undermine trust. . .'

The NWT-SEU partnership was initiated to combine efforts from the schools sector (NWT) and HE (SEU) towards developing more innovative strategies to support raising attainment—part of SEU's stated commitment in their 2020–2025 access and participation plan. In contrast to most attainment-focused widening participation initiatives at the time, the project intentionally focused on educational improvement and began much earlier in learners' educational journeys (Year 5 of primary school)—following mixed prior attainment cohorts through to Years 7, 8 and 9 in secondary school, recognising the significance of learning trajectories across different phases of education (Baker et al., 2014; Sammons et al., 2018).

Engagement with the programme took place via termly academic enrichment sessions co-designed and co-taught between teachers and university early career researchers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and modern foreign languages (MFL) specialisms—subjects that have historically opened greater access for young people making competitive applications to more 'elite' Russell Group universities—so-called 'facilitating subjects' (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018). Good quality enrichment experiences are recognised as a strong influence on learners' later attainment outcomes at GCSE and A-Level (Sammons et al., 2014, 2016, 2018), i.e., 'activities that provide extra academic dividends and are linked to aspirations and self-belief' (Sammons et al., 2016, p. 5).

Universities and schools play important roles in shaping young people's beliefs and intentions. Younger et al. (2019, p. 743) advise that efforts to widen participation can occur at 'multiple points in the 'journey' towards HE', including those 'designed to increase knowledge and affect the behaviour of prospective students.' According to Crawford (2014, p. 13), raising learners' expectations—described by Reynolds and Pemberton (2001, p. 704) as 'an important cognitive link' between aspirations and achievements—can be seen as a 'direct route' through which schools can influence students' education choices after 16 years of age, when young people typically study A-Levels.

Participation rates for more socioeconomically disadvantaged young people at more selective, research-intensive universities are still relatively low compared to those from more advantaged contexts (Boliver, 2013; Chowdry et al., 2013). Attainment gaps between children from more and less advantaged backgrounds are clear from the start of primary school and increase as they progress into and through secondary school (Feinstein, 2003; Crawford et al., 2014; EEF, 2018). The gap in participation at elite universities by young people from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds is largely but not completely explained by differences in prior attainment at GCSE (particularly in facilitating subjects) and background characteristics (Crawford & Greaves, 2015). Near the start of the NWT-SEU collaboration (2018/19), the rate of progression to elite university for students eligible for Free School Meals[4] (FSM) was 4.4% compared with 13.2% for students not eligible for FSM (a gap of 8.6 percentage points). In 2023/24, the FSM eligible student progression

rate stood at 4.9%, compared with 14.3% in the non-FSM eligible group—a wider gap of 9.4 percentage points (DfE, 2025c).

Learner sessions were complemented by (1) a teachers' continuous professional development and learning (CPDL) programme focusing on strategies to promote enrichment for all learners regardless of prior attainment, and (2) new materials and resources to facilitate curriculum-linked enrichment in day-to-day classroom settings. During the early stages of the partnership and as part of the programme's co-design, the SEU research and evaluation team acted as 'knowledge brokers' (Cooper, 2014). Recognised as pivotal to the design of evaluation methodologies and frameworks, knowledge brokering involves the adaptation and communication of knowledge to/with partners in a shared leadership and professional learning context (Friesen & Brown, 2024) such as, in this case, educational research evidence linking schools and HE sector literature aimed at supporting raising attainment and school improvement. In return, NWT leaders and teachers shared their knowledge and expertise during partnership planning meetings and continuous professional development and learning sessions in the programme—drawing from their own professional practice and encounters with the research literature. These exchanges formed the groundwork that would inform the partnership's strategy and vision, contributing towards NWT-SEU's collaborative widening participation practice and NWT schools' capacity for educational improvement and positive change. Knowledge—distributed and transformed in this way—was seen by NWT-SEU's co-founders as potentially adding another dimension to the partnership's research infrastructure, by supporting organisational learning and situating NWT within wider educational and societal systems and structures (Godfrey, 2016). MacKillop et al. (2020, p. 339) succinctly illustrate this intended process between researchers and practitioners in their definition of knowledge brokering across organisational boundaries:

> 'All activity that links decision-makers with researcher[s], facilitating their interaction so that they are able to better understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each other's work, forge new partnerships, and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision-making.'

Most widening participation initiatives do not take a school improvement perspective. Access and outreach programmes tend to focus on more immediate concerns at the point of national assessments (GCSEs and A-Levels) and supporting young people to progress to HE. However, as argued by Sammons et al. (2018, p. 32), such interventions would benefit from a better comprehension of the 'interconnections between family background, academic attainment, educational experiences and the likelihood of obtaining results that enable admission into HE'. It is essential in collaborations that support attainment-raising for HE stakeholders in particular to 'increase understanding of the main drivers of the equity gap over time' (Sammons et al., 2018, p. 32) by for example (1) following learners' educational journeys longitudinally (and beginning engagement with schools earlier than towards the end of secondary school), and (2) considering the influences on learners' attainment at the individual, family, home, school and levels—so as to co-design interventions with school stakeholders that are more in-step with learners' lived realities at their different stages of schooling. Numerous areas are open to exploration such as the influence of teacher effects, teaching quality, classroom climate factors, and school leadership qualities (Sylva et al., 2012). Certainly, senior leaders at NWT were interested in pursuing the collaboration with SEU in order to enhance curriculum and teaching quality, and ultimately support raising expectations, student engagement and attainment.

The five-year collaboration from 2019 to 2025 sought to co-create space and conditions to reduce achievement gaps between students from more and less disadvantaged backgrounds (based on students' eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) in their last six

years of schooling), ultimately aiming to widen participation and diversify the pool of potential applicants to HE, particularly to competitive universities (not restricted to 'South East University'). The ethos of the project was driven by principles of systemic equity and inclusion—actively moving away from notions of enrichment aimed exclusively at 'high ability' students, and instead widening provision to include all students—supported by the use of adaptive teaching, the creation of resources accessible by different student groups, and more critically questioning the merits of equating 'ability' and 'potential' with prior attainment. Indeed, in a recent announcement that accompanied a national Curriculum and Assessment Review led by Becky Francis (DfE, 2025a), the UK's Department for Education (DfE) stated that all pupils will soon be offered a 'core enrichment entitlement' (DfE, 2025b)—further reinforcing NWT-SEU's earlier recognition of, and support for, an inclusive 'enrichment for all' approach.

3. Literature Synthesis

3.1. Leadership Models

Conceptualisations of leadership are abundant in the educational research literature. From a schools' perspective, international research over the last 25 years has consistently highlighted the pivotal influence of leadership on organisational culture and functioning, quality of teaching and learning, and student attainment and achievement. Salient examples include the role of school leadership in policy enactment (Gu et al., 2018; Day et al., 2020; Gu & Colman, 2023; Lundqvist & Westerlund, 2024), strategies for successful leadership and school improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020; Barber et al., 2010; Day & Sammons, 2013; Day et al., 2016), technology-supported leadership (Davis & Sammons, 2019), and disposition-focused leadership models, e.g., democratic leadership (Woods, 2004), moral and ethical leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014) and compassionate leadership (Harris & Jones, 2023).

Woods and Roberts (2019, p. 5) emphasise the role of 'non-positional leadership' (enacted by those not in formal leadership roles) who 'add to the leadership mix'—by influencing others, making changes, or introducing innovative practice and ideas. These more informal and implicit approaches to leadership also include how individuals interpret, support, amend or resist changes and school policies instituted by leaders in formal positions.

Leadership is often defined as a means of 'influence' (Hallinger & Heck, 2010a)—e.g., Yukl (2013, p. 7), defines organisational leadership as

> 'the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives'.

Yukl and Lepsinger (2006, p. 3), in an earlier collaboration, describe effective leadership behaviours and actions as those that influence and facilitate 'adaptation, efficiency and human resources'. Harris (2009, p. 10) asserts that leadership is 'primarily about influence and change', and 'creative leadership' recognises 'the need to influence others so that talent can be released and maximised'. Similarly, Bush and Glover (2003) define school leadership as 'a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes', later conceptualising leadership along three dimensions: influence, vision and values (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 554).

In contrast, Woods and Roberts (2019) offer a broader understanding and critical questioning of how leadership manifests in different situations, advocating a closer examination of (1) who is seen as contributing to leadership and who is not; (2) whose ideas for action and change are valued more or less than others; and (3) possible rea-

sons behind this. For these researchers, the distributed nature of leadership is driven by two features: (1) 'intentionality'—given by 'the human spark, the ideas, motivations and creativity that lead people to initiate and guide action and to seek to influence others', alongside the interplay of people, relationships and their social and institutional context; and (2) 'emergence'—informed by complexity theory, individuals can 'plan and take responsibility for their own actions, but they cannot plan the actions of others in the same way'. Implementation and outcomes, from a strategic plan for example, are shaped by the 'interplay over time of the plan's aims, people's interpretations, people's actions and interactions with each other', and institutional structures and resources for change (Woods & Roberts, 2019, p. 6). Similarly, Bush (2008, p. 277) acknowledges that while the central concept of leadership is influence—exercised by both groups and individuals, it is independent of authority and intentional in nature and is 'capable of residing with any member of the organisation, including associate staff and students'.

3.2. Collaborative Leadership and Other Shared Practices

Relevant to this paper is how more individual and collaborative aspects of leadership combine to influence policy implementation and educational improvement practices within and across different institutional settings. Jäppinen and Ciussi (2016) propose that, under the banner of collaborative models such as 'shared, distributed, dispersed, flexible, generative, sustainable, transformational or relational' leadership, the following fundamental features persist—leadership as '*interactive co-performance* and *collective learning*', pointing to the importance of '*a close relationship between the collective and individuals*', and consequentially, the process of '*synergy creation*'. This conceptualisation of collaborative leadership links with the idea of school–university partnerships as so-called 'third spaces'—places of *shared* knowledge and learning—distinct from a school's or university's individual space (Bernay et al., 2020), eliciting more complex ways of thinking and requiring dedicated time and effort to pilot new ideas and take risks together (Berger & Johnston, 2015).

From an individual school's perspective, Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) identify four domains of leadership practice: Setting Directions, Building Relationships and Developing People, Redesigning the Organisation to Support Desired Practices, and Improving the Instructional Program. In addition, Day and Sammons (2013, p. 2) distinguish nine salient dimensions of successful school leadership based on extensive mixed methods research on the relationships between leadership and student outcomes, namely:

(1) Defining the vision, values and direction; (2) improving conditions for teaching and learning; (3) redesigning the organisation: aligning roles and responsibilities; (4) enhancing teaching and learning; (5) redesigning and enriching the curriculum; (6) enhancing teacher quality (including succession planning); (7) building relationships inside the school community; (8) building relationships outside the school community; and (9) placing an emphasis on common values.

From a network or partnership perspective, Greany (2023, pp. 146–148) lists seven core features which tie together practices within multiple institutions:

(1) a shared goal or interest; (2) shared investment, commitment and ownership over decision-making and power; (3) shared values, practices and attributes, e.g., solidarity and trust; (4) embeddedness within wider societal networks and interaction with multiple social networks, resulting in potential partnership overlaps; (5) development of formalised governance and management structures or a recognisable spectrum of association—from 'loose association' to 'emerging collaboration' (shorter term tasks), 'sustained collaboration' (longer term) to 'collegiality' (shared values and vision); (6) partnership design including availability of resources (e.g., dedicated time for engagement), shared protocols and 'routines'. Perry et al. (2020) frame these along four lines: *structure*—partnership architec-

ture and links between organisations, *function*—exchanges, services and supports made accessible via the network or partnership, *strength*—intensity of bonds between partners, and *content*—flows of knowledge, learning, money, skills, attitudes and beliefs across the partnership.

Both models share the need to define a shared goal and vision, design and develop staff and partnership structures, build and enable relationships through shared commitment and investment (both within and outside of individual institutions), and develop shared values and practices. A partnership across sectors such as schools and HE, however, in contrast to established schools and organisations, needs extra effort to build and maintain its collective identity and common purpose. As Kolleck et al. (2020, p. 917) note, collaborative leadership calls for 'both leadership and participation' combined with a need to 'establish joint goals that support the development of a common identity and trust' between the actors involved. For Harris et al. (2023, p. 921), networking, also relevant to schools–universities relationships, implies:

> 'crossing school boundaries and building bridges between different actors who are collectively involved in leadership practices that go beyond the school gates and limits.'

The authors suggest that as a result, compared to leaders of individual institutions, leaders working across institutional networks are likely to occupy a different type of role and function and hold distinct responsibilities and priorities (Harris et al., 2023). As such, distributed and other shared forms of leadership within a school may look and feel different to models that are spread out over *one type of entity*, i.e., other schools, and different still over *multiple entities*, e.g., schools and universities. In addition to ensuring the 'structural embeddedness' of a partnership or network—its configuration and the extent to which individuals and organisations are able to relate to each other (Feld, 1997); leaders in collaborative or partnership settings would need to be equally attentive to 'relational embeddedness', i.e., the *quality* of relationships in a configuration (Moran, 2005). Bolton et al. (2021) stress the importance of 'relational coordination' that reinforces and is reinforced by timely and accurate communication to aid problem solving. Shared goals motivate partners to act beyond individual borders towards the good of the whole, and shared knowledge promotes greater consideration of the impact of individual actions on others (Weick & Roberts, 1993). Torfing (2023, p. 180) suggests that 'relational coordination' is facilitated by 'boundary spanners' who translate meaning across 'boundaries and life-worlds', plus:

> 'shared information and knowledge systems allowing everyone to access updated material; and shared accountability and reward systems that encourage actors to work together while reducing collective action problems'.

Terminology for more dispersed configurations of leadership in the literature can be imprecise. 'Shared', 'distributed', and 'collaborative' leadership are often used interchangeably. Jameson (2007), however, provides a useful framing for dispersed leadership arrangements—a continuum ranging from shared to collaborative leadership:

a. 'shared leadership'—where more than one person exercises some degree of joint leadership, but without necessarily the sharing of power, knowledge or authority.
b. 'distributed leadership'—fuller engagement than shared leadership, and the sharing of some knowledge and power.
c. 'collaborative leadership'—full sharing of knowledge, power and authority.

J. P. Spillane (2005, p. 146), meanwhile, offers that 'distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice rather than leaders or their roles, functions, routines, and structures. Distinctions between different types of leadership are also proposed by other scholars—e.g., distributed—defined by 'conjoint agency' (Gronn, 2002) and shared—a

less hierarchical and procedural form of instructional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003). Early adopters of the term, Hallinger and Heck (2010b, p. 97) refer to 'collaborative leadership' in the context of 'strategic school-wide actions that are directed towards school improvement'. Coleman (2011, p. 300) in his review notes that 'collaborative leadership' is conceptualised as (a) both an alternative means of 'distributed leadership' (e.g., Jameson, 2007)—where 'collaboration relates to a *style* of leadership, characterised as open, inclusive and empowering'; and (b) the '*focus* for leadership, concerned with realising the benefits of collaborative advantage' beyond the confines of single institutional structures (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Avery, 1999). Coleman (2011, p. 300) catalogues the following four foci for leadership action which we are attentive to in the NWT-SEU work: (1) sensemaking—to 'promote a common vision and inspiring others'; (2) empowerment—to 'encourage ownership and participation'; (3) conflict—'resolving disputes between partners at a strategic and operational level'; and (4) commitment and effectiveness—to 'secure the benefits of joint working'.

In this paper, we adopt Coleman's interpretation of collaborative leadership as a 'blended phenomenon' that is 'both principled and pragmatic, guided by vision and values but sensitive to the needs of others and the broader context within which it resides' (Coleman, 2011, p. 312). We apply Coleman's (2011) framing of collaborative leadership as a departure point for our findings but enhance our analysis by recognising the boundary-spanning properties of the partnership. While Coleman's conceptualisation aids our interpretation of the coordinated efforts within and amongst school stakeholders, additional considerations are needed to parse the cross-sector and 'third space' features of the NWT-SEU endeavour (as outlined in Section 3.3). 'Collaboration' in this NWT-SEU example acts as an anchor point for leadership in a joint effort to support raising attainment through the means of school improvement—linked to purposive curriculum-linked enrichment, improving teaching quality and enhancing professional knowledge. Engagement and leadership encounters take place within and across multi-sector institutions, where different realms of possibility for change are created in that shared, alternate in-between space.

Kolleck et al. (2020) point to the potential positive impact of cross-sectoral collaboration by way of 'collective problem solving'—where schools and universities are able to mobilise their social networks, unite based on common goals and share resources towards improving programme coherence and student achievement (Wells et al., 2015). Collaborative leadership approaches beyond school boundaries potentially provide dedicated space to devise more innovative and coordinated policy and practice solutions to address interdependent problems manifesting in school improvement (Chapman & Donaldson, 2023). A case study by Constantinides (2025, p. 11) illustrates how, by developing a culture of trust and dispersing power and authority over different educational and policy domains, headteachers were able to act as 'boundary spanners':

> 'by creating linkages across hierarchical, functional and external divides as an 'anchor point' between organisational structures, cultures and norms'.

While leadership within a partnership may take on a collaborative edge, or indeed a 'collaborative advantage' (Bryson et al., 2015), Bieluch's (2018, p. 35) study reveals the value of passing the baton at crucial points and trusting the other partners to move alone, to work independently' where social, community and other organisations placed trust in universities to contribute towards solving mutual problems. Here, boundary spanners may also take on the role of 'knowledge brokers'—partnership actors who are able to transform research, policy and practice knowledge into action and change by transcending boundaries and facilitating relationships (Friesen & Brown, 2024; Rycroft-Smith, 2022; MacKillop et al., 2020)—highly relevant to collaborations motivated by policy enactment and concerns such as widening participation. As argued by Gu et al. (2018, p. 386), schools—constantly facing

external policy demands in their 'everyday working worlds'—stand a better chance of successfully enacting such policies by 'building and consolidating the capacity for further growth and development'.

Moreover, Hubbard et al. (2006, p. 14) suggest that schools continuing to succeed despite numerous external policy demands are also 'active agents' in educational reform processes. Such schools are able to 'reshape policy initiatives into actions that are culturally, organisationally and educationally meaningful to their teachers and students in their daily realities'—actively co-constructing their responses and contributions towards policy as '*enactment* in context', as opposed to '*implementation* with fidelity.' (Gu & Colman, 2023, p. 118).

'What the leaders appear to be doing exceptionally well is using policies and reforms as opportunities for change—purposefully, progressively and strategically—to regenerate collaborative and coherent cultures and conditions which encourage and support the staff to learn, to reflect and to renew their practice.' (Gu & Colman, 2023, p. 125).

It is in this context of strategic collaboration that we examine cross-institutional leadership practices next.

3.3. Cross-Institution Leadership: Schools–University Partnership Context

Day et al. (2021, p. 2) define successful school–university partnerships as 'places of learning' in which:

> 'deep, dialogic thinking and reasoning of the knowledge in use inspires curiosity and fuels enthusiasm in all parties to commit themselves to improving the quality of practice and, through this, further knowledge creation and development which meet schools' own interests, needs and concerns in their contexts of use'.

Such partnerships afford opportunities to better understand how different roles come together from distinct organisational settings in what can be described as 'third spaces', originally conceptualised by Bhabha (1994) and Soja (1996). Christophersen et al. (2024, p. 2) note that a 'third space' can function as a more 'neutral', jointly created space born out of deliberation and the production of new knowledge—as 'tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge in one's own culture or field is made explicit through questioning' from stakeholders external to each organisation.

Alongside knowledge, leadership practices can also combine or at least potentially take on new forms from their individual spheres, for example, leaders in schools and universities who collaborate and share accountability of specific goals related to access and outreach in HE. As Handscomb et al. (2014, p. 5) suggest:

> 'Partnerships are a third space distinct from the culture of the partnering organisations. This "hybrid" space not only draws on the knowledge and discourses of two distinct communities but also facilitates them. . . Partnerships can have a collaborative advantage or dividend. Mutually constructed learning communities provide opportunities that are both different from and richer than the opportunities either the school or the university can provide alone.'

On the leadership front, the authors add that what is enacted across organisational boundaries by 'key roles'—specifically the 'blended professionals who work across institutional boundaries'—contributes heavily to the success of a collaboration (Handscomb et al., 2014, p. 5).

In multi-institutional contexts, transformational and boundary-spanning concerns occupy a larger portion of leadership practices as stakeholders attempt to understand and forge common ground to enact policy—although being in a position to forge common ground is not a given. Leadership in these settings tends to take on a flatter, more networked

configuration, particularly among formal leaders of schools and universities in partnership who may see each other as 'peers' and therefore of similar general status (Torfing, 2023, p. 179). Horizontal leadership aims to ultimately devolve power to team members and facilitate their self-management while promoting communication between all stakeholders (regardless of their role), and creating a shared or distributed socio-cognitive space (Yu et al., 2018; Drouin et al., 2021).

To summarise, the leadership literature synthesised here provides a way to examine and report on the enactment of leadership for improvement in this case study partnership and its potential for impact. Boundary spanning and collaborative leadership can facilitate the development of a distinct realm or 'third space' where actors are able to:

- practise collective sensemaking with colleagues beyond their immediate purview,
- share accountability for novel and innovative ideas,
- 'broker' and exchange knowledge and learning across different roles and identities, and
- be open to mutual influences that trigger shifts in thinking and implementing.

Coming together as educational professionals using this blended approach potentially presents opportunities to conceptualise and implement attainment-raising strategies in unique ways, and explore collaborative leadership models across organisational confines and norms.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Procedures

The research and evaluation components of the case study collaboration comprised an investigation of learner, teacher and senior leadership practices and organisational processes in the context of raising attainment and widening participation to HE. In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the collaboration's context, functioning, and 'mechanisms of impact' such as teacher and learner responses to the programme, intermediate processes, and 'unintended pathways and consequences' (Moore et al., 2014, p. 8), an internal implementation and process evaluation of a 'complex whole-school intervention' (Anders et al., 2017) was undertaken. The full list of the programme's evaluation questions is available to view in Appendix A. This paper is framed by a smaller selection of the following two driving questions:

1. What is the implementation process for the NWT-SEU collaboration that NWT (senior and middle leaders and teachers) has followed—particularly around school improvement and capacity development in schools? How has implementation evolved and changed since the partnership's launch in 2019?
2. What benefits and challenges do NWT's teachers and leaders associate with the programme and partnership as a whole?

For the purposes of this article, we are focusing on collaborative leadership aspects among teachers and leaders in NWT academies across the partnership with SEU, paying attention to the following research question:

> In what ways are the intersection of leadership enactment and experience and collaboration across school-university spaces recognised and conceptualised from a school stakeholders' perspective?

To examine this question, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with classroom teachers, and middle and senior leaders at different stages of the five-year relationship, beginning in the summer of 2020. In addition, meeting observation notes (from two initial co-design meetings with senior leaders and four planning and co-design gatherings with teachers and early career researchers) and field journals kept by three SEU research team members were analysed to make tentative connections between school actors'

expressed intentions, motivations and articulations of practice (in interviews) and perceived behaviours, attitudes and practices observed in real-life situations. Interview transcripts, meeting notes and journal entries were all imported into NVivo (v12) qualitative analysis software and coded as a joint data set for emerging themes—to see where topics and codes bore similarities and differences.

The main aim of conducting qualitative interviews was to develop, as outlined by Lichtman (2010, p. 12), an "in-depth description and understanding" of participants' experiences of the collaboration and the mechanisms, accountabilities and dynamics that may lead to change (Pawson & Tilley, 2004, Hordern, 2021). Elements of ethnomethodology and organisational ethnography were employed to scaffold our research aims, questions and instruments. From an ethnomethodological perspective, collaborative leadership is seen as emergent and partner accounts originate from a place of 'situated organising' (Nielsen & Larsson, 2025, p. 76). Our analysis centred how school stakeholders 'create or adopt norms and use them in their activities together' (Blaikie, 2007, p. 145), and additionally, 'how actions and accounts are constituted in relation to each other' (ten Have, 2004a, p. 141).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo, along with meeting observations and researcher field notes, allowing NVivo to act as a data and coding repository. Coding consisted of two phases, with Phase 1 comprising three rounds: (1) an initial round created codes from interview questions so that responses to each question could be compared across all participants; (2) the second round involved 'open coding'—creating more inductive codes from participants' responses, followed by (3) 'axial coding'—grouping multiple codes into 'themes' (Boeije, 2010), enabling intersections of codes to be examined. Coding integration took place using elements of Blaikie's (2007, p. 8) research strategies, with analyses moving between retroductive and abductive approaches in an iterative 'feedback loop' (Saldaña, 2016, p. 68). The retroductive analysis phase involved constructing 'models' from possible mechanisms or steps given in interviewees' accounts, whereas the abductive analysis aimed to produce technical accounts from lay accounts (Blaikie, 2007). In the latter, the objective was to move towards analytical generalisation (Yin, 2014)—shifting from participants' specific descriptions of processes, structures and explanations to the research literature—which formed Phase 2 of the coding process, referred to as 'selective coding' (Boeije, 2010). Codes and participants' statements were then synthesised to start to assemble 'analysis clusters' featuring elements of 'practice-informed evidence' (Green, 2008; A. S. Bryk, 2015) and "problems of practice" (Coburn & Penuel, 2016, p. 49). The process sought to build trustworthy and coherent accounts of interviewees' responses (Ellingson, 2011)—while trying to better understand teachers' practices and perceptions in the context of existing research literature in widening participation and educational improvement. Codes originating from participants' own words and framings (open codes) were compared with those driven by the literature—including Coleman's features of collaborative leadership (axial codes). An ethnomethodological lens provided further clarity, helping us to identify 'socially shared procedures' that NWT school stakeholders (in the context of their joint engagement with SEU) deployed in order to institute and maintain 'an intelligible and accountable local social order' (ten Have, 2004b, p. 16).

Taking inspiration from the work of Hallinger and Heck (2010a, 2010b), we look at leadership practices that promote *schools'* capacity for improvement and professional development and learning designed to influence students' teaching and learning experiences (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b). Our focus on collaborative leadership practices is trained on 'strategic school-wide actions that are directed towards school improvement' (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b, p. 97) and shared among academy leaders and teachers. Also, motivated by Coleman (2011, 2012), we have chosen to feature how blended forms of leadership as

articulated by school actors specifically point to their potential to 'effectively realise the potential collaborative advantage' (Coleman, 2011, p. 301).

All 8 secondary teachers and leaders from the initial three secondary schools involved in the programme from 2019 to 2020 (with a connection to STEM provision) were invited to be interviewed, with all 8 agreeing to participate (The remaining two secondary schools in NWT joined the partnership the following year). To help preserve participants' anonymity, Table 1 showing school characteristics has not been matched with teacher pseudonyms but displays the number of interviewees per school. One can see the diversity of schools within NWT. All schools are located in the same urban town but in differing areas of wealth and deprivation. Secondary B, for example, serves a particularly disadvantaged area, with a Pupil Premium (PP) percentage of 47.3%, whereas Secondary A (also the largest school with 1567 pupils on roll) is the least deprived with only 9.8% of students eligible for PP, well below the national average of 27.1%.

Table 1. Secondary school characteristics, January 2019.

	Secondary A (DfE, 2019a)	**Secondary B**	**Secondary C**	**National (2019)**
Pupils on roll	1567	866	885	
Free school meals (FSM) eligibility	5.3%	26.7%	15.0%	14.1% (DfE, 2019b)
Pupil Premium (PP) (FSM in the previous six years)	9.8%	47.3%	27.2%	27.1% (DfE, 2020)
Special Educational Needs (SEN) Support	6.6%	15.7%	8.7%	10.8% (DfE, 2021)
English as an Additional Language (EAL)	2.9%	8.4%	4.0%	16.9% (DfE, 2019a)
Research participants (n)	4	3	1	

Section 5 centres the voices of school actors, providing a synthesis of our interviews with NWT's leaders and teaching practitioners. We focus on early-stage interviews with NWT senior and middle leaders and classroom teachers conducted online between July and August 2020 (three months after the first COVID-19 outbreak). Due to space considerations, we concentrate on secondary headteachers and STEM-specialism teachers and middle leaders who shared their experiences of the partnership and teacher–learner programme with us.

Positionality

While this paper features school stakeholders' perspectives, we must acknowledge our positionality as researchers and co-authors based at South East University. To different degrees, we occupy what can be defined as 'pracademic' positions—manoeuvring between, on the one hand, academic credentials combined with research expertise, and on the other, practical and strategic oversight of the widening participation student lifecycle in our work with access and outreach professionals (Basham & Piggott, 2020). As noted by Schram (2006), it was important for the SEU team to recognise that we were not 'simply researchers' in this collaboration. Our professional roles and university status necessitated a critical reflection of the beliefs, assumptions and lived experiences that had likely influenced our framing of the research project and the collaboration and its perceived workings. With heightened awareness of our educational research backgrounds, we were particularly attentive to differentiating between our interpretations of events as they unfolded, with how we may have imagined they *should have* unfolded. This interplay between 'thick

description' and normative judgments of practice revealed both a tension and opportunity to interrogate our engagement with both the research project and partnership.

We also acknowledge the undeniable power dynamics and ethical dilemmas (implicit and explicit) of an elite HE institution collaborating with schools to support attainment-raising and widening participation while also engaging in knowledge brokering in the form of CPDL with teachers, and the higher standards of reflexivity that we should hold ourselves to in our research and evaluation endeavours with partners. With the help of regular reflection sessions and analytical journals, we have made concerted efforts to be mindful of the regulatory and targets-based focus of our roles against the high stakes of young people's educational journeys and futures. We saw part of our role in this collaboration as co-constructors of knowledge with NWT stakeholders. As a partnership, we made time to share our learning with each other and have regular exchanges that allowed us to interrogate our research findings and literature syntheses together. It is on this basis that the knowledge brokering aspect and professional learning with teachers was structured and framed.

Lastly, we recognise an additional dimension to this perspective which is one of professional voice. Support for widening participation practitioners to communicate their work and write for publication is not commonplace (Hudson, 2019), ironically so within academia. We have attempted to use this opportunity to co-write this piece as a formative learning exercise, not only by collaborating with NWT but amongst ourselves as co-authors in our varied roles in SEU, inhabiting a 'third space' of a different kind. We see this opportunity to publish more widely about our analysis and interpretations of school stakeholder perspectives as potentially elucidating a side of widening participation practice that is usually left unexamined. Uniquely, this means we are also acutely aware of the difficulties, novelties and possibilities of 'boundary-spanning' within HE and beyond.

> 'Developing a stronger voice through widening participation practitioner research and publication could indeed potentially enable a greater practitioner influence upon widening participation policy, as well as the development of research skills and a contribution to knowledge in the field of widening participation by dissemination to professional bodies and policy makers.' (Baines & Gregson, 2020, p. 3)

In a sense, this paper is another iteration of knowledge gathering, translation, communication, exchange and 'brokering' that underpinned the NWT-SEU collaboration, and forms a part of a portfolio of learning that accompanies NWT stakeholders' own reflections and publications. Our aim is to add to the ongoing debates on the relationship between research, policy and practice in widening participation, increase the rigour and transparency of HE engagement with schools, thus mobilising the under-tapped potential of 'research as a vehicle' for widening participation (Gazeley et al., 2019, p. 1009).

4.2. Instrument

A selection of questions from the secondary school interview schedule pertinent to the findings explored in this piece is shown here. Responses to interviews with school partners were analysed alongside session observation notes, meeting minutes and reflexive analytical memos created by SEU research team members reflecting on their own position within the partnership as 'knowledge brokers' and partnership connectors between SEU's widening participation interests and NWT's school improvement and attainment goals.

1. Could you describe the main things that you have done as part of the collaboration so far?
   Prompt: e.g., *do you participate in planning meetings, select learners for delivery days,*

participate in the delivery days when they take place, coordinate delivery between teachers and researchers etc.?

2. What are the criteria used to select Y8 and Y9 learners for the NWT-SEU collaboration, for STEM and/or MFL?
   Prompt: do you select by Free School Meal status, what sort of prior attainment (which subjects?), what other factors go into your decisions?
3. How would you describe this programme to your learners when asking for their participation—what are some of things you might highlight about the programme and its aims?
4. To what extent do you think this programme supports/does not support:
   a. Raising attainment in your class and/or school?
      Prompt: Do you see any change in take up/attainment in EBacc subjects?
   b. Improving how young people see themselves as capable learners [academic self-concept]?
   c. Improving learners' educational motivation?
   d. Increasing learners' experiences with independent learning [self-regulation]?
   e. Improving learners' expectations towards HE study?
5. To what extent do you think any content from the NWT-SEU STEM/MFL delivery sessions might be applied to your day-to-day classroom practice?

4.3. Ethics

This research was approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and all data was treated as confidential. Identifying details from individual stories were changed or redacted to protect participants. All participants submitted signed consent forms and were given information sheets on the research project indicating how to withdraw from the research at any time should they wish. All data shared was treated confidentially, and extra measures were taken to make sure that school leaders were not privy to any data shared by their school colleagues or direct reports.

5. Case Study Findings

The following section showcases school practitioner accounts of their involvement in the NWT-SEU partnership, outlining the different ways that the intersection of leadership and collaboration across school–university spaces was recognised, conceptualised, and synthesised by the SEU research team.

5.1. Realising the Benefits of Collaborative Advantage: Understanding Potential Barriers and Enablers

Initial interviews were conducted 15 months after the official launch of the partnership in March 2019, and around two years after the first meeting mentioned below between NWT and SEU stakeholders in July 2018. When asked to outline the main things that leaders and teachers had done as part of the collaboration to date, SHT1, a school principal and co-founder shared:

> *'I was fortunate to be part of the first group of people who met with you and articulating the idea of having a link with yourselves, basically with the premise: What are teachers particularly good at? Teaching. What is <South East University> good at? Research. Therefore, what do disadvantaged students need, equally what is their stumbling block and their barrier of going to somewhere like <SEU>—sometimes it's perception. So the idea was that we would use our teachers to be the bridge between yourselves and the university,*

but then as part of this virtuous circle, teachers would engage with <SEU> as a research project and benefit from your research skills.' [SHT1, Secondary HT—Co-founder]

In the following passage, SHT1 identifies a mutually reinforcing aim that drove the partnership:

'It was a nice case of <SEU> providing a research context, evidence-based thinking to construct what we were doing, teachers love doing that, and that informed their planning. And what we were able to do in return was to bring the classroom practice of working with disadvantaged pupils and translate <SEU's> thinking and our thinking into specific work with disadvantaged pupils. So everyone has had two roles in the process, which is why it's been so enjoyable.' [SHT1, Secondary HT—Co-founder]

Three features are striking. First, SHT1 responds by expressing 'what had been done' as a common task or goal between NWT and SEU, and not NWT alone. Second, SHT1 outlines their understanding as a series of 'exchanges' taking place between the boundaries of the academy trust and university at every step, resulting in what they termed a 'virtuous circle'. Lastly, SHT1 describes the experience as enjoyable—surprising to the project's researchers as the programme was relatively early in its formulation and amongst the initial teething problems, there remained some uncertainty among leaders, teachers and SEU staff around how the project's design and implementation would be perceived and understood. Of interest here is the combination of boundary-spanning exchanges, teachers identified as 'bridging' agents, apparent enjoyability, and initial signs of relational aspects emerging in the collaboration, not only from a senior leadership perspective but also among classroom teachers—however, only relatively later on in their partnership engagement. An example of early 'hiccups' in the programme delivery is exemplified by STEM teacher STF1 describing her unplanned encounter with the NWT-SEU partnership:

'In fact I was dropped in it really! I was told 'oh by the way [STF1], could you please do this? And it's on Wednesday' and this was on the Monday… So I was thrown into doing the first session that I did which was absolutely great, I mean I loved every second of it! I'm really into inclusive education anyway. I came from a background where I left school with very few qualifications and did my maths degree through the <university name> so I believe that when I had that opportunity—education gives everybody that opportunity to the way out really for lots of kids' situations.' [STF1, Secondary Maths Teacher]

Headteacher SHT1′s voiced aspirations for teachers as bridging agents was somewhat dampened by teacher STF1's account of being 'dropped in' to sessions without much warning or preparation. A similar experience was shared by STEM classroom teacher, STM1:

'I think it's a really good programme, I enjoyed it. Even though you sometimes get dropped in at the deep end, I really did enjoy doing it and it's nice to be able to do that extra little thing because teaching just in secondary school you sometimes lose sight of what you would hope [is] the ultimate goal of people—to go to university. So it's just a nice little way of readdressing the balance on that one…' [STM1, Secondary Science Teacher]

However, the sentiment of being 'thrown in' under somewhat confusing circumstances but then recalibrating to eventually see value in the sessions later became a unifying feature among this initial group of teachers engaging in the partnership. Journal entries by SEU research team members reflected an initial nervousness around how the potential success of the partnership rested heavily on NWT senior leadership's careful handling of these introductory events with teachers. While the team recognised the benefits and limitations of the rapid rollout of the programme due to the few term dates available to organise sessions with schools, there was now an acute awareness that the possibility of realising any kind of 'collaborative advantage' offered by the partnership was dependent on: (1) how teachers

were introduced to the idea of the partnership, combined with (2) teachers' own dispositions on education and learning, (3) how these dispositions aligned (or not) with the programme's aims, and (4) what value they could glean from programme sessions—including seeing how they could contribute to the enterprise.

Elsewhere, additional confusion and misalignment around the different criteria being used to select learners for the secondary programme was also coming through during interviews (ranging from the heavy emphasis on 'student choice' to (initially) regrettably only considering already high-performing students):

> *'Really we approached the [Year 8] classes and asked for interest for children to come back and tell us if they were interested. I think we had around 50 children that were interested and that was a completely free vote for them if you like—whether they wanted to participate or not. Then they submitted their forms and we had a look at them, we immediately picked anybody that was [eligible for FSM in the last six years] so they went straight onto the list.'* [STF2, Secondary Science Teacher]

> *'Originally we looked at our top sets and we obviously said the most likely to go on to study at a higher level. We got them to apply for it and [FSM eligible] students were automatically given a place. And then the rest were randomly selected—picked out of a hat.'* [STF3, Secondary Science Teacher]

By contrast, others such as STF1 (interestingly based at the same school as STF2 and STF3 above) explained

> *'Attainment? Yes and no. We didn't pick the most academic children if that's what you mean. We picked children who showed promise—those kids, who just got that little bit of a spark that you think, 'hang on, although, you're probably not the top achievers yet but with a little bit of a push in the right direction and a little bit of experience you can actually get there'. That's what we looked for. So, no, it wasn't your top attainers. We didn't choose the kids who, it sounds awful, are going to do it without the extra help. We gave it to kids that probably needed that little bit of a confidence boost'.* [STF1_Secondary Maths Teacher]

Early recognition by teachers STF1 and STM1 of the wider goal of the partnership (and later Head of STEM teacher STM2) linked with the wider aspirational aims of education is notable—despite some persistent confusion around what was expected of partners in the NWT-SEU collaboration. Also noteworthy is the re-contextualisation or 'pivoting' of their individual backgrounds towards a 'common good', framed by their personal realms of experience. As revealed by teachers STF2 and STF3, however, here the picture is mixed too. Elements of 'interactive co-performance' between individual teachers and the 'collective' of the partnership seemed to be slowly emerging amidst the early development of the programme's structure and routines. Amongst these interactions, however, were operational-level misapprehensions and differences in opinion around student selection, which later on in the partnership would act as openings for the potential enactment of leadership as influence and knowledge brokering among school teachers and leaders, and with SEU researchers—'pracademics'. As the next section highlights, signs of relational coordination between senior leaders and teachers both within and across schools would go on to help secure the benefits of joint working and open the space up to more creative ways of implementing the partnership's widening participation goals.

5.2. Sensemaking and Shifting Frames at Senior Leadership Level—Facilitated by Boundary Spanning

Creative pivots (where they appeared to take place) were not limited to within-session framing (seen with STEM teachers STF1 and STM1 earlier) but also outside of

sessions—with senior leaders, crucially around notions of 'high ability' and learners' access to the NWT-SEU programme. In this example, prior to the project officially commencing in March 2019, SHT1 (a partnership co-founder) framed learners' engagement with the programme at a planning meeting as potentially mirroring NWT's existing approach to academic and extra-curricular provision—a clear division between 'participation' and 'exclusive achievement':

> *'. . . a 'tapered model' through the key stages based on academic ability. We offer two kinds of activity in NWT: 'engagement' and 'elite': opportunities are fundamentally inclusive but with an opportunity for stretch and challenge for HAPs (Higher Ability Pupils)'.* [SHT1, Planning meeting, Dec 2018]

By July 2020, however (notably in the midst of COVID-19 and the considerable teaching and learning challenges facing schools), when asked what else could be done to identify potential learners for the NWT-SEU programme, particularly where their prior attainment was not indicating 'high academic potential' at the time, SHT1 appeared to have moved on from more fixed models of ability:

> *'Say for example you have a child coming to you in Year 7 and they are 'average' against KS2 scores, they may be average but the disadvantaged factors around that child mean that although they are currently average, and they may therefore slip by on your radar, they should actually be significantly above average, but they've already lost ground. So it's recognising that sometimes you can mask loss of ability, so your middle ability kid who's doing ok should actually be a high ability kid. So there are some constructs that we put out to people to make sure that we're very clear. The risk is you just look at your least performing children because you think that's disadvantage. That's not the case at all. You can have middle performing kids who have arguably got a bigger gap in their learning as a low ability kid, but people don't recognise they should be in that high ability cohort.'* [SHT1, Secondary HT—Co-founder]

Referencing the NWT-SEU programme, SHT1 went on to explain the value of investing earlier in learners who may not be presenting as 'high ability' based on their existing prior attainment and contextual factors—and therefore including them in the programme (implicitly not pursuing the past 'tapered model').

> *'There is a truth that the vast majority of children come into your class with disadvantage in Year 7 will already have fallen behind. And if there is an attendance profile that goes alongside that shows their attendance is poor, the one fact you have to accept is they're already behind. So we have this concept that you get them on track, but then you've also got to keep them on track because you've got to also look to the future where the likelihood that they will fall off. So it's getting people to understand that, and this 'positive discrimination', it's not positive discrimination, [positive] investment to bring them up to speed is entirely right, and I think it's a good culture shift for people. because people tend to think that what a child brings into the classroom is where they're at, but of course it might not be if they've already slipped behind because of other social, societal factors. Getting that across to people is quite a good wake up call, and we find that very, very useful.'* [SHT1, Secondary HT—Co-founder]

It is pertinent to mention here that, when NWT and SEU co-founders first met in July 2018, the expressed intention for the collaboration was more modest in scope—to build on an existing relationship between other stakeholders in SEU and NWT's FE college—ostensibly to provide more support at Key Stages 4 and 5[5] at the end of which await national assessments of great consequence to learners applying to universities in the UK. The bulk of school–university partnerships in the widening participation space

were (and still are at the time of writing) located at Key Stages 4 and 5. Following more research-informed discussions and professional development and learning sessions—co-designed by SEU staff, teachers and leaders—around the importance of prior attainment and the potential benefits of earlier engagement with learners to support attainment-raising and widening participation, the programme's design took on a longer term, school improvement-led framing. In the above example, SHT1 appeared to recognise the value of NWT's learners engaging with SEU during primary school and earlier years of secondary school (and not just Key Stages 4 and 5) to redress previous inequalities. Two years after the initial partnership meeting, signs of collective sensemaking to aid strategic-level misalignments were starting to emerge, which in turn seemed to promote a sense of ownership and active participation among school stakeholders in particular, supported by what could be interpreted as a growing trust between NWT and SEU staff.

5.3. Creating Space and Conditions for Empowerment and Co-Ownership: Pushing Boundaries—Broadening Perspectives

By mutual agreement with SEU, in all four primary NWT academies, sessions were delivered with whole classrooms in Year 5 to reduce the potential influence of 'selection' early in pupils' learning journeys. In the five secondaries, however, owing to larger year groups and limited resources, some selection was necessary—taking into account teacher judgments, and learners' prior attainment and consent to participate. The programme was designed to include learners who may not traditionally have been chosen for such enrichment sessions with HE—including those from more disadvantaged backgrounds whose prior attainment perhaps did not yet reflect their academic potential. This new way of engaging learners in a schools–university partnership required effective and timely communication between SEU and NWT to co-devise ways to define selection criteria fairly, practically, and clearly. When asked what criteria were used to select learners for the programme, this Head of STEM and classroom teacher, STM2, signalled a shift in thinking about intelligence and prior attainment, coupled with a willingness to take a calculated risk—instituting changes to previous ways of doing things:

> *'From the conversations we've had with [named SEU research team member] [that] were around disadvantaged students, we knew there's a big conversation around getting more disadvantaged students to elite universities, and that's kind of what the project was about. But additionally, we also had to make sure that the students that we chose had some realistic possibility of being able to take up a place at an elite university so we, you know, we certainly weren't looking at anyone who was below kind of high ability or kind of middle-high ability. . . But what we also took into account was not just the ones that have already shown examples of being able in kind of STEM subjects in particular—but also from conversations with teachers—ones that we thought perhaps had a lot of potential, but perhaps weren't as traditionally test-intelligent, if you will. Ones that showed some possibilities of achieving, but we didn't feel that their performance of the potential on the tests [was showing]—which involved kind of an experimental way of assessing intelligence at the moment. So it was a mixture of the two of those. And our particular school is about 50% disadvantage anyway [so the] majority of the children who were on their were from disadvantaged backgrounds.'* [STM2, Secondary Head of STEM]

What stands out in STM2's response is again, amidst the uncertainty of the partnership's beginnings, the degree to which they were interested as a middle leader in exploring other ways to consider learner selection with the rest of their team. The next contribution sheds some light on how this may have come to be—with the help of buy-in by NWT's senior leadership, shared alignment with SEU's goals and relational embeddedness. More implicitly, the various shifts in framing articulated by at least five NWT practitioners (out

of the eight in total engaging at that stage) seemed to be translating into a newly formed 'third space' inadvertently being made available to experiment, take small risks and pilot new ways of thinking and enacting policy and practice across organisational boundaries. Distinct but connected aims from SEU's perspective (widening participation) seemed to be lightly but practically 'attached' to NWT's school improvement goals. It is perhaps here where widening participation collaborations focused on the longer term come into their own—when school practitioners can see how the aims of the intervention link with the day-to-day operations of teaching and learning in schools, alongside their broader strategic objectives to raise attainment and achievement among more marginalised student groups.

5.4. Opening Up Potential Space for Conflict Understanding and Resolution: Collaborative Leadership to Support Relational Coordination

In this exchange, another project co-founder, headteacher SHT2 described his involvement using collaborative language—not taking sole credit for specific achievements while also pointing to strategies they had put in place such as mobilising the 'right' staff to co-lead the partnership (STEM leader STM2) and promote the programme's message. When asked how SHT2 talked about the project to colleagues in NWT, rather than give a generic 'review' of the project, they referred straightaway to a potential barrier to engagement they had encountered—specifically around the complexity of bringing students from across the academy trust together to one venue for enrichment sessions. Rather than treating the issue as purely logistical, SHT2 linked it back to the programme's original purpose and how that was understood at NWT:

> SHT2: *I can't really take personal responsibility for anything really, I've sort of dipped into all of it*.
>
> Interviewer: *Communicating the project?*
>
> SHT2: *Yes, it's been a big part of what I've done, to push the whole partnership with the heads, schools and so on, to ensure that engagement is there, and getting people like [STM2] involved who's been a very active member throughout, making him see the importance of it, I did a lot at the outset to make sure people knew what we wanted from this and what the importance is, and it's maybe gone some way to ensure that they were motivated to get involved.*
>
> Interviewer: *Yes, because in the beginning, [only two secondaries were involved]—it took a while before the others came onboard, now [the programme has] all five secondaries and all four primaries!*
>
> SHT2: *Definitely, hearts and minds!*
>
> Interviewer: *How would you describe this programme to your learners/teachers when asking for their participation?*
>
> SHT2: *When you're looking at some of the barriers and obstacles, when you ask a head to send students or staff out of school or free them up, that just sounds like an obstacle. And that's why to some extent the shutters will go up. Because they don't want students missing learning time or teachers missing lessons, which is completely understandable. So I think it is around 1-to-1 and team conversations where you talk about the long-term goal and the long-term life of this project because lots of things come and go, and you've got that short-term engagement or impact, but it doesn't really justify the input into it. So I think what we talked about at the start was the longer term relationship with yourselves, where we saw it going, what we saw the value of it being, and really emphasising it on a 1-to-1 level and within the heads meetings too.* [SHT2, Secondary Headteacher, Co-founder]

Signs of further collaborative discussion and leadership were observed in how headteacher SHT2 introduced the project to STM2 who was recognised as more likely to understand the aims of the partnership and position the work purposefully with their staff.

Certainly, in this partnership, keeping the project on track and maintaining the 'hearts and minds' messaging throughout its course required regular and creative action by NWT's co-founding headteachers and the collaboration's coordinator to synchronise with teachers and the SEU team. Messages did sometimes get lost as more schools, teachers and learners came onboard, particularly after COVID-19 arrived. Reflecting on partners' views before sessions were forced online in the new school year (September 2020) reminded us of the importance of keeping up the momentum and energy throughout the programme.

When quizzed about how SHT2 'pitched' the NWT-SEU programme to teachers and learners, their response described an approach to overcoming potential barriers cited by other school leaders, while also demonstrating their trust that investing time and effort in the project would pay off in the longer term. This was seen as a big undertaking at the time for both NWT and SEU, and indicated the high levels of faith, hope and confidence in the partnership on all sides. Again, there appeared to be some use of collaborative leadership strategies to find common ground in attempting to resolve potential conflicts and practical barriers in the day-to-day workings of the collaboration. There were also signs of collective sensemaking among school stakeholders to communicate a common vision across the partnership through the positive influence of teachers. Knowledge was being shared in both directions between NWT and SEU—in efforts to overcome challenges with implementation and coordination, further promoting a sense of shared accountability even in the face of problems and time pressures. SHT2's resolution of potential barriers to teachers' and learners' engagement seemed to create an intentional shift from the original operational and logistical issue raised by NWT colleagues towards a more collective perspective of the bigger, longer-term picture of the partnership. Identifying commonalities and forging links beyond one's immediate role emerges as a theme in the next example.

5.5. Signalling Commitment to the Cause: Creative Leadership and Joint Working Across Professional Boundaries

Here, STEM teacher STM1 demonstrated their initiative and creative follow-through for the partnership's goals by translating programme sessions that sought to bring together primary and secondary learners and teachers during 2019–2020 into a clear recognition of the benefits of joint working across year group boundaries:

> *'I'm actually in conversation with a couple of primary schools linking in, doing STEM, and I've been going to one or two of them every now and again. It's nice to be able to see those people in the CPD session as well I think, it's developing the links. So even though we're talking about 'what are the links across different key stages', when it's [within] high school—yes you've got them separate [Key Stages 3 and 4]—but because it's all the same people it doesn't really seem like a barrier. But between Key Stages 2 [primary] and 3 [secondary] with it being different schools, it can be a barrier. But because we're seeing those people [teachers and students] more often now it means that there is a link there and it sort of removes that 'oh this is strictly what we're doing', 'strictly what you're doing', you can see the similarity in the two approaches.'* [STM1, Secondary classroom teacher]

In direct contrast to the partnership's intended ethos of 'joint enterprise', silo-ed ways of working were also linked with the primary–secondary transition barrier for many learners, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, and by virtue of school years being divided into key stages, the compartmentalisation that tends to follow between teachers (and learners). NWT-SEU CPDL sessions had been designed so that teachers and

leaders from all key stages could participate, in an effort to reduce this separation and facilitate more shared knowledge and learning between different schools and year groups. According to several teachers at the time, no other school or FE college-based teacher event organised by NWT had taken place in this way before, so the idea of gathering all teachers together in the NWT-SEU partnership seemed novel, and for some, evidently beneficial, also exemplified by STF1's contribution here.

> *'I've done collaboration meetings which were great. It's really nice to, sort of, sit down with people with different experiences. The researchers come with their experiences, we as secondary teachers come with experiences, the <Further Education college> have their experiences as well. And then to actually discuss—everybody has something to offer which is quite enlightening really I think. I've learnt certainly a lot from the whole experience, personally it's enriched me. But I hope that other people—the researchers and you lot [SEU research team]—have really gained something from it as well because it would be a shame if you haven't.'* [STF1, Secondary classroom teacher]

There appeared to be a sense of co-performance among NWT teachers from different schools and key stages being communicated by STF1—knowledge sharing and co-designing programme sessions at planning meet-ups (referred to as 'collaboration meetings'). They also raised questions for SEU researchers to consider around mutual beneficiality—who gained from, and were seen to contribute meaningfully to, the programme? This can be linked back more implicitly to features of collaborative leadership that include sensemaking and empowerment that promotes participation among all partners regardless of their role—in this case, a teacher questioning if the learning and 'enrichment' they are drawing from the programme might be reciprocal elsewhere in the partnership—again taking a wider-lens perspective beyond their immediate remit.

A perception of growing 'relational embeddedness' was observed of learners by STEM teacher STM1:

> *'The idea of talking across schools—so it's not just been all the <Secondary School name> people in one room—we've had all the <NWT> schools that have been involved in each high school [and] the groups are all mixed between them. And the students at first didn't like that! The first time they were there, it was well 'I'm not really mixing with them' but by the time it got to the third or fourth sessions with the same people, they were happy to be talking to people from other schools. They remembered other people from other schools so I think socially it's helped them out. And I think with the way that things have been presented—because we as the teachers are involved in the planning and the CPD around it as well—we know where each of the sessions is leading so we can actually help students work cognitively towards it so that they're not getting overloaded.'* [STM1, Secondary classroom teacher]

Here, STM1 appeared to reflexively link what they expressed as *learners*' experiences back into their own frame of reference as one of the many *teachers* all across NWT participating in CPDL sessions together. Head of STEM and teacher STM2 echoed this sentiment by aligning learners' engagement with teachers' confidence and future practice:

> *'Certainly for the teachers who've been involved, you know, it's easier for them to kind of relate experiences they've had with the early years researchers' [SEU Early Career Researchers'] experience, content that they've picked up, you know—just the opportunity for the teachers to spend time with them as well and certainly with <the SEU research team>. Teachers have a huge influence on students, and if we can be confident in our experiences with an elite university, then it allows us to be able to kind of, mentor our own students on a daily basis for those that we feel got you know the potential and the*

drive to achieve that, that we can actually support them with real information.' [STM2, Secondary Head of STEM]

Evidence of relational embeddedness among teachers and learners being mutually reinforced was also seen here with teacher STM1. They described a moment in a CPDL session where teachers were tasked with responding to questions from learner session material as if they were also students. In a sense, STM1 managed to intricately connect how their own school fared relative to the rest of the NWT group and teachers' own learning dispositions, and therefore teachers' assessments of other schools' performance and potential.

'Doing some of the [CPDL] sessions, seeing what we have to cover, it's nice to be able to see how other people see what we do in school, if you understand what I mean. I've been teaching for 22 years and I will have taught throughout my whole career in—I'm not going to say a certain type of school because that sounds a bit elitist or defeatist or whatever. . . a type of school where to get the engagement from students you've got to [put in the] work as it's [about gaining] respect. . . And it's actually nice to see a lot of the things that were being talked about actually came through with us—what students were going to be asking when we did the activities in the CPD sessions (as students). It's quite strange how people from across <NWT> came up with different ideas from what the person delivering the session might have been intending but it's nice to know that this is how the teachers might be thinking. We're open minded to different situations, we're trying to work on stuff—I thought that was quite good in the way that it worked.' [STM1, Secondary classroom teacher]

Hearing about how teacher STM1's experience then translated into their daily classroom practice further demonstrates what they may have taken away from their time in the partnership. When asked how they might apply any of the enrichment content in their normal lessons, the research team learned that

'We've been trying to integrate it into the majority of lessons—more importantly it's with trying to integrate bits of it into the actual schemes of learning that we're producing as a school. Because obviously I've been one of the members of staff that has been involved in this whole programme, if I put in just in my teaching it would probably defeat the object of the programme, by not sharing out amongst others. So by putting it into the schemes of learning it means that the opportunities are actually going across the whole department to be used. Instead of just me, there's a department of 10 teachers who are all able to use [the material] to develop it into a day-to-day delivery.' [STM1, Secondary classroom teacher]

A picture emerged from our analysis of the different perspectives shared here. A sense that NWT teachers and leaders collaborating with SEU in a way that attempted to involve as many teachers and learners as possible regardless of individual starting points may have opened up a space between (or beyond) boundaries, a kind of 'third space' where partners had permission to think differently and consider what schooling and equitable participation could look like. This idea is exemplified by Head of STEM STM2's reflection, echoed by at least seven other practitioners at NWT secondary and primary schools:

'I kind of mentioned that before about those students who, we know it's difficult in a school where you've got a thousand children sometimes to know each child intimately in terms of the motivations and the kind of drivers and. . . where their intelligence is sometimes. And we know that children do get missed sometimes, and certainly where you've got a school that's got streaming, or we'll find kids that will come through later in school and kind of really start to show their ability, when they've been maybe placed in lower ability

sets where the work hasn't been as quick. So if anything, it's broadened our focus—to make sure that we are conscious of all the children, showing intelligences, showing ability in different ways. Just traditional test passing, which is easy to, you know, it's easy to use a numerical value. It's very simple and it can be done on a spreadsheet, but we knew before, but this is kind of raised it again that we do need to be conscious of those children who might be missed, but still have huge potential to succeed.' [STM2, Secondary Head of STEM]

6. Discussion

Similar to the Distributed Pedagogical Leadership (DPL) model highlighted elsewhere in this Special Issue (Okiri et al., 2025) our case study reveals clear evidence of collaborative leadership signalled among school and university partnership actors, characterised by interdependencies observed in task management and delivery, coupled with efforts to build shared understandings at the outset of the project. Collaborative leadership practices—dispersed among teachers as well as middle and senior leaders while engaging with university stakeholders—seemed to create a 'liminal' or 'third space' that encouraged more coordinated sensemaking, increased empowerment, openness towards resolving strategic and operational problems, and commitment towards realising the benefits of joint working—features of collaborative leadership referenced by Coleman (2011).

Equally apparent in the early stages of the partnership was the vulnerability and potential for misalignment presented by such a space. The possibility of practitioners (and by extension learners) recognising any kind of benefit from the collaboration appeared to be contingent on: (1) the quality of teachers' introduction to the partnership, (2) teachers' own dispositions and belief systems on education and their approaches to teaching and learning more widely, (3) whether these dispositions aligned with (what they understood as) the programme's aims, and (4) what value they can potentially draw from, and contribute to, the space.

Where more favourable engagement was reported and observed, much of the leadership articulated by participants can be interpreted as more collective and coordinated in addition to collaborative, i.e., multiple actors working separately, sometimes interdependently, other times distinctively or in sequence to fulfil a specific purpose, e.g., to improve the understanding of the partnership's aims and theories of change among teachers and students, or translating those aims and theories into practical strategies for the classroom. There are indications of shifts in framing by way of cross-border influences and knowledge brokering, potentially leading NWT teachers and leaders to reflect more deeply about the partnership's goals in the context of their own lived realities and histories, and the common purpose of engagement negotiated between NWT and SEU. The newly created space seemed to encourage opportunities for knowledge brokering between and indeed beyond organisational and sector boundaries, which in turn made possible conditions for more collective sensemaking to be cultivated—where previously, decision-making, e.g., to resolve conflicts or respond to operational challenges, may have been more unilateral. Whether and how these opportunities were realised seemed to be dependent on teachers' own assumptions and beliefs, and if they felt able to engage in teaching and learning practices that may incur more risk, experimentation and more unfamiliar ways of thinking, being and doing.

Our analysis points to a critical role played by informal leadership (Bryson et al., 2006) by teachers like STM1, via 'relational trust'—potentially enabling 'more effective decision-making, enhanced social support for innovation. . .and an expanded moral authority to "go the extra mile"' for students (A. Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 22). STM1's observations on the greater ease with which both teachers and learners across NWT appeared to interact with

each other after repeated encounters and growing familiarity point to the potential benefits of 'structural embeddedness' where

> '[t]he more partners have interacted in positive ways in the past, the more social mechanisms will enable coordination and safeguard exchanges.' (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 46)

The authors suggest that, in addition to the building of legitimacy and trust, 'leadership' as its own entity is also developed among partners in the process (Bryson et al., 2006). Exchanges with headteachers and co-founders SHT1 and SHT2 on their conceptualisations of NWT's partnership with SEU revealed elements of 'boundary spanning leadership', i.e., 'the capability to establish direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal' (Loignon et al., 2025, online). In one example, headteacher SHT2 chose to make an important and strategic connection between (1) (what initially appeared to be) an operational or logistical issue in arranging programme sessions and (2) the partnership's longer-term aims. Similarly, a link had implicitly been forged between the collaboration and NWT's wider school improvement goals. This move was seen to potentially encourage greater teacher buy-in to the project, and as a result, increased co-ownership and sustainability of the partnership over the longer term.

A. Bryk and Schneider (2002, p. 33) note that schools and other organisations come together primarily to 'address mutual problems'—often employing 'bridging and buffering strategies' (2002, p. 34) to strategically combine institutional spheres of influence:

> 'Interagency collaborations can minimize the impact of negative environmental forces, reduce redundancy in responses and capitalize on valuable resources.' (A. Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 33)

The teachers and middle leader STM2 featured in this paper can be characterised as 'sponsors' or 'champions' by sharing knowledge and following through on innovations in novel ways with colleagues outside the partnership, further demonstrating signs of legitimacy and trust in collaboration (Bryson et al., 2006). Classroom teachers STM1 and STF1 also signalled non-positional leadership qualities that seemed to boost senior and middle leaders' efforts and messaging towards building a joined-up approach to the NWT-SEU programme.

> 'Leadership is vital in ensuring coherence and success in [partnership environments]... In committing to the partnership there is a sense of uncertainty, of risk, of operating outside one's comfort zone—but at the same time it is a vibrant, creative space which may offer up potentially great dividends. The differences between schools and universities are thus seen as a source of creative tension rather than discord.' (Handscomb et al., 2014, p. 5)

Compared to individual schools, however, accountability and outcome pathways can be more dispersed, in the same way that leadership may also be more diffuse. There is potential for greater creativity and freedom from day-to-day responsibilities in a partnership space but also heightened potential for accountability and outcome-monitoring to become diluted or disappear altogether. For example, due to SEU's elite 'Russell Group' status, some early assumptions made around learner selection criteria by teachers at different stages of the programme indicated misalignment along cultural–cognitive lines (Scott, 2008)—relevant to the earlier reference to 'sensemaking' in collaborative leadership (Coleman, 2011). Sahlin (2020, p. 55) in their study of a school–university collaboration in Sweden identifies this dimension as 'preconscious and shared taken-for-granted understandings' that may translate into teacher and learner expectations.

Collaboration-based leadership would ideally be strategically spread and 'built on clear and agreed divisions of labour in which there is scope for all partners to make

distinctive contributions' (Marsh, 2021, p. 233) and play to each other's strengths. Handscomb et al. (2014) argue that collaborations benefit from leadership that looks for win-win situations—exemplified by teacher STF1's apparent pragmatic demeanour, coupled with their honest consideration of the mutual benefits being drawn by SEU in the partnership relationship.

Crosby and Bryson (2005) offer a framework for leadership that spans cross-sector collaboration, the Leadership for the Common Good Framework, where the focus is to develop 'regimes of mutual gain' (2005, p. 182). The framework is attentive to action at personal, team, organisational and societal levels and recognises that leadership will need to be dispersed across different groups and collectives in 'shared power arrangements' that facilitate the pooling of information, resources and practices around a common purpose. Leadership of the Common Good shares key characteristics with collaborative leadership in its range of eight capabilities (Crosby & Bryson, 2005, pp. 187–188): an appreciation for leadership in context—understanding the 'givens' of situations, e.g., social, political, technological; personal leadership—understanding the self and others; team leadership; organisational leadership; visionary leadership—communicating shared meaning; political leadership—implementing strategies and decisions in legislative and administrative realms; ethical leadership; and policy entrepreneurship—coordinating leadership over changing policy reforms. This layered framing of leadership would be well-suited to a study of cross-sector collaboration such as NWT-SEU but from both school stakeholder and university perspectives—a potential future direction for this research project.

Based on the findings from this case study, we argue that the very act of spanning boundaries in a schools–university partnership—underpinned by mutual trust and a common purpose—encourages more dispersed forms of coordinated action that promote collaborative and creative forms of leadership. By virtue of coming together in a distinct, somewhat novel 'third space' partners potentially feel able to engage in work 'beyond their formal professional role[s]' (Rudder et al., 2025, p. 300) and explore new ways of thinking that require dedicated time and collective inclination to trial fresh ideas (Bernay et al., 2020).

Third spaces are characterised by a sense of safety, whereby professionals from distinct disciplines are able to transcend traditional boundaries to engage creatively with ambiguity and complexity by questioning assumptions, contradictions and tensions inherent in new ways of working. This realm of alternative possibility in turn appeared to enable greater potential for changes in framing and practice among NWT school stakeholders, fuelled by knowledge brokering and exchange (Cooper, 2014). Opening a space for both NWT and SEU partners to realise the benefits of a cross-sector collaboration, opportunities were then activated for collective sensemaking, empowerment, strategy realignment and renewed commitment—features also referenced by Coleman (2011).

The motivation to span boundaries and explore influences outside of one's immediate organisational realm, while seeking to collaboratively achieve mutually beneficial goals can also be interpreted as a form of leadership in itself, specifically in a widening participation and attainment-raising context. Akin to strategically coordinated leadership models such as 'systems leadership' (Hopkins & Higham, 2007), the central argument is that:

> 'considerable value is added to the system when experienced and effective leaders move beyond their immediate role to build relationships and forge new impactful links with others' (Gorman et al., 2025, p. 149)

As endorsed by Constantinides (2025, p. 11):

> [S]chool leaders, as boundary spanners, build and sustain partnerships and collaborations to drive continuous improvement... [L]eadership in school or-

ganisational settings transcends internal management, extending beyond the immediate school environment to actively shape boundary-spanning activities.

Their research into collaborative partnerships aligns with our case study by highlighting where boundary spanning comes into its own, based on our analyses of stakeholders' perspectives and—uniquely for a widening participation-focused collaboration—drawing on a school improvement lens. Leaders and teachers deciding to redesign processes in concert rather than conform to more familiar internal customs in NWT around 'high ability' and enrichment also signalled to SEU that a sense of trust and commitment had been built in the shared space over the partnership period.

The implications of our study are twofold. First, evidence presented here suggests that if managed and designed carefully, investing in longer-term widening participation initiatives that aim to influence teachers and leaders in their framing and expectations in addition to students has the potential to yield positive outcomes for young people's outcomes. More can be made of the collaborative advantage of schools–university partnerships that mobilise knowledge exchange and brokering between education sectors, and being attentive to the fuller student lifecycle over more one-off point-in-time interventions. Second, designers and leaders of such partnerships would do well to not underestimate the interactive power of individual dispositions and values combined with the spaces and alternate realms of influence that may be created as a result of collaboration across institutional confines. Opportunities could potentially be maximised for creative and innovative engagement with students and other stakeholders that offer something different to the day-to-day classroom experience but are still rooted in students' educational realities.

7. Conclusions

This paper has explored approaches to collaborative models of leadership across institutional borders and multi-sector educational contexts, providing evidence of dispersed and coordinated practices using a case study of a partnership focused on raising attainment and widening participation to HE. Successful collaborative leadership practices in schools—facilitated by school and university stakeholders working and brokering knowledge together in partnership—seemed to create an alternate 'third space' that potentially encouraged increased opportunities for collectively driven: sensemaking, ownership of partnership goals, and openness towards resolving problems creatively. The success or otherwise of collaboration and collaborative leadership appears contingent on (1) the strength of alignment between partnership aims and beliefs and values at an individual level, (2) how discernible any links are between the joint goals articulated in the newly established third space and institutional-level strategic and operational objectives, and (3) the degrees of shared understanding and collectiveness in decision-making both within *and* across organisational boundaries.

The case study outlines distinctive features of leadership as influence, knowledge brokering and promoting change by establishing mutually beneficial goals, coming together under a common purpose and developing approaches that blend ways of thinking and doing towards educational improvement. Our unique contribution to knowledge can be summarised as an empirically grounded, school stakeholder perspective on leadership within a *long-term*, *attainment-focused* widening participation partnership combined with an exploration of collaborative leadership practices across institutional and sector borders—a valuable contrast to short-term outreach models often described in the literature. Reaching out beyond individual settings and educational phases seemed to furnish stakeholders with 'permission' and space to frame and practice attainment-raising differently and collectively, and engage in knowledge negotiation across organisational boundaries.

8. Limitations and Future Directions

A noted limitation of this paper is our choice to concentrate on a specific timeframe and perspective—the first round of interviews with NWT teachers and leaders—presenting a schools stakeholders' perspective in secondary STEM subjects. Quantitative and qualitative data from interviews, surveys and observations with teachers, learners and researchers in the remaining years of the research project (2020–2025) are still being analysed to formulate a fuller picture of the partnership's design, implementation and impacts—including both perceived and realised attainment outcomes. The next iteration of publications will seek to convey a more holistic illustration of this partnership by presenting evidence shared by a wider array of voices using mixed methods.

Looking to the future, the Office for Students' has recently placed renewed emphasis on 'whole-provider' approaches that aim to improve 'alignment and consistency' across each HE provider calling for

> 'A pragmatic approach to change, developing a culture and structure that promotes and supports approaches that benefit students from all backgrounds.' (OfS, 2023, p. 15)

These more coordinated models of operation open up possibilities of greater collaborative leadership across organisational borders in order to meet the needs of all students under universities' care. As Gorman et al. (2025, p. 151) warns, however, the 'mobilisation of new practices' through collaborations, partnerships and networks 'unquestionably holds great promise, but the real challenge is making it a practical and positive reality'. A possible direction for future research might incorporate more comprehensive frameworks such as Crosby and Bryson's (2005) Leadership for the Common Good Framework referenced earlier—to study and make sense of the many potential contributions to change and leadership in such arrangements, including by other system actors such as families, communities and policy makers in addition to schools and HE providers.

A second promising future direction involves a critical examination of the barriers and enablers of university–school partnerships using an equity and social justice lens (e.g., Kandiko Howson et al., 2022) and social inclusion (Gidley et al., 2010) specifically around stakeholder decision-making and their implications on student's educational trajectories. As recognised by Highfield et al. (2023, 2024) in their studies of culturally responsive leadership, what teachers and leaders sometimes articulate in theory may be rather different to what they do in practice. Our next paper would seek to investigate the difficulties in selecting students for widening participation programmes, particularly in the context of elite university entry.

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Appendix A

NWT-SEU Evaluation Programme Driving Questions

1. What impact does the NWT-SEU partnership programme have on learners' attainment and progress in STEM and MFL subjects?
2. What impact does the NWT-SEU programme have on learners' attitudes to school and learning (in STEM, MFL subjects and generally)?
3. What is the implementation process that SEU's staff (senior leaders, project coordinators and early career researchers), NWT (senior and middle leaders and teachers) and other collaborators have followed, and how has implementation evolved and changed since the partnership's launch in 2019?
4. What are NWT's learners' views on their experience of the programme?
5. What benefits do NWT's teachers and leaders associate with the programme and partnership as a whole?
6. What challenges do NWT's teachers and leaders associate with the programme and partnership as a whole?

Notes

[1] A group of state-funded schools called academies that have more autonomy than other English state schools—e.g., to set their own curriculum and term times.

[2] The Russell Group represents 24 research-intensive universities in the UK, with locations including Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Leeds, Cardiff, Manchester, Oxford, Cambridge, London, Edinburgh, Durham, Nottingham, Newcastle, Exeter, Glasgow, Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, York and Warwick.

[3] The former government body that distributed public money to universities for teaching and research. HEFCE was replaced by the OfS and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a national funding agency for science and research in the UK.

[4] Free School Meals (FSM) = a statutory benefit available to school-aged children from lower income families who receive other qualifying state financial support and who have registered their eligibility.

[5] Key Stage 4 = Years 10 and 11 of secondary school, at the end of which students sit for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) national assessments. Key Stage 5 = Years 12 and 13 take place in a sixth form or FE (further education) college and usually culminate in A-Level national assessments. Applications to universities often take into account prior GCSE results and predicted A-Level grades.

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