
From exchange to collaborative inquiry: the evolution of a university partnership between Northern Illinois University and the University of Tetova

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the development and sustainability of a twelve-year partnership between Northern Illinois University and the University of Tetova (North Macedonia), highlighting the processes by which this partnership has been initiated, sustained and expanded over time in a multiethnic and post-conflict education context.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing a process-oriented analytic approach, the authors collaboratively reviewed documentary materials from 2014 to the present to construct a partnership timeline and identify critical events and recurring processes across phases of collaboration.

Findings – Findings from the analysis of the partnership show that this collaboration developed through several phases, beginning with the establishment of relationships between the universities, expanding through joint activities and evolving through flexibility and responsiveness to changing priorities. Across these phases, relationship building, reciprocity and responsiveness emerged as recurring processes supporting the partnership's development and sustainability. The latest cycle of collaboration has set the stage for reciprocal research and teacher development related to social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices.

Originality/value – This paper identifies how international school-university partnerships can develop through intentional relationship building, reciprocity, collaborative inquiry and responsiveness to international problems of practice within post-conflict educational settings.

Keywords Partnership, Inquiry, Global awareness, Social and emotional learning (SEL), Teacher education

Paper type Practitioner paper

International university partnerships have increasingly become an important mechanism for fostering academic collaboration, professional development and institutional growth. In a North Macedonian context, with a history of low interethnic tolerance, such partnerships

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can create opportunities for institutions and educators to jointly address intercultural understanding, democratic participation and student wellbeing in post-war, interethnic contexts. After 30 years as an independent state, North Macedonia is still being shaped by historical tensions that create unique challenges within its education system. Reforms in education in North Macedonia have contributed to institutional development, but they have not fully addressed the relational, intercultural and professional dimensions of education. These ongoing challenges underscore the need for international partnerships that support intercultural understanding, professional learning and institutional collaboration across different educational contexts. In alignment with National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Essential 1, placing emphasis on missions grounded in equity, the Northern Illinois University (NIU) and University of Tetova (UT) partnership developed collaborative spaces where institutions could jointly address educational, intercultural and community-centered challenges.

Research about international school-university partnerships indicates that sustainable relationships are built around shared purpose, reciprocity and trust. In addition to providing expertise, sustainable partnerships honor complementary knowledge, resources and priorities that partners contribute while facilitating opportunities to construct knowledge together (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2016; Hall, Tandon, Tremblay, & Singh, 2015; Hora & Millar, 2023). Trust within international school-university partnerships is developed through pragmatic expectations, repeated interactions and being responsive to the contextual needs of participating institutions (Puge, 2026). Relational processes are especially important within international partnerships where collaborators work to negotiate differences in cultural norms, communication styles and educational priorities (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Meyer, 2016).

While essential, relationships alone may be insufficient to sustain enduring collaboration. Partnership scholarship also underscores the value of structures that distribute decision-making and participation across institutions. Shared governance, for instance, along with collaborative agenda setting, institutional leadership and boundary-spanning roles, are also critical elements of sustainable institutional collaboration (Barber, de Castell, & Hughe, 2014; Davidson & Penuel, 2019). Structures like these support mutual accountability and shared ownership while reducing a partnership's dependence on individual champions. In this way, sustainability involves two dimensions: a relational dimension built upon trust and reciprocity among collaborators as well as an organizational dimension involving institutional structures and practices to nurture shared commitments (Henrick, Cobb, Penuel, Jackson, & Clark, 2017; Penuel & Hill, 2019).

Finally, across scholarship, sustainable international school-university partnerships are understood as developmental and in flux. Because institutional conditions, participants and educational priorities change over time, long-term collaboration requires opportunities for adaptation and renewal (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016; Puge, 2026). Iterative cycles of collaborative inquiry can support partners over time as they reevaluate priorities, respond to emerging needs and expand their work without abandoning relationships or shared commitments upon which the partnership was built (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Penuel, Allen, Coburn, & Farrell, 2015). In this way, sustainability does not necessarily mean maintaining the same activities over time, but rather the partnership's ability to learn and evolve while preserving reciprocal partnerships and shared purpose (Penuel, Furtak, & Farrell, 2021).

In this context, UT reflects the role higher education can play in advancing educational access, representation and cultural identity. Collaboration between universities offers opportunities to build upon this progress while addressing emerging educational and intercultural priorities. This article discusses the development of the partnership between Northern Illinois University and the University of Tetova, focusing on the ways the collaboration was created, sustained and further developed over the course of time. Instead of presenting the partnership as a model and focusing on a specific outcome related to a particular theme, this article adopts a process-oriented analytic approach to examine how the partnership

evolved and adapted across different phases of collaboration. We use *process-oriented* as an analytic emphasis rather than a formal methodological framework, with attention to critical events and recurring processes that contribute to the partnership's development and sustainability. Through iterative cycles of collaboration and relationship-building, the partnership expanded beyond cultural and academic exchange toward forms of collaborative inquiry, professional learning and shared research agendas across international contexts. By examining this partnership across a 12-year timeframe, this article offers a longitudinal perspective on how international university partnerships can sustain shared commitments while adapting their participants, priorities and forms of collaboration over time.

Context: post-conflict educational development in North Macedonia

The development of education in North Macedonia is closely connected to broader socio-political transformations involving language arts, representation and educational access. Following independence in 1991, constitutional and institutional changes restricted the rights of non-majority communities and contributed to the political and institutional exclusion of ethnic Albanians (Andonovski, 2018; Kadriu, 2011). These tensions, including unresolved contested language rights and grievances surrounding equitable education and social inclusion, intensified throughout the 1990s and culminated in armed conflict in 2001 (Commission of the European Communities [CEC], 2003; European Stability Initiative, 2026; Fraenkel, 2003).

Contested language rights were particularly evident in education. In the late 1980s, policies requiring Albanian students to attend classes in Macedonian prompted mobilization among Albanian students and intellectuals advocating for Albanian language education (Aziri, 2004; Hyseni, 2010). These efforts, including class boycotts and demonstrations, contributed to growing recognition of Albanian language educational rights despite government resistance (Hyseni, 2010; Lëvizja, 2018).

The six-month conflict ended with the 2001 Ohrid Framework, which laid the foundation for constitutional and legal reforms recognizing the multi-ethnic character of North Macedonia. The agreement advanced principles of non-discrimination, equal representation of all communities and decentralization while strengthening language and educational rights for ethnic communities, including guaranteeing the right of individuals to primary, secondary and higher education in their mother tongue (CE, 2019; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2001; Reka, 2011).

Although the armed conflict only lasted six months, it resulted in significant human consequences that continued after the conflict. At its peak, approximately 70,000 people were internally displaced (Norwegian Refugee Council Global IDP Project, 2002), and nearly one third of this population continued to meet criteria for trauma and post-traumatic stress four years later (Popovski & Naumova, 2008). The 2001 war marked a crucial point for the education system in North Macedonia, where structural challenges and persistent practices of educational segregation have continued in primary and secondary education (Bakiu, Dimitrova, & Brava, 2016; Bloodworth, 2020).

Although reforms expanded access to education, little attention has been directed to the wellbeing, socio-emotional and intercultural dimensions of education (Bloodworth, 2020). Research from neighboring post-conflict contexts further demonstrates this need: Kida and Butler (2021) identified substantial trauma-related symptoms in a sample of primary school teachers, underscoring the importance of attending to teacher wellbeing alongside student wellbeing. Likewise, research in Bosnia and Herzegovina emphasizes preparing educators to navigate politically sensitive histories, prejudice and intercultural relationships through context-responsive pedagogies (Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Mulalić, 2024).

Within North Macedonia, the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) aligns with international attention to students' social and emotional development and wellbeing

(OECD, 2015); however, examination of implementation remains limited. A recent examination of Albanian-language primary textbooks found attention to emotional awareness and expression, but fewer opportunities to address cooperation, conflict resolution, diversity and, importantly, the practical application of SEL exercises in classrooms (Zenki-Dalipi, Ameti, & Abduli, 2026). Little is known about how such approaches are understood and enacted in North Macedonia's post-conflict educational system (Bloodworth, 2020; Kasumagić-Kafedžić & Mulalić, 2024; Kida and Butler, 2021; Zenki-Dalipi et al., 2026). Understanding these contemporary challenges also requires attention to the historical development of institutions responsible for preparing educators and serving the country's diverse linguistic and ethnic communities.

The development of Albanian-language higher education after 2001 cannot be fully understood without considering the establishment of the University of Tetova (UT) in 1994. Founded through the Albanian Cultural Community in Macedonia, UT became the first higher education institution to provide instruction in the Albanian language (Monograph of the University of Tetova, 2026). The Macedonian government initially opposed the establishment of this institution and refused to grant it state recognition (HUTA, 2022). In 2001, the internationally supported South East European University was established as another institution providing access to Albanian-language higher education.

The establishment of South East European University did not diminish demands for state-sponsored Albanian-language higher education. Following constitutional reforms, this goal was realized in 2004 when the assembly of the Republic of Macedonia adopted the Law of the Establishment of the State University of Tetova (UT). UT subsequently became a state-supported institution providing higher education primarily in the Albanian language (Monograph of the University of Tetova, 2026).

Today, UT functions as a fully established public university in North Macedonia, reflecting the expansion of Albanian-language higher education (University of Tetova, 2026). The development of Albanian-language higher education represents a significant achievement in access and representation. However, the complexity of North Macedonia's educational landscape continues to require ongoing collaboration, dialog and innovation. International partnerships provide opportunities to connect local experiences with global perspectives through shared learning and collaborative approaches to educational challenges.

Partnership context and development

Approach to documenting and analyzing the partnership

To explore the development of the NIU–UT partnership, the authors collaboratively reviewed documentary materials from the partnership's establishment in 2014 through the present. Materials included signed memoranda of understanding, meeting notes and agendas, correspondence among participants and stakeholders, institutional memos, programming and workshop materials, photographs, reflections, news articles and records associated with collaborative initiatives, including the Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication and *FREEDOM: Journal for Peacebuilding and Transcultural Communication*. These materials provided the authors with a historical record of formal agreements, exchanges, scholarly activities and shifting priorities within the partnership over time.

The authors reviewed materials chronologically to create a timeline of the partnership's development. During this process, the authors first independently identified events they believed were foundational to the development or evolution of the partnership. Events were then discussed collaboratively to compare interpretations and reach agreement about critical events and phases of the partnership's development. Upon constructing the first version of the timeline, the author team consulted founding members and participants involved in early stages of university collaboration to clarify historical details and identify people, events and perspectives missing from the timeline. This iterative process resulted in a collaboratively constructed account of the partnership's development.

After developing the timeline, the authors revisited critical events across phases of institutional collaboration to identify recurring processes that contributed to the partnership's development and sustainability. Instead of applying a coding framework, the authors compared timeline events and discussed patterns in how the NIU–UT partnership established relationships, developed shared activities and generated new opportunities for collaboration. Through iterative examination and discussion, the authors reached consensus about the key processes presented later in the manuscript. Importantly, the resulting analysis is not intended as an evaluation of partnership outcomes, but as an exploration of how the partnership developed, adapted and expanded over time. The following sections trace this development from the partnership's early relationship building and international exchanges through its more recent evolution through collaborative inquiry.

Origins of the partnership: from initial contact to shared vision

The partnership between Northern Illinois University (NIU) and the University of Tetova (UT) emerged through exchanges, collaborative initiatives and shared commitments to intercultural dialog. Initial exchanges took place in 2014 and 2015, focusing on relationship building. During this period, 15 participants from the University of Tetova visited NIU for academic and cultural exchange activities. The visit, although not part of an official partnership, was critical for building relationships and trust. Activities, visits and lectures were tailored to participants' disciplinary interests. These exchanges helped participants identify shared interests that evolved into collaborative initiatives. A key outcome of these exchanges was the establishment of the Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication (CPTC), a joint NIU–UT initiative supporting dialog, scholarship and peacebuilding. Given North Macedonia's interethnic context, the center strengthened UT's international visibility while strengthening the relationship between universities.

In 2016, CPTC activities were formalized through established bylaws and a steering committee, and NIU supported travel and collaborative programming for joint conference activities. As a new university, this conference signified an important step in UT's internationalization efforts. The partnership later expanded through additional reciprocal conferencing, joint academic programs and collaborations between physical education and business departments. At the same time, mutual honorary recognitions further strengthened institutional engagement and trust between universities. NIU continued to honor UT through several important activities, including a Blackwell Museum exhibition underscoring UT's historical advocacy for ethnic and linguistic civil rights and educational equity. Later collaborations between 2017 and 2018 emphasized additional academic conferences, academic exchanges and a joint MBA, further institutionalizing the NIU–Tetovo academic pipeline. This continuity reflects the institutionalized nature of the partnership and created conditions for post-pandemic renewal.

Identifying problems of practice: a pathway towards SEL and trauma-informed research collaboration

Following a period of relative international inactivity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a new phase of the partnership was launched in 2024, characterized by increased engagement and cooperation. This period provided opportunities to expand collaboration across additional colleges and faculty at NIU. In September 2024, a delegation of 15 UT students, faculty and administrators visited NIU's College for a week-long academic and community-based exchange designed to deepen existing and establish new opportunities for collaboration.

As our partnership evolved beyond institutional relationship-building and cultural exchange, faculty from NIU and UT identified collaborative pathways to address North Macedonian problems of practice. Through meetings and the development of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), delegations identified mutually beneficial priorities based on shared

expertise: (1) active learning pedagogies, (2) inclusion of students with special needs, (3) social justice pedagogies and (4) trauma-informed and SEL practices.

Co-developed priorities informed professional learning experiences during UT's visit to NIU. Experiences were intentionally sequenced to bridge observation, dialog, application and reflection through school observations, dialog sessions and reciprocal faculty workshops. UT faculty engaged in activities related to educational leadership, instructional practices, inquiry-based learning, educational AI technologies and SEL while NIU faculty and students engaged with UT presentations on democratic education, peacebuilding, student wellbeing, and SEL. These activities supported a balance of reciprocal dialog and collaborative exploration of educational problems of practice across international settings.

UT students also participated in NIU lectures, classroom discussions and collaborative activities, interacting with US peers while sharing perspectives from their cultural contexts. In several sessions, students analyzed case studies about belonging and explored how NIU teacher candidates work toward developing inclusive learning environments. These experiences positioned UT students as active participants in the academic community rather than observers of the exchange.

UT faculty also contributed directly to the exchange by delivering lectures and sharing perspectives on education, university practices and ongoing research, fostering a more balanced and reciprocal exchange between universities. These reciprocal learning opportunities highlighted educational problems of practice aligned with the interests of both universities. Conversations between delegations revealed that SEL is not a monolithic framework, but rather a set of values and practices influenced by cultural, historical and educational contexts. This realization prompted both institutions to reconsider their assumptions about how SEL is contextualized and enacted across educational systems and to understand it as a culturally adapted and collaboratively interpreted practice.

Visits to elementary and secondary schools in DeKalb complemented the exchange by providing UT participants, many of whom prepare future teachers, opportunities to examine educational practices within local contexts. School-based experiences became important spaces for comparing educational structures and considering how belonging, SEL, institutional culture and student support may be enacted differently across educational settings.

Throughout the week, shared meals and tours in Chicago and other informal activities created relational spaces that strengthened interpersonal trust and camaraderie necessary for long-term partnership development. On the final day, a concluding reflection session enabled UT participants to synthesize their experiences, identify systemic educational challenges and generate new directions for collaboration, particularly around SEL and trauma-informed instruction. These discussions helped shift the partnership from exchange to collaborative inquiry focused on problems of practice.

Over the following year, the NIU and UT partnership evolved through bi-monthly meetings focusing on collaborative inquiry, research planning and preparation for future exchanges. [Table 1](#) illustrates how the partnership engaged in Essential 5 (Research and Results Through Collaborative Inquiry) and Essential 8 (Boundary Spanning).

The NIU and UT partnership transformed into an iterative cycle of collaborative inquiry. Ideas emerging from school observations, workshops and reflection sessions informed subsequent planning and discussion, allowing partners to continually refine directions for research and scholarship.

Partnership meetings and discussions eventually resulted in the co-construction of a shared research agenda. Faculty jointly examined questions like *How do teachers understand trauma and trauma-informed practices in North Macedonian schools? How have teachers been prepared to enact SEL practices to support student well-being?* Research teams reviewed potential research instruments while considering translation, cultural adaptation, school demographics and implementation. Through this process, the partnership progressed from

Table 1. Post-visit collaborative inquiry and research planning

Time period	Agenda	Collaborative inquiry & outcomes
October 2024	Reflection & identification of educational needs	UT delegation reflected on teacher preparation, trauma-informed instruction & SEL practices within North Macedonian schools
December 2024	Exploration of SEL & trauma-informed practices	Teams explored how trauma and SEL were understood across international contexts, identifying research gaps and lines of inquiry
January -March 2025	Development of shared research agenda	Teams refined research questions and study designs
March -April 2025	Survey exploration & contextual adaptation	Teams reviewed research instruments with attention to language translation, cultural adaptation, regional representation and implementation
Spring-Summer 2025	Research preparation & planning for professional learning	Teams finalized IRB processes, survey translations, implementation logistics. Teams co-designed workshops

relationship-building and cultural exchange toward a shared model of inquiry shaping the research agenda and subsequent work of two research teams.

Key processes in the development of the partnership

In alignment with school-university partnership literature, our analysis suggests that sustainable partnerships emerge through iterative processes that involve trust-building, shared decision-making and responsiveness to changing contextual and cultural contexts (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016; Hora & Millar, 2023; Puge, 2026). Across the phases identified through our analysis of the NIU–UT partnership, several recurring processes shaped its development and sustainability. These findings suggest that the partnership was not built on a single initiative, but rather through incremental steps grounded in shared experiences and collaboration.

First, relationship-building functioned as a foundational process for collaboration as it expanded from informal cultural exchanges to larger-scale institutional engagement. Within the first visit, for example, trust was established without having a formal agreement. Delegations from each university established a common goal for reciprocal engagement where faculty could learn from one another. By offering the joint establishment of the Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication in both countries, NIU provided the opportunity for both parties to find a safe space to share their ideas and contribute to the continuation of the cooperation. These activities became important mechanisms for cultivating trust and creating spaces where collaboration could evolve into individual relationships and institutional engagement. As the relationship evolved from exchange to collaborative inquiry, relationships were further strengthened through regular meetings, often held twice monthly, that sustained communication and progress across collaborative activities. This progression aligns with partnership scholarship underscoring that the trust needed for strong relationships develops through shared expectations, repeated interactions and responsiveness rather than formal agreements alone (Hora & Millar, 2023; Puge, 2026).

A second critical process involved the co-construction of activities to support reciprocal participation, cultural exchange, professional development and research partnerships. Every detail of the exchange was proposed, discussed and approved by representatives of both parties, spanning from school observations to reciprocal facilitation of workshops and opportunities to meet and collaborate with faculty. The continuous process of co-construction ensured that activities were not externally imposed but developed through dialog and shared input, making them more relevant and meaningful for both partners. This process reflects scholarship that positions reciprocity and co-construction as an essential dimension of

sustainable partnerships, especially when partners contribute different forms of knowledge and resources toward shared objectives (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016; Hamilton & Margot, 2024). In this case, co-construction functioned as a mechanism for translating reciprocity as a partnership value into shared decision-making practice.

Infrastructural and institutional support emerged as a significant mechanism working to cultivate, sustain and expand long-term collaboration. Activities, although represented and carried out by individuals, were always supported at the institutional level through resource allocation, including funding for faculty travel, support for conferences and workshops and the involvement of graduate assistants. Other forms of institutional support included collaborative study programs, boards established to support the Center for Peace and institutional recognition of leadership through honorary degree awards. Together, these elements demonstrate the commitment of both institutions to strengthening the partnership, even during the pandemic period when mobility was limited. These findings reinforce partnership scholarship that emphasizes how relationships alone may be insufficient for long-term stability without organizational restrictions to distribute responsibility and institutionalize collaboration (Davidson & Penuel, 2019). Within the NIU–Partnership, institutional resources, governance structures and leadership support ensured that collaboration moved beyond depending on individual relationships.

Perhaps most importantly, the partnership demonstrated a capacity for adaptation and renewal in response to changing educational priorities. Although the partnership initially focused on peace and communication, it was later redirected toward the NIU College of Education in response to evolving contextual needs. This shift is an important point in the partnership process, as it shows that the partnership has not been static, but has evolved by responding to new contexts, opportunities and challenges. This was clearly illustrated by the readiness of the deans of the Faculty of Education of UT and the College of Education of NIU during the planning of new exchanges in 2024 and 2025. The partnership has been sustained not only through long-term commitment but also through its ability to respond to changing conditions and to generate new forms of collaboration. This pattern supports scholarship conceptualizing sustainable partnerships as process-oriented and developmental, requiring partners to revisit priorities, commitments and collaborative activities as contextual conditions shift over time (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016; Puge, 2026). Sustainability, in this context, involved preserving shared commitments while allowing both the focus and form of collaboration to evolve, creating opportunities for new faculty and administrators to contribute to emerging initiatives.

Across these processes, the NIU–UT partnership evolved from episodic exchanges and relationship building toward a cycle of collaborative inquiry. While initial interactions centered on relationship building, later stages jointly established research teams and designed shared initiatives. Building on these advances, collective reflection, inquiry and meaning-making further evolved into the establishment of two working groups focused on research in trauma-informed practices and SEL within the North Macedonian context. This level indicates a shift from collaborative exchange to deeper academic engagement, as both institutions continue to learn from each other and develop knowledge anchored in their common experiences. In this approach, the relationship has evolved beyond institutional engagement toward a more persistent type of collaboration, demonstrating its evolution into a meaningful and developing academic partnership. This progression also reflects school-university partnership scholarship positioning collaborative inquiry as a mechanism through which partners move beyond exchange toward shared knowledge generation and professional learning (Mitchell, Hayes, & Mills, 2010).

Implications for practice

Sustainable partnerships begin with relationships

Sustainable partnerships are cultivated through shared experiences, trust building and intentional opportunities to develop relationships before establishing formal agreements

and initiatives. Early exchanges, including informal meetings, joint online conferencing, museum visits and shared cultural experiences, provided opportunities to establish interpersonal trust and camaraderie.

The value of relationship-building cannot be understated: During moments of uncertainty, contention, or evolving priorities; pre-established relational trust and psychological safety create conditions for authentic communication, constructive feedback and respectful disagreement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Edmondson, 2018). These relational foundations may be significant within international partnerships where collaborators may bring different communication norms, expectations regarding hierarchy and approaches to collaboration that may influence partnership dynamics (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Meyer, 2016).

Co-construction and reciprocity strengthen partnership outcomes

While sustainable and successful relationships should begin with intentional relationship-building, partnership activities should also be co-constructed (Hall *et al.*, 2015; Hora & Millar, 2023). Within the partnership, bi-monthly meetings became spaces for co-designing MOUs, planning for cultural exchanges, developing conference agendas and establishing dialog between scholars with shared research interests. Careful planning not only allowed teacher educators to design and explore educational activities together, but also generated opportunities to explore how beliefs, values and enactments of SEL differ internationally based on sociohistorical and cultural contexts. Regular meetings allowed conversations to flow from meaning-making to shared research agendas.

Structures supporting engagement and reciprocal participation became particularly important when working to ensure that collaboration reflected perspectives and priorities of both institutions. Collaborative agenda-setting through shared documents ahead of scheduled meetings allowed individual members time to process and share ideas across linguistic differences, while voting structures created opportunities for team members to actively shape partner decisions. In addition to equitizing participation and voice, these structures reduced the likelihood that planning processes were dominated by the perspectives of one group or context.

Rather than assuming that reciprocity will form organically, international partnerships should intentionally construct spaces for cross-cultural dialog and shared governance (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016). Reciprocal dialog may become particularly vital when educational concepts like SEL and student wellbeing may carry distinct meanings across cultural borders (Belz, 2007; Visser, Tijmsa, & Zweekhorst, 2025). Cultivating spaces for collaborative interpretation can strengthen shared understanding and support sustainable culturally responsive partnership outcomes (Berryman, SooHoo, & Nevin, 2013; Palmowski & Angouri, 2025).

Responsive partnerships evolve through inquiry

Sustainable partnerships thrive when long-term commitments are complemented by responsiveness and a willingness to evolve when new questions, contextual needs and collaborative learning contexts arise. Within this partnership, the focus of collaboration shifted from episodic efforts to cultivate peacebuilding and transcultural communication to broader educational initiatives, most recently including collaborative inquiry involving SEL and trauma-informed practice. This progression underscores how partnerships function as adaptive processes in the wake of emerging priorities and opportunities for inquiry. Predetermined goals were malleable and collaborative inquiry catalyzed the development of initiatives that addressed contemporary educational challenges.

In this way, international partnerships may benefit by creating structures that make collaborative goal setting, investments and governance visible over time. Tools designed to support reflection like the Degree of Collaboration Abacus Tool (Doberneck & Dann, 2019) or the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (Botkin *et al.*, 2025), can help partners monitor growth and identify new opportunities for collaboration. Building upon earlier exchanges, subsequent funding has supported the development of community advisory

structures to strengthen translation, support cultural adaptation and expand broader participation in partnership efforts to cultivate SEL and trauma-informed practice in North Macedonia. Notably, community advisory approaches may provide partnerships with mechanisms and structure to ensure that work is sustainable, responsive to local knowledge, context and values (Holland, 2001; Newman *et al.*, 2011).

Conclusion

The article traced the evolution of the partnership between Northern Illinois University (NIU) and the University of Tetova (UT) from early cultural and academic exchanges to a sustained model of collaborative inquiry. The institutions' shared mission of intercultural professional learning and responding to ongoing educational challenges in diverse contexts allowed for a gradual expansion of its scope and activities. Experiences described throughout this article demonstrate how meaningful international collaborations can be cultivated through reciprocity and intentional relationship building and sustained through cycles of inquiry in response to local challenges and emerging educational priorities. The 12-year trajectory examined here further suggests that partnership sustainability may be understood as the capacity to preserve shared commitments while adapting relationships, priorities and forms of collaboration. Over time, this partnership expanded beyond exchanges to include shared professional learning and collaborative research related to student well-being, SEL, trauma-informed practices and community-engaged structures to guide future work. While situated in sociohistorical and educational contexts of Illinois and post-conflict North Macedonia, lessons emerging from this international partnership can offer guidance for other institutions seeking to develop international partnerships grounded in shared missions, mutual trust, shared governance and joint problem solving. As this partnership continues to take shape, opportunities for sustainable research, professional learning and community engagement remain important objectives for future collaboration.

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Further reading

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