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Professional Higher Education in transition –

An integrated value-based model for industry collaboration

Owen Kelly, Camilla Wikström-Grotell

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Owen Kelly, Camilla Wikström-Grotell¹

Abstract

The SMARTNET (smart working life collaboration) project aims to investigate and identify needs of the different interest groups involved in cooperation with higher education (HE). It has set out to do this in order to create a model that can be used to develop a digital platform that coordinates course assignments, projects, internships, lab environments, guest lectures and degree projects for collaboration between students, academic staff and representatives from public, private business and third sector organisations. In this paper, we will describe and discuss the views of researchers on project-based collaboration together with organisations from private, public and third sector in professional HE.

Key words: collaboration, international, partnerships, research, strategy, value-based

CHALLENGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education (HE) holds a key position in any process of taking ethical responsibility for the future development of society. The economic, medical and social aftermath of the recent pandemic coupled with the unstable global political situation has created a range of uncertainties for individuals, societies and economies. Additionally, the long-term effects of industrialisation and our consumer lifestyles have created unprecedented global problems from the climate crisis to increasing social inequalities, that need to be addressed on both the individual and collective level. Society desperately needs new ideas, new competencies, and new jobs to power economic, political and social recovery. Creating new models for learning in collaboration with working life becomes more important

¹ Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, Finland (cwg@arcada.fi)
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than ever. The role of universities as research-based creators of new ideas, as knowledge developers, and as educators of skilled professionals will prove crucial. This in turn will place great emphasis on soft skills such as resilience, curiosity, problem solving, and on communication skills, critical thinking, confidence and intrapreneurship, all of which can best be developed in real life situations. This will also bring psychological well-being and a sense of belonging and community to the forefront of societal development. (Barnes, 2006; Council of European Union, 2021)

Professionally oriented higher education (HE) faces major challenges due to climate change, digitalisation, globalisation and increasingly rapid moves towards virtuality. In order to prepare students for a future working life in an increasingly uncertain world, completely new models for education are needed, which include both profession-specific and generic competences for students. Institutes of higher education need to prepare students for systems thinking, change management and networking. We need to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, as turns towards the digital replace some but create others; for learning and developing throughout their lives and careers; and for working and communicating in multicultural and -disciplinary contexts. We need to inspire and equip students to act as resilient change makers, to give them confidence and information to make informed decisions in their lives and careers. This in turn, places career support for professional and personal development and wellbeing at the heart of HE institutions' work. (Cook, 2020)

Higher education must focus on lifelong, continuous learning, on educating innovative experts, implementing digital and AI applications, as well as all aspects of sustainable development, in order to contribute to social development and the preservation of a welfare society. Students must graduate with competencies to act in a working life where changes are rapid and unexpected. Therefore, in this project, we want to develop a model to support learning and the development of competencies needed in the future working life. All involved in education need to develop a deep understanding of the implications of a transition to a green and digital world. This understanding will remain impossible unless we learn to relate to a global world. The belief that international collaboration benefits society through supporting more democratic methods of knowledge exchange acts as a guiding light for nurturing global mindedness, helping to ensure continued cross-societal progress with long-term benefits for humanity. One-way we can begin to accomplish this is through internationalising the curriculum so that learners and faculty begin to comprehend differences and similarities in ideas, ways of communicating, cultural beliefs, and values. This increased awareness births understanding of diversity, which is needed to gain success as an ethical entrepreneur. An intrapreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial skills for students in all fields enable students at both bachelor's and master's level to develop new digital and AI-based services and products and to create their own companies during the course of their studies. (Isacsson, Slotte & Wikström-Grotell, 2020; Holm, Slotte & Wikström-Grotell, 2021)

CHANGING APPROACHES TOWARDS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HE

Providing services to society and engaging with the community should be seen as a major goal for professional HE today. Achieving this requires a systemic approach in terms of both leveraging existing activities and developing new initiatives in order to tackle local and global social issues, which often are interconnected in complex ways. This kind of education needs to unleash wide-ranging effects, from students and academic staff to experts in working life, from research to teaching and learning, from HEI to society and from the local to the global. It manifests HE as not being limited to the HE community, but drawing in and being a part of broader communities and ecosystems in partnership with actors in the “real world”. (Brandenburg et al.,2019 a; Brandenburg et al.,2019 b)

Creating university specific strategies and policies that are communicated through entrepreneurial thinking has the potential to provide fertile ground for innovation where higher education institutions can thrive in a continual state of becoming (Villikka, Wikström-Grotell & Lejonqvist 2017). The purpose of such a conceptual contribution is to bring forward knowledge and skills that can be used to support innovation, collaboration, and communication among faculty and working life both on staff and on organisational level. In the future, traditional methods of collaboration between universities and working life will not prove dynamic enough. Instead, we will need to future-proof our ways of living, studying, learning and working by finding methods of encouraging positive societal impacts from the international communities that already exist within our borders, as well as online. To enhance innovation we need to develop the co-creation of regional and international ecosystems where HEIs, government, employers, organisations, municipalities and working people come together to increase the attraction of the region. This requires a range of changes in organisations and the cultures within them towards increased autonomy and open-mindedness as well as a focus on interdisciplinary thinking and continuous and life-long learning.

THE SMARTNET PROJECT – PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A broad range of collaboration with external stakeholders will enable the development of systemic sustainable solutions to societal challenges and give the HEIs a key role as a connector between academic disciplines, industrial sectors, regional needs and regional potential. We need, therefore, to develop strategies and policies that involve society and other central actors in higher education development in an inclusive way. To this end, the goal of **SMARTNET** (smart working life collaboration) is to develop a pedagogical/educational framework and ecosystem that goes beyond the university's boundaries and is

based on shared values, goals and models for collaboration. This ecosystem necessarily values diversity and includes working life as an active part in the daily life in HE.

In order to learn in concrete detail about the day-to-day issues that such a project will need to tackle we spoke to a number of potential stakeholders. Of particular relevance are the researchers at Arcada UAS with whom we conducted several focus group interviews. They revealed some of the complex elements that we will need to take account of at each stage of the project. This paper focuses on broadening the understanding of the challenges and possibilities from a researcher perspective in Research Development and Innovation (RDI) collaboration with actors outside HE. We conducted and analysed the transcripts (Spring 2022) which included statements from 10 researchers at Arcada. The collected interview material was transcribed and grouped after repeated readings into five categories: preconditions, requirements, interaction and communication, ways of working/process related factors and risks (see Table 1). Key concepts were identified in each category described by short meaningful notes. We compared and discussed the similarities and distinctive characters that we found in the material and concluded that the three most significant key concepts that emerged from the material were:

1. personnel collaboration and commitment;
2. benefits for all partners;
3. a formal agreement on collaboration.

Dimensions such as reciprocity, open dialogue, trust and respect characterized personal collaboration. The mutual benefits deriving from the project were recognised as crucial. The project should preferably be in line with the organisation's strategies and lead in a concrete way to the achievement of goals that are beneficial in a sustainable way and that contribute to impact on society level. The researchers also highlighted the value of a formal agreement as a necessary complement to personal contacts when establishing partnerships. A formal agreement enables involved partners to commit to long-term cooperation and provides an explicit guarantee of support from management.

Table 1. Summary of results. Focus group dialogues with researchers.

PRECONDITIONS	REQUIREMENTS	INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION	PROCESS RELATED FACTORS	RISKS
Formal agreement	Formal and informal meetings	Close contacts, continuity	Concrete results-oriented activities with benefits for all partners	Financing and / or time is running out
Clear goals and responsibilities	Motivated partners	Respect, trust and confidence	Long-term, perseverance	The network is not stable
Good / concrete plan	Driving motor, enthusiast	Open dialogue	Joint funding applications	The projects are not anchored well
Structure and organization	Cooperation on equal terms	Creativity	Involve Ba & Ma degree students	The collaboration does not work
Follow-up	Time and resources	Scientific journals	The collaboration is multifaceted	Results not available
Complementary competence	Formal and informal meetings	Social media, blogs vlogs.	Concrete results as publications	Results not implemented
Benefit for both parties / everyone		Personal contacts/ commitment	Spread the knowledge widely	
Support from own organization			Cumulative knowledge development	
Systematics / not only personally oriented			Good cooperation develops itself	
Common need for development			Good collaboration leads to new projects	
Link to strategy and policies			Applications require network / partners	
Infrastructure and support			Continuous learning and co-production	
The agreement as a social contract			Bring results to real life / seminars, workshops	
Maintain contact despite no actual collaboration				
Financing				

The key concept in which all the researchers agreed² involved the processes of establishing a collaboration. They identified what they felt to be important differences between collaborations established between institutions and collaborations formed between people. They felt that institutional partnerships often appeared as impositions rather than opportunities for genuine collaboration. One researcher described such a project like this: “there wasn't one person who was committed to the project ... actually the project leads in the end also changed very often. And I had to find out ... actually who is it that I'm supposed to be in contact with”. They regarded trust as fundamental to long-term collaborations likely to bring significant results, and they argued that trust necessarily occurs between people and not between institutions.

One interviewee described the difference like this: “You meet somebody, either through email, through writing to them because of something they've written, or you actually meet them at a conference or wherever. And a likely project comes after that conversation, and you go off and you see if you could realise it. In that form of collaboration, you've established the trust before you've established the institutional arrangement. In fact, if you meet them at a conference, you may actually be deciding whether there is a research goal you have in common or not during the three beers. But how do you decide what's worth pursuing if a collaboration is proposed at an institutional level? What steps do you take to make sure it has potential that it's going to be productive, that it's going to be manageable, that it's going to be pleasurable?”

Another researcher compared two projects they had had direct involvement in and suggested that the nature of the difference lay in the fact that one project “was kind of driven by interest altogether and” the other “was kind of driven by this understanding of the fact that there was money available”.

From these and other comments made within the researchers' focus groups we have become clear that the new kinds of collaborations we envisage must also involve developing the means to foster new kinds of professional relationships between people in different areas - between students, academic staff, and people in business - and not just new formal relationships between companies and institutions. In talking about a recent research project one of the interviewees said that “I've never been encouraged to go [to visit the institution and I have never been able to] travel there for a month, [or to]... invite the researcher from there and then explore. Because research, at least from my view, is not only about the topic. It is not only about opportunities. You need to find these... I mean, it surely requires money, but you need to see each other and host somebody from there for a while and see if some interest pops up somehow. These institutional agreements are signed at high level, but we do not see that. Or we are not encouraged as researchers to create these networks.” The new formal arrangements must come from internal partnerships between

² Bolded text in the table

administrators, researchers, and teachers in order to maximise the benefits to all concerned.

Another central key concept that we identified was mutual benefit for the organisations and partners involved. Our researchers emphasized that this is needed not only because of the importance of concrete results and societal impacts, but also to maintain motivation, drive and long-term cooperation. This can be facilitated or made possible by rethinking finances at the early stage of a project. One interviewee described an experience working with another organisation in a different country: “they had something called pre-project money... So, we got money to travel to Croatia and then I think we met with some 16 different organisations and institutions. And at the very end, we found an organisation that we actually worked with in the future. It was when we were there, a lot of organisations said, you should really work with this organisation. So, I think actually that's quite a good way of working.”

If the projects are well anchored in the organization, and if personal efforts are supported, then initial developments can promote further innovation in a way that enables long-term sustainability and encourages the development of additional projects in the future.

LONG TERM GOALS AND NEXT STEPS

The aim of our SMARTNET project is to provide students with competence to develop future and reality oriented competences in different fields of professional higher education. The project aims to develop new ways of learning in real or real-like environments is to support students' entrepreneurial mindset and innovation skills. Furthermore, the aim is to develop safe, efficient, economically and ethically sustainable digital solutions in collaboration with working life in order to gain maximum quality in services. As a long-term strategic aim, we will work to support a democratic welfare society with a sustainable, green future by providing working life with new professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to be able to act within a labor market in constant fast-paced change as well as a series of concrete social innovations.

The practical purpose of the project “**SMARTNET - smart working life collaboration**” is to create a model for a digital portal or platform containing manuals on different forms of collaboration as course assignments, projects, internships, lab environments, guest lectures and degree projects with external organisations. We aim to design these to be applied within a wide field of activity: teaching, research, teaching and innovation (FUI), continuous learning and alumni work. Because the portal/platform must respond to the wishes and visions of various interest groups we have begun with the goal of investigating and

identifying the needs of different interest groups regarding cooperation. These interest groups include students, teachers and researchers, amanuensis and other employees as well as representatives of external actors in business life.

Our eventual long-term goal is to create models for active and integrated industry collaboration within all fields at Arcada, which provide added value for both the university and the organisations with whom we cooperate. We expect the project's results to include:

1. Active and systematic industry cooperation as an integral part of Arcada's operations and thus higher quality.
2. Integration of business cooperation in the studies and development of the skills that students need in the future working life. This provides better opportunities for career development and employment after completing studies in a world where every workplace can be seen as international and global.
3. Support for employees at Arcada in their daily work for the maintenance of continuous cooperation with local, national and international companies and other external stakeholders and thus increased collective business financial competence.
4. Promotion of business activities: the university and their students contribute to the development of expertise, competences and services in the companies in a result-oriented and productive way, which contributes to benefit for the collaboration partners promoting their operations and profitability.
5. Possibilities for Arcada to invoice the companies for development activities and collaborative projects and thus better profitability for the university.

One conclusion of our dialogues with researchers at Arcada is that we need to support new forms of personal contacts and collaboration between working life and university and invest in more long-term development. It also seems to be of the greatest importance that the collaboration on joint projects contributes both to the benefit of all partners involved and to wider society. Thus, the collaboration must be integrated in daily operations and anchored in ethical evaluations; that is to say, they must be value-based. In the following stage, we will compare our results from interviews with researchers with results from interviews with teachers, students, alumni and experts from working life, in order to further develop the model for collaboration.

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