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Mon 06 Dec 2021

12:15 - 12:35

New Higher Education Institutions: Developing a New University for the 21st Century Student

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Research Domain: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract: Across the UK a number of new university initiatives are starting to come to fruition, driven in part by the government's 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. New higher education institutions (HEIs) claim to be filling a gap in the market and aim to prepare students to become more employable and prepared to tackle complex problems of the 21st century. This research captures the experiences of setting up and developing new HEIs in the UK. It aims to explore how vision, pedagogies and approaches to learning are being developed.

The qualitative research includes semi-structured interviews with staff from at least four new HEIs. Firstly during their developmental stage before beginning their HE delivery. Secondly, interviews with staff and students will also be carried out in autumn 2021 after some HEIs have started to deliver their provision. Policy makers were also interviewed. Thematic analysis of the interviews will be carried out.

Paper: Context and literature

Across the UK there are a number of new university initiatives starting to come to fruition, driven in part by the government's 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. The Act aimed to '*create more competition and choice that will promote social mobility, boost productivity in the economy and ensure students receive value for money from their investment in higher education*' (Department for Education, 2016). In order to award foundation or bachelors' degree qualifications, higher education (HE) providers need to apply for degree awarding powers from the Office for Students (OfS). Furthermore, these providers must apply to use the title 'university' (OfS, 2018). A number of potential universities have decided to pursue the opportunity to develop and deliver HE provision since they see a gap in the market and an opportunity to take a non-traditional approach to HE delivery. Particularly they aim to offer students the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary learning and so preparing them to tackle complex 21st century problems. These new HEIs focus on developing students' employability in the broadest sense, using such practices as problem-based

learning, work-related learning, interdisciplinary learning and collaborations with employers.

The employability of students has been an increasingly prominent debate within universities, with increased pressure for universities to play a greater role in ensuring their students are better equipped to enter the workplace and be successful once in a job (Prokou, 2008, Watts, 2006). It is argued that this should be integrated into the academic learning to ensure it includes '*employability enhancing content*' (Crammer, 2006), rather than responsibility for employability lying outside of the learning environment, for example with careers services and wider university provision.

Definitions of graduate employability have been numerous and evolving over the years, with no single agreed definition or model. Small et al., (2018) synthesises this debate, acknowledging that the nature of employability has changed over the past century driven in part by the changing and competitive nature of the workplace and the growing HE sector. They outline the following definition: '*the capacity to be self-reliant in navigating the labour market, utilising knowledge, individual skills and attributes, and adapting them to the employment context, showcasing them to employers, while taking into account external and other constraints*.' (p.151)

We acknowledge the fundamental debate about 'what universities are for?' and that focusing on employability is restrictive. However, developing employability may lead to inclusion and contribute to social mobility. In this piece of research we explore the experiences of setting up and developing a new higher education institution (HEI) in the UK, and how their approaches attempt to develop employable students ready to respond to the 21st century's challenges. Specifically, we aim to explore:

- What are the guiding principles behind setting up a new HEI?
- How do new HEIs develop their vision to become a new university?
- What (innovative) pedagogies/approaches are being sought for, used and why?
- How do new HEIs experience the policy landscape around setting up a new HEI?

Methods

This piece of research is in progress. The research takes a qualitative approach focussing on at least four HEIs across the UK, which are in the process of being set up and some are recruiting their first intake of undergraduate students. Within each HEI semi-structured online interviews have been carried out with a range of stakeholders, in particular, founders, directors, senior leadership team and those involved in the development process. Policy makers were also interviewed. So far, seven interviews have been conducted. We also plan to carry out semi-structured interviews with new students and staff once courses have started in the autumn of 2021. The interview data will be analysed using thematic analyses to draw out common themes within the data (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data collection and analysis are ongoing.

Findings

Some of the findings so far have indicated that pedagogies which emphasise project-based learning, team working and community engagement will be successful for preparing students for their futures. Interviews have also highlighted that the way staff are recruited and work collaboratively across disciplines and teams are also important for establishing a successful HEI. The findings will add to the current debate around the employability of HE students and offer unique insights about how new

HEIs can support the development of successful graduates who are work-ready and equipped to tackle complex world issues.

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