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Hybridity in Higher Education: Positive Transformation?

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Abstract:

This paper explores the various ways in which hybrid working models can enhance higher education practice. It first explores hybrid models within the context of the face to face or virtual space as giving flexibility and opening opportunities for collaboration. It then presents an approach where all staff are encouraged to practice considering research, education and professional practice evidencing that this way of working can encourage a culture of continuous improvement. Following this cross-discipline collaboration is explored highlighting its benefits and characteristics. The last part of the paper presents a series of suggestions that can be applied to any of these hybrid ways of working in order to be successful.

Paper:

Hybrid working models within higher education can be interpreted in various ways. In this paper we explore some of these and its benefits to improve practice and cross collaboration. We are at a pivotal time in Higher Education, following a period of difficulty with a global pandemic and lockdowns. In this new way of working, the HE environment has an opportunity to enhance practice by embracing hybrid working models in which staff can work together, to fulfil their roles, through a combination of face-to-face and virtual approaches. This approach will allow HEIs to develop agility and flexibility and focus on practices that benefit individual's needs, as well as wider institutional needs (Carte et al. 2006).

Our university embraces a FUSION model where staff (both academic and professional) are encouraged to practice considering education, research and professional practice as integral parts of their role. This provides a novel opportunity for everyone within the university to embrace a culture of continuous improvement. What is more, it enables individuals to develop their knowledge and professional expertise. Each individual has a different way of being 'fused' and can cater what they consider each of the aspects of FUSION to fit their role, with the support from their line manager.

As part of this change, there is also an opportunity to embrace interdisciplinarity. Buring et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary teaching, developing meaningful interactions

between disciplines and discussing how individuals can work together with a shared goal. This includes embracing and respecting the different forms of expertise that staff members from different areas of the institution can bring. Interdisciplinarity creates new avenues through creativity and innovation. Interdisciplinary collaboration is more successful at problem solving than when studied within only one discipline through the use of a diverse range of perspectives, skill sets and interpretations (Dollinger et al. 2018).

Developments within HE around hybrid working are likely to see initiatives in which students are also taught across a number of disciplines. In this instance it is important to consider the varying skills and knowledge that students from multiple disciplines possess and that there will be a need to build a curriculum that can support a variety of needs (Beltran and Millar 2020).

In this increasingly flexible and complex environment, collaboration take on a more valuable role in HE, creating these hybrid communities doing hybrid work, using hybrid practices. We propose that HEIs should not focus on academic disciplines alone. In fact, working collaboratively between academics and professional members of staff enhances and positively impacts organisational culture. It goes further towards removing the traditional them and us culture, sometimes present in HE environments (Devis-Rozental 2020). By professional members of staff also engaging in research and education within their own job roles whilst collaborating with academics to enhance the student experience, a more consistent approach can be achieved. What is more, this way of working and being helps cohesiveness and collaboration whilst empowering individuals as important members of the team.

Mindful collaboration and purposeful communication between staff, where everyone feels listened to and able to speak up without fear of judgement enable critical discussions and the development of common themes across the work, as well as a positive culture within the team (Roper and Clarke 2020). One important aspect of this way of working is to have a responsive and effective use of communication strategies across disciplines and job roles, to facilitate and enhance collaboration and ensuring that barriers are minimised.

This includes giving meaningful feedback and encouraging the sharing of ideas and opinions, to enable staff members to work collaboratively and ensure coordination and consensus-based decision making in addition to a shared accountability (Beltran and Millar 2020). The collaborative process results in a high level of integration, producing improved scholarly engagement. It can also enhance job satisfaction, staff morale and a sense of belonging (Devis-Rozental 2020).

Successful teams collaborate with a clear set of ground rules and with an open and honest peer review process. Thus, teams need to recognise that working towards a common goal can be more valuable than working alone. This promotes both transparency and higher levels of standards and trust (Johnston et al. 2020).

Whichever hybrid way of working is embraced, by each member of the team bringing their own expertise and perspective, a culture fostering creativity and innovation is developed. Ultimately, transparency, openness, honesty and genuineness are therefore key to the successful development of these hybrid ways of working.

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