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Blurring the boundaries between higher education and professional practice: Constructing new relations across institutional and epistemic spaces

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe are facing increased expectations to demonstrate societal relevance and engage with “users” of research-based knowledge in multi-stakeholder, developmental processes. However, such engagement represents a challenge to historical ways of working in higher education. In this paper, we investigate how six Norwegian HEIs engage with national policy expectations of new partnerships with local municipalities and schools. A key objective of the reform was to transform existing relations between higher education and the teaching profession. We examine how the institutional characteristics of HEIs enable and challenge their collaboration with school districts, and how actors in HE respond to expectations of new partnerships.

We analyse group interviews with eight HEIs collected in 2021 and follow-up interviews to be conducted in the fall of 2022, supplemented by observational data and survey data. Preliminary results point to a range of challenges associated with the new roles of HEIs.

Full paper

HEIs across Europe are facing increased expectations to demonstrate societal relevance and engage with “users” of research-based

knowledge in multi-stakeholder, developmental processes. However, such engagement represents a challenge to historical ways of working in HE, which has been characterised by a focus on basic research, disciplinary orientations, and a 'delivery mode' of knowledge production and sharing (Gibbons, et al., 1994). By contrast, new forms of partnerships typically require HEIs to engage in new and more horizontal relations with other actors, to re-contextualise research-based knowledge to the needs of practitioners, and to operate within institutional logics that are different to those of HEIs.

In this paper, we investigate how Norwegian HEIs engage with policy expectations of new partnerships in the context of a national reform aimed at strengthening school-based, professional development. A key element of the reform was to strengthen collaboration between HEIs and school districts on needs assessments and the implementation of educational development projects.

Previous research on university-school partnerships has addressed questions related to unequal partnerships, hierarchical constructions of theoretical and practical knowledge, and a range of efforts aimed at promoting more collaborative and equal partnerships (Daza, Gudmundsdottir & Lund, 2021; Zeichner, 2015). This body of literature is to a great extent normative and seeks to pursue improved models for university-school partnerships. In this paper, we take a different approach by analytically foregrounding the institutional constraints and affordances that inform HEIs participation in school-based development initiatives, and the choices and strategies that actors within higher education adopt as they attempt to respond to new expectations for collaborative partnerships. In this way, we attempt to bridge insights from two research traditions: that of higher education studies, in which the organisational and institutional dynamics of universities have been prominent (Stensaker, Välimaa, & Sarrico, 2012) and teacher education research on university-school partnerships (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). We address the following research questions:

- How do institutional characteristics of HEIs enable and challenge their collaboration with school districts?
- How do actors in HE respond to expectations of new forms of partnerships?

- How do actors outside of higher education perceive the role of HEIs in the partnerships?

This research is part of a six-year, multi-method project funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. In this paper, we draw upon qualitative interviews, observational data and excerpts of previously published survey data (Fossestøl, et al., 2021). Eight group interviews have been conducted at six different HEIs in Norway, and follow-up interviews are scheduled for the fall of 2022. One interview was conducted with the coordinator for a national HE network, and we also observed four national seminars for all Norwegian HEIs. Together, these data sources make up the primary data, as they shed light on the experiences and perspectives of the participating HEIs. Additionally, we draw upon survey data and qualitative interviews that provide insights into how different actors involved in the reform perceive the role and actions of HEIs.

The empirical analysis was conducted in three steps. First, we used the concept of institutional practices (Hedegaard, 2014; Hermansen, 2020) to examine how established organisational and epistemic practices at HEIs enabled and challenged their engagement with school-based development projects.

Second, we examine the agentic dimension of HEIs through a thematic analysis (Ryand & Bernard, 2003), focussing on how they sought to address emerging challenges and tensions connected to their collaboration with local municipalities. Third, we draw upon the survey data and the interviews with the two regional school networks to examine how other actors perceived and constructed the role of HEIs in the partnership.

Preliminary results show that i) the institutional and organisational complexity of HEIs represent significant barriers for engagement in school-based development processes, including issues ranging from financial management, recruitment policies, organisational boundaries and the organisation of academics' work time; ii) HEIs pursue a diverse range of strategies and approaches towards school collaboration and the development of new partnerships, which are informed by their historical and organisational trajectories, and iii) HEIs are not necessarily valued by other actors as carriers of research-based knowledge; iv) several HEIs are uncertain whether

the development projects they are involved in actually align with teachers' needs, and v) decentralization as such does not necessarily mean that teachers become more involved in development projects, but the HEIs' approaches to the collaboration seem to make a difference.

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