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Building Bridges Between Higher Education, Vocational Learning and Employment: Fostering a Sustainable Ecosystem through Practically Based Higher Education (HE) Models

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

There is a clear tendency of diversification in the higher education (HE) sector in England. This is observed in the ways HEIs develop strategies to integrate academic and workplace learning. As universities become increasingly market-driven, there is a growing dominance across universities' agendas to develop practices to meet the needs of employers and students by facilitating graduate employability. Therefore, work-related experiences within HE and practically-based learning spaces need to be developed to ensure students' employability is fostered. This research investigated two practically-based HEIs, as examples of an industry engaged model of HE which combines academic and practical learning, through cross-disciplinary contextually-relevant curricula. The findings indicate that the cross-over between academic studies and practical experiences involves more than simply transferring knowledge and skills from one context to another. It requires enabling learning ecosystems, underpinned by a range of components, including continuous stakeholder collaboration, curriculum development and integration of theory and practice.

Full paper

The Higher Education (HE) sector in England demonstrates a tendency of diversification of their provision, specifically through developing strategies to integrate academic and workplace learning. There are multiple and complementary aims of vocational education and training (VET). Preparation for working life is primary, with some arguing beyond this, that preparing young people to be productive and valuable citizens in the workplace and in their wider lives is also a fundamental aim of VET (Winch, 2018). Higher Education (HE) has often been positioned as distinct from VET, with assumptions that university provision is not always aligned with the needs of the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012). However, as universities become increasingly market-driven, there is a growing dominance across universities' agendas to develop practices to meet the needs of employers and contemporary students by facilitating graduate employability. Therefore, work-related experiences within HE and practically-based learning spaces need to be developed to ensure students' employability is fostered (Kersh and Laczik, 2022; Emms et al. forthcoming).

The paper aims to consider two case studies of practically-based higher education institutions in England, as examples of industry engaged models of higher education which combine academic and

practical learning, through cross-disciplinary contextually relevant curricula. The focus of the research is on identifying and exploring characteristics, challenges and implications of practically-based and industry-engaged HE models operating within an emerging learning ecosystem, that facilitates crossing boundaries between academia and the workplace. The following research questions will be explored:

- What are the key features and components of the ecosystem that facilitate practically-based/industry engaged HE models enabling graduates to transition to the workplace?
- What are the processes, strategies and approaches that universities develop when moving their academic provision towards a more work-related provision?
- How can networks of HE institutions and businesses facilitate, support and sustain these models and processes within the ecosystem?

Our methodology involves undertaking a case study approach to explore and describe innovative and effective approaches of practically-based higher education, in the context of HE in England. This research is based on two case studies which include 1) contextual analysis and 2) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, e.g. senior leadership, lecturers, employers, students.

Empirical data collection (case study of two universities representing models of practically based higher education) has involved undertaking both individual and focus group interviews with key informants, including HE lecturers and curricula leaders; industry representative, students and other relevant stakeholders.

University-wide strategies transform undergraduate provision to align with industry needs and to develop employable graduates necessary for the contemporary world of work. This is achieved by the expansion of job descriptions of existing staff to include responsibilities related to the work-readiness of graduates and to ensure work-related provision is at the core of the student experience. Simultaneously, new, non-academic, jobs are created to support bridging the gap between industry and the academic world.

The case studies suggest that the development of practically-based approaches, is based on a strong conviction that cooperation and collaboration among the key stakeholders represent key features of the ecosystem that facilitates industry engaged HE models enabling graduates to cross boundaries between academic learning and real life workplace experiences. Engaging students through different forms of learning, workplace and community experiences has been strongly related to addressing their work-related skills, which are both underpinned and influenced by relevant ecosystems and ecologies. The findings indicate that the cross-over between academic studies and practical experiences involves more than simply transferring knowledge and skills from one context to another. It requires an enabling learning ecosystem, underpinned by a range of components, including continuous stakeholder collaboration, curriculum development and integration of theory and practice. The case studies have illustrated some emerging strategies and processes that the universities develop when moving their academic provision towards a more work-related provision. Specific strategies include (1) curriculum re-design and (2) industry engagement, particularly working with SMEs, which contributes to the development of a local ecosystem. The complex processes of building and sustaining such learning ecosystems strongly relates to facilitating meaningful communications among all relevant stakeholders.

The findings indicate that the development of the ecosystem is underpinned by a set of interrelated processes that have been shaped by the emerging communication and collaboration patterns, between all key stakeholders within the local ecosystem.

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