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Creating a Framework for Collaboration: An exploration of Knowledge Alliances

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Abstract

Delivering on Europe's Modernisation Agenda for universities has been a work in progress since at least 2006 (COM, (2006) 208 Final). It has recently taken on a new impetus, with the current Erasmus+ Call for Proposals likely to inject a further 1,507,3 million Euros (14.7 billion over 7 years) into education, training, youth and sport in the years to come. In terms of higher education, priority will be given to projects contributing to the Modernisation Agenda. What this means in reality is building, "...new, innovative and multidisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning; stimulating entrepreneurship and [the] entrepreneurial skills of higher education...and enterprise staff and facilitating the exchange, flow and co-creation of knowledge" (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2014). This is the role of Knowledge Alliances, to foster closer collaboration between higher education, business and the wider socio-economic community. The aim is to create structured dialogues that will result in transnational, results-driven projects, based on common goals and mutual benefits and outcomes. By being an active partner in the education process, it is argued, business can more effectively deliver graduates as business/industry ready. The approach is premised on not just the co-development, but co-delivery of enterprise and entrepreneurship education, with what is envisaged as being, "a truly two way process, with higher education and business joining forces to design innovative, sustainable ways to increase human capital" (ibid). Facilitating the dialogue requires new approaches to governance, funding and staffing within higher education institutions and this is characterised as resulting from a cultural shift, which is seen as being necessary if the disjuncture between the needs and expectations of business and universities is to be overcome.

But how might it work in reality? In 2011 three pilot projects were established to explore various models and frameworks for collaboration, as a precursor to the Erasmus+ Call. The aim was to 'test the water' and see what complexities might arise and how they could be resolved. This paper explores one of three pilot Knowledge Alliance projects which ran between 2011 and 2013. After setting the context, this empirically based paper will provide details of the various approaches and challenges faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) and business partners; what was tried; what worked and what did not. The findings will be of interest to university leaders and staff; business leaders looking to engage more closely with HEIs, also to students and their advisors who are interested in what the education system has to deliver.

Knowledge Alliances are a key aspect of Europe's strategy for the future of enterprise and entrepreneurship education, through collaboration with business and the wider community. The approach has far reaching implication that stretch beyond building successful university/business collaborations and starts to impact on governance, control and delivery in the classroom.

Keywords: Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education; Innovation, Collaboration; Knowledge Alliances; New Pact; Modernisation Agenda; Europe of Knowledge

1. Background

Over the past decade there has been intensification in thinking about the future role of public universities across Europe (Kurkiewicz and Kwiek, 2012). While the belief that universities should serve a wider public good predates the current economic crisis, the later has been both the impetus and catalyst for deep change and restructuring (COM (2012) 795 final:3). Before the economic crisis, the European economy faced "structural challenges to its competitiveness and growth, and obstacles to its entrepreneurship" (ibid). The Europe 2020 strategy aimed to address these societal challenges and to set the foundation for growth and competitiveness through the shared responsibility of its Member State and EU Institutions. The "closely intertwined" (ibid) nature of the Member State's economies needed to be reshaped through models of economic governance that ensured better policy responses to current and future challenges. A part of this reshaping was the need to de-link education policy from the traditional needs of the nation state and to establish closer links to a more integrated Europe wide strategy. This approach it is argued has "given rise to substantially new ways of thinking about universities at the level of the European Commission" (ibid: 19).

Dale (2010) argues that the transformation of higher education will emerge from the relationship between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) and their role in the Europe of Knowledge (EoK). He argues that the EoK is a project aimed at increasing Europe's competitiveness, (indeed there are many projects in Europe with this aspiration), by bringing about a "qualitative shift in the relationship between the EU and Member States in ways that radically challenge some deep assumptions about the nature of Higher Education as a sector (ibid: 3). He goes on to quote Gornitzka et al (2007) discussion of the 'new pact' between universities, political authorities and society at large (ibid: 7). They argue that the new pact is not the same as the "strategic calculation of expected values" (ibid) by the *public* (sic), all monitoring and regularly assessing the university on the basis of its usefulness, it is more a search for a legitimate position for the university in the political and social order of a Europe in search of a new order (ibid). They argue that this raises the fundamental question, "What kind of University for what type of society? What do the University and society expect from each other?" The root of this transformation is seen as being the Lisbon Strategy.

2. The Lisbon Strategy and its Impact

EU education policy is both informing and shaping university reform agendas not just as part of the Lisbon Strategy but also the more recent Europe 2020 Policy strategy and its supporting programmes like Erasmus+. Kurkiewicz and Kwiek (2012) argue that this has resulted in EU member states not only adopting the Lisbon Strategy but also the wider social and economic concept of the university implied within in (ibid: 10). They argue that this approach required for the first time in the history of the EU the need for Member States to balance education policies between those which reflected local needs and those seen as critical to the wider economic future of the EU (and therefore requiring EU intervention). The Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation (COM (2006)208 final) set out a strategy which aimed to "reinforce the societal roles of universities in a culturally linguistic diverse Europe" (ibid:2). The need for modernisation is premised on the belief that European universities have enormous potential that is not fully harnessed and that they need to be put to work to effectively underpin the drive for growth and jobs (ibid: 3). The root of the problem is seen as a homogeneous education system, in which excellence and diversity has given way to uniformity and mediocrity (ibid). If the intention is for a differentiated structure for the education system, how is this to be brought about? Gornitzka et al (2007) argue that there is not a straight causal line from European integration to performance and development (ibid: 16). University developments are strongly rooted and embedded in individual institutional arrangement and traditions (ibid). The strength of the institutional tradition and its origins and history may counteract attempts to transform it. The relationship between the institution and the state may have close links with national policy and aspiration and the state may have a particular understanding of how to control its domestic institutions (ibid: 17). In this respect, "less variation between university systems and more variations within the university system of a single country (amongst other things) can be seen as an indicator of European integration" (Egeberg, 2006c, cited in Gornitzka et al, 2007: 18). Research (Gornitzka et al, 2007: Dale, 2010; Maassen, 2008) suggests that tensions arise between those who see the need to reform the HE system and those who see reform as a threat to institutional identity. Again, Gornitzka et al describe this as the difference between an institutional and an instrumental perspective (ibid, 22). Universities have an institutional identity which reform challenges. Those who oppose reform as presented here, argue that the university, if left to its own devices, will cope with the shifting framework and yet keep its foundational identity. From the instrumental perspective, the argument would be that universities need to be reformed in order to realise their full potential and live up to society's expectations (ibid).

The massification of education, as a worldwide phenomenon (Johnston and Marcucci, 2007 refer to it as one of education's megatrends), combined with the higher cost of education, has led to a resource gap for both research and educational activities (ibid, 2; EC, 2006 (208): 4). The argument here favours a more differentiated role for universities, one in which they build on their own strengths. The argument being that not all universities are good at all tasks, both education and research for example. Whilst education and research are key parts of the whole process of education, they may not be necessary for all institutions (EC, 2006 (208:4)). The Commission argues that differentiating research and education would enable the renowned research institutions to flourish and make space for the provision of excellent national and regional universities who would be able to provide shorter technical education. Research may fall to a few universities in each country. The increased

throughput of students in higher education also needs to be managed, with calls for the education system to increase its productivity by being, for example, less selective, more vocationally oriented, having shorter cycles and employ faculty staff oriented to teaching rather than research (Johnston and Marcucci, 2007: 14).

The higher education system as it currently stands is seen as having a limited range of courses (too little diversity) which are open to the academically best-qualified, leaving those from socially disadvantaged groups and non-traditional learners out on a limb (COM (2006) 208final). The level of graduate unemployment continues to rise and this rationale for this is linked in part at least to the failure of universities to provide the labour market with appropriately skilled graduates. Curricula development and teaching styles are seen as failing to be sufficiently innovative or reflective of the skills and competencies needed in the workforce. It is argued that administrative regulations are a barrier to mobility within education for both students and staff (academics and researchers), preventing them from working, studying or researching in other countries. The complexity of cross border recognition of qualifications and restrictions on the portability of national loans or grants, it is argued, also prevent students and staff from fully appreciating the opportunities available in other Member States (COM (2006) 208 final; Dale, 2010; Kwiek, (2012); Kurkiewicz and Kwiek (2012). The Commission argues that in order to “overcome the persistent mismatch between graduate qualifications and the needs of the labour market, university programmes should be structured to enhance directly the employability of graduates and to offer broad support to the workforce more generally” (COM (2006) 208 final: 6). A key element of this approach is that universities “should develop structured partnerships with the world of enterprise in order to become significant players in the economy” (SEC (2009) 423: 9). It is argued that this can be achieved without in any way calling into question the social and cultural remit of HEIs (ibid) and Knowledge Alliances (KA) are part of the solution.

3. Knowledge Alliances

The report *Delivering on the Modernisation Agenda for Universities: Education, Research and Innovation* ([COM \(2006\) 208 Final](#)) and previous work on University Business Collaboration (UBC) led directly to the creation of KAs. For KAs to flourish, education and business need to have the desire, (culture and structure) to engage in structured dialogue that will lead to action. Whilst it is recognised that many businesses have constructive and reciprocal relationships with universities, it is argued that they are still too few in number and seen as exceptional rather than the rule (SEC (2009) 423:9). The KAs provided a mechanism for the development of structure dialogues, which would “...bring opportunities for universities to improve the sharing of research results, intellectual property rights, patents and licenses” (ibid: 6). In the wider context, KAs aim to:

- develop new, innovative multidisciplinary approaches to learning and teaching;
- stimulate entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial skills of higher education teaching staff and enterprise staff;
- facilitate the exchange, flow and co-creation of knowledge.

The EU Forum for University Business Dialogue (2009) (COM(2009)158 final) further reinforced the critical role that UBC is seen as playing in the Modernisation Agenda. Teaching staff and trainers are regarded as being particularly important in the development of an entrepreneurial mindset in students. To be able this, staff must have “a positive attitude and openness towards business as a source of progress, jobs and welfare” (ibid: 5).

In support of this objective, the following actions are recommended:

- The development of an entrepreneurial culture at universities – this requires profound changes in university governance and leadership.
- Entrepreneurship education has to be comprehensive and open to all interested students, all academic disciplines, with due regard to the gender perspective.
- Universities should involve entrepreneurs and business people in teaching.
- Equally, professors and teachers should have access to training in teaching entrepreneurship and exposure to the business world.

The Commission sees Knowledge Alliances as ‘a recent and ambitious action’ and comments that projects run under the KA banner will be closely monitored (Erasmus + Knowledge Alliance Call, 2014). In 2011 three pilot projects were run to test the concept and processes outlined in the KA strategy. One of those projects is the subject of the case study below.

4. The European University Enterprise Network

The European University Enterprise Network (EUEEN) was a pilot project under the DG Education and Culture: Knowledge Alliances, which ran between November 2011 and July 2013. Its aim was to explore the mechanism, barriers and potential for greater levels of engagement between universities and the business community and to initiate the type of institutional change enshrined in the Bologna Process, which led to the Lisbon Strategy. At a very practical level, the project tried to capture the processes used at individual (HEI) partner institutions to develop and deliver a more entrepreneurship-friendly culture and closer cooperation with their business partners. The cooperation was intended to operate at all levels, from the development of strategy at an institutional level, to the development and delivery of programmes in the classroom. To this end the project has four main stages:

- Leaders Forums
- Transnational exchanges
- Academic staff capacity building
- Joint projects (staff, students and business).

These stages will be discussed in more detail below.

The academic partners in this project might already be described as ‘entrepreneurial’, even if during the project one of our main challenges was to define what exactly that meant. Business partners were identified, some where the result of new collaboration; some were existing partners (at a School or Faculty level), and others were strategic partners (at an institutional level). The project aims were ambitious and would have been impossible to achieve had the partners not already been committed to the idea of the entrepreneurial university. In this respect, the cultural shift perceived as needed to create the climate for structured dialogue to take place, was already embedded in those parts of the university engaged in the project.

The EUEEN project aimed to enhance the innovative and entrepreneurial potential of staff and students from across a broad range of disciplines, particularly from non-business disciplines. Clearly, the playing field across Europe for entrepreneurship in education is not even. In fact there was a high degree of variability between partners in terms of their understanding, experiences and skills. However, regardless of prior experience, the project aimed, through a partnership approach with business, to:

- influence institutional leadership to create better conditions for entrepreneurship;
- build teaching capacity to deliver better entrepreneurial learning opportunities through different ways of teaching;
- engage learners and staff in entrepreneurial learning opportunities through innovative approaches to curricula design and delivery;
- embed learning opportunities across diverse disciplines;
- support entrepreneurial action that leads to the creation of new enterprises and innovation.

This was to be achieved through:

- collaborative leadership workshops that implement enterprise/entrepreneurship-friendly structures, policies and cultures in education;
- collaborative cross-disciplinary faculty development programme and workshops to co-create and deliver innovative curricula that enhanced entrepreneurial learning outcomes;
- designing and testing innovative approaches to the development of entrepreneurial mindsets and attitudes through collaborative co-teaching models;

- embedding partner tools and resources to increase the engagement of staff and students in knowledge exchange partnerships;
- targeting the engagement of students and staff from non-business disciplines;
- piloting collaborative partnerships for supporting new venture creation through the provision of online workshops, tools and mentoring programmes.

The main stages of the project were as follows:

- **Leaders Forums (Forums)** – Seven Leaders Forums to be run across academic partner institutions. These would be development workshops run for the management of the university and their business partner to explore the nature of the leadership challenge, focusing on personal, relational and institutional development.
- **Transnational Exchanges** – Given the nature of the EUEN, the aim was to allow the leaders from the partner institutions to participate in tailored international visits to partner universities, to explore in more detail areas of good practice. Four transnational exchanges were anticipated.
- **Action Planning** – Individual organisational strategies to be developed, to provide an opportunity to agree actions arising from the Forums. A key objective was to embed innovation and entrepreneurship expertise in academic faculties through their teaching and learning provision.
- **Staff Development** – Short programmes to be developed and delivered to build capacity (knowledge and capability) of academic staff to support the entrepreneurial skills of students and strengthen linkages between HE and business.
- **Collaborative Projects** – The aim was to test approaches to UBC through a series of collaborative projects between staff, business and students. To prepare students for this engagement, new and/or enhanced academic programmes were developed using more entrepreneurial pedagogies.

Major Findings and Lessons Learned

In summary, despite the short timescale (18 months), the project was largely successful in achieving its objective, that being to bring university and business partners together for the purpose of structured dialogue. The dialogue was structured around the following: the ways in which the business could influence the structure and strategy of the HEI to enable a more effective and mutually beneficial relationship to be fostered; building on that relationship, the aim was to engage business in the development and delivery of academic programmes that would result in more enterprise friendly staff and more labour ready graduates, and finally testing the process through a series of collaborative projects between staff, students and business.

The lessons learned are outlined below:

At the core of the project is the principle of university-business cooperation and partnership. The initial aim was for each university to nominate a dedicated business partner and in this context the university and the business would be the direct beneficiaries of the project. However, in reality, universities and businesses work widely with a range of partners in quite a focused and deliberate way. To have a general business wide engagement with a single partner, covering all disciplines, was in some respects artificial and therefore did not lead in all cases to the depth of relationship that was anticipated. The HEIs who worked closely with a dedicated business partner, on a focused project, produced the highest level of mutual benefit.

It has been suggested that businesses seem reluctant to engage with universities and that academics have a poorly developed sense of enterprise and entrepreneurship. Whilst both might be true to some extent, our results show that businesses are willing to engage, but they need a good justification for doing so. The same might be said of academics. The key to successful collaboration is a perception of mutual benefit and a willingness to strive to achieve it.

The Leaders' Forums generally started with a discussion on what was meant by 'entrepreneurship', 'enterprise' and 'innovation'. Understanding these terms in the context of the individual organisations was deemed important as it set the tone for the partnership. There was a perception that HEIs focus on business start-up, whereas the business partners were more interested in mindset development.

The discussions in the Leaders' Forums helped to 'clear the air' and also helped the partners to come to an agreed understanding of the approach to be adopted, even if they could not be reconciled on definitions.

The discussion on what activities an entrepreneurial university might engage in resulted in some of the partners going back to first principles to re-examining whether the range of activities they undertook (teaching, research, UBC, innovation, third sector activities) were consistent with the needs of their stakeholders. This was seen as a necessary precursor to wider UBC. The lesson learned here is that progress was not always linear, but more iterative. As one of the partner's comments, "Sometimes you have to go backwards before you can move forwards".

Implementing cultural change in any organisation generally flow from the top down. Arguably entrepreneurial organisations need entrepreneurial leaders. The aim of the Leaders' Forums was to generate 'high level' discussion on what it meant to be an entrepreneurial university and consequently to create the strategy and structure to operationalise it. As the EUEN HEI partners had already committed to the concept of the entrepreneurial university, there was a great deal of buy-in from senior people in the HEIs anyway and consequently in the business partners they chose to work with. The range of activities that resulted from the Forums supported staff development, curricula development and the development of better mechanisms to support UBC. Had the EUEN project been longer it would have been beneficial to bring leaders and staff together to discuss the process of implementation. Whilst both groups (staff and leaders) were engaged in the discussions, they were often separate as the opportunity to bring them together did not always arise. As a consequence of this, the approach at times seems to be a little top-down. In some cases this was reflected in the choice of business partner. Where mutual benefit was determined and agreed at a lower level (Faculty or Department), the level of buy-in on both sides was much higher. When UBC was determined top-down the partners sometimes struggled to find a common cause; this was a positive deterrent to collaboration.

5. Conclusion

A glance over almost any European Commission publication will evidence the significant role it is anticipated that education, specifically higher education, will play in Europe's strategy for the future. The answer to the treat of globalisation has been a strengthening of European integration. A part of that strategy is the redefinition of the role of higher educational institutions. In terms of European integration, this might more accurately be considered a transnational education strategy, rather than a strategy devised and implemented within the Member State.

The reform agenda for HE is part of the Lisbon Strategy and, more recently the Europe 2020 strategy, which brings into focus the 'pact' between higher education and the state. The argument being that the *pact* is currently being renegotiated and, as part of that process, the capability of universities to satisfy the needs of society now and in the future being challenged. In reality, the debate on this has probably been concluded, with the outcome already decided, that being that the education system is failing to live up to its promise or potential. The argument now is not 'if' the system is in need of reform, but how quickly reform can be brought about and what the reformed structure will look like.

The Modernisation Agenda argues that too few universities in Europe are recognised as world class. The current system of higher education results in competition which creates a homogeneous offer. In essence, universities should focus on their key strengths and not try to compete in too many areas. Universities might be seen as serving local (community needs), but also wider global needs in specialised fields of study or research. The preference is for autonomous universities with a focus on third stream income, generated through niche activities. Staff are encouraged to think more entrepreneurially about their teaching and research and their role and contribution to the institution. By bringing business and industry into the arena, the belief is that the university will be reshaped in a way that better utilised the resources it has (knowledge, innovation, people) to serve societies needs more effectively. Knowledge Alliances are part of that reshaping process.

The EUEN aimed to support, (or at least initiate), the transition from university to entrepreneurial university by influencing the leadership and governance structures at partner institutions to create opportunities for change. Institutionally, the changes were on the whole micro in scale. Institutional

wide change was not possible in the time allowed for this pilot project. However, discrete pockets of change did result in new approaches being implemented and some of the developments that were initiated might develop into (or support) institutional wide change in the longer term.

Staff training did raise enterprise and entrepreneurial capacity and resulted in a range of collaborative projects with business partners. These opened up peoples' minds to the potential for future collaboration and gave contributors more confidence to 'have a go'. Trial collaborative approaches were undertaken in areas that had hitherto resisted change. None of the partner universities had institutional wide strategies for collaboration, although all had viable UBC in place. The most effective collaborative ventures were small scale and based on relationships between active partners with shared interests, as opposed to institutional level relationships.

Based on the experience of this project, the Knowledge Alliance framework developed by the EUEN project did provide a basis for better UBC. It highlighted the benefit of working with smaller more dedicated and focus partners (SME) rather than larger strategic (corporate) partners. However, leaders need to create the space for meaningful partnerships to be developed and to provide the infrastructure and reward system to support them. There are many good reasons to collaborate; the focus in this project was on graduate employment and business start-up. The students who engaged with the collaborative projects welcomed the opportunity to do so. Embedding enterprise and entrepreneurship skills into academic programmes was on the whole well received by both students and staff.

There are many obstacles to overcome in the agenda to modernise the HE system in Europe. New Knowledge Alliance projects (currently being considered for funding) will push the agenda further in the years to come. Part of the problem will be balancing the desire for mass higher education, (and its associated funding), with the aspiration for universities to generate more revenue through third income strategies and the drive for research excellence. Research knowledge is of course also of commercial value and a core element of competitiveness. Where a university position itself through its teaching, research and innovation will be a significant factor in its ability to attract business and industry partners for collaboration, which will in turn impact on staff and student recruitment. Knowledge Alliances seem to be here to stay.

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