

# OPENNESS, FLEXIBILITY AND THE ROLE OF AI IN UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS. THREE QUESTIONS TO GARY HUSBAND

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*Following the eucen autumn seminar in Barcelona in November 2022, Eva Cendon, on behalf of the editors of EJULL, asked Gary Husband three questions pertaining to the theme of the autumn seminar “ULLL as enabler of talent enhancement - Reskilling and upskilling to meet new demands”<sup>1</sup>. The interview, conducted online, focussed on professional education and the link between universities and industry.*

*Gary Husband is Associate Professor of Further, Adult and Vocational Education at the University of Sunderland. Until September 2022, Gary was Head of Department for Education Studies at the University of Stirling. Gary has had an eclectic career, much of which has been spent in the further, adult and vocational sector in the UK where he has held various roles including teaching mechanical and renewable technologies, head of department and head of professional education.*

**Eva Cendon:** What is important to consider when we talk about partnerships between universities and industry?

**Gary Husband:** The key consideration for me here is flexibility and a genuine approach to two-way collaboration. Where there is reciprocal movement of staff, students, ideas, projects and learning between the university and the industry partner, there are significant advantages for both parties. Specifically, students have a much more immersive experience in the working and learning environments as they gain real time experience, and the industry partner has presence within the learning spaces. There are also advantages in how collaborative approaches to projects can be undertaken. Problem- and work-based learning offers further opportunity for both students and staff (of both organisations) to undertake meaningful work that has genuine impact and real-world consequence. Starting from a point of identifying a real-world problem and engaging collaboratively to explore solutions, students gain valuable and real-time experience and, concurrently, industry partners are able to access and engage with both the creative responses from the students, but also the expertise of the university and its staff.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://autumn2022seminar.eucen.eu/>

**Eva Cendon:** We all know that our structures and mindsets within universities are quite rigid, especially when we look at the degree level. How can we make our programmes more open, or more specifically: how can we integrate flexibility and space for innovation?

**Gary Husband:** This is critical moving forward as there are now many very agile training providers, educational partners that are moving into these spaces. If universities want to be able to continue to develop these partnerships, they will need to look at ways in which very flexible approaches can be adopted. There is nothing wrong with maintaining traditional degree structures (they work for many scenarios) but developing very flexible routes in partnership is also critical.

This could include provisions such as micro-credentials, where staff from companies of students can undertake modular learning in very specific subjects and gain the recognised credit (e.g., 10 post graduate credits for a micro-credential as opposed to 40 credits for a whole large module; this example is based on the UK higher education credits system). Additionally, using the collaborative partnerships to support work such as staff professional learning (both ways), collaborative projects (linked to courses) and, importantly, new pathways. Degree apprenticeships are going to continue to grow in importance as they offer staged and affordable routes to degrees for students and tailored programmes for industry partners.

The significant advantage to these programmes is that students are embedded within industry and immersed within the professional environment whilst also gaining the university provided learning. They often come with fees paid by employers which can widen participation and access for students that may previously not have been able to engage with degree level learning. The industry partner gains significantly through having employees learning whilst 'on the job' and also by having stakeholder input into the courses the students are undertaking.

**Eva Cendon:** What role can digitisation play in here, especially when we look at the almost breath-taking developments with AI?

**Gary Husband:** My thoughts here are in a similar place to my response to question one and two. We need flexible, reflexive, integrated, interactive and dynamic digital spaces for industry partners, teaching and research staff and importantly, students. The days of using VLE platforms as storage spaces for class notes and PowerPoint presentation should be well behind us. The level of technology available to us now that is increasingly accessible, easy to engage with and intuitive to produce with is almost impossible to fully fathom. But, critically, this isn't about making digital spaces bloated with a dazzling array of sense-overloading software and content. It's about creating useful, dynamic and interactive spaces that support collaborative learning approaches (staff, industry and students) both inside and outside the university.

Chat GPT has seemingly come from nowhere and is a powerful and entirely accessible tool that, undoubtedly, students will access and use heavily. This can either have serious implications for how we try and maintain the status quo, or it's an incredible opportunity to engage with a powerful tool that we can integrate into what we do and how with work with students and partners.

A useful example could be to focus on integrating Chat GPT as a tool (much like we accepted search engines and 'googling') and engage with the technology in the production of collaborative assignments and impactful projects. If we shift to a position of greater emphasis on assessing project content and not project reporting (the written aspect) then the uses for assistive digital technologies become more apparent. These are of course very early days...

**Eva Cendon:** Thank you very much.

