

Building a hybrid and networked university through long-term lifelong learning agreements with the surrounding society

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Abstract

The current study focused on lifelong learning as a tool for higher education institutions to build relationships with surrounding society. As a theoretical point of departure, the study built on empowerment and human capital discourses of lifelong learning and the ivory tower, the factory, and the network as modes of higher education institutions' collaboration with the surrounding society. The study focused on a lifelong learning initiative to move a higher education institution towards a hybrid and networked mode. Particularly, the initiative focused on building long-term relationships with organisations in the surrounding society. Therefore, this paper aims to report results, in terms of a preliminary conceptual framework, from a higher education lifelong learning initiative. It answers the following research question: How can higher education institutions build hybrid and networked long-term relationships with the surrounding society through lifelong learning initiatives? The study was based on a design-based research method and described and analysed the conceptual development of a Swedish collaborative lifelong learning initiative between a higher education institution and an organisation. Data included in the analysis is taken from documents and field notes, including a long-term agreement, conceptual documents, and plans. The studied initiative included three phases. The first phase, preparatory work, embraced a course for the top management team of the organisation to strengthen their ability to plan, lead and organise professional and organisational development, followed by identifying the needs of the organisation. The second phase, implementation, included dialogue and analysis of the identified needs and development and implementation of suitable courses matching prioritised needs. The third phase, follow-up, included an evaluation of the different parts of the initiative, possible impacts, and a discussion of further needs of collaboration for both professional and organisational development. The conceptual development work included the design of a hybrid and networked framework based on the idea of collaboration partners subscribing to higher education courses under a long-term agreement called POD (collaboration for Professional and Organisational Development). Among others, these PODs include regular dialogues on the needs of the organisations and courses built on networked learning principles. Bring-your-own-data is a core principle to ensure a strong link between theory and practice. The early stage of the initiative included promising results, going in the direction of becoming a hybrid and networked higher education institution by signing its first POD.

Keywords

Higher education, hybrid university, lifelong learning, networked university, professional development

Research Context

Building relationships with surrounding society is an aspect of higher education organisation. It includes collaboration between higher education institutions and organisations in the surrounding society. Such collaboration can include development, research efforts, and lifelong learning initiatives. The current study focuses on the latter. Depending on the ideological foundations, in terms of discourses and modes, lifelong learning collaboration between higher education institutions and organisations in the surrounding society will differ.

One ideological foundation of higher education institutions' lifelong learning collaboration with surrounding society is the discourse of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning as empowerment or development of human capital

are two common discourses. Lifelong learning as an empowering phenomenon aims to enlighten humanity. Such a discourse builds on democratic and humanistic values. Individuals and groups should develop a stronger capacity to take initiative and participate in a democratic society (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018; Poquet & De Laat, 2021). Lifelong learning from a human capital perspective builds on economic values in the labour market. Such a perspective of lifelong learning aims at supplying work life with a well-educated workforce. Lifelong learning is a response to changes derived from digitalisation, globalisation, and new regulations. Such changes drive the demand for lifelong learning. Individuals and groups should participate in lifelong learning to adapt to societal changes (Olssen, 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). Even if these two discourses compete with each other, both might be prevalent in higher education institutions' lifelong learning initiatives (Jaldemark, 2021, 2023).

Another ideological foundation of higher education institutions' lifelong learning collaboration with surrounding society is the mode of collaboration. Some scholars have discussed the relationship between higher education institutions and surrounding society in terms of three modes: the ivory tower, the factory, and the network. These modes are sometimes also discussed in terms of metaphors (Jaldemark, 2023; Nørgård et al., 2019; Matthews, 2023). The ivory tower is the oldest of these modes. Its relationship with society is weak. Ivory Tower institutions see themselves as independent from society. Supplying a society with a well-educated workforce in particular professions is not in focus. The idea of match-making between the individuals these institutions educate and the needs of society is up to the newly produced workers and employers to solve by themselves. The ivory tower controls the content of education and research. Therefore, higher education institutions' lifelong learning collaboration with surrounding society builds on the needs of the ivory tower.

The factory mode of higher education institutions is a product of the neoliberal era and the need for higher education institutions to adapt to the surrounding society. In effect, higher education institutions' lifelong learning collaboration with the surrounding society builds on the needs of society. Governments assign tasks such as educating a specific amount of workers in appointed professions – for example, engineers, nurses or teachers – to the factory. Funding of the factories is linked to these assigned tasks. Society deploys the factories as a tool in the match-making process between workers and employers.

The third mode is the networked higher education institution. In such a mode, lifelong learning collaboration between higher education institutions and society is a hybrid phenomenon where the boundaries between organisations are blurred. In the networked mode, lifelong learning collaboration builds on the needs of higher education institutions and organisations in society. Match-making processes to the labour market are a shared responsibility of higher education institutions and society. These three modes might be present simultaneously in a single higher education institution, depending on activities in different parts of an institution (Jaldemark, 2023). Nevertheless, this study focuses on a lifelong learning initiative (Jaldemark & Bång, 2020) that aims to move a higher education institution towards a networked mode. Particularly, the initiative focused on building long-term relationships with organisations in the surrounding society.

Moreover, the reported lifelong learning initiative focuses on employees' professional development through higher education courses. Professional development embraces individual and collective aspects (Jaldemark, Håkansson & Mozelius, 2019). The former aims at developing competencies and strengthening the individual's fit to the conditions and demands of their work. Through participating in education, professionals should develop their abilities, behaviours, knowledge, and skills to deal with issues they face in their profession. Collective aspects of professional development are focused on changes in an organisation and how it links to fulfilling its goals and strategies. Therefore, organisations need their professionals, as a collective, to develop competencies that match the organisations' goals and strategies. Even if the studied initiative emphasised collective aspects of professional development through a hybrid and networked mode, the initiative also embraced the professional development of individual employees.

Aims and Research Question

This paper aims to report results from a higher education lifelong learning initiative in terms of a preliminary conceptual framework. It answers the following research question: How can higher education institutions build hybrid and networked long-term relationships with the surrounding society through lifelong learning initiatives?

Outline of the initiative

The initiative is based on a design-based research method (Barab & Squire, 2004) describing and analysing the development of a collaborative lifelong learning initiative between a higher education institution and an organisation in the northern part of Sweden. The organisation is a local government with approximately 3,000

employees. The initiative is linked to a lifelong learning initiative called BLAD within the higher education institution (Jaldemark & Bång, 2020). BLAD run and evaluates development projects within the chosen institutions. These projects aim to develop hybrid and networked lifelong learning educational designs suitable for higher education (Jaldemark 2022). Based on the outcome of these projects, the next phase within BLAD was to develop a conceptual framework for hybrid and networked long-term relationships with the surrounding society through lifelong learning initiatives, hence the start-up of a collaborative initiative with another organisation. The initiative builds on three phases of conceptual development. The first phase is preparatory work, including a course for the organisation's top management team to strengthen their ability to plan, lead and organise professional and organisational development, followed by identifying the organisation's needs. The second phase, implementation, includes dialogue between the collaboration parts, analysis of the identified needs and development and implementation of suitable courses matching the prioritised needs. The third phase, follow-up, includes an evaluation of the different parts of the initiative, possible impacts, and a discussion of further needs of collaboration for both professional and organisational development of the organisation. Data included in the analysis is taken from documents and field notes, including a long-term agreement, conceptual documents, and plans.

Conceptual framework

The intention of the conceptual development was to design a hybrid and networked framework based on the idea of collaboration partners subscribing to higher education courses under a long-term agreement. Here, these framework agreements between the higher education institution and organisation are called POD (collaboration for Professional and Organisational Development). These PODs focus on professional development efforts that, besides developing the individual, mainly focus on encompassing the entire organisation's development; in effect, a POD aims to contribute to real change by building on these organisations' goals and policies and improving their capacities. The long-term nature of the POD should provide hybrid and networked conditions for good planning of human resources for the higher education institution as well as for the organisation subscribing to the courses. In detail, the PODs should be designed to extend over a specified period of time, suggesting a range between two to four years. The structure should be based on a legally binding agreement with an overall budget specified. The POD includes an attachment, referred to as the course appendix, detailing the courses offered within the subscription. The subscription period starts with an introductory course on Strategically Managed Professional Development aimed at the organisation's top management team. Theoretical knowledge is combined with practical work, and the purpose of the course is to provide tools for systematic assessment of the existing needs of professional development in the organisation. The assessment then forms the basis for planning courses that match the organisation's needs for professional development. A dialogue between the institution and the organisation about the emerging professional development needs is a recurring feature of the POD. It takes place regularly, ideally one to two times per year. The purpose of the dialogue is to revise and, if necessary, modify the course appendix to achieve the optimal impact on the organisation's development.

Within the courses included in a POD, one of the most important features of the hybrid and networked design is flexibility, as the courses are short and employ digital communication technologies. Moreover, the design of these courses should emphasise dialogue between participants and organisations, in effect building on networked learning principles. The content of the courses should also be customised based on the organisation's needs, and it includes the idea that assignments should be work-integrated, where course participants work with authentic and real challenges situated in their organisations by bringing-their-own-data (BYOD) into the courses (Jaldemark & Öhman, 2020). The link provided by BYOD is a way to ensure organisational development in POD courses.

So far, the initiative has resulted in the conceptual development of a hybrid and networked framework for long-term collaboration within lifelong learning initiatives between higher education institutions and organisations in the surrounding society. At the time of writing, a first POD is signed with an organisation. So far, the top managers of the university and the collaborating organisation have agreed on its future value. In a comment on the signing of the POD, the vice chancellor of the higher education institution emphasises that "this is a new way to combine our, and the organisation's, investment in lifelong learning". The top management of the collaborating organisation has similar thoughts. "The set-up gives us a unique way to meet skills needed in our business while at the same time offering our employees a workplace where they can grow and develop". Both parts emphasised the POD as a mutual learning opportunity and a development tool. The higher education institution underlined the POD as a means to deepen its relationship with the surrounding society by contributing to regional development. The collaborating organisation by emphasising the opportunity to solve organisational challenges.

Conclusions and Further Directions

Although it is in the early stage of the process, a conclusion is that the signing of the first POD resulted in interest from both potential collaboration organisations and other higher education institutions. In the extension, this could lead to the signing of more PODs. Throughout the expansion of PODs, higher education institutions can reach a well-developed course database based on the needs of organisations in society. Moreover, many ongoing PODs form a network that offers significant coordination advantages from an economic and organisational perspective. The strategy of the higher education institution is to create agreements with as many collaboration partners as possible so that significant administrative, financial, and educational coordination benefits can emerge for both the higher education institution and the collaboration partners. Through lifelong learning initiatives building on the idea of combining many POD agreements, higher education institutions can move towards a more hybrid and networked long-term relationship with the surrounding society. Future studies need to study the impact of expanding the amounts of PODs and analyse its consequences on regional development in the surrounding society. Another study can analyse the impact PODs have on the capacity and development of higher education institutions. This also includes how higher education institutions are impacted by becoming more hybrid and networked.

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