

Capturing the value of university-business collaboration in education requires flexible approach to measurement tools

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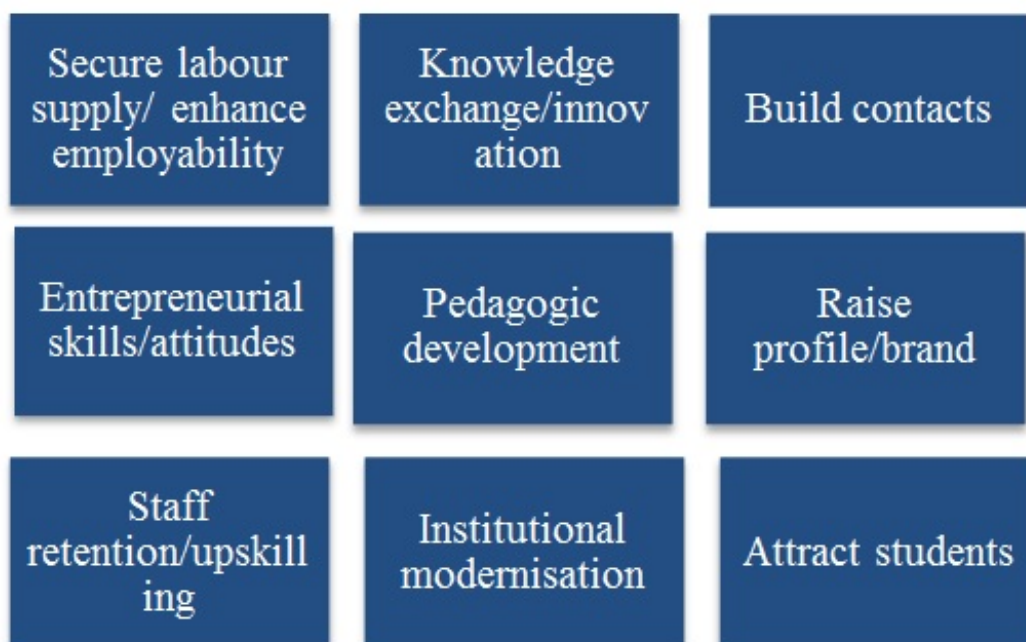
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Co-operation between businesses and universities is now firmly on the agenda. However, co-operation in the field of education plays something of a runner-up to co-operation in the field of research, particularly when it comes to valuing and measuring the outcomes of this. [Adrian Healy](#) recently led an exploratory study for the European Commission's Directorate General of Education and Culture, examining the benefits of co-operation in the field of education, how this is currently being assessed and what approaches could be adopted in the future.

Strengthening cooperation between universities and businesses is now a firmly established goal amongst policy-makers and university administrations. It is regarded as one mechanism through which to stimulate economic growth and to bring direct benefits to the universities and researchers involved. To date though attention has largely been focused on the benefits of co-operation in the field of research. Much less attention has been paid to the potential benefits of co-operation in the field of education, an area where, arguably, the opportunities for positive gains are at least as strong.

Typically, the benefits identified by those undertaking co-operation activities are heavily weighted towards human capital development, primarily of students but also involving the employees of participating firms and universities. Entrepreneurship and innovation outcomes are also prevalent. Students can form a highly effective means of taking new knowledge and ideas into firms, whilst business-linked activities – such as Summer Schools – can be fruitful mechanisms for stimulating new approaches to real world problems. Significantly, business involvement can also lead to innovation in pedagogy in the universities involved. Universities and businesses also report that cooperation in the field of education can prove valuable in developing contacts for future research and innovation activities and that their involvement in educational projects can prove valuable in raising their profile and brand image. For universities this can be an essential part in raising their attractiveness to future students.

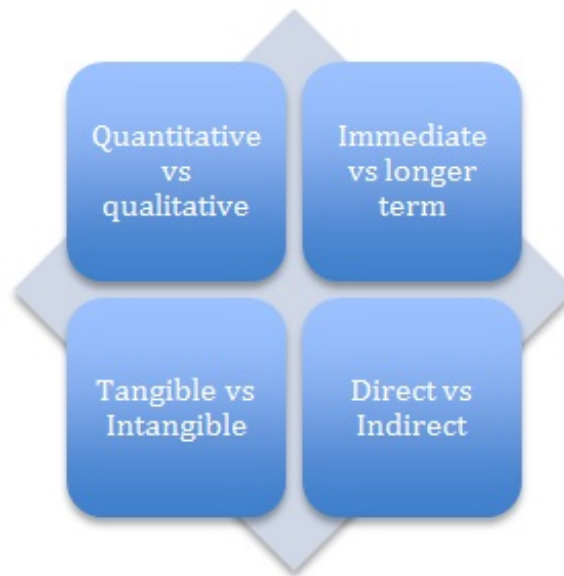
Numerous benefits are associated with cooperation in the field of education



Capturing the value of these benefits is challenging. Those involved in co-operation activities highlight the

significance of outcomes that are qualitative, longer-term, indirect and often intangible rather than those that are more directly observable in the short-term. For instance, the exposure of a workforce to new ideas and techniques through the involvement of students in work-placements. Equally, the perceived benefits for students, academic educators and firms typically vary, even within one co-operation activity.

Capturing outcomes is not just about the directly measurable



When asked how they measured the benefits of co-operation activities two distinct approaches emerge. On the one hand, universities tend to measure the impact on student learning and employment outcomes, effectively ignoring many of the wider benefits of cooperation activities. On the other hand, employers often simply follow 'gut-instinct', based on a sense of whether the cooperation is delivering on their expectations and should be maintained, an approach often taken by individual academics as well. Yet, this also fails to articulate the benefits of co-operation activities and makes it more challenging to secure wider support for co-operation in the field of education. This not only affects the development of educational co-operation activities more generally, but can also impede their take up within individual organisations, as the wider benefits remain invisible to those tasked to deliver the educational activities.

In seeking to measure the outcomes of educational cooperation between businesses and universities it is important to avoid the trap of anticipating linear input-output-outcome relationships. As those involved identify, the valued outcomes are often difficult to quantify. They result from a process rather than a defined input. For this reason balanced scorecards or success maps may offer more informative measurement tools. As an example, the very fact that participants in a cooperation activity interact may be sufficient in the short-term, with more tangible benefits only materialising in the medium to longer-term. This may suggest a value in separating out the monitoring of the process of delivering an activity, valuing key (procedural) inputs, and the evaluation of the outcomes of this.

The use of scorecards, success maps and other such techniques also acknowledges that different parties have different objectives when entering into co-operation, objectives which might also change over time. For example, the successful introduction of a new industry-relevant course may be a desired end-result or simply the foundation of a new phase of co-operation.

In consequence, it is hard to be prescriptive about how university-business co-operation activities should be measured. Ideally, each activity should be measured against its own unique context. However, some groundrules do appear to be worth identifying. One of these is the importance of valuing processes as well as outcomes. A second is the significance of qualitative outcomes as well as typical quantitative measures, whilst a third must be to

recognise the significance of different types of outcomes associated with education co-operation activities, particularly:

- Those that relate to teaching and learning, aimed at strengthening the labour supply and employment
- Those that relate to stimulating entrepreneurship through teaching and learning
- Those that relate to knowledge exchange, aimed at promoting product/process innovation or new pedagogy
- Those that relate to raising the profile of an organization, discipline or sector

This exploratory study has highlighted the significance of university-business educational collaborations in a variety of contexts across the EU. Although these are often less visible than their research-related cousins they are often equally valuable in terms of their wider spillover benefits, contributing to economic growth through innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives as well as through developing appropriate skills amongst students and within the wider workforce. Limitations in our understanding, and capture, of the value of these co-operation activities is one element constraining their wider promotion and uptake. This forms a fruitful field for further research and is an area we hope will stimulate critical engagement.

Further details of the study can be [found here](#).

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