Building hybrids between higher education and society: Applying a networked work-integrated learning framework in a business administration program

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Abstract

In this study, the changed context for higher education institutions is analysed through the lens of various approaches to collaboration between higher education institutions and society. Three different approaches are discussed: the ivory tower, the factory, and the network. Although these approaches differ, higher education institutions are complex organisations and can embrace a mix of approaches. Nevertheless, depending on the approach applied, this impacts how collaboration between higher education institutions and organisations in society plays out. The study contextualised these approaches in a joint higher education-industry project focusing on developing work-integrated learning (WIL) in a Business Administration program. WIL should embrace practice-based pedagogical methods and strategies by integrating theoretical knowledge in the workplace. To achieve WIL, a network of stakeholders needs to be engaged actively in practice-based activities. The study aimed to report preliminary results from a higher education work-integrated learning project. The following research question was posed: *How can higher education institutions, together with organisations in society, apply a networked approach to work-integrated learning?* Thus, this paper contributes to knowledge regarding the networked aspects of the design and development of a preliminary framework, including the following themes: *Exchanges of experiences and knowledge, Guest lecturers* and *Bring-Your-Own-Data (BYOD) assignments.* These themes manifest a networked WIL framework as a hybrid between higher education and society. First, the networks of experiences and knowledge within academia merge with those of experiences and knowledge in society. Between these two, a hybrid networked work-integrated framework links higher education and society. Second, the same can be said to be true for guest lecturers. Here, guest lecturers became a link between higher education and society and therefore merge the two networks of learning through information and knowledge exchange. Third, BYOD assignments provided further manifestations of a networked WIL framework. Authentic data from the workplace meet the theories of higher education and a hybrid is created. When practice meets theory, they, too, become a link between higher education and society.

Keywords

Bring-Your-Own-Data, Business Administration, higher education, hybrid university, networked university, work-integrated learning

Research Context

Many societies are in transformation due to challenges from digitalisation and globalisation. These challenges also lead to national and transnational regulatory changes, and potentially to changed expectations on societies' relationships with higher education institutions. Among these expectations, the demand for higher education institutions to supply work-life with a well-educated workforce has been increasingly emphasised. This study analyses this changed context for higher education institutions through different approaches to collaboration between higher education institutions and society. The study contextualises these approaches in a joint higher education-industry project focusing on developing work-integrated learning (WIL) in a Business Administration program (Jaldemark et al., 2023).
Depending on the choice of approach to collaboration between higher education institutions and society, the view of WIL differs. There are at least three approaches to collaboration between higher education institutions and

society: the ivory tower, the factory, and the network. In the work of some scholars, these are also called modes or metaphors (Jaldemark, 2021; Matthews, 2023; Nørgård et al., 2019). The ivory tower is the oldest approach, stemming from a time when higher education institutions, to a great degree, were independent on the surrounding society. Ivory towers deemphasise the focus on educating for certain professions. Instead, it is up to the graduated students and employees to find a match. From such an ideological foundation, collaboration between higher education institutions and society builds on the needs of the ivory tower. Later, neoliberal ideology began to transform higher education institutions. The activities within these institutions became more impacted by a stronger governing of higher education. Under such circumstances, institutions need to respond to the needs of society. Governmental steering in terms of assigning tasks such as educating a specific amount of people in a particular profession, became a usual method. In effect, decisions over the future supply of a well-educated workforce were moved from higher education institutions and became, to a high degree, a political matter. Higher education became educational factories that should deliver what they are paid for. The ivory tower and the factory approaches are challenged by a third approach, the network (Jaldemark, 2021; Matthews, 2023; Nørgård et al., 2019). This approach is a hybrid between higher education institutions and society. The network approach embraces the dissolution of the boundaries between higher education institutions and the surrounding society, forming a hybrid character of collaboration. Such a hybrid builds on the needs of both parties, including sharing the power over content issues and the production of a well-educated workforce.

Even if the three approaches differ, higher education institutions are complex organisations and can embrace a mix of these approaches. Nevertheless, depending on the approach applied, there is an impact on how collaboration between higher education institutions and organisations in society plays out. In other words, these approaches are important in a joint higher education-industry initiative that builds on WIL.

WIL is basically built on educational collaboration between higher education and industry. It should typically involve "three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum" (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38). Moreover, in WIL, "students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development" (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38). Therefore, WIL emphasises a strong link between theory and the practice of work. In effect, WIL should embrace practice-based pedagogical methods and strategies by integrating theoretical knowledge in the workplace. To achieve WIL, a network of stakeholders needs to be actively engaged in practice-based activities, such as applied projects, apprenticeships, simulations or student-led enterprises. These activities should help students link theory and work-life practices, and can include analogue technologies as well as digital technologies, be site-based or separated in time and place. Two examples of digital technology applications are simulations of work-life practices or performing remote work.

In the current study, a higher education institution collaborated with a network of partners to design a WIL-based Business Administration program. Empirically it built on a development project called OLIKA (Swedish acronym, English translation *Organisational development, Lifelong learning, Individual competence and Competence provision for Employers*). The project focused on transforming a higher education Business Administration program into a networked WIL program that emphasises a strong link to work-life practices (Jaldemark et al., 2023). Therefore, the paper aims to report preliminary results from a higher education work-integrated learning project. The following research question was posed: *How can higher education institutions, together with organisations in society, apply a networked approach to work-integrated learning?* Thus, this paper contributes to knowledge regarding the networked aspects of the design and development of a preliminary framework.

Project outline

The OLIKA project consists of three distinct but interrelated stages: *the development and design of the framework; the implementation of the framework;* and *an evaluation of the framework* (Jaldemark et al., 2023). The preliminary framework was designed and developed by combining subject content, learning activities and educational principles adapted to a WIL approach. The preliminary framework was implemented, adjusted, and fine-tuned in the following stage. Moreover, the framework was first tested with try-outs in practice. The third stage comprised a more thorough evaluation of the framework to identify and suggest alterations to the preliminary framework. This positional paper describes and discusses the main ideas behind the project design, and the early preliminary results from testing of the try-outs. The main focus is on the networked aspects of the scientific foundations for the design and development of the preliminary framework in this project's first stage.

Preliminary Framework

In this section, the ideas included in the preliminary framework are presented. The following themes were constructed: *Exchanges of experiences and knowledge, Guest lecturers* and *Bring-Your-Own-Data (BYOD) assignments*.

Regarding exchanges of experiences and knowledge between the higher education institution and the surrounding society, the networked aspects are obvious. The idea is based on a network with higher education institutions connected to many companies. There are also many existing collaborations to build on in institutions and companies. Some important success features have been identified in a study by Rybnicek and Königsgruber (2019). The recommended features should have several aspects in focus. For the institutional aspects, a key recommendation is flexibility. For relational aspects, there should be a base of honesty. Concerning output aspects, these researchers recommend clarity. Regarding the environmental aspects, the collaboration partners should raise awareness of current economic, legal, political, or social developments (Rybnicek & Königsgruber, 2019). In summary, flexibility, honesty, clarity, and awareness regarding environmental aspects are suggested to support exchanges of experience and knowledge. As emphasised by researchers, higher education institutions should re-evaluate the ivory tower metaphor. This metaphor portrays these institutions as the sole producers of knowledge and adheres to a traditional one-way knowledge transfer from academia to society (Watson & Watson, 2013). This transfer may take place in several alternative ways. For example, a technology-enhanced and multi-directed approach is necessary for facilitating networked collaboration that bridges geographical boundaries, enabling full-time working adults to learn anytime and anywhere (Mozelius, 2021). Furthermore, Sjöö and Hellström (2019) pointed out the importance of collaboration experiences beyond features such as culture, resources and the organisation of higher education institutions.

The networked aspects of guest lectures also come naturally with the idea of making a pool of lectures with specific competencies available for collaborating higher education institutions. Guest lecturers should be hand-picked for every course and teaching and learning session. In the realm of WIL, the practice of involving industry professionals to deliver guest lectures has existed for many years (Edwards, 2007). As outlined in the model proposed by Bernhardsson et al. (2017), guest lectures should be an essential core component in WIL. Moreover, the idea of guest lecturers from the surrounding society replacing the regular teacher in parts of a course has a strong potential to increase the quality of WIL. A guest lecturer could use concrete examples and cases from everyday life and not only present and discuss theory. The guest lecturer could also furnish utilitarian illustrations and scenarios from real-life experience, expanding beyond the presentation and discussion of theory. Examples of what a guest lecturer may incorporate are prior financial statements, settlements, and evaluations. The main role of the guest lecturer should be to incorporate practical experience in the classroom setting. A recommendation is to supplement guest lectures with practice-based simulations, industry-related materials such as programming code, and yearly company reports (Bernhardsson et al., 2017). This recommendation bridges the next section of bringing authentic data for realistic activities and assignments with useful learning outcomes.

Looking at the networked aspects of bringing data from companies, networking becomes a bit more complex. All companies would not open more specific data, either to other companies or to higher education institutions. Therefore, it is important to interpret the *you*r in Bring Your Own Data with care. For educational purposes it should be interpreted as organisational data that is not owned by the student. The point of applying this version of the BYOD acronym in WIL is to emphasise the importance of integrating a link between practice and theory. Even the more well-known interpretation of the acronym BYOD as Bring Your Own Device, has been shown to involve security issues (Afreen, 2014). However, the concept has matured and is often taken for granted and involved as a core part of the technology-enhanced setup in the OLIKA project. The Bring Your Own Data interpretation of BYOD is also an essential part of the OLIKA project (Jaldemark et al., 2023). To be able to design course activities involving real-world practice-based workplace tasks, companies should provide authentic data. This enables learners to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Jaldemark & Öhman, 2020). The crucial question which remains is to what degree companies will make their data available to the public. Less sensitive data could be selected, or the more sensitive parts of datasets could be excluded.

Conclusions and Further Directions

The aim of this paper was to report preliminary results from a higher education work-integrated learning project. The following research question was posed: How can higher education institutions, together with organisations in society, apply a networked approach to work-integrated learning? The contribution was knowledge regarding the networked aspects of the design and development of the preliminary framework.

The main issue is how the presented themes – *Exchanges of experiences and knowledge*, *Guest lecturers* and *Bring-Your-Own-Data (BYOD) assignments* – can be said to manifest a networked WIL framework as a hybrid approach between higher education and society. Such a hybrid approach manifests a networked WIL framework in at least three ways. First, the networks of experiences and knowledge within academia merge with those of experiences and knowledge in society. Between these two networks, a hybrid networked work-integrated framework links higher education and society. Second, the same can be said to be true for guest lecturers. These lecturers become a link between higher education and society and, therefore, merge the two networks of learning through information and knowledge exchange. Third, BYOD assignments provide further manifestations of a networked WIL framework. Authentic data from the workplace meet the theories of higher education, and a hybrid is created. When practice meets theory, a link between higher education and society emerges.

The limitations of this study can be seen in the presentation of preliminary results. Therefore, the networked aspects of the design and development of the preliminary framework warrant further testing and try-outs to further explore the possibilities of the suggested WIL framework as a hybrid between higher education and society. More research is needed to push further the understanding of networked aspects, design and development of the framework to support networked learning.

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