Reaching for a hybrid and networked university through lifelong learning initiatives

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Abstract

Working life is transforming, including an emerging digitalisation of its products and processes. Due to such transformation, competencies need to be developed in organisations that suit the emerging conditions for performing work. In the growth of these competencies, higher education is a key player. Its role is twofold, including preparing students for working life and being involved in professional development through continuous education and lifelong learning initiatives. This role as a key player has the potential to assist in the development of competencies at both an individual and organisational level. Another movement in society is the dissolution of boundaries between organisations, leading to the emergence of networked and hybrid organisations. Digitalisation is a driving force in this phenomenon. Even within universities, this trend has grown and impacted the relationship between the university and the surrounding society. In a hybrid and networked university, its operations are closely linked to the surrounding society, including the interplay of the needs of both parties; a balance of power; and weak boundaries between the university and organisations in the surrounding society. Another trend in the higher education sector is the emphasis on lifelong learning policies. Such policies link lifelong learning to global competition and social inclusion for all. The project reported in this paper builds on the ideas of lifelong learning from a university that aims to be hybrid and networked. The reported initiative builds on data from an early phase of a development project that aims at developing new forms of lifelong learning and professional development. Thematically analysed Post-it Notes from workshops supported the answering of the following research question: How do higher education staff perceive development of lifelong learning? The following four main categories were generated: (1) the hybrid and networked university, (2) pedagogical models, (3) internal organisation, and (4) quality. The conclusion includes staffs' positive attitude towards lifelong learning initiatives. They emphasise the university as an open space and as a partner for agents in the surrounding society. Moreover, they stress lifelong learning initiatives for staff; further development of educational models; scientific legitimacy and high-quality deliverance; flexible internal organisation and structures; and finally, the importance of collaboration and networking. Further data collection is needed to validate the results and the potential for developing theoretical insights that could inform lifelong learning initiatives in emerging digitally infused societies.

Keywords

Research Context

Working life is transforming, including an emerging digitalisation of its products and processes. Due to such transformation, competencies need to be developed in organisations that suit the emerging conditions for performing work. In the growth of these competencies, higher education is a key player. Its role is twofold. First, higher education institutions are involved in educating the workforce by preparing them for working life. Usually, this educational process involves the development of competencies within individuals. Together with research, this is at the heart of the activity of higher education. Second, higher education institutions are involved in professional development through continuous education and lifelong learning initiatives. This activity has the potential to assist in the development of competencies at both an individual and organisational level (Jaldemark, Håkansson Lindqvist, & Mozelius, 2019).

Another movement in society is the dissolution of boundaries between organisations (e.g., Jones, Hesterly, & Borgatti, 1997). From this movement grows the idea of networked and hybrid organisations. Digitalisation is a driving force in this phenomenon. Even within universities, this trend has grown and impacted the relationship between the university and the surrounding society. Over the years, at least three different approaches to this relationship have evolved (Nørgård, Mor, & Bengtsen, 2019). The first one builds on the metaphor of the ivory tower. In this approach, the link between the university and society is weak. Society has the role of taking care of the competencies developed within individuals. The power of deciding over the content and form of higher education is within the university. The second approach follows the metaphor of the university as a factory. Higher education delivers the competencies the market needs, and it is society that defines the market. This approach has grown out of the philosophy of new public management, a philosophy that embraces the idea of governing society as if it were a company, including applying management ideas from the private sector. The third approach emerges out the metaphor of the network. In this approach, the university and society are closely linked, and higher education emerges in the interplay of the needs of both parties. Therefore, it includes a balance of power. A networked university has a hybrid character, with weak boundaries between the university and organisations in the surrounding society. This hybrid character is intentional, with a mix of different discourses, forms, and perspectives (Bakhtin, 1935/1981). The competencies the university should nurture are a result of interplay with the surrounding society.

Another trend is the emphasis on lifelong learning. This concept includes both private and public spheres. The private sphere includes aspects of learning from an individual perspective, while the public sphere includes aspects of the social institutions within society that the individual encounters (Jarvis, 2007). The emphasis on lifelong learning has grown from emerging policy work. Among others, the emphasis on global competition and social inclusion for all were identified in the 20th century as key aspects in the emergence of global policy work in the field of lifelong learning. Global organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) formed policies (e.g., Faure et al., 1972; OECD, 1996) that later diffused into national initiatives (e.g., Swedish National Audit Office, 2016). These national initiatives are also implemented into the policies of higher education institutions. From such higher education policy work follows various development projects. Therefore, the project reported in this paper builds on the ideas of lifelong learning and the hybrid and networked university. Through policies, the studied university has initiated various development projects that should push the university towards being a hybrid and networked university ready to act as a driving force in the development of the surrounding society. One of these initiatives is reported here, and the preliminary results presented build on data from an early phase of a development project. While societal and technological development impacts private and public sectors, the project aims at developing new forms of lifelong learning and professional development, forms that should build on the demands and needs that follow from emerging societal and technological development. The project is built on three different phases. During the writing of this paper, it is in the first phase, preparatory work, including external analysis, investigation of internal conditions, and identifying suitable pilots. The second phase, development, includes running and evaluating pilots. The third and final phase should be a wider implementation of the results into regular operations of the university.

Aims and Research Question

The paper aims at reporting preliminary results from a higher education lifelong learning project. It answers the following research question:

How do higher education staff perceive development of lifelong learning?

Methods

The project is currently in the first phase. In this phase, the authors of this paper initiated a workshop that aimed at investigating how staff perceived the development of lifelong learning in the operations of the university. Following a short introduction of the topic, participants worked in smaller groups with a Post-it Note method (Hrastinski et al., 2019). The initial phase of the group work included five minutes of individual work in which each participant reflected on the theme of the workshop and wrote down his or her thoughts on Post-it Notes. Following this individual reflection, the Post-it Notes were presented to the group and clustered on posters. In the workshop, 17 staff participated, including administrative staff, managers, researchers, and teachers. These participants were sampled from an open invitation sent out through e-mail to all staff at the university. The sample include all staff that participated in the workshops. In total, the analysis included 101 Post-it Notes. These were inductively approached through a thematic analysis model including the following six steps (Braun

& Clarke, 2006): (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) generation of preliminary codes, (3) identification of patterns and themes, (4) review of patterns and themes, (5) creation and naming of categories, and (6) presentation of the analysis. Quotes from the Post-it Notes are included in the results.

Preliminary Results

The analysis of the Post-it Notes generated four main categories: (1) the hybrid and networked university, (2) pedagogical models, (3) internal organisation, and (4) quality.

The hybrid and networked university

Post-it Notes clustered in this category were about the regional, national, and international role of the university. The university should "be a hub" and "a distinct agent" that feeds off networks, digitalisation, and globalisation. Participants also mentioned the need for networks and arenas for dialogue, identifying needs, and enabling collaboration, both within the university as well as with agents and "networks in the surrounding society". Furthermore, the notes dealt with issues of formalised collaboration including agreements and long-term stability. To facilitate collaboration, dealing with issues of communication and providing channels for communication were identified as important.

Pedagogical models

Post-it Notes clustered in this category were mainly about different aspects of the design and forms of lifelong learning, for example, "short and module-based flexible courses". Several notes mentioned needs orientation, flexible solutions and technology-enhanced learning oriented towards the needs of the targeted group of professionals. One of the notes emphasised "assessment that supports development within participating organisations". Some notes also mentioned co-production together with the target group. Moreover, they discussed various educational methods. Another aspect within this category concerns the impact of lifelong learning, emphasising that it should include "benefits on both individual and organisational" levels.

Internal organisation

This category deals with how the university set up its organisation to encourage, support, and enable its development within lifelong learning. Administrative support should embrace "faster processes of adaptation", an obvious way into the university, and clear governance and a consensus on the meaning of lifelong learning. "Invest more on pedagogical qualifications (for example incentives of pedagogical development projects)" was also discussed.

Quality

This category deals with issues of competence and the quality of higher education. It is about the competence of the teachers and the need for continuous learning and development to be able to meet the needs of the surrounding society and to deliver high-quality education. These issues of quality emphasise the importance of "resources for delivering lifelong learning opportunities to staff" and "joint development of competencies" between the university and the surrounding society.

Conclusions and Further Directions

Some preliminary conclusions could be drawn from the early analysis of the data. Staff included in the study seem to have a positive view of lifelong learning initiatives. However, this positive stance from staff members might be biased due to the small sample and the sampling method. Negative voices might not be heard in the results because workshops might have only attracted staff that are positive about lifelong learning initiatives. Nevertheless, staff emphasised the university as an open space and as a partner for agents in the surrounding society. Moreover, lifelong learning for staff is an important issue of quality; the university should be able to stay up to date with current developments and deliver state-of-the-art education. Further development of educational models including designing courses should be adapted to the needs and context of professionals. Such designs should be flexible to the needs of organisations and their professionals and embrace strong educational approaches. Staff also emphasised the importance of scientific legitimacy and high-quality deliverance. To facilitate and support development and implementation of lifelong learning initiatives, the internal organisation and structures need to be flexible and ready to adapt to various agents and situations. Finally, collaboration and networking are important to connect, uphold dialogue, identify needs, and co-produce.

Initial results from the project are discussed in this short paper. These results will be applied to the project to enable further development in the forthcoming pilots. Pilots may benefit from building on issues linked to the categories. Nevertheless, to strengthen the validity of the results and be able to optimise these pilots and later implement them on a wider scale, further data needs to be collected. Therefore, a survey should be distributed to all staff to learn more about the conditions for building a hybrid and networked university that acts as a driving force for lifelong learning in the surrounding society. This survey and additional interviews with selected staff could build on the categories presented in this paper. The deliverance of the preliminary results has the potential to enable developing theoretical insights that could inform lifelong learning initiatives in emerging digitally infused societies.

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