

E-EMCOSU

Emerging modes of cooperation between private sector organisations and universities

In the framework of the European project entitled "Emerging Modes of Cooperation between Universities and Private Sector Organisations", researchers from various EU countries are exploring how employers perceive modes of cooperation with higher education institutions, as well as the drivers and barriers involved in such cooperation. It entails studies in several EU countries and reinforces the link between educational activities and higher education graduates' employability needs and the promotion of cooperation with higher education tools in particular. The main result of the project is a comparative survey on the modes of cooperation between employers and employers' organisations in EU countries with over 600 employers included.

Assessment of cooperation among higher education institutions and employers in Europe

The qualitative interviews conducted with 60 respondents throughout Europe reveal a common belief that universities and business speak different languages. The gap between the worlds of education and business is explained with the conservativeness of the higher education institutions, and the dynamic business environment. Effective cooperation between them is essential and has to be treasured for its contribution to knowledge and the economy.

University-business cooperation (UBC) is considered by most organisations involved in the interviews as a priority. It is mostly implemented on a bilateral level and focused on joint projects and practical initiatives of common interest. Two main areas of UBC can be determined: an improvement in graduates' practical skills, and knowledge transfer/research and development.

Shared successful cases of university-business cooperation

The most successful cases of UBC are related to an improvement in the quality and relevance of practical training (internships, graduate placement and scholarship programmes), curriculum development, review and update and practical training courses in employability and career management skills, in which university career centres play a significant role. Other important areas include research and technological development with an exchange of know-how and innovation, management- and governance-related collaborations, such as the participation of companies on university boards and the establishment of common bodies and new training/entrepreneurship centres.

The assessment of cooperation among higher education institutions and employers in Europe was aimed to support the development of the meta-framework used in the large-scale survey among employers and employers' associations.

The key challenges and areas of UBC which have to be focused on in the next few years

For successful UBC, some challenges still need to be tackled in the next few years. First of all, it is important to find the crossing points of common goals, mutual needs and benefits and initiate joint initiatives and projects. Communication needs to be improved and there are some mentality barriers to overcome, like a lack of understanding, will, flexibility and sustainability of cooperation. UBC has to be facilitated through the provision of an appropriate legislative framework and incentives and also through adequate and efficient funding.

Four Co-factors represent the model of a fruitful and long-lasting partnership

- *Common goals* – cooperation should be based on mutual benefits, needs and aims;
- *Commitment* – a good partnership lies in the hands of the ‘right people’, starting from the leadership and involving all levels;
- *Communication* – to have established ongoing and open dialogue, to have mutual trust and good knowledge of each other – represent a major milestone in UBC. A special role in linking university and companies is played by career centres and specialised departments, such as industry liaison offices, technology transfer offices, scientific/applied research units; and
- *Context* – UBC should be reviewed as a priority and supported with adequate legislation and strategic incentives on the European, national and institutional levels.

The most significant impacts on both higher education institutions and enterprises in the target countries are: a better match of graduates’ skills with labour market needs, encouraged R&D and the facilitated transfer of know-how and innovation.

The key changes needed to enhance university-business cooperation

To enhance UBC, some changes should be introduced on several levels. Education needs to be modernised to narrow the gap between theory and practice and respond to the needs of the labour market. Communication needs to be facilitated and R&D should be stimulated through joint activities, projects and centres. Finally, it is important to provide strategic support and incentives for UBC.

The large-scale survey among companies on university-business cooperation

The initial goals of the large-scale survey were related to the following three questions:

- a) Which are the most relevant modes of cooperation between universities and enterprises, and why?
- b) What are the current characteristics of cooperation modes and their future developmental needs?
- c) Which are the key developmental drivers and motives for cooperation on the side of universities and enterprises?

The companies included in the large-scale survey cover economic sectors that were identified in the first phase of the EMCOSU project as sectors with the greatest developmental potential. These sectors were recognised as important within the elaboration of the key national economic strategies. Considering the identification of these sectors, one can say that on the general level the most important sectors in the EMCOSU countries which also have the biggest developmental potential are information and communication technologies, agriculture and food industry, logistics and transport, electrical energy and electrical industry (including renewable energy), and technology (including biotechnology, new materials, medicine and pharmacy).

Empirical analyses of the large-scale survey are based on the data obtained from around 400 companies in EMCOSU countries and 100 companies from other EU countries and ex-Yugoslav regions (the EU report results will be available in the next issues of E-EMCOSU). The large majority of companies are private for-profit organisations and most of them can be identified as small and medium enterprises. The companies are categorised in three broad economic sectors: industry, service and ICT and were selected upon the elaboration of the key economic sectors with the biggest developmental potential.

Modes and activities of university-business cooperation

The results show that companies are most often and to a larger extent included in research and development and teaching activities at the universities in almost all EMCOSU countries. Throughout the cooperation with the universities they are also looking for opportunities to approach the students as their potential future employees in the form of mobilising students into their environment and making presentations to students at career events. In general, there are no major differences among companies of different sizes or of different economic sectors, but these differences are more obviously shown within each EMCOSU country and also when comparing one country with another.

An example of employers' perspective:

»The activities of research groups at universities and technology centres are sometimes far from the needs of businesses. For a company, it is important commercial exploitation, but the priority of universities is to publish the results of research. There is little market orientation in the research activity of universities. The work of researchers is measured by the number of publications they have, not by their practical outcome« (Spanish employer).

An example of employers' perspective:

»The university-business cooperation has direct tangible benefits for both the company and the student. What is important for the company is that students have the chance to acquire valuable new knowledge, which in turn can be used for the strategic development of the company« (Polish employer).

However, we can still point out that larger companies are usually more involved in cooperation with higher education institutions, presumably due to the greater support they have within their own company, especially regarding the broader activities of human resources departments and larger staff needs. Taking into account that national economies consist of a big share of micro and small-medium companies, the future emphasis of university-business cooperation should also be to target them.

Drivers and barriers of university-business cooperation

One can generally say that companies decide on cooperation with higher education institutions mostly based on the previous experiences they have had with them which also led to the establishment of mutual trust and commitment, which is the main driver of university-business cooperation regarding the responses of the company's representatives included in the EMCOSU research, along with sharing the same motives and interests.

However, when it comes to possible or actual cooperation between companies and universities, there are also barriers reducing or even eliminating the cooperation. The main barrier identified by the representatives of companies is the bureaucracy within or external to higher education institutions which usually does not allow the flexibility of the cooperation that is required in the private sector. Thus, one of the main challenges facing higher education systems and other stakeholders, most notably policymakers, will be to adapt, reduce and/or remove bureaucratic obstacles to the establishment and implementation of university-business education.

Outcomes and impacts of university-business cooperation

Most of the variables that were available to the employers to evaluate the benefits of university-business cooperation received high rankings and one can say that, in general, the employers recognise the benefits of cooperation with universities.

We can assume that university-business cooperation not only provides good knowledge to the students before they enter the labour market but that usually these students and their internships are also a good investment for the company itself. According to the reported responses, university-business cooperation also improves the innovative capacities of companies where we suppose that the innovative processes are mostly run through research and development. Future development of this field could thus also include the presentation of good practices to companies with weak cooperation with universities and their benefits.

Companies' perceptions of universities and university-business cooperation

When comparing the reported results among the EMCOSU countries there are only minor differences regarding the developmental needs that should be implemented in the future in order to enhance UBC. Bulgarian, Slovenian and Spanish representatives reported that there should be tendencies towards the development of strategic cooperation with business, and Hungarian and Polish representatives reported that higher education institutions should increase the practical orientation of their teaching.

Project partners: University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), University of Deusto (Spain), University of Groningen (Netherlands), Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia (Slovenia), Chamber of Commerce and Industry of County Zala (Hungary), Business Foundation for Education (Bulgaria), Polish Chamber of Commerce (Poland), High Council of Official Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation (Spain).
The EMCOSU partnership also includes associate member institutions: Tuning Academy, Eurashe, Petrozavodsk State University.

For upcoming final results and more information about the EMCOSU project, please visit our website www.emcosu.eu or e-mail us at: mateja.melink@fdv.uni-lj.si.