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Best practices in enhancing graduates' skills for employability: insights from three European countries

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This paper describes the preliminary results of the ongoing project *Skill Up: Matching graduates' skills and labour world demands through authentic learning scenarios*. Funded by the Erasmus + programme of the European Union, the project aims to address the priority established by the Europe 2020 policies [1] of promoting graduates' employability by strengthening ties between higher education, VET curricula and the labour market

Research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

The gap between the fast-paced demands for new skills in the European labour markets and the slow pace of the diverse European educational systems to meet these demands persists. At the policy level, the solutions are ambitious: the 2014 "Education and Training Monitor" [2], calls for all learners in all European countries to be equipped with the required skills to successfully participate in society and the labour market. Specifically, the report calls for: a) strengthening the quality and relevance of HE programmes, focusing on improving graduates' employability; b) involving employers in the development and quality assurance of programmes as a means of bridging the worlds of education and work; and c) combining innovative pedagogies with an effective use of digital tools and content to foster more innovative methods of learning, and far-reaching access to learning resources and learning opportunities.

It is generally acknowledged that the transmission of disciplinary knowledge is insufficient in regards to preparing students for the workplace [3]. A crucial challenge for educators is to connect course design with technology and learners' needs to enhance an interactive learning environment. Many theories focus on authentic tasks that help the students to transfer their knowledge from educational situations to work settings [4]. Authenticity is a notion that can include different meanings in different contexts. Some [5] have argued that only real-problem contexts should be presented to guarantee authenticity. Others [6] have shown that maximum fidelity, does not necessarily lead to maximum effectiveness in learning [7]. Furthermore, the cognitive authenticity, rather than the physical authenticity, is the key principle [8], [9]. Authenticity is not a neutral component. Rather, it occurs in the interaction of various components, such as the learner, the learning environment and the task [10].

We employ the characteristics of the authentic learning task [11] as theoretical framework to provide an authentic context that reflects the way the knowledge will be used in real life, including; complexity, multiple roles and perspectives, collaboration, reflection, coaching

and scaffolding. Taking these recommendations and theoretical framework into account, the follow specific objectives of the Skill Up project are thus defined:

- Map best practices in matching graduates' skills and labour market demands through authentic learning scenarios in project partners' HE settings. The level of authenticity of a learning scenario is related to how far its design (including tasks, environment, resources, scaffolding and assessment) matches the real-life skills that graduates will need when entering the labour world [12] [13].

- Improve soft and hard employability skills of undergraduates by means of designing, developing, applying and evaluating authentic learning scenarios in various HE programmes, identified by partners as priorities.

- Enhance access to career counselling and guidance services for undergraduates by training tutors in Career Counselling with emphasis on e-Counselling by means of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).

- Implement and promote a virtual environment that acts as a hub for attracting stakeholders offering guidance to labour market newcomers and real hands-on experiences of their professional roles as part of students learning.

- Promote the wider take-up of the methods and results to targeted early-adopters and both national and international multipliers of innovation and policy decision-makers, equipping them with a set of indicative principles, guidelines and best practices for aligning HE curricula with the labour market.

In this paper, we give an account of some of the results of the first Intellectual Output of the project, related to the first specific objective, providing a cross-institutional analysis which focuses on the identification of best practices that further enhances the employability skills of the students in HE and VET settings.

Methodology

We adopted the collaborative action research (CAR) approach to our study, a participatory, democratic process that "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" [13]. The approach allows for the sequentially-linked spiralling of four action research cycles related to planning-acting-observing-reflecting, to produce the best results in the most efficient way. Each cycle is integrally linked with an intellectual output (Figure 1).
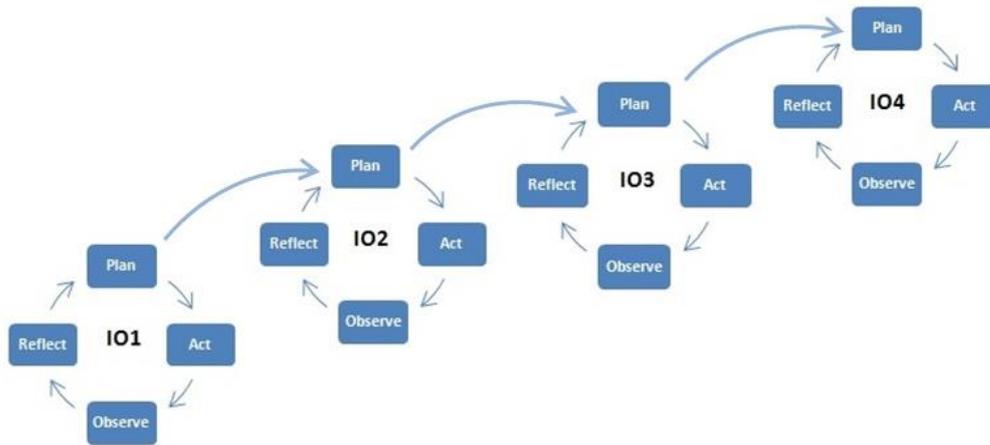
Figure 1: Project cycles

The first cycle related to the first intellectual output, with some of the results presented in this paper, had three main phases:

- Phase 1: this involved a systematic review of current literature and reports on employability skills of new graduates at two levels: a European-wide level and a national level for partner countries. The aim of this review was to create an overview of the current supply and demand of new graduate's employability skills in Higher Education and VET settings.
- Phase 2: this comprised exploratory interviews and focus group method to identify, analyse and describe good practices in matching graduates' skills and labour market demands in the partner institutions from the perspective of authentic learning.
- Phase 3: this included writing the final report, peer review analysis and future sustainability development with the International Advisory Committee and showcasing the results.

In this paper we present some of the good practices that are described as authentic learning scenarios, identified in the second phase of the study.

Expected outcomes/results

The results of this phase of the project give criteria and guidelines for increasing the connection between HE curricula and the real-life skills that graduates are required to have when entering the labour market. We present two examples of good practices identified in two of the partner universities: Stockholm University-Sweden and Open University of Catalonia-Spain. These good practices are described as authentic learning scenarios that include tasks, environment, resources, scaffolding and assessment [3].

Intent of publication

- The International Journal of Higher Education Research

- Journal Studies in Higher Education

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