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Now, more than ever, there is a growing recognition that education is a lifelong process, and that it plays a crucial role in addressing the most significant challenges that Europe is facing today. Technology has proven to be an indispensable tool in tackling societal challenges and in overcoming unexpected situations, such as the pandemic. However, the digitalisation process, which has already significantly transformed our societies, must also ensure citizens' active participation in democratic decision-making, help to create better and fairer workplaces, and support sustainable development.

Universities are in a unique position to equip learners with the necessary skills and expertise they need to play an active part in these processes and to adapt to our rapidly changing societies. In order to ensure learner-centredness, flexibility is key to university lifelong learning. Flexibility for universities as institutions concerns as much changes internally as reaching out to learners (Sonne, 2023). Flexible learning for learners means learning according to one´s own needs, includes learning at one´s own pace, and having a choice on the place, and on the mode of delivery according to one´s own needs (Advance HE, 2019; Gordon, 2014). This model of flexibility has been advanced by Andrade & Alden-Rivers (2019) as the fourth axis of access to learning.

On a broader scale, university lifelong learning as flexible learning includes four dimensions of learning: *digital learning* for using technology to access knowledge, *professional learning* for the enhancement of talents, *responsible learning* for connecting learning with the community and *inclusive learning* for a world where everyone is welcome. Taking flexible learning as a common frame of reference, the eucen autumn 2022 activities focused on approaches, projects, and practices of university lifelong learning that put the spotlight on one or more of these dimensions. Accordingly, this volume of the European Journal of University Lifelong Learning (EJULL) addresses flexible learning and its dimensions as *Contemporary Issues in University Lifelong Learning,* including the ULLL Open Fora 2022 (eucen, n.d.) and the 2022 eucen autumn seminar (eucen, 2022) as eucen autumn activities.

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EUCEN AUTUMN ACTIVITIES

The eucen autumn activities in 2022 included the eucen ULLL Open Fora and the eucen autumn seminar in Barcelona. The ULLL Open Fora is a series of short online activities started by eucen during the Covid-19 pandemic in November 2020. In one month, we focus on four hot topics in each of the four weeks. The ULLL Open Fora provide a stage for short presentations and in-depth discussions, each week starting with a master class - an introduction to the topic by an expert from academia, policy, or business sharing his or her insights. After short presentations on the following days, a panel discussion concludes the week's topic with key stakeholders and presenters. The eucen autumn seminar, which took place from 17 to 18 November 2022 in Barcelona after two years of suspension due to the pandemic, was structured to stimulate dialogue, gather new ideas and work together towards new projects and collaborations. It allowed time for interaction and open discussion.

LIFELONG LEARNING AS FLEXIBLE LEARNING AND ITS FOUR DIMENSIONS

The eucen autumn activities 2022 focused on university lifelong learning as flexible learning and encouraged contributions relating to issues and questions concerning its four dimensions: *digital learning*, *professional learning*, *responsible learning* and *inclusive learning*.

Digital learning

Digitalisation and the use of technology in education pose some crucial questions: How is technology influencing education and what are the latest developments in the sector of *digital learning*? What role do virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, distributed ledger technology, gamification, and other technological innovations play? How can we use these tools in our classrooms and how can they replace or complement more traditional learning approaches?

Responsible learning

Besides research and teaching, universities have a so-called third mission and a responsibility to engage with their communities and address societal challenges from local to global, including rising unemployment, growing economic inequalities and climate change. Questions connected to that are: How do universities currently address these challenges? What can they do to provide their communities in well-connected urban environments or in rural areas with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop in a sustainable manner, and what is the role of community-based research? How do universities themselves benefit from this community engagement and research, including student placements or continuing professional development for university staff?

Professional learning

In light of the constant labour market demands for different and better skills, university lifelong learning plays a key role in delivering the required training while supporting professional learning. Universities provide technology-based teaching and learning approaches to support continuing education of individuals and to address skill requirements of the labour market. How are higher education institutions meeting this demand? Through which tools can university lifelong learning help learners develop their full economic potential? How can learners' new skills be made visible and be recognised? And, how can ULLL remain ahead of the labour market demands and offer programmes relevant to industry?

Inclusive learning
The European Commission states that 'making higher education systems inclusive and connected to society requires providing the right conditions for students of different backgrounds to succeed' (European Commission, n.d.). Opening up to diversity, and fostering humanistic and democratic values, entails embedding them as key principles in institutional policies and implementing them through concrete actions. What are our universities doing to become more inclusive and welcoming? Which steps need to be taken to become a genuinely inclusive organisation? How to sustain a democratic culture, humanistic values, and human rights?

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONTENT

In this volume of the journal, we present a collection of five papers, all of them addressing one or even two dimensions of university lifelong learning. Four of them are shaped as innovative practice papers, offering a closer look at certain practices, approaches or projects that are either in progress or have been completed, and critically reflecting on their impact within the university or beyond. One paper is a *research paper*, drawing on theoretical debates, contextualised within current national and international policy debate, and reporting on project-based research done.

All papers share unique perspectives on flexible learning at universities and offer innovative approaches and practices to support it. All of them are based on insights and findings of European or national projects. Likewise, they all share the issue of project funding, and hence, sustainability of innovation.

The first innovative practice paper is dedicated to *inclusive learning*. *Angela Scanlon, Ursula McTaggart and Shauna McCloy* from Ulster University in Northern Ireland, UK explore how education, employers and specialist organisations and disabled graduates could collaborate in order to achieve inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and early career transition into employment within a Graduate Boost Project. This paper captures both the employer and graduate perspectives as the programme team build an enhanced understanding and guidance for inclusive recruitment practice which can ensure the onboarding of graduate talent and skills to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse workforce.

The second innovative practice paper combines *responsible learning* with inclusion and provides a good example of community learning in Ireland. *Derek Barter and Sinead Hyland* from Maynooth University in Ireland discuss here how "Communiversity" – a three-way partnership between Maynooth University, community-based organisations in the form Local Development Companies and the public library service – is targeting people experiencing 'exclusion' not only from a socio-economic standpoint but also in terms of age, mental health, addiction recovery, disability and other forms of marginalisation.

Digital learning is captured by the next two short papers which explore the role of instructional design in e-learning planning. In the third innovative practice paper, *Jenny Good* and *Vanessa Holtgrave* from University of Massachusetts Global, USA, discuss the iDEAL model of learning, which focuses on learning-centred approaches in online teaching with an emphasis on diversity, equity, experiential learning and use of technology. The authors describe innovative instructional design approaches in online learning that highlight the ongoing need for fair, accessible, and inclusive course content. Additionally, they put a spotlight on the use of media to engage learners and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning through their preferred means of knowledge acquisition.

The next paper deals with the development of micro-credentials programmes which is a new and important trend in the European educational landscape. *Neill Wylie, Laura Widger, Valerie Brett* and *Helen Murphy* from South East Technological University in Ireland evaluate the collaborative development of six micro-credentials in the area of basic skills within an Erasmus+ project. They critically explore design considerations for micro-credential development, emphasising the importance of choosing an appropriate instructional design framework.

The final paper is dedicated to *professional learning* and focuses on work-based learning (WBL). In this research paper *Kirstin Sonne* from eucen introduces the UniLab project experience. Today, higher education (HE) should not only provide students with subject-specific knowledge, but also equip them with transferrable, work-related skills. She explores the experiences of staff members within four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus involved in UniLab, and the challenges they faced in promoting WBL, both within their institutions and among relevant external stakeholders. The paper identifies several enabling factors, such as universities' connections with key stakeholders, student involvement, and the exchange with EU partner universities.

In the concluding "Three questions to…" *Eva Cendon* and *Gary Husband* discuss openness, flexibility and the role of AI in university-industry partnerships.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of our journal and that it is stimulating and inspiring for you – as the work on this edition was for us. And we thank all our authors for sharing their insights and reflections and all our reviewers for their support in making the articles accessible for an international readership.

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THE GRADUATE BOOST PROGRAMME – HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYERS COLLABORATING TO EXPLORE INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT PRACTICE FOR GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES

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Keywords: *Inclusion, graduate recruitment, employment*

ABSTRACT

This innovation paper opens exploration for a collaborative opportunity for education, employers and specialist organisations and disabled graduates to come together to look at how we can support inclusive recruitment, onboarding, and early career transition into employment. A Graduate Boost Project was created to allow lived experiences of all stakeholders to inform the way forward, acknowledging the shared responsibility for inclusion and success. This paper captures both the employer and graduate perspectives as the programme team build an enhanced understanding and guidance for inclusive recruitment practice which can ensure the onboarding of graduate talent and skills to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The area of graduate success through graduate internships to employment has a long history of success at Ulster University (UU), Northern Ireland (NI), with 550 graduates completing the Graduate Leadership Internship Programme and achieving 100% progression to employment since 2012. Recent challenges have included adapting the work-based learning provision to ensure solutions that guarantee access and support which is engaging and worthwhile for all students and employers. For those graduates with disabilities, the consistent challenge is securing employment at a graduate level. For those disabled graduates, the likelihood of gaining highly skilled/graduate-level employment is 10% less than that of their non-disabled peers (UU Graduate Outcomes (GO) Survey 2019/20). While graduate-level employment across the UK nations has improved slightly following the pandemic for those with disabilities, this has not been the case in NI.

More recently, the profile of graduate students on internship programmes has become increasingly diverse, calling for a change in the learning experience both in the academic programme and within the work-based context. A well-established internship pathway has been utilised to focus uniquely on graduates with disabilities, allowing the programme team to immerse themselves in the review of the lived experiences of this cohort of graduates,

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including more fully understanding the needs of the employer partners who are providing the work-based opportunities. This has been undertaken with the support of competitively secured local government funding. The Graduate Boost programme gives employers the opportunity to have a subject-relevant graduate contribute the most up-to-date research, knowledge and understanding to their business. To address skills gaps in the context of falling numbers within the working population in NI, it is also critical that employers now seek to increase inclusive recruitment practice.

The Graduate Boost Programme builds on experience gained from Ulster University's Graduate Leadership Programme, a successful graduate internship programme (since 2012). To date, over 550 students have completed this programme and have secured graduate-level employment alongside a postgraduate-level award. From within the full graduate leadership award, a 15-credit postgraduate module called 'Demonstrating your Professional Identity' was selected to underpin the Graduate Boost internship and is designed to develop higher-level skills around three key leadership areas - leadership of (a) self, (b) others and (c) strategic projects. The module facilitates critical reflection on graduate attributes and behaviours within a professional context and helps graduates to analyse their current skills and identify future skills needed for career progression. The overall aim is to enable graduates from all subject areas to build their leadership capacity and develop confidence in an applied context. The current iteration of Graduate Boost focuses on disabled graduates alone.

The purpose of this programme is to:

- Enhance the visibility of the lived experiences of employers and disabled graduates.
- Encourage the development of inclusive practice which respects individual differences and reduces the reluctance to innovate because of fear of the unknown.
- Provide safe psychological spaces where employers, students and project partners can address existing barriers and constraints such as law related constraints limiting the willingness to explore new approaches.
- Support the development of new partnership working across higher education and industry.

Current Challenges for Disabled Graduates Seeking Employment

Across the UK and Ireland, there are challenges for people with disabilities in seeking to secure employment when compared to their non-disabled peers. In Ireland, 36.5% of people (aged 15-64) have a disability at work, compared to 72.8% of people without a disability (IBEC, 2019). The Labour Force Survey (NISRA, 2019) shows that across the UK 'there were no significant differences in the overall employment rate for non-disabled people. However, Northern Ireland had the lowest employment rate for disabled people (37.8% in 2019) and a rate for non-disabled people of 80.1% had the largest disparity (42.3 percentage points). The employment rate for disabled people was higher in England (53.7%) than other countries (Scotland, 46.9%, Wales, 48.6%).'

The student profile within higher education has become increasingly diverse. The challenge is to ensure that the opportunities for success are both inclusive and diverse, meeting the needs of individuals, society and the wider economy. It is both interesting and encouraging to note that a recent report in 2022, carried out by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in collaboration with Pearson, shows that more university applicants are declaring their disabilities. 'More applicants are sharing an impairment or condition: 14% of all UK applicants shared an impairment or condition in 2021 – an increase of 105% (+42,650)

since 2012' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022). However, this does not always translate to those with hidden disabilities where they are 'more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment, and less likely to have high expectations for HE' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022).

Graduates with disabilities also find challenges in securing employment. However, a degree adds recognisable value in reducing the disparities when compared to outcomes for nondisabled peers. The GO Survey (HESA, 2022) in the UK showed that almost two-thirds of first-degree graduates with disabilities (63.9%) managed to find full or part-time employment 15 months after graduation with almost half (48.4%) working in professional-level jobs (Smith, 2022). The need to address the inequalities of access and support to employment that recognises the ability and skills of the applicant is vital for social inclusion, the future of a vibrant workforce and ensuring the skills requirements for future economies are met.

At UU, those students declaring disabilities rose from 12% (2018/19) to 15% (2021/22). The graduate outcomes survey for 2017/18 – 2019/20 (up to 52% response rate) continues to show that graduates declaring disabilities are 10% less likely to secure highly skilled employment 15 months after graduation. This is an indication of the diversity of the student profile and potentially the differentiated support required to help ensure a comparative experience for students. The UCAS report in 2022 states that 'not only are these students more likely to defer, but 56% researched available support before applying, with these students commonly looking at the general and educational support available, and facilities and physical adjustments on campus' (UCAS and Pearson, 2022).

When a comparison is made (*Figure 1* overleaf) between those graduates with and without disabilities who are employed in 2019/2020, they earn on average £2k (approximately €2200) less than their non-disabled counterparts. When this is specifically considered for highly skilled employment, the gap is reduced to around £600 less. This trend suggests that where disabled graduates are employed at the right level commensurate with their ability and aptitude, equity is more apparent.

Northern Ireland Regional Context

Historically, the NI economy has been characterised by comparatively low pay, low productivity, limited opportunities for career progression, elevated levels of economic inactivity and low levels of innovation. While the Department for the Economy (DfE) Regional Skills Strategy 2022 identifies these as challenges to be addressed, the need to ensure equality of access to labour market opportunities is now critical. For the disabled graduate, access to work-based experiences including part-time work prior to graduation has been limited. This has been due to a range of factors including societal stereotypes, lack of supportive infrastructure and lack of confidence on the part of employers and disabled graduates. However, the longer-term impact of this restricted work-based experience also impacts their readiness to avail of ongoing and future opportunities that ask for a defined experience timeline alongside their educational achievements and qualifications.

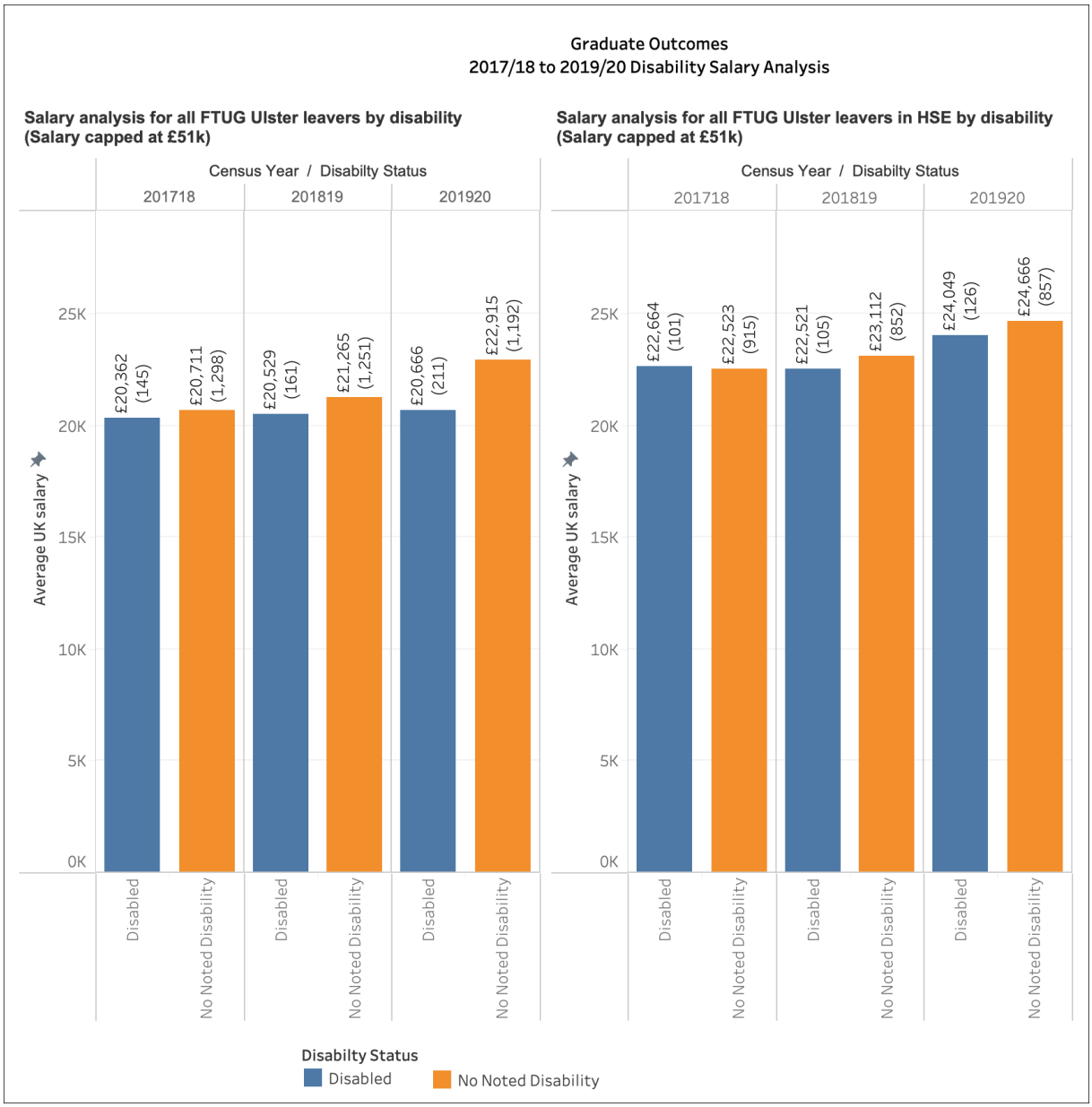

Figure 1: Ulster University Graduate Outcomes Disability Salary Analysis 2017/18 to 2019/20

Developing Partnerships – Informing Design

The development of stakeholder partnerships for Graduate Boost considered those with the best placed expertise to inform and guide employers to grow inclusive and diverse recruitment practices and achieve the best possible outcomes for graduate participants. Working with delivery partners such as Disability Action NI and Specialisterne NI who have extensive experience in supporting pan-disability and neurodiversity in the workplace ensured that academic programme staff and employers had the collective confidence, tools and techniques to deliver on programme outcomes.

Adapting and building on the recommended factors for success (Eurofound, 2021), the sustainability measures utilised included:

- Northern Ireland informed guidance/support for employers relating to lived experiences of inclusive recruitment and early onboarding into professional employment.
- Funding secured through local government supported 75% of costs (NI-DfE) valuing £170k, which supported student fees and graduate bursary/funding for successful disabled graduates for 15 weeks of the internship to support autonomy.
- Engaged employer partners contributing 25% of overall costs who are supporting pathways to actual jobs.
- Integrated approaches to include physical, organisational adjustments and other support.

UU has a strong track record of purposeful employer engagement and connecting the skills ecosystem across Northern Ireland to enhance the student learning experience. Success in this space is strengthened by the regional nature of our campuses and the extensive reach of work-based and work-related learning provisions, which include undergraduate placements, practice placements, internships and graduate development programmes. Every year over 2,000 UU students undertake professional roles in local, national and international settings. Employer partners for the Graduate Boost programme were secured by utilising those existing established connections, engaging in online networks such as LinkedIn and reaching out through new employer networks such as Employers for Disability NI. Eighteen graduate students secured opportunities with NI employers in January 2023.

EXPLORING INNOVATION, THE GRADUATE BOOST PROGRAMME

A collaborative approach from all programme partners was essential from the outset because of the tight time constraints of the funding model. A large programme team was formed, and external partners came alongside the University Employability and Careers, Student Wellbeing and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion teams to ensure the programme was fit for purpose and to agree on a shared language with all stakeholders. Over 120 employers were invited to participate in the programme via personalised emails highlighting the benefits of improving diversity in the workplace. Employers were encouraged and supported to submit inclusive job vacancies focusing on the function of the role and avoiding ableist language.

An HR consultant from the university reviewed all job applications prior to advertising on the website, providing another inclusivity and safeguarding layer. Employer interest was impressive, with high-profile employers such as Allstate (a large multinational insurance company), Reach PLC (one of Britain’s biggest newspaper publishers), Northern Ireland Electricity, Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment and the Northern Ireland Executive Office (government department) all registering to participate with roles covering a vast range of subject areas from marketing and communications, engineering, law, creative design and computing.

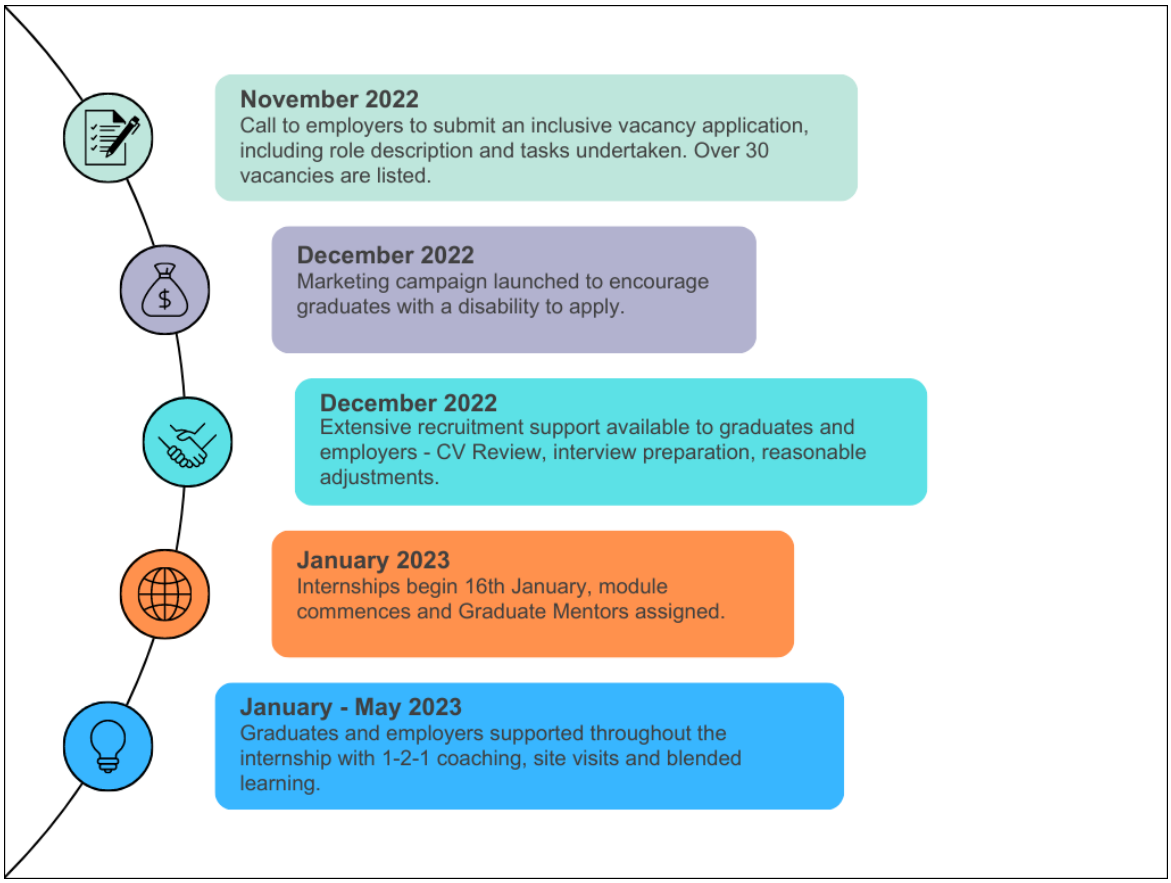

Figure 2 Timeline and recruitment process for Graduate Boost

The University Marketing and Communications team assisted with creating modern and vibrant marketing collateral (*Figure 3*) that was used to promote the programme to graduates via paid-for social media campaigns and newspaper print adverts. Marketing collateral was shared with all partners, and they were encouraged to engage with social campaigns via their networks. Whilst employer response was notable, graduate engagement and uptake was more challenging. This could be for several reasons:

- timing (mid-December)
- timeframe (two weeks from programme launch to the application deadline)
- stigma associated with a programme such as this
- not actively using social media and missed the marketing campaign

As part of their application, graduates were asked to outline their experience of living with a disability and seeking graduate-level employment. Many students discussed getting to the interview stage but not progressing further. The programme team supported graduates with curriculum vitae review and interview preparation, and with the graduate's permission worked with employers to implement any reasonable adjustments required for the recruitment process, such as:

- access to interview questions prior to the interview
- familiarisation tour of business prior to the interview
- competency based tasks instead of an interview
- extra time to answer questions

Figure 3. An example of social media marketing collateral

Assessment Strategy for Skills & Employability

The programme combines a 15-week internship with a 15-credit postgraduate module called Demonstrating your Professional Identity, delivered in a blended model with a mix of online live sessions, recorded lectures and face-to-face workshops. A curriculum review was required to ensure curriculum and delivery met the Universal Design for Learning guidelines, with multiple opportunities for engagement, representation, and action and expression provided (CAST, 2018). The curriculum was scrutinised on an ongoing basis and content was adapted to meet a range of learning needs. Learning and assessment within the module are closely aligned to a workplace experience and the module helps to facilitate critical reflection on attributes and behaviours within a professional context. Through a written reflection and a professional conversation, graduates are required to analyse and articulate their current skills 'justifying and extending what they know, can do and value' (Billet, 2019). Alongside the taught programme, graduates were provided with a connected and supported pedagogical experience (Campbell et al., 2019). Each graduate was assigned a mentor for the duration of the programme, who provided one-to-one coaching and mentoring to support a smooth transition into the workplace. Mentors also worked closely with employers to actively inform work-based practice and are developing feedback from the programme to co-design recruitment support for employer-based teams.

DISCUSSION

Early feedback from employer partners has identified known challenges to inclusive recruitment and accessing graduate talent via initiatives such as Graduate Boost. These include employer confidence, workplace readiness, financial constraints, programme timing and existing recruitment practices that could not be adapted. Working with the specialist programme partners, some of these barriers could be easily overcome, particularly through employer-facing training and consultancy. It is worth reflecting on the power dynamics of these partnerships and how to best foster successful collaborations with organisations that do not have the resources or agency of the university but whose input and expertise can help deliver successful outcomes.

Employers noted that their engagement in the programme included alignment to corporate social responsibility and social value objectives and, because of the additional funding, it allowed a low-cost and low-risk opportunity to explore introducing a graduate into their organisations. However, as the programme progressed, learning and reflections included the current constraints within existing recruitment and onboarding practices and challenged them to address and reconsider existing norms such as not sharing questions with candidates prior to interviews. Due to the nature of collaboration with the university, which included addressing recruitment challenges together, seeking solutions and providing dual mentoring support, a stronger working partnership has been developed where partners welcome the increased visibility of their profiles in this space. The value of the work experience for individual graduates became part of the lived experiences for both employers and the graduates themselves and the appreciation of the value of this was shared. An employer commented that ‘In a competitive labour market, this programme has enabled us and other employers to access a broader pool of potential employees with very unique skillsets, looking beyond their disability and recognising their ability’ (RSK Ireland Limited). As employers seek to fill their skills gaps both now and in the future, the programme has provided confidence to review recruitment practices to increase an inclusive and diverse approach.

Graduate students have noted increased confidence and opportunity to develop their experiences giving additional personal reference points that they did not develop due to previous barriers to work-based learning experiences including part-time jobs and placement. Understanding the challenges faced by employers and the wider workforce through an opportunity to reflect as part of the programme allowed the graduate voice to help inform solutions and/or ask questions directly to employers, which enabled them to rethink why practices were established. Some of this included sharing of interview questions and utilising hybrid and flexible working patterns. Challenges in changing working patterns do continue for some employers, particularly where they perceive that the size and infrastructure of their workforce prevents agility.

The review of the curriculum ensured that inclusive learning, teaching and assessment principles supported individual success and addressed future of work demands for graduates. The alignment of the assessment strategy with work-based practice was valued by graduates in supporting real-world experiences. Recent research shows that disabled people often feel a lack of confidence that they will be treated fairly in the recruitment process (Leonard Cheshire, 2019). The assignment of a mentor for each graduate enabled minimisation of early barriers to engagement during recruitment, such as anxiety and fear, and was recognised by all programme partners. Feedback suggests that this support was critical to retention on the programme including the internship. The development of this new practice should inform any future iterations of programmes like Graduate Boost with a view to ultimately developing programmes that are inclusive for all graduates.

Stakeholder engagement led by the university programme team included an international representative from the Harkin Institute, graduate interns, NI employers and local government. This provided an opportunity to reflect on lived experiences and discussion on how policy and practice regarding graduate recruitment could be enhanced. It was notable that graduates demonstrated an increase in confidence through open engagement in a discussion where they each reflected on their work-based lived experience.

CONCLUSION

Graduate Boost was welcomed regionally as a unique programme whose purpose was to influence and connect local government and key stakeholders with international best practice, policy advisers, specialist community-based organisations and a diverse spread of employer partners. It is envisaged that the Graduate Boost programme will inform a more inclusive provision of university graduate internship programmes in the future, removing the need for explicit disability cohorts. Together, partners have recognised the appetite amongst employers and all programme partners to grow momentum and best practice that will deliver sustainable and scalable practice across the region.

New partnership working has resulted in enhanced practice actively informed through stakeholder review in protected and safe contexts. This includes:

- Revising the approach to recruitment assessment and how the interview process is managed, including the pre-allocation of questions, results in a richer conversation at the formal interview point.
- Lived experiences are supporting informed changes for working practice, including onboarding, which has resulted in enhanced communication and benefits for all employees, not just limited to those with disabilities.
- Internships offer an opportunity for graduates with limited work-based experiences to have a reference point which is valuable for themselves and academic mentors and tutors.
- Internships provide a pathway to develop professional confidence and work-based understanding for disabled graduates, and the learning and professional skills gained are evident.
- Increased inclusion in recruitment extends beyond corporate social responsibility and can support significant improvements and return on investment for an employing organisation.

The dissemination of practice following project completion will include employer-facing information. This is aimed at supporting confidence and engagement with inclusive recruitment practice and moving from conceptual support to actioning the growth of a diverse workforce. Working with all programme partners, the aspiration is that this guide will be shared across a range of sectors. Together, the university, employer and specialist organisations are committed to developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of all stakeholder needs to best deliver on the regional skills agenda. This includes listening more intentionally and defining the challenges that need to be addressed. This type of consultation is demonstrating stronger partnership working that will support employers in addressing their skills gaps and increase equity of opportunity for access to employment for disabled graduates and job seekers.

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THE COMMUNIVERSITY: A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGED ADULT EDUCATION

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Keywords: *Partnership, lifelong learning, widening participation, community engagement*

ABSTRACT

The Communiversity is an adult education intervention targeting people experiencing 'exclusion' not only from a socio-economic stand point but also in terms of age, mental health, addiction recovery, disability and other forms of marginalisation. It is a three-way partnership between Maynooth University (MU), community based organisations in the form of Local Development Companies and the Public Library Service. This article will emphasise the importance of higher education partnership arrangements with like-minded organisations who can deliver value for money within the public sector by pooling resources and sharing services to promote the aim of community engaged lifelong learning. It will also consider threats to the initiative in terms of insecure funding and 'special' status outside the mainstream of skills acquisition and job readiness that lifelong learning education budgets are weighted towards.

INTRODUCTION

The Communiversity is a three-way partnership established in the Republic of Ireland in 2012 between the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in Maynooth University, community-based organisations in the form of Local Development Companies (LDC) and Local LEADER Partnership Companies and the public library service. For each partner there are particular policy demands that come under the general headings of social inclusion, widening participation, community development and capacity building. These policy demands are contained in a number of different reports such as Our Public Libraries: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities pertaining to the libraries; for the university, The National Higher Education Strategy to 2030 is relevant; and for community-based partners, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) applies. These policies converge through the goal of promoting education as a way to engage individuals and communities with these public sector services. For the individual, the Communiversity offers a testing ground by introducing them to academic subjects and, even more importantly, to academics as neighbours and citizens with the same concerns as the participants. Some people have progressed to formal further and higher education from the Communiversity, so it can be used as a pre-access gateway. Others have become involved in their local communities through volunteering or re-entering the workforce. All have found it a way to connect with other people and socialise. The three-way partnership between the university, community partners and local libraries is a model of best practice for shared

services by publicly funded bodies. Although it has been quite a successful initiative, it still suffers from drawbacks common to all such 'special projects' – precarious funding (LDCs fund the programme from different education or social inclusion budgets) and overreliance on committed individuals as drivers (Estabrook, 1979 cited in Killacky, 1983, p. 57).

The idea for the Communiversity developed out of necessity brought on by the economic crash of 2008 and the ensuing years of austerity. Those sections of society hardest hit, so called 'areas of disadvantage', were those that heavily relied upon the services of Local Development Companies. The LDCs implement community development programmes on behalf of the state for social inclusion, education and employment schemes. As public services were cut or curtailed, the possibility of a community based lifelong learning initiative that went beyond labour market activation seemed remote. The agenda for lifelong learning was now being set by the Department of Education and 'Skills' as it had recently been re-designated. Job readiness and skills-based training was to take precedence over all other forms of adult education. In late 2011, DACE and the Library Council of Ireland approached the relevant government department with evidence suggesting a good level of interest for courses in the arts and social sciences beyond strict economic concern. A small amount of seed funding was allocated and two pilot schemes, one in a rural location and one in an urban library, were established in February 2012. These MU Library initiatives became the forerunner of the Communiversity which has been operating in various locations across Ireland ever since.

How It Works:

- The venue, usually a local library, is a familiar and welcoming space and less daunting for adult learners encountering HE for the first time than a university campus.
- A prologue 'taster session' for the general public allows those interested to gain a better understanding of programme content and structure. The 'taster' also includes a speed-dating exercise and a round of introductions that sets the tone for the social nature of the programme. It also allows the community partners to recruit from the attendees.
- The following week, the programme proper starts with a local history module. The intention here is to create the space for the participants to share their local knowledge. By the end of the four weeks of local history, the dialogic nature of the course has been set and more abstract modules can be introduced, e.g., psychology, economics, politics, philosophy, media studies, classics, criminology, etc. Most importantly, the participants have found their voice.
- It is free of charge to the user.

The selection of quotes used in the rest of this paper are taken from research into the Communiversity carried out in 2018 (Barter and Hyland, 2020) through focus groups, telephone interviews and a survey questionnaire.

A NEW BEGINNING AND THE DIALOGICAL APPROACH CONSIDERING THE WIDER IMPACT WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

> *For all of us in this room going to college wasn't an option it just wouldn't occur to you. It just wasn't an option, the economics of things. We all worked from when we were very young even part-time jobs. I handed up money at home when I was 11 years of age to my mother. I never thought that I would be going to college at 63. (laughs) I am 65 now so I started college at 63 which is two years ago. It was a great thing and even to go up to Maynooth [university]* (participant focus group 1).

The use of libraries as spaces for adult and community education is not new. Killacky (1983) refers back to the early nineteenth century and their use as 'community learning centers [sic]' in the US and this has continued in various guises to this time (p. 51). It is also fairly widespread. Wherever there is a public libraries network there seems to be a natural inclination to use them for community education and lifelong learning (Astbury, 1994; Benseman, 2006; Lantham, 2000). The Communiversity is therefore not unique in that sense. However, what appears to be different, at least in the Irish context, is the combination of three public services that offer a wraparound social and educational intervention. The community sector in Ireland, although somewhat diminished since the economic crash, is still quite strong, and LDCs and LEADER Partnership companies have the specific remit to target the hardest to reach and most underserved. As libraries reimagine themselves for the 21st century they continue to be regarded by the public as a 'trusted' service. They are safe spaces for learning. 'The setting of the course was excellent and took the intimidation out of education as everyone was already familiar with the library' (participant from focus group 2). This theme is continued in the following:

> *It was so much more than just education. I had a lot of anxiety, so it was a great place to find out what a learning environment would be like. I felt so good about myself and I felt that I was a good influence on the class… I was full of fears and they just gave me the confidence to go back to education* (participant focus group 1).

University campuses heighten anxiety for adult learners where feelings of 'imposter syndrome' can be very strong (Chapman, 2017, pp. 112-119). This is where access programmes often fail. In the rush to prove inclusivity and meet mature student admission or other key performance indicators for lifelong learning targets, the slowness and messiness of 'people work' can get lost or overlooked in the urge to be impactful. Not every intervention has to have a seismic impact; the ripple effect can also produce results:

> *People who organised this course I doubt that they realised the ripple effect that it was going to have. I have a son who is a secondary school teacher and he talks about this course when he is teaching the kids in school and I think that this course definitely needs to go on. My wife wants to do it next year because I talk about it so much*. (participant focus group 1)

This participant used his/her learning from the Communiversity to teach others:

> *I gave a 'class' to my grandparents group about looking up family history and did up some notes as well as doing a slide show showing how to follow notes as some of the members would not be very familiar with computers.*

Engagement on more than a superficial level takes time and effort. However, it is obvious from the last quote above that it can be empowering. The do-it-yourself agentic attitude is encouraged. In one community, the participants even carried on without university involvement and brought in a local historian to continue the work to the point of collaborating with a college of further education to produce a multimedia exhibition based on oral history.

Within the discipline of adult education, agency and the dialogic process are central to all learning encounters. Learning is not merely about content acquisition but also about meaning making and creating and recreating new realities (Rule, 2004, p. 323). The Freirean approach of 'problem posing' education (Freire 1970, pp. 52-67) means that relevance of the subject comes to the fore.

> *It [the economics module] stirred me, it lit a fire underneath me. I understand consumerism, it made me want to become somebody in opposition. It gave me a place to vent about economics and it linked it to philosophy…* (participant focus group 3).

> *This course proved very lively as many of the people taking part had been directly and indirectly affected by the banking collapse and housing market crash. Again, I was struck by the diversity of people taking part in the course, a former bank employee and a local politician attended that day, and a lively debate about what the future holds for Irish banking and housing followed the lecture* (participant focus group 1).

The above quote highlights two issues that continue to be of real concern to citizens right across Europe – the aftershock of the global banking crash and its reverberating effects on the current housing crisis. If such concerns go unacknowledged, anger at perceived injustice can find expression in populist anti-democratic and reactionary forces. The aspiration for an active citizenship has been a European Union ideal for many years. Unless 'activation' is accompanied by some mechanism and a forum for critically thinking about the economic and social realities that we face daily, citizens remain open to persuasion by arguments generated by algorithms or worse. Brexit and the anti-vax movement spring to mind.

As well as being dialogic, the Communiversity promotes learning as a reflective process. It gives participants opportunities for self-directed learning to explore areas of interest as identified by themselves. Each tutor/lecturer encourages open discussion in the group which enables participants to develop their learning in terms of their own lifeworld/life-conditions (Kraus, 2015, p. 2). There was also a very strong feeling that the lecturers/tutors were benefitting from the exchanges that took place during the Communiversity. One participant reported:

> *We learnt a lot from the lecturers and the lecturers said that they learnt a lot from us. We all came back with a positive feeling that we would like to learn more* (participant focus group 2).

This is echoed in feedback from a Communiversity economics lecturer:

> *There have been many memorable moments and each group is completely different. I have found my work with these groups to have been hugely rewarding and enjoyable…My work with Communiversity has enriched my life immensely.*

PROGRESSION (LACK OF) FUNDING (INSECURE)

Through dialogue and discussion we begin to see a meeting of minds. What the Communiversity offers is a beginning. Its weakness is that it does not follow through and have easily accessible progression routes to engage further with formal education. The lack of links to further development was emphatically stated by a participant in focus group 3: 'I just felt that at the end you were brought up to here and it was fantastic but the link at the end it just didn't exist.' A response to the survey showed how the Communiversity went some way to addressing educational deficits of participants, but was ultimately not enough to prepare for third level engagement:

> *The Communiversity could help us follow up certain subjects but it stops there. I would have liked the classes to go on, to have more. We got a taste for it and a thirst for it and we were just left thirsty. It gave us a great thirst for knowledge. There were other people in the Communiversity and they left because they felt that it was great to have the university learning but if they wanted to take the courses that they wouldn't have the academic writing skills to attend university.*

This and other evidence seems to suggest that the Communiversity is effective in getting (some) participants to think about attending higher education, but that there are some additional steps required to prepare a potential mature student for successful engagement in higher education. In an attempt to address this, the Communiversity Network made a submission to the consultation process for the new National Access Plan 2022-2028 that recommends increased pathways and funding structures to support lifelong learning (Barter et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the greatest weakness is in the area of funding. Funding for the Communiversity relies too heavily on the community partner and their Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) budget. When reporting to the EU funders, key performance indicators for the LEADER Partnerships are heavily skewed in the area of those Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETS) and Labour Market Activation. It is only since late 2018 that people over the age of 64 have been counted in terms of interventions. Therefore, if the community partner needs to divert monies into other more pressing programmes, the Communiversity is one of the initiatives most at risk. In the current climate, funding for non-instrumentalist and non-credentialist programmes is more than likely going to be harder to come by. If this is indeed the case, it is a very short-sighted approach to long term and deeply entrenched societal issues. These include mental health and age related problems such as loneliness, isolation and depression. It is becoming increasingly apparent that local community engagement and social prescribing (Khan and Giurca et al., 2023) are meaningful and cost-effective ways to combat these ills.

CONCLUSION

The Communiversity shows what can be done when public institutions are enabled to work together to think more strategically and longer term. The initiative emerged out of a crisis, but the policies that allowed this partnership to develop had been written long before and came from a core set of values for social justice, inclusion and equality that are at the heart of public and community sector service. At a time when university metrics value research impact, grant and funding applications, the citation index and university rankings, the Communiversity recalls a pastoral dimension that is not easy to quantify. Herein lies its greatest weakness. The fuel that runs the Communiversity is the zeal of particular personnel from each of the partner organisations who are dedicated to widening participation, access and community engagement for critical thinking for the public good. These are key in any attempt to create a more democratic and egalitarian society, but this mission is often seen as idealistic and peripheral to a lifelong learning culture that has been colonised by credentialism and skills acquisition for the economy. When other demands to fulfil more ‘productive’ objectives towards employability and job readiness are made upon the staff involved in terms of time, resources or finances, the risk to the Communiversity’s longevity becomes real. We face an anxious age of climate change, insecurity regarding migration caused by political upheaval or environmental destruction, the rise of Artificial Intelligence and uncertainty as to what this means for the human race and the more familiar horrors of war in Europe. The perennial societal ills of disadvantage, exclusion, loneliness and isolation in old age, depression, mental health issues and addiction will also be with us. In the face of these phenomena it is initiatives such as the Communiversity that will help people come together to think, talk, deliberate, care for and feel solidarity with one another. This aspect of lifelong learning is worth celebrating (and financing) just as much as labour market activation, skills acquisition and credentials. It is hoped that recognition for each of the partners from the recent funding success under the EU Europe for Citizens ‘Foundations For Futures Europe Project’ will be one way to secure and mainstream the Communiversity in the longer term and make it sustainable.

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APPLICATION OF THE iDEAL MODEL OF LEARNING TO INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND MEDIA IN ONLINE LEARNING

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***Keywords**: Learning, media, equity, collaboration, instructional design*

ABSTRACT

Authors discuss the iDEAL model of learning, which focuses on learning-centred approaches in online teaching with an emphasis on diversity, equity, experiential learning and use of technology including use of applications, interactive case conceptualisations, virtual demonstrations and exercises and diverse learner options to facilitate more engaged learning in collegiate courses. Authors will describe innovative instructional design approaches in online learning that highlight the ongoing need for fair, accessible, and inclusive course content in addition to highlighting the use of media to engage learners and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate learning through their preferred means of knowledge acquisition. Authors define key terms (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and investigate how educators can use tools in virtual classrooms to supplement traditional approaches to learning. This manuscript also explores practical approaches for the use of technology to enhance student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain once said, 'I have never let my schooling interfere with my education' (Seybold, 2017). Twain recognised that attainment of knowledge was neither exclusively guaranteed through school nor was education an exclusive product of the school system. With the rise of online education, the necessity for fair, accessible, equitable and diverse learning experiences is imperative. Learners have demonstrated a need to have opportunities to grow and be challenged (Kumi-Yeboah & Amponsah, 2023). This translates into the necessity for instructors to create a safe environment in which students feel free to discuss different perspectives, viewpoints, and ability for exploration within these areas.

THE IDEAL MODEL OF LEARNING FROM AN EQUITABLE AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVE

According to Harvard University Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (OEDIB) 'diversity typically means proportionate representation across all dimensions of human difference,' equity refers to 'fair treatment for all while striving to identify and eliminate inequities and barriers,' and 'inclusion means that everyone is included, visible, heard and considered' (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023, para. 12-14).

From an academic perspective, equity, diversity, and inclusion are essential concepts to consider when creating and facilitating course content that is not only accessible to a wider range of students, but meets the learning needs of students whose lived experiences do not always echo those of a traditional campus-based learner.

Another important concept is the iDEAL Model of Learning. The iDEAL philosophy, which stands for Instructional Design for Engaged Adult Learners, is a model of learning developed at the University of Massachusetts Global (formerly Brandman University). The engaged learning concept within the iDEAL Model de-centres the instructor from a position of authority and master of knowledge and, instead, the instructor becomes a guide as they assist students in the process of learning. In other words, the iDEAL Model is learning-centred rather than teacher-centred. The iDEAL philosophy aligns with what we know about adult learners: 1) that adult learners bring a vast reservoir of experience that should be considered when planning learning experiences; 2) they exhibit a readiness to learn that is based on a need ‘to know something’ or ‘to do something.’; 3) that adult learners exhibit an orientation to learning that is task or problem-centred rather than subject-centred; 4) and lastly, they exhibit a relatively high degree of internal motivation (Brandman University, 2015).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Distance education programmes in counselling and behavioural sciences continue to trend and have done so for over a decade. In fact, the number of U.S. undergraduate college students enrolled in at least one online distance education course was 97 percent higher in 2020, during the pandemic than the prior year in 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The post-pandemic landscape highlighted the increase in demand for distance education as well as many areas of need when it comes to accessibility within courses and programmes (U.S. Department of Education, 2021; Wan and Dean, 2023).

Virtual education employs a type of learning that tends to be more flexible and accommodating to the needs of adult learners and diverse student populations, including those who have limited access to on-ground campuses, when compared to traditional learning environments (Bosshardt and Chiang, 2016). Paradoxically, one misconception is that online teaching and learning mirrors the face-to-face experience, but simply uses digital tools and a virtual platform to make course content accessible. While the tools aid in accessibility, not all online programs use tools in a manner that aids or enhances the learning process. To paraphrase Kranzberg, ‘tools are neither good, nor bad, nor are they neutral, and the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances’ (Kranzberg, as cited in Tate and Warschauer, 2022, p. 197). That said, while distance education programmes have made education more accessible and available to learners, virtual learning has shown to reflect a host of challenges that can impede student success if learning needs are not acknowledged and barriers are not removed.

Hart and colleagues (2018) found that, on average, students taking courses in online environments had poorer performance with regard to passing courses, receiving optimal or passing grades, and continuing on in the programme beyond the first course. Students were also more likely to have to repeat courses in an online programme. The aforementioned highlights the need to provide greater support to students in online programmes in an effort to not only make education accessible, but equitable, approachable, and meaningful with regard to individual students' style of learning. Students have demonstrated different needs for support during the educational process, even if they have equal access to educational content. The concept of equity (or equality) goes beyond student demographics to include

needs-based supports within courses, as well as removing barriers to participation, in order to reduce the potential for inequity or individual disadvantage (Claeys-Kulik, Jørgensen, and Stöber, 2019).

Given that online education has become omnipresent in modern times, educators are positioned to continue to develop practices in course content integration using whatever means necessary. Much of the recent research on online learning experience addresses the experiences of students in synchronous, asynchronous, and blended/hybrid environments (Fadhilah and Sutrisna, 2021). For example, research on the topic demonstrates that students prefer synchronous settings with peer-centred activities and the greater support of psychological and competency needs that were present in synchronous settings (Fabriz, Mendzeritskaya, and Stehle, 2021). In the past, traditional learning environments have hindered student learning by falling short of inclusivity (Salmi, 2020). One way to combat this need is by diversifying the course content and by integrating media, technology, and by including a variety of learning opportunities into courses in order to reach students in a manner that is conducive to their unique learning needs.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that was developed to guide inclusive learning in educational environments in order to make education accessible to students regardless of disability status and environment. This framework considers the needs of students with a focus on prosocial curriculum change, which places the need for intervention on the course content rather than placing the responsibility on the student to adapt to course content that is not equitable or inclusive (Meyer and Rose, as cited in Rao, 2021). Some of the main tenets of UDL include: 1) addressing variability in learners' strengths, abilities, experiences and learning preferences, 2) reducing barriers in curriculum and instruction, 3) and supporting the development of student self-awareness for strategic and goal-directed learning. This also includes purposeful integration of digital tools as a foundational online experience (Meyer et al., as cited in Rao, 2021). Some ways authors have integrated tools in the form of multimedia and technological applications are described in this manuscript.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

As these various interactive tools for technology are implemented to facilitate meaningful interactions between instructors and students, additional research continues to emerge revealing that culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is essential in creating safe spaces for learning online (Educators Team, 2021). Courses that have a lens of awareness regarding cultural identities and varying perspectives provide an opportunity for connection and relevance within any educational environment (Kyei-Blankson, Blankson & Ntuli, 2019). It is essential that educators embrace culturally responsive pedagogy in a manner that does not feel haphazard or forced. Instead, educators are encouraged to ensure that the values of equity, inclusion and diversity are a core component of their coursework, programme, and overall university mission.

One important consideration is as follows: what does this look like in course design and instruction? It is essential for students to be able to 'see' themselves in the readings, the resources, the assignments and so on. There is an opportunity for different perspectives to be valued and viewed throughout the course and instruction. Some courses may use vignettes or case studies within their topic areas of expertise. It is important to incorporate the differing cultural background of students within their life or areas of study. By doing so, varied backgrounds, stories, narratives and perspectives will be more represented. The students may potentially connect with these vignettes or case studies and, as a result, widen their lens when thinking about the diversity of human experience and making sense of the content. By providing this opportunity to connect and the flexibility for students to use preferred learning methodologies, learners can continue to connect with different

perspectives, voices, and narratives. Finally, it is important to discuss classroom instruction, and this can be within the face-to-face classroom or online environment.

MEDIA COLLABORATION

The focus of this publication is the use of technology and media integration through the lens of the iDEAL model. It is important to consider the need to incorporate a positive, equitable and inclusive environment (as previously defined) for all students in order to promote fair and optimal learning. Media collaboration occurs between faculty and members of a media team or technological support team in order to create learning opportunities that extend beyond the conventional pedagogical approaches most students are accustomed to within the traditional learning environment. Keep in mind that while certain skills or tool sets may be required to create these innovative opportunities, most of the examples provided within this submission can be developed and created through online resources at no cost.

Virtual Brain Dissection

Most students who have taken a course on biopsychology or physiological psychology in a traditional classroom environment can agree that one of the major highlights in that course is the activity involving neuroanatomical dissection of the brain. So, how can this applied learning experience translate to students in an online environment? The answer is: using technology. Through collaboration with our Center of Instructional Innovation (CII), the virtual brain dissection activity came to life.

A member of the media team utilised tools to create a three-dimensional (3D) image based on a real-life magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan of a brain including the cerebrum, cerebellum, and brain stem. Course designers can create this same type of 3D image on free platforms such as Sketchfab (https://sketchfab.com/) or The Virtual Brain website (thevirtualbrain.org). Once the 3D brain is created, students in the course then use virtual tools to ‘dissect’ the brain. The model, being based on a real scan, increases the overall realism of the assignment. The brain is fully rotatable and can rotate around various axes in order for students to access a variety of different brain structures for external structure identification. Students are then prompted to make dissection slices of the brain with a virtual scalpel. The virtual scalpel is a mouse-based tool that the student can move, allowing the student to move the scalpel to the appropriate position on the brain to make a slice or cut. After the student is able to make the appropriate movement (or slice) with the virtual scalpel, different portions of the brain and internal structures are presented to the student.

The purpose of this activity is two-fold: to increase overall awareness of brain anatomy and functionality and to use visual learning to appeal to students’ unique learning styles. This type of interactive assignment has provided students with the opportunity to engage with the material in a deeper, more meaningful manner, and apply the information to create a learning experience that is unlike others within the online environment. In addition, this exercise allows students to “do something” in a task-centred orientation which aligns directly with the iDEAL Model of learning.

While formalised data has not yet been collected for this exercise, qualitative data on student experience has been obtained to illustrate overall value and effectiveness within this activity. The main themes that have been noted in this subjective data (student quotes from student opinion surveys) centred on the extensive amount of information that was delivered in this exercise, application (being able to dissect a brain) and how fascinated the students were with this activity. The following is one quote that was written by a student that completed this activity within their biopsychology course:

> "*I am so glad we had the opportunity to do the brain simulation activity! It was so interesting and informational to me. I never really took into consideration how much is done and how small yet mighty our brain is! It amazed me how our brain is structured and how everything is labelled*."

Interactive Vignettes

In the advanced psychopathology and diagnosis course, course developers incorporated media into the course consisting of interactive vignettes. Students are presented with a virtual 'therapist couch,' which provides interactive vignettes loaded with dynamic content. The couch is a digital representation of historic popular culture notions of therapy. Once students click the image of the couch, a list of 'clients' is presented to the learner. Closed-captioning and a written transcript are also provided for accessibility. During this activity, the students have the opportunity to analyse cases which present several scenarios to help students conceptualise diagnostic content. Each real-life vignette or scenario is presented, then followed by questions that prompt students to use clinical decision-making to present their rationale behind the potential diagnosis and recommended treatment planning. Based on the type of vignette, students identify areas of clinical concern by clicking on available options, identifying one or more primary diagnoses, presenting differential diagnoses, formulating treatment recommendations and making referrals. Students are also able to use an option of clicking on the 'therapist's case notes' in order to conceptualise the vignette from a culturally sensitive lens. Students are given real-time feedback on diagnostic considerations and recommendations in order to prompt students to use critical thinking to evaluate the macro and micro-level aspects of a client's presenting problem. The hope is that the student will engage in deeper, more interactive self-directed experiential learning, which aligns with the iDEAL model of incorporation of best practices and adult learning theory.

Use of Applications

Our newly re-designed cognitive psychology course integrates the use of modern applications ('apps') to put concepts and ideas learned within the course into practice. For this activity, students are given a list of approved applications that pertain to web-based self-testing of a variety of different cognitive abilities or impairments. The most frequently assessed domains were memory, attention, and executive function. The approved applications have existing information on psychometric quality (Charalambous et al., 2020). It is essential for students to understand the importance of efficacy and the necessity to use evidence-based tools when drawing conclusions. The approach to this course was to use applications that are well-validated and reliable with regard to identifying or measuring possible cognitive impairment, but also accessible to students of varying socioeconomic statuses (at no cost or involve a free trial).

Students are instructed to select a cognitive application, explain what the app measures, 'test' their chosen application and gather data (document their experience taking the test/playing the game). Students are given the opportunity to link theories of cognition that explain the cognitive functions identified in their chosen app, reflect on their overall experience using the app, interpret their results using knowledge learned from their course, discuss multicultural considerations, consider if the application presents a bias or is equitable across cultures, expand on validity and reliability, elaborate on strengths and weaknesses of the application, reflect on test result implications and provide recommendations about whether or not they would suggest the app to test cognitive function. This coursework utilises the iDEAL model, which blends current curriculum and the latest technology to facilitate student learning.

The following quote was written by a student that completed this activity within their cognitive psychology course:

> "*I recognise that there are a lot of 'apps' out there that measure intelligence and cognition, but I also recognise that these applications are not always valid or reliable measures. One aspect of this course that I found meaningful to my education was being given the opportunity to test and research an application that has been validated for testing. It helped me to make better sense of what it was that we were learning in the course when it came to attention and memory*."

Diverse Learning Opportunities

The content presented in traditional learning environments, which largely consist of written assignments and assessments (testing), is not always conducive to unique student learning styles. That said, it is essential for faculty to give students the opportunity to express themselves with their preferred methodology of learning and reflection of knowledge, while also keeping the assignment options for content fair and equitable across students. Another strategy that can be used in course development and instruction is the creation and implementation of diverse learner discussion boards. Diverse learner discussion boards are discussion boards that focus on the same topic but allow the student to present content in varied ways. This may be through the traditional written response, presentation, media project or even a vlog/video. At times, students have received faculty permission to create a comic book series, animation, or complete newspaper on specific learning content. These opportunities attend to the different learning styles and experiences of our students. By allowing students to express learning in their preferred learning style, which may or may not be through writing, having multiple options to respond promotes fair treatment for all while striving to identify and eliminate inequities and barriers that may be embedded in traditional discussion board response style (set word count of written expression, for example).

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

There are several notable future implications that can drive the ideas and concepts presented herein, which include consideration of how the concept of media effectiveness in instructional design will be measured, how to effectively measure student satisfaction with technology or diverse content, how to implement and measure effectiveness of educator training and how to measure overall content learned as a result of media integration. Topics of future investigation include the creative delivery of clinical content in online environments and proper training of educators to teach practical elements of clinical skill competency using media and technology. Overall, the authors are continually investigating 'what we hope to achieve' and 'what is the potential impact' of using media to enhance learning in an online environment.

CONCLUSION

In summary, innovation within digital learning is becoming standard practice. There have been numerous advances allowing students to connect with the material in a way that transcends previous models of learning and application. It is important for educators to move out of their comfort zone in order to embrace change and encourage learning from a more gestalt perspective. This new model of teaching has worked to create an equitable learning environment that is comparable, or even superior, to the traditional in-person teaching environment. There will continue to be an evolving landscape within the digital learning

realm, which will open doorways for learners, educators and universities. As a result, it is important to be flexible, continue to be open and work to recognise how these changes will assist in creating a new pathway of learning for all.

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN MICRO-CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AN ERASMUS+ PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Micro-credentials can authenticate the achievements of personalised and focused learning experiences. This innovative practice paper critically evaluates the collaborative European development of six micro-credentials in an Erasmus+ project in the area of basic skills. A unique aspect of this research is that, at the time of writing, this was among the first European funded projects which attempted to collaboratively develop micro-credentials based upon the European Commission's recommended micro-credentials definition. The methodology employed for developing the themes for the micro-credentials is discussed. This paper critically explores design considerations for micro-credential development emphasising the importance of choosing an appropriate instructional design framework. This research supports further understanding on micro-credential development at a critical phase in their growth and application in higher education across Europe.

INTRODUCTION

While higher education institutes have tended to consider awards in terms of credit accumulation in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), the validation of smaller parcels of learning has grown in popularity in recent years (Flynn et al., 2023). Micro-credentials can be used in a variety of settings and offer a flexible and reliable means of capturing continuous professional development (CPD). In 2022, after much consultation with European stakeholders, the European Commission (EC) (2022) advanced the following definition for micro-credentials:

> "*A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity*" (EC, 2022).

The definition places a strong emphasis on the specific knowledge, skills, and competences that a learner acquires through a micro-credential. Additionally, it emphasises that micro-credentials are portable, specifying that they can be shared and transferred across different contexts, institutions, or industries. This suggests that micro-credentials should be used to demonstrate skills and knowledge in a variety of settings and can support learners to advance their careers or pursue new opportunities. What is notable about the definition is that it does not set down specific criteria for associated ECTS for micro-credentials, which may result in variation in terms of content load and duration of micro-credentials delivered across Europe. However, it does note the importance of micro-credential design to address societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs (EC, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the motivation for the swift application of micro-credentials by governments in several authorities (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021). Additionally, international government organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO are increasingly turning their attention to micro-credentials (Kato, Galan-Muros & Weko, 2020). This increased focus on micro-credentials is part of the EC's response to digital transformation, whereby a growing number of individuals in Europe are required to update their knowledge, skills, and competences to fill the gap between their formal education and the needs of an evolving society. Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the acceleration in the use and uptake of digital technologies in our everyday lives has increased the pace of change in how we live, learn and work. Intentionally designed micro-credentials are a relatively new concept and lend themselves to a wide variety of educational knowledge, skills, and competence achievement. Furthermore, micro-credentials can certify the outcomes of small, tailored learning experiences. While micro-credentials are usually regarded as distinct from ECTS credits, some European universities have also formalised a connection between the two (Flynn, *et al*., 2023).

This paper is based upon research from an Erasmus+ funded project entitled 'EBSN (European Basic Skills Network) Professional Development Series for Basic Skills Teachers[1]' which commenced in September 2021 and will finish in June 2023. At the time of writing, this research was one of the first collaborative Erasmus+ projects which attempted to develop micro-credentials from the blueprint phase through to the post evaluation phase across several European states and institutions. The project differs from the approach adopted in other micro-credential projects where partners typically develop their micro-credentials in isolation, but collaborate to share experiences and develop frameworks for recognition and transferability of the associated credits. This paper critically analyses the development of the micro-credentials within the project providing the context in which micro-credentials have risen in popularity. It briefly elaborates on the development of key themes for the micro-credentials and explains key considerations of the design framework employed before advancing a micro-credential design blueprint and discussing challenges involved in collaborative micro-credential development.

MICRO-CREDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

A review of European Union (EU) policy and literature on the upskilling of basic skills teachers informed the selection of six overarching themes, presented in *Table 1*, for the micro-credentials developed by the partners as part of the Erasmus+ project.

[1] Project partners: Progress Consult and the University of Pécs in Hungary; the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and the South East Technological University (SETU) in Ireland; Folkeuniversitetet in Norway; and the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta (DRILLE).

Micro-credential Themes	ECTS*	EFQ	Delivery
Approaching Digital Teaching and Learning	1	5	Online
Basic Literacy			
Diversity and Interculturalism			
Empowering Adult Learners of Basic Skills			
Digital Competence			
Facilitating the Learning Process			

*Equivalent to 1 ECTS in duration c.25 hours. At the time of writing micro-credentials were not credit bearing.

Table 1: Micro-credential themes for the EBSN Professional Development Series

It was important at the outset to determine a common structure for the development of the micro-credentials to mitigate design flaws. The European standard elements to describe a micro-credential, as set down in the EU recommendations (EC, 2022), include the mandatory elements presented in

Table 2. All these elements were included in the design phase with each micro-credential being equivalent to 1 ECTS at EQF (European Qualifications Framework) level 5.

Mandatory element	Description
Learner information	The learner needs to be identified and records kept within the awarding body.
Issuer information	Information on the issuer/provider, including country; information on the awarding body or institution, including country, including a signature or seal of the issuer/provider and/or awarding body or institution.
Micro-credential information	Title, date of issuance or date of assessment, verification of authenticity.
Learning experience	Learning outcomes, workload (in ECTS, when possible), assessment and form of quality assurance.
QF level	NQF level (when possible), QF-EHEA and EQF level (if self-certified/referenced), ISCED level & subject area code, SQF level (if needed).
Assessment	Type of assessment.
Participation	Form of participation in the learning activities and access requirements.
Quality assurance	Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential.

Table 2 Mandatory elements for issuing micro-credentials (adapted from EU recommendation, page 16)

The project's methodology followed a shared design process where partners fed their different fields of expertise (in teacher training, basic skills provision, designing micro-credentials) into a joint planning procedure facilitated by the lead content developer based in one of the project partners. While this process appeared to be the most efficient way to develop content, it did not always go as planned. Points of improvement are discussed below.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Occasionally, there is a perception that the course material is uploaded onto a Learning Management System (LMS) without adequate attention to design, given that micro-credentials are often short in duration and predominantly delivered fully online. Further,

deconstructing already existing modules may seem like a pathway to micro-credential development. However, micro-credentials need to facilitate ease of access, be engaging for the learner, have distinct outcomes and be intentionally designed and fit for purpose targeting specific skills, knowledge, and competences (Flynn *et al.*, 2023). Micro-credentials that lack transparency about their learning outcomes, assessment methods, and the criteria for earning the credential can lead to confusion and scepticism among learners and employers, which can ultimately limit the effectiveness and value of the credential. As noted by Wheelahan and Moodie (2021), there is a need for more transparency in micro-credential programmes. Therefore, instructional design is a key component of the development phase of micro-credentials, however, there appears to be a lack of relevant literature on the design principles of micro-credentials. This paper seeks to address this gap by advancing design considerations for micro-credential development.

Employing an instructional design framework helps ensure that the course content and activities are designed in a way that promotes effective learning. A well-designed framework considers the learning objectives, target audience, and the learning environment to create a course that is engaging, effective, and promotes meaningful learning. Moreover, by using an established instructional design framework, course developers can save time and resources by leveraging existing best practices and avoiding common mistakes. This can help streamline the course development process and improve efficiency. Salmon's (2014) Carpe Diem design framework was selected as the mechanism to develop the micro-credentials. Carpe Diem (Salmon, 2014) allows for the micro elements to be given consideration in terms of the actual learner profile or persona. Micro elements relate to, for example, delving into the finer details of persona building or fine tuning the course storyboard. This was important in this research as the developers were not faced with one complete lens through which to filter content but rather a fragmented lens consisting of various personas over multiple cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Building in time for deciding who the target personas were was an essential aspect of the development process. This allowed for a more comprehensive approach to content development which was focused on serving a European audience as opposed to one specific institutional or national audience as is often the case with micro-credentials, such as those offered by HEIs .The collaborative approach embedded in the Carpe Diem framework works well in a development process in which subject matter experts (SMEs) and instructional designers (ID) work in tandem through the six steps outlined in *Table 3*.

Stage	Description
Blueprint	SMEs and IDs collaborate on the essential aspects of what they aim to achieve. This output is agreed in a mission statement. Persona is created.
Storyboard	Collaboratively the process of learning, teaching and assessment is drawn out in a visual way, working out a schedule, a sense of flow and alignment between the components.
Build Prototype	IDs build the design in the online environment and create some real practical testable activities.
Reality Check	Colleagues act as 'reality checkers' to provide productive feedback by engaging in beta testing.
Review and Adjust	Any adjustments can be made, and an Action Plan is developed for the additional work that is needed.
Planning Next Steps	The team implements the course based upon the Action Plan.

Table 3 Carpe Diem Approach

Several other frameworks were considered and subsequently discounted due to their limitations for this project. One such framework was ADDIE. ADDIE, an instructional design framework comprising the five stages of Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation, is widely employed in various fields. It was developed in the 1970s and was first used by the United States military as a methodical approach to crafting training programmes (Molenda, 2003). The ADDIE model has since undergone numerous modifications and enhancements by several individuals and organisations and has gained widespread acceptance as one of the most used models in educational and training contexts (Smith & Ragan, 2005). The authors found that while generic in nature, ADDIE did not lend itself well to this research due to its linear approach. This approach can be effective for more static content but may be restrictive when dealing with collaboratively generated content or learning outcomes that do not have a predetermined end state, such as those in this research.

Similarly, Backwards Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) was discounted as a suitable model for this research. While the model does have strengths in that it identifies desired results and seeks to determine criteria for evaluating student progress and has the added benefit of being both systemic and flexible (Graff, 2011), it does not contain a specific 'blueprint' phase for outlining the essential criteria and developing the 'persona' or lens in which the content is filtered through. It is advised that further research into the development of European collaborative micro-credentials should consider the design framework and pay particular consideration to the initial blueprint phase which facilitates persona creation.

Importantly, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was employed during the design phase. UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development which provide students equal opportunities to learn, including those with disabilities. Studies have demonstrated that the UDL framework holds considerable promise for catering to the needs of diverse learners across various environments. (Coffman and Draper, 2022). It seeks to enhance the experience of all students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching to cater for the diversity of learners. An example of its use in practice is evident in the inclusion of podcasts, videos, and recorded texts in the project's micro-credentials. Furthermore, participants are given the option of submitting activities in various media forms which caters for those who prefer more visual, experiential communication styles.

Design Blueprint

As depicted in *Figure 1* overleaf, each micro-credential contains eight weeks of content spread over four units consisting of engaging activities, moderated discussion forums, quizzes and synchronous webinars equivalent to 1 ECTS credit or c.25 effort hours of study.

This research aims to share good practice by developing a blueprint for micro-credential design after an initial piloting phase which yielded feedback on content, duration, tools, facilitator involvement and accessibility. It is deemed essential to pilot and seek feedback on the micro-credentials before their release to a wider European audience due to, among others, the nature and complexity of the development process. Feedback from pilot participants provides authentic insights into how engaging and effective the course is for learners which can in turn help instructors and course designers identify areas for improvement to increase learner engagement and motivation. In some instances, feedback pointed out issues with content localisation which merited a review of the content including

assignments, assessment and digital media. In others, videos were not deemed culturally appropriate for some audiences and were amended.

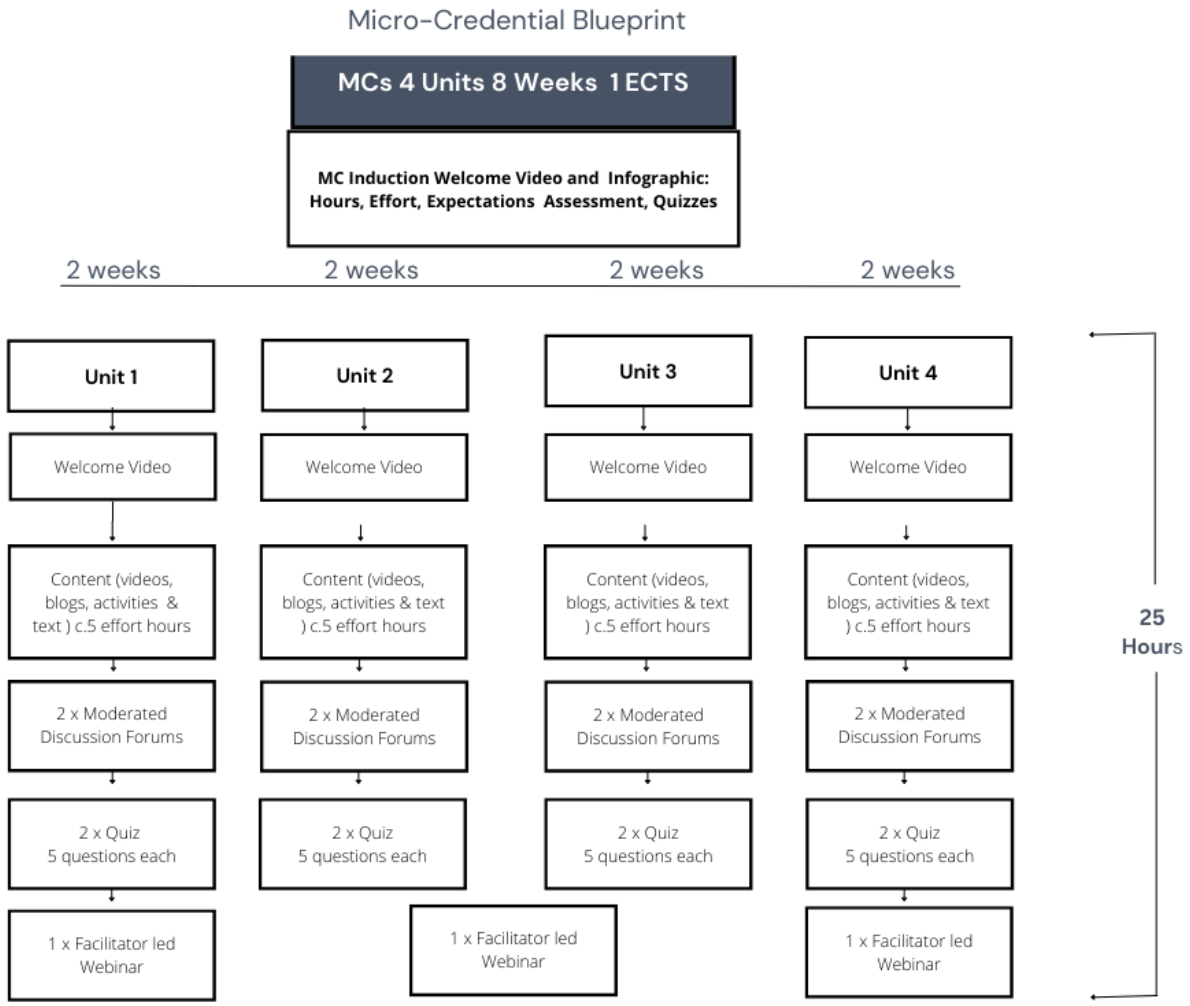

Figure 1 Micro-credential blueprint

In addition, the feedback enabled the developers to rebalance items such as the number of quiz questions and webinars. Participants preferred to have a standardised approach to quizzes which led the team to devise two quizzes per content unit of five questions each, totalling forty quiz questions for each micro-credential as depicted in *Figure 1* above. Moreover, the team added one more facilitator led webinar as participants saw value in synchronous contact which allows the participants and facilitators to interact with each other in real time. Studies have shown that synchronous instruction presents an effective opportunity for online facilitators to develop new instructional models and promote the active involvement of online learners in the teaching/learning process (Leo *et al*., 2009). The participant feedback aligns with research indicating students prefer a consistent course structure when taking online courses (Young & Norgard, 2006).

Biweekly micro-credentials workshops were held for the partners involved in content development where the various phases of Carpe Diem were consecutively worked through. These meetings provided fertile ground upon which team members could raise questions on content suitability, design, licensing, edtech and activities, as well as providing the

opportunity to ‘soundboard’ ideas with one another, thus adding to greater coherence over the six micro-credentials. It was important in these meetings to develop solid ‘storyboards’ for each micro-credential which visualised the learning paths and ensured constructive alignment within. Again, this aspect made Carpe Diem the most effective design framework for this research’s goals.

Activities were built into each micro-credential which aimed to further engage the participants in the content following the ‘Build Prototype’ phase in Carpe Diem in which tangible, practical and testable activities are designed and tested. These activities were designed with UDL in mind using downloadable templates so that participants could easily access the activity and follow the format for submission. In total, each micro-credential contained two downloadable template activities which participants were encouraged to share in the discussion fora for peer and tutor review.

All six micro-credentials were released to specific European audiences in late Spring 2023, each being facilitated by a member of the project team. A further evaluation is planned which will provide more feedback on their efficacy.

Challenges in collaborative European micro-credential development

While there exists a European framework for micro-credential development, uptake has been slow, with many EU countries still to adopt the definition based on ongoing research at South East Technological University (Widger *et al*., 2023). Initial consultation, as part of the EBSN project, with teacher training organisations in Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Ireland and Malta, indicate that the latter four countries have organisations that offer micro-credentials.

Cronjé (2011) posits that educational technology has developed a new society in which we need to learn how to grow together despite our differences. While this educational technology assists cross-cultural research, it is also imperative to be aware of and respect cultural norms within the partner organisations involved in the collaboration. The research consisted of partners from four European countries, each with distinct working styles and communication norms which had to be managed from a content development perspective.

It was noted at times during the content development phase that some partners adopted a more team-oriented approach while others worked independently. While this did not cause conflict, it is interesting nonetheless to note especially in team-oriented tasks as some partners preferred a more individualistic approach. Another challenge related to engaging stakeholders. Engaging stakeholders at all levels, including employers, educators, and learners, is essential for the success of micro-credentials. Achieving this engagement across Europe can be challenging given the diverse interests and priorities of different stakeholders. Additionally, cultural differences towards ‘netiquette’, the rules of conduct for respectful and appropriate communication on the internet, and online team meetings caused some minor issues during the development phase.

As a way of mitigating possible issues with communication, it is recommended that a digital communication manifesto be developed at the outset which outlines the core principles and values that guide digital communication practices. Additionally, it provides a framework for decision-making and helps to ensure that digital communication activities are aligned with the organisation's goals and values. In addition, it promotes consistency and clarity in communication activities. Outlining clear guidelines and standards helps to ensure that messages are communicated effectively and that communication practices are consistent across different channels and platforms. Importantly, for collaborative European projects such as this one, a digital communication manifesto can help to build trust and credibility with partners by demonstrating a commitment to transparency, openness, and ethical behaviour.

By developing a digital communication manifesto at the outset, expectations could be set which partners would agree to abide by.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the European development of six micro-credentials. It has explored the selection of an instructional design framework upon which to develop the micro-credentials and analysed the design phase of micro-credentials. It has provided a blueprint for the micro-credentials designed in this research and has advanced some challenges inherent in cross cultural development of micro-credentials.

The increased focus on the use of micro-credentials in education illustrates the need for innovative and adaptable recognition of learning. Micro-credentials facilitate students to learn specific skills or gain knowledge in professionally focused areas, and are stackable, supporting flexible progression. They provide a unique mechanism to recognise and develop the work-based learning of employees to support both reskilling and upskilling as well as lifelong learning. While the research discussed in this paper focused on the development of micro-credentials at a European level it is also timely for those seeking to develop micro-credentials in institutes of higher education and other educational institutions. Furthermore, micro-credentials must be relevant to the learners' needs and the rapidly changing demands of the labour market. They need to be recognised and accepted by employers and other education providers to ensure that learners can transfer their credentials across different contexts and make use of their qualifications. This requires collaboration between different stakeholders, including employers, education providers, and policymakers. Collaborative development is necessary to ensure that micro-credentials stay current and meet the evolving needs of learners and employers. It is hoped this paper will contribute to increased European collaboration in micro-credential development.

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PROMOTING WORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES: THE UNILAB PROJECT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about how higher education (HE) should not only provide students with subject-specific knowledge, but also equip them with transferrable, work-related skills, have led to a growing interest in work-based learning (WBL) and employability skills courses in HE. Several such initiatives have also involved partners from outside the EU. One such project, UniLab, bringing together universities from Belarus and Azerbaijan, as well as Spain, Austria, and France, aimed to contribute to the modernisation of HE in the three partner (i.e., non-EU) countries through convergence with the collaborating EU universities. This was to be achieved by enhancing partnerships between enterprises and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), raising awareness of the importance of WBL among policymakers, and offering soft skills courses to students. The current paper explores the experiences of staff members within the four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus involved in UniLab and the challenges they faced in promoting WBL, both within their institutions and among relevant external stakeholders. It finds that their efforts were stymied by 1) discrepancies between the universities' curricula and the needs of employers, 2) a lack of awareness among employers of the importance of WBL and 3) limited technical infrastructure and professional capacity to implement more innovative WBL practices within their institutions. The research also identifies several enabling factors, such as universities' connections with key stakeholders, student involvement, and the exchange with EU partner universities. Looking beyond the UniLab project, the current paper considers the role that external factors, including institutional and political contexts, play in the implementation of WBL, and reflects on the importance of a context-engaged approach.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The notion that HEIs are not only centres of academic excellence and scientific research, but should also contribute to the training of tomorrow's workforce is not new (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). With the massification of higher education (Hornsby and Osman, 2014), which initially began in industrialised nations, but has in recent decades expanded beyond the "Global North", the primary responsibility of universities shifted from delivering exclusively subject disciplinary knowledge to equipping the next generation of workers with the skills and competences they need to compete in the global labour market. There is a growing understanding among policymakers and higher education professionals that this requires a closer integration of higher education and employment. Research suggests that HE students who gain work experience either within or outside of the curriculum enjoy increased employment premiums compared to those who do not (Cedefop, 2021). Student

projects that are realised in collaboration with industry have also been found to help students develop new skills and competences (Baaken et al., 2015).

Work-based learning (WBL) has emerged as the umbrella term and overarching strategy in HE to formally incorporate such experiences in students' academic trajectories. The term WBL encompasses many different activities and forms of learning, as reflected in the definition set by the Interagency Group on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, which describes WBL as 'all forms of learning that takes place in a real work environment' (IAG-TVET, 2017, p. 2). Talbot (2019) usefully proposes categorising WBL into three types; the first is part of a programme wholly located within an educational institution and is designed to facilitate entry into the workplace ('employability'). Examples of this include placements and internships. The second type sees students dividing their time between the educational establishment and the workplace, and is often referred to as an apprenticeship, while in the third type, students are based entirely in the workplace. The successful implementation of the first and 2nd type, in particular, thus depend on a close collaboration and alignment between the educational institution and the workplace.

Although WBL has become much more widespread and well established (especially in Europe) since being described as the 'new pedagogy for new times' by Boud and Symes two decades ago (2002, p. 15), this imbrication with the labour market remains a challenge for many HEIs. Based on their international case study report, Dadze-Arthur and colleagues (2020) conclude that for many HEIs, WBL represents a 'novel and unexplored terrain, for which most are neither structurally, financially, pedagogically or institutionally equipped' (p. 8), but that there is significant variation among disciplines, and institutional or country contexts and cultures. While their report emphasises the importance of HEIs developing their own tailored WBL solutions, and showcases how certain "trailblazer" institutions promote WBL in innovative and contextually specific ways, the authors acknowledge that WBL is an inherently collaborative endeavour which requires the close involvement of the workplace or industry. As Lester and Costley (2010) astutely note, 'Work-based learning will only 'work' if the *work environment* is capable of supporting learner-managed, reflective learning at an appropriate level' (emphasis added). Whereas the 'willingness and capacity of the HE learning provider for structural, institutional, operational and cultural changes', as described by Dadze-Arthur and colleagues, is undoubtedly an important factor in the successful implementation of WBL in HE, the 'impetus for change' which they highlight cannot emerge solely from the educational institution itself, but must also be mirrored by a similar openness and readiness among the collaborating industries and local authorities.

Whose responsibility it is to prepare students for the labour market is a question that is also widely discussed in relation to the development of graduates' soft skills, which Andrews and Higson (2008) identify as one of the three key components – besides work experience/work-based learning, and knowledge of discipline-specific issues – of graduate employability. In their research on the perspectives of employers and graduates towards graduate employability, they found that employers across Europe expect graduates to be "employment-ready" when they join their company or organisation; that is, not only equipped with discipline specific "hard skills", but also "more generic interpersonal and communication competences" (p. 419). These findings suggest that employers consider it the task of universities to equip graduates with such competences. In fact, according to Succi and Canovi (2020), the "blame game" on whom to hold responsible for teaching graduates these skills has been ongoing between universities and employers for the last 30 years. Succi and Canovi warn that this has drawn attention away from the importance of HEIs, with employers and students recognising their shared responsibility to work together towards higher levels of graduate employability. To counter this, the authors call for stronger partnerships between the different stakeholders.

This call has been taken up by various initiatives across the EU, which aimed to develop a stronger orientation towards employability and the labour market within HE. This has included the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education's (EURASHE) work on "Professional Higher Education" (PHE). Similarly, the project "Integrating work-based learning and entrepreneurship in Higher Education" (WEXHE) establishes university-industry collaborations to improve "the balance between practical and theoretical learning in HE" and to address "mismatches between the skills sets of graduates and the skills they require during early careers" (WEXHE, n.d.). Outside of the EU, the project "Introducing work-based learning in higher education systems of Armenia and Moldova for better employability of graduates" (WBL4JOB) 'aims to enhance partnership between enterprises and higher education institutions and to increase graduates' employability through development and implementation of supporting policy, legal framework and generic, flexible Apprenticeships Higher Education Model' (WBL4Job, n.d.). The frameworks and models developed as part of this and other projects tend to be 'inspired by European practices' (WBL4Job, n.d.), and are transferred to the non-EU contexts to boost the employability of HE students.

The WBL4JOB project was initiated in part to address challenges in Armenia and Moldova that are to some extent typical of post-Soviet states. While a relatively high share of the population hold university degrees, graduates struggle to find employment, especially in the field in which they undertook their studies (Jonbekova, 2015; Lichy and Khvatova, 2019; Gvaramadze, 2010). This is no less the case in Azerbaijan, where, according to a survey conducted by a youth agency, 60% of 8,921 surveyed youths work in areas that are not relevant to their university degree (NAYORA, 2018), a mismatch Sadirkhanov (2009) traces back to a lack of coordination between HEIs and rapidly changing labour market demands. This has been confirmed by the findings of other studies (Amirova and Valiyev, 2021; Gille-Belova & Titarenko, 2018), which report that employers in both Belarus and Azerbaijan encounter difficulties in finding graduates with appropriate soft skills. In a similar vein, the World Bank, in its country analysis of Azerbaijan, calls for strategic reforms to increase the relevance of higher education, as it feeds into the economic competitiveness of the country (The World Bank Group, 2018). The Bologna process, which intended to initiate this modernisation process, has been implemented to varying degrees in the two countries. Belarus in particular, which only joined the European Higher Education Area in 2015 - a decade after Azerbaijan - continues to struggle to meet the requirements for convergence with EU countries, especially in relation to graduate employability.

Against this backdrop, the UniLab project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, was established in 2020 to improve cooperation between higher education institutions and industry. The project originally brought together eight universities from three partner (i.e., non-EU) countries; Russia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, as well as universities from Austria, Spain and France. It aimed to develop tools and resources to make the participating Azerbaijani, Russian and Belarusian universities more labour market-oriented, thus boosting graduates' employability. The project took a holistic, learner-centred and collaborative approach, and involved multiple stakeholders from both within and outside the universities. Project activities included setting up a student portal, through which employers could recruit students for internships, placements, or graduate jobs; establishing curricular and extra-curricular modules and courses to help students develop generic soft skills; and raising awareness about the importance of university-industry collaboration among employers, local authorities and national policymakers. An ancillary objective of the project was to strengthen career centres and services in the participating universities, given their key role in this stakeholder collaboration. The project provided equipment and resources for career centres, and laid out standards and guidelines aiming to strengthen their orientation both towards learners and employers, thus sparking what Dadze-Arthur and colleagues (2020) describe as the "impetus for change" that is necessary for implementing WBL and employability-oriented provision.

The aim of this study is to better understand how staff involved in the UniLab project (both academic and non-academic) in participating universities in partner countries initiated such change, both within their institutions and beyond. It considers the enabling factors and challenges that they encountered in implementing the project activities and in collaborating with universities within their own country as well as abroad. While much research on student and graduate employability has focused on the views of students and employers (Sarkar et al., 2016; Cai, 2013; Succi and Canovi, 2020), the perspectives of university staff, and especially non-academic staff supporting career guidance and services, have rarely been under investigation, despite being crucial to the re-orientation of the institutional culture and despite their role as intermediaries between students and employers. This research aims to address this gap, specifically in a geographical context which is underrepresented in research on innovation in HE, and where, as indicated above, there are significant internal and external pressures to reform HE for better graduate employability.

The research will also shed light on how such initiatives may unfold against the backdrop of various challenging external factors and unexpected changes to the make-up of the project consortium. In the case of UniLab, the project implementation was severely impacted by major world events, specifically, the Covid-19 health crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The former severely restricted possibilities for travel and collaboration among EU and non-EU partners, while the latter led to the four Russian universities' involvement in the project being terminated prematurely. The war furthermore impaired the Belarusian partners' ability to travel abroad for the participation in study visits, even once Covid-19 related restrictions were lifted. In light of these challenges, the current study focuses solely on the experience of the two Belarusian and the two Azerbaijani universities. It takes into consideration how these exceptional circumstances affected their work on the project, and especially their collaboration with each other and with the EU partners.

The current study thus sets out to answer the following research questions:

- How was the notion of WBL and employability training conceptualised and operationalised by the Azerbaijani and Belarus partner institutions participating in the UniLab project?
- What were the enabling factors and barriers in the implementation of the UniLab project specifically, and WBL more generally, for the participating HEIs in Azerbaijan and Belarus?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research is a qualitative, small-scale study. In the tradition of interpretative, social constructivist research (Cohen et al., 2018), it aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of research participants and place them within the wider social and institutional contexts in which they occurred. The research draws from four interviews held in October 2022, several months before the end of the project. Interviews were held with a single representative, or "key informant", of each of the non-EU partner universities, except for one interview, in which two members of staff participated. The table below contains information on the participants' role within their institution. All interviews were conducted online, using video conferencing software, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They followed a semi-structured format (Horton et al., 2004), whereby the interview was structured according to a set of themes and questions that had been identified based on the research questions, but was conducted in a way which allowed for other topics to emerge spontaneously.

Participant number	Country	Type of institution	Role within their institution
1	Azerbaijan	Public university	Head of International Projects Division
2	Azerbaijan	Public university	Deputy Vice Rector for International Affairs[1]
3	Azerbaijan	Private university	Project Manager
4	Belarus	Public university	Head of the Department of Economics and Management
5	Belarus	Public university	Project Manager and Professor

Table 1 - List of research participants, the type of institution they work at and their roles.

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis (TA) approach, and followed the six steps of TA as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). After initially surveying the data, codes were generated and clustered into themes. Given the open-ended, exploratory nature of the research, this process was highly inductive, and codes were generated from the data itself. While not explicitly intended as a comparative study, the small number of participants from two related contexts and their shared involvement in the UniLab project inevitably prompted questions about how the Azerbaijani and Belarusian experiences resembled or differed from each other. This comparative approach also informed the organisation of codes into themes and the analytic narrative in which they were embedded through the write-up.

FINDINGS

The UniLab project: an impetus for change

For all interviewees, the UniLab project was an opportunity to initiate change in their institutions. Participants from both Azerbaijan and Belarus reported that they had previously witnessed a significant mismatch between the skills and competences provided by HEIs and those needed by employers. They especially noted the growing demand among employers for graduates with soft skills, and saw it as their institution's responsibility to develop students' employability and work-related skills in order to create what most interviewees described as a better "product" (i.e., graduate) for employers. They understood the UniLab project as a means to achieve this goal through multiple avenues. On the one hand, new courses and learning activities for students, developed as part of the project, would equip them with the more generic work-related competences that were lacking in the standard curricula. On the other hand, the project involved reaching out to employers, both to gain a better understanding of their expectations and requirements, as well as to advocate for students, to seek out new opportunities for them, and to persuade employers of students' potential to make meaningful contributions to their company or organisation. All interviews emphasised the novel aspect of this approach in their country. In the following paragraphs, the barriers that they faced in bringing about this change, and the strategies they used to overcome them, will be outlined, as well as interviewees' perspectives on the added value that participation in the UniLab project brought with it.

[1] Research participants number 1 and 2 belonged to the same institution.

Institutional and governmental barriers to the implementation of the project and WBL

As publicly funded (in the case of three of the four universities) or publicly recognised institutions, the HEIs under investigation faced limitations in adapting their provision to the demands of the labour market, as they are also directly accountable to their respective national authorities. Interviewees from both countries reported facing significant governmental restrictions in adapting the curricula in their institutions to improve students' workplace-preparedness. For example, for the participating public university in Azerbaijan, ratifying a new Master´s was a long and complicated process, and required the approval of the Ministry of Education. Compared to their Azerbaijani counterparts, the Belarusian participants were even more constrained by such regulations, both at the state and institutional level. One interviewee reported that scheduling placements which followed the "European model", i.e., that lasted more than several weeks, was difficult within their academic calendar and degree structure. Centralised career centres also did not feature in university regulations. Instead, staff in individual faculties were responsible for liaising between students and employers. They were primarily tasked with assigning graduates who received government scholarships (who make up around half of the students in one of the participating universities) to mandatory two-year placements, which were primarily hosted by state-owned entities or public institutions such as schools.

Cultural barriers: Differing attitudes among stakeholders

In addition to such formal barriers as the institutional structures and state-level regulations outlined above, interviewees also emphasised how their efforts to implement the UniLab project also came up against what can be termed "cultural barriers". These were especially prevalent in Belarus, where established forms of WBL were not aligned with the principles of learner-centred, labour market-responsive WBL, as envisaged in the UniLab project. This started with the assignment of placements. In what one interviewee described as a **"**remnant of the Soviet era", students still expected to be assigned a placement, rather than seeking one out for themselves. Companies that hosted students, especially state enterprises, had little interest in actively involving students, and as a result, the placement was a "formal agreement" rather than a real learning opportunity for students. By contrast, private companies were more likely to integrate students in their everyday business, and especially welcomed students who were more advanced in their studies. A similar discrepancy between private and public companies was noted by Azerbaijani interviewees, who also noted a "generational gap" between international companies that had recently arrived in the labour market, and local, more established companies. Among the latter, the notion of "learning on the job" was still novel. Instead, they expected their new employees to arrive with fully developed skills. Large, international corporations, however, had a more open mindset, and, in their quest for young, qualified workers, were initiating closer collaborations with universities.

Strategies for addressing barriers: responding to context-specific challenges

Just as the challenges that interviewees in Belarus and Azerbaijan faced in implementing the project were similar in some regards, but differed in degree and nature, the strategies they developed to overcome said challenges also varied according to their context. While in Belarus, the structural barriers prevailed throughout the project, in Azerbaijan, interviewees explained how they and their colleagues managed to circumvent certain regulations. Requirements relating to the curriculum could be bypassed by retaining the title of a module, but adjusting the curriculum content. Moreover, the Azerbaijani partners who had been working in similar EU-funded projects for many years found that there was a noticeable shift in attitudes of government authorities towards the modernisation of HE, and an ever-growing

appetite for international partnerships. As one participant summed up, ‘project by project, bureaucracy and governmental obstacles are getting softer and softer […] it’s a matter of time’. According to interviewees, this change was driven primarily by key individuals with ties to the universities (e.g., former alumni), who, due to their position within the government or government agencies, were able to push for a stronger labour market orientation in higher education.

A similar strategy, of reaching a group of stakeholders by engaging individuals and using their social networks to bring about change, was applied by one HEI in Azerbaijan in order to involve students more actively in WBL and employability training. Specifically, the institution in question engaged students as “career ambassadors” to support the career centre’s activities. This “internship” proved popular among students, whose tasks included promoting career centre events and administrative work, but who were also invited to attend meetings with employers and other stakeholders. In Belarus, factors such as the lack of centralised career centres made this kind of stakeholder engagement and networking through personal connections more challenging. The Belarusian interviewees also noted a reluctance among employers to establish new partnerships, and how this had been further exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic, political instability in Belarus, and the war in Ukraine. Given these circumstances, it becomes evident that the personal mobilisation of stakeholders, whether students, employers or government officials, as it was employed in Azerbaijan, could not be easily transferred to the Belarusian context.

Collaboration through UniLab

Despite their different circumstances, all interviewees reported how participating in the UniLab project contributed to their efforts to bring about positive change in their institutions. Interviewees highlighted the soft skill courses for students, which were developed by the consortium, and which addressed an evident gap in their institutions’ employability training provision, responded to the demands of the labour market, and could be implemented without too many difficulties. The extent to which the partners benefited from the other project activities varied among the participating institutions. The Azerbaijani partners highlighted the study visits to the EU universities, and took inspiration from seeing how WBL is operationalised there. At the same time, they found that these visits threw into stark relief the discrepancies between the resources and infrastructures available at the European institutions and the situation in interviewees’ home institutions/countries. Some interviewees felt that the EU partners did not always understand how this impeded the UniLab project implementation, nor how difficult it was to initiate changes in the curriculum, let alone to broader university structures or government requirements. While the interviewees had made efforts to circulate the insights they gained from the UniLab project among their colleagues, a lack of English skills, or in some cases, a reluctance among more senior staff members to introduce change, posed additional challenges.

Overall, however, the Azerbaijani partners were hopeful that a change in attitudes across all stakeholder groups was underway, and that students could play a significant role in driving this change. The UniLab project, they stressed, had been unique in involving students directly in study visits to EU countries and other project activities, instilling in students a strong interest in more innovative, learner-centred forms of WBL. Similarly, the opportunities for collaboration among institutions within the same country were highlighted as an advantage of the project, as it allowed institutions operating in the same national context but with different institutional structures and cultures - depending on whether they were private or public, and on how much previous experience with EU-funded projects they had - to learn from each other and to find shared solutions to overcome the barriers of implementing WBL.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings outlined above, all interviewees understood WBL and employability training as an essential strategy to respond to the pressure that their institutions were under to become more responsive to the labour market. This pressure resulted from both employers' and students' expectations not being met, reflecting findings from studies undertaken in both partner countries which highlight the mismatch between HEIs' learning provision and the demands of the labour market. In relation to the "blame game" on whether it was the responsibility of employers or universities to develop students' employability skills, the interviewees saw it primarily as their institutions' duty. However, they also recognised the crucial role employers played in creating an enabling environment by offering opportunities for WBL and for collaborating with HEIs. There was therefore a sense of frustration among interviewees at the lack of employers' understanding of the importance of WBL and its value, especially among local employers who assumed that the graduates they employed would arrive fully prepared for employment, i.e., not need any further training, while at the same time expecting them to have a range of soft skills that went beyond the academic training provided by universities.

The interviewees' accounts also provide interesting insights into the conditions that are necessary for WBL to be implemented successfully, and reaffirm the importance of several enabling factors identified by Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020), including 'a purposeful division of staff roles involving teaching staff, employer-facing staff, student-facing staff and professional services personnel'. Such a division could be (to some extent) observed in Azerbaijan, where dedicated career centres with designated staff, and supported by additional student "career ambassadors", allowed for an effective division of labour and made it possible for employers and other stakeholders to be targeted effectively whilst also attending to students' needs. By contrast, in Belarus, a less centralised institutional system, in which many of these tasks were handled at the faculty level, made it difficult to alter institutional procedures, let alone bring about change within the institutional culture. While this could be read as a lack of what Dadze-Arthur and colleagues describe as institutions' 'willingness and capacity [...] for structural, institutional, operational and cultural changes', the experience of the non-EU partners involved in the UniLab project shows how this willingness cannot be reduced to a single factor. Instead, it should be understood as the outcome of multiple elements which are highly contextual and are interwoven with the institutional structures and broader political realities in which HEIs inevitably operate.

Such realities made themselves particularly noticeable in an international collaboration such as the UniLab project. Exceptional external circumstances - resulting primarily from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine - especially affected the Belarusian partners. In their case, these circumstances significantly stymied the development of 'productive partnerships between universities, employers, industry, vocationally-oriented learning providers, and other non-traditional stakeholders', a further enabling factor for WBL identified by Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020). For such partnerships to emerge, a basic consensus and stability across society is needed. In its absence, stakeholders remain isolated and rarely initiate new forms of collaboration. Even in more favourable circumstances, such as those in Azerbaijan, such partnerships will inevitably be operationalised differently depending on the particular history of university-industry collaboration in the country in question, and on the type of organisation, as well as the attitudes of individual stakeholders and the broader economic and political situation.

These findings raise the question of the validity of a universal model of WBL being implemented across multiple contexts, and suggest that, as Felce (2010) argues, WBL needs to follow a "context-engaged approach", starting with stakeholders considering 'different foci, understandings and definitions of WBL before [an HEI] can identify its own understandings for its unique context' (Felce, 2010, p. 23). While the international

collaborations made possible through Erasmus-funded projects such as UniLab play an important role in facilitating knowledge exchange and setting innovative practices in motion, this should not come at the cost of neglecting the partner institutions' particular context, nor fail to consider the limitations as well as the possibilities inherent to this context. The interviewees overwhelmingly focused on the European model of WBL as exemplified in the EU programme country institutions, and the limitations and barriers preventing them from achieving this model themselves, rather than on the context-specific possibilities for change that could be realised in their own environment. Such a self-reflective approach is especially important for the implementation of WBL that goes beyond the establishment of formal university-industry agreements, institutional procedures and extracurricular employability courses, but that initiates a pedagogy that, as Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020) describe, 'bridges unhelpful binaries between theory and practice, knowledge and competence, and classroom and work-site' (p.43). This kind of learner-centred, context-engaged pedagogy cannot be implemented purely through a top-down approach as part of the "Europeanisation" of HE and WBL in the EU's partner countries, but can only be sustained if stakeholders across various sectors and fields are driven by a shared impetus for change.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Analysing and evaluating more thoroughly whether such a process is underway in any of the participating institutions was not within the scope of the current study. For this, more longitudinal research and a larger and more diverse range of research participants would have been necessary. Instead, the current study offers a snapshot of the implementation of WBL in four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus as a result of their participation in the UniLab project. Rather than focusing on the specifics or practicalities of this implementation, the study investigated the general understanding and vision of WBL in these institutions and the internal and external barriers and limitations they face in realising their vision, while also shedding light on relevant cultural and sociopolitical factors. While the interviews conducted with institutions' staff members were the main source of data collection, it is important to note that the author, as part of the eucen team coordinating the project, was heavily involved in the project's final stage. This provided ample opportunities for observing the project's evolution and for discussing it informally, both with EU and non-EU partners. However, it also raises questions about the author's positionality and bias within the project, as well as the degree to which interviewees' answers could have been affected by their relationship as project partners.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting large scale studies that involve various stakeholders, such as employers, students, HE managers and government authorities. Combined with comprehensive baseline studies of the state of WBL and employability training in HEIs across the post-Soviet nations that have joined the European Higher Education Area - similar to those already undertaken at a smaller scale as part of the UniLab project (UniLab 2020a; UniLab 2020b) - these could contribute to our understanding of the contextual factors affecting the implementation of WBL in these countries, and help institutions formulate context-engaged strategies that are both learner-centred and responsive to the labour market.

CONCLUSIONS

The partner institutions in Azerbaijan and Belarus, like so many universities around the world engaged in WBL, faced significant challenges in reconciling the shifting demands of the labour market with the rigid structures regulating HE. However, as this research has shown, the challenges they face are specific to the cultural and sociopolitical context of the two countries, and especially to the particular circumstances that arose as a result of the Covid-19 health crisis and the war in Ukraine. Implementing WBL is highly complex, and even in two contexts that are similar in many regards, including their shared Soviet history, their membership in the European Higher Education Area, and the growing pressure HEIs face in addressing the mismatch between employers' requirements and students' expectations, their experiences differ significantly based on current circumstances and the degree to which previously established institutional cultures and procedures continue to be implemented. Despite these specific circumstances, the experiences of the UniLab partners also highlight the universal importance of strong collaborations with stakeholders, a learner-centred approach, and an openness towards change at the institutional and governmental levels in order to implement innovative WBL and boost graduate employability.

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OPENNESS, FLEXIBILITY AND THE ROLE OF AI IN UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS. THREE QUESTIONS TO GARY HUSBAND

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Following the eucen autumn seminar in Barcelona in November 2022, Eva Cendon, on behalf of the editors of EJULL, asked Gary Husband three questions pertaining to the theme of the autumn seminar "ULLL as enabler of talent enhancement - Reskilling and upskilling to meet new demands"[1]. The interview, conducted online, focussed on professional education and the link between universities and industry.

Gary Husband is Associate Professor of Further, Adult and Vocational Education at the University of Sunderland. Until September 2022, Gary was Head of Department for Education Studies at the University of Stirling. Gary has had an eclectic career, much of which has been spent in the further, adult and vocational sector in the UK where he has held various roles including teaching mechanical and renewable technologies, head of department and head of professional education.

Eva Cendon: What is important to consider when we talk about partnerships between universities and industry?

Gary Husband: The key consideration for me here is flexibility and a genuine approach to two-way collaboration. Where there is reciprocal movement of staff, students, ideas, projects and learning between the university and the industry partner, there are significant advantages for both parties. Specifically, students have a much more immersive experience in the working and learning environments as they gain real time experience, and the industry partner has presence within the learning spaces. There are also advantages in how collaborative approaches to projects can be undertaken. Problem- and work-based learning offers further opportunity for both students and staff (of both organisations) to undertake meaningful work that has genuine impact and real-world consequence. Starting from a point of identifying a real-world problem and engaging collaboratively to explore solutions, students gain valuable and real-time experience and, concurrently, industry partners are able to access and engage with both the creative responses from the students, but also the expertise of the university and its staff.

[1] https://autumn2022seminar.eucen.eu/

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Eva Cendon: We all know that our structures and mindsets within universities are quite rigid, especially when we look at the degree level. How can we make our programmes more open, or more specifically: how can we integrate flexibility and space for innovation?

Gary Husband: This is critical moving forward as there are now many very agile training providers, educational partners that are moving into these spaces. If universities want to be able to continue to develop these partnerships, they will need to look at ways in which very flexible approaches can be adopted. There is nothing wrong with maintaining traditional degree structures (they work for many scenarios) but developing very flexible routes in partnership is also critical.

This could include provisions such as micro-credentials, where staff from companies of students can undertake modular learning in very specific subjects and gain the recognised credit (e.g., 10 post graduate credits for a micro-credential as opposed to 40 credits for a whole large module; this example is based on the UK higher education credits system). Additionally, using the collaborative partnerships to support work such as staff professional learning (both ways), collaborative projects (linked to courses) and, importantly, new pathways. Degree apprenticeships are going to continue to grow in importance as they offer staged and affordable routes to degrees for students and tailored programmes for industry partners.

The significant advantage to these programmes is that students are embedded within industry and immersed within the professional environment whilst also gaining the university provided learning. They often come with fees paid by employers which can widen participation and access for students that may previously not have been able to engage with degree level learning. The industry partner gains significantly through having employees learning whilst ‘on the job’ and also by having stakeholder input into the courses the students are undertaking.

Eva Cendon: What role can digitisation play in here, especially when we look at the almost breath-taking developments with AI?

Gary Husband: My thoughts here are in a similar place to my response to question one and two. We need flexible, reflexive, integrated, interactive and dynamic digital spaces for industry partners, teaching and research staff and importantly, students. The days of using VLE platforms as storage spaces for class notes and PowerPoint presentation should be well behind us. The level of technology available to us now that is increasingly accessible, easy to engage with and intuitive to produce with is almost impossible to fully fathom. But, critically, this isn’t about making digital spaces bloated with a dazzling array of sense-overloading software and content. It’s about creating useful, dynamic and interactive spaces that support collaborative learning approaches (staff, industry and students) both inside and outside the university.

Chat GPT has seemingly come from nowhere and is a powerful and entirely accessible tool that, undoubtedly, students will access and use heavily. This can either have serious implications for how we try and maintain the status quo, or it’s an incredible opportunity to engage with a powerful tool that we can integrate into what we do and how with work with students and partners.

A useful example could be to focus on integrating Chat GPT as a tool (much like we accepted search engines and 'googling') and engage with the technology in the production of collaborative assignments and impactful projects. If we shift to a position of greater emphasis on assessing project content and not project reporting (the written aspect) then the uses for assistive digital technologies become more apparent. These are of course very early days…

Eva Cendon: Thank you very much.

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