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Embrace this high level of industry engagement - it can benefit us all

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The influence of industry on the curriculum has never been greater, says Frazer Mackenzie, but it is far more positive than simply creating a workforce

There has been a relentless drive from the Government, quality assurance agencies and others to place "employability" at the centre of the university curriculum.

As public funding continues to be squeezed and the reality of carrying large loans into working life hits the first wave of variable fee-paying undergraduates entering the employment market, we can be certain that qualifications demonstrably aligned to industry partners and key employment skills will become even more important to students when making university choices. Some would say this is nothing new. The challenge associated with delivering a well-rounded higher education experience, while ensuring that our students develop the necessary skills to make a living, has been at the heart of the enormous growth in higher education during the past decade.

So why do employers still have such a dim view of what universities can provide? What is it that we are doing that seems to fall so short of what industry would wish for? Perhaps there has never been a better time for us to reassess what we really mean when we use the term "industry facing".

There's a high degree of suspicion on both sides of the education/industry divide. Employers recount stories of graduates with hopelessly overinflated expectations of what they can offer, claiming that lecturers are at best out of touch, or at worst guilty of creating an artificial demand for graduate and post-graduate qualifications. On the flipside, some academics may accuse industry of adopting a short-term view of what education should provide, with an emphasis on training to do one specific job at the expense of a richer learning experience. At a more fundamental level, the value of critical thinking is arguably being marginalised and replaced with a drive to simply provide a workforce.

Although I've worked in full-time higher education for more than 18 years, I've never seen a conflict between education and industry. Moreover, it was the desire to see a much stronger link between education and industry that initially brought me into higher education. As a freelance audio/music producer and corporate film-maker, I graduated with a strong sense of my own creative abilities, but with little or no appreciation of how I could turn this into a regular and sustainable income. Little in my degree prepared me for contracted self-employment in the creative industries. The cut and thrust of constantly hustling for clients, the need to maintain a network of contacts, and the emphasis on good communication and management skills when pitching for projects meant a very steep learning curve.

A stronger level of industry engagement during my degree would have undoubtedly given me more realistic expectations of what working in the creative industries would mean, but it wouldn't have changed my passion for the more theoretical aspects of my research. A strong grounding in cultural theory had a lasting impact on my client relationships in the music and entertainment industries.

Both higher education and industry need to put the old divisions to one side and reassess what we can offer one another. Working closely with the creative industries has fundamentally changed our approach to curriculum design and delivery at Bucks New University. Music, film, TV and performing arts sectors are experiencing

unparalleled changes, and a high level of industry engagement is the only means we have of staying relevant. Since the creative industries are multidisciplinary, requiring complex creative and entrepreneurial skills, the artificial and often budget-driven subject divisions between departments, schools and faculties have to go. Our industry partners are now our primary course content providers. Course development and structure unashamedly emerge from where there is an industry need.

As old business models for monetising intellectual property fail, we also provide industry with the perfect low-risk environment to test new ideas and provide them with graduates who can "hit the ground running". A more "project-centred" approach to module writing brings colleagues together from across the university to create learning experiences and assessments that more accurately replicate work scenarios, with the potential for innovative work that has real-world value.

Let us be in no doubt, though, that developing and, more importantly, maintaining successful industry partnerships requires continuous engagement. Partnerships have to lead to real and tangible wins on all sides. Universities have to be able to listen and respond quickly to industry needs, and with the minimum amount of bureaucracy. They have to talk the language of industry and share in the risks that businesses are taking every day if they want to share in the rewards.

Postscript :

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