Innovative Roles in Leading Community Engagement and Cooperation with employers:

Case Study from a Bahraini University

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Abstract

This paper adds to academic practice in a specific context – the Kingdom of Bahrain. Researchers give specific attention to the two case studies prepared, the first focusing on "Community Engagement Leadership" and the second on "Promoting Cooperative Relationships with Local Employers". They are weaving through this qualitative work aiming at scrutinizing challenges related to creating innovative change to enhance and develop the work of the university leadership in its socio-cultural interplanetary. This work gives insight into attaining experience from the practice of others and perhaps inspire them to effect change on their own. The two cases reflecting on personal experience and researched here would help practitioners in education to follow some role models that can contribute to adopting distinguished creative ideas in performing their educational tasks.

Key words:

Change, Community Engagement, Innovative roles, Employability.

1. Introduction

There are now over 120,000 Fellows of the Higher Education Academy worldwide. Fellowship is designed to enable individuals to be recognised for their contribution to Higher Education against the standard set by the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF)[1]. It is interesting to note that the title of the framework is not detracting from the popularity of Fellowship as indicated above,

with over 6500 individuals recognised as meeting the requirements set by one of the four categories located outside the UK. Of this number, 390 are in the Kingdom of Bahrain where 46 individuals are Senior Fellows[2]. The reason why Fellowship has engaged individuals and institutions in this socio-cultural context is, in part, explained by the fact that the Kingdom is not immune from what Smart, Asghar, Campbell and Huxham (2019) identify as a global pressure on higher education. Citing, Gourlay and Stevenson (2017: p391) Smart et al (2019) acknowledge the impact of international league tables, market competition, and the dominance of prestige culture, with notions of 'excellence' framing both sector-wide responses and institutional practices'. Curiously, learning and teaching expertise struggle to hold its own in terms of its relative importance alongside disciplinary research, especially if it is externally funded. Creanor (2014), for example, is one author who is convinced that only lip service is paid to the centrality of pedagogy in the university because of engrained cultural perspectives, which devalue it alongside the prestige afforded to research.

Such a sidelining of teaching and learning seems, on the face of it to be odd given what Devonshire & Brailsford (2012) recognise as the increasing commodification of education and a growing emphasis on the student as consumer. The prevailing discourse is that if the quality and profile of teaching and learning are raised, students will speak more positively about their programmes of study, thus becoming pseudo-marketers for institutions who must compete for their business.

Therefore, despite a criticism of Fellowship of the HEA that it is individualistic and retrospective in its essence, it does offers something more to the institution because promoting the numbers of Fellows employed therein can speak to its commitment to teaching and the support of learning in higher education. Thus, as Smart at al, 2019) suggest the UKPSF is of its time because it offers to the sector a tool through which academic practice can be recognised and valued. While this view originated from the UK, it is perhaps even more pertinent in the Kingdom of Bahrain, a small island nation in the Arabian Gulf with a population of around 1.5 million and 12 HE institutions. In this context, Fellowship might have particular value in being able to differentiate HE providers one from another using Fellowship

as a marker of quality, which can then attract students to particular programmes and establishments.

However, this is a limited perspective, because while the numbers of Fellows may indeed communicate something about the institution, the detail of the claims themselves would speak far more eloquently to the institution, its mission, its values and priorities. Yet, commonly creating claims for recognition is a private enterprise, with minimal dissemination out from the process. Therefore, we argue the need for claimants to plan to address this weakness in the current trend, which as we have already said is individualistic, retrospective and commonly private. This paper is, therefore,   because it brings into the public space a private claim. The content of which we suggest is of value to the wider HE community, in the Kingdom of Bahrain and beyond not least because, as will become clear, the two case studies offer a window into the purpose of the university and its commitment to its community.

2. Context

It is mandated that universities in the Kingdom of Bahrain must exert efforts to establish and maintain contacts with local employers and professions and be proactive in looking for occasions to engage with them. The aim of any such activity is for universities to seek out and learn from the views of local employers about future market demands and opportunities for collaboration to support engagement between business and industry and academic provision. Responsibility for this endeavour sits with the universities. It is for these institutions to develop close links with employers and to work consistently to broaden the number and range of collaborations. Enabling universities to engage in cultural and social activities within the community provides opportunities for mutually beneficial and respectful alliances. Just as universities need to establish their networks, - cultural, social, economic and community-based - students must be encouraged to volunteer and develop their contributions as a social responsibility.

It is in this socio-cultural context that the two case studies, which formed part of one academic's claim against the standard for Senior Fellowship of the HEA, are

situated. In essence, each case study is illustrative[3] providing the opportunity to reflect on personal experience and the roles the individual took to enhance learning and teaching at a university level (Glauser-Patton, 2010). For the individual Fellowship applicant, the case study approach enabled a deepened understanding of their own pedagogic practices; for the reader the opportunity to stimulate thinking and provoke learning are made possible, in respect of both what Senior Fellowship demands and the specific examples on which focus falls (Glauser-Patton, 2010). As would befit what is in effect a personal account of practice, both case studies are written in the first person.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is a professional reflection of experiences and the roles played to enhance learning and teaching at a university level. Such research works are characteristically of qualitative approach, following in a description and explanation of behavior and/or experiences based on investigation and scrutinizing a phenomenon. Subsequently, this line of thought will validate the case study approach; how experienced scholars can be very effective in influencing student learning and teaching using the Higher education Academy UKPSF. The work will show the experiences and how that reflected on students and peers to enhance learning and teaching. This approach is agile and permits the scholar to learn and discover as the research progresses. It consequently leads into additional line of thoughts or formulating hypotheses for further research (Glauser et al ,2010).

4. Research question

How the case study approach can generate new insights in the domain of teaching and learning, such a question will lead to an effective method of demonstrating theories that can help to show how different aspects of teacher's experiences will

formulate a basis for professionals to enrich and nurture the T&L practices at the university level**.**

5. Framework for Case Analogy Review & Discussions

5.1 Case Study 1: Community Engagement Leadership

I was employed for a period of three years as Vice President for Administration & Finance and Community Engagement in a privately funded Bahraini university. Historically, the university lacked a clear setup for community engagement (CE); its function neither clear in the context of the curriculum nor in terms of the student learning experience. I was concerned about the status of CE because I understood the mandate for it in the Kingdom of Bahrain, but also because I knew it had the potential to enrich external relationships and the curriculum. I saw the opportunity to use my prior experience, knowledge and training to build CE into the layers of the university and its operations. Noteworthy amongst these experiences was a workshop on CE facilitated by the Executive Director of the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training, Prof. Dolina Dowling. The workshop had been stimulating and served to capture my imagination. Upon joining University, I saw the opportunity to apply what I had learned.

My attention focused on how to engage University in a way, which would enable the achievement of quality objectives since CE, had become a requirement for quality assurance as stated in the publication of the Education & Training Quality Authority in the Kingdom of Bahrain.

> 'It should be emphasized that the primary aim is to help the institution enhance its quality assurance arrangements in the three core functions of teaching and learning, research and community engagement' (Institutional Handbook Review p.29; Unlan,2014).

I began the process of change by raising the subject of CE with University's President, and, having secured his support, brought it to a University Council Meeting. I persuaded the meeting to support my plan, arguing that CE was one of its quality pillars. It was agreed that I should form a Community Engagement Committee, which would include representation from each of University's Colleges.

I was nominated as its Chair, supported by a newly established post - Director for CE – and a CE team. This arrangement mirrored the recommendations presented in the workshop I had attended.

I spent time with the CE team, guiding them in understanding the importance of CE and their roles in developing this function so that it embedded into university system and its culture. My collaboration with the team was frequent; I had daily interactions with the group overall and with individuals in the team. Ultimately, my work with the team kept a clear focus on CE in the context of an enhanced student experience. I sensed the timing was right for this; I felt success was going to happen, but to ensure it; I adopted an approach, which was inclusive and facilitative. I chose to lead, mentor and coach the CE team as a whole and its individual members to open the path for effective engagement and forward planning focused on how CE could enhance student learning (Aburgre and Kpipuo, 2017; Hobson et al, 2015; Knippelmeyer et al., 2007; Rowlings, 2002).

However, I recognized that leading change would depend on setting out a baseline on which to scaffold a way forward. Therefore, I prepared a report on CE at University, setting out the current picture. I then spoke to colleagues, Deans and students to discuss their insights in respect of how they saw the current situation, seeking their views on how it might evolve more systematically at University. Their feedback helped shape my plan for CE and my leadership of the project (Black, 2015: Bryman, 2007, Cott et al., 2008).

Running in parallel to my work at a senior level was my mentoring, coaching and supervising of my CE team (noted above) designed to manage the activities, which would create a base for CE and disseminate the concept into learning and teaching practices in the university and more widely in the community. I mentored individual team members to enable them to achieve best results in their assigned roles, making them more self-determining and capable, building self-reliance and readiness to be effective.

To build on the interest in CE, which was emerging, I identified the need for some training, which would support the sharing of ideas within university. Consequently, I initiated and delivered two workshops designed to promote faculty engagement

and secure input into our plan for CE. They were well attended, by staff with feedback confirming significant concern for CE in its present form. The workshops also generated ideas on how to drive CE forward at the university. Attendees reminded me of the importance of engaging everyone from across university in the initiative, building awareness and securing support from all quarters. I was assisted in the process of creating momentum behind CE because of the way in which I had structured the CE team so that every College was represented in its membership. Furthermore, I had asked the Student Affairs and Public Relations Departments to participate. Consequently, the university started to buzz with ideas and activities. Moreover, word started to spread outside of the university.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) began to contact me and the CE team wanting to get involved. Consequently, the spirit of engaging with the community began to gain ground. In parallel, I noted that the CE team was gaining confidence and skill in persuading others. This paved the way for enhanced learning and teaching at the university. The progress I was making aligned with the expectations of the Higher Education Council Strategy 2014-2024 where it states

'interactive participation in higher education should be promoted and incentivized for all key stakeholders including industry, community and the academic institutions to achieve an innovation-driven knowledge economy'.

As CE attracted attention in the university, I worked on the development of the necessary Bylaws, formulating the draft framework for the university by undertaking benchmarking against regional and international standards (Booth, 2015). In the formulation process, I took into consideration reflections on teaching, learning and the role of each individual faculty member in the long term. I distributed the draft to colleagues in the CE team to get their comments. These proved extremely valuable in terms of shaping the function and the role of CE at university. Then, I wrote and implemented the policy with the assistance of my team based on the Bylaws. It was endorsed and circulated to University's staff. As a result, course-learning objectives were closely aligned, associated and harmonized with CE. I ensured Curriculum Review committees within the Colleges were aware of the Bylaws to ensure effective changes in practice.

As change embedded, senior managers required CE activities to form 20% of faculty workload, a decision welcomed by faculty who recognized the value of engaging with the community and saw its potential to enrich the student learning experience. Faculty started to build relationships with societies for the elderly and began volunteering and giving lectures to youth groups preparing them for future business life. One amazing outcome was the insistence of staff on documenting the events with us such as in the President's weekly news digest. Together with my team, I established a positive atmosphere among staff, and the university became very well known for its CE activities.

The initiative I led had impact at three levels. First, students became better at understanding the link between theory and practice, influencing their problem-solving and critical thinking. Through volunteering, they gained skills in communication and leadership. Second, faculty became more passionate about interactive teaching and learning methods and more involved in class interactions. They also reported new avenues for research and networking opening up. Finally, the community became more aware of students' needs as learners and future leaders, information, which was communicated to the CE team and more widely at events, held in and outside of the university.

Importantly, the adoption of CE as a central component of the curriculum, contributed to how students and faculty came to understand quality-learning experiences. CE became an enabler of change as students became more enthusiastic in their studies, giving positive feedback through course evaluation processes.

My leadership of CE resulted in sustainable change and influenced thinking about the purpose of the university. Furthermore, it confirmed the positive impact reported in the literature of how students gain through an emphasis on CE (O'Connor et al., 2011; Hofmeyer, et al, 2015; Middlehurst, 2012). The initial success I led on, developed further as the university started to design and manage programs in partnership with communities, giving me confidence to pioneer CE outside of the Kingdom of Bahrain too and resulting in my election as a Fellow to the Royal Society for Arts UK. The team I put together and led has now taken over

the development of CE in the university and is therefore central to enabling its social responsibility to be met.

5.2 Case Study 2: Guide Promoting Cooperative Relationships with Local Employers: Contribution to Teaching and Learning

The university lacked a comprehensive guide to the kind of relationships it should develop with local employers to support our graduates and to enhance the teaching and learning of our current students. From the perspective of the university, I saw that this guide was essential to make it a key player in the Kingdom of Bahrain with the potential to assist its students on many fronts. In seeing this, I understood that positive, sustainable relationships with employers are important for our students' teaching and learning, not least because higher education qualifications must match labor market needs. If not, young people may face unemployment or may have to work away from their specialization, thus questioning the point of their degree qualification.

Without what I saw as the necessary guide, I recognized the opportunity to develop one with a clear focus on learning and teaching, aligned with employer needs and priorities. I led its development, drawing together existing sources of information with supporting policies and procedures guided by the university's senior management (Program Advisory Board Policy, Students Internship Policy and Learning & Teaching Policy). I worked with Deans, HODs and staff to formulate the guidelines that would assist them in the implementation of the process, determined to make sure it operated well. Key to my plan was my determination to facilitate open dialogue with all parties to convince them of the importance of such a guide, with clarify of focus on how to use it.

Initial feedback from colleagues was positive; the view shared with me was that the guide was of paramount importance in terms of the process of performing their duties to serve our students. I outline here the changes that I led on, as a result of my collaborative practice.

First, I started with the role of the Advisory Councils, an official structure within the university providing university–industry linkage with the Colleges in coordination with the relevant ministries and departments. The Councils provide advice on academic affairs including graduates and teaching plans, together with the necessary amendments to meet labor market requirements.

The Deans, Heads of Departments, Senior Executives from large companies, specialist experts, academics and Executives Directors from large and individual service establishments (either public or private), comprise the membership of the Councils. These councils provide an essential channel for professional feedback, highlighting the actual market needs and making sure all programs serve the market to ensure a high rate of student employability (Olson, 2008; Rose and Stiefer, 2013; McElroy & Dove, no date).

The second thing I did was to prepare a guide for student internship and academic supervision for each College, to ensure a consistency of practice, which could be evaluated and subsequently enhanced. Included within this guide was the requirement for students to prepare reports about their internship period focused on specific requirements and identifying additional learning experiences they had been able to access. Data from the individual reports were to be used to shape ongoing practice in the Departments and Colleges, which who have to prepare their own, reports centered on student learning. I designed the guide to provide students with field experience integrated with the opportunity to share their insights and exploring the links between academic preparation and fieldwork. I was also conscious of assisting students in developing and carrying out a major research project, which would serve to draw together the learning from their internship experience. In leading this initiative, I was determined to ensure that internships were individualized and tailored to the needs and interests of each student in the programme. Because of the need for students to become independent, as part of the internship experience, the guide required students to take active roles in finding appropriate internships for themselves aligned with the quality assurance process sitting with the university.

Subsequently, I conducted a survey on a representative sample of students to evaluate the teaching and learning they got from internship programs. Then, I did the same for their academic supervisors. The feedback from both was positive. The report confirmed the success of internship as a core component of student learning and development (Bukaliya, 2012; Anderson et. al., 2106).

I further enhanced the internship programme through embedded course site visits designed to acquaint students with real-life situations. These visits were to be timetabled by course leaders working with professionals from the companies who together would plan these visits to support student learning. I worked with staff guiding their thinking in planning these visits. I also persuaded them of the need to incorporate them into their course specifications and advised them how they might align the visits with the course ILOs - Intended Learning Outcomes - using university quality processes. Feedback from students and staff confirmed the positive impact on student learning of embedded site visits.

Another part of the initiative I led was requiring programmes to include guest speakers from different disciplines into the student learning experience. I did this because of the powerful connection between industry and university-based learning. Selected topics on hot issues were discussed with students and documented in course portfolios. Ideas sparked by such activities helped in enhancing courses and programs. I initiated the draft policy for guest speakers and benchmarked it with other universities in order to support teaching and learning practice at the university.

While meeting with faculty to discuss implementation, I got positive feedback about the guest speakers. They said the speaker's added value to the student learning experience and gave students the chance to work together with professionals from the field. They identified the value of different perspectives and working with experts to convey new ideas to students and the course of study. They spoke about the students' enthusiasm to interact with the speakers and how students saw it as a way to gain additional knowledge and network, which may assist them in their future employability (Riebe, Sibson, Meakins, 2013; (Wolfe, n.d).

I also took the initiative to open pathways with professional bodies to help faculty and students through joint events to support teaching and learning at the university. I initiated several memoranda of cooperation and in so doing supported the university's vision to extend relationships with these bodies. The list of bodies now comprises the SMEs Society, the Capital Governorate, the Business Women Society, the Social Media Club and the Flat6Lab. Cooperation with these bodies has had an immense benefit for the faculty. It gives insight into what each profession requires, which faculty can match with stated graduate attributes.

Finally, recognizing the university's commitment to promoting entrepreneurship and to providing appropriate academic, physical and financial resources – as identified in its strategic plan, I saw the need to further develop systems and processes which would support entrepreneurship and enterprise across the institution. I knew this would involve developing policies and mechanisms which would facilitate funding for graduate and staff enterprise and provide appropriate facilities such as incubator support. (Accreditation Handbook, Higher Education Council, 2016). To achieve my goal, I formulated suggestions for the university's senior management aiming to foster an entrepreneurial mindset that results in innovation, initiative, and commitment. An entrepreneurial mindset also consists of self-determination, a belief in one's self and one's ideas, and the ability to visualize these ideas coming to life (Kerr, et al, 2017). Teaching students to develop this type of mindset is invaluable because it is what will ultimately help transform them into successful entrepreneurs.

I started to approach different institutions which could help us in promoting "entrepreneurship". One such example is Tamkeen, a semi-government organization supporting the private sector through business and human capital development support programs for Bahrainis. I visited Tamkeen to discuss how to develop entrepreneurship at university. I also initiated contact with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce as well as the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce & Industry. I arranged to include experts in entrepreneurship from Tamkeen on our Advisory Board. I arranged for the hosting of specialized international and regional conferences on Entrepreneurship at University. Altogether, these discussions led

the university to the question how it might enhance teaching and learning practices through entrepreneurship.

Consequently, I was asked to devise a course in entrepreneurship to be taught at university level. I gathered a team, assigning tasks and supervising activities. The first task was to benchmark with other universities who had advanced experience in teaching entrepreneurship. Then it was essential to design a course with clear teaching and learning outcomes, and assessment strategies. The course is now approved as an elective and has been widely accessed by a significant number of students.

To sum up, I have learned immensely from all the activities each of which contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning and the improvement of quality. By fostering this dynamic approach, more focus has been given to all sources that support and enhance teaching and learning. My support to colleagues has been continuous, taking the form of one to one mentoring and formal meetings with all parties at the university. The role I have played has developed my own practice in thinking about local employer engagement and making it happen. The guide was adopted and has been sustained in its use. Additionally, the staff development unit uses the guide to train colleagues on how to adopt and adapt it to suit their programmes.

6. Conclusion

At the start of this paper, we posited the critique that recognition as a Fellow of the HEA is individualistic because it has to centre on what the individual applicant did, and must be retrospective, looking back at what was done. We also spoke to the fact that the process of creating claims is commonly private with an overall tendency not to disseminate out from the final claim made. We argue that this paper has addressed all three critiques. It has brought into the public space, the detail of an individual's Senior Fellowship claim providing food for thought for the readers which could well act as an impetus for change in their own practice. The detail provided also makes explicit the fact that while the claim itself may be

focused on what *was* done, it can and should signal what was *achieved*, laying the foundation for future practice. Therefore, by being evaluative in its positioning it becomes forward-focused.

In closing, we note the value of the process of reconfiguring what was a private claim about a person's academic practice aligned with the requirements set in respect of Senior Fellowship into a paper which makes public the private. It added to the process of learning, but moreover convinced us that there is value in dissemination becoming embedded as part of the ongoing professional development of successful claimants. If such a practice became commonplace, in the claimant's own institutional space, in their local context, and nationally and internationally we may be able to evaluate just has much Fellowship of the HEA is acting as an agent of change – something believe to be true.

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