External placements from the perspective of collaborating companies

Las prácticas externas desde la perspectiva de las entidades colaboradoras

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Abstract

Introduction: The partnership between higher education and the labour market is a prerequisite for improving graduates' employment opportunities. However, this partnership is not always as fluid as it should be, sometimes because universities do not understand what companies expect from the collaboration and forget that companies are not NGOs; other times because companies are not aware of the potential benefits and impacts they can derive from the partnership. This paper sheds light on the perception of this collaboration held by the entities collaborating with the university in placements, and uncovers their motivations and demands. Methodology: Based on the literature review of motivations, impacts and benefits associated with university–business partnerships, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of entities collaborating in external practices with Jaume I University, following a cuota sampling design. Results: The main results obtained from the content analysis show that the main motivations driving entities to collaborate are the principles of corporate social responsibility, although underlying this motivation is the selection of potential future employees. The demands organisations made include improving the quality, quantity and forms of relationship between the partners, and the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of using university services. Discussion: In the field of Spanish academia, the collaboration between university and business generally seems to be discussed as a one-way relationship. Universities show a certain lack of interest in partnerships, and their concern appears to focus more on assigning students to placements rather than on their specific suitability. In addition, work placement practices are often designed by academics who fail to consider the real needs of the labour market.

Keywords: External placements, higher education, education work relationship, corporate social responsibility.

Resumen

Introducción: La cooperación entre la educación superior y el mercado laboral es un requisito para mejorar las oportunidades de empleo de los titulados. Sin embargo, esta asociación no siempre es tan fluida como debería, a veces porque las Universidades no entienden lo que las entidades esperan de esa colaboración y olvidan que éstas también deben ser compensadas de alguna manera. Pero otras veces las empresas no son conscientes de los beneficios potenciales y el impacto que pueden obtener de esta colaboración. El presente trabajo hace un acercamiento a la percepción que las entidades que colaboran con la universidad en prácticas externas tienen de dicha colaboración, así como sus motivaciones y demandas. Metodología: A partir de la revisión de la literatura al respecto de motivaciones, impactos y beneficios asociados a la colaboración entre universidad y empresa, se ha realizado una entrevista semiestructurada a una muestra de entidades colaboradoras en prácticas externas de la Universidad Jaume I siguiendo un muestreo de cuotas. Resultados: A partir del análisis de contenido, los resultados muestran que las entidades colaboran sobre todo movidas por principios de Responsabilidad Social Corporativa, aunque subyacente a esa motivación aparece la selección de potenciales futuros empleados como base de la colaboración. En el terreno de las demandas, aparecen el de mejorar la calidad, cantidad y formas de relación entre ambas organizaciones, así como la posibilidad de disfrutar de beneficios en la utilización de servicios universitarios. Discusión: Al hablar de colaboración entre universidad y empresa para la docencia en nuestro país, en términos generales, parece hablarse de relación unidireccional. Las universidades muestran un cierto desinterés por mantener y fidelizar dicha

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relación. De hecho, esta preocupación parece estar más vinculada a la localización de los puestos de prácticas que a la idoneidad específica de estos. Además, dichas prácticas suelen estar diseñadas únicamente por profesorado universitario no teniendo en cuenta las necesidades reales del mercado laboral.

Palabras clave: Prácticas externas, educación superior, relación educación empleo, responsabilidad social corporativa

The Europe 2020 strategy highlights education systems as a means of achieving more sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010), which obliges them to develop study programmes that are more relevant to society, new methods of delivering this education, and new ways of validating and evaluating learning.

At the heart of this objective is the urgent need to build bridges between universities and external organisations[1] as a way of improving the relevance of study programmes and facilitating integration in the labour market (European Commission, 2011a). More specifically, as stated in a 2012 OECD report, close collaboration between universities and the labour market through a range of projects provides opportunities for students to acquire competences. The importance of the connection between institutions has been widely acknowledged, particularly with reference to external work placements, not only because of its weight in the study programme, but also as a vital period of transition between academic study and the working environment, during which students are socialised in the professional context and prepared to carry out their chosen careers. Placements therefore give students a taste of the environment that they will experience and work in after they graduate, and provide them with the frames of reference in which to develop their professional competencies (Álvarez, Iglesias & García, 2007; Egido, 2017; Latorre & Blanco, 2011; Valle & Manso, 2011).

Additionally, learning processes embedded in institutional and corporate working environments help universities to interpret and respond, through their study programmes, to the increasingly uncertain and complex challenges of today's society.

However, analysis of the present situation in Europe, and particularly in Spain, suggests that education systems (especially universities) are not responding quickly enough to these changes and are failing to adapt their programmes to the demands of the economy and the labour market.

On occasions, universities fail to understand what companies expect from this collaboration and forget that they expect some kind of recompense for their efforts. In turn, companies are not always aware of the potential benefits and impact that such collaborations can have (Ferrández et al., 2016a; 2016b). Whatever the case, there is no question that collaboration is necessary, and for it to be meaningful and sustainable universities must have a thorough understanding of how to foster and maximise the potential of this cooperation. Universities must therefore explicitly understand the motivations, benefits and potential impact as perceived by their student placement partners.

To achieve this understanding the following questions must be answered: What motivates companies to collaborate with universities? What benefits do they hope to obtain? What impact do they expect or have they received from such collaborations?

A review of the literature suggests certain possible responses to these questions in an international context. We classify these responses into four areas of motivations,

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[1] In this paper the terms entity, business, company and organisation are used interchangeably, but should be understood in their broadest sense to mean representatives of the world of employment.

impacts or benefits: economic, corporate social responsibility (CSR), innovation and strategy.

Economic variables. These factors are related to the perception of increased productivity in the organisation (Basit et al., 2015; Daley et al., 2016) and to savings in both employee training (García Delgado, 2002; Guinart, 2005; Healy et al., 2014; Marzo et al., 2008) and in accessing cheap or free human resources over a period of time (Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015; Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a; Siebert & Costley, 2013). When the collaboration is not limited to external work placements, savings can also derive from the sharing and reduction of R&D expenses (Marzo et al., 2008).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR refers to companies' taking responsibility for their impact on society (European Commission, 2011b). It is a transversal concept that affects various areas of business management. These factors are related to how the entity's public image is perceived, and how its reputation and prestige are boosted by giving support to universities (Daley et al., 2016, Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a,b; Healy et al., 2014; Marzo et al., 2008).

This enhanced image is good publicity for the company (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016b), but it also provides the opportunity to influence university curricula by enhancing study programmes, thereby improving students' employability and their social benefits (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016b; Garnett, 2016; Marzo et al., 2008; Whittington & Ferrández, 2007).

Transformation. This concept covers a range of approaches with a common thread: collaboration enables companies to keep up to date and foster an entrepreneurial attitude (Healy et al., 2014). Some aspects noted in the literature include modernising the workforce (Basit et al., 2015; Felce, 2017; Ferrández-Berrueco, 2016a; Marzo et al., 2008; Whittington & Ferrández, 2007) through the new knowledge and latest innovations that employees can learn from students on work placements (Antcliff et al., 2016; Geller et al., 2016; Guinart, 2005). The effect of this interaction is to promote a learning culture in the firm (White, 2012) by introducing a cycle of continuous improvement (Ions & Minton 2012).

Other factors related to professional reflection concern the way collaboration encourages greater acceptance of changes and compels mutual understanding (White, 2012), thereby helping companies to shift away from more traditional ways of working (Whittington & Ferrández, 2007; Ions & Minton 2012). In sum, collaboration transforms companies into learning organisations (Bolívar, 2007; Ions & Minton, 2012), a concept introduced into the business world by Peter Senge (1992) and that has subsequently been incorporated into the educational context.

Finally, this section also includes factors related to evaluation because collaboration gives firms a reference with which to evaluate their efficiency (Hegarty et al., 2011) and at the same time a way of monitoring their employees' performance (Siebert & Costley, 2013), thus promoting better qualified current and future employees (Felce et al., 2016).

Strategic planning. The last group of benefits covers two main perspectives. The first of these is strategic planning as a prospective action. Collaborating with universities, and specifically taking students on work placements, helps firms to identify new professional profiles (Guinart, 2005), select new employees (Daley et al., 2016; Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015; Felce 2017; Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a; García Delgado 2002; Healy et al., 2014; Marzo et al., 2008; Whittington & Ferrández, 2007), and strengthen their loyalty (Daley et al., 2016).

The second perspective of strategic planning refers to the opportunity to establish fruitful contacts in universities (Geller et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2014; Hegarty et al., 2011), which are sources of knowledge and technology for firms (Marzo et al., 2008).

Objectives

The above literature review identified companies' motivations and the benefits they can accrue and expect from collaborations with universities. In the second part of this paper we examine the real responses from collaborating entities in our immediate environment. The main aim of this study[2] is to identify the motivations and benefits associated with cooperation as perceived by entities already collaborating with the university through work placement agreements. Our second aim, which is related to the first, is to identify the elements or variables perceived as barriers to greater collaboration. Finally, and intrinsically linked to the previous aim, we attempt to find out which factors, beyond the motivations and benefits initially identified in the first aim, could facilitate or promote a better relationship.

Methodology

Bearing in mind the exploratory nature of this study due to the scant literature on the subject in Spanish (see, for example, Bolívar, 2007; García Delgado, 2002; Guinart, 2005; Marzo, Pedraja & Rivera, 2008; Zabalza, 2011, 2013), to meet these objectives we carried out semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) in a representative set of entities that currently collaborate with the university by taking external placement students from a range of degree programmes. This type of interview was chosen in order to combine two purposes: to confirm the theory evidenced in the international literature, and to validate it in our context (Wengraf, 2012).

The research team prepared a draft interview, drawing on the literature review and incorporating the categories deriving from it. This draft was then validated by three international experts in the area of university–business relations[3]. We followed the recommendation of the expert reviewers to include a question about any previous links the person responsible for implementing the work placement programme had with the university. This variable proved relevant when we analysed the entities' motivations to collaborate.

The data were collected in November 2017 by six members of the research team who had previously received two months' training. The six researchers contacted by telephone the person responsible for university work placements in the organisations, who then responded to the interview questions. Their responses were recorded in a Word document for subsequent content analysis, during which, and following proposals from various authors (Álvarez-Gayou, 2005; Fernández, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994), the information was classified into content categories. This interpretive process is described in the results section of the paper.

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[2] The results of this study are part of the project *Relaciones Universidad-Empresa para docencia. Motivaciones, Impacto y Beneficio. EMBI* (UJI-B2016-04).

[3] The experts were Tauno Kekäle, rector of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Stefan Humpl (Austria), expert assigned by the European Union to promote university–business relationships, and Jayne Mothersdale, responsible for the development of learning contract in companies as part of university degrees at Leeds Beckett University (United Kingdom).

Table 1 - *Semi-structured interview. General information*

A. **PERSONAL DATA**
Previous relationship with the university
Interviewee's position in the organisation
Length of time the entity has collaborated with the university

B. GENERAL QUESTIONS
1. Why did the organisation begin cooperating with the university?
2. Who instigated the initiative?
3. What previous relationship did this person have with the university?
4. How many placement students does the organisation usually take?
5. What are the reasons for continuing with the collaboration?
6. Does the university provide sufficient information about the possibilities of collaboration with your company? Why? What do you think is missing?
7. Would you like to benefit from any of the university's services in return for the collaboration?
8. What do the work placement students contribute to the business?
9. Do you have any other contact with the university apart from the placements? Giving talks, for example.
10. In some European countries, collaborating entities have a broader role that may involve cooperating in the design of study programmes, providing real cases for the students to work on, or asking the university to provide courses for their employees to retrain or update their knowledge. Would your organisation be interested in this type of collaboration? Which of the examples I mentioned do you find most attractive?
11. What do you think are the main barriers to a closer collaboration with the university?
12. What aspects do you think are missing from the collaboration with the university?
13. *Why does your organisation take students with different profiles? (only varied student profile)*
14. *Is there any particular reason for this? (only varied student profile)*
15. *Who takes this decision? (only varied student profile)*

C. QUESTIONS ABOUT ECONOMIC FACTORS
1. Do you think your organisation spends less on employee training as a result of taking work placement students?
2. Do you think that collaborating with the university can increase the company's productivity? Please give your reasons
3. What do you consider to be the greatest economic risk that could arise as a result of collaborating with the university?

D. QUESTIONS ABOUT CSR
1. Do you think that collaborating with the university improves the company's image? Please explain why.
2. Would you recommend other entities to collaborate with the university? Please give your reasons.

E. QUESTIONS ABOUT INNOVATION
1. To what extent do you think collaborating with the university helps to modernise the company?
2. Do you think the students contribute with innovative ideas? Please give your reasons.
3. Are you responsible for supervising placement students?
4. *(Only if the respondent is the placement supervisor)* Does your position as placement supervisor help you to learn more in your own job?

F. QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIC PLANNING
1. Do you use work placements as a way of selecting staff? Please explain why.
2. Has your company hired university students who did their work placements there? How were they contracted? Were they given an interview or contacted directly?
3. Has the company considered taking students with a different profile? Please give your reasons.

CONCLUSION
1. Would you like to make any further comments?

Sample

The entities selected for the interviews came from the university's database of firms with agreements to take placement students during the 2016–2017 academic year, which yielded a total of 922 organisations (Table 2). These entities were updated and classified in accordance with the categories we considered relevant for the study, and that would be suitable for our stratified sampling for the interviews. The following categories were used:

Size: the sample was divided into four categories according to the EU definition (DOUE, 2003): large (≥ 250 employees), medium (249–50), small (49–10) and microfirms (<10 employees).

Sector of production: the most commonly used definition of four production sectors was used (Kenessey, 1987): primary (farming and fishing), secondary (industry, construction and manufacturing), terciary (trade and services), quaternary (information management and technology).

Academic sector: as far as possible, the predominant academic field for the sector of production was determined, in accordance with Royal Decree 1393/2007 (arts and humanities, social and legal sciences, health, engineering and architecture, others).

Student profile: a dichotomous categorisation was used in which "single profile" referred to firms that only took students from one specific degree, and "varied profile" when students came from various degrees.

Ownership: two types of ownership were established: public and private.

Having established the company profiles, we selected the sample for the interviews using a non-probabilistic sampling technique combining expert selection and quotas (Kalton, 1983) in order to guarantee at least one company from each of the nested modalities, and including some specific cases of entities that regularly collaborate with the university on other questions that could provide more comprehensive information. For example, cases in which the subset of entities of a given profile included a sponsor or organisation with a specific relevance to the university were automatically selected for interview. Similarly, representatives of special cases that could be hidden within a more homogenous subgroup were also taken into account. This was the case of NGOs or associations with limited representation in the reference population and that might be concealed among the small or micro private entities in the tertiary sector.

This process yielded a total of 72 entities for the interviews. This number was finally reduced to 46 (see Table 2), since the information gathered did not contribute new elements and saturation was therefore reached (Hernández Carrera, 2014).

Table 2 - *Summary of collaborating entities in accordance with the variables considered relevant for the sample (N) and the sample composition (n)*

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	N (%)	n (%)
Size	Large (L)	96 (10.7)	11 (23.9)
	Medium (M)	144 (16.1)	13 (28.3)
	Small (Sm)	241 (26.9)	10 (21.7)
	Micro (Mi)	414 (46.3)	12 (26.1)
Production sector	Primary (P)	4 (0.4)	1 (2.2)
	Secondary (Sec)	103 (11.2)	13 (28.3)
	Terciary (T)	748 (81.3)	25 (54.3)
	Quaternary (Q)	67 (7.3)	7 (15.2)
Academic sector	Arts and humanities (A)	144 (15.6)	5 (10.9)
	Social and legal sciences (Sls)	408 (44.3)	12 (26.1)
	Sciences (Sc)	195 (21.2)	12 (26.1)
	Health (H)	73 (7.9)	5 (10.9)
	Engineering and architecture (E)	83 (9.0)	8 (17.4)
	Others (O)	19 (2.1)	4 (8.7)
Student profile	Single (Si)	872 (94.6)	37 (80.4)
	Varied (V)	50 (5.4)	9 (19.6)
Ownership	Public (P)	129 (14.0)	9 (19.6)
	Private (Pr)	793 (86)	37 (80.4)

Note. The code identifying each profile in the results is given in brackets.

Results

The main results obtained from the content analysis of the interviews are presented below, following the order of the study aims. No significant differences were found among the response patterns according to the independent variables (size, production sector, academic sector, student profile and ownership).

Motivations and benefits

First we determined the motivations and benefits that existing partners with the university associate with the cooperation (Table 3). When interpreting the results, it should be borne in mind that although a total of 46 entities were interviewed, the responses frequently referred to one or several of the categories, implying that the total number of responses was not always 46 but exceeded that number. However, the percentage for each category is calculated on the basis of the 46 entities.

The results are accompanied by comments from the respondents. We identified the entity's profile, following the same order as in Table 2 and using the initials for each category, which appear in brackets. Hence, a comment followed by initials in brackets, for example (LTSlsSiP), indicates that it was made by a Large company in the Terciary sector in the Social and legal sciences field, that only takes students with a Single profile, and is Publicly owned.

Table 3 - *Main results from the content analysis of the interviews*

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	n	%
Motivation for collaborating	Strategic planning	6	13.6
	R&D	1	2.3
	CSR	37	84.1
	No answer/Do not know	2	4.3
Economic benefits	Savings in salaries	7	15.2
	Investment for the future	14	30.4
	Increased productivity	25	54.3
	No benefits	8	17.4
Benefits associated with CSR	Improves company image	44	95.7
	Publicity for the entity	11	23.9
	No benefits	7	15.2
Benefits associated with company transformation	Innovation/modernisation	31	67.4
	Learning	14	30.4
	Change	6	13.0
	No benefits	8	17.4
Benefits associated with strategic planning	Influence the curriculum	3	6.5
	Identify future employees	32	69.6
	Find new professional profiles	5	10.9
	No benefits	6	13.0

At first glance one of the most striking results is the large majority of the entities (84.1%) claiming that CSR factors drive their collaboration with the university. Arguments such as "it is good for the company and for the students" (MiSecSlsSiPr); "the university asked us to collaborate" (LTSlsSiP); "the students approached us" (LSecESiPr) are examples of some of the comments included in this category. The motivation associated with strategic planning, namely the need to assess the quality of future graduates, was the second most common reason given (13.6%).

However, on examining each of the variables reported in the literature it is immediately obvious that although CSR is the motivation expressed as the superficial reason for the partnership, other underlying arguments indicate clear benefits for the firm in all the modalities noted, namely, economic, CSR, transformation and strategic planning.

The most noteworthy economic benefits mentioned are increased productivity (54.3%)

because the work placements generate "more work done" (MSecESiPr), or because "while the placement students are doing basic, mechanical tasks, employees can get on with more complex work" (LTSlsSiP). This comment clearly suggests that companies are covertly using students as cheap labour, which translates in lower salary costs for regular employees (15.2%).

The most frequently mentioned benefit associated with CSR in the interviews concerns enhanced company image (95.7%), supported by arguments such as "improves the company's social standing" (LSecASiPr), leads to "a higher reputation" (LTSlsSiPr) and "shows we are a serious company" (MiTOSiP). At the same time, however, other benefits associated with this enhanced social standing include the positive publicity deriving from the collaboration (23.9%); on one hand "it is good publicity for the firm" (MSecScSiPr) and on the other, "the students themselves help to publicise the entity" (LSecESiPr).

The third set of benefits is associated with transformation in the company. In this section, over half the entities affirmed that the collaboration was important for modernising the firm (67.4%) because students contribute innovative ideas (MiTSlsSiPr), from which the entities can gain new knowledge (30.4%).

Finally, in the strategic planning category the most commonly noted benefit concerned prospective future employees (69.6%), which ties in with the hidden motivation underlying CSR. Indeed, 65.2% of the entities (n=30) had hired workplace students when they graduated. Bearing in mind that public companies are not authorised to hire staff, and that the sample contained 37 private entities, we can verify that practically all the organisations with control over staff recruitment had used this system as a personnel selection mechanism (81.1%). Moreover, some of these firms used no additional selection mechanisms, contacting the graduates directly with a job offer (LTHSiP).

Barriers and facilitators

In this section we present the results relating to the second and third of our aims (Table 4), concerning the barriers to and the facilitating factors for greater collaboration between the university and the world of work. This information mainly derives from the analysis of responses to questions 6 to 12 in the general section of the questionnaire.

Table 4 - *Main barriers to and facilitators of the collaboration.*

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	n	%
Barriers	Lack of direct contact	20	43.5
	Lack of information	18	39.1
Facilitators	Preferential treatment	17	37.0
	Publicity for the company	15	32.6
	Provision of real cases	14	30.4
	Design of study programmes	7	15.2

The main barriers we found were lack of direct contact and lack of information. In the first case, the entities (43.5%) reported practically no contact with the university lecturers responsible for supervising placement students (MTSlsSiP), which gives entities the impression that the university is unconcerned about these placements. Secondly, entities would like more information (39.5%) on both the placement process (MTOVPr) and the students' profiles (SmSESiPr) and their curricula (MTOVPr).

Entities also reported a lack of knowledge about the services offered by the university (MTHSiP). At the other extreme, some entities (10.9%) reported that they were fully satisfied with both the contact with (SmTScSiPr) and the information provided by (LTHSiPr) the university.

On the other hand, the interviews revealed elements that we classified as facilitators, understood as ways in which the university's dealings with the entity could help the

relationship to develop in a positive direction. Thus, the entities reported, in similar percentages, enjoying a certain preferential treatment (37%), for example, a reduction in fees for courses offered by the university (MiQSlsSiPr) or discounts for hiring or using the university's facilities (MiSScSiPr).

They also expressed their willingness to participate in classes and collaborate with lecturers by providing real cases (30.4%) for students to solve or discuss (LQScSiPr); this information about the entities would also help students make informed decisions when choosing the organisation for their placements (32.6%).

Finally, although to a lesser degree, respondents stated that they would be willing to collaborate in other ways such as designing study programmes (15.2%).

Discussion

In order to build bridges between the university curriculum and the working environment, and thus progress towards achieving the aims of Europe 2020 (European Commission, 2011a), the present paper makes an initial attempt to understand the collaboration between universities and entities offering student placements from the latter's perspective, together with their main motivations and demands. By simply understanding what such entities expect from these partnerships, universities can put mechanisms in place to enhance the relationship and therefore improve the quality of the education they provide.

To this end, semi-structured interviews were carried out in a sample of entities representing all profiles that offer work placements to students from Jaume I University, one of the first Spanish universities to introduce compulsory practical placements for all its students, and whose strategic plan is firmly committed to helping its graduates make the transition into the workplace.

Following the objectives formulated for this study, and having verified the absence of any significant differences in the response patterns in terms of the independent variables considered, we first examined the motivations and benefits that work placement partners associate with these collaboration agreements. The main results coincide with other studies performed both in Spain and in other countries in that entities are motivated to collaborate for intrinsic reasons, which we classified within the CSR variable, in pursuit of improving their social standing (Daley et al., 2016; Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a,b; Healy et al., 2014; Marzo et al., 2008). However, medium- and short-term motives are also at play. Medium-term motives include those related to strategic planning, specifically with regard to assessing potential future employees (Daley et al., 2016; Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015; Felce, 2017; Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a; García Delgado, 2002; Healy et al., 2014; Marzo et al., 2008; Whittington & Ferrández, 2007); short-term benefits sought include higher productivity, associated with the economic variable, which has also been confirmed in other studies (Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015; Ferrández-Berrueco, et al., 2016a; Siebert & Costley, 2013).

When saturation was reached, however, the interviews provided no clear evidence of other motivations associated with a closer relationship between the two organisations. That is, the company only pursues the benefit or impact directly associated with taking the student on the work placement programme. For example, none of the organisations interviewed claimed to collaborate because the university is a centre that generates knowledge, or that they hope to advance towards becoming a learning organisation (Ions & Minton, 2012; White, 2012).

Secondly, we examined the barriers to collaboration. Here, we perceived that the exclusive focus on the student is such that most of the entities interviewed were unaware of the other channels available for them to cooperate with the university, such as participating in classes with real-life problems, or the possibility at the institutional level of influencing the content of study programmes, practices that are widespread in other European countries (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a,b; Koski, 2017).

The above point, together with the lack of contact with lecturers supervising the work placements reported by the entities, suggests that the university fails to understand that placements form part of the education process and as such, should be coordinated and planned as an integral part of this process, and not limited to a simple description of the length and requirements published in the study programme. Evidence of the same shortcoming has also been found by other scholars working in the Spanish context (Marcelo & Estebaranz, 1998; Zabalza, 2011, 2013). However the reality seems to show that no noteworthy changes have been made in this respect.

In fact, the design of study programmes in Spain continues to be undertaken almost exclusively by the universities, and despite the need recognised in current legislation to contact representatives from the world of work when drawing up these plans, in reality their participation is limited to a mere administrative role, and their needs are not really reflected (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016b).

In addition, the study revealed a further element to facilitate collaboration between university and business, namely the use of real cases in the teaching process. We consider this to be of particular interest, given that the university curriculum is oriented (at least in theory) to developing students' professional competencies. The implementation of this philosophy requires methodological proposals, designed in conjunction with partner entities, in which students' learning is steered towards activities that are directly related to their immediate context, and that according to Monereo (2009) should be as realistic and authentic as possible.

The incorporation of the European higher education area (EHEA) into the Spanish university system has led to a more diligent application of active methodologies, such as project-based and problem-based learning, service learning, seminars and workshops (De Miguel, 2006). However, we consider that they are not being used to their full potential, as these methods are simply simulations or designs that rarely take external agents into account, and thus miss the opportunity to draw on the synergies deriving from these collaborations. Collaborative models and styles can take various forms; what seems to be clear is that universities must not become inward-looking organisations, but must promote and foster cooperation, especially to provide students with meaningful learning (Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006).

As we noted in a previous paper (Moliner & Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2015), it is not always easy to commit to inter-institutional cooperation given the current organisational model for curricula proposals in universities. According to Rué (2007), this usually follows a dual rationale, one vertical (referring to power relations) in decision making, and another of successive fragmentation (or specialisation) of the proposals in each department. As a result, putting into practice initiatives that fall outside the formal framework can be problematic (often limited to bureaucratic procedures), and may discourage the instigators of such initiatives.

Needless to say, this does not mean that businesses should tell universities what they should be doing; that is not their role (Ferrández-Berrueco et al., 2016a). But neither should they leave all decisions about the curriculum to the universities, which often design their curricula to accommodate their own structural needs rather than the needs of their surrounding environment (Major et al., 2011). There is therefore a need for mediating mechanisms to ensure that study programmes seriously contemplate the educational needs of future graduates, narrowing the gap between university studies and the demands of society and industry (Zabalza, 2008). Entities are willing to cooperate, as illustrated by the comments from the interviewees in this study; what universities must do now is open their doors and let them see the way ahead.

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