

EARLY RESEARCH EXPERIENCE.

A CASE OF UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY COOPERATION ON STUDENT'S DEVELOPMENT.

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Introduction.

At the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, where I work as lecturer and Director of the Degree course in business Studies, we have a noble mission. Our aim is to develop the nature of "homo quaerens" that is inside every student. As hard supporters of including humanistic studies in all the Degree courses, we love to use Latin words. I'll give my own translation of this term. The verb "quaero", in Latin, means "question" and could mean, in some contexts, "search". So we could translate this as "The man who makes questions" or simply, "the Researcher". We link this attitude with other competencies that we develop in the students: curiosity, attention, analysis capability and critical thinking.

As with many other transversal competencies, we think that the research aptitude must be developed within all the subjects and along the four courses with some intensive "initiation" activities in the first one.

Beside this focus on the early development of key competencies related with Research and Innovation attitudes, we also include in our mission the creation of a strong community Industry-University for the practical and professional development of our students. Additionally, this community will generate and support a continuous dialogue regarding the consistency of the subjects included in our syllabi and the professional skills and competencies required by the companies.

As a combination of both ambitions, we have designed and implemented an innovative initiative called "Early Research Experience". In the following exposition I will describe it and show the main benefits that we have generated for our students, the University and the companies that have participated.

1 INITIATIVE DESCRIPTION.

1.1 Concept.

Students from first courses of Business Studies (ADE) organized into groups of a maximum of 10 members supervised by a Lecturer and a Company Director who work during 9 months on a research project on a relevant issue for the company, the University and society.

1.2 Objectives.

Through this initiative we aimed at accomplishing the following objectives:

- Development of the innate curiosity of the students in order to reinforce their nature of "Homo quaerens". Somebody with a natural instinct to question everything, trying to find new answers and perspectives for the resolution of any problem.
- Early development of the basic research capabilities and methods in the students.

- Professional interaction with the management team of top companies in order to identify and develop the basic competencies to be successful in the first job.
- Creation of multidisciplinary groups formed by Lecturers and professionals. The groups identify areas of real cooperation to generate new and practical solutions that create value to the University, the Industry and society.
- Bring to the classrooms, both in the University and the Company, business cases created by the research groups. Cases are discussed with the students or the employees under the supervision of a Lecturer and an Executive following co-teaching methodologies.

1.3 Milestones and Methodology.

In order to gradually develop the capabilities of the students while reinforcing the interaction in the team we follow, mainly, Project Management methods. The key milestones in this research route are, at least, the following.

1.3.1 *Presentation of the initiative to the top management of some companies and identification of research subjects.* The lecturer who acts as Project Coordinator together with the Director of the Degree in Business Studies meet some HR Directors and CEO of some companies in order to introduce the University and its mission. In that first meeting we detect some areas of eventual research. All must have in common the possibility to apply the results of the investigation and the opportunity for the students to develop their skills and practice the theory learnt in classroom.

1.3.2 *Presentation to the students and creation of the groups.* The Lecturer who coordinates the projects presents the initiative to the first and second-year students. The information provided includes:

- Name of the company.
- Name of the project and short description of its targets.
- Skills and knowledge to be developed.
- Ideal composition of the team. Depending on the industry sector and the departments involved we might define some requirements for the team as specialisation in certain domains (marketing, finance...) or degrees (International relations, restauration...)
- Estimated workload and schedule.
- Credits to be obtained. The activity lasts all the course and is considered by the University as a Complementary Educational Action (Acción Formativa Complementaria). The credits obtained are about one

After the presentation in classroom the students have one week to apply for one of the projects.

1.3.3 *Kick-off meeting.* Once the teams have been created and a Lecturer has been nominated to lead each one, the first meeting takes place in the University. Only students and lecturer are present. In that meeting they investigate into the company, complete the first definition of targets and prepare the first meeting with the company.

1.3.4 *First meeting with the company.* The first meeting with the top management of the company and the professionals who will join the team must take place in the headquarters of the company. The scenario of this first meeting is critical as the students must perceive from the very first moment a real professional environment.

We always try to do it in a meeting room or a presentation room used by the management team of the company. They take there their first lesson on networking and professional relations as they have to introduce themselves presenting their strengths and demonstrating a real interest in the project and the application of the results.

Following Project Management methods, we dedicate that meeting, after the induction, to take the requirements of the “client” and concrete the objectives of the projects. Then we make a first estimation of the resources, the roles within the team and a Gantt plan with the key milestones and dates.

- 1.3.5 *Data collection and sub-groups meetings.* As in a typical research project the first field works are related to the collection of information in and out the company, the analysis of the information and the synthesis of all the data in relevant information clusters. This work is done in reduced groups under the supervision of the lecturer and the professional assigned by the company.
- 1.3.6 *Presentation of first findings and revision of the plan.* The team meets the company managers in the same scenario of the first meeting to present a synthesis of the findings of the field work. They may propose some changes in the scope of the research or the plan. They also take this opportunity to obtain feedback about the competencies and qualities shown by the team and the eventual areas for improvement.
- 1.3.7 *Focus Group about the first benefits of the project on the individual development for the students.* In order to keep in mind the learnings objectives of the project the Lecturer facilitates a Focus Group with all the team where each one must share with the rest which have been the key benefits that he or she is getting from the project. The Lecturer motivates the students to make a deep analysis of all the findings, putting them in perspective with the mission of the University and the Educative Plan of the Degree course.
- 1.3.8 *Draft of conclusions.* With the feedback that the students got in the presentation in front of the company management team they keep on investigating to obtain the first conclusions. The field work extends the focus to other sources as customer surveys, interviews or direct observation of the market. Through several work meetings they share their conclusions with other members of the team and the lecturer in order to prepare a draft to be presented to the company. Their feedback is crucial for the next step.
- 1.3.9 *Presentation of the conclusions to the management team of the company.* In a working session very similar to the kick off meeting, the students present the results in front of the management team. They must follow a very professional style in the “mise en scene” as if they were a team of a consultancy firm presenting the conclusions of a project. After the presentation the management team gives again their feedback to the students, not only about the results of the research, but about the oral presentation too.
- 1.3.10 *Closing focus group.* Closing the research project the students will meet again with the lecturer to review all their experiences and put in value all the individual and group learnings. The lecturer pays special attention to the similitudes with the professional environment and the transversal findings that put in connection several subjects included in the Degree program.
- 1.3.11 *Publication of an article or a case study about the results.* The students must write individually or in groups an article related to the investigation. It is at least published in the blog section of the University web site. Depending on the educational interest

of the research the lecturer, in cooperation with the students, may prepare a case study that will be used next course in a session where both the teacher and a company manager will act as facilitators.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH WORKS DONE IN 2015-16 COURSE.

2.1 *FERROVIAL. Contribution of Social Responsibility policies to company strategy.*

Education Area: Social Responsibility, Business Strategy.

Subject:

The group analysed the Social Corporate Responsibility Policies of the large Spanish multinational Ferrovial measuring the impact on the global strategy and results of the company. Special focus was put on Finance, HR and Innovation.

Team:

A group of students supervised by two lecturers of HR and Finance worked with the Quality Director, the Training and Development Manager and the person responsible for the Corporate University for middle management.

Results:

Business Case used in the Training Center of Ferrovial with middle management and in the classrooms on Social Responsibility area of the University.

2.2 *CASA DEL LIBRO. New Book-Store concept.*

Education Area: Marketing, Innovation.

Subject:

New market tendencies on the book store business make the re-defining of the traditional big store model necessary. While keeping the physical space in order to have a real contact with customers and to create spaces of cultural exchange new marketing models are needed to combine traditional selling with digital innovations.

Team:

A team of students and store managers with a Lecturer of Business Strategy worked with the General Manager and the Sales Director of Casa del Libro (Grupo Planeta)

Results:

Marketing plan that includes the redesigning of the stores and the introduction of express-shops aligned with a new on-line market strategy. The management team was so satisfied with the result that they have asked an extension of the project in the next course.

2.3 *Kentucky Fried Chicken. Sensorial Marketing.*

Education Area: Marketing, Customer Experience.

Subject:

Impact of the KFC restaurant's design, decoration and ambience (music, aromas, etc.) on the customer experience.

Team:

Students of the Degree in Business Studies specialised in the Gastronomy sector and managed by a Marketing Lecturer together with the Country Manager and the Marketing Director of KFC Spain.

Results:

Some field research has already been carried out with the cooperation of the restaurant managers. The findings will be described in a Business Case to be used as the Ferrovial one. Changes will be made in the restaurants following the results of the research project.

Use as many sections and subsections as you need (e.g. Introduction, Methodology, Results, Conclusions, etc.) and end the paper with the list of references.

2.4 *IDC Research. Impact of Technology revolution on the generation of new professions.*

Subject:

Definition of the new professions created by the emerging technologies. Analysis of the coherence of the University Degrees to the new professions. Proposals of adaptation.

Team:

First-year students managed by a Lecturer specialized in Technology worked directly with the Managing Director and the Research manager of IDC.

Results:

Report with the definition of two new positions related to Marketing and a proposal of the adaptation that should be made in the contents of some official grades. It will also be used internally to adapt some subjects in order to include technology in the methodology and the approach.

3 BENEFITS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS.

We consider this innovative experience a success as far as it has reinforced our commitment with society, building a community with some major companies that will keep on growing next academic years. We could summarize the benefits for the different participants as follows:

3.1 Companies.

All the Managers and Directors who have participated in this educational activity were impressed by the maturity shown by the students during the presentation of the results. They have learnt that they shouldn't treat new young professionals as children but trust them and be as demanding as they are with other professionals.

They all agree that the biggest value of the students have been the curiosity and their capacity to have a new and fresh prospective. Thanks to this, they have concrete company challenges and propose solutions that now they will implement in their business.

In some cases, the (KFC and Ferrovial) the University Lecturers have cooperated with the managers in development activities and courses for the employees sharing the role of trainer with a member of the top management team.

3.2 University.

The Lecturers have discovered new methodologies to combine theoretical concepts in the classrooms with a professional and practical education inside the company. Some of them said that it has been like taking the classroom to the professional environment.

In some cases they have also produced training materials as business cases or reports to be discussed in the classroom next academic year. It has also been an opportunity to update the syllabus, adapting them to current tendencies in business management and responding to the needs shown by the managers in terms of human resource profiles.

The University, globally, has increased its reputation in the business community by demonstrating that we are already working to eliminate the prejudice that considers the Universities out of the business reality, educating new professionals that will not fit with the new requirements.

3.3 Students.

In the focus group meetings and the final survey they have evaluated this action very highly. They have stressed the following points:

- Knowledge of the company from inside. They know better now how companies are organized and which are the main departments. Moreover, they feel more comfortable with the idea of joining a company with no previous experience but with strong personal skills.
- Discovering Research as a way of identifying and solving problems. Before that experience they thought that research was something related with science that is done only in the laboratories. Now they have learned how the methodology might be the same but the application and direct impact on the business may be different.
- Team working. They have evolve from mere groups of students to effective teams. Although they have already worked in teams in other activities in the classroom, they didn't know the importance of cooperation and the individualization of values to be shared.

4 CONCLUSION.

The key success factors to achieve all the objectives defined in point 1.2 have been:

- Both company and University must have always borne in mind that the main purpose of the initiative is the education of the students. It is not a free consultancy work, it is not a student's visit to the company, and it is not an image or reputation initiative for the company to show a social interest but an extension of the classroom to an office.
- Participation must be voluntary throughout the entire project. About 25% of the students left the team in the first months for different reasons as work load, lack of interest, etc.
- The selection of the Lecturer who leads the group is crucial. He or she must demonstrate a true interest in approaching the University with the companies. For that it is better to

choose a Lecturer who has previous professional experience. This will help him or her to act as a link between the professionals and the students.

- The purpose of the project must be flexible. As the main target is the education of the students on research methods, the project must be as flexible as possible. The secret is to define a project where the students can excel making the best use of their individual and group strengths.
- There must be a combination of meetings to work on the projects and meetings (focus groups) to make a collective reflection on the learnings that they are doing. That is the only way to guarantee that they learn by doing.

Early research experiences of this kind are very easy to implement and motivate the students to experience a deeper view of their vocation and a global perception of all the subjects and competencies included in the Business Studies Degree.