Setting the agenda: Motivations behind a University-Industry Collaboration (UIC)

Dr Clare Littleton, Dr Louise Townsin, Professor Justin Beilby (2021)

TORRENS UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Introduction

We present the findings from a case study based on a UIC (Thin Ice VR) related to virtual reality and climate change that was set up in 2018 between a university and a small digital production company (industry partner) in Adelaide, South Australia. We applied a political science lens to the data and present findings that focus on the agenda setting phase, and specifically the associated motivations, which requires all stakeholders to consider the merit and motivations of the proposed project.

Background to University Industry Collaboration in Australia

Over the past 20 years, universities have been innovating and transforming curriculas and teaching models to include a deeper focus on student employability (Cotronei-Baird, 2020; Ferns & Lilly, 2016). This direction has been driven by governments increased focus on productivity, and as a result, universities fulfilling the dual purposes of generation of traditional knowledge and employable graduates (de Wit-de Vries et al., 2019). Employers also place expectations on universities to produce graduates with skills that match specific work environments (Jackson et al., 2017). This has led to an increased interest in the academic literature regarding the types of agreements and partnerships forming between educational institutions and businesses – both profit and not for profit organisations. Throughout the literature there is relatively little empirical research to understand the agenda setting process that stakeholders undertake when pitching a project to universities and industry partners to gain support for a UIC. Yet, in the university sector there is a continued assumption that such projects will be implemented to enhance the student experience. Therefore, understanding the motivations associated with these collaborations is important.
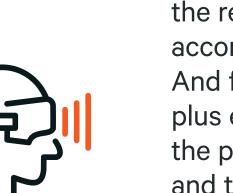
A description of the Project:

The project was based around Sir Ernest Shackleton's journey of survival over a 100 years ago to save his men from the ice in their journey across the Antarctic, and a comparison to how that journey would look now. Tim Jarvis AM, a leading environmental scientist and presenter, delivers 'a world-first historical re-creation documentary VR experience' that takes the audience on this journey with him. The aim of the project is to 'offer an unrivalled immersive experience that will leave viewers in no doubt about the devastating effect of climate change' (thinicevr.com).

Methods

This study is part of a larger project that includes three case studies. In this case study (Thin Ice VR) we conducted 7 semi-structured interviews with academics and industry partners directly involved in the UIC. The interviews were conducted between Aug and Nov 2020 and lasted between 45-60 minutes. Ethics approval was obtained from Torrens University Australia HREC. We applied a political science framework (adapted from Littleton-Phillips, 2019; Littleton et al., 2021; Oliver, 1991; Shiffman & Smith, 2007) to unpack the politics of developing UIC's in an Australian university environment, with a particular focus on the motivations, negotiations, processes, and outcomes for this type of activity.

In this presentation we focus on exploring how stakeholder's motivations influence the agenda-setting phase of a University-Industry Collaboration.

Overarching research question: What is the politics of developing University-Industry Collaborations (UIC's) in Australia?

Discussion

In this presentation we concentrate on the agenda setting phase of the UIC development. Shiffman and Smith (2007) suggest that setting the agenda in a decision making environment involves the list of possibilities that those making decisions are 'giving priority' (p.1). Oliver (1991) asserts that unpacking the inter-organisational relationships is integral to the decision to support a UIC and involves consideration of a range of categories these motivations can fall under. The data from the Thin Ice VR case study presented here suggests that this case study falls under the reciprocity category which implies balanced power between the two organisations (University and industry partner) in collaboration, and goals that are perceived as likely to bring equal gains (Oliver, 1991). Our main findings suggest that there are benefits for both the university and the industry partner in engaging in UIC's that are anticipated to bring mutual benefits related to innovation, new knowledge, and employability. However, as per the Shiffman and Smith (2007) framework, we found that the success of the UIC reaching the top of the agenda depends on internal trust and respect between stakeholders, a commitment to the cause, and overarching commercial benefits (in this case branding awareness and integrity, and student recruitment and retention) justifying the time and financial commitments made on both sides.

Conclusion

Through this case study our findings provide real world insight into how to influence the agenda to develop sustainable and successful UIC's that enhance the student experience, and potentially impact employability after graduation.

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Findings: Motivations for UIC

Stakeholder – trust and respect

'I have the trust in attaching someone like him to the project... I think if it was another uni with a lecturer that had been in education his whole career, I don't think I would've done it because I wouldn't have the trust that they had the talent'
Participant 1

'It's about the university being seen as a credible partner to industry'
Participant 4

Innovation (VR technology)

'The motivation in my book's very simple. The competency base and the resource base in the institution was not sufficiently developed to accommodate a large project like that into a new technology space. And for that reason, the resource optimisation and the resource availability plus experience was important in this case. So the opportunity to drive the project was enhanced through finding a synergy between industry and the university'
Participant 5

'This virtual reality framework may well have huge reverberations in terms of how we inevitably teach'
Participant 6

Commercial benefits

'There was the opportunity to get our brand into every single high school in the country alongside the ABC as a brand, and that was my motivating factor...'
Participant 4

'I guess we saw it as an opportunity to get a stakeholder on the project who's interested in this and then we could use that as the leverage then to attract the remaining finance for the project'
Participant 1

Employability – mutual benefits

'Students got to see behind the scenes and hear from some of the makers...'
Participant 2

'What motivates me is students come to class and going, "Wow! We get to work on this." And also, the open days and stuff like that, you can show the students what being a designer is'
Participant 3

Commitment to cause

'And then the bigger one with Thin Ice, you had a high profile environmentalist on board. It was about sustainability, saving the planet'
Participant 6

'Thin Ice ticks it off. I think that it's smart because its opening up a conversation about climate change...'
Participant 3

Research focus/new knowledge

'Well, the first thing is the research part. So in other words, the fact that it enables us to enhance the research into the space. The second thing is that the outcome of the research from where we're sitting in terms of the perspective we have about the future of the technology, creates an opportunity for us to advance specific areas in education'.
Participant 5

Investment in staff

'The university from the faculty perspective, employs people who have industry experience, I'm not an academic...I'm someone who comes from industry.'
Participant 7

'The staff member, he's a young academic who is industry connected. He's already done a similar virtual reality project that really shone a light on what was possible from this private university perspective in terms of engagement, innovation, reaching people... and so it's a project that is a real-life project for him as a pracademic, someone who's working as well'
Participant 6