

Workshop Innovation in regional business and industry, NGOs and the public sector – the role of University Lifelong Learning

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ULLL beyond formal postgraduate education: Possible models and settings for knowledge exchange and network building between universities and businesses.

**by Mag. Edith Hammer
Postgraduate Center, University of Vienna**

Abstract

In our presentation we provide a short theoretical reflection of existing knowledge transfer models at universities and present a practical case of a university-industry-collaboration from the Postgraduate Center of the University of Vienna. We will present the project “University Meets Industry” (uniMind) in the context of the “Austrian lifelong learning strategy” (LLL-strategy paper 2020) and show how it complies with certain action lines in the strategy paper and what benefits can be expected from this project.

Through its activities, the uniMind-project promotes lifelong learning on four levels: the individual, societal, organizational and macro-economic. This wide approach helps to implement practices of lifelong learning in the everyday life of people as well as in their work environments. On the other hand, it considers the importance of lifelong learning on a larger scale.

The importance of such an initiative has also been recognized by various public partners that support the project: Ministry of Science and Research, Ministry of Economy, Family and Youth, Viennese Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Austrian Industries. Also the project is supported by the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research.

The project complies with various action lines that are stated in the “Strategy for lifelong learning 2020”, published by four Austrian Ministries in 2011. On the one hand, it supports “The enhancement of Community Education” as it offers innovative learning settings and brings together people with different educational and professional backgrounds. These people are encouraged to build knowledge alliances and support each other. Also, the project targets the “Promotion of learner-friendly work environments”: Through the workshops, we promote the idea that lifelong learning should become an essential part of the organizational culture in enterprises and that employees should be supported in their learning processes by the employers.

A more intense collaboration between the University of Vienna and representatives of regional enterprises and organizations will create new impulses for innovation and therefore strengthen the region around Vienna as a progressive “knowledge hub”. Also, the collaboration with practitioners provides valuable experience for the development of postgraduate programs and new didactic models that match the learning modes of working professionals. „University Meets Industry“ wants to engage enterprises through concrete activities such as workshops and support them in establishing lifelong learning as part of their organizational culture. In the workshops we address topics that are of high economic and societal relevance for promoting the region around Vienna as an innovative and progressive business location. Experiences from the workshop settings will be presented and critically discussed in the paper, regarding its outcomes and sustainability.

As the University of Vienna covers a wide range of disciplines, knowledge exchange for us involves more than technology transfer. While some university departments and faculties are heavily engaged in knowledge transfer activities, others rarely connect to external organizations. We encourage disciplines such as social or cultural studies to get involved in knowledge exchange with practical fields and try to find contact points with real issues from enterprises. We will explore reasons that hinder knowledge transfer both at universities as well as in enterprises, regarding university structures as well as the role of "transfer agents" in particular.

Throughout the “University Meets Industry”-project, we will tackle questions such as: How can a culture of lifelong learning be implemented in enterprises and institutions and how can universities support enterprises in doing so? In the workshops we use innovative didactic models that enable communication and the creation of new ideas and solutions among students, scientists and practitioners. In the course of the project, we will research if and how the experiences from the workshops will help the participants in their daily work routines. Hence, the workshops not only involve individual learning but also team and organizational learning practices. In previous projects, where we worked in similar settings, we have received feedback from practitioners that found the “communication climate” extremely beneficial for open-minded discussions and they said that it helped them to find new points of view regarding problems they face. Enhancing communication processes, community building, social and work-place learning and the possibilities for innovation are clear goals of the workshops and the project.