

# The Impact of Professional Learning Community and Collaboration in Higher Education

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*“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”*  
(African proverb)

*“Higher education now sits at the crossroad of tradition and new possibilities.”*  
(UNESCO, 2009)

*“The HE system of 2025 will be global in organization and international in culture.”*  
(Foskett & Maringe, 2010)

## Abstract

The paper introduces the redesigning of university, especially focusing on the different types and levels of collaboration in higher education (HE). Based on the conceptual changes and some models of universities, two parts were built in the lecture. The first part describes contextual background of the topic, e.g. knowledge economy, revised concept of learning, teaching and knowledge. The second part analyses some features of Professional Learning Community (PLC), especially interdisciplinarity, sharing and change. The paper concludes with some dilemmas and questions for understanding the impact of PLC and collaboration in HE.

### Keywords:

universitas  
collaboration  
professional learning community

## 1 Introduction

Internationalization and globalization of higher education has been a driving force of redesigning universities in the 21st century. (Altbach, 2016; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Altbach & de Witt, 2015; Mariange, Foskett et al., 2010, 2008; de Wit, Gacel-Ávila, Elspeth, Jooste et al., 2017) As Foskett and Maringe stated: *“The future of HE has become a significant focus for debate.”* (Foskett & Maringe, 2010, p. 305) But internationalization and globalization are not new phenomena, some key features come from the history of universities. Various scholars, policy-makers, international organizations, practitioners have defined and analysed definitions, made and disseminated concept papers of this process. It can be seen from both the theoretical and practical dimensions, that growing needs of collaboration also plays a constructive role in internationalization and globalization of HE. Under the umbrella of this process, in 2008 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) started the international debate about “Higher Education to 2030”. The first report has summarized the “meta trends” of HE:

- The expansion of student participation in HE
- The increasing diversity in the profile of students as participation begins to provide access to groups currently under represented

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- The increasing international mobility of students
- The increasing international mobility of graduates as the graduate labour market less constrained by national boundaries
- The increasing international mobility of academic staff (OECD, 2008; Foskett & Maringe, 2010)

UNESCO has also defined some key trends of HE, namely Changing Patterns of Enrolment; From Access to Completion; Diversification; Privatization and Funding; New Technologies; The Concern for Quality; The Struggle for the Soul of Higher Education; The Professionalization of Higher Education Management and Leadership. (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009)

One of the challenges is defining and analysing increasing collaboration of HE, which is (in my opinion) the key element among the above-mentioned international trends. For that reason, the paper introduces the redesigning of university, especially focusing on the different types and levels of collaboration in higher education (HE). Based on the conceptual changes and some models of universities, two parts were built in the lecture. The first part describes contextual background of the topic, e.g. knowledge economy, revised concept of learning, teaching and knowledge, growing needs of creativity and innovation. The second part analyses some features of Professional Learning Community (PLC), especially interdisciplinarity, sharing and change. The paper concludes with some dilemmas and questions for understanding the impact of PLC and collaboration in HE.

According to the definition of Encyclopaedia Britannica: *“University, institution of higher education, usually comprising a college of liberal arts and sciences and graduate and professional schools and having the authority to confer degrees in various fields of study. A university differs from a college in that it is usually larger, has a broader curriculum, and offers graduate and professional degrees in addition to undergraduate degrees. Although universities did not arise in the West until the Middle Ages in Europe, they existed in some parts of Asia and Africa in ancient times.”*<sup>1</sup> Basically, this definition contains the scientific core concept of university, but understanding the increasing needs of collaboration and changing roles of the higher education institutions, firstly we need to map the prior knowledge about the concept. There are two basic pillars of prior knowledge, namely autonomy and isolation. The general, basic principle is: “My house, my castle.” Autonomy depends on independence, which is a basic point of decision-making and scientific freedom. Isolation equals loneliness, which called “ivory tower effect”. Secondly, my assumption on the base of these two pillars of prior knowledge of university, autonomy has not been resulted isolation. The historical roots of university strengthens collaboration. Thirdly, turning to the historical, original meaning of the concept of university, c. 1300, “institution of higher learning,” also “body of persons constituting a university,” from Anglo-French université, Old French universite “universality; academic community” (13c.), from Medieval Latin universitatem (nominative universitas), “the whole, aggregate,” in Late Latin “corporation, society,” from universus “whole, entire” (see universe). In the academic sense, a shortening of universitas magistrorum et scholarium “community of masters and scholars;” superseded studium as the word for this. The Latin word also is the source of Spanish universidad, German universität, Russian universitetü, etc.<sup>2</sup> Summarizing the ancient meanings of university, I would like to underline “community of masters and scholars”, which indicates the traditional needs of collaboration. On the one hand, this collaboration is based on different workshops with students and masters. On the other hand, the basic phenomenon of university is hierarchy, which determined the collaboration, see meetings and lectures for instance. Historically, the University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is considered the “mother of European universities.” The word universitas originally applied only to the scholastic guilds—that is, the corporation of students and masters—within the studium, and it was always modified, as universitas magistrorum, universitas scholarium, or universitas magistrorum et scholarium. Eventually, however, probably in the late 14th century, the term began to appear by itself to exclusively mean a *self-regulating community* of teachers and scholars recognized and sanctioned by civil or ecclesiastical authority.<sup>3</sup> The methodology of the early universities was questioning, discussion, text interpretation and students learning by teaching other students. (Willis, 1984) To sum up, on the base of the above-mentioned trends and processes, the paper raises some key questions:

- What feasible relationship between the impact of professional learning community and collaboration in higher education?
- What different phenomena of professional learning communities are needed for effective collaboration in higher education?

## 2 Contextual background

As we see in the introduction part, turning to the 21st century universities, the central features of higher education are internationalization and globalization. As Maringe states: *“Universities have always had an international mission and character.”* (Maringe, 2010, p. 24) In fact, the driving force of globalization is market-oriented mind and it has been affected the coherency between education and economy, *“university and industry linkages”*. Indeed, in the 21st century, we are living under the age of changes. Traditionally these changes have characterized the universities for decades, but the speed and complexity of these changes are different. Especially around the education sector there are tremendous economic, social, cultural and scientific changes, which have redesigned and renewed the function and structure of universities as well. The current competitive global market focuses attention on the applied knowledge and life skills. In contrast to some misconceptions, these needs come from the history of education, think about Seneca, Locke and Dewey. As the ancient Latin proverb states: *Non scholae, sed vitae discimus*. Undoubtedly, that world of education and work characterizes interdependency and complexity. Among the numerous articles, analysis and conference papers, knowledge economy is one of the most common concepts, which can help understanding this interdependency and complexity. As the 2009 UNESCO Report emphasizes: *“An important trend has been the spectacular growth of scientific and technological research that forms the underpinning of the knowledge economy.”* (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009, p. 11) Analysing the concept of knowledge economy in close connection with the above-mentioned changes of universities, we need to recall some contextual key terms, for instance knowledge-based society, information society, knowledge-driven economy, competency-based education etc. It is no coincidence, that knowledge economy is in the centre of these key terms, and in parallel, the contextual background of the paper. In fact, there is still no agreed definition of what a knowledge economy is. But there are some common phenomena and processes to understand the essence of this concept. Research, development and innovation has become more and more importance in the companies and universities as well. There is a greater degree of knowledge to the competitive and effective performance of the institutions. Powell and Snellman defined *“knowledge economy as production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, as well as rapid obsolescence”*. They stated that *“the key component of a knowledge economy is a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources”*. (Powelnd & Shellman, 2004)

The new conceptual trends of knowledge economy in the connection with the 21st century universities, *“role of learning and continuous innovation”* is the driving force and common dimension. In other words, quality of knowledge production and transfer has played a dominant role, but the tendency is a greater focus on knowledge management and dissemination. In fact, in the 21st century, knowledge has become one of the most important driving forces of economy. We have found statistically significant improvement and correlation between effectiveness of economic innovation and quality of learning to learn competence.

In this process the revised concept of learning, teaching and knowledge has appeared. Firstly, we need to differentiate the narrow and broad concept of learning in order to understand the dynamism of knowledge management and dissemination. Narrow concept of learning is based on memorization and concentration. But broad concept of learning contains motivation, attitudes, higher-order thinking, curiosity, affective and cognitive factors. The broad concept of learning highlights lifelong learning, which emphasises the quality and effectiveness of self-directed learning. Illeris states: *“Learning can broadly be defined as any process that in living organism leads to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or ageing.”* (Illeris et al., 2018, p. 1) This definition has based on two key pillars: *“extensive and complicated set of processes”* and *“comprehensive understanding of human learning”*. This is the starting point, one of the most relevant and contextual answers to the above-mentioned key questions (see introduction) of redesigning HE. In fact, learning is a very complex process determining the changes of teaching strategies and knowledge as well. Secondly, teaching needs to promote this broad concept of learning focusing on collaborative learning, teaching strategies and project method. It has been resulted changing teaching roles, especially put the spotlight on facilitating mentoring and tutoring learning in higher education. Thirdly, revised concept of knowledge, the emphasis is on the process of understanding, application and analysis. It means, instead of memorizing and recalling knowledge, learning and teaching process stresses interpreting, classifying, summarizing, explaining, implementing knowledge. In other words, higher education focuses attention on the need for conceptual, procedural and metacognitive knowledge, in line with balancing cognitive and affective dimensions. Bruner’s concept of knowledge is based on the constructive way of learning and contains two key factors of knowledge: students are active learners who construct their own knowledge. (1960) As McLeod states: *“So, to Bruner, important outcomes of learning include not just the concepts, categories, and problem-solving procedures invented previously by the*

culture, but also the ability to “invent” these things for oneself.” (McLeod, 2008) Basically, this was a starting point in order to rethink learning, teaching and knowledge in higher education as well. The “chalk and table” simplified education philosophy and teaching methodology has changed. Increasing interactive teaching and learning strategies: project method and collaborative learning has played important roles. Otherwise, there are growing needs to develop and promote self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation and interdisciplinary knowledge. But this is the first level of collaboration in HE. The second level of collaboration has focused on the organizational dimension, namely collaborative curriculum planning and continuous professional development via different workshops and collaborative learning network. The teachers have moved from the ‘ivory tower’ and plan, develop and assess together. This organizational dimension of collaboration in HE has changed the traditional hierarchy moving forward to the professional learning community.

### 3 Some features of Professional Learning Community (PLC)

Over the past two decades, “professional learning community” has become a popular concept in educational research, policy and practice, especially in the field of leadership and management. Understanding some features of PLC, we need to highlight Senge’s fundamental definition of learning community as “...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” (Senge, 1990) This concept has changed the vision and strategy of HE as well. The Senge’s publication, *The Fifth Discipline* has indicated the new model and function of educational organization. He described five learning organization components:

- System Thinking: Interdependence all functions, working together as a whole system.
- Personal Mastery: Individual commitment to the process of learning.
- Team Learning: Accumulation of individual learning, shared together to others and become team knowledge.
- Mental models: Unlearn unwanted values, learn new and applicable values.
- Shared vision: Vision owned by all levels, create focus and energy for learning. (Senge, 1990)

In fact, the Senge’s focus of definition was on corporation rather than school, but there is no doubt that it has basically changed the vision of universities as well. In this sense, this view of schools and higher education institutions has focused on collaborative learning. The process of transformation a university into a learning community means some significant challenges. Understanding these challenges, we need to emphasize (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1995) vision and feasible impact of learning community, as “a professional community should be the growth and development of all the students”. (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009) They defined five elements of professional community: reflective dialogue, focus on student learning, interaction among teacher colleagues, collaboration and shared values and norms. (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1995; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009) Admittedly, the definition of learning community has various meanings in the literature, but on the base of some decades of research, the basic Senge’s vision was an effective impetus turning to the greater professionalism. Understanding some key features of PLC, we need to stress the Hord’s and Sommer’s seven elements of effective leadership, known as the Seven C’s, especially related to the professionalism of PLC: communication, collaboration, coaching, change, conflict, creativity and courage. (Hord & Sommers, 2008) From the vision and model of traditional universities, competition and individualism has changed, collaboration and teamwork has come to the front. In summary, the concept of PLC has some key features, namely interdisciplinarity, sharing and change. Interdisciplinarity means collaborative curriculum planning among the teachers organizing workshops and projects and stressing assessment for learning. Sharing is related to stronger needs of knowledge management and teamwork change has two levels: organizational and cultural dimensions of HE. From the point of leadership and management, leading learning, being a district and system player and becoming a change agent of key competences has played an important role in the above-mentioned process. (Fullan, 2014)

### 4 Conclusion

It can be seen from the origin of universities and theoretical dimension of redesigning higher education in this paper, that continuous dynamism and learning an integral part of the transformation of professional learning community and increasing collaboration in HE. The process of this transformation has enormous challenges and

it requires changing the attitudes among the actors inside and outside of the universities. No doubt, that professional learning community has dramatically changed the concept and vision of HE, but if we turn back to the starting point of the historical roots of universities, collaboration was a traditional strength. This paper has raised some points to a need for even more collaboration: planning, development and assessment of students' learning in HE in the future. Finally, turning back to the key questions of this paper: What feasible relationship between the impact of professional learning community and collaboration in higher education? What different phenomena of professional learning communities are needed for effective collaboration in higher education? No doubt that we are facing a lot of challenges in front of us, but the new HE landscape around the world has a lot of positive indicators and signs moving forward to the more effective collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/university>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/university>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/university>