

Standard Policy Brief Template

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COORDINATION OF NETWORKS, PARTNERSHIPS AND ENVIRONMENTS AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This brief describes the policy to develop the University's relational dimension through the figure of the networks and partnerships coordinator. The university has usually been characterised by some distancing from the real world, a tendency towards hermetic compartments and remarkable rigidity. In contrast, this proposal describes a model that, beyond degree curricula consisting of different isolated subjects, connects topics, disciplines, professionals and needs in this region through a policy to cultivate and increase the institution's social capital. This policy is governed by the principle of the university's social responsibility and establishes a short-, mid- and long-term action plan in relation to the internal and external dimension of our degree studies.

In the short term, the operational Unit of networks and partnerships is set up. This Unit monitors, supports and centralizes cross-curricular relationships and projects, or either a database with all the collaborating agencies is created. In the mid-term, an inter-studies S-L is proposed, or either the promotion of strategic collaborations with the close environment, education administration and some important education hubs, both national and international. In the long term, the consolidation of an interdisciplinary challenge among studies at every academic year is agreed upon, or either the development of a Magnet Project. These are some of the examples at the base of this strategic line that intends to transform our School into a 360º-scope community education hub in the short, mid- and long term.

[FPCEE Blanquerna-URL, Spain]

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Acronyms

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019

ERC: Educational Resource Centre

FPCEE: Blanquerna School of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences

NGO: Non-governmental organization

SAIP: Educational Guidance and Innovation Service

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

S-L: Service-Learning

STEAM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics

URL: Ramon Llull University

VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity

1. Introduction

This policy brief focuses on the sub-theme 4.4, *Partnerships for success: Students, teachers, employers, communities*, which in turn approaches a challenge that higher education is facing nowadays: training professionals with skills to work and manage in the current world. Thus, the text proposes to develop the university's relational dimension through the inspiring practice in the Education degree courses at Blanquerna School of Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences (FPCEE), Ramon Llull University (URL). This practice includes the coordination of networks and partnerships in the context of their studies, the School, the institution and in relation with the environment. The university institution, as a thoroughly regulated organization and coming from a cathedral and monastic tradition, has usually been characterised by some distancing from the real world (ivory tower), a tendency towards hermetic compartments (departments) and remarkable rigidity and slowness to implement changes. Thus, this brief presents a model that, beyond degree curricula consisting of isolated subjects, connects topics, disciplines, professions and needs in our region through a policy to cultivate and increase the institution's social capital.

In this brief, there is a short literature review, including existing practices and UNESCO reports connected to the university's relational dimension. Then, the lines of development of this coordination and their practical implications are presented.

This is, then, a brief that goes deeper into a procedural issue in the context of SDG 4, particularly target 4.4 in relation to educating youth and adults in the skills needed to their access to the professional world.

2. Educational ecosystem, university and social capital

One of the main challenges that education systems are facing now is to provide efficient, sustainable and innovative responses to complex, changing and multivariable educational and social problems (Flores, 2016; Sarasa & Sales, 2009), a circumstance that has undoubtedly increased with the pandemic. In this VUCA context, the educational community is more and more aware that the education *system* is in fact an *ecosystem* where educators, learners, challenges or needs are closely connected. Thus, in the same way as in biological ecosystems it is the collaboration among organisms and species rather than the fight for survival that allows ecosystems to evolve and species to prosper, an educational ecosystem also has to be based on connections and collaboration as a natural motor.

Higher education, as a critical agent in this educational ecosystem, has a key role in this scenario (Guerrero & Urbano, 2017) and, in the middle of the crisis brought to the world by COVID-19, it must be an essential stronghold to face it (UNESCO-IESALC, 2021). However, the university model is still characterized by being static, conservative and very bureaucratized, which prevents a real connection with society and translates many times into an obsolete academic offer (Corell & Garcia-Peñalvo, 2021). It seems unbelievable that the university is preparing prospective professionals for professions that may not exist anymore in the future, or that it is not preparing them for those professions that are about to emerge (Almerich et al., 2019).

In short, the university has to connect more and better, as the transformation and innovation in education is more and more defined as a process of collaboration among many agents (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016; Clayton, 2016), overcoming institutions walls. This idea leads us to interconnections among educational agents that include internal –among professionals and agents inside an organization- and external interdependencies –among organizations in the

community, such as universities, schools, social organizations, cultural associations, healthcare services, companies, etc.- (Civís & Díaz, 2021; Civís et al., 2018).

Considering the collaboration among educational agents or professionals in the community, there are different studies that show how the systematization of these relationships and the formal arrangement of a shared project with common goals becomes essential so that these initiatives are effective focusing towards educational ecosystems (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Clayton, 2016; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). In this regard, the UNESCO document 'Education in a Post-COVID World: Nine Ideas for Public Action' (2020) reports that those communities that have given a more innovative and effective response to the COVID-19 crisis and have shown the most resilience are in fact the systems with greater collaboration among the agents in the educational community, a fact which is also described in recent studies by Azorín (2020) and Ion and Brown (2020).

Borrowing the metaphor of COVID-19 as a supernova in education (Azorín, 2020), the pandemic probably implies a turning point in the history of education (and many others), indicating the end of a period: The period of the segmented, fragmented, compartmentalized and segregated education. Paradigm to reinvent itself from the collaboration among educational agents and settings as the natural motor to make the educational scenario become an educational ecosystem, and within its framework to make all the agents connect to weave, nourish and cultivate an ecosystem capable of guaranteeing a quality education for all the people involved.

An ecosystem is determined both by the type of agents and the type of existing relationships. To the quantity and quality of relationships among them we give them the name of social capital. Adopting Lin's (1999) definition, the social capital refers to those resources embedded in a social structure that are accessible or used by a purposeful action. In the last decades, the social capital has emerged as one of the outstanding concepts in the field of social sciences (Daly, 2010; Dika & Singh, 2002) and the awareness of its potential in education has led to an increasing number of studies about its effects and benefits (López et al., 2018). In this sense, understanding the network of relationships and the role of every agent in it increases the possibility to achieve goals and objectives. To do so, it is key to emphasize, increase, start or modify relationships in order to strengthen the network and therefore the ecosystem. Finally, this strengthening will benefit both the teachers and students, the institution and the entire community.

At present, there are already university experiences that follow this orientation, such as [Ashoka-U](#), [Ecoversities](#), [Civic University Network](#), [Opida](#), [Universitat 360](#) or [Edvolució](#), among others. All of them are based on a greater and better relationship with the environment and better care of people and their relationships.

3. Coordination of Networks, Partnerships and Environments

3.1 Justification

Considering the previous explanation, FPCEE Blanquerna-URL has made the decision to pilot a new coordination that promotes and manages the School's relational dimension, starting with the degree courses in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education. The reason has to do with the vision of educational ecosystem already existing among the teaching staff of these education-related courses and with their longer tradition in cooperative work and networking.

These degree courses have 6 strategic axes, 3 of them with marked relational purpose:

- 3rd: 'For a teacher connected and able to work in networks, we have to establish bridges that promote synergies between the degree courses in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education and the school, families and networks and university.'

- 4th: 'For a teacher able to educate in solidarity, in the construction of peace, in freedom and responsibility, justice and truth, we have to encourage students to develop proposals of participation and involvement with the environment and with others, so that these experiences reach and enrich them as professionals and people living in a community.'
- 5th: 'For a teacher open to the world, committed and respectful with others, we have to guarantee that learning situations are developed beyond the walls of the School and our region. We also have to go to museums, natural spaces and international educational realities, among others.'

Thus, the new coordination is born with the intention of strengthening these strategic axes and achieve an improvement in the courses as a whole. Below, we will present the characteristics of this management figure and then will specify the lines of action to be developed and their practical implications.

3.2 Definition, roles and actions

The coordination of Networks, Partnerships and Environments is a second-row (there is no coordination of direct attention to students and teachers) management figure, who focuses on identifying, cultivating, promoting and guaranteeing connections and collaboration relationships inside and outside of the School. Thus, the aim is to make the existing transversal and collaborative work visible, and at the same time promote it and lead the Education studies (and the School, by extension) towards a role of educational and community hub, activator of ecosystems.

The **roles** to be developed consist in:

- Identifying nodes (people or institutions).
- Identifying connections (relationships among nodes: types and frequency).
- Promoting highly interesting links (relationships to be increased, relationships to be started).
- Organizing the most optimal map of relationships for the degree courses, students and teachers.
- Coordinating cross-curricular projects.

Efforts are addressed at recognising our current potential and to see to what extent it is well activated, avoiding scarcely productive efforts and promoting fruitful collaborations.

Specifically, the following **actions** are developed:

- Identifying nodes inside the institution and active or latent connections: among subjects, among teaching staff, among students, among degree courses, among schools... (micro level)
- Identifying nodes outside the institution and active or latent connections (individual level – teachers- or institutional level –Blanquerna-) (meso and macro level). This action is developed in close connection with the international relationships coordination and service in order to expand the territorial scope and also achieve greater presence in the world.
- Increasing Blanquerna's relational capital by identifying and promoting critical connections, collaborations and partnerships.
- Monitoring and coordinating cross-curricular projects in the degree courses (among subjects, among academic years, with the environment...).

4. Diagnosis

In order to design an action plan adjusted to the expected goals and available resources, a mapping of existing connections and partnerships was carried out, through a questionnaire for the teaching staff, asking them for existing and desirable relationships. Out of a total of 73 teachers, 58 answers were collected, which represents 80% of the target population.

Next, we present a summary of the most significant results:

1. Experiences or collaborations among degree subjects:

- 93% of teachers collaborate with some other subject, with an average of 3 collaborations.
- They are mainly interdisciplinary projects or module work among 2 or more subjects.
- There are also conferences, sponsorships, co-teaching or specific collaborations among subjects.

With regard to this question, we can observe a tendency in teachers to establish collaborations and a balance between initiatives springing from the teachers themselves and others from the management team.

2. Cross-curricular experiences in the context of the degree course (beyond the subjects)

- 95% of teachers collaborate with some cross-curricular initiative, with an average of 3 or more collaborations:
 - Commissions and work groups (most of them).
 - Conferences (Hackathons, School-University Day, Saint George's Day, Cultural Week, PRE (Educational Practice and Reflection) Week, Spiritual Cinema Week, M. Antonia Canals...).
 - Programmes: Blanquerna-School Transition programme, international programmes.
 - Visits to educational and cultural centres.

With regard to this question, we can observe a wide diversity of initiatives, most of them appointed (by the management team) and some emerging. In most of them, there are only teachers (no students or school teachers or administration staff or external professionals), with some exceptions.

3. Collaborations with other degree courses in Blanquerna

- 58% of teachers collaborate with other degree courses in the School or in Blanquerna, with an average of 2 collaborations per teacher.
- Collaborations are connected to training, cultural events or management.
- Training collaborations:
 - Training sessions from one degree course to another: voice (Speech and Language Therapy), mindfulness (Psychology), first aid (Nursing)... (conducted by students or teachers).
 - Intercultural workshop.
 - Interdisciplinary case (Education, Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Sports Sciences, and Nursing).
 - Double degree courses (Education and Psychology, Education and Sports Sciences, Education and Speech and Language Therapy).
 - S-L Day (Sports Sciences and Education).
- Cultural initiatives:
 - Celebrations (Easter, Saint George's Day...).
 - Observatory of religions.
 - Blanquerna Choir.

- Cultural Week.
- Management initiatives:
 - Study of synergies with degree courses in Speech and Language Therapy, Psychology or Nursing (and as a result, double degree courses, shared optional subjects or a case study).
 - Cross-curricular projects among degree courses (COIL programme...).

With regard to this point, we particularly identify isolated actions but more grassroots initiatives (rather than appointed). We can also observe that there is collaboration with all the degree courses in the School, but with more affinity with the Speech and Language Therapy studies.

4. Relationships from the subjects with associations, schools, organizations or external people

- 88% of teachers establish some relationships from the subject with external agents.
- Relationships consist in inviting referential/testimonial people to the School, going to visit experiences, or establishing collaborations.
- Visitors: Former students, professionals of the Department of Education, teachers and head teachers from schools, other professionals (social educators, social workers, psychologists...).
- Visits: cultural outings (theatre, museums, exhibitions, archaeological sites...), music outings (auditorium, Liceu, Institut Jacques-Dalcroze in Geneva...), nature outings (Cram, natural parks, Fabra Observatory...), social outings (NGOs connected to vulnerable children, Casal dels Infants, Migra Studium,...), visiting facilities (markets, libraries, archives...), visits to schools, 'educational' outings (ClickEdu, Department of Education, pedagogical service, institutions...), international mobility (international placements, PEERS Project...).
- Collaborations: brief voluntary work with NGOs connected with SDGs, collaborations with schools, concert-music workshop in Wad-Ras, S-L, Blanquerna-School Transition programme, 'The party of the senses' (ERC of Sarrià-Sant Gervasi and schools in the district) ...

We identified, then, a large number of experiences, which involve both people coming in to visit and outings, as well as experiences of collaborations which are even more interesting.

5. Social-educational projects or associations with individual collaborations

- 81% of teachers collaborate with some social-educational project or association outside the School.
- These associations or projects correspond to the fields of sports, environment, music, foundations/NGOs in the social and educational sector, educational administration, universities, schools, journals, professional associations or conferences, among others.

These relationships are established with a wide variety of associations. Noteworthy are relationships in the music sector and with administration (local, supra-municipal, or autonomic). We could not observe much international collaboration/relationship.

6. Proposals concerning connections, collaborations and partnerships in the context of our studies, School, institution and external agents

In the prospective section, respondents were asked about desirable relationships at the internal and external level, and they suggested a high number of ideas:

- At the level of degree course, there are *general* (e.g., an impact assessment or organizing learning from challenges) and *specific* (e.g., greater link between subjects and practicum or intensifying sponsorships) proposals.
- At the level of School/institution, there are *general* proposals (e.g., structuring and institutionalizing the existing network of partnerships), *inter-* proposals -inter-degree

courses in the School, Blanquerna or URL- (S-L between degree courses, or Hackathon with all the degree courses) or *cross-* proposals (improving the link between teaching and research or the Professori -retired teachers- project).

- At the level of relationship with external agents, there are *micro* proposals (increasing relationships with our close environment - Bellesguard, CosmoCaixa, ERC Sarrià-Sant Gervasi...- or meetings with the District), *meso* proposals (joining educational networks –Networks for Change, Futures of Education...- or establishing partnerships with relevant associations in the educational, media, social and cultural sectors), and *macro* proposals (establishing connections with important International Education Hubs/Projects -UNESCO, Wise, Ashoka...- or joining some international networks -Guni, Vives Network...).

In the years following this diagnosis/mapping, a system to collect data will be set up concerning new projects and initiatives in order to have an updated database for contacts and initiatives.

5. Action plan

From the results summarized in the previous section and the strategic axes of our studies, an action plan was designed. The plan is aimed at improving the social and relational capital from an ecosystemic vision that involves the improvement of the School and the entire social and educational ecosystem.

Thus, the plan is guided by the principle of the university's social responsibility, aware that this institution is a key element for the progress and well-being of the entire society, with regard to:

1. Cultivating the entire social and educational ecosystem.
2. Promoting the culture of social innovation.
3. Catalysing social change and impact.
4. Training professionals with skills to work, develop and be agents of change in the current world.
5. Taking care of the community and the environment based on the Sustainable Development Goals.

From these premises, we established a short-term, mid-term and long-term action plan, revisable yearly, which we present below synthetically:

5.1 Short-term (current)

Degree, School/institution

1. Create the Operational Unit for networks and partnerships (consisting of the coordination of Networks, Partnerships and Environments, the Practice Placements coordination, the Office for Social Action and SDG, the unit of the social teacher and the S-L coordination). This Unit monitors, supports and centralizes all the new relationships established with external agents and accompanies the new cross-curricular projects of the degree courses/School.
2. Develop a presentation about the mapping and a visual map with the ecosystem of relations (egonetwork) for its dissemination (teaching staff, students, exterior...).
3. Encourage the collaboration among subjects from the coordination of every academic year and in the meetings at the beginning of the semester.
4. Make the contribution from the different subjects to the practicum visible: collecting evidence in the learning folder or final report.
5. Introduce the 'culture of authentic activities' concerning assignments of subjects that meet the real needs of the educational world (schools, associations...).
6. Encourage students' involvement and participation in the educational project of the degree courses and the School. Mechanisms: awarding credits to students who lead

stable initiatives (film forum, Cultural Week...); promoting the Blanquerna Passport, which will collect the students' cross-curricular experiences –beyond the subjects-. *Joint coordination with the Vice Dean for Quality, Students and Employability.*

7. Develop guidelines on Networks, Partnerships and Environments to assess the relational dimension of the Education degree courses. The document includes number and type of collaborations, agents involved, achievement of goals in the short, mid- and long term, new projects promoted, community impact (micro, meso and macro), etc.

External relationships

1. Database with all the associations that we collaborate with (specifying actions, potential possibilities, whether there are agreements...).
2. 'Professori' (retired teachers) Project. *Joint coordination with the Vice Dean for Degree Courses and Innovation.*
3. Contact with educational services from associations, museums, facilities.... to create and supervise practice placement places. Possible guidance by the School (through the SAIP office).

5.2 Mid-term

Degree, School/institution

1. Organize 3rd-year and 4th-year learning from challenges and interdisciplinary proposals and STEAM.
2. 'Co-Learning Time Bank'.
3. S-L: inter-degree courses and among the different Blanquerna schools.
4. Regular (spaced) coordination among the management teams of the degree courses of the School/institution (Education, Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Sports Sciences, Nursing, and Communication) to find/consolidate joint initiatives (interdisciplinary case, Hackathon, Design Thinking, training sessions among degree courses with participation of students...).

External relationships

1. Impact research concerning teaching methods.
2. Promote strategic collaborations:
 - a. Meetings with officials with responsibility over education in administrations to explore collaborations (training sessions, conferences, projects, response to needs...).
 - b. Increase relationships with the close environment: Bellesguard, CosmoCaixa, ERC Sarrià-Sant Gervasi...
 - c. Meeting with the District-Neighbourhood to explore collaborations (training sessions, conferences, projects, response to needs...): Casa Orlandai – 'Sarrià, educating district'.
 - d. Establish contacts with important educational hubs (Jaume Bofill Foundation, Trams Foundation, Movements for Pedagogical Renovation, Rosa Sensat, Catalan School Association, Federation of Christian Schools in Catalonia, Magnet Project....).
 - e. Promote a stable partnership or regular conference in collaboration with some of the aforementioned associations of reference in education.
 - f. Connect with educational networks: Edu 360, Laboratori Transformació (Transformation Lab), Futurs de l'Educació (Futures of Education), Xarxes per al canvi (Networks for Change), Xarxa de Competències Bàsiques (Network of Basic Competences)...

- g. Establish contact with important international education hubs/projects (UNESCO, Wise, Ashoka...).
- h. Join some international network (Guni, Vives Network...).

5.3 Long-term

Degree, School/institution

1. Cross-disciplinary project in the 4th year, involving all the subjects.
2. Consolidate an interdisciplinary challenge among degree courses (Education, Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Sports Sciences, Nursing and Communication) in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th academic years.
3. Promote a cultural/artistic commission.
4. Promote a musical theatre group.
5. Promote an instrumental band.
6. Promote a coordination of Networks, Partnerships and Environments in the different degree courses of the institution.

External relationships

1. Stays of teachers from our School at a school (and a possible exchange of residences).
2. Explore the collaboration with TV3 and other mass media.
3. Magnet Project with some centres.
4. Intensify voluntary work, S-L or collaboration with associations in the social and educational sector.

6. Conclusions

This policy brief has presented a strategic proposal by FPCEE Blanquerna-URL concerning the relational dimension of its Education degree courses. The proposal is set on the basis of a new coordination of Networks, Partnerships and Environments, with the goal to increase the social and relational capital of our institution.

Although previous literature established the importance of collaboration to face educational challenges, the university institution is not precisely permeable to this approach, which is why this proposal has a degree of uniqueness and audacity. Moreover, opting for this coordination implies that the institution loses human resources of direct attention to students or teachers, as mentioned above. However, the assessment is highly positive, and that is why we developed this policy brief.

Thus, the implementation of this coordination is planned in the following phases:

- Phase 1: Appointing the person in charge of this coordination, and setting up the operational Unit of Networks, Partnerships and Environments.
- Phase 2: Mapping the relational dimension and supporting cross-curricular projects, either emerging or in process.
- Phase 3: Analysing the mapping and proposal based on the diagnosis, strategic axes and development of the principle of social responsibility (cultivating the ecosystem, culture of social innovation, catalysing change and social impact, preparing competent professionals, taking care of the community and SDG).
- Phase 4: Short-, mid- and long-term action plan concerning internal and external relationships.
- Phase 5: Assessing through a guidelines document and including or modifying proposals.

These phases combine the analysis and proposal perspective with the direct action perspective concerning existing or starting projects, with the aim of weaving and cultivating the educational ecosystem and the role of university in it.

This current academic year has been the first and therefore a pilot experience, but the perspective is that of continuity and expansion to other degree courses. As this was the first year, more effort was focused on diagnosis and, as a result, a human group and institution with great disposition to collaborate at different levels have been made visible, as well as many opportunities for collaboration. Getting to know, organising and identifying these opportunities has been the essential task of this academic year, together with the activation of some collaborative initiatives and accompanying tasks for existing cross-curricular initiatives.

In fact, and beyond the mapping, the events in relation to the pandemic show this collaborative vocation when the School reached an agreement with charter schools to create an ad hoc list of employable teachers in 24 hours, including teachers, last-year Education students and master's students to fill the constant COVID-19-related vacancies during the toughest days in the 6th wave.

Thus, in this policy brief we present what we think is a strategic line for the future for universities through an inspiring and successful experience, the case of Education studies at FPCEE Blanquerna-URL. With this example, our School intends to become a 360°-scope community education hub in the short, mid- and long term.

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