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CO-CREATING VISIONS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY IN THE GERMAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must navigate diverse stakeholder interests and align their efforts towards a common goal to sustainably fulfill their missions. Co-creating visions is a promising approach to developing shared visions and thus aligning stakeholders' interests. However, there is a lack of methodological guidance to support individual institutions during these co-creation processes. To address this gap, this paper aims to understand the impact of providing external methodological support to co-create visions with a multi-stakeholder approach. It investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of the co-creation process, the key factors that contribute to its success, and how student participation is perceived in the process. The co-creation program was evaluated with 30 participants from 11 institutions that took part in the program. The results show that a systematic and moderated co-creation of visions supports stakeholders in clarifying their contribution to achieving a better future for higher education.

Keywords:

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are put under pressure by digital transformation in governance and learning, the changing expectations of students, and decreasing enrolment numbers (Pucciarelli, & Kaplan, 2016; Benavides et al., 2020). Given their complex organizational constructs and high diversity in status groups, goals, and needs, HEIs have to face various requirements to sustainably fulfill their mission in a changing and volatile world (Ewing, 2021). To align institutions and move forward, many HEIs already publish strategy papers (e.g., for teaching and learning) or negotiate target agreements with ministries. Moreover, third-party funding projects are often acquired to implement innovative projects, especially in the area of digital learning, and third-mission teams are set up to increase efforts in contributing to society at large.

From this abbreviated presentation of the HEI organizational construct, it is already apparent that HEIs are dealing with diverse goals and requirements. Moreover, decision-making power and responsibilities are distributed among different levels that have varying degrees of autonomy (e.g., leadership, faculties, administration, research institutes), and a range of stakeholders have differing interests in steering and developing the institution (Ewing, 2021). At the same time, participation becomes more and more important for HEIs. The diversity of interests, perspectives, and goals within an HEI poses a challenge to developing and aligning it towards a common vision and mission. This strengthens the need for approaching the development of visions and strategies as a systematic co-creation process (Pucciarelli, & Kaplan, 2016; Doten-Snitker et al., 2021).

Several approaches and tools for co-creation in businesses (Rajan and Read, 2016) as well as experiences with vision building in higher education (HE) already exist (Doten-Snitker et al., 2021). In particular, vision building is often used as an approach in broader foresight studies for the future HE landscape (HolonIQ, 2018; Orr et al., 2020; Sabzalieva et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2022). The studies indicate that the co-creation of visions can support the development of HEIs and align the efforts of heterogeneous stakeholders toward a common goal. At

the same time, there seems to be a lack of methodological approaches that can guide individual institutions through such a co-creation process.

This case study aims to understand the impact of providing external methodological support and facilitation to vision co-creation with a multi-stakeholder approach. It investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing a co-creation process for vision building for HEIs and explores the key factors that contribute to its successful implementation. Moreover, it explores how the participation of students is perceived during the process.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we introduce related work on vision building in HEIs and describe the methodology. Next, we present a program for co-creating visions for HEIs and report its evaluation. Last, we discuss the results and implications, and then conclude with a summary and outlook on future work.

Related Work

Vision Building in HEIs

Vision building is a creative and aspirational approach to strategic planning and focuses on what an organization wants to achieve in the future (Collins & Porras, 1996). It typically involves creating inspiring narratives and open innovation sessions to generate ideas and build consensus on long-term goals, values, and purpose. Moreover, it is often combined with methods from futures thinking which is a more analytical and data-driven approach to design possibility spaces and create projections about how the future may unfold.

In the context of HEIs, vision building approaches can be used to create future scenarios in strategic planning (Ahmad, 2020). Moreover, methods of vision building and futures thinking are commonly used in foresight studies to create future scenarios that inform political and leadership decisions. Examples in the context of HE are mapping out the UK HE landscape 2035 (Blass et al., 2010), a trend analysis for the HE landscape 2030 (Orr et al., 2020), or an analysis of the impact of technology on HE (HolonIQ, 2018). Accordingly, the UNESCO report on the future of HE (Sabzalieva et al., 2021) and the Horizon Report (Pelletier et al., 2022) are built upon methods from this area.

Co-Creation of Visions as a Participation Tool in HE

Next to strategic planning and foresight studies, vision building approaches are commonly used to align multiple stakeholders and foster participation within an institution. In the context of business organization, this is called co-creation and includes concepts of co-production (multiple stakeholders working together) and value-in-use (how participants create individual value from co-creation activities) (Rajan and Read, 2016).

This also reflects in HE research where studies focus mostly on participation between students and staff, e.g., through approaches like students-as-partners (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2016). In the context of visions for HE, Géring et al. (2018) explored the use of participatory backcasting to study the future of HE. Similarly, Doten-Snitker et al. (2021) investigated the co-creation of shared visions in 13 change projects and a collaborative approach as a means to support empowerment and inclusion. Inclusion and empowerment were also studied by Dollinger & Lodge (2020), who analyzed ten case studies of student-staff co-creation and found that co-creation activities tend to not only produce greater output value but also reward the participating individuals. They report that student-staff co-creation is a broad category of activities and highlight the importance to reflect on individual and environmental considerations in the design of co-creation activities to ensure authenticity and remove potential barriers.

Methodology

With the aim to develop and test educational innovations in real-world contexts, this study uses a design-based research (DBR) approach (Barab & Squire, 2004). DBR involves iterative cycles of designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions in practice and improving them based on feedback. In this case study, we developed a prototype of a program to co-create visions with HEIs working with small groups of relevant representatives from the institutions including students. The program was then implemented in two cohorts of HEIs. We describe the program in the following section.

Data Collection

To evaluate and iteratively improve the approach in practice, we surveyed the participants on their expectations and experiences before the program, the experience with the program components, the participation of students, and the outlook on future activities.

The first cohort was surveyed at the end of the program, with a response rate of 16 answers. Out of the 16 survey participants, ten were working in service or support structures, three were lecturers, and the rest considered themselves as students or others. Two-thirds (n=10) were in the age group between 30-45, and the rest were distributed among the other age groups.

The second cohort was surveyed after the fourth workshop, with a response rate of 14 answers. Half of the survey participants were working in service or support structures, the rest were distributed among students (3), HEI leadership (2), and lecturers and others (2). Age groups were distributed as follows: five persons between 36-45, four between 18-25, two persons each between 26-35 and 46-55, and one above 55.

Data Analysis

For the closed questions in the survey, the quantitative responses were reported directly or with descriptive statistics. The open items were independently analyzed and coded by two raters using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004) to identify common themes in the answers.

Case Study: Co-creating Visions with HEIs

The case study describes the implementation of a program set-up to co-create visions with teams from German HEIs. The program - a joint initiative by the German think & do tank Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (German Forum for Higher Education in the Digital Age) and its student future working group "DigitalChangeMaker" - ran in two cohorts and consisted of five workshops spread over 4-5 months with integrated remote working phases including take-home tasks for the teams.

The conceptual approach of both cohorts was the same. However, some slight changes in methods and workshop designs were implemented based on the feedback from the first cohort. These include, for example, extending the workshop length to 4 hours instead of 3 hours, starting a regular cross-university student check-in call, and allowing for more flexibility regarding the methods used.

The first cohort consisted of Germany-based 6 HEIs, each providing a heterogeneous team of 3-6 people, and ran between June and October 2022. The second cohort consisted of 4 HEIs and one HEI network and ran between October 2022 and March 2023.

Beside collaborating in cross-HEI workshops, the participating teams formed tandems within their cohort for a more in-depth interaction during and beyond the workshops, e.g., in shorter tandem check-in meetings in between the workshops and a dedicated communication channel. Moreover, each tandem had designated student mentors guiding and facilitating the discussions as well as coaching the teams during the workshop sessions. An overview of the program is shown in Figure 1.

Overall, the program can be divided into three phases: understanding futures, designing futures, and getting futures off the ground. The first phase aims to collect, describe and understand future images. The second phase focuses on the development of future scenarios by the participating teams for their HEI in 2035. The third phase sets out to pave the way to proactively achieving these desirable futures by developing a roadmap, backcasting the next steps, and communicating visions. The components and exercises of the program were built based on relevant literature as well as strongly inspired by approaches and methods used by futures facilitator organizations and competence centers KNOWEAUX Applied Futures (n.d.), Berliner Ideenlabor (2020) and Zukunftsinstitut (n.d.).
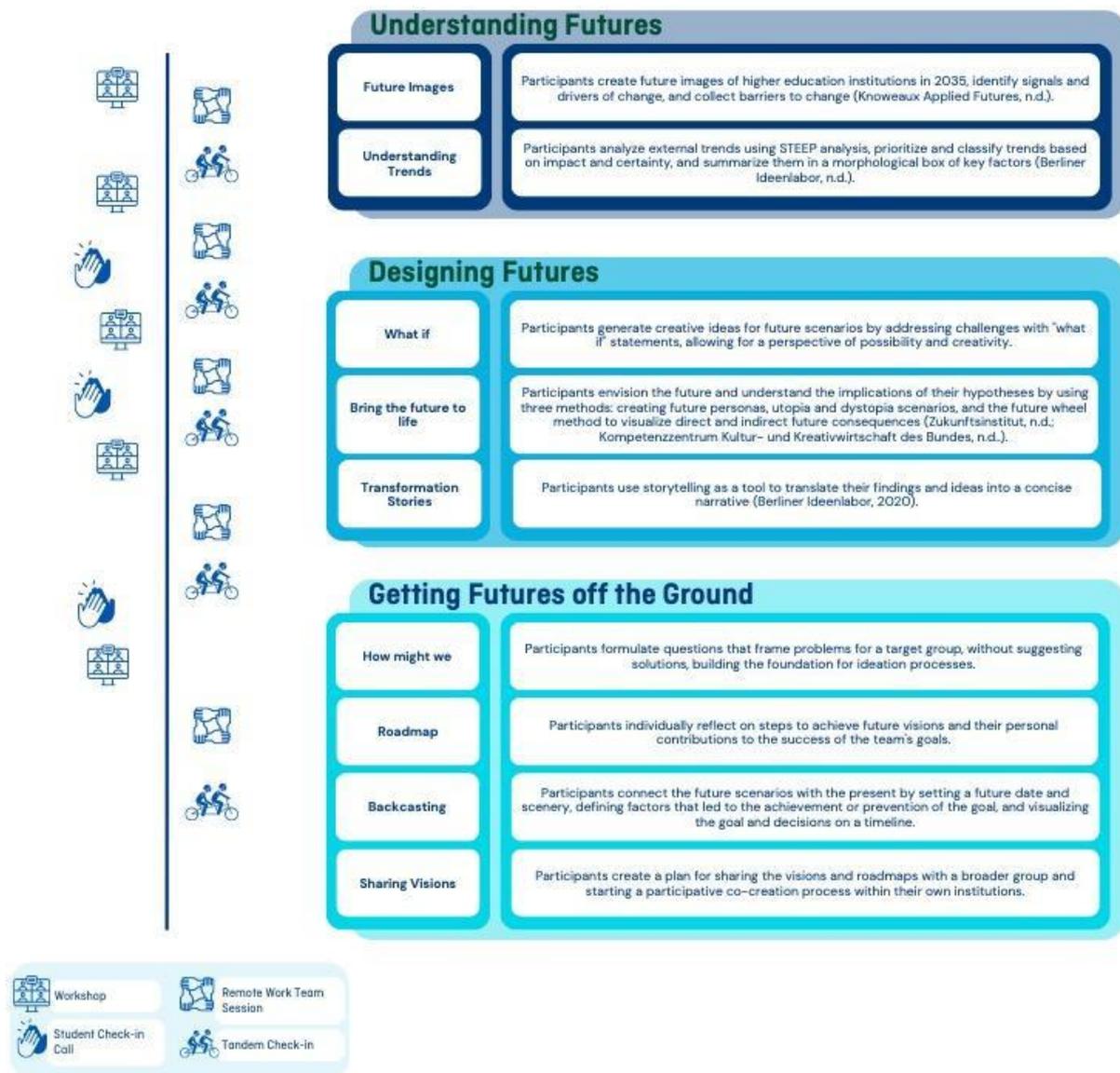
Figure 1. Overview of the program time line (left) and phases of the co-creation program with respective exercises (right).

Results

The following section reports the results of the survey of 30 participants distributed among two cohorts and 11 institutions.

Prior Experiences and Expectations

In the first cohort, 50 % (n=8) mentioned that they had at least one prior experience with vision building or futures thinking, 31.3 % (n=5) had no experience, and 18.8 % (n=3) considered themselves as experienced. Two-thirds of the participants of the first cohort (n=10) were "excited about what awaits me" and the rest (n=6) were "open and curious."

In the second cohort, 35.7 % (n=5) mentioned that they had at least one prior experience with vision building or futures thinking, 35.7 % (n=5) had no experience, and 28.6 % (n=4) considered themselves as experienced. Half of the participants (n=7) reported being "open and curious," and the other half were "excited about what awaits me."

Regarding expectations the participants had when starting the program, participants of the first cohort mentioned aspects like "impulses" (n=8), "(methodological) support and structure" (n=5), "room for exchange" (n=4), and "getting to know new methods" (n=3). The second cohort reported, "concrete visions and plans" (n=5), "(methodological) support and structure" (n=5), and "getting to know new methods" (n=4).

Program Components

Table 1 illustrates the perceived benefit of the participants regarding the different program components, each rated on a scale from 1 (not helpful at all) to 5 (very helpful). Both cohorts rated the remote work phases as most helpful, followed by the support through mentors and cross-HEI workshops.

Table 1:   Perception of program components on a scale from 1 (not helpful at all) to 5 (very helpful).

	Cohort 1 Mean (Std)	Cohort 2 Mean (Std)
Cross-HEI workshops	3.50 (0.73)	3.07 (0.83)
Remote work phases	4.06 (1.12)	3.86 (0.95)
Support through mentors	3.44 (0.81)	3.43 (0.85)
Exchange in tandems	2.88 (0.89)	2.50 (0.76)

Overall Program Evaluation

In the first cohort, 75 % (n=12) would recommend the program to a friend or colleague at another university, 25 % (n=4) were unsure, and one would not recommend it (multiple answers were possible). In the second cohort, 64 % (n=9) would further recommend the program, 21 % (n=3) were unsure and two would not recommend it.

Highlights and Improvements

When asked about their highlight of the program, participants of the first cohort reported: "workshops/methods" (n=4), "network and exchange" (n=4), "working on transformation story/own vision" (n=3), "documentation of process" (n=3), and "work in their team" (n=2). Accordingly, participants in cohort two highlighted the "work in their team" (n=6), "workshops /methods" (n=5), "in-person workshop" (n=3), and "working on transformation story/own vision" (n=2).

To the open question of what changes would lead to a ten percent improvement of the program, the first cohort reported: "working more concretely on own vision" (n=5), "overview over program" (n=3), and "more time" (n=3). Participants of the second cohort mentioned "working more concretely on own vision" (n=4), "individualizing the support" (n=4), "reducing process reflexion" (n=3), "more time" (n=2), and "focus on results" (n=2).

Participation

Table 2 reports the perception of participation of students during the different program components, showing an overall good perception of participation.

Table 2:   Perception of student participation in the program on a scale from 1 (not good at all) to 5 (excellent).

	Cohort 1 Mean (Std)	Cohort 2 Mean (Std)
Cross-HEI workshops	4.00 (0.89)	3.64 (1.28)
Remote work phases	3.94 (1.29)	4.29 (0.83)
Exchange in tandems	3.44 (1.03)	3.07 (0.62)

Participation in own team	3.19 (1.60)	4.43 (0.85)

To the question of measures to strengthen student participation in the future, participants of the first cohort mentioned: "support with the recruitment of students" (n=3), "expectation management" (n=2), "incentives (credit points, monetary)" (n=2), and "guidelines/obligation" (n=2). The second cohort mentioned "strengthening the role of the students" (n=4), "inclusive participation" (n=2), and also "guidelines/obligation" (n=2).

Future Steps

On the question of what the next steps would be, participants of the first cohort reported aiming to "bring vision/process into institutions" (n=12), "get more specific" (n=5), and "initiate measures for implementation" (n=4). Correspondingly, the next steps of the second cohort were to "get more specific" (n=8), and "initiate measures for implementation" (n=8), "bring vision/process into institutions" (n=3). However, it is important to note that the second cohort was surveyed with one workshop to come.

When asked what support measures and conditions would be needed to implement their next steps, participants of the first cohort mentioned, "external moderation" (n=4), "time" (n=3), "acceptance in the institution" (n=3), and a "participative process" (n=2). Participants of the second cohort reported the need for "external support (politics/funding)" (n=4), "motivation/commitment in their team" (n=4), "acceptance in the institution" (n=4), and "further exchange" (n=2).

Discussion and Implications

Concerning our question about the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing a co-creation process for vision building for HEIs, the results show that more than two-thirds of both cohorts would recommend the program, highlighting the methods and the structured time to work with their team as beneficial. Moreover, exchange and networking between institutions was helpful. At the same time, the question of improvements indicates that working on visions is a highly individualized process and might require customized support and supervision. Moreover, participants of both cohorts mentioned "working more concretely on own vision" indicating a desire to spend more time on the later phases of designing and getting futures off the ground, and less on understanding futures at the beginning.

The results indicate that the key factors that contribute to the successful implementation are (1) the structure of the program, (2) the methodological support, and (3) the network and exchange among the participants. First, the structure of the program combining workshops and remote working phases seemed to be an important factor. On average, the remote working phase was rated as the most helpful (see Table 1). Moreover, multiple participants highlighted "working in their teams" as their highlight. This hints at the fact that providing a structure and clear take-home tasks helped the teams to move forward. Second, the results show that providing methodological support is an important success factor for participants. Multiple participants mention "workshops /methods" as a highlight and the support through mentors is perceived as rather helpful (see Table 1). This also aligns with the initial expectations of multiple participants to learn new methods and get methodological support in the process. Third, the aspect of network and exchange played an important role. The cross-HEI workshops were perceived as rather helpful and multiple participants highlighted the aspect of "network and exchange." At the same time, the exchange in tandems between two HEIs in the current offered form seemed to not contribute that much.

The reported participation was relatively high throughout the program components, which support the benefits of co-creation found in literature (Doten-Snitker et al., 2021). At the same time, we find that participation needs to be actively pursued and willed.

Conclusion and Outlook

This case study has investigated the impact of providing external methodological support for co-creating visions with a multi-stakeholder approach, focusing on the perceived benefits and challenges, key success factors, and student participation. The results indicate that the key factors that contribute to the successful implementation are the structure of the program, methodological support, and network and exchange.

Based on the results, we can conclude that providing methodological support to co-creating visions with a multi-stakeholder approach can be an important tool in supporting institutions in the development of visions and underlying strategies. In this context, a co-creation process supports team building as well as the alignment, engagement, and sense of ownership of different stakeholders in the process. This underlines that participation is an important aspect of creating better visions for the future. Overall, this case study provides valuable insights into the potential of co-creation of visions for HEIs on their way to creating better futures and offers practical guidance for institutions seeking to implement this approach.

Future research should continue to explore the long-term impact of the intervention of a systematic co-creation process for vision building within HEIs. Moreover, it can examine the contribution of (student-)participation to vision building as well as aim to investigate if the findings generalize in an international context.

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