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Short bio:

Dr Kerr Castle is the newly appointed Head of Digital, Marketing and Communications at QAA, responsible for transforming the agency's approach to engaging with external audiences and increasing cross-sector awareness of its work. Previous to this role, Kerr was a Quality Enhancement and Standards Specialist and led on a range of activities designed to improve the quality and experience of UK higher education. Some of his key areas of focus included student transitions, education for sustainable development, and addressing awarding gaps, as well as enhancing teaching, learning and assessment more broadly. He also collaborates with internal and external stakeholders to develop and implement solutions that enhance the student learning experience and outcomes.

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Short bio:

Dr. Fredrick Agboma is an accomplished academic and practitioner with expertise in entrepreneurship, innovation management, and the integration of experiential learning in business and management education. With a PhD in Entrepreneurship and Development Policy from the University of Manchester, Dr. Agboma's research delves into how ecosystems shape the growth of enterprises, particularly in emerging economies.

As a Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship at Liverpool Business School, Dr. Agboma has been instrumental in increasing experiential and collaborative learning initiatives both in the UK and Internationally. He is actively involved in several research networks, including the ICT4D North of England Steering Group and Research in Enterprise Education (REntEd), where he drives innovation in entrepreneurship education and policy.

As a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Chartered Management Business Educator, Dr. Agboma is deeply committed to leveraging education, consultancy, and research to address contemporary economic challenges and enhance societal impact.

Paper

Title: Enhancing impact through collaborative partnerships in UK Higher Education

Abstract

Since 2020/21, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has offered funding for small groups of institutions to work together on projects to enhance the quality of their students' learning

experiences and develop outputs that benefit the sector as a whole. Advancing knowledge and practice around priority topics – including generative artificial intelligence, assessment and flexible delivery, education for sustainable development, innovative quality processes, student engagement, and enterprise and employability – the [Collaborative Enhancement Project \(CEP\)](#) programme has funded over 60 distinctive projects to date involving over 125 UK and international partners. Creating valuable opportunities for topic experts from different disciplines and institutions to collaborate and develop new tools and communities of practice, the programme has been a welcome catalyst for change and emboldened a spirit of community and cooperation in the English sector.

This paper focuses on the design and management of the CEP programme and how it enables thought leaders and expert practitioners to meaningfully address increasingly complex challenges at local, national and global levels. Specifically, it considers the role of quality assurance agencies in pioneering research and practice in partnership with higher education (HE) institutions, and enhancing engagement with the academic third mission. Developed jointly with Liverpool John Moores University, which led a collaboration focused on enhancing the impact of work-based learners on global issues, the paper considers the experience of completing a CEP and how this particular project has empowered educators and students to enhance the societal impact of academic learning.

Cause for collaboration – why Collaborative Enhancement Projects were the right development for HE in England and the QAA

The QAA plays a crucial role in HE across the UK and internationally, trusted by HE providers and regulatory bodies to maintain and enhance quality and standards. We collaborate with governments, agencies, and institutions globally to benefit UK HE and its international reputation. Our work includes reviewing standards and quality in HE, producing key sector guidance and providing practical support for our members. We engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including universities, colleges, professional bodies, regulators, and students.

Collaboration and partnership are central to our identity and the effective delivery of our services. We believe the sector thrives when we embrace opportunities for dialogue, exchange ideas, learn from each other, and share experiences, successes, and missteps. Values such as honesty, trust, curiosity, self-awareness, and a willingness to evolve and take feedback are essential for significant change and progression, whether at a local/campus level or beyond the boundaries of a single institution. However, partnership working is not traditionally seen as a strength of English HE, partly due to the competitive nature of such a customer-driven sector (by necessity) and a quality system focused on assurance rather than enhancement and continuous improvement.

We aimed to challenge this perception, recognising the countless positive interactions with our members and their contributions to sector reference points like the [2024 UK Quality Code](#) and [Subject Benchmark Statements](#), as well as [support developed in response to COVID-19](#). From our perspective, there was a growing appetite for enhancement-led approaches to quality in England and a renewed interest in community and collective action. Inspired by the success of collaborative projects in Scotland's national [Enhancement Themes](#), the CEP programme for England was launched in 2020. This programme encourages institutional partnerships to create knowledge and innovative practices addressing shared priorities and benefiting the wider sector.

Creating partnerships – exploring the design, delivery and evaluation of the CEP programme

At the beginning of each academic year, QAA publishes a call for CEP proposals, highlighting broad themes to address proactively as a community. Funding of up to £10,000 is offered for groups of institutions to work together to explore areas of shared interest and enhance the quality of their students' learning experiences. Each project must be led by a QAA member based in England, but partners can be drawn from across the UK and beyond, including relevant subject associations or professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). In 2023-24, we received 147 proposals and greenlighted 18 projects, with a particular interest in the roles and impacts of generative artificial intelligence. As we enter phase five of the programme, themes for 2024-25 include good practice in strategic reform, enhancing student outcomes, and delivering effective transitions.

Following an internal selection process and confirmation of successful bids, an inception meeting is held with the Manager of the CEP programme, the identified Project Lead (PL) from the lead project partner, and an assigned Link Officer from QAA who will serve as the primary point of contact for the project. The focus of this meeting is to confirm the project milestones as part of the final contract agreement and establish a strategy for dissemination of practice and outputs across the life of the project. Representing both the interests of QAA and the project team, the Link Officer is an important conduit tasked with situating CEP progress and outputs in the wider context of ongoing activity across the sector. Typically a quality specialist, their role is to identify opportunities to showcase the merits of CEP approaches and findings, as well as offer guidance to ensure projects satisfy stakeholder needs.

Working closely with PLs has resulted in highly effective and lasting partnerships, combining our values and expertise as a quality assurance agency with subject and practitioner-specific knowledge and increased engagement with their associated networks. Indeed, just as the QAA name is seen to add value from a PL perspective and guarantees insight, promotion and reach beyond traditional networks, the same is true for QAA as our efforts to make space for impactful work and support pioneering research and practice with topic experts has further enriched our reputation and expanded our audience.¹ The CEP programme has enabled us to diversify our membership offer, catering to needs and expectations beyond the capacity of our service delivery team alone, and curate an ever-expanding empirical knowledge base available publicly for the good of the sector. CEP outputs and activities afford valuable opportunities for sector colleagues to leverage discussions internally around existing approaches to key challenges and support them to develop impactful change initiatives based on relevant contextual evidence and the use of tried and tested toolkits and resources.

For practitioners participating in these projects, there has been strong recognition that working with partners adds value to any project. From co-constructing project aims and plans to supporting each other and sharing resources (particularly with partners who may have more limited access to resources internally), to learning together and combining intellectual capacity; working in this way typically results not only in the generation of valuable new tools and insights, but also creates partnerships that are based on parity and can continue beyond the scope of the original project. Moreover, direct involvement of students wherever possible and ensuring that student voice is inherent and not an adjunct to staff-led activities and findings has heightened the authenticity and impact of completed CEPs. Genuine student-staff partnerships have helped to ensure the creation of outputs and implementation of changes within partner institutions that are relevant to their students' experiences and their priorities and concerns as students, such as the embedding of sustainability skills and competencies.

Reflecting on evaluation, internal metrics including the number of webpage visits, resource downloads, and attendance at launch events and related project-led engagement activities (such as the [QAA Podcast](#)), indicate a real appetite for these kinds of projects and the associated communities of practice that often develop around them. Our ongoing evaluation of the impact of the CEP programme suggests that we are witnessing project success, embedding change both locally and with engaged practitioners, and inspiring a number of subsequent spin-out activities, too. These include book publications, CEP-inspired conferences, and enduring partnerships as former CEP teams tackle new challenges together and continue to build on the legacy of their original work. The ripple effect is real and continues to reinforce that enhancement-led approaches can help meet the needs of the sector and society more broadly.

Taking the lead: from proposal to live project to successful completion

The Student Intrapreneur and Entrepreneur Toolkit and Community of Practice project, led by Liverpool John Moores University with the University of Chester and Oxford Brookes University, highlights collaborative partnerships in enhancing academic learning's societal impact. This project empowers work-based learners—students engaged in both academic study and professional employment—to address global challenges. Supported by QAA, it provides essential tools and a supportive community to drive innovation and entrepreneurship.

The project's development and implementation focused on four key elements: ensuring parity among partner institutions, cultivating strong rapport within the project team, actively engaging alumni and

¹ A point reinforced by the subsequent introduction of similar initiatives, including Advance HE's Collaborative Development Fund (2021) and the Office for Students' Equality in Higher Education Innovation Fund (2024).

current students as key partners, and leveraging the broader academic community. The analysis then shifts to the project's embedded impact, particularly the unique positioning of work-based learners in addressing global issues, initiatives bridging theory and practice, influence on teaching practices and curriculum development, and broader societal effects.

A cornerstone of the project's success was establishing true parity among the participating institutions. Liverpool John Moores University, the University of Chester, and Oxford Brookes University each brought unique strengths and perspectives but operated under a shared vision and equal footing. This equitable partnership ensured collaborative decision-making and valued each institution's contributions equally. Parity allowed for a balanced distribution of responsibilities, with each university leading different aspects of the toolkit's development and the formation of the community of practice. This approach maximized the use of each institution's resources and expertise and cultivated a sense of shared ownership over the project's outcomes. Moreover, parity facilitated open communication and transparency, essential for addressing challenges promptly and effectively. The institutions collectively navigated the complexities of aligning their curricula, administrative processes, and strategic goals to support the project's objectives. By maintaining parity, they ensured that the toolkit and community of practice were truly representative of a collaborative effort, increasing their relevance and applicability across diverse academic settings.

The project's leadership and execution benefited immensely from the existing familiarity and strong rapport among the project team members. Many team members had previously collaborated on other initiatives or were part of overlapping professional networks within the higher education sector. This prior relationship foundation expedited the team's ability to coalesce around the project's goals and work effectively from the outset. The trust and mutual respect among team members engendered an environment conducive to open dialogue, creative brainstorming, and constructive feedback. Team meetings were characterized by candid discussions where ideas could be freely exchanged and refined. This dynamic was particularly important when addressing complex issues such as integrating intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship concepts into distinct academic programs. The cohesive team dynamics served as a model for the collaborative spirit the project aimed to instil among students through the toolkit and community of practice.

Recognising students and alumni as essential stakeholders, the project actively involved them as partners rather than mere beneficiaries. Their firsthand experiences and insights were invaluable in shaping the toolkit's content and the community of practice's structure to be relevant, engaging, and impactful. Current students participated in focus groups and pilot testing phases, providing feedback on the toolkit's usability and content relevance. Their input helped tailor the resources to address real-world challenges students face when applying entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial skills in academic and professional settings. Alumni, many of whom had successfully transitioned from academia to industry or had become entrepreneurs themselves, contributed as mentors and content creators. They shared their journeys, lessons learned, and practical advice, enriching the toolkit with authentic narratives developed through their lived experiences. Their involvement also helped bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical application, enhancing the toolkit's effectiveness. By positioning students and alumni as partners, the project empowered them to take ownership of their learning and professional development. This approach also fostered a sense of community and continuity, as current students could envision themselves following in the footsteps of their predecessors, thus reinforcing the project's sustainability and long-term impact.

The project's success was amplified by strategically leveraging the wider academic community. The team reached out to educators, industry professionals, and subject matter experts beyond the three primary institutions to contribute to the toolkit and participate in the community of practice. Workshops and networking activities were organized to develop and disseminate the project's findings and resources, inviting participation from other universities and supporting institutions. This inclusivity not only broadened the project's reach but also enriched the community of practice with diverse perspectives and expertise. Collaborative events facilitated networking opportunities, knowledge exchange, and the cultivation of partnerships that could extend the project's impact even further. The project also aligned its objectives with national educational priorities and industry needs, ensuring that its outputs were relevant to broader academic and professional contexts. By engaging with professional bodies, entrepreneurial networks, and policymakers, the project positioned itself as a contributor to systemic change in how intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship are integrated into higher education. Furthermore, the project team shared their methodologies and lessons learned through publications, conference presentations, podcasts, and blog posts. This transparency and willingness to share best practices serves to encourage other institutions to adopt or adapt the toolkit and join the community of

practice, amplifying the collaborative movement towards enhancing the societal impact of academic learning.

Embedding Impact: Enhancing the Influence of Work-Based Learners on Global Issues

This CEP empowers work-based learners to address global challenges. Positioned at the intersection of academia and industry, these learners can significantly contribute to societal issues like sustainability, social inequality, and technological innovation. The project provides tools and resources to develop their entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial skills, aligning their efforts with global goals such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Work-based learners are seen as catalysts for innovation, capable of introducing new ideas that extend beyond their immediate environment.

To bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, the project developed a comprehensive toolkit for teaching and learning staff working with business and management learners. This toolkit equips staff with resources to help learners amplify the societal impact of their academic pursuits. It also establishes a community of practice for educators and student intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs to share best practices. The toolkit supports staff at various levels to integrate impact-focused learning into their teaching and includes external resources from leading organisations on impact and teaching. These initiatives are flexible and accessible, accommodating the varied schedules and commitments of work-based learners and their educators. By focusing on experiential learning, the project ensures that students can immediately apply new skills and insights to their professional contexts, creating a continuous cycle of learning and impact.

The project has significantly influenced teaching practices and curriculum development within participating universities. Key impacts include:

- Integration of entrepreneurship education into existing curricula, ensuring all work-based learners access these vital competencies.
- Adoption of experiential learning models, prioritising hands-on, practical experiences aligned with students' professional roles.
- Faculty development, providing training and resources for educators to support and mentor work-based learners in entrepreneurial endeavours.
- Curriculum flexibility, with adjustments in programme structures to accommodate the unique needs of work-based learners, such as modular content, micro-credits, and asynchronous learning options.

These changes promote a dynamic and responsive educational environment, better preparing students for modern professional landscapes. Emphasising entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship equips learners with the skills to innovate and adapt, qualities highly valued in today's global economy.

The project's impact extends beyond educational settings, contributing to broader societal and global objectives. By empowering work-based learners to initiate change within their organisations, the project indirectly influences industry practices and policies. Broader effects include:

- Advancement of sustainable practices, with students leading initiatives to reduce environmental footprints within their companies.
- Promotion of social innovation through projects addressing social inequality and community development.
- Economic growth and job creation, as entrepreneurial ventures launched by students create new jobs and stimulate economic activity.

By cultivating professionals who are both skilled and socially conscious, the project contributes to solutions addressing complex global issues. The ripple effect of empowering individual learners can lead to significant cumulative impacts on society.

Looking ahead, the project aims to continue evolving and contributing to long-term educational and societal goals. Future plans include:

- Expansion of the Community of Practice, growing the network to include more institutions and learners.

- Continuous improvement of the toolkit, updating resources based on feedback and emerging trends.
- Research and dissemination, sharing best practices with the broader academic and professional communities.
- Policy influence, advocating for the integration of entrepreneurial education in work-based learning programs at a national level.
- Sustainability of impact, establishing mechanisms to ensure the project's benefits are sustained over time, such as alumni networks and ongoing industry partnerships.

By maintaining momentum and adapting to changing needs, the project aims to embed entrepreneurial competencies as a fundamental aspect of work-based learning. This long-term vision aligns with broader educational objectives of producing graduates capable of driving positive change in their professional and societal contexts.

Conclusion

This CEP exemplifies how collaborative efforts can drive meaningful change in higher education. By ensuring parity among institutions, building strong team relationships, involving students and alumni as partners, and engaging the wider academic community, the project created a sustainable model for empowering students to become innovators and entrepreneurs. The project's emphasis on practical application, community building, and shared ownership has enhanced the learning experiences of students and set a precedent for how academic institutions can address complex societal challenges. Through targeted initiatives, strategic partnerships, and a commitment to evolving and sustaining its impact, the project will continue to influence teaching practices, enrich curricula, and contribute to societal advancements. It serves as a model for how higher education institutions can collaborate to empower students to become agents of change, equipped to tackle the complex challenges of our world.

As the project continues to grow and adapt, it holds the promise of nurturing a new generation of professionals who are innovative, socially responsible, and capable of making meaningful contributions to global issues. The legacy of this initiative will be seen not only in the achievements of its participants but also in the lasting changes it inspires within educational practices and societal outcomes. As a result, the project has contributed significantly to the overarching goals of the CEP programme and the QAA's mission to enhance the quality and impact of higher education through collaborative partnerships.

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