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# A new path for the public sector: How to design a co-created strategy in higher education

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**Abstract.** The use of collaborative platforms and eParticipation has turned out to be a promising channel to integrate citizens and external experts in various scenarios. While initiatives from institutions like political parties, governments or municipalities have been the target of influential research, another public service, namely higher education, seem to run below radar level. In this paper we analyze the project “Tomorrow’s MBA” of the College of William & Mary, Virginia, and show through hands-on insights key success factors on how co-creation initiatives have to be designed in the field of higher education. The bottom-up strategy to create a new MBA program together with external stakeholders, students and the faculty delivers substantial results, which can be transferred to other fields within the public sector.

**Keywords:** Open Government, eGovernment, eParticipation, Co-Creation, Open Education

## 1 Introduction & Theoretical Background

Ever since the philosophy of Open Innovation emerged, firms dwelled upon the question which tasks in value creation would be suited for the active integration of consumers (*Co-Creation*) [1]. In contrast, the strategic use of co-creation -in times of web 2.0- within the public sector needed more time to flourish, even though the active participation of citizens –in an offline format- has a way longer tradition [2]. The research often refers to the Obama administration with its White Gov-initiative [3], when similar to a snowball effect, eParticipation spread overseas to Europe and led to pilot, and later on long-term citizen sourcing projects, like participatory budgets, online consultations, city dialogues or collaborative strategy discussions. Best practices like in Ontario to use an online discussion platform to re-structure their voting

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system, or in Bavaria, where the Christian Social Union searched collaboratively for concepts for its new party program [4] nearly blossomed out of thin air in the years after.

These paths lead the way for various researchers to explore potentials and challenges public organizations are facing when using innovative co-creation methods to actively engage citizens [5]. Nam for instance, focused on the differentiation and definition of Open Government and Open Government 2.0 as well as citizens' attitudes toward their integration [3]. He found out that the use of existing e-Government services does not significantly influence citizens' attitudes toward Open Government, while those who value the use of e-Government have a more positive attitude regarding Open Government and Government 2.0. Interesting findings have been identified by Schlozman et al., who state that the use of the new medium to foster citizens' engagement has mainly turned out to be a weapon of the strong [6]. Hereby they refer to the use of Open Government possibilities majorly by those, who are already interested and engaged in socio-political processes. According to Walters et al. there are five purposes to integrate public opinions: 1) the search for definitions, alternatives or criteria; 2) educating the public about an issue or alternatives; 3) measuring public opinion; 4) persuading the public; and 5) legitimize government decisions [7]. In contrast, King et al. identified three barriers to the effective participation: 1) the nature of life in contemporary society, 2) administrative processes and 3) techniques for participation [2]. In 1981 Kweit & Kweit analyzed the reasons for participation success and structured those in three characteristics: 1) the structures of participation mechanism and organizations; 2) the target organization, its resource base and member attitude and 3) the environment such as stability, form of government or community size. These research insights show us in other words that especially following guidelines are important regarding the integration of the public: 1) Why integrating the public, 2) how and, 3) with what expectations? [8]

The basis for a more open political approach, as mentioned above, was not laid through modern technologies and ICTs, but has already been addressed by democratic thinkers since the Antique. Back then people were defined as "idiots" [9], when not participating in everyday politics. While Aristoteles' *zôon politikón* can be seen as the individuals' obligation to interact and participate with the society to be fulfilled and create a strong and vital *polis*, Barber points out that representative democracy through politicians without participatory elements, where citizens can engage actively, are strongly dangerous for innovative societies and should thus be pursued actively [9]. In the same vein Corrado and Fireston concluded that online discussions will create a "conversational democracy" in which both the citizen as well as the political leaders will meet in a new (online) and existing (offline) way [10]. As Wright and Street summarized in their article on Democracy, deliberation and design "will promote the development of more democratic forms of government where citizens will be able to develop a more meaningful voice in their government" [11]. When looking further into the argumentation of a public administration perspective, the most obvious shift within the general development lays in the object of analysis. Whereas traditional research has mainly focused on the administration itself, many recent perspectives on public service provision focused on the relationship between citizen and gov-

ernment referring to the basic idea that government officials need to provide public services support [12].

Even though the literature on the use of co-creation and open innovation in the public sector is growing rapidly, it covers mainly the primary institutions like political parties, governments, politicians, administrations or unions and their need or approach to execute co-creation initiatives. In this paper we aim to broaden this approach on another field of the public service, namely higher education. We are interested, if openness and the method of co-creation can also be applied on this sector. Interestingly, the discussion about co-creation within higher education (open education) in general has led to major findings about the question if higher education should be free of tuition, but just a few insights about using those methods at universities have been delivered [13,14]. Hereby we want to identify critical success factors and answer the research question on how to concept, design and execute a bottom-up co-creation project within higher education. Within the field of higher education we seek to focus on universities. However, universities have no hands-on products to co-create, so, the integration of public opinions and ideas for strategies or programs seem to be most likely. However, the lack of literature surprises, as you might think the step from opening up companies to consumers or governments to citizens, is logically followed by universities, which are opening up to students or external experts.

## 2 Empirical Approach

To answer our research question and to bridge the gap between the rich and already existing body of literature and cases from the open innovation research community and the upcoming paradigm in the educational sector, we introduce a five objective framework, which was originally developed by Li and Bernoff to analyze the outcome of co-creation and crowdsourcing projects [15]. We will now use this framework to better understand and analyze a co-creation project in the public sector, specifically for strategies within higher education. Due to the fact that many open strategies are struggling in the implementation phases, we will introduce a sixth dimension labeled “living”, which will focus on the actual implementation and realization success of a co-creation campaign.

Dimension	Open Innovation objectives within higher education
Energizing	Energizing aims to actively embrace students, academics, alumni and experts to engage in the given setup and to motivate sustainably in order to share their experience and knowledge.
Listening	Listening can be described as a key dimension as it aims to opening up the internal administrative barriers to integrate the voices from external experts and target groups sustainably.
Talking	Talking can be described as an external communication chan-

	nel, which aims to promote the public initiative in order to generate more awareness for the respective project.
Supporting	Supporting seems to be the hard ground work of open public collaboration initiatives as its objective is to actively give feedback to shared ideas and to motivate the target group throughout the live phase of the co-creation initiative.
Embracing	The goal of embracing is to guarantee that an open public initiative is backed up by the majority of stakeholders and responsible persons within the institution.
Living	Living can be described as a term that stands for the strong will to implement the results of the initiative, which were discussed and evaluated together with the crowd.

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**Fig.1.:** Objectives for Open Innovation Formats within Higher Education

- *Energizing:* The first dimension focuses on the recruitment, activation and motivation of the relevant target group to participate in the open call for ideas. Within this approach for universities, not just students and faculty staff should have the possibility to contribute, but also academics, experts or innovators around the globe to gather as much insights and knowhow as possible. Energizing and addressing these target groups is especially important as they have to be seen as a diverse and locally disperse crowd. An activation and motivation strategy will help to identify the most relevant target groups, which will be more engaged due to their knowledge and experience, but also their topic or task related responsibility.
- *Listening:* Generally, this dimension describes the use of an open innovation platform to involve the outside of the organization or administration to “listen” to a larger peer group of users/consumers (external academics, students) or own employees (teaching staff). As students and the teaching staff are dealing with the processes and content of a university on an everyday basis, they should have an influence on what they are learning or teaching at least have a possible feedback channel for proposing improvements or changes. Therefore, “listening” can be described as a key dimension as it aims and describes the steps how to open up the internal administrative barriers to sustainably integrate the voices from internal as well as external.
- *Talking:* Although the main objective should focus on the generation of qualitative output, the communication and marketing dimension of such an initiative has to be seen as key factor. This dimension can be subdivided in communication efforts aiming on community growth, on output development, or on more general, not directly related communication efforts. So, “talking” might in other words be described as an external communication channel, which aims to promote the public initiative in order to generate more awareness and traffic on the platform as well as addressing the defined target group.

- *Supporting*: Open Innovation processes are based on the idea of peer-to-peer feedback. This implicates the participative and collaborative aspect since platform participants may support each other. Within the public sector setting such an approach within higher education can be a viable means to get in touch with other academics, students or likeminded users, connect with experts or the faculty staff and get feedback from them. Especially during the planning, implementation, and realization phases of an open innovation campaign relevant peer-to-peer feedback is considered very helpful. Moreover, a continuous and professional management and guidance of the initiative helps to identify relevant multipliers and motivate contributors to give them a positive feedback. Therefore, “supporting” seems to be the hard ground work as its objective is to actively give feedback to shared ideas and to motivate the target group throughout the initiative.
- *Embracing*: The final dimension introduced by Li and Bernoff focuses on embracing relevant stakeholders. We know that the successful implementation of ideas and concepts, submitted within such a campaign, often fail due to the lack of motivated and engaged people within the organization. However, this implicates that the systematic integration of relevant experts and especially multipliers may be a success factor. By using a more open process these people can be identified, invited, motivated, and specially treated (embraced) to profit from their central and influencing role. Consequently, through the dimension of “embracing” the project owner tries to guarantee that an open public initiative is backed up by the majority of stakeholders and responsible persons within the institution.
- *Living*: Since public driven strategies usually in general, but especially with a more open approach, can be evaluated and reviewed by the public itself, a new dimension of transparency is achieved. However, the chance to be integrated leads inevitable to certain expectations of those, who contributed and spend time to help. If nothing happens with ideas and concepts or if there is no certain feedback to the engagement, negative rebound effects can arise. So, open approaches may also serve as a valuable mechanism to report, discuss and evaluate the consequences of the actual purpose. Even through an open strategy mechanisms no ground breaking input has been generated, the transparent communication of what is going to happen with the concepts and the initiative itself, is strikingly important.

Based on the foundation provided by literature on open innovation, crowdsourcing and co-creation and especially on the introduced framework of open innovation objectives for higher education, we executed a crowdsourcing project for the Mason A. School of Business at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA. The initiative targeted the reorganization and development of the MBA. In this scope stakeholders of the program, e.g. students, managers, alumni were addressed to co-create a more consumer-focused and improved Master in Business Administration.

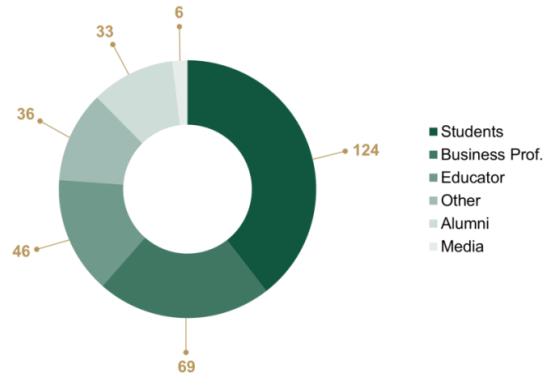
Since we were not able to draw on already existing research from other open strategy projects within the public sector, we applied a rather explanatory and thus qualitative research approach focusing on one single case. To get a better understanding of

the effects between more open participatory approaches and the functions of governmental organizations, we chose a methodology that combined participatory and qualitative research approaches. "Participatory Action Research Approach" (PAR) refers to a research process that makes scientists become active participants and participants become scientists in the project that needs to be analyzed [16]. By creating a clear structure for planning, implementation, execution as well as systematic learning loops, it can be ensured that a new phenomenon in all its complexity is analyzed in a concrete use case. Therefore PAR is an approach primarily used for research questions that have only been analyzed very little, where scientists actually have to actively immerse themselves in the project. Consequently, the participatory project was conducted in close arrangement with the leaders of the College of William & Mary, the implementing consultancy and the research team. The research team was part of the entire project, as an observing and actively supporting instance.

### **3 Empirical Case: Creating Tomorrow's MBA**

In 2015, the Raymond A. Mason School of Business at the College of William and Mary decided to collaboratively design the future of their MBA. The nucleus of this decision has been the international experience of influential enterprises and organizations, which use co-creation in order to find new trends, innovate their products or improve their services. While different researches have shown that the use of crowdsourcing and methods like innovation contests can be successfully applied in industry and the governmental sector, not many higher education institutions have tested this approach in field and especially for their own use. The major difference was the focus on a strategy, as companies usually co-create new services or products. Therefore, the target group differed tremendously from classical co-creation approaches. In order to integrate different stakeholders, but not necessarily from the covered home turf USA, a community as a virtual table for discussion was initiated. This community was approved by the William & Mary CI and enabled interested experts to register (with e-mail, professional background, username) and afterwards submit ideas, comment on others or evaluate contributions. The user-friendly ideation platform [www.tomorrowsmba.mason.wm.edu](http://www.tomorrowsmba.mason.wm.edu) was equipped with various social media shares to spread the word of mouth. Up in front the project team existing of the faculty and a professional innovation consultancy decided to frame the community within an eight-week idea contest to trigger gamification on the community. After the submission phase (end date December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015) an independent jury of influential business professionals decided upon the winning ideas. The whole process was transparently displayed on the community as well as further information about the current MBA program. During the community activation phase MBA students, the teaching staff, business professionals, academics, alumni and experts around the globe were able to share their ideas on how the future of the MBA and business administration could like on the open access platform. During the ideation phase 200 ideas from over 5.000 unique visitors from more than 80 different countries worldwide were submitted. 307 of them registered actively and shared various information about their profes-

sional background as well as their contact details. Moreover, 265 comments on shared ideas and 537 evaluations have been made by the community.



**Fig. 2.:** Background of the registered community members

## 4 Discussion & Findings

As described, the research team observed the co-creation process during the live-phase in order to understand how faculty staff, experts and students might cope with the platform and especially what key success factors could be identified. The conclusions help to improve the set up and design of co-creation initiatives in higher education. In order to provide a structured project analysis we will use the initially introduced framework to present as well as reflect our insights.

### 1.1. Energizing

Energizing the target group to participate and to help a public institution to generate ideas is crucial. To do so the right set-up and framework has to be found:

- Activation strategies: Typically citizens and experts can be motivated intrinsically or extrinsically. However, we have learned that unlike to open innovation initiatives in the industry, public sector eParticipation should mainly offer intrinsic motivation, because citizens want to influence politics sustainably. We therefore used a gamification approach by framing the project as an idea contest, where participants compete to other members of the platform community. Furthermore, we focused by the prizes for the winning ideas on non-cash incentives. The reason for this is the demand of participants to have an influence on an important strategy, but also the chance to show their experience and push profiling. The winner was eternalized in the university with a visible badge as well as an invitation as an interviewee in the successful business podcast of the school (Leadership & Business). Moreover, due to an active community management, we aimed on establishing a strong social grid between all community members, motivating feedback, additional materials, constructive comments, and evaluation. Technical functionalities like e-mail notifications etc. supported re-activation of rather passive platform participants. Social networking functionalities, like the usage of personal



profiles with a picture and message boards enriched the communication between the target groups.

- Community management: In line with research on open innovation projects, we identified a pro-active community management as a further crucial factor to really energize the growing community. The research team participated as community managers on the platform performing the following tasks: monitoring (e.g. content screening & reporting), technical support activities, conflict management, activation (e.g. welcome messages, feedback, sharing and evaluating ideas) and triggering active participation. Thereby, we were immediately able to find solutions to task-related or technical problems and, even more important, establish a well guided and interrelated network structure. The latter addresses especially the fact that different community roles must be addressed and differently motivated to be “energized”.

## **1.2. Listening**

One of the strongest arguments for conducting public sector strategy development processes more openly aims on the potential to profit from external knowledge but obviously also from the experiences of all related students. Hence, finding the most appropriate ways of establishing an efficient and effective process of “listening” seems crucial. Generally, this dimension focuses on the abilities to profit from external inputs of the project initiator or the strategy owner. Traditionally, public administrations are used to consult internal experts, when developing new political strategies. During this project we have learned that this dimension subsumes different potential starting points, which should be reflected in the following:

- Capacity Building: Before starting the online phase of the community the faculty of the university came together in order to discuss the crucial topics of the MBA program and to reflect already failed ideas. This guidance was then mirrored to the community in the scope of different categories on the platform. Here, the target group was able to contribute ideas to the provided guidelines, namely 1) Courses, Focus & Skills, 2) Formats, 3) Scholarship & Financing, 4) Lifelong Learning & Community and 5) Marketing & Branding (overall concepts with all dimensions were possible as well as submitting ideas affecting multiple categories). In each category the faculty came up with initial ideas within a workshop to give the community a certain orientation point. However, listening starts already during the planning and conception phase of a public sector open strategy project. Integrating the faculty and the member of the university board has to be seen as a key success factor as important stakeholders within the organization might issue a “not invented here problem”. So, to trigger an early enough capacity building process, we conducted lectures and workshops aiming on approach related (open innovation, open strategy, citizen participation) as well as project related (recruiting, tasks, roles etc.) topics.



**Fig.3.:** Submitted ideas per category

- Engagement on the platform: the second aspect focuses on the actual engagement on the open strategy platform. We observed that those experts from the public administration who participated actively on the platform, were more likely to positively participate and constructively use the platform output within the following strategy formulation phase.

### 1.3. Talking

The dimension of “talking” in public sector might seem to be tremendously interesting, as “getting the word out” is one of the big challenges when initiating a co-creation project. Finding the right target group, communicating the content and actually “market” the own purposes can be highlighted as key success factor.

- Recruiting activities: In order to identify and activate relevant target groups, we learned that an online focused activation and recruiting strategy, accompanied by project related offline events, like workshops and conferences seems totally sufficient. Due to budget restrictions, we did not use traditional media like newspaper ads to promote the co-creation strategy project. Besides the very successful approach of identifying topic related bloggers, forums, and online journalists as virtual multipliers, we also shared the content in influential social media groups as well as in existing channels like LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter. Interestingly, one of the most influential blogs on MBAs (Poets & Quants) wrote an article about the initiative and selected it in the aftermath as one of the most innovative campaign in higher education in 2015. Furthermore, the College of William & Mary used existing alumni newsletter, institutional social media channels and networks. On the other hand we initiated various events and information campaign to gather ideas in the offline world. As most promising approaches the execution of personal interviews with leading experts in this field (here professors and top managers) as well as Meet-Ups with students can be identified. The latter was based on round-table discussions in universities like the LMU or TU in Munich or the College of

William and Mary in Williamsburg. However, the acceptance among external stakeholders and students lead to a broad interest also in classical media like newspaper, which reported about the campaign and automatically shared the word of mouth (f.e. Virginia Gazette). Even the info stands on different universities and selected guest lectures (f.e. University of Lübeck) led to a broad engagement all over the world, seeing that 78 different nations were registered as users on the platform.

#### **1.4. Supporting**

The dimension of “supporting” focuses less on a citizen/administration relationship, but rather on a horizontal interconnection of different platform participants. The open strategy process showed how relevant and important qualitative feedback is in order to improve concepts, rework ideas and connect input from different participants with each other.

- Focusing on the dimension “supporting” we found out that the welcoming and motivation of participants, by leaving messages on their personal pin-walls established a trustable and transparent setting, which leads to a constructive, creative, and feedback orientated community.
- Expert engagement: The integration of internal experts is not just inevitable for capacity building, but also for the feedback management. Ideas from various stakeholders on the community should be feed backed to activate the discussion and to share the insights from the institutions. A collaborative dialogue is the intentioned consequence. Consequently, without the permanent feedback of other platform participants and the support of the experts, many ideas would not have been qualitative enough to influence the strategy (in average every idea has been feed backed four times -either evaluated or commented; 200 ideas/848 interactions on the platform in general).

#### **1.5. Embracing**

As stated before, a co-creation process by integrating the opinion and ideas from external -but also from extended internal- target groups, needs an open mind set within the institution. By conducting capacity workshops in the first place, you create a decent working atmosphere with a common goal. In the long run, this process has to be intensified, especially with the faculty in the university, as their task is to bring the final strategy to life. Even though the whole co-creation format is a bottom-up approach due to the participation of a broad basis, the institution itself should integrate the head of the university/program to have to reputation to push the process through the internal stage-gate.

- Systematic further capacity building: To integrate the internal stakeholders from ideation to implementation, it helps to have responsible and constant project owners throughout the process. This team needs to focus on pushing the underlying

idea of an open strategy format, integrating topic related experts from the faculty and ensure a sustainable project progress.

### **1.6. Living**

The dimension “living” addresses the needs of an open strategy approach with respect to the sustainable development and implementation of a co-creation strategy for the higher education. From projects in the public sector we know that a lack of implementation might lead to further distrust and disappointment within the target groups [17].

- Transparent communication: Right from the start of the online platform, the project owners have to clarify the rules and terms & conditions on when input from the co-creation process might be implemented in the strategy. Here it is inevitable to not raise false hopes and to explain the essential credo of the institution. Hence, the participants knew from the start what will happen to their ideas and what goals the initiator address in the process. As a consequence, no negative rebound effects have been measured or frustrated posts on the co-creation platform were registered.
- Output formulation and implementation: the final aspect emphasizes the importance of finding an appropriate mode of summarizing the content from the platform and analyzing as well as condensing the most important insights. One key take away from this study is to integrate the above mentioned experts from the faculty also as “consultants” in the post-platform realization and implementation phase. Furthermore, for the evaluation and further elaboration of the ideas, an independent jury of influential professionals (f.e. CEO of Canadian Tire) was consolidated to select the best ideas for the idea contest. So, the selection of best ideas (selected from the faculty and then the jury) is currently (2016) in progress to be implemented in the strategy, which will be communicated in 2016/2017.

## **5 Conclusion & Further Research**

The “Tomorrow’s MBA” co-creation strategy development process was a unique approach, systematically accompanied by research and practical partners in the public sector. The initiative aimed at integrating external stakeholders like business professionals or students as well as the internal organization (faculty). Consequently, the insights generated in this study are not generalizable. Further research might exactly jump in here and try to compare our results to the experience in other public sectors to find key differences. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the implementation strategy, compared to other sectors, might be interesting to address.

However, while linking our research to already existing open strategy research in the public sector, we conclude that the approach was a powerful tool to co-create an important strategy in higher education. Summarizing the insights gained from open government literature, we were able to further elaborate and extend the five dimension

framework, originally introduced by Li and Bernoff. Overall, the study was able to show that an open co-creation strategy approach is also applicable within a public sector setting, specifically in higher education. Hence, our discussions and insights contribute more or less a manual on how to design and execute a co-creation initiative within the public sector, more precise within the public sector and open education research community.

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