# Creativity and Innovation in Higher Education: A Palestinian Academic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of fostering creativity and innovation in higher education due to higher education's critical role in individuals' information age. The study relied on in-depth interviews with 20 faculty professors at MOU University in the West Bank, Palestine, to explore their creativity and innovation perspectives and its importance in higher education. The results indicated that all professors considered creativity and innovation essential in higher education. It gives students opportunities to produce new knowledge and think differently for the benefits of themselves and their communities. The professors presented different factors that encourage creativity and innovation, remove specific regulations and instructions, and provide instructors with the freedom to enhance creativity and innovation in a higher education institution. The study asserted what has been emphasized in the literature on the importance of the university's role in preparing students for industry demands. The study also confirmed on the important role university instructors' role in cultivating and promoting creativity and innovation among the students  The study participants confirmed that although augmenting creativity and innovation faces challenges and difficulties in conflict and crisis settings, it is a resilience tool encourage young generation to think creatively and adapt living under difficult situations. It recommended that building partner relationships between universities and the private sector would enhance that role.

**KEY WORDS:** ACADEMICS, CREATIVITY, HIGHER EDUCATION, INNOVATION, PALESTINE.

## INTRODUCTION

An increasing rate of changes, uncertainties, challenges, and problems characterizes today's world. It is a time of complexity, disorder, ambiguity. The labor market is increasingly competitive, demanding employees who can successfully meet the workplace challenges, innovate, act quickly, and present practical solutions to unexpected problems. Under this complexity, creativity and innovation have become the melody, which politicians, business people, employees, teachers, professors, students, and others chant for. The awareness of creativity and innovation's relevance has led several countries' governments to adopt initiatives to implement educational policies that ensure innovation and creativity through education. Scholars from various fields highlighted the need for great attention to developing the creative and innovative capacity across the multiple levels of education, especially in higher education (Donnelly & Barrett, 2008; Gaspar & Mabic, 2015 Alencar & Pereira, 2017).

They are a potential answer to a wide range of problems like social, economic, and educational. They can direct young people love to self-employment, and desire to take positive risks and work hard to make new ideas

succeed and transform it in a short period into a larger project that opens new job opportunities (Masharaqa & Al-Silwadi, 2019). Paradoxically, despite recognizing the importance of developing students' creative abilities, not only in early education but also in higher education, there is an agreement that creativity and innovation have not received the necessary attention in university courses (Nassar, 2018).

**Problem Statement & Research Questions:** Higher education institutions are the first destination for graduates from schools, where they find themselves through studying a specialization, which honors their talents in it. Nevertheless, if we expect institutions to play this vital role in society and the economy, mechanisms are needed to explore the academics' perspectives in those institutions about creativity and innovation. They are the researchers, curriculum designers, and implementers of those curricula. Due to the vital role instructors play in developing students' creative potential, creativity and innovation should be a topic widely discussed in a higher education institution, to help them recognize and develop the future generation's creative and innovative abilities. This study will open the instructors' opportunity to start thinking of creativity and innovation and start establishing conditions for the flourishing of creativity in higher education classrooms.

Due to the lack of research that focuses on this topic in the Palestinian environment compared to other contexts in the global south, this study aims to identify the meaning of creativity and innovations from the viewpoint of faculty members at MOU University in the northern part of West Bank in Palestine. The study also seeks to be acquainted with the university curricula and its ingredients for developing creativity and innovation among university students. Moreover, understanding the kind of obstacles that prevent activating the curriculum role in promoting innovation and creativity among university students is another aim of the study Accordingly, to help achieve the presented objectives, the study answers the following main questions: - What do creativity and innovation mean from the academic's perspectives?- How can creativity and innovation be developed from the academic's views?- What are the main challenges that face academics from developing and fostering creativity and innovation?

The study highlights scientific importance by addressing a topic that is considered hot these days as we live in an era when the speed of innovations and inventions in science, culture, technology, and industrialization is more accelerated than any other time in humanity's history. The study highlights ways to develop university education to meet the local Palestinian market's needs and supply it with creative graduates who may solve Palestine's aggravated unemployment problem.On the practical level, this study's importance lies in providing decision-makers in universities scientific results and recommendations that may contribute to making the required change and development in the fields of

knowledge creation, skills, and attitudes towards building creative and innovative graduates.

This study also identifies obstacles that prevent Palestinian students from achieving creativity and innovation to avoid and know the factors that enhance them. The present study brings practical ideas to the students said by university instructors themselves. It draws their attention to the labor market's primary skills or entrepreneurs and innovators in building their small projects. Moreover, the study will be an excellent guide for university academics by pinpointing the number of teaching strategies that can foster creativity and innovation skills.

Many believe that creativity and innovation are inherited characteristics that only some lucky people are born with it. Today, it is proved that these abilities universal among humankind and all at birth have this talent in varying degrees. (Fadaee & Alzahrh, 2014). Educationalists, researchers, and theorists have defined creativity differently; some look at it from the process dimension in which sees creativity is a mental process involved in a generation of new ideas (Hargreaves, 2007). Hence, the creativity process passes through several stages until it is complete. This process includes the mental maturity of the ideas and objectivity of judgments presented by the creative person.

For creativity to be based on the truth, it must be translated into a practical reality that others can benefit from as much as possible, whether based on evidence that proves it is true, realistic and correct.Others refer to creativity as the constellation of personality and intellectual traits shown by individuals who, when given a measure of freedom, spend significant amounts of time engaged in the creative process. (Edwards, McGoldrick, & Oliver, 2006). Al-Akhdar (2011) defined creativity as a mixture of abilities, preparations, and personal characteristics that can be enhanced by mental processes to lead to original and beneficial productions if any suitable environment exists. However. Most researchers and theorists adopt a creativity definition focused on the product, the outcome, and novelty (Edwards, McGoldrick, & Oliver, 2006).

In summary, although creativity and innovation are closely related, they differ since innovation depends on creativity to turn those creative ideas into use as products or as active practices. (Fadaee & Alzahrh, 2014). In other words, the notion of creativity includes ideas, inventions, and breakthroughs. On the other hand, innovation is the successful implementation of creative ideas within a specific context or environment (Louca, Varnava-Marouchou, Mihai, & Konis, 2014). From this point, innovators are creatives, but not all creative people are necessarily innovators (Fadaee & Alzahrh, 2014).

From the above definitions, we can see that creativity is composed of several factors, such as the cognitive abilities and processes involved in creative thinking and

the learning environment (Louca, Varnava-Marouchou, Mihai, & Konis, 2014; Fadaee & Alzahrh, 2014). Amabile (1998), Edwards, McGoldrick, & Oliver (2006) added intrinsic motivation because, Without intrinsic motivation, a creative thinker is unlikely to have the persistence required to solve a problem nor requiring knowledge and a willingness to challenge accepted wisdom.

**How to facilitate creativity and innovation in higher education?:** Research conducted to nurture and facilitate creativity suggests that it can happen when individuals feel free from stress, safety, and positivity; This is important for the environment. Amabile (1998) did a comprehensive study that included three studies with three distinctly different subject populations. The interviewees were 120 scientists from over 20 various organizations, 16 marketing and development employees of the largest banks. For the third study, the interviews were 25 marketing and sales employees of significant railroads from the transcripts' content analysis.

Amabile (1998) revealed nine qualities of the environment that promote creativity; this fostering environment includes 1) freedom in deciding what to do and how to accomplish the task. 2) proper project management, which provides a good role model with excellent communication skills, protects the project team from outside distractions and interference. 3) sufficient resources with access to necessary resources, including facilities, equipment information, and people. 4) encouragement and being enthusiasm for the new ideas and creating an atmosphere free of threatening evaluation. 5) an environment where innovation is prized and failure is not fatal. 6) Recognition and showing a general sense that creative work will receive appropriate feedback. 7). It provides sufficient time to think creatively about the problem to explore different perspectives rather than impose an already determined approach. 8) a sense of challenge arising from the intriguing nature of the problem itself. 9).

The last quality of the environment that influences creativity and innovation is pressure and urgency, which is internally generated from the competition with an outside organization. Higher education graduates will be primarily creative when their task is enjoyable, stimulating, challenging, and when the group feels safe for its members (Roisio,2004). Donnelly & Barrett, (2008, p. 10) suggested detailed approaches for fostering student's creativity, and the approach includes three pathways. Pathway 1 encompasses several pedagogical strategies that can be integrated relatively quickly with students. All are creative, participatory teaching techniques that are essential tools in the teaching repertoire. These approaches involve high group member involvement while facilitating meaningful and fun learning through strategies such as role-playing, debates, poster presentations, one-to-one tutorials, and creative thinking techniques and tools.

Role-plays should be structured and have a defined set of participants with specific times, places, equipment, and rules. Debates are powerful teaching models because they help students' master concepts and learn to pursue goals effectively. Finally, with presentations, the student must understand what is being presented and whom it is being presented and apply appropriate presentation strategies.



Figure 1: Approaches for fostering students' creativity. Adopted from Donnelly & Barrett, (2008, p. 10)
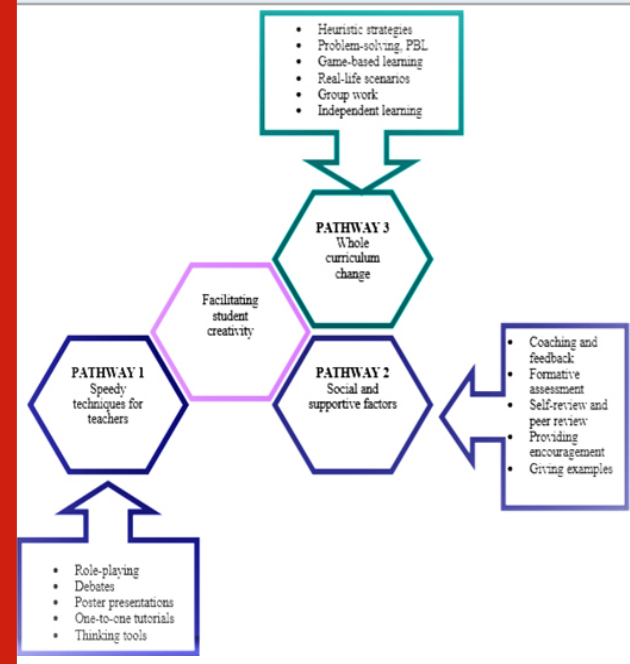
Pathway 2 emphasizes the significance of feedback and support from an instructor who understands the creative process. More specifically, formative feedback (including self-review and peer review) can be used to prompt creative performance, develop artistic talent, and improve learning relationships. It can also can encourage students to reflect on their creative processes and working relationships, help students tap into powerful "creative flow" states, develop students' unique creative thinking and learning styles, help students explore strategies for more effective communication and collaboration.

Pathway 3 concerns fundamental curriculum change; the focus of education should be not on what students learn as to what they can do with their learning. He is mainly concerned with addressing cognitive development, mostly students' capacity to think and be happier. Any program that addresses creative education (Donnelly & Barrett, 2008) needs to cover every aspect of being creative, including motivational and emotional factors. The development of knowledge and skills, the capacity to imagine (primarily via the arts), and the capacity to solve fuzzy problems should be coved.

## METHODOLOGY

**Contextual background:** This research was undertaken during the second semester of 2020 at MOU University. It is considered one of the largest Palestinian universities located in the Northern part of West Bank. It was founded in 1977. The university played a role in the Palestinian political and economic everyday life. Many prominent figures have emerged from it, who have made a significant contribution to the history of the Palestinian cause. The university has 11 faculties located and offers 103 undergraduate programmers, 23 diploma programs, and 66 graduate programs. The university is dedicated to promoting understanding, providing the highest quality undergraduate and graduate education, and serving as a leader in scientific research. The university acts as a base for sustainable development by encouraging students and the University community to assume leadership roles and participate in serving society. Study Participants: The sample was designed to include a range of disciplines and staff experience.

| Table 1. Study Participants | | |
|---|---|---|
| Pseudonym Name | Gender | Major |
| Karim | Male | English Literature |
| Shakir | Male | Education |
| Huda | Female | Computer Engineering |
| Khaldoon | Male | Transport Engineering |
| Omar | Male | Economic |
| Noor | Male | Accounting |
| Durgham | Male | English literature |
| Saleh | Male | Pharmacy |
| Basheer | Male | Sports |
| Hamid | Male | Medicine |
| Nafez | Male | Sharia |
| Jameel | Male | Sharia |
| Suha | Female | Finance |
| Manal | Female | Physics |
| Mohamad | Male | Law |
| Gonaim | Male | Medicine |
| Rami | Male | Management |
| Jabi | Male | Law |
| Kefayah | Female | Education |
| Shareef | Male | Medicine |

The participants were 20 academics at MOU University, holding PhDs and teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in several fields (Communication, Information Technology, Administration, Education, English Literature, Sharia, Medicine, Mathematics, Engineering, and Physical Education). Some professors are holding managerial and administrative positions in addition to their teaching responsibility, but their positions are not mentioned in the study in the protection of their privacy.

Sixteen were male, and four were female. The table below summarizes the study participants.

**Procedure and Analysis:** Semi-structured interviews were carried out within the participants' office. The interviews were used to elicit perspectives, and each Interview lasted from 25-45 minutes. It was challenging to schedule a longer time to interview several professors due to their duties. A common semi-structured approach was adopted. The study objectives and goals were presented to all participants. Their verbal consent to participate in the study were taken before conducting the interviews. Participation in the survey was voluntary. The interview protocol was used as a guide, but the professors' responses determined course of the interviews. All the themes of interest were covered by most respondents, but not necessarily in the order listed in the protocol.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in Arabic, relevant quotations were translated from Arabic to English and were determined according to study aim and questions. The confidentiality of the responses was assured to the participants, thus fulfilling the legal, ethical requirements. The translation was based on the meaning, as it is hard to have full meaning using verbatim translation. After the interviews were recorded and transcribed, they were analyzed by constant comparative categorization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to identify the meaning of creativity and innovations from the faculty members' viewpoints at MOU University and be acquainted with the university curricula and its ingredients for developing creativity and innovation among university students. Moreover, the study is also looking to understand the obstacles that challenge facilitating creativity and innovation in higher education institutions in Palestine. Accordingly, the study findings will be arranged in a way to help to achieve these goals. The findings section presents the perspectives of the academic of creativity and innovation concepts, and then highlights the facilitating factors of creativity and innovation in higher education. The findings will shed light on the importance of creativity and innovation in general and Palestinian context in specific. The section ends with a presentation to the main challenges that face creativity and innovation from the academic perspectives.

**Creativity and Innovation Conception:** According to the participants, "newness", "originality," "thinking outside the box," "benefit of self and community," and "problem-solving" are among the essential notions related to innovation and creativity.Innovation and creativity are "the student's ability to think in a way and is not necessarily identical to the teacher," Mr. Karim. It is "coming up with something new and find a team to develop and get out of the ordinary with something unfamiliar," Mr. Basheer. Ms. Huda believes that creativity and innovation refer to "teaching our

students a new way to solve problems facing us in our lives and focusing on students' critical thinking skills and not being limited to what the student takes or the teacher provides to students in the lecture."

Mr. Khaldoon believes that creativity and innovation are the new languages nowadays to overcome the unemployment challenge because "It is an opportunity to create employment and earning, but this opportunity will not be successful without serving the community." Therefore, students should think of unconventional ways to earn income other than employment.For Mr. Hamad, the creative person is: A person who can work successfully and becomes distinguished with limited resources. For example, a student from a low-income family with minimum resources and can succeed and become a successful engineer, doctor, or teacher; I can consider him creative and creative.

Mr. Saleh thinks what characterizes creativity is the "consistency in distinction" with "continuous development and improvement." On the other hand, innovation is transferring a good idea into tangible things and has a social, financial, or scientific impact." Creativity and innovation, according to Mr. Durgham, are different, and creativity comes before change. Creativity is "thinking outside the box and coming up with the new idea," while innovation is "converting those new ideas into the concrete project which has a financial return and benefits the community." Mr. Durham asked for an education system that encourages students to think outside the box.

**Nature vs. Nurture:** MOU University professors think that students can be creative with different degrees; they also believe that creativity and innovation cannot be taught or learned. It is the instructor and institution's responsibility to provide the fostering environment to spark creativity and innovation. "the teacher can urge students to be creative and guide their ideas and thinking but can't teach them creativity." Mr. Basheer elaborated by saying, "the most important thing is creating motivation and readiness among students, and this will not be through indoctrination."Due to the problematic situation Palestinians live under, Mr. Khaldoon thinks that instructors need to work hard, to build student's confidence "students do not have the confidence in themselves, and they can be creative." Doing that, according to him, is the first step to foster creativity. Mr. Saleh summarized this discussion by saying, "any human being and any society need creativity and innovation. %50 of creativity and innovation are based on innate genes, % 30 on society, environment and enthusiasm, and %20 percent on education".

**Facilitating creativity and innovation in higher education:** Academics at MOU highlighted the most recognized factor, which facilitates the nurturing of creativity in higher education. The institutional culture encourages teachers and instructors to think creatively and not bounded with instructions "It is important to give the teacher discretion, and there is no template for

all teachers to use. The teacher knows his students," Mr. Durgham. Basheer also highlighted the need for changing the curricula and the evaluation system to encourage students to think outside the box "The educational process must be developed in all its aspects; our curricula and courses must be developed to avoid indoctrination and imitation. Evaluation methods also must be developed". The study participants discussed evaluation and assessment and they are covered in the challenges section.

No one can deny the critical role instructors play in the education process, and that was emphasized heavily among academics. According to Mr. Khaldoon, "A faculty member plays a major role in developing creativity and innovation. For example, when the teacher is positive and full of energy and vitality, she/he sends positive energy to students and makes them feel comfortable, and that encourages students to think openly and create". Mr. Hamad thinks that the teacher is responsible for developing creativity and innovation; the teacher "creates a successful or capable student, who can interact with the community and build its community." He continued saying, "the issue is not about a lesson that can be taught. It is a behavior in which the teacher behaves in front of his students and society". To help achieve that, Hamad elaborated more by saying, "the teacher must be a model of success so that students can emulate him/her and build their ideas from those around. The teacher must at least be convinced that students have creativity potentials". Mr. Shareef added to that by saying, "The teacher must believe in the idea of creativity and leadership to transfer it to students."

Ms. Huda & Mr. Hamad highlighted the role the university plays in fostering creativity and innovation and asserted on the importance of cooperation with the private sector to ensure sustainability "the university plays a significant role in supporting and developing leadership and creativity for the development to occur well, the cooperation of both the government, the private sector, and investors should be there." Ms. Huda.The importance of creativity and innovation: According to all participants, creativity and innovation are relevant and essential in higher education and graduate studies. Creativity and innovation are "gradual processes, and therefore it is impossible to develop it while students in their third or fourth year," Mr. Khaldoon. The study participants highlighted the point that university programs should be concerned about developing creativity and innovation, which should happen from the first academic year for the students.

According to Mr. Shakir, creativity and innovation are very important because they are the "requirements of the twenty-first century." These requirements are renewed and changed "if we looked at the required jobs in 2010, we find many of them fell in 2015, and expectations of jobs in 2030 will be different. Shakir. Thus, renewal is required". Ms. Huda elaborated on this issue by presenting the concept of the "skill gap," this gap refers to the difference between what students learn in the university

and requirement of the labor market. Hence, Ms. Huda thinks that creativity and innovation is a right solution for unemployment especially unemployment is very high in Palestine: "we should focus and work on initiatives and workshops to develop students' skills so they can come up or create a pioneering idea that employs these skills that have been developed for them."

One of the university goals, according to Mr. Hadi, is "to graduate students who will be active members of society after graduation, so if students will not be active members, it means that universities have not succeeded in achieving their goals." Accordingly, students in higher education must be prepared to think about the future step after graduation and "develop their personalities, creativity, and innovation skills" Mr. Noor.

**Challenges that could face creativity and innovation at the University in Palestine:** Despite the recognition of the importance of creativity and innovation for individuals and their achievement as well as for society, the development of creativity and innovation is still in its early steps. Professors, during their interviews, highlighted some challenges that face creativity and innovation in Palestine generally and in MOU University particularly. Although students are expected to be creative, creativity is seldom a clear objective of the learning assessment process. More specifically, looking at the types of assessments used in the Palestinian universities, including MOU, we see that the conventional paper exams with multiple choice and essay questions are preferred. According to Mr. Durgham, "there are policies at the university that limit the independence of the creative teacher, focusing too much on paper exams and having unified material and exams.

We must be freed from these restrictions to encourage creativity and innovation" Mr. Basheer agreed on the same point by stating, "the system used, regulations and laws limit creativity, such as the system used in the evaluation, and the lack of resources and awareness of the importance of creativity." The focus on exams and grades in the evaluation system creates a grade culture. According to Mr. Noor, "students are convinced that all learning depends on grades and that the question has the grade, grades became a community culture." Lack of "good mentorship and investment" is another challenge that faces creativity and innovation in higher education institution in Palestine according to Ms. Huda and this lack of mentorship is related to "the absence of institutions that support start-up opportunities, the absence of incubators for projects, so students start from them after graduation" Mr. Hamad. Other professors noted that excessive academic workload, not enough time to prepare lessons, large class sizes, and inadequate resources were factors considered that restrict the expression of creativity in higher education.

Recognizing the critical role faculties play in fostering creative thinking among their students, the primary objective of this study was to understand creativity and innovation conception from MOU university academic perspective. The findings revealed that the participants were aware of the importance of enhancing students' creativity in higher education, but creativity and innovation are not present in higher education classrooms. This agrees with other studies that explored creativity and innovation from academic perspectives (Alencar & Pereira, 2017; Edwards, McGoldrick, & Oliver, 2006 ; Masharaqa & Al-Silwadi, 2019). Despite this recognition, creativity and innovation in higher education are still in its early stages. MOU professors had a great time discussing how creativity and innovation are essential for the students themselves and their communities. At the same time, specific challenges are impeding their development in higher education. The next paragraphs will discuss these points in more detail and connect other literature.

Most pedagogical practice, as was indicated by the academics, is concentrated on the traditional way of teaching and focusing on accessing information "unfortunately, education in the university is still traditional" Ms. Huda. The traditional education means that it is teacher-driven education where students are gathered to learn and receive information based on teachers' knowledge. The students are unable to learn new things, and their experience is restricted to the education provided by the books and lecturers. Creativity and innovation, according to the participants, are related to "thinking outside the box," "benefit of self and community," "problem-solving," and "newness." To help realize that, students need to be agents and actors instead of recipients and audience. Creativity and innovation will not be acquired through indoctrination, will not be found in a specific course or a book. Students must be engaged in practical activities and connected to the community so they can think openly and creatively. Being connected with the community helps students also acquire problem-solving, critical thinking, and research skills.

The education system at MOU University is not different from any other education system, according to (Louca et al., 2014). Accordingly, the educational system in many countries does not promote creative teaching/learning processes (Ferrari et al., 2009; Robinson, 2006).

The participants' thoughts of fostering creativity and innovation are significantly connected to pathway 1 in Donnelly & Barrett, (2008) model, as presented in the earlier section. Pathway 1 encompasses several pedagogical strategies that teachers can employ in the classroom to encourage students' participation and envelopment. Students have the potential for creative living, which is a combination of nature and nurture, as was discussed by the participants. This suggests that some students have some upper limit of their creative capabilities, but they need to be guided toward achieving their goals. Creativity and innovation are not taught in a specific course as pointed by all participants but are acquired gradually and indirectly. Donnelly & Barrett, (2008) model emphasized in pathway three that the

education should be not so much on what students learn as on what they can do with their learning.

Teachers can guide students on the basic principles of creativity and innovation and encourage them to apply them in real cases or situations. Teachers can guide students' thoughts and ideas; they can drive students' interest and motivation but cannot teach them the knowledge of creativity and innovation and ask them to memorize it. The research findings show a strong relationship between teaching for creativity and teaching creatively, being a role model for students reflecting innovative ideas, experience, and be a great way to teach them creativity. Teachers' ability to transfer his/her course to be more practical, teachers' behavior and great personality driver to creativity and innovation because students are more likely to accept the notion of creativity and innovation from creative teachers.

## CONCLUSION

Today, it is crucial to be innovative more than ever, manages a changing environment, respond to technological advances, evolving customer needs, and globalization. Educational practice requires not only keeping pace but also being proactive in meeting the needs of the workforce. This research contributes to a discussion of innovation and creativity and the university's role in creating productive and successful graduates with critical and necessary skills. Besides, it explains more about Masharaqa & Al-Silwadi, (2019) findings regarding the lack of creativity, leadership charactersitcs among Palestianin graduates. This paper argues for the need to mix innovation theory with practice and create experimental and participatory courses to ensure students preparedness for real-life challenges. This research is presented to start this discussion. It seems undeniable that creativity and innovation are essential to organizations, and the role of the university is to prepare students for the demands of industry and the labor market. Consequently, the study recommends building partner relationship between universities and the private sector taking into account the nature of the work of the sector and graduate specialties.

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