

Industry Interviews

Summary



EMERGING MEDIA EXPLORATION



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Project Consortium: University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF (Germany); Tampere University (Finland); Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland); University of Lincoln (United Kingdom); University of Central Lancashire (United Kingdom)

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Summary

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Interview partners

Name, Role	Company
Graham Thomas	BBC
Stephan Schindler, Head of people and culture	Exozet
Dirk Martens, CEO	House of Research
Fax Quintus, CEO	I-Immersive
Annette Wilson, Head of Innovation projects	RBB
Zakaria Jaiathe, CEO	Xibit

Cooperation

One interview partner (Exozet) stated that while they frequently work with students, they have not worked with universities as an organisation so far. They like to integrate students completely in their teams and give them longer-term contracts. They deem it complicated to cooperate with universities on an organisational level, with the exception of long-term research projects. The lack of commercial pressure at the side of the university is cited here as both an advantage and challenge, i.e. they have the time to really focus on issues, but have less incentives to stick to short-term deadlines.

i-immersive experienced the university as the partner to give the frame and the room (in spatial as in metaphorical meaning) for a common project and immersive would contribute their special knowledge and insights they have on the respective theme.

Apart from student collaborations, they sometimes subcontracted universities to do research for them.

House of Research usually works with PhD students or sometimes master students working on their final thesis. Sometimes the major part of project supervision lies with them, sometimes with the university. This seems to depend on whether who owns the project, e.g. whether House of Research gave the briefing or the university. Their cooperations appear to be more initiated around individuals and usually do not involve classic teaching, i.e. presentations to larger groups of students.

At BBC Research, most cooperative projects with universities are funded by the UK government and other funding bodies. They also deliberately cooperate with universities in areas where the university partners have access to further funding programmes for particular areas. The hosting of PhD students is at the

core of most cooperations. The students spend a number of months at the BBC premises to do their research and collaborate with other students and BBC staff there, but they also do hours at their home university. Usually, the students study about 4 years and the cooperation projects are as well planned for similar time frames. Preferably, the students would have researcher contracts with their universities and BBC pays the university for the cooperation to compensate for the time they spend at the BBC premises. So far, BBC has created a very large network of university cooperation partners. In former times, BBC approached universities at academic conferences rather randomly and asked whether they had students looking for a supervisor. However, recently they are trying to focus by creating theme-related clusters of core university partners.

During the cooperation, partners work with technology, content or data that the BBC owns or develops.

Among the motivations to work with universities they mention special expertise, labs or test environments. BBC does not have and access to affordable staff. They usually compensate the university for the time the PhD-students work in the BBC lab.

For BBC a key point in communicating with students is bringing them onsite to their lab. They point out that in cooperations where students were working in academic environments and had only weekly or monthly meetings with BBC, there was a danger that the project would be influenced too much by the academic supervisor and the prime motivation became publishing another paper. They underscore that “if the students spend a significant proportion of their time in our [i.e. BBC’s] lab [...] it’s the key to get everything working well”.

Xibit utters the impression, that there is a disconnect between universities and the start-up scene, making it difficult to create relevant industry contacts for start-ups. At the same time, they feel that they spend too little thought about how students could actually contribute to their projects.

RBB’s closest cooperation is with the journalism school EMS. While it is partly owned by rbb, the school also trains journalism students working at other companies. The focus of the school is multimedia journalism, meaning that the students get a broad training across all media. The students are tightly integrated into journalistic projects and learn about the day-to-day business at a media publishing house. Apart from that, RBB has a network of European universities they cooperate with in international research projects. These cooperations may involve students, but usually this is handled on the side on the university and RBB staff does not get in direct contact with students, with the possible exception of PhD-level students.

Initiation

I-mmersive state that they do not actively look for university partnerships from their side. One time, when trying to initiate a cooperative project, the feedback from the university side was too slow, so they abandoned the project.

For HoR, the project initiation may come from both sides. Sometimes they need to tap on specific knowledge and think of a professor to approach. In other cases, individual professors or students approach them with an idea. Even though they regularly do have university cooperations, they make the remark

that some universities are difficult to understand from the outside and that structures and modalities under which cooperations may happen are not transparent.

The start-up Xibit miss opportunities to get in contact with universities and would wish the universities would be more pro-active in approaching start-ups. RBB coordinates the students' assignments with the EMS and accommodates for themes the students have chosen, as far as possible. For EU-funded research projects, RBB is often contacted out of its international partner network. BBC would sketch the initial idea in one or two paragraphs and then approach academics whether they were interested to advertise it to their students. The students would then further frame the research project with guidance from their academic supervisor. The focus is usually on longer-term PhD-projects.

Collaboration Methods

Exozet sees practical problem solving as the essential skill students can learn in company settings, as well as access to professional technologies.

i-immersive wants students to imagine, to create new stories and aesthetics. They do consider it a challenge to bring students into the right mind-set and brief them accordingly, emphasizing it takes time and energy, "but once you achieve this, usually they are quicker to find the perfect solution". Yet they also mention that there is always a natural performance spread in the group and usually only a couple of students bring satisfying results from their point of view. They usually start with a lecture to give input about the field the project is about, along with existing good practice examples. This is then followed by a phase where the students do research into the domain by themselves and share their findings with their peers. The concept phase starts with brainstorming in groups or individually and can take the shape of a Design Thinking workshop to push people to create ideas out of the box. This is followed by a 3-days prototyping phase and a pitch presentation at the end.

When working with master students, HoR prefers short-term projects with intense contact. They e.g. employ daily design sprints to keep the pace.

Xibit so far had no collaboration with student projects, but is in talks with a university institute on giving workshops or show cases of their technology and then providing it to the students to see where it could lead. However, Xibit have been working with student groups at their premises, where the student teams are completely integrated into their team, without the university as mediator.

BBC researchers regularly give university courses and conference presentations.

In the case of rbb, the journalism students are completely responsible for the conception and production of their content.

Motivation for Collaboration

HoR, see the value for the students in providing authentic project cases and industry contacts, along with some funding allowing the project to be more elaborate than a usual university project.

RBB, In case of university collaborations, they see access to new technology and knowledge, as well as research expertise as a motivation

For BBC, access to specific expertise, lab or testing environment is a motivation for collaboration with universities. Also, sometimes universities have access to certain exclusive funds for particular topics.

Nature of the Results

I-immersive emphasize that there is a great variation among the results by the student groups: Some stay close to the briefing, others create surprising results and yet others stray far off without reflection. With regards to obtaining usage rights for the results, i-immersive would see that as a follow-up negotiation with the respective students after the workshop.

BBC usually secures all relevant rights to research results. They are interested in practical and focused results from an industrial point of view. If they fund the student themselves, they use their own contract template. In case the idea comes from the university, it would be the university's agreement that is used. Even though the BBC is eager to retain commercial rights, the university usually keeps the right for using the results freely in research and development or teaching. As well, students are free to publish their thesis unless there is any confidential information, which is described as a rare case.

HoR usually deals with the problem of confidentiality by having the students write the respective passages more abstract.

RBB is interested in attractive content in new and unusual forms in the short-term view and the long-term perspective is in getting well-trained journalists with a deep understanding of the modern media landscape. The project results are published and featured by RBB. All rights of the results of student projects belong to RBB according to their apprenticeship contract.

Talents

Exozet is generally very satisfied with student employees, to the extent that they get a full position after they graduate. University staff, especially professors, help them by recommending students for different positions. In general, Exozet is looking for long-term engagements of students, as it does take a long time to onboard them and integrate them into the team. This is why they usually do not take interns that stay only for a couple of months, but give annual part-time contracts (20h/week). Currently, they are especially looking for students with expertise in Virtual Reality and immersive media technologies. Also, they need people who know both about game engines and camera capture technologies.

I-immersive works with interns, which sometimes become employees. They are looking for a broad range of skills in animation, virtual environments, storytelling, virtual cinematography. They also express a special need for the theme of live streaming in virtual environments and people who can combine interaction design with artistic approaches.

HoR do work with interns and students from different fields, with a focus on computer sciences and social sciences, but the latter with basic technology skills. Most of the interns stay on on a student employment contract till graduation, as they already know the job.

BBC is looking especially for computer sciences, Human-computer-interaction, software engineering, psychology and related areas. They have a very good experience with (PhD) students, particularly because they spend a lot of time in the BBC lab.

Themes

With regard to the theme of emerging media, exozet envisions a world where the production and productions tools for creating digital media content of any kind is completely democratized and accessible for all.

HoR gives a rather broad assessment that they see potential for Virtual Reality in Gaming and business use, not so much in the domain of cinema.

In a project with master students they develop a tool for media analysis: A music recognition system that analysed the music played in every radio station in Germany for one year.

Sometimes they also provide their own tools for the students to work with, e.g. a special application to measure media perception.

Exozet sees the field of immersive media still offers a lot of room where a company can learn from universities.

i-mmersive is interested in developing worlds and assets for sets and installations. They work a lot with live streaming cameras when they collaborate with film students. This is currently a more technical task but could be extended to format development.

BBC shapes the topics of student collaborations together with the respective student and the university. In general, they are interested in exploring all forms of media and their potential uses for different audiences. This currently includes VR, XR, AR and AR audio, from angles like human behavior and psychology, but also politics. A particular cornerstone of their research agenda is the concept of object-based media, which allows to adapt the media experience on the side of the receiver for a personalized and contextualized experience. They mention different example projects. One student is looking at information presentation in augmented reality, with experiments like providing an AR TV programme guide. Another student is working on the theme of “narrative importance”, to improve the way audio is mixed for TV programmes, to make it easier for people with hearing problems to follow the narrative of a TV show.

Xibit has a lot of research project that include machines and would like to involve students in those. They want to use both new and existing technology to communicate in new and different ways.

For RBB, Emerging Media includes “all new media formats, technologies, distribution and consumption forms”.

Timing

I-Immersive suggests intense, short-term projects to keep the focus with student groups, preferably just one week. Middle or long-term planning of student collaborations is difficult because of the intense co-working needed to realise the project and this may collide with the students' regular curriculum. HoR prefers shorter periods from a day to a couple of weeks, too. This depends on the scope of the project. They tend to work on their projects much faster than universities, as they work for clients who usually want to their projects to be realized within a couple of months, sometimes with a hard deadline in form of an exhibition or other event that is targeted.

BBC has the longest engagements, often spanning over the full PhD qualification cycle of four years, but they also take interns, which stay for three months over the summer. Other projects may take anything in between. Usually, the projects BBC does with universities aim at the long-term perspective and they prefer longer cooperations to get substantial results.

Exozet sees a challenge in university collaborations when it comes to reliable deadlines and communication especially during the semester breaks.

Xibit would prefer a limited time frame of one to two months for a collaboration, because they fear that students might lose interest if the interaction is limited to a semester-long course with two hours per week.