

"QUALITY AND STATUS OF VET MUST GO UP TO ATTRACT INDUSTRY"

Eduardo Padrón has served as an advisor to six US presidents

Photo: American Council of Education

Eduardo Padrón, advisor to six US presidents and one of the country's most influential voices in education and training, gives **Live&Learn** his recipe for getting education and industry to really work together. President of Miami Dade College (MDC), Florida's largest provider of higher education, since 1995, he has introduced innovative approaches to teaching and learning and is a powerful advocate for underserved groups such as low income and minority students.

"Governments should resist the temptation to micromanage education systems" says Padrón, "you have to free institutions from state bureaucracy so that they can have freedom to interact with businesses," he adds. More freedom for schools and colleges must be accompanied by greater responsibility. "You have to make schools accountable – you set expectations and you judge them on their results." And finally, difficult though it may be to achieve, "quality matters, this is the best way to convince business to support you."

Vocational education and training or VET suffers from a bad reputation in many countries. This is not helped, according to Padrón, by the way decision makers often vote with their feet when it comes to their own offspring. "The very same people who are trying to tell you to go into VET programmes want their children to go into a different system," he says. The negative perception of VET creates another barrier to better links with business – "you have to elevate the status of VET in order for industry to want to benefit from it and draw its employees from it."

One way of doing this is to make sure that VET is offered alongside more academic courses within a single institution – as is the case at MDC. Another is to train not just for the specific or hard skills for a specific job, but also soft skills such as analytical thinking, the ability to work in a team or problem solving. The aim is to produce self-directed, creative and adaptable people who will be able to navigate today's less certain job market.

Teachers have a vital role to play in improving the quality of VET. But if they are to act as bringers of change, first they have to change themselves, says Padrón, and act more as coaches and facilitators of learning and less like traditional lecturers. "Many are still in the 20th century mode of teaching but today's students do not relate to that, in fact they switch off," he says.

Working conditions in many countries may not encourage teachers to give their best. "Imagine I do all the extra things, like learning new techniques and motivating students. But you just come in, teach



your classes and go home and you get paid exactly the same as me," explains Padrón, "there are no incentives in terms of professional development and salaries so we are not rewarding people for innovation or effort."

How MDC responds to industry ...

Community colleges are a distinctly American phenomenon somewhere between higher VET and university. Close relations with industry and an open-door approach to admissions, which makes for a very diverse student body, are defining characteristics.

“There are 300 programmes at my institution and every one has a small board of industry people who try to keep the curriculum and the programme up-to-date,” says Padrón. Industry not only has a significant input into existing programmes at MDC, but sometimes the college will develop a specific course to meet demand from the private sector.

In the mid 2000s, Florida Power & Light (FPL) was having trouble finding new employees to join an ageing workforce at its Turkey Point nuclear power station. It approached MDC. Working with the company, MDC came up with its electrical power technology programme, whereby students are trained by industry experts, mostly from FPL, in an environment which prepares them for available jobs.

In May this year, the sixth cohort of students graduated. Padrón says the partnership has benefits for all. “FPL has a pipeline of qualified candidates from which to draw new employees, MDC is able to educate students who will get jobs at the end of their training. Students, who are the greatest benefitters, know that they have a high-paying job waiting for them,” he says. As the curriculum meets national standards, graduates can also seek work elsewhere.

... and students

Over half of MDC students are the first generation to attend college, 70% work and 20% work full-time. The college offers

flexible schedules including evening and weekend classes, but efforts to support students through higher education go beyond this. Guidance begins online before students arrive and continues throughout their time at MDC.

Advice covers not only academic issues, but also finance and managing family obligations, aiming to free students up to focus on their studies. Students can enrol in communities of interest which provide a support system of peers, lecturers and other staff with similar interests. Mentoring puts them in touch with professionals in relevant fields.

Eduardo Padrón defends this inclusive approach as the way that education can really add value. “Many universities are remnants of elitism as just a few people get in based on artificial barriers. If you only let in the best and the brightest – students who will succeed anyway – you are not harnessing the value of every individual,” he says, “the real added value comes by taking those individuals who did not have the same opportunities and by harnessing their potential to be real contributors to society, then you are adding a lot of value.” ■

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