

UPDATE FROM EURASHE

WHY RESEARCH ON EMPLOYABILITY?

Education is one of the priorities in Europe today. The Bologna Reform (in which the countries of the European Union play an essential part) aims at creating a European Higher Education Area by 2010. Now that the Bologna Process reaches its final stage, it is quite normal that the concern is shifting towards the issue of employability. After all, the reform was meant to have a beneficial effect on society at large. This evolution has been further stimulated by the interaction with the Lisbon strategy, which wants to give Europe a leading knowledge based economy. The employability of young graduates is also one of the key issues in the Lisbon strategy.

It therefore makes sense to stress in the London Communiqué the necessity of research on employability in the three cycles, “involving the responsibility of the three players in ‘the knowledge triangle’, HEIs, governments and employers” (especially the private sector). It should appear from this paper that still more research is needed on the employability of all those (including bachelors) graduating from higher education institutions in Europe.

Employability as a concept has many different aspects. It can be understood to mean getting fulfilling work, moving self-sufficiently within the labour market or maintaining employment.

Statistics of initial employment can easily be found in many European countries. Many national survey centres, individual institutions and other bodies conduct so-called follow-up studies. These studies already reveal at some level how successful the education in the institutions has been, in terms of the success rate of graduates in finding an employment shortly after graduation

However, it is more difficult to know whether the employment of graduates really corresponds with their education and expectations. Many highly qualified graduates are obliged to accept as a first job positions that do not match their qualifications. This is true especially for students graduating from traditional research oriented universities. Recent research confirms this aspect of employability. One such study was published in Finland in November 2006. In this study, the emphasis was put on the graduates’ own opinion about their employment. More than 4,500 graduates were asked five years after graduation among other things how their current work corresponds with their studies and qualifications.

Studies like the above mentioned give interesting feedback to institutions about how their curricula meet the expectations of their students and the demands of the employers. However, these studies are only productive in the sense that they induce the institutions to draw the necessary conclusions.

At the moment it seems that graduates from professional higher education institutions and universities of applied sciences tend to find immediately relevant work in the private sector more easily than graduates from traditional research oriented universities. It would make an interesting field of study to investigate where this difference comes from. More concretely it could be useful for traditional universities to know how professional HEIs institutions prepare their students for the labour market.

It thus appears that HEIs prepare their students for the labour market in different ways. Education and research at professional HEIs are in most cases highly oriented towards the needs of the labour market and thus the students graduating from HEI are often per se ready for their working life. This makes their employment relatively easy. For example in Germany, the new two-cycle system has been in place at universities of applied sciences (UAS) for only a few years. Most of the students graduating with a bachelor’s degree find employment shortly after graduation and do not continue to the Master’s level. In fact, at the moment only 5-10% of bachelors graduating from UASs in Germany continue up to Master’s level. However, the goal in Germany is that 30% of UAS bachelors would continue with Master’s studies (Prof. Dr. Michael Stawicki, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, BaLaMa conference in Berlin 21 March 2007).

There is however still another aspect of employability, namely employability can be seen as an individual's employability assets. These assets consist of an individual's knowledge, skills and attitudes. A graduate's employability depends not only on his or her knowledge and skills, but also on the labour market information one has or on the way one uses his or her assets and presents them to employers. Not only qualifications, but also one's personal qualities and sometimes even an institution's reputation can play a role in finding a job. Employers want entry-level employees to possess an array of basic, higher-order, and effective employability skills. Often employers value these generic employability skills above specific occupational skills. In too many cases traditional education teaches to student only the content of their future work (i.e. knowledge and skills), but not how to prepare students for the labour market.

It would be interesting to investigate how HEIs prepare their students for the labour market and thus help their employment.

In 2005 EURASHE conducted a small-scale study about employability at some of its member institutions. Data collected were on

- the type of higher education institution
- the various disciplines at Bachelor level offered at the institution.
- the status and employment rate of the Bachelor graduates.
- the practical content of studies offered (internship/project work/other)
- the degree of participation of the socio-economic sector (students, trade unions, businesses, professional organisations) in the governance of your institution, and at which level (institutional, faculty level or other)
- degree of cooperation with the regional socio-economic environment
- forms of cooperation with other HEIs (including research universities)

Such data would be relevant in a further, more extensive study on the factors that influence graduates' employability, including the following issues:

- Efforts to stimulate employment of the Bachelor graduates in an institution (regular studies about employability or follow-up of graduates / presence of a Careers office)
- How do job titles/positions in the enterprises relate to the graduates' qualifications and studies? What about salary levels?
- The students' and the socio-economic sector's opinions about the studies and diplomas (Correspondence of the studies with working life's demands? Professional/language/communication/labour market specific content of studies?)
- The reputation of diplomas' or institutions' on the labour market and students and its effects on the graduates' employability. Are professional diplomas known on the labour market?
- Differences in employability between different fields of study/countries/institutions/types of employer (public, SME...)/gender (fixed-term contract/permanent appointment)
- How does the institution support the students' employment (contacts with working life)? Which of the following are/would be the most useful?: traineeship/other professional experience /thesis/port-folios/alumni/tutors/projects/teachers' connections with the world of employment.
-

There is no doubt that employability is a relevant topic today in the education field. It should appear from the above that EURASHE as a representative of European professional higher education institutions is well situated to conduct such research, preferably in cooperation with other stakeholders in higher education.

Jenni Iskander / Stefan Delplace