

Working Group on Employability.

Background

1. The group comprises the following members: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom (Chair), as well as BUSINESSEUROPE, Education International, ESU, EUA, EURASHE, UNESCO-CEPES, Bologna Secretariat.
2. The group has met three times (31 October 2007 and 1 February 2008 in London, and on 9 July 2008 in Berlin). It has a further meeting scheduled for 16 January 2009 in London.

Purpose

3. The objective of this group is to provide a report to Ministers for the 2009 Bologna conference on how to improve employability in relation to each of the three cycles (but with a particular emphasis on graduates with Bachelor degrees), and in the context of lifelong learning.
4. The group agreed that the report to Ministers should not be prescriptive but should help to extend understanding of the meaning of the concept of employability and provide practical examples of good practice from a range of areas but in particular in relation to Bachelor degrees. In order to inform the work of the group, individual members of the group agreed to contact Bologna countries to conduct short informal surveys to collect information in a wide range of areas such as the main challenges in terms of employability and the dialogue between higher education institutions and employers. In addition to the survey responses this Group drew on reports such as "Bologna with Student Eyes" 2007, Trends V report, and international comparative surveys of graduates which provided valuable information about the relationship between higher education and employment.

Employability: Main issues

5. The main issues identified by the Group were:
 - The growth in the number of graduates in the 1980's and 1990's produced an apparent over-supply in the labour market in some countries and in some sectors of the economy, though access to higher education remains an important issue;
 - Employability of graduates at the Bachelors level is a particular problem for some countries, with a perception amongst both graduates and employers that the qualification is not adequate for employment;
 - Work experience is highly valued by employers. Young graduates who finish studying with work experience tend to be more competitive in the labour market than those who do not;

- Employers do not think that universities are doing enough to prepare graduates for the world of work. Some universities query whether employability should be a part of their mission and purpose; and
- Some employers and some higher education institutions have little practical experience of engaging with each other, especially in curriculum design focussing on improving employability which is an area where both sides should work together more closely.

Possible future actions

6. The identification of these issues has led the Group to consider the following suggestions to improve employability:

Raising awareness of the Bologna Process and the value of a first cycle/Bachelor degree

7. Successful implementation of the existing Bologna Process action lines envisages higher education being organized in three cycles and with the possibility of exit from, or progression to the next cycle at each stage. National qualifications frameworks will be compatible with the overarching Qualifications Framework for the EHEA with mobility facilitated and employability enhanced. However, a good deal more progress is needed to make this a reality across the EHEA; and, in some countries, more work is needed to ensure that these reforms and the benefits they bring are fully understood by all key stakeholders. Students, higher education institutions and employers need to be made aware of the value of first cycle/Bachelor degrees. In countries where the first cycle has only recently been introduced, these degrees are sometimes perceived as simply a step towards gaining a Master's degree, rather than as a qualification in their own right.

8. This points to an ongoing need to promote the Bologna Process more widely to ensure that its benefits are fully understood. Emphasis on quality assurance arrangements, credit transfer and recognition systems is essential to developing a wide range of employability (and mobility) options for students (and researchers) which would strengthen the recognition of first cycle/Bachelor degree amongst employers and students. The working group believes that the careers and guidance services within universities could play an invaluable role in raising awareness of the value of the first cycle/Bachelor degrees in their work with employers. **It is for Governments to take the lead in this work and we suggest that they, together with higher education institutions and appropriate representative organisations, should:**

- **continue to promote the benefits of the Bologna reforms, including the benefits of a first cycle/Bachelor degree, to students, potential students, employers and professions (including promoting the benefits of a high quality European**

Higher Education Area being a distinctive and attractive destination);

- **make further progress in establishing their national qualifications frameworks in line with the overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area; and**
- **that Governments, as appropriate, lead by example and ensure that their own public sector employment practices cater to graduates with first cycle/Bachelor degrees.**

Promoting greater dialogue between higher education institutions and employers

9. Employers, both in public and private sector, and universities need to be encouraged to co-operate more to ensure that the skills that they feel graduates need are reflected in higher education provision. There is a need to encourage a more systematic dialogue between higher education institutions and employers at all levels – internationally, nationally, regionally and locally. This dialogue needs to take place across a wide range of different areas, including curriculum design, accreditation and/or quality assurance of programmes, work placements for students, preparation of professional standards, and transforming knowledge and research into practice. **We suggest that:**

- **Governments should take the lead in setting the conditions which will promote and incentivise dialogue; and**
- **that higher education institutions and their representative bodies should develop or strengthen links with employers and employer bodies (such as business and employers' associations, chambers of commerce, trade associations or professional groups) to establish partnerships to share best practice in how to make higher education provision more responsive to labour market demands and advise employers of the range of skills that graduates can bring to their employment.**

Employability skills

10. Higher education institutions and employers need to work together to identify ways in which courses and programmes of study can offer students the opportunity to develop and define for themselves the employability skills set out in paragraph 13. **We suggest that there is an increased focus on providing work placements as part of courses; on encouraging students to take jobs related to their course of study where appropriate and which are compatible with their study work-load; and towards developing more programmes of part-time study to cater for those people already in the workplace who wish to update their skills as part of the lifelong learning agenda. Consideration should also be given to the interchange, through short work placements and secondments,**

between staff in business and staff in higher education institutions to overcome any barriers between them. Governments, employer bodies, and higher education institutions should consider ways to increase interchanges.

Information, advice and guidance

11. In some countries there are well-developed careers advisory services provided at the level of each institution. These may offer a range of advice and support to current students to help them identify and clarify their individual skill sets and put them in touch with potential employers. In some case these services are available not only to students currently studying at the university concerned but also to students from that university throughout their subsequent career. In other countries this responsibility falls to the national employment service. **We suggest that responsibility for the provision of advice and guidance should be strengthened within higher education institutions. Higher education institutions, together with Governments/government agencies and employers, should improve the accessibility and quality of their employment-related services to students.**

Next Steps

12. The Working Group on Employability will take careful account of the observations, suggestions and ideas which emerge at the Luxembourg Seminar on Employability: The Employers' Perspective and its Implications (6 and 7 November). It will discuss the results and conclusions of this Seminar at its January meeting and will present an updated report to the full Bologna Follow-up Group at its meeting in Prague on 12 – 13 February. This will then form the basis of recommendations to Ministers for further action on Bologna Post 2010.

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