

Beyond the Bologna Process: Creating and connecting national, regional and global higher education areas

Background paper for the Third Bologna Policy Forum

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Chapter 4 – The Contribution of Higher Education Reforms to Enhancing Graduate Employability

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a. The role of (higher) education in society

The role of higher education has evolved in the more complex societies we are living in. Society values (higher) education more than ever - pointing to knowledge as a powerful driver of change and development. Education plays a key role in the life of citizens, as it responds to the various needs of individuals and society as a whole. Still, many countries do not manage to guarantee access for those that have the potential for studying but who cannot attain higher education for financial/economic and/or social reasons. Increasing levels of higher education attainment is beneficial from both the economic point of view, as it taps into a larger and more diverse share of the national pool of talent, as well as from the social justice point of view, by enabling more citizens to develop to their full potential.

b. Employable graduates

Understandably, more and more young people choose an education that they believe will secure their prospective employment. However, such a short-term vision may not necessarily be the best guarantee for sustainable employment, as generic skills and a sound general education background constitute the firmest basis for finding employment.

An area of concern remains the mismatch between qualifications of graduates and the skills needed at a given time, while one has to be conscious of the difficulty in predicting the needs of the labour market in a changing society.

In European countries where the three-cycle system has been implemented as one of the priorities of the higher education reform process, the employability of bachelors in disciplines in which the first degree did not exist was originally seen as problematic. This is something that the second decade of the Bologna Process is tackling through a shift to learning outcomes approaches, better synchronization of the existing Bologna tools, such as ECTS, the Diploma Supplement and qualifications frameworks and increased dialogue between the academic community and the world of work. It should be reiterated

that in many systems, where the reforms are very new, it becomes difficult to draw firm conclusions about whether or not Bologna has contributed to graduate employability.

c. Research findings on employment and employability

Stocktaking reports for the Bologna Ministerial Conferences and studies by stakeholder organizations reveal that the impact of the introduction of the three-cycle system on the employability of graduates varies greatly according to the country (and the time of its accession to the EHEA), the sector of activity, etc. A diversified offer of programs seems to respond more accurately to the diverse needs of society in rapidly changing contexts. Latest research on the outcomes of education shows the direct relevance of education for the employment prospects of graduates. There is clearly a 'transition problem' between higher education and the labour market, as quite often young persons with higher education qualifications often take up jobs not usually requiring such a qualification¹.

A European Commission staff working document² indicates that highly-skilled workers suffer less from the consequences of the economic and financial crisis than low-skilled workers and that education can play an important role in combating problems with employability and thus the economic downturn.

d. A shift of paradigm

Through the adoption, development and implementation of regional and national qualifications frameworks in different parts of the world, public authorities have engaged in a more student-centred perspective and have focused on the Learning Outcomes approach in higher education. In this perspective, those developments reflect the responsiveness of higher education to the needs of the world of work.

Lifelong Learning and especially Recognition of Prior Learning, which may also include non-formal and informal education, are acknowledged as strategies to broaden access to higher education and to reduce skills shortages by recognizing skills which were not considered before in formal settings.

e. The role of stakeholders

This Bologna transformation rests upon the involvement of stakeholders in the education process and in the systemic reform of higher education. Examples are the role of employers in the (re) design of curricula, etc. and also the participatory role given to students, in for example external and internal quality assurance. The world of work has become an acknowledged stakeholder in higher education. This has resulted in a closer cooperation between both sectors, education and business, and in greater involvement of the world of work in general, thus supporting national and regional development. It is increasingly seen as the responsibility of higher education institutions to ensure that their graduates

¹ The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report

² Commission of the European Communities (2010). Progress towards the common European objectives in Education and Training, Indicators and benchmarks 2010/2011. p. 78

have the right skills to contribute to the innovation potential of national and regional players (including SMEs and the not-for-profit sector). The dialogue between higher education institutions and the world of work should also focus on a long term view of employability, in a context in which graduates are expected to be able to develop and change their professional profiles more than once during their active lives.

f. The impact of mobility on the graduate's employability

It is important to mention the role of mobility here in stimulating and supporting the employability of graduates. Mobility between institutions in different countries and between institutional types helps graduates match their aptitudes and interests with the range of education and training opportunities available to them and thus facilitates their contribution to the labour market and society. Qualifications frameworks play an important role here, in that they can eliminate, or at least draw attention to barriers to mobility that exist within systems. That said, there are still many barriers to student mobility, despite the repertoire of tools and structures that have been developed under the Bologna Process. Erasmus Student Network annual surveys demonstrate that students that have been mobile are more likely to consider international work experiences, and to have developed language skills and intercultural competencies. In this respect, it is critical that governments and higher education institutions work to encourage more and better learning mobility and engage employers in a discussion on its benefits.

g. Employability focus in other regions of the world

As was stressed in the *2009 Report on the Bologna Process in a global setting*, there is “a ‘general’ higher education modernisation agenda which is common to all world regions and to all countries of today and which is about ‘broadening access, diversifying study programs, quality enhancement, employability’³.”

According to testimonials from neighbouring countries of the European Union⁴ employability of recent graduates is poor, as the system often does not have the flexibility to adapt curricula to current needs of employers. There is a great need for first-cycle professionally oriented programs and traditional training with poor employment perspectives is in desperate need of more innovative study programs or a professional orientation.

h. The link with the economy and the economic crisis

With the economic crisis and under the influence of the focus of EU governments on the priorities of Education 2020, the Bologna Process is increasingly paying attention to ‘employability’ as a matching of skills and competences gained or enhanced through education with employment perspectives and labour market needs.

³ Report on the Bologna Process in a global setting, retrieved from <http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Documents/Strategy-for-EHEA-in-global-setting.pdf>

⁴ The Parliamentary Assembly for the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in its gathering in Brussels on 5 October 2011.

Too often there is a mismatch between the demands of the labour market and the qualifications obtained by young people, which is due to a lack of dialogue between the two sectors.

In this context, a reflection is needed on the efforts that regions and individual countries are making to educate more employable graduates. There is a growing awareness among both governments and stakeholders that an exchange of relevant policies and experiences with other regions in the world will also stimulate global employment.

Questions for discussion:

- **Is there in your opinion a lack of responsiveness to the expectations of employers in your country? If this is the case, how would you address concretely the mismatch of qualifications and labour market needs?**
- **How does one create synergies between higher education, research and innovation, with the aim of fostering entrepreneurial skills of graduates?**