

Keynote Paper –

Employability of Higher Education Graduates: Projects, Studies and Institutional Practices

1. Introduction

Over the last few years the probability of higher education graduates finding a job has been decreasing in many EU countries (Garrouste and Rodrigues, 2012). In this context, it is ever more important to understand what determines a graduate’s early career success and what that actually means. These two questions provide a starting point for quality assurance mechanisms and governance principles at the different levels of higher education systems. At two international conferences within the framework of the DEHEMS Network (2013–) researchers tried to complement these aspects with the following questions:

a) What is the overall idea of higher education institutions about how your studies take the future professional activities of their graduates into account?

b) What do higher education institutions do to successfully help graduates make the transition to work?

c) Where do higher education institutions see the biggest developmental needs?

d) Which are the most relevant modes of cooperation between universities and enterprises, and why?

These questions indicate there has been a shift in social attitudes towards a large spectrum of professional workers and their training. In this process, examining the relationship between general and specific competencies and the role of formal educational programmes in their development seems to have become a central issue of policy concern in the area of education and the labour market. Higher education systems are suggested to apply curricular reforms that aim to improve the employability of their graduates and the usability of their competencies in the world of work. Key tools proposed by EU institutions that should support these goals are synchronised three-cycle systems, competence-based learning, coupled with the internationalisation and flexibility of study programmes.

Traditional claims that the development of professional competencies urgently requires strong links to knowledge abstraction and scientific structuring are currently under test. In the interplay of the actors responsible for the development of competencies, policy makers and society at large seek answers as to what extent the theoretical background gained during

education enables a later professional performance or the transition from higher education to the the labour market.

2. Professionalism as a context of higher education graduates' training and work

The sociologist Abbott (1988) described professionalism as the key mechanism for a division of expert labour. His book touched upon the trivial question of why the mastery of work matters in modern societies. A decade later, Freidson (2001) labelled professionalism as the third logic, as a supra macro context in which occupational practitioners gain the meaning, purpose and justification of performing occupational tasks. Friedson referred to professionalisation as a superior way and context of experiencing work in comparison to commodification and bureaucratisation. Yet Friedson did not explain well to what extent and in what situations commodification, bureaucratisation and professionalism might overlap, if and where such overlapping takes place these days and what education systems have to do with this. More precisely, he did not explain if there is a universal logic between general and specific knowledge across educational segments, occupations and sectors.

The issue of Friedson's book matched the start of the Bologna and Copenhagen-Maastricht Process with the goal to create a "Europe of knowledge", and emphasised the call to strengthen the role of educational structures to support the requirements of the world of work. These processes went hand in hand with the increasing flexibilisation of labour and melting all three external aspects of work – commodification, bureaucratisation and professionalisation – into a single framework reflecting the intersection between education and the world of work. At first glance, this instrument matches the concept of professionalism described by Evetts (2003) as one's perception of one's own work in line with the great deal of personal belief concerning how work should be done well.

If the responsibility for developing a broad spectrum of general competencies is spread across a across a large spectrum of actors and situations, the two main actors for developing professional professional expertise are education systems and employers. In this interplay of roles in developing competencies, the question concerning to what extent the theoretical background gained during education is the one which enables a later professional performance in the world of world of work largely remains unsettled. In the existing education systems and qualification frameworks there is a hidden assumption that the secondary school level mostly trains students to students to be able to perform working tasks on the single loop learning level ¹ – providing a solution within a given context with limited capabilities for reflecting one's own role. Higher education systems enable the upper dimension. They improve one's capabilities for performing performing tasks in the framework of a double loop learning level which is related to understanding the working context and to the ability to accordingly adjust one's behaviour. However, the question arises concerning the extent to which double loop learning and a theoretical background are really needed for a good professional performance.

When assessing the role of higher education institutions in developing professional expertise and and work performance, one should take several limitations into account. First, professional expertise is socially related to the context of work which varies substantially among different work work placements and organisations. What may be rewarded in one environment may not be

¹ The concepts of single and double loop learning were coined by Argyris (2004).

tolerated in another. Second, professional expertise between occupations and fields of study – e.g. – e.g. the humanities and technical sciences – seeks a substantially different logic for its comparison and observation. Field of study and occupational context shed a very different light on light on the close relationship between generic and professional competencies. What can, for example, be observed as a generic competence in technical sciences might be a professional professional competence in social sciences. Third, graduates follow substantially different tracks of tracks of learning experiences and social networks and the relations between these and curricula, curricula, which stipulates its own context of observation.

3. European projects on graduates' transition from education to work

In the last few years at least three related projects – CHEERS (Careers after Higher Education)², Education)², REFLEX (Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society)³ and HEGESCO (Higher (Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competences)⁴ – have sought to compare graduates graduates in their transition from education to the world of work in a country-comparative fashion. These projects have tried to understand the role of higher education systems in the development of professional expertise. They have looked beyond the short-term educational goal goal of preparing higher education graduates to enter the labour market towards assuring the basis for a long and complex labour market transition process and career development. This is is related to several issues identified by Teichler at the DECOWE International Conference (2009), (2009), which offered guidelines for over 130 contributions by European researchers:

- “a) To what extent should educational systems make people ready for work? What is the relative weight of different kinds of competencies for the successful employment and work?”*
- a) How much do job requirements as well as patterns of competencies vary according to occupations, economic sectors and countries? Do we note the stability of traditional patterns, convergent trends or other dynamics?”*
- b) How do job requirements, competencies as well as links between competencies with employment and work differ according to educational levels?”*
- c) What is the actual role of educational institutions in fostering vocationally relevant competencies – as compared to socio-biographic background, ‘credentialism’ and reputational ascriptions, initial training and learning after starting a job start as well as continuing professional training and learning?”*
- d) To what extent does and should educational institutions ‘respond’ to presumed job requirements or be proactive actors of innovation and new configurations of competencies?”*

Various projects and contributions such as, for example, HEGESCO (2013-), provide some general answers that are relevant to future policy development:

² See: http://www.uni-kassel.de/wz1/TSEREGS/publi_e.htm

³ See: <http://www.fdewb.unimaas.nl/roa/reflex/>

⁴ See: <http://www.hegesco.org/>

- a) In general, the relatively ambiguous group of competencies related to personal proficiency, such as team work or decision making, are the most important for new graduates to function well in the workplace. Two other very important competencies reported are the mastery of disciplines and field-specific knowledge, and skills related to communication.
- b) HE institutions consider themselves to be a far more important actor for generating graduates' key competencies than employers. Employers consider themselves as being equally important to HE institutions when it comes to generating competencies.
- c) More than three out of five employers reported having experienced some kind of shortage of field-specific knowledge of newly employed graduates, while more than half of them said they found that graduates possess the proper level of generic competencies.
- d) Two out of three HE institutions consider lectures and classes as the most suitable means of competence development. Approximately every second academic considers active learning modes (e.g. problem-based learning), team and project work as being key factors for generating competencies in higher education.
- e) HE institutions and employers reported that practical training is the most important form of cooperation between these two spheres. Other means were reported to a smaller extent, but career days and career centres, programme creation and research projects were reported the most frequently.
- f) The most important means reported by HE institutions that should in the future contribute to competence development were curriculum development, an improvement of financial systems, and cooperation with employers. Employers stressed the high level of relevance of practical work that was less frequently reported by HE institutions.

4. Conclusion

Below we propose six elements for discussion on the relationship between graduates' employability and the management of higher education institutions in a way that is relevant to a wider group of higher education stakeholders:

first, comparative data on graduates' employment and employability before and after the crisis;

second, the implications of the concept of employability;

third, the components of graduates' career/employability success and its determinants;

fourth, a consideration of models in relation to various professional domains;

fifth, identification of relevant events, projects, surveys and findings; and

sixth, institutional practices, perceptions and good practices.

In conclusion, we should stress the question of whether graduates having a high level of acquired competencies is really the most desirable result of higher education systems. In these times of economic crisis, many HE stakeholders say they do not need more skills and greater flexibility, but more jobs. In this way, it is important to know if higher education institutions should focus primarily on improvements to learning and teaching modes in order to improve the early career success of their graduates, or if they should pay much more attention to promoting their own programmes and better protecting vulnerable and socially important segments of the labour market.

5. Sources and literature

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