

REPORT

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PARTICIPANTS

The following participated in the Roundtable held on Thursday 7 February 2013 in Brussels (Belgium):

- **Bernadette Frech**, FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences (Austria)
- **Klaas Vansteenhuyse**, Leuven University College (KHLeuven) (Belgium)
- **Michal Karpíšek**, Czech Association of Schools of Professional Higher Education (CASPHE) (Czech Republic)
- **Jan Koucký**, Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic)
- **Birgit Hanny**, ASIIN e.V. (Germany)
- **Carlo Parietti**, EUROCADRES
- **Stefan Delplace**, EURASHE
- **Iva Voldánová**, EURASHE
- **Alexandre Wipf**, EURASHE
- **Martin Humburg**, Maastricht University (Netherlands)
- **Rolf Van der Velden**, Maastricht University (Netherlands)
- **Alicia-Leonor Sauli-Miklavčič**, Association of Slovene Higher Vocational Colleges (ASHVC) (Slovenia)

BLOCK I-A: EMPLOYABILITY: REFINING A DEFINITION

Some would see *employability* as a combination of factors (Jan Koucký). Thereby, it is viewed as more than simply knowledge skills. It is therefore indeed necessary to take a holistic view onto this whereby also personal life plays a role in *employability* (Carlo Parietti). It is of course acknowledged that this point of view makes it difficult for higher education institutions (HEIs) to keep their focus when developing new degree programmes. Often this results from the fact that HEIs still do not seem to be aware who their stakeholders are. In fact, HEIs must continue to be heterogeneous because they have different offers. It is good to have a diversified set of competent graduates rather than only 'broadly formed academics' (Jan Koucký). Yet, an improved clarity towards the future student would be necessary: what exactly are they offering and in what terms do they really differ from other HEIs? This results in the quote from Samo Pavlin in the framework of the DEHEMS project: 'Employers have still little knowledge what to expect from Higher Education (HE) graduates, and HE have similar little knowledge on what employers expect'.

However, HEIs should stop trying to develop all necessary skills since a great deal of those skills are fostered outside the educational world anyway (Rolf Van der Velden). There is some talk about the 'learning to learn'-ability but it has never been clear cut as to what it means. Perhaps one could relate it to general lifelong learning skills in general.

The Roundtable did arrive at quite a simple definition it would seem. *Employability* was defined as those abilities by which a person can be employed soon after graduation but also to be equipped with skills and attitudes to remain employed in the future. *Employability* is therefore a dynamic concept and it does not just apply to the very day of graduation.

BLOCK I-B: EMPLOYABILITY: CRUCIAL ELEMENTS

The researchers (Martin Humburg, Rolf Van der Velden) proposed 6 elements of which the general applicability can be understood as declining down the list. So the first element on the list would apply to all graduates, the ones below to some. Also, the elements lower on the list would generally be needed only at a later stage in the professional career while the top ones would require to be used immediately.

1) Professional expertise

(Understanding of 'professional' being not so narrow as to be only 'specific' skills but all those skills one needs to do the job well').

2) Skills regarding the mobilisation of human resources (HR) (e.g. self-management skills, interpersonal skills)

3) Innovation and knowledge management skills

4) Entrepreneurial skills

5) International competence

6) Flexibility

The Roundtable thus referred back to the remarks in Block I where it was mentioned that HEIs need to develop programmes that may cater to only one or only the lesser of those competences. Providing of course that they clearly define on which elements their programmes focusses. Again, this clear communication of which elements were built into the programme was a major issue in the group and it seems from reality that this communication is often forgotten.

The Roundtable could agree that *employability* is a clear outcome of Lifelong Learning (LLL).

It remains puzzling to notice that employers attach great importance to the first diploma but they focus more on work experience in the following career path, even if this work experience has not been validated/certified.

While the diploma certifies a certain body of knowledge and skills, work experience seems to signal work-readiness in the sense of being instantly deployable, knowing work-life, and to some extent that the skills certified by the diploma have been applied successfully in practice.

It is true, however, that these skills have not really been certified and that the signals are noisy.

This is also where LLL in Professional Higher Education (PHE) can have an added-value.

BLOCK II: EMPLOYABILITY AND PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

It was clear that the boundaries between so-called academic education and PHE were far from clear. It is of crucial importance that the HEIs know well the stakeholders they have to deal with. It often lacks (Birgit Hanny). Within certain professions more importance can be attached to soft skills than in other. Moreover, many skills and competences do not need to be present as clear courses but can be worked into existing learning activities.

As such, the competence matrix would be the most interesting instrument to connect stakeholders and programme builders but also an instrument to be used for further communication (Bernadette Frech). However, the term 'learning outcomes' is absolutely not widespread and certainly not among HR professionals.

BLOCK III: EMPLOYABILITY IN PRACTICE

Participants were asked for recommendations for EURASHE as an European-level organisation to further the case of *employability*.

It was suggested on the one hand to have a common understanding to communicate on what HEIs should target to reach employability; and to establish an European-level monitor of studies on employability, on competencies, for trends on the labour market and the graduates' need to refer to it.

Another suggestion was to organise more of these Roundtables in which views and practices could be shared.

A question was also whether most degree programmes really put *employability* centrally into their structure? If not, should we work on changing this?

On a practical level EURASHE could continue to organise workshops on instruments, good practices, etc., perhaps even develop a database for it. Yet, it should be realised that a European-wide approach is not possible since a lot depends on the context of institutions, students, regional job market, etc.

Another option was to gather all the existing European-wide surveys and to highlight PHE's contribution in their findings. This data must then be used to point out the relevance of PHE in Europe and its sector. There would be no need to work, as EURASHE, on the development of an entirely new survey.

Possible existing surveys referred to were, amongst others, REFLEX, OECD, European Social Survey, BIP (German), EUROGRADUATE.

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DEHEMS: Network for the Development of Higher Education Management Systems

GEM: Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. The world largest ongoing study on entrepreneurial activity, aspirations and attitudes of individuals.

ESS: European Social Survey

EUROGRADUATE: *Feasibility study for a European graduate study*

HEGESCO: Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competences.

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IES: Improving employment service systems through European benchmarking and good practice implementation.

MISLEM: Developing meta-level indicators for establishing a systematic linkage between educational institutions and the labor market.

PIAAC: Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (OECD)

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