

Employability in the context of the Bologna process Bled/Slovenia 21st-23rd of October 2004

Employability – student perspective and some key questions

Predrag Lazetic, ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe

The newest developments in Europe higher education in the frame of Bologna process show that higher education is more and more integrated with the wider economic strategies (Lisbon objectives for instance) and that employability is started to be considered as an important and unfortunately in some cases only aspect taken into account by the creation of the new study programs or by reforming old ones. Higher education institutions are invited not only to answer the needs of the national labour markets but also to incorporate European labour market perspective into their work. All these developments open a lot of important questions. The most important one is maybe the student role in all these processes. Are all these developments actually beneficial for students and Europe as it is proclaimed? What do students need? Is the traditional role of higher education institutions really changed and in which direction? Which demands labour market, employers and society in the modern and future Europe really have?

Employability between all other purposes of higher education

Employment and increased employability are only one of the purposes and aspects of higher education. Personal development, education for active citizenship, development and spreading of knowledge and humanistic legacy, fostering of critical thinking are only some of the equally important purposes and roles of higher education. Is there a fundamental contradiction between employability and other aspects of higher education?

The Role of the Student

The student must be seen as at the centre of the development of employability in higher education. It is important that the other players recognise this role and work to ensure that each student is supported in making their own career and employment decisions. Students should be considered as academic citizens with ability, capacity, responsibility and right to freely and independently choose or not to choose their own study paths and way toward their employability. Students know the best what they need and what would be the best way and option for them. HEI and other stakeholders should basically only support and facilitate student choices and needs by various and widest possible offer and flexibility of study programmes and courses. Any measure of employability must look at the whole range of skills and experiences of any individual entering the labour market.

Consideration should be given to the following:

- Work placements.
- Work experience
- Broad Based Curricula vs. Specialisation
- Recognition of informal and non-formal learning
- Social capital
- Adequate counselling service

Role of Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions (HEI) must have and lead an open proactive dialogue with society and economy and their needs and should not be self-isolated/isolated systems but also should not be treated as a servant of economy and society. But there are a lot of open questions HEI sector needs to answer. How to educate people who will have sustainable employability, how to organise and implement reform of degrees, how to facilitate communications of students and potential world of employment, how to create such programs which will enhance the acquisition of generic competences etc.

Role of the Employer and the Labour Market

Experience tells us that employers more and more need employees with not only an academic degree, but with a diverse set of competences. Students graduate with a wide variety of competences that should be recognised and developed further. In the same time employers should have the aim of promoting an innovative work environment when seeking applicants for jobs.

The Bologna Process has promoted extensive reform of European higher education and employers must stay aware of the new competences of graduates of higher education. It is important that employers follow and contribute to the developments within the field of education in order to be able to make the best decisions when hiring new people.

There are also a lot of open questions here as well. Recognition of non-formal learning, stimulation of the continuous process of the professional development etc. One of the questions which need a proper reaction and an answer of employers is how to respond to the increased number of diverse, graduate employees who also have diverse backgrounds, social, cultural and ethnic heritage, vary in age, gender and may have disabilities.

The Role of Government

Higher education and the students' ability to face the challenges of the labour market have a huge impact on the society as a whole. There is a need for long-term strategies for a sustainable labour market, and the co-operation between employers and higher education institutions must be facilitated.

There is a need to support and start various initiatives to increase opportunities and enhance access to internships/work placements and to ensure the continuous career counselling in all levels of education. It is also important to consider acquisition of generic competences when assessing quality of higher education.