

Employability in the context of the Bologna Process

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FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the discussion which took place at the Bologna seminar “Employability and its links to the objectives of the Bologna Process”.¹ It does not represent a chronological account of the discussions but is rather organised around several questions which kept coming back in all of the presentations and discussions. These are:

- What is employability?
- What makes someone employable?
- What impact the stressing of employability as an objective has on higher education in general and more specifically on issues such as curricula development, enrolment procedures, quality assurance, governance and management of higher education etc?
- How does this reflect the development and creation of new types of qualifications and what is the relationship between recognition and employability?
- Who is responsible for increasing employability, or to put it in the opposite way, who is responsible for problems with employability? Therefore, we should see who are the stakeholders, what are their individual responsibilities and in which areas they should cooperate more closely with each other.

It concludes with a list of open questions and issues for discussion which may serve as guidance for future work, not only on the European level, but also to initiate debates on the national and institutional level.

Let's illustrate the complexity of the topic with an example from my own experience.

My formal qualification at the moment is Bachelor of Science in Astrophysics. I have started my studies with 14 of my colleagues a while ago, in 1996. My intention at that time was to pursue a research career and therefore, I planned to do both master and doctoral studies, bury myself in a university or a research institute and spend time being a Scientist. We were told at the beginning of our studies that there are two main possibilities after graduation:

- a) continuing ones study until PhD and opting for a research career, within a university or a research observatory, preferably abroad
- b) teaching mathematics or physics in elementary or high school.

Eight years later the results are as follows:

¹ The seminar was jointly organized by EUA, ESIB and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia. More than 100 participants from 24 countries attended the seminar.

- 6 of us have graduated up to this point. Out of these 6:
 - o one is doing PhD studies in Astrophysics in USA
 - o one is doing PhD studies in particle physics in Canada
 - o one is doing PhD studies in macroeconomics in Spain
 - o one is currently working as security officer in a bank
 - o two are at the moment unemployed: one at the moment has no plans in starting any kind of graduate studies and the other is hoping to start her graduate studies in educational research and has so far worked on higher education issues in several organisations

- 2 that haven't graduated yet, are both employed in the field: one is working for the Belgrade National Observatory and is designing programmes and courses for general population and promoting astronomy as science to the wider public, the other one is the main responsible for programmes in astronomy in a youth research centre where high school pupils have a chance to taste what scientific research is all about

- the remaining 9 are stuck somewhere in their studies and unfortunately will most likely not complete their studies. However, all of them have some kind of employment (one is for example a sports reporter for a daily newspaper).

As you can see, the situation of all of us is quite different. Was employability on all of our minds when we choose to study Astrophysics? What influenced our decisions and success when it comes to completion of studies? Are all of us employable in our field or in other fields and why? What kind of jobs are we likely to have?

It is very evident here that the example in astrophysics is by far not a very common one when discussing employability. However, it does reflect the diverse outcomes of the same programme when it comes to employability and employment.

What is employability?

When defining employability, one has to ask oneself who is asking and who is answering the question. Perspectives of employability tend to be different depending on the country or subject. Employer has different characteristics in focus than e.g. the individual or the overall society. Similar to that, a student just starting his higher education straight after secondary education has a different understanding of employability than someone who is returning to higher education after several years of active work life. It seems, however, that the participants were able to agree upon the following definition of employability (formulated by ESECT – Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team):

Employability is a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

When referring to employability, one also has to bear in mind the circumstances affecting employability, and not to forget the fact that “the chosen occupation” as well as the achievements necessary to be successful in one occupation may change and that employability is a very dynamic concept. In addition, the concept of employability does not correspond only to being employed by another, but also to self-employment.

What makes someone employable?

Here it would be very important to underline the difference between employability and employment. Employability has to be understood as indicating potential of someone to be employed. It is not a guarantee that is given to graduates by either the higher education institutions or the labour market. If employability indicates only the potential, one has to wonder what affects the development of this potential and how it can be fulfilled. And to do this, one has to analyse in more detail which achievements (skills, knowledge and personality features) are important for employability. These may be grouped largely into three categories:

- subject specific knowledge and skills
- generic or soft or transferable skills (communication or presentation skills, leadership and teamwork capabilities, use of ICT, critical thinking etc.)
- personal characteristics, such as motivation to learn and continuously improve one's own capabilities.

For employability it is necessary to have all the three present. However, depending on the field and position some may be more important than the other. It is crucial to understand that there is no one size fits all answer to what makes someone employable and that the prescriptive interpretation of employability should be avoided. Besides the field and level - external aspects – such as the overall situation of the economy, or even administrative issues (visas and working permits), may affect employability of the individual on a certain labour market.

Connected to this discussion is the opposition between academic and professional higher education and possibilities for employment after graduation in one or the other field. However, one has to ask if this opposition is true or only perceived by the higher education community. The usual distinction is made on the basis of research focus of studies and the possible career patterns after graduation. It reflects also the differences that exist between the university and polytechnics sector. However, the difference between academic and professional degrees may not be that great as it would seem in the first place and is largely dependant on the field in question. It was suggested here to focus more on the distinction between the research-based (using existing knowledge) and research-driven (advancing knowledge) studies instead of professional and academic ones and to analyse the knowledge and competences acquired in both. However, the remaining task, and not a small one for that matter is to promote and explain this new perspective to the higher education community.

One of the issues that were also raised here was the issue of non-formal and informal learning and how do these experiences reflect upon someone's employability. While it is certain that additional learning schemes may be very beneficial to someone's employability, both in their field of study and outside of it, the problem of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, both by higher education institutions and employers, remains.

Focus on employability and implications for qualifications structure and recognition

When discussing the purposes or objectives of higher education one usually focuses on (not in the order of importance):

- personal development – reflecting someone’s pleasure in learning
- education for democratic citizenship – for active and responsible citizens
- widening and systematizing knowledge base and even wisdom of the society and
- improving one’s chances for employment and thus also improving the social and economic status and contributing to social cohesion.

Traditionally, two of these objectives are already accommodated for in the present curricula, mostly of the research driven education – personal development and widening of knowledge base. The other two, although they were implicitly acknowledged, have relatively recently emerged to the surface.

This is especially true for employability. The increasing pressure on higher education institutions to justify the investment into them (either by the society or by the individual students), along with the changes in the labour market which more and more seeks highly qualified employees, have lead to increasing focus on the employability of graduates and usage of employability statistics as an indicator (reliability of such an indicator is something to be discussed further) of quality of the programme. This of course influences several aspects of higher education:

- curricula development – both in terms of content and methodology and wider issue of developing coherent and transparent qualifications frameworks, on the national as well as on the European level
- governance of higher education – call for continuous dialogue and in some cases even formal participation of employers and trade unions in governance bodies of universities
- legislation
- procedures and criteria for enrolment of new students
- financing of higher education – even tough it was not extensively discussed at the conference etc.

The issue of curricula development and, related to this, reforming degree structures and developing framework of qualifications have been the cornerstone of the Bologna Process. The demand for the first cycle degrees relevant for the labour market and development of both professional and academic second cycle degrees are the reference point of almost all discussions taking place under the Bologna label.

From the papers presented and discussions in the working groups there seems to be a problem with the acceptance of the new first cycle by the labour market. The nature and scope of problems faced by first cycle degree holders with finding a job depend on the specific field and also on the overall situation of a certain labour market (both national and international/European). A part of the problem lies in the level and salary range of jobs offered to the holders of first cycle degrees and jobs expected by them. In some cases the

salary difference between the so-called Master and Bachelor is not significant so the employers will likely hire a more qualified Master and spend only slightly more on his/her salary.

When designing or re-designing the first and second cycle courses, more flexibility is needed, in terms of structure, content, orientation and profile. This allows for various pathways leading to employability. Rigorous regulatory mechanisms in this respect should be avoided; otherwise they may hamper the possibilities offered to students. The curricula offered need to be adapted to the realistic possibilities of the HEI as well as the realistic needs of the labour market. It was proposed to create two possible directions when at the first cycle exit point – one leading to the job market and the other to further education. This could be achieved through offering various optional courses already at the first cycle level and supporting students with counselling and mentoring to choose one or the other direction. However, provisions need to be put in place to allow changing this direction and due attention has to be paid not to have this lead to another break within the first cycle and emergence of some kind of “sub Bachelor” degrees. The whole issue of the relationship between the first and the second cycle (and, even if it was not extensively discussed here – the third cycle) is still an open question but one has to keep in mind that here as well there are no unified answers.

In approaching this issue one is usually faced with, more or less strong, reluctance of the teaching staff to discuss the teaching methods, learning outcomes and competences. Furthermore, there is a problem with the mismatch of time scales in this process – effects of curricula and degree structure changes made on the basis of the present situation are visible after a certain number of years; by then circumstances of the labour market may change. Therefore, both to counteract the reluctance of the higher education institutions to change and to overcome to some extent the problems with the mismatch of the timescales of change of the labour market and the higher education – a small step approach might be more effective. This of course implies that an ongoing process of curricula readjustment is necessary. It is necessary however to understand that lack on employment is not a direct indicator that the institutions are not responsive to the needs of the labour market and that there may be other reasons for low employment of graduates which lie outside of the higher education community.

As was mentioned before, employability, apart from depending on the field, due to the ever changing requirements of the labour market may also have a “best before” label. In this respect, many see life long learning as the almost infallible cure for decreasing employability of the workforce. It is true that life long learning is in no way in opposition to sustainable employability but it should not be considered as the only solution nor as a substitute to more traditional higher education where the employability of the graduates is one of the main objectives and where students can gain skills necessary for the continuous self development.

When it comes to recognition for employability, the awareness of existing recognition and transparency tools (ECTS, DS, Europass, work of the ENIC and NARIC Networks) seems to be there, however only on the surface level. Most of the target groups (institutions, employers and graduates) know of the existence of these tools. However they are not used as widely as possible and sometimes are misused or even abused. It is essential that all “users” of these recognition tools (for various purposes) become involved in the further development and improvement of these recognition and transparency tools and therefore shift from the top down introduction of the recognition tools to the bottom up approach and true implementation.

Furthermore, the added value of mobility in terms of employability needs to be promoted. In an increasingly international labour market, it is essential that graduates possess some experience with studying or even internships abroad.

Who is responsible?

This section will deal with various stakeholders dealing or responsible for increasing employability. Apart from the usual suspects – institutions and students (future graduates) – these include also the employers, professional associations² and the trade unions, and more widely and more abstract manner, the economy, the state and the whole society.

Higher education institutions are seen as responsible for designing courses and programmes for both the first and the second cycle. Each of them should also be relevant for the labour market and take into account the fact that graduates, apart from obtaining knowledge and skills, need also to be able to update their own skills on their own, or be “autonomous self learners” (as was said in one of the discussion groups). The quality of these programmes is essential and it is up to the higher education institution to ensure reliable and adequate procedures for quality assurance. The possibility of using employability of graduates as one of the criteria in external evaluation and accreditation should be further explored. It is also of crucial importance that the institutions inform their prospective students and wider public as much as possible, among other things, on the employment possibilities after graduation. This information needs to be reliable and objective, in other words, the information itself needs also to be “quality assured”.

The active and constructive input of employer organizations was very much appreciated and it was evident that the academic community lacked feedback from that part of the employability process. The employers could contribute to improving employability of graduates by:

- designing a larger number of relevant internship programmes³ for students which will provide the students with the meaningful work experience,
- by relating their needs to the higher education community more actively and extensively and also
- by disseminating information on the job opportunities more widely and openly.

Trade unions and professional associations have also a role to play in improving employability of graduates, primarily in designing curricula and analysing obstacles to employability by proving information both to the higher education institutions and employers on the problems graduates face when entering the labour market.

The last but certainly not the least stakeholders are students (primarily as future graduates and entrants to the labour market). They are, in the majority of cases, involved in

² The term “professional associations” here refers to the associations of e.g. dentists, engineers, historians etc. In some countries, the term “associations of professionals” is used. However, to avoid confusion with trade unions or similar organisations, the term “professional associations” is used both in the report and in the Recommendations and Conclusions.

³ “Internship programmes” does not refer only to programmes taking place outside of the higher education institution. It may be also organised within the institution, however, it is essential that it encompasses working in the job related field.

quality assurance procedures and curricula development, however, their role should be strengthened further and they should also become involved in providing information on e.g. possibilities for internships and quality of internship programmes. There is also a need for graduates to provide feedback to their higher education institutions on the problems and challenges they faced when entered the labour market.

The need for specific legislation and other framework and incentives was also discussed. The role of the state and need for legislation or other regulatory framework should be explored further. However, one should be careful that this discussion does not lead to overregulation.

Finally, it is of utmost importance that the dialogue between all these stakeholders is maintained and improved and that exchange of views and cooperation in developing new programmes (either the courses/internships within higher education institutions or internship programmes in companies) becomes the usual and natural practice.

Conclusion - Open questions and suggestions for follow up

The participants recommended making a broad distinction between the first and the second cycle with suggestions as follows:

- first cycle degrees should encompass general and specific disciplinary knowledge as well as the development of personal qualities including the one of the autonomous learner, the capacity to approach new issues, communication skills and other transferable skills;
- second cycle degrees should encompass specialised disciplinary and thematic knowledge, methods as well as higher level cognitive and communication abilities.

Further discussion on the content and outcomes of the first and second cycle degrees is necessary. As there are already several Bologna seminars planned to focus specifically on the degree structure, the participants asked that the perspective of employability would also be taken into account. Employability should be regarded as one of the key reference points in establishment of the overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. The employability of the third cycle may be introduced in this discussion as well and due attention should be paid to the recognition or prior learning and the bridging of higher education academic studies and professional activities, as well as the relationship between the academic and vocational education.

Another task for the future is to explore the strategies for shifting the discussion from the conflict between academic and professional degrees into the complementarities of the research based and research driven higher education.

In terms of recognition, and here we should focus primarily on the recognition for the purpose of employment, procedures for recognition of non-formal, informal and life long learning, as well as recognition of prior experiential learning need to be developed. However, the suggestions is first to focus on the possibility of using the existing transparency and recognition tools and adapting the existing tools to the new needs.

The potential of the small and medium enterprises in the initial stage of employment should be explored.

At the end, it is suggested to further explore the possibilities for decreasing any sort of discrimination of underrepresented groups when it comes to employability, both in terms of access to jobs as well as remuneration and promotion.

To finish, I would like to reflect back on something that Lene Henriksen from ESIB – the National Unions of Students in Europe, said concerning graduates “leaving the university to enter the real world”. Realising that the period spent in learning is and should be different from the life of an employee or an employer, the difference between the university and the real world must not be that large as to cause a reality shock for the newly graduates. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders – students, higher education institutions, employers, trade unions, and professional associations etc. to make this step from higher education into the real world a small step for a student but a big step for the whole of society.