

International Conference on
Employability of Graduates & Higher Education Management Systems
Vienna, 22 - 23 September 2011

**Aspects of Transition and Professional Success.
Some Findings from Austrian Graduate Surveys**

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Abstract:

1. There were three comprehensive graduate surveys with members of the Klagenfurt Department of Sociology participating: CHEERS (1997-2000), REFLEX (2004-2007) and ARUFA (2009-2011). – Some findings on transition and professional success out of the two transnational projects will be pointed out.
2. Higher Education researchers have been critically observing the implementation of the Bologna Process. Some experience with its challenges has been gained so far, together with some empirical evidence on its problems. – “Employability“ as a result of the new Bachelor degrees was a key topic in the recent study focusing on Austria.
3. In Austria at least two matters for public concern are evident: “precarious“ occupation and “unemployment“ for HE graduates. In recent times the so called *Generation Praktikum* has become the subject of intense discussion. – Graduate surveys may contribute to a factual and data-based discussion about the vocational practicability of academic degrees and related topics.
Up to now, only ‘ad hoc’ graduate surveys have been carried out in Austria. But, obviously, there is a need for periodical surveys, to support “national“ Higher Education politics as well as to shape the European Higher Education Area. – Policies, to be successful, depend on data, information and knowledge about the respective HE systems, including actors and stakeholders, and – above all – students and graduates.
4. In view of the growing importance of “new“ degrees, there is no way back. But the Bologna Process still involves a series of challenges. We face a high degree of heterogeneity: combinations of studying and working, types of degrees completed back-to-back ... – Consequently, much remains to be done in (comparative) Higher Education research.

1. About 15 years of HE graduate research

There were three comprehensive graduate surveys with members of the Klagenfurt Department of Sociology [IfS] participating: the two transnational projects CHEERS (Careers after Higher Education: A European Research Study, 1997-2000) and REFLEX (The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society, 2004-2007), followed by a project related to Austria with the acronym ARUFA (*Arbeitsituation von Universitäts- und FachhochschulabsolventInnen*, 2009-2011).

First, some findings on transition and early professional success with regard to Austrian graduates, resulting from the previously mentioned transnational projects will be pointed out. – What one has to keep in mind is that things have changed a lot in the meantime, first and foremost the implementation of the Bologna Process with its three-cycle study architecture, based on a changed HE philosophy.

1.1 University graduates (graduation 1994/95)

Two researchers responsible for the transnational CHEERS project (funded by the European Commission) summarised:

“The CHEERS study shows that higher education graduates in most of the European countries that were analysed and Japan faced relatively positive employment and job prospects in the latter half of the 1990s. “ (Schomburg, Teichler 2006, 135)

10 years ago, the Austrian section of the report on the international study on “Higher Education and Graduate Employment in Europe“ (see Schomburg, Teichler 2006, as well as Teichler ed. 2007) was presented. More than 5,600 graduates from the 12 universities existing in Austria at that time were contacted, this being a randomly selected sample of the total number of graduates (11,000) in the academic year 1994/95. The survey yielded 2,313 valid questionnaires, corresponding to a response rate of 45 per cent. This quantitative part of the study was accompanied by a qualitative part – intended to be supplementary and illustrative – in which 25 selected graduates and 25 selected employers were interviewed. (See Guggenberger et al 2001 for more details relating to the following remarks.)

This survey of graduates involved a highly standardised, relatively extensive questionnaire, only available in printed form (16 p.). It dealt primarily with possible paths leading from university to the world of work, current working situations and their development potential, the view of the system of gainful employment, experiences with regard to acquired or professionally required skills, as well as the impression gained of the university system.

The personal interviews established contact, on the one hand, with “successful” graduates, who were “content” with their job situation; on the other hand, interviews were also held with “dissatisfied” graduates, who found themselves in “precarious situations”; some worked in “innovative” fields of work, others did so in more “traditional” areas. On the other hand, in order to establish a comparison, interviews were also carried out in businesses or organisations (services, technology, media) with staff responsible for personnel issues.

In this way, it was hoped, the picture to emerge of the situation of university graduates from the mid to late Nineties of the 20th century would be as realistic as possible.

At the time of graduation, the individuals surveyed were, on average, 27.8 years old, which put them clearly above the average age established in other European countries (26.5). At the time of the study, the relatively advanced age of graduates was a much-discussed aspect of the Austrian university system. The above-average length of studying was another.

It should be noted, however, that there were no “short degrees” lasting less than four years at that time. Furthermore, in yet another contrast to other countries, there was also a proportion – not to be neglected – of professionally experienced or, respectively, employed students; in addition, the switching of focus between work- or family-oriented activities and study activities during the course of studies was also not an infrequent occurrence. Together with other specifics this shows that in fulfilling their obligations, Austrian Universities did not merely provide initial vocational training, consecutive to previous school education; instead they accommodated a range of more complex careers both within the context of studying and beyond, into the world of work.

Below, we shall present some results relating to transition and employment. Graduates were surveyed approximately four years after their first graduation, in other words, at a time when a professional career may already be outlined, but when it is not necessarily firmly cemented or determined.

Following graduation in 1994/95, clearly more than half had searched for work (57 %); a smaller percentage had found work without actively searching (18 %), or continued with an activity they had already performed previously (10 %); a few studied exclusively (12 %).

At the time of the survey, the vast majority (79 %) were in gainful employment; a small proportion were independent or worked as free-lancers (8 %). Only 4 per cent indicated that they were unemployed and looking for work (i.e. “unemployed”).

With regard to the organisation of working hours, for the most part people were in full-time employment (87 %); in contractual terms, this was mainly permanent employment (70 %). – The assumption, circulating in public discourse at that time – that a large proportion must be working in “non-traditional” or “precarious” employment conditions – was therefore not (yet) confirmed.

In relative terms, private industry was the dominant area of dependent employment (45 %), followed by the public sector (33 %), and respectively NPOs (11 %). After including the self-employed individuals, this means that gainful employment was mainly organised along the lines of private industry and those surveyed thus disproved the assumption that academics were mainly employed in the area of state-organized employment.

The working situation of the surveyed Austrians could be described as mostly positive. The relationships detected between studying and working were also of interest. One of the questions used to investigate this area was the question about the “fit” (horizontal or vertical), as well as the question about “job satisfaction”:

Just below half of the individuals surveyed indicated that the degree course studied had been the only subject area possible or the best by far (47 %); one quarter felt that a different subject area would have provided an equally suitable preparation for their professional duties (26 %); around ten per cent respectively stated that the subject area had either no relevance or that a university degree was not necessary for their job.

Answering the question about the adequacy of their occupation – or their formal level, to be more precise – with regard to their studies, two thirds were in general or complete agreement (65 %).

Finally, the question about job satisfaction: The vast majority of surveyed Austrians declared themselves to be very satisfied or satisfied (69 %); depending on the field of study, some significant differences were found.

The report summary records the following (see Guggenberger et al 2001, 36f.): During the preceding decade, the public discourse about universities included the issue of significant reform efforts. Unsupported assumptions, for example about the “inefficiency” of universities or the “production of graduates not corresponding to the labour market”, frequently stood at the centre of these discussions.

However, rather than referring to empirically confirmed knowledge, the assumptions were often based on existing prejudice with respect to specific phenomena (rates of academics, duration of studies, dropout rates ...) But who would deny the existence of problems and the need for reform? “Issues of reconciliation” between the university system and the employment system – which were highlighted by the project, particularly in the international comparison – should be regarded as an expression of the difficult relationship between education system and the system of gainful employment.

1.2 Universities and courses at *Fachhochschulen* (graduation 1999/2000)

Reporting general results, the project leaders of REFLEX wrote:

„We started our analysis with the identification of three trends (the growing importance of human capital, growing importance of flexibility and globalisation) resulting in five demands on higher education graduates.” (Allen, van der Velden eds. 2007, 40)

As demands there were mentioned: professional expertise, functional flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, mobilization of human resources, international orientation (cf. *ibid*, 2-5). – Were Austrian graduates prepared for these demands? What role did studying play in preparing them?

To a certain extent, the graduate study “The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society. New Demands on Higher Education in Europe“ (see Allen, van der Velden eds. 2007) represents a variation of the CHEERS study mentioned above. The study was also funded by the EU. The consortium – once again assembled transnationally – wanted to analyse the relationships between university and occupation under the prevailing conditions, some of which had changed since the 1990s.

Against the background of the challenges posed by an emerging “knowledge society” – this was the underlying assumption – a course of study at a university was perceived as increasingly relevant around the turn of the century. Graduates – as a second assumption stated – were expected to demonstrate ever more flexibility and adaptability. They should have state-of-the-art specialised subject knowledge at their command, while at the same time being able and willing to face challenges for which they have not been specifically prepared.

The Austrian segment of the project involved graduates from the academic year 1999/2000; every university and selected *Fachhochschul*-courses (based on subject areas) were asked to provide a relevant sample. In the end, approximately 6,000 graduates were contacted and given the choice between completing the internet-supported survey online or in printed form. The central topics were: Transition into first form of occupation, professional situation around five years after graduation; relationship between qualification and occupation, professional success; correlation between studying and working, job satisfaction; retrospective assessment of the degree course studied.

Scientific universities (including faculties of medicine), universities of the arts and individual universities of applied sciences (UAS) eventually yielded 1,830 questionnaires for analysis (31 % return rate). (For this and subsequent representations, compare Guggenberger et al 2007.)

Prior to embarking on their course of study just under one third of the respondents had gained professional experiences, which related to the chosen field of study (31 %), while two thirds had done so while they were studying (68 %).

One quarter of the respondents (25 %) continued in the gainful employment they had already pursued while studying; not quite three quarters (73 %) commenced gainful employment following graduation. Only three per cent declared that they had never been gainfully employed. – Among those, who started to work, the largest proportion in relative terms began to search for work after graduating (32 %), a somewhat smaller share started around the time of graduating (29 %). On average, the duration of the search was 3.6 months; gainful employment commenced after 7 months (mean figure).

10 per cent had been self-employed immediately after graduating. Of the employed persons, 60 per cent had a permanent contract, the remainder had a temporary contract (36 %) or other contractual conditions.

Vertical fit: Most respondents felt that a diploma degree (Master, Diploma Engineer) was the degree best suited to their initial occupation (79 %); one fifth would have regarded a lesser degree than a degree from a university or UAS as sufficient (20 %). Very few viewed the Bachelor degree – which was not available in Austria at the time of the survey – as appropriate (2 %).

Horizontal fit: Not quite half of the respondents (48 %) regarded the subject area studied, or a related subject area as best suited to their first occupation, while a third (34 %) only considered their own subject area to be a good fit.

Six out of ten respondents felt that their knowledge and skills were used to a significant or very significant extent in the context of their first occupation (61 %). One third stated that their first job required more knowledge and skills than they actually had, to a significant or to a very significant extent (33 %); four out of ten felt that this was not or absolutely not the case (41 %).

By the time of the survey, around five years after graduation, the majority (59 %) had left their initial job; a minority remained in the initial job (men 44 %, women 38 %). In the time following graduation, more than one third had been unemployed and searching for work at least once (36 %), while a third of these had experienced this more than once.

When the survey took place – in other words, four to five years after graduation – 88 per cent of the graduates surveyed had been employed; the remainder were either in transitional or temporary positions, in an occupational programme, or they were not, strictly speaking, in gainful employment. 14 per cent were self-employed. Of the employed persons, 80 per cent were in permanent employment.

Once again, the connection between the degree studied and the subsequent employment was an important issue, particularly for two reasons:

Vertical fit: Identifying the degree that was regarded as most adequate for the current occupation, the majority named the diploma degree (68 %), while a small group named the doctoral degree (15 %). Few even considered anything lower than a degree from a university or a UAS (11 %), and the Bachelor degree barely registered (1 %). – In formal terms, there appears to have been a decent fit between degree earned and subsequent employment.

Horizontal fit: The majority (55 %) considered that the subject studied or a related subject area were adequate for their current employment; a smaller group felt that only their own subject area was suitable (29 %); even fewer considered no specific subject area to be adequate (19 %), or an entirely different subject area (6 %). – Thus, the correlation between specific subject studied and professional activity can only be defined as close in a very restricted sense; what appeared to be of importance was simply to have studied.

A kind of balance was addressed through the question about job satisfaction: Three quarters of the surveyed Austrian graduates (74 %) claimed to be very satisfied or satisfied, while only one tenth stated that they were either not, or distinctly not satisfied. – Compared to the CHEERS sample, job satisfaction found an even clearer expression here. It was noted however, that the demonstrated high level of satisfaction should not lead to hasty conclusions: Satisfaction is represented by a complex bundle of factors, in which not only individual, culturally varied levels of aspiration play a part, but also the social kind, such as regionally viable possibilities.

No conclusions were drawn in the “Austrian Report” – it appears that the initial assumptions had been rather too complicated to allow (simple) responses. Viewed across the distance of time, what is noticeable is the varied “objective” differentiation (universities of the arts as new addition to the survey; faculties of medicine still belonging to the scientific institutions; recognised relevance of the relatively new universities of applied sciences).

It may well be that the “knowledge society” postulated in the basic assumption had not yet taken on a sufficiently definite form to allow the observation of pertinent effects, for example with regard to “fit”/“non-fit”. In any case, it is interesting to note the differences as they apply to the participating countries, and to do this against the background of the overall result:

„When we look at labour market outcomes the overall impression is that graduates from the European higher education systems fare well on the labour market. [...] Moreover we have some good indications that the produced human capital is used on the labour market.”
(Allen, van der Velden eds. 2007, 41)

This leaves the old question unanswered: Is an orientation along the lines of the “labour market” or respectively, as has been suggested, along the lines of the “system of organised occupation” ultimately the only meaningful point of reference?

2. The recent Austrian study – universities, *Fachhochschulen* (2003/04-2007/08)

In many countries Higher Education researchers have been critically observing the implementation of the Bologna Process. Some experience with its challenges has been gained so far, together with some empirical evidence on its problems. “Employability” as a result of the new Bachelor degrees was a key topic in the recent study focusing on Austria. But employability is just a word – or maybe an analytical concept to deal with topics of a (successful) transition from HE to the world of work, and with issues of (successfully) coping with the challenges of occupation.

2.1 The survey

Within the context of the empirical study „*Arbeitssituation von Universitäts- und FachhochschulabsolventInnen*” [The Working Situation of Graduates from Universities

and Universities of Applied Sciences], graduates from Austrian public universities were the subject of investigation. With regard to the institutions that the individuals graduated from, one must distinguish between universities and universities of applied sciences [UAS; *Fachhochschulen*] on the one hand, and on the other hand a distinction must be made between scientific universities, universities of medicine and universities of the arts.

This survey was conducted by INCHER-Kassel, supported by the Department of Sociology in Klagenfurt. It set out to cover mobility, but also studying, transition and occupation issues – and addressed five “cohorts” of graduates. (Regarding this and the following information cf. Schomburg et al 2010; also Guggenberger et al 2011.)

The survey was conducted on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Science and Research. It included the five graduation years from 2003/04 to 2007/08, and was designed as a total population survey. Over all, the target population covered about 116,000 persons.

The survey was internet-based and involved a highly standardised questionnaire. The content of the online survey was jointly finalised by the co-operation partners (representatives from the ministry, advisory board, project team); the survey instrument was technically implemented and hosted by INCHER-Kassel. An initial letter was issued in December 2009, and a reminder followed in mid-January 2010; both letters were sent by regular postal mail und included a brief explanation of the project as well as the website address www.arufa.at and a randomly generated individual code, allowing access to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire, with a maximum of 132 questions and about 600 variables, covered many topics; among these were some valuable questions addressing aspects of the transition process and of first and further occupation.

The report at hand is based on the approximately 23,000 cases remaining in the sample after some data cleaning. The rates of “new degrees” are increasing, as they are in the target population.

The study faced the significant challenges of current survey research – representativity in online surveys, diminishing willingness to participate, and analysis of complicated samples (cf. Weichbold et al eds. 2009). In terms of the relevant problems and the resources available, the ARUFA project can be considered successful from the perspective of the project team. Never before had such a comprehensive and intricate study targeting university and *Fachhochschule* graduates been carried out in Austria.

2.2 Some general findings

57 per cent of the graduates that participated in the *ARUFA* study were female; more than one third had parents with higher education; nine out of ten were Austrian citizens. 7 per cent had not acquired their higher education entrance qualification in Austria; the greatest share hereof did so in Italy and Germany, fewer in East European countries. The vast majority had taken a “traditional” route to higher education, i.e. first attending a general secondary school, and a significant number went to a secondary vocational school; a very small proportion had followed a “non-traditional” access path.

One third of the survey participants had completed a vocational education programme prior to studying (e.g. apprenticeship or secondary vocational school); seven out of ten had gained previous professional experience (full- or part-time work; during or after their time at school, but in any case before the first degree course).

Viewed across the entire sample, the period of study leading to the first degree took almost six years on average. For more than two thirds this first degree programme was their main activity. More than eight out of ten had taken part in a study-related work placement; at least four out of ten completed a compulsory internship; a further four out of ten accomplished a voluntary internship. The average age at the first graduation was 27 years; graduates with Bachelor degrees were 25 on average, graduates with a Diploma degree were 28. – So the age at the time of graduation is clearly differentiated, compared to the earlier surveys.

2.3 Notes on professional success

The following can be considered indicators of “professional success” (cf. Schomburget al 2011, 9-32):

- transition types: gainful occupation – vocational training – further study – unemployment / seeking employment – children, family etc.
- success of the search: length of time spent seeking employment
- income
- work characteristics: temporary/permanent
- work characteristics: part time/full time
- vertical fit (match)
- horizontal fit (match)
- job satisfaction

The table might offer an overview of selected issues of transition and “professional success” (regarding first degree; “Bachelor” is the new degree, “Magister” and “Diploma-Engineer” are traditional degrees).

	Bachelor UAS	Bachelor Uni	Mag. UAS	Mag. Uni	Dipl.-Eng. UAS	Dipl.-Eng. Uni	total
Duration of job search (month; mean)	3.4	5.2	4.2	6.0	3.2	3.7	5.3
Full time employment – first employment (%)	76	54	88	67	94	87	72
Employed for an unlimited period – f.e. (%)	74	61	78	55	82	68	60
Gross income per month – f.e. (€, all; mean)	2,000	1,501	2,321	1,634	2,508	2,229	1,830
Employed for an	85	70	91	76	91	81	76

unlimited period – at time of survey (%)							
Gross income per month – a.t.o.s. (€, all; mean)	2,347	1,909	2,992	2,388	3,124	2,967	2,544
Use of qualifications – a.t.o.s. (1+2, %)	54	51	54	48	58	55	51
Vertical fit (%)	59	61	74	70	73	75	70
Adequacy (1+2, %)	60	57	70	60	70	71	62
Equivalency (1+2, %)	49	46	55	47	52	48	48
Job satisfaction (1+2, %)	71	70	77	72	81	76	73

To make the picture more complex, a number of indicators for identifying success were taken into consideration: “fit” or “match”, equivalency, satisfaction ...

One possibility to objectify “fit” or “match” is through the question about the usefulness of the qualifications acquired by studying: 51 per cent of the total state that they use these “to a very high extent” or “to a high extent” in their current occupation.

It is possible to objectify the professional situation further by using the perspective of adequacy in relation to prior studying. When considering all aspects of their professional situation related to their current occupation and asking themselves to what extent this is commensurate to their training, the respondents produced varying assessments: A majority of 62 per cent stated that adequacy is given to a “very high” or a “high” extent, Bachelor graduates are (slightly) more pessimistic, while the Diploma Engineers are rather more optimistic.

However, when asked for equivalency – i.e. considering all aspects of their professional situation and to what extent this corresponds to their expectation at the start of their studies, a less differentiated – and altogether more negative – picture emerges, in contrast to the usefulness of qualifications and the adequacy of the degree studied: Merely 48 per cent overall perceive the current professional situation as “much better” or “better than expected”; and as much as one sixth see it as “worse” or even “far worse than expected”.

2.4 Some notes on employability

The second significant keyword – besides mobility – in the Bologna Process is employability. This term, the meanings and definitions and concepts behind it, are sometimes viewed very critically. At the same time it is taken as a very serious challenge – so “promoting the employability of graduates with a Bachelor’s degree, including public service” (cf. bm.w_f 2009a, 40) in Austria is an explicit goal.

In practice and over an extended period it would appear that, above all, problems are caused by the lack of awareness about the „new“ degrees beyond the confines of the educational institutions (Campbell, Brechelmacher 2007). In the context of the Bologna Process there can be no doubt that a Bachelor degree represents a “full” degree, which can lead directly to employment. However, experience shows that many students perceive their studies to be “complete” only upon completion of the Masters degree.

The *Universitätsgesetz 2002* (bm.w_f 2009b) establishes the following as one of the duties of Austrian universities: “3. academic, artistic, pedagogical and critical training for occupations requiring the application of academic knowledge and methods, as well as training in artistic and academic abilities to the highest levels”. Austrian universities of applied sciences are subject to the *Fachhochschulstudiengesetz* (FHStG 2010), which has the following to say about self-concept and goals: “2. to impart the ability to solve the tasks faced by the respective professional field in accordance with current scientific knowledge and with practical requirements;”

“[T]raining for occupations ...” as well as “to impart the ability to solve the tasks ...” are intended to contribute to the professional success of graduates. – It should not be difficult to describe the vocational routes of graduates emerging from different institutions belonging to the tertiary sector using statistical criteria. How, though, should one measure something called “professional success” – a question repeatedly asked in relation to studies on universities and universities of applied sciences?

Job satisfaction is a rather “subjective” criterion. In response to the direct question, to what extent they are satisfied overall with their professional situation, there is some variation between the answers provided by the participants affected: Around three quarters in total stated that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied”. – Even the earlier CHEERS and the REFLEX studies showed that 4 to 5 years after graduating, Austrian university graduates claimed an above average level of satisfaction with their occupation.

Some differences are revealed when viewed by type of university: Graduates from universities of applied sciences are more satisfied with their professional situation; scientific universities precisely represent the average, medical universities lie just below as do universities of the arts.

Upon completion of the first degree, four out of ten respondents moved directly into an occupation; for approximately one fifth the transition took up to three months, for one tenth it took four to six months, another tenth took seven to twelve months; a total of one sixth took more than twelve months – for Bachelor graduates this share was one in ten. This may provide us with the first clue that if graduates from Bachelor degrees or degree courses decide to continue studying, they do so due to transition issues.

When asked about their professional situation, more than three quarters stated that they were in a gainful occupation within 6 months after completing their (first) degree. One fifth, seen as a whole, continued their studies – while this applied to almost half of the Bachelor graduates. A rather small proportion devoted their time to child rearing or similar activities; at least one tenth were unemployed, in other words, were not in a gainful occupation, but were actively seeking work.

With regard to types of transition or destination and the success of the search for work, there are no dramatic differences between traditional and new types of degree to speak of. A more detailed investigation, however, reveals some interesting results: In the first six months after graduating, 62 per cent of all respondents were exclusively in regular employment, while this only applied to 42 per cent of Bachelor graduates. Ten per cent

overall and 28 per cent of the Bachelor graduates focused solely on studying; nine or respectively 16 per cent combined studying and working; six or respectively four per cent were actively looking for work.

As far as the conditions of occupation viewed in detail are concerned, little validation can be found for the frequently invoked trend towards increasing precariousness. With regard to the first occupation after graduation the picture is this: Six out of ten respondents had a permanent job; seven out of ten had a full time occupation, while there were greater differences between types of degree. – In short: permanent employment is dominant; viewed across the cohorts, temporary jobs are on the increase; in their first occupation Bachelor graduates tend to be more likely to have temporary jobs. Full time occupation prevails, with the share of Bachelor graduates represented lying below the average.

Turning to the occupation at the time of the survey, a somewhat different picture emerges: eight out of ten respondents are now in a permanent job; more than three quarters are in full time employment, with fewer differences between types of degree than previously apparent. – Clearly, Bachelor graduates are markedly less likely to have a permanent job, but do not appear disadvantaged in terms of full time occupation.

Adequacy: Viewed according to the adequate graduation level for the current occupation, the following becomes apparent: Most respondents, 70 per cent, perceive their university degree level (last degree) as most appropriate for their occupation. Only a few believe that no university degree would have been necessary; fewer still believe that a lesser degree would suffice or that a higher university degree would be appropriate. – Bachelor graduates are more sceptical with regard to the suitability of their degree level (vertical fit) than graduates from traditional degree courses. This may indeed motivate them to engage in a Masters' degree with a focus on their studies, either accompanying their occupation or following a phase dominated by work.

Type of degree, and type of institution, especially combined, appear as factors of influence on employability and professional success. Further potential factors of influence – field of study, gender, field of occupation, social background – must also be examined.

The documented combinations existing between first degree, eventual gainful employment and further study are clearly rather complex and require further in-depth analysis (exemplary further considerations cf. Weiss, Klein 2011; also Lödermann, Scharrer 2010). In any case, the simplifying model that is circulating in the Austrian public discourse, which describes a “completed Bachelor degree – followed by a bolted-on degree due to lack of employability” only corresponds to one, rather small, aspect of reality. Transition is plural!

2.5 Résumé

In order to identify one key feature of the new academic degrees – “employability” –, as well as distinctions to the traditional degrees, selected results were presented here. This involved comparing Bachelor degrees with Diploma degree courses (Mag., Dipl.-Eng.). In some instances this comparison revealed fewer differences between types of degree than between types of university – for example with regard to the satisfaction with the completed studies or with the occupation.

What about “professional success”, at least after the first cycle (Bachelor level)? On the whole, the Austrian university graduates involved in the ARUFA study – astonishingly similar to their predecessors from CHEERS and REFLEX – appear satisfied

with their study programmes and with the associated conditions. The job satisfaction also appears to be very high – however, we are not in a position to establish a truly “objective” picture based on a survey of students or graduates, and we should therefore not be too certain based only on these results. As far as horizontal (use of qualification) and vertical (adequacy of degree) fit are concerned, no really significant problems were revealed; Bachelor graduates are only worse off to a limited extent here, as with regard to other criteria relating to (emerging) professional success.

Accordingly, the following conclusion was offered on the occasion of the presentation of the final report in May 2011 in Vienna: The surveyed Austrian graduates from the years 2004-2008 reported very positive conditions of employment. They reveal a high level of job satisfaction; the fit of degree level and occupation remain very high; there is a dominance of occupations in fields that are closely related to the discipline studied. There is no „*Generation Praktikum*“ in sight.

However, a more detailed differentiation by gender (level of initial salary ...), field of study and type of degree earned reveals a number of significant differences.

3. Why carry out graduate surveys?

Having gathered experience with graduate surveys, both on a national scale and in the transnational context, some reflection upon their significance and purpose stands to reason. Such studies appear to fulfil a dual purpose: on the one hand, they serve to put into perspective instances of widely held prejudice and assumptions that bypass reality; on the other hand, they support planning, development and reform measures in the sphere of Higher Education, by providing substantiated information.

3.1 Some current assumptions

In Austria – like elsewhere in Europe – at least two matters for public concern are evident: “poor” (or precarious) occupation and “unemployment” (i.e. no occupation) for university and meanwhile also *Fachhochschule* graduates. These phenomena have been topics for some decades. In more recent time, starting in Germany, the so called *Generation Praktikum* (“generation internship”) has been the subject of intense debate.

Whatever the buzzwords for concern in the area of educational policy may be: They are currently backed by questions regarding the impacts of the Bologna Process on students and graduates (see also Kellermann et al eds. 2009; Pechar, Wroblewski 2011).

Let us address a popular buzzword: What does “generation internship” actually mean? A journalist’s report, penned during the early days of public attention to this perceived phenomenon, characterises the facts affecting university graduates – among others – as follows:

“In the past, interns were merely expected to gather experiences for their future working life. Today they are deployed as cheap labour.” (Matthias Stolz. DIE ZEIT 31. March 2005; http://www.zeit.de/2005/14/Titel_2fPraktikant_14 [01.09.2011]; translation *IfS*)

The issue percolated into public awareness through journalism and developed into a widely acknowledged problem. Consequently, researchers looking at Higher Education explored the question whether the “generation internship” is merely a myth, or is indeed a mass phenomenon. One response claims:

[...] the figures presented permit the conclusion that internships following upon the completion of a degree course do not merit being classified as mass phenomenon at this

time, and the term “generation internship” is not justified in view of the professional continuance of university graduates.” (Briedis, Minks 2007, 10; translation *I/S*)

In Austria too, “generation internship” is drawing attention, both from the research field and from the realms of civic engagement. This has led to, for example, a quantitative study, published by the *Plattform Generation Praktikum* (see Schopf, Ringler 2007), titled *Arbeit ohne Wert? Strukturmerkmale der PraktikantInnen-Beschäftigung im Hochschulkontext in Österreich* [Labour without Value? Structural Characteristics of Employing Interns within the University Context in Austria]. This study describes the current state of research, placing emphasis on the diversity of the internships (see *ibid.*, 7): 40 per cent of persons surveyed had completed a voluntary internship during the course of their studies; the remaining 60 per cent were compulsory internships; in addition there were also graduate internships (survey 2006 via www.generation-praktikum.at).

A subsequent study, *PraktikantIn gesucht!* [Intern Required!], investigated the issue by performing a content analysis of the market for internship positions in Austria (see Schopf et al 2009). The introduction records the following:

„Little research has been carried out to date on the features and societal repercussions of the phenomenon “generation internship”. [...] In the long term, the aim of this study is to contribute to providing empirical knowledge for the societal debate about the phenomenon ‘internship’.” (*ibid.*, 5; translation *I/S*)

The study provided an initial overview of the market for internship positions (online job-fairs) in Austria. Summary: “There is no such thing as ‘the internship’.” (cf. *ibid.*, 9)

As is also the case in other areas requiring answers (such as the “employability” of Bachelor graduates), it is obvious that further research is required here.

Reactions to the presentation of the ARUFA study in May 2011 clearly showed that the question about the extent and significance of internships at the intersections of university system / labour market / system of organised employment remains contentious. The Ministry for Science and Research in Vienna made a documentation of the reception by the public – an analysis of the content or a similar examination of the reporting would certainly prove useful; additionally, an analysis of the debate taking place in the internet forums, e.g. of broadsheet newspapers, would also be of interest.

Generally, some consideration should be given to looking more closely at the reception and the subsequent “fortunes” of graduate studies. At times, the impression has emerged that studies of this kind – be they research projects awarded by contract or the result of an application – are executed professionally, but are then not taken any further. This means that effectiveness or (“long-term”) virtue come into question. Extracts of relevant studies have found their way into the Report on Universities, which is published by the Ministry of Science and Research every three years. However, the societal relevance of graduate degrees would surely be undermined if it remained solely the domain of the specialised scientific community consisting of HE researchers.

3.2 On the use of graduate surveys

As mentioned previously, more research is required: It is true that the relationships between studying and working in the midst of the “Bologna Era” produce a confusing picture rather than allowing clearly visible trends to emerge (see Jungbauer 2011, as well as Gaedke et al 2011; also Jürgens et al 2011, Oechsle, Hessler 2011).

However, complexity provides fertile ground for unrealistic assumptions and stubborn prejudices. – Graduate surveys may contribute to a factual and data-based discussion about the vocational practicability of academic degrees and related topics.

In Austria there are no regular graduate surveys yet. Beside particular studies on certain fields of study (cf. Mosberger et al 2007; Leuprecht et al 2010) or specific universities there were surveys targeted to a sample taken from total graduations per year (CHEERS, REFLEX). In the end there remains a kind of ‘ad hoc’ survey, as is the case with ARUFA.

This does not mean that this must be the last word in the matter – particularly at this time of the creation of a “European Higher Education Area”, graduate surveys could prove highly relevant. So what is the “greater context”, and what are the “little issues”, which will allow these surveys to prove their value?

About ten years ago, under the title “Knowledge is all”, the Austro-American economist Peter F. Drucker stated:

“The next society will be a knowledge society. Knowledge will be its key resource, and knowledge workers will be the dominant group in its workforce. Its three main characteristics will be:

- Borderlessness, because knowledge travels even more effortlessly than money.
- Upward mobility, available to everyone through easily acquired formal education.
- The potential for failure as well as success. Anyone can acquire the ‘means of production’, i.e., the knowledge required for the job, but not everyone can win.” (Drucker 2001)

By conducting graduate surveys, we accompanied the trend towards Knowledge Society past at least three landmarks, as pointed out in chapters 1 and 2.

In diagnosing what is and what is to come, it is not necessarily vital to aim for a theoretical concept such as “knowledge society”. In the “daily struggles on the plains” [*Mühen der Ebenen* by Bert Brecht] of planning and governance, graduate surveys can lend support to quality management and the steering of universities (see Jaeger, Kerst 2010).

Possible fields of action take the shape of quality development in teaching, and Career Service. Amongst other things, graduate studies offer information providing a retrospective assessment of the degree courses studied, the range and conditions of degrees courses on offer, as well as of career entry and career path.

Significant relevance must be attributed to the appropriate design and implementation: it is important to consider the timing (accessibility; validity) as well as appropriate address management (profile; feedback of results) as well as the expected effort (evaluation, interpretation and presentation of results). What remains to be resolved is the question whether individual university surveys (decentral), or rather general, representative (centrally implemented) surveys would be more meaningful.

With regard to CHEERS and REFLEX, Ulrich Teichler concludes the following – though not without indicating, with a degree of disappointment, that further studies hitherto remain pending:

“These two international surveys provide a relevant account of the employment of generations of graduates who had studied in various countries prior to the Bologna cycle-structure. Thereafter, however, no similar studies have been undertaken as an information base to assess the impact of the Bologna reform.” (Teichler 2011: 39)

ARUFA followed a different path: disregarding the “international aspect”, and instead focusing on several years of graduation. Both – the transnational comparison and the development over time – represent considerable challenges for graduate surveys and the reception thereof by university management and university policy makers alike. However, it is also important not to neglect the consideration of universities’ responsibilities and definitions of purpose (see, e.g. Kellermann et al eds. 2009; Kellermann 2011).

4. A summary and some perspectives

There will continue to be a range of combinations of studying and working: Bachelor, Master and Doctoral degrees completed back-to-back; alternating phases of either exclusively studying or working; various manifestations of “students who are gainfully employed” or “gainfully employed persons who study” ...

The heterogeneity both of forms of studying and of transitional forms will provide a number of challenges for the institutions in the tertiary educational sector. Consequently, these heterogeneities might be considered as a challenge for HE research, bearing in mind transition, labour market and occupation issues – at a transnational or/and national level. If there needs to be a decision between these two possibilities, it would be well to mention here what Ulrich Teichler, speaking at the EMBAC conference in Berlin 2010, specifies:

“If national graduate surveys will continue to be undertaken in individual European countries and no European-wide system of graduate surveys is established in the near future, the quality of the feedback of these studies for the Bologna Process will depend on the high degree of comparability of national graduate surveys.” (Teichler 2011, 39)

To give an example for an embarrassing phenomenon: In Austria it is seen as a problem that many Bachelor graduates proceed to the Master level, continuing to study without interruption (cf. Campbell, Brechelmacher 2007; Unger et al 2010). As it is intended in principle that they use their knowledge, skills and competences in some kind of occupation, and return to university or UAS with some experience to join a more specialised Master programme, this might be in contradiction to Bologna goals.

In fact, the constellation is more complex – we have to consider for example persons’ abilities and the opportunities offered by the system of labour. In order to gain more insight into this problem and beyond, there is some need for periodical graduate surveys – intending to support “national” Higher Education politics as well as for shaping the European Higher Education Area.

These research attempts have a number of consequences: One very important aspect is to improve return rates, respectively the willingness to participate. Decentralisation – with coordination by experts – may also be a good idea for Austria. With regard to comparisons, we should keep in mind that we have to deal with different “cultures” all over the emerging EHEA (even between Germany and Austria). So “asking the same question” (cf. Atteslander 2010, 350ff.) is important for gaining indicators, as well as for defining the right wording. Nevertheless, international comparisons – meeting a common “core” of questions – represent the “way of the kings” [*Königsweg*] in Higher Education research. National politics – not to speak of policy – are dependent on information and knowledge about their HE systems and the actors and peer groups (stakeholders), first and foremost all students and graduates.

In view of the growing importance of “new” degrees, and new labour market, and respectively occupational conditions (“knowledge society”, “knowledge based economy”), there is no way back. But the Bologna Process still involves a series of challenges. We face a high degree of heterogeneity: combinations of studying and working, types of degrees completed back-to-back, a plurality in transition processes ... – Consequently, much remains to be done in (comparative) Higher Education research.

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