

University of Ljubljana



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



DEHEMS

Development of Higher Education
Management Systems

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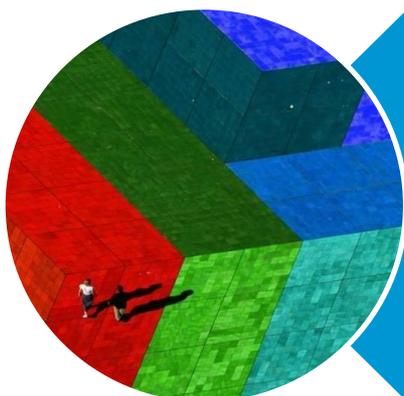
Higher education institutions (HEI) and their role in the transition to the labour market

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Objectives of DEHEMS



Identification of typical early career patterns in particular educational fields and sectors



Optimisation of the transition from education to work

- Role of job destination of graduates for HE curricula
- Importance of graduates' employability for HE strategies, teaching practices and quality assurance mechanisms

■ Higher Education Systems

- in transition, mainly due to the Bologna Process
- employability – a ‘new’
 - major responsibility in HEIs on the organizational and pedagogical level (Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2006; Morley, 2001)
 - performance indicator for HE (Fallows & Steven, 2000)

■ Employability

- various definitions and several streams of literature, e.g. public policy and employment (e.g., Kossek, Huber, & Lerner, 2003), vocational literature (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004), psychological literature (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007) and labour economics (e.g., Lefresne, 1999)

■ EU definition: “the ability to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market” (Working Group on Employability, 2009: 1)

■ Overall

- broad and decontextualized definition leaving room for interpretations
- results in varying local responses of HEI to the macro policy of increasing employability through HE

- Six countries: Austria, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Turkey
- Six domains: Business and Economics, Education and Teaching Studies, Engineering, Life Sciences, Medicine and Pharmacology, Sociology and Political Studies
- Quantitative analysis
 - OECD Education statistics
 - Labour Force Survey (LFS) dataset (2008 survey); N= 61,182
 - combined REFLEX/HEGESCO dataset; N= 30,177
- Qualitative analysis
 - 3 x 2 approach, i.e. 3/2 interviewees per 2/3 institutions in every country
 - Experts in higher education management
 - members of HE institutions; N=229
 - stakeholders of HE institutions; N=91
 - Semi-structured interviews, approx. 45 min., recorded
 - categorial coding, using NVivo



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Empirical glimpses – interviews

Graduates as problem analysers and solvers

- HEIs *"do not prepare graduates for a clear occupational profile"*
- But: varying scope of *"broadness and flexibility"*
- teach how to analyse a problem, know where to start and how to go on from there
- provide an understanding of the area they work in but no detailed knowledge of one particular job



Curriculum characteristics

■ Bologna process

- Three-tier degree structure was a novelty in many systems
- is in fact counter-productive

■ Curriculum changes

- External drivers (law, market)
 - slow, ambiguous
 - implementation needs time (study duration): *"A faculty has to provide knowledge which will be useful for some time."*
- more impact from continuous adaptations driven by internal factors: *"anticipate the change or even create the change"*
- Teaching modes and teachers' training
 - Generally more student-centered approaches
 - benefits doubtful

- great variety of views if deemed important at all
 - teach what they will do at work (e.g. laboratory work)
 - Practitioners as lecturers
 - Provide contacts to possible employers
 - Practical experience (internships)
- Internationalisation
 - mainly student exchange
 - Automatic reaction "*is important*" has to be contextualised

Relations with stakeholders

- primarily employers
- Goals of relationship
 - contacts between students and potential employers
 - Not as a source of information or partners for research
- highly personal issue, a professor's individual network

- ambivalent benefit
- between
 - “best practice” and
 - unsuccessful cases
- often at a university level
 - to serve all faculties and departments
 - more use for some of the faculties/departments than for others

Major developmental needs in HEI

- Self-reflection and readiness for changes
 - experts start to critically reflect on their own activities
 - strong focus on existence of obstacles (e.g. financial resources) and overcoming them
- Internal changes within HEI
 - Improve relations to employers
 - enhance internationality
 - put more attention on soft skills
 - increase the utilisation of career centres
- Contextual changes
 - students' prior education decreases
 - lack of financial resources



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Dispute, critique, and compromise – reflections on HEI and employability

Our theoretical perspective

- Convention school of thinking (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991, 2006) - assuming conflicting worlds and focus on dispute, critique and coordination processes (conflict, compromise)
- HEI and employability
 - How does the context of dispute on employability in HE look like?
 - How is employability constructed among HEI agents and what kind of critique can be identified in HEIs' dealing with employability?
 - Recognizing critique, which areas of conflict and compromise can be observed?
- HEIs' core actors
 - participate in negotiation or contention processes concerning the common goal or at least general interests
 - draw on higher-order principles of justice ('states of worth')
 - able to engage in avoiding a particular *test*, e.g. HE education as a market good, by suggesting another test, e.g. HE as a public good
- HEIs as organizations becoming a "compromising device" (Thévenot, 2001)

- HEIs co-responsible for graduates' job security by making them employable – resembles disputes
 - conflict between states of worth or worlds
 - education as a public good vs. a market good triggered by labour markets
- Visible artifacts and underlying assumptions
 - managerialism (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Deem, 2003; Sousa et al., 2010)
 - decision-making processes shifting from somewhat egalitarian and democratic ('civic world') to hierarchical ('managerial world')
 - neoliberal assumptions: graduates to be endowed with skills that lead to competitive advantage for their future employer which is also emphasized for the growing service industry (Warhurst & Thompson, 1998)

The critique

- HEIs find themselves being 'used' to 'produce' people for the labour market
 - lack of information on graduate careers
 - a shortage of resources
 - varying demands depending on the nature of the HEI
 - difficulties in
 - linking teaching, research and practice
 - managing the education-skills fit
 - ensuring employability of Bachelor's graduates
 - allocating graduates, i.e. matching supply and demand
- graduates' situation: more competitive, precarious, self-made (*"It's all about the person [graduate]! Yes."*)
- career success is understood as being out of HEIs' reach

The critique – some illustrations

■ Role of HE

- *"It's not the task of universities to fulfil industries' wishes; otherwise we would be reduced to universities of applied science".*
- *"Our task is to support our students [or young people] to find their path of life and nothing else".*
- *"Bachelor's courses are actually nothing".*

■ Boundaries: *"Some departments have reservations about getting into contact with the field of practitioners"*

■ Uncertainty about employability

- *"We do not know what happens to the graduates".*
- *"What we provide to students actually contributes to their employability – in a general sense. However, in the way it is very often interpreted, 'employability' means that one has to have specific training in order to be employable – and job descriptions usually do not refer to sociologists, political scientists or historians."*

Consequences of the critique

- Difficult integration of employability into HE's reality
- Major issues
 - 'input': what does employability or the employable graduate mean
 - coordination process: what role can HEIs actually play
 - 'output': what kind of uncertainty do HEIs face

Test: conflicting states of worth – conflict or compromise?

■ Conflict

- a “necessarily unstable moment in a dispute” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 224)
- no valid test can be established
- example
 - the hybrid student
 - *“That we do not prepare people perfectly for the world of work, that’s a fact. But the question is whether we want to do it, because other things will be left behind.”*

■ Compromise

- “... people agree to come to terms, that is, to suspend a clash – a dispute involving more than one world – without settling it through recourse to a test in just one of the worlds. The situation remains composite, but a clash is averted” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: p. 277)
- contested validity of a test
- example
 - Career Centres and Alumni Clubs
 - Involvement of employers and other stakeholders

Conclusions – leaning towards compromise?

- both potential conflicts, e.g. hybrid students, and compromises, e.g. 'outsourcing' employability to career centres
- reveal complexity of criticizing or agreeing on terms and conditions drawing from conventions beyond civic and market higher-order principles
- Two conflicting worlds – market and civic – seem to lead to coordination processes or compromises as indicated by increasing importance of (outsourced) services for graduates



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