

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 10

Higher Education & Graduate Employment in Europe

Context of the Research

The expansion of higher education has produced an increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace. The world of work that these graduates enter is undergoing rapid change. New technological demands are common and new types of job roles continue to emerge. There is a growing focus on the role played by social competencies (affective and motivational) as opposed to knowledge. Increased Europeanization and internationalisation also affect the nature of work in many cases.

This project analyses the employment and work of graduates from institutions of higher education in eleven European countries (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, Norway and Czech Republic) and also Japan. Nine country studies were sponsored by the EU-TSER programme, whilst the Czech Republic, Sweden and Japan conducted so called “parallel” studies with their own research funds.

The project collected data from more than 40,000 graduates who graduated in 1994/95 and were interviewed four years after graduation, on their graduates’ socio-biographic background, study paths, transition from higher education to employment, early career, links between study and employment, their job satisfaction and their retrospective view on higher education.

It explored European and international dimensions of graduate employment and work, identified early career progress, and attempted to identify the impact of higher education on graduate employment and career success. The project also paid special attention to graduates not finding suitable employment, as traditionally conceived, or facing unemployment. Though graduates tend to fare better on the labour market than non-graduates the project dealt also with aspects of a growing frequency of social disadvantage and exclusion.

This study provides the most thorough comparative information on graduate employment and the links between higher education and graduate employment and work to date.

Key Conclusions

Key conclusions reached: -

1. Graduates from institutions of higher education in most Western European countries faced relatively positive employment and job prospects at the time of the survey in the second half of 1999.
2. Some employers and politicians appear to consider that the expansion of higher education results in “over-education”. However, there is concern that they fail to recognise that qualification requirements rise as the knowledge society develops.
3. The graduates’ average search period for the first regular employment lasts only about 6 months. The average unemployment ratio is 4% - four years after graduation, and even most graduates from fields notoriously for employment market problems find their way towards satisfactory employment and work a few years after graduation.
4. Approximately 20% of graduates employed four years after graduation state that they make little professional use of the knowledge acquired in the course of study and that their work and employment situation is worse than expected.
5. Only 12% considered their occupational situation inappropriate with respect to the level of their educational attainment and were dissatisfied with their job.
6. Only 7% believe that higher education is superfluous for their kind of work and employment situation. Only 4% would not study if they could choose again.
7. There is a wide variation between European countries as far as higher education and its relationship to the world of work is concerned. This is due to a diverse range of factors such as the length of higher education programmes, vocational versus academic provision, institutional reputation, and the extent to which independent learning is encouraged.
8. Views varied widely between countries about the need for close links between field of the study and related occupations, and about the characteristics of a good graduate job.
9. This disparity has resulted in for example: -
 - a) Graduates, in some countries, having to spend three times as long searching for a job compared other countries.

- b) Only 1 or 2% of graduates in most countries being unemployed for long periods during the first years after graduation. But this was 7-9% in three countries and as high as 18% in one country.
 - c) The average gross annual income of full-time employed graduates in one country is only slightly more than 40 percent of the average income of the country where graduates receive the highest remuneration.
10. There are also regional differences within countries. This is greatest in the poorer countries of Western Europe than in the richer ones, thus amplifying the disparities that exist between countries.
11. The relationship between higher education and employment and the type of higher education provided varies in most respects more substantially by country than by field of study. There are more frequent “national” cultures than “disciplinary” cultures in the relationships between higher education and the world of work.
12. A more realistic view on the common elements and differences among Western European countries was provided by the inclusion of the Czech Republic and Japan in the project. For example, Japan shows that the smooth process of study and transition to employment results in a lesser chance of students acquiring broad experiences beyond the core domains of higher education. They are thus being equipped with a smaller range of professionally relevant competencies upon graduation.
13. In general, most graduates appreciate their study and believe that learning in higher education is useful for coping with the job tasks they undertake.
14. However, they also criticise many aspects of higher education – certainly to a varying degree across countries and fields. Many graduates expressed the view that higher education should prepare students better to be in a position to apply knowledge to the work environment and to the job tasks they are confronted with.
15. In the majority of European countries, students spend a substantial part of their study acquiring experiences and competencies in environments other than the classroom. Many students consider this more valuable than “efficient” study in terms of a short and smooth “pass-through”.

16. The values of students and graduates are so different and the experiences in the world of work are so numerous that any claim for a single dominant culture of higher education seems to be irrational.

Key Recommendations

The following key recommendations were made: -

1. A regular system of surveying graduate employment and work is needed. This should be 4 years after graduation, involve 3,000 graduates per country and be conducted every 3-5 years.
2. A European-wide conference on higher education and graduate employment in Europe should take place in order to stimulate a Europe-wide dialogue on the policy implications.

Further Information

Full title of project - "Higher Education and Graduate Employment in Europe"
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[Partner details](#), [Website](#) [Final report](#)

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