

BALTIC LIFESTYLE

The role of Higher Education in improving employability



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The main objective of universities always was to prepare people for serving society at large meeting the employment needs in each historical moment. From its origins in the Middle Ages, universities have served the labour demands of society, providing priests to Church, servers to kings and nobles, and professionals to society. Later, in the Industrial Age, universities provided civil servants and professionals required by modern states and technicians demanded by the emerging industrial sector.

That labour market was static with no main changes in jobs during lifetime. Consequently, the higher education model was also static, preparing for stable professions and teaching and learning the state of art of disciplines to be applied later on the jobs. The educational systems were fully regulated and with rigid learning structures. The static labour market required a static and regulated higher education system. In that static model universities provided a diploma that it was equivalent to a professional title. With few exceptions, the identification between academic diploma and profession has been a main and relevant trait of higher education system for centuries.

Currently labour market context is dramatically changing. We are moving towards a global society, where mobility of persons and ideas is faster than ever before, where knowledge and information is becoming the engine of development. On the other hand, higher education is becoming universal in a triple sense: everywhere, with open access to almost everybody and for people of any age (lifelong learning).

The consequence of this new context is that jobs are changing, many new professions are emerging and many of these new professions have blurry borders. A second consequence is that the direct link between academic degree and profession is broken and a new concept emerges: Employability.

Employability has been defined by Manzt Yorke as: “A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”.

Employment, a main objective for all graduates, depends on their employability but not only. Obviously, the general economic situation of a country or region is important. In the case of higher education graduates, the level of development of the knowledge society has also a relevant influence. Nevertheless, universities have to focus in improving employability because the possibility of being influential in general economic factors is quite limited.

Certainly higher education is something else that to prepare students for future work. Higher education has other missions such as to transmit understanding of theories, methods and knowledge and cultural enhancement and personality development. Even in relation to jobs, higher education has to prepare students to call into question the established “rules” and “tools” of professional work: to be sceptical and critical, to handle indeterminate work tasks and to strive for innovation.

Employability depends basically of two factors: personal characteristic of individuals and education. The educational systems improve employability through increasing the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) of individuals. In summary, universities increase competencies, competencies increase employability and employability increases good employment. Then, universities have to focus in providing the right competencies to graduates because this will improve the participation of graduates in the labour market, something that is, by the way, the most important mission of universities from an economic point of view.

Consequently, competencies should be the central objective of higher education. Higher education quality should be measured under this perspective. An education of quality is that which provides graduates with the right competencies for labour market and for life.

How to improve competencies? First at all we need graduates tracking. We need to know what graduates are doing after finishing their studies, how was their educational experience and how is their labour experience. With this information we will be able to analyse where are the gaps between the demands of competencies and the acquired competencies of graduates. Several projects (REFLEX, HEGESCO, PROFLEX) have settled the basis for this type of studies. Eurograduates is a new proposal for tracking European graduates in a systematic way.



We need to know also the opinion of employers about which competencies are most required in the labour market. A recent study concludes that European employers think that:

- Professional expertise (i.e. subject-specific knowledge and expert thinking) is the most important skills set that affects graduates' employability.
- Interpersonal skills (communication, teamwork skills,..) are almost as important as professional expertise.
- In an organisation it might be enough to have just one or two persons who are strong in innovative/creative skills or commercial/entrepreneurial skills.
- Strategic/organisational skills are needed for long-term career opportunities
- Foreign experience can tip the balance in selecting a graduate for a recruitment decision, although employers will still look more closely at relevant work experience and field of study.
- General academic skills are well developed but they do not rank highly on the agenda of employers.

The following question is: Are universities providing the competencies required by the labour market? There is a competencies gap between the required competencies and the contribution of higher education to competencies? All recent studies show that there is a gap especially in some competencies more related to innovation and entrepreneurialism. Higher education is

good preparing graduates for the more traditional labour market (the static model) but is not good enough preparing for a changing labour market.

The next question is obvious: How can universities bridge the competencies gap? In several ways, but acting on the ways of teaching and learning is the most effective. Some studies conclude that acquisition of competencies required by labour market depends on the prevalence of some pro-active teaching and learning modes, mainly: Problem-based learning; facts and practical knowledge; participation in research projects and internships, work placement. On the other hand we know that traditional modes in teaching and learning contribute little, if any, to develop competencies.

Universities have to modernise the ways of teaching and learning but they need the support of business for bridging the competencies gap. Business (public and private) have to cooperate with universities in different ways for improving graduates competencies. For instance: Cooperating actively in curricular development; developing joint study programmes; cooperating in Continuing Education; facilitating work placements, problem based learning and on the job training; cooperating with career offices; and supporting mobility.

In conclusion, if we want better jobs for graduates, we need to increase their employability and eventually their competencies. Improving competencies requires proactive ways of teaching and learning and the cooperation of stakeholders.