

**The transferability of (under-)graduate knowledge gained in UK higher education
institutions (HEIs) within the European Higher Education Area**

[Final Report]

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1. Introduction - Mobility of the highly-skilled within Europe

Political developments such as the European single market; the creation of the European Higher Education Area; the availability of cheap air travel; and new forms of information and communication technology have created an opportunity for the highly skilled to realise occupational ambitions and get to know a foreign country without longer-term commitments.

Previous research has shown that

- EU movers are now a positively selected population in terms of their education; i.e. the average level of their education is generally higher compared to non-movers (Recchi and Favell 2009)
- Mobility within European countries is no longer a one-way occurrence rather than a continuous and multiple process (Murphy-Lejeune 2003).
- Mobility can improve career prospects by enhancing movers' skills (Behle and Atfield 2013, Crossman and Clarke, 2010) and "by adding to an individual's social and cultural capital" (Findlay et al. 2006). 'Mobility capital' identifies the holder as 'migratory elite', and thus ready and willing to move, open to changes in their environment, language, personal entourage, lifestyle, working style (Murphy-Lejeune 2003).

Publicly, mobility of the higher skilled is seen ambivalently: graduate mobility, on the one hand, is encouraged as it will help to create a joined European identity and also strengthen the national economy. The new UK strategy for outward mobility sees the experience of mobility as one way to maintain and increase graduate employability both within the UK and outside (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2013). On the other hand, graduate mobility could indicate a possible mismatch between the skills developed by the educational system and those actually required in the economy (Independent, 2013).

Most previous studies on graduate mobility have looked at returning graduates in order to see how transferable the skills acquired in a different country are for the home labour market (Wiers-Jenssen and Try, 2005; Liagouras et al., 2003; Cai, 2012). In contrast, the starting point of the presented SRHE-funded research findings is a cohort of graduates (including international and other European graduates) educated in UK higher education institutions some of whom had moved to different European countries (EMG). Using this approach, the SRHE-funded project sets out to analyse the transferability of (under-) graduate knowledge gained in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) within the European Higher Education Area. The research aimed, first of all, to identify determinants distinguishing 'stayers' and 'leavers' consisting of UK mobile graduates; returners; and other mobile graduates (chapter 2). A third chapter deals with EMGs' early pathways into further study or employment. The fourth and fifth sections will concentrate on the skills graduates acquired whilst studying at UK HEI, and the barriers they experienced in their mobility.

The report is based on two data sources:

- Quantitative Futuretrack¹ survey which tracked the pathways of applicants to undergraduate courses in higher education in the UK in 2006 through their time at higher education and after graduation, and

¹ More information about the Futuretrack project can be found here <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/glmf/futuretrack>, Purcell *et al.*, (2009) and Purcell *et al.*, (2013).

- Follow-up qualitative data. Especially for this research, a bespoke interview guideline was compiled, and interviews were conducted with twelve European Mobile Graduates.

EMGs were identified in the Futuretrack survey as those who had moved to a different country after graduation at a UK HEI. Three different groups of EMGs were identified using the survey data:

- UK home graduates (lived during their application to HE in 2006 in the UK)
- Returning graduates (had come to the UK to study and returned to their other European home countries after graduation)
- Other mobile graduates (had come to the UK to study and moved to a different European country after graduation)

Interviewees were selected so that they included all three different groups of EMGs, and also included approximately the same proportion of employed graduates and those involved in further study. During the field phase, it became apparent that some of these EMGs had, at the time of their interview, already experienced multiple forms of mobility to different countries. The following table 1 gives an overview of Interviewees (For a complete list of all activities undertaken for this project see Chapter 6.)

Table 1: Overview of realised qualitative interviews

| id | Gender | Type of mobility | Current Activity | Current Country | Subject studied in the UK |
|------------|---------------|--|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| EU1 | Female | Other mobile graduate | Further study | Switzerland | Chemistry |
| EU2 | Female | Returner | Employed | Denmark | Event Management |
| EU3 | Female | Returner, | Employed | Greece | Conservation |
| EU4 | Female | Returner, multiple mobilities | Employed | Portugal | Creative Arts and Design |
| EU5 | Male | Returner; multiple mobilities | Further study | Belgium | Physics |
| EU6 | Female | Other mobile graduate; multiple mobilities | Employed | Switzerland | Politics |
| EU7 | Female | Returner | Further Study | Germany | International business |
| UK1 | Female | UK home graduate | Employed | Czech Republic | History with German |
| UK2 | Male | UK home graduate | Further Study | Austria | Geography |
| UK3 | Female | UK home graduate | Employed | Belgium | History and English |
| UK4 | Male | UK home graduate | Further Study | Sweden | Politics and Philosophy |
| UK5 | Female | UK home graduate | Employed | Spain | French and Spanish |

2. Who are the UK-educated Intra-European Mobile Graduates?

Of all Futuretrack respondents, 87 per cent remained in the UK after graduation. Seven per cent of all respondents had moved to a different European country; and the remainder went to a different non-European country. The current mobility of EMGs comprises of three substantially different groups:

- UK mobile graduates (37 per cent)
- Returning graduates (46 per cent)
- Other Mobile Graduates (18 per cent)

A logistic regression model (Behle 2014) was estimated to disentangle impact factors influencing Intra-European mobility. Findings show that graduates from the youngest and the oldest age group and female graduates were less likely to be mobile. There was a clear connection between the socio-economic background (based on parental occupations) and mobility, as those from a higher socio-economic background were more likely to be mobile compared to those from intermediate occupations. It was not surprising that graduates holding the citizenship of other European countries were most likely to have moved to a different European country. Other findings related to their higher education and their current activity. There was a clear significant impact on the type of HEI EMGs had graduated from, as those from highest and high tariff access HEIs² and those from general and specific HEIs were more likely to be mobile (compared to those from medium and lower HEIs). The impact of the subjects was consistent over all the models. Again, there was no surprise that EMGs were more likely to have studied languages or interdisciplinary subjects many of which included a language element. Interestingly, the class of degree did not show any significant impact. Compared to those involved in further study, unemployed graduates or those working in non-graduate jobs were significantly less likely to have moved to a different European country. Graduates holding non-graduate jobs were less likely to be mobile compared to those remaining in the UK.

3. Transitions into employment and/ or further study

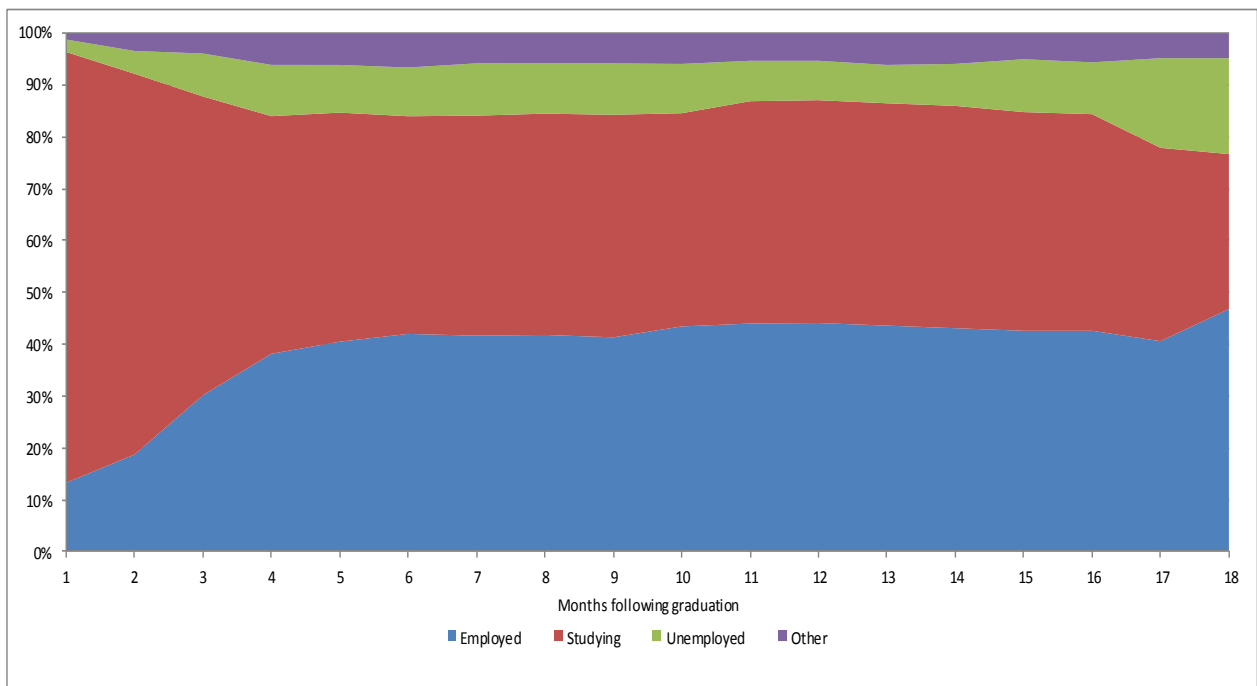
The following section looks at the transitional period after graduation from a UK HEI, and it is based on those EMGs who had, at the time of the last interview, either completed their undergraduate course and were no longer full-time students (45 per cent); were currently full-time postgraduate students (21 per cent); or had completed a post-graduate course (22 per cent). 12 per cent stated that they were currently full-time undergraduate students.

Activity History

The following Activity History charts show the proportions of EMGs involved in the aggregated events 'employment'; 'studying'; 'unemployment' and 'other' at any given time after their graduation. The charts describe how graduates both of three and four year courses left their undergraduate courses and entered employment, further study or other activities. The three charts of the different types of EMGs enable first of all a comparison between the pathways of 'UK home graduates', 'returners' and 'other mobile graduates' and between EMGs and those of UK-based graduates (Purcell et al. 2013 p. 22).

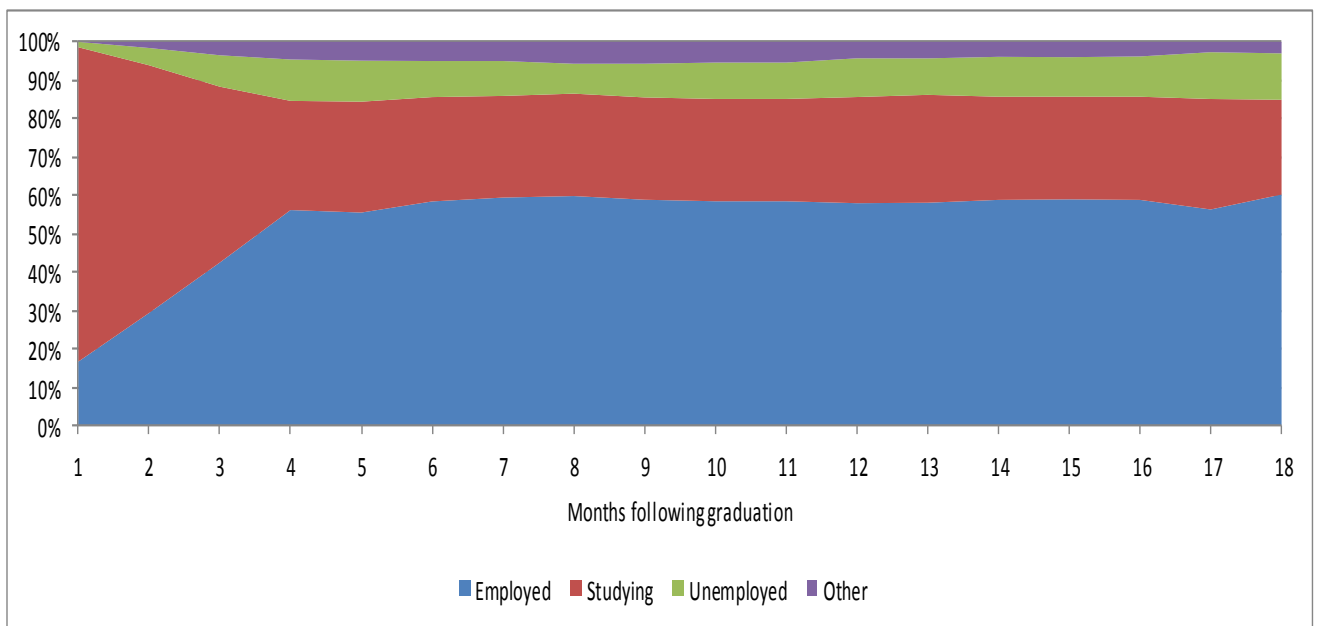
² HEIs were classified according to the tariff points required for access (Purcell et al.,2009).

Figure 1: Activity History of Returners



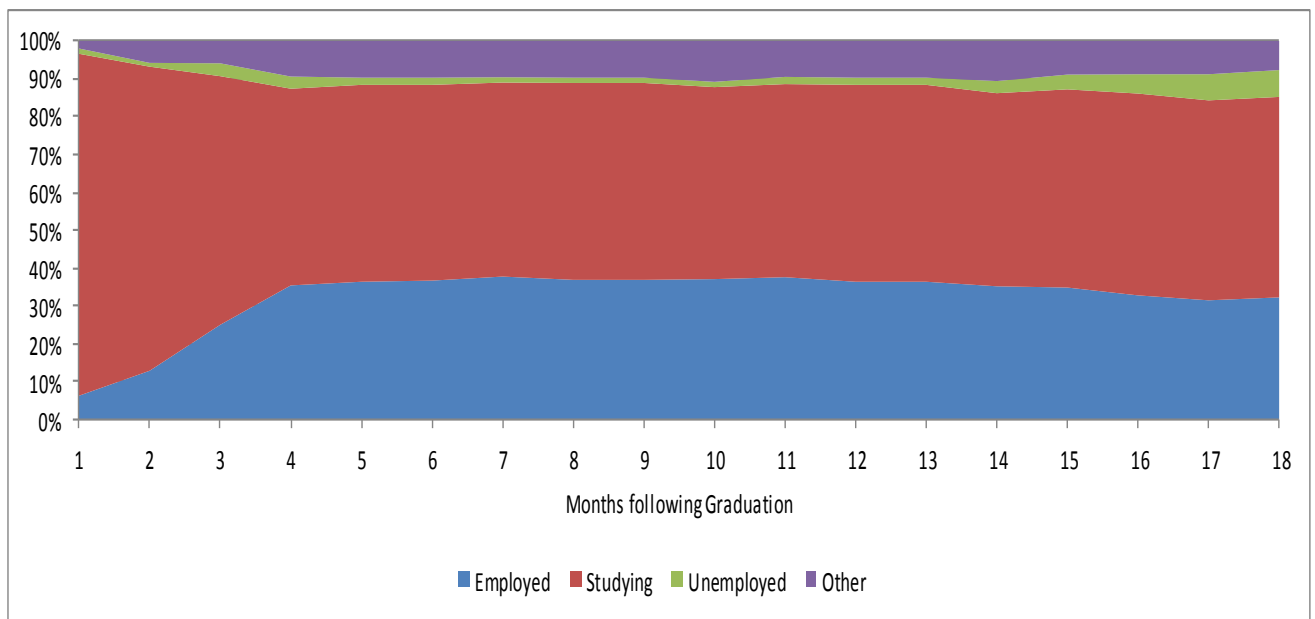
Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

Figure 2: Activity History of UK mobile graduates



Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

Figure 3: Activity History of other mobile graduates



Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

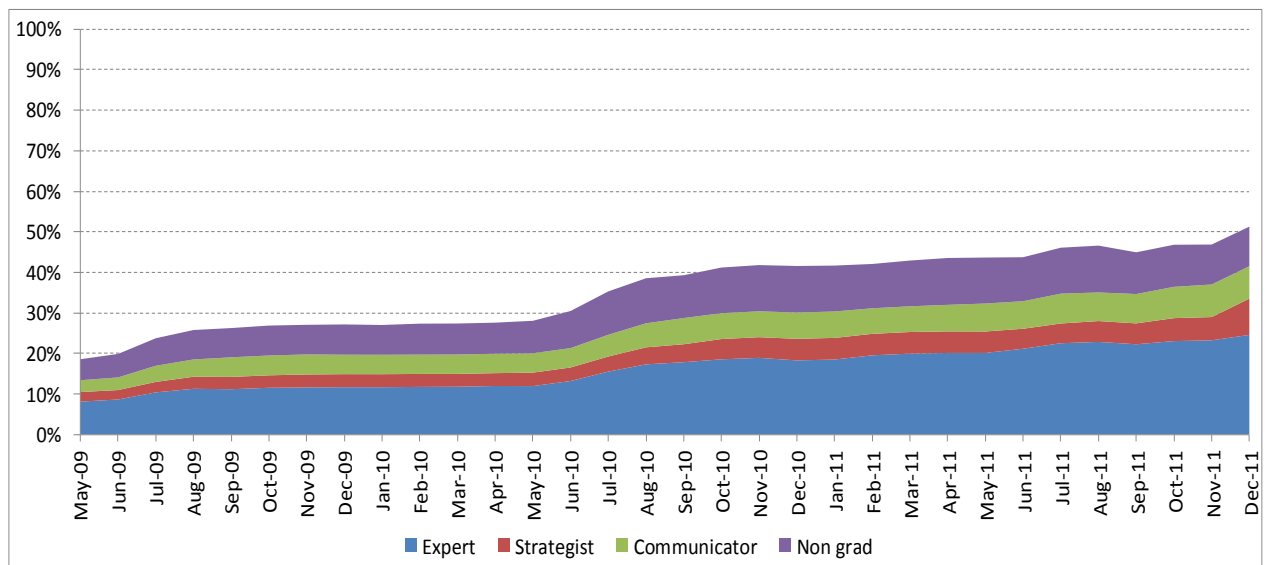
It becomes apparent that a higher proportion of Intra-European mobile graduates remain in education after graduation. Also, at about 16 months after graduation, another major difference becomes visible: A large proportion of mobile graduates reported unemployment spells compared to UK graduates.

UK mobile graduates were the most likely to enter employment whilst other mobile graduates were the most likely to remain in education. Both a high proportion of returners and UK mobile graduates reported periods of unemployment.

Employment History and Current Employment

The following chart describes the transition of the whole EMGs sample following graduation using a new classification of graduate jobs (SOC-HE) (Purcell et al., 2013). Compared to UK based graduates, differences in the transition pattern can be observed. Whilst the proportion of graduates in graduate occupations was approximately the same, a lower proportion of EMG entered non-graduate employment.

Figure 4: Employment History (SOC-HE) of EMGs



Source: Futuretrack 2006 combined dataset: European Mobile Graduates on three and four year courses only (weighted)

4. Skills and qualifications gained during their studies in the UK and the transferability of these

In the qualitative follow-up interviews we asked the type of skills that graduates had built up during their undergraduate courses at a UK HEI, and how transferable these skills had been for their further study or employment in a different European country. Based on the qualitative data analysis, skills were grouped into traditional academic skills and employability skills. Traditional academic skills relate, for example, to subject specific and research skills whilst examples for employability skills are the ability to work in teams, communication and presentation skills. Graduates were also asked, with the benefit of the hindsight and based on their current experiences of mobility, what kind of skills they would have liked to acquire.

Traditional academic skills

When asked about the skills they developed during their undergraduate degrees at UK HEIs, most of the qualitative interviewees reported subject-specific skills such as scientific and laboratory report writing, becoming familiar with software and hardware equipment and materials that were necessary to perform their current tasks either in further studies or employment.

Three graduates had completed a language degree, either in combination with another language or with other subjects. Two of these highlighted that their advanced language abilities played a decisive role in their current employment in international occupational roles, such as

- UK1 who had studied History with German and, at the time of the interview, was working at a company in the Czech Republic that requires daily communication with German and British clients.
- UK5 who studied French and Spanish, currently working a Spanish company that offered relocation services to foreigners in Spain.

All graduates reported that their ability to speak and communicate fluently in English and another foreign language was a decisive element for them gaining these jobs.

The majority of interviewees also stressed the research and critical thinking skills they developed during their studies in the UK. As shown above, they reported of academic staff encouraging students to critically engage with raw materials and software in labs and challenge concepts, arguments, ideas and written essays. The examples below were drawn from one UK and one EU graduate and explain how they experienced the usefulness of their critical thinking skills in the context of further studies e.g. when they pursued a masters' degree in another European country:

'A lot of my courses were about critical perspectives which was very helpful as it allows you to kind of question things a lot more and develop a lot of ideas.' (UK4)

(The UK undergraduate degree) 'helped me develop a visual language, gave me some critical thinking tools which were very valuable' (EU4)

In addition, graduates emphasised how their strong research training during their degree was highly transferrable to a great variety of job roles and workplaces, enabling them to carry out their daily job tasks:

'The thing I put in my CV is that history taught me to research, compile and present the information. I do this on an almost daily or bi-daily basis. Even if I am not researching in the sense of I have to look at several sources at once, like for an essay, I am still researching (in my current job)' (UK1)

'[UK HEI] promotes research and in that way even if you have a situation which is very new to you in your work, you don't feel that you don't know how to approach it. You know the steps of research and that is the most important thing I believe in my work. [...] (one of the most important skills is) the knowledge of how to research.' (EU3)

Transferrable or employability skills

Employability is an extremely complex concept (Harvey, 2001) and should include both soft skills and hard knowledge (Andrews and Higson, 2008). The Intra-European transferability of skills and qualifications obtained in the UK were one of the core themes of qualitative interviews, especially since a recent study found that, based on their use of knowledge and skills from higher education, UK-educated graduates were less prepared for entry to employment, compared to graduates from continental Europe (Brennan and Little, 2010). Many interviewees reported that they developed soft skills such as presentation and communication skills, organisational, teamwork and people skills not only through courses and skills training but also through their extracurricular activities.

The emphasis of UK degrees on transferrable skills in the past decade seems to have been noticed and welcomed by EMGs with exposure to different education systems who stressed the importance of having advanced such skills compared to graduates with different educational experience:

'Presentation skills, and the team work, that was really emphasised in my course, and we did not really do that at school, so that was really developed during these three years..' (EU7)

'I think in the UK in general, you have to do a lot of presentations and a lot of transferrable skills which I think are pretty useful because I noticed here when I took some courses with master students, they are really bad at presenting, they have a lot of knowledge, they knew everything about their topic but they were just not able to sell it well.' (EU1)

In terms of extracurricular activities, two interviewees emphasised how having been elected as presidents for university societies had enhanced their organisational and people skills which had proved indispensable for their current employment. One of them now works in the United Nations liaising on a daily basis with NGO representatives from around the world responsible to build up relationships and connect people from different organisations. She reported how she managed to enhance her communication skills and her confidence during her studies in the UK by talking to people she did not know 'without being afraid to put out my ideas'. She acknowledged the significance of the internationality of the higher education environment in the UK which had familiarised her with liaising and interacting with people from different cultural and language backgrounds:

'The greatest skill was the environment, being surrounded by so many different people with cultural backgrounds and interact positively with those people'. (EU6)

Skills they would have liked to develop

During the interviews, graduates were asked about the skills they would have wanted to develop during their time at a UK HEI. Contrary to the positive comments about presentation and communication skills, time management and independent work seemed to be a contentious matter amongst the interviewees. A few interviewees commented that their degree completion reflected their time management skills and ability to work independently, considering that their degree was based on independent study and a few contact hours, while others thought that the nature of the degree did not allow them to manage effectively their time which was also reflected in the quantitative findings.

In hindsight, interviewees would also have appreciated more opportunities to get employment experience and exposure to different workplaces that would have enabled them to 'figure out what to do after higher education'. Career guidance and raising awareness about labour market conditions would also have been appreciated.

5. Mobility Barriers

The Lisbon Convention (the 'Convention on Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region') which most European Union member states have ratified demands that each country recognises qualifications for access to higher education, periods of study or higher education degrees as "similar to the corresponding qualifications in its own system unless it can show that there are substantial differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which recognition is sought" (Lisbon for pedestrians, undated). The following section describes interviewees' experiences with the recognition of their degrees obtained in the UK in other European countries. Interviewees were asked whether they have experienced any barriers in relation to mobility. Their responses were clustered in those who did not experience any barriers; general barriers; barriers for further study; and those who experienced barriers for work..

No barriers experienced

Graduates who did not experience any barriers to their mobility usually connected this with previous mobility experience and networks that they had already built up in the destination country. For example, one UK graduate returned to the country where she had absolved her ERASMUS year and she used the knowledge that she built up during this year for her current settlement (i.e. the National security number was still valid, she knew where to get registered) (UK5). Another UK graduate who went to work in Brussels stated: *'Brussels's employment world is rather international and a UK degree is very reputable'* (UK3).

General barriers

Many graduates who wanted to study in a different country reported the organization of moving to a different city (e.g. getting registered, health insurance) in order to enrol themselves in a course in a different country (EU2, EU4). Other problems reported referred to the costs of moving (UK4), missing language skills which prevented mobility to specific countries (UK4) and the necessity to find information about prospective courses:

In the UK, obviously, there is UCAS, you can easily find information which is consolidated in terms of all universities and their courses. Obviously it is a bit broader in Europe to get things together. In certain countries, yes, but if, you want to compare university in Sweden with a university, say in the Netherlands, I don't see any way that there is there. It would be very useful, to do that, and I imagine, competitive, because it would allow you to actually compare and see what they want in their courses. (UK4).

Barriers to further study

Interviewees also reported about problems to obtain information whether their undergraduate degree from a UK HEI was sufficient enough to study for a higher degree (UK5). In one case (EU7), HEIs differentiated between 'home grown' (those who had done their undergraduate degrees at the same institution) and other applicants. Some other applicants had to take an entry exam (EU1), or simply were not accepted for Master courses if the University was over-subscribed (EU7).

One graduate reported that the HEI in his native country expected him to have a higher level of subject-related skills and knowledge in order to be able to follow the Masters course. As a result, he had to repeat the third year of the BA course at this HEI.

'Even while I was at my [UK HEI] I realised that the level in Maths was not great. In 2010, after graduating from my [UK HEI] I started my Masters in Brussels but after two weeks I realised that the level in Maths was too high and I would need some time to catch up with it. (...) [my UK degree] is an advantage because people have a good opinion on degrees from the UK but it was a disadvantage for myself because my level of maths was lower. (EU5)

Barriers to work

Some graduates who returned into countries in which entry to higher education is highly competitively (EU1, EU3), reported that after their return to these countries, they were looked down upon because of their degrees gained in the UK.

I: to what extent do you think holding a UK degree was an advantage?

EU6: (after a pause) I actually think it isn't. (...) If I ever had a job interview with a French person in front of me they would always ask me why I did not even considering study in France. (...) The original idea would be that I was not good enough to get into one of the French schools. (...) it basically made me realise that I should not even try to get into any job in France. My profile does not fit into the system anymore so I don't even bother trying (EU6).'

Another graduate described that that her BA from a UK HEI was not recognised as it failed to meet the length requirement of her home country.

'They changed it that you need four years of degree in the UK to be recognised, which does not make sense because in Greece³ the fourth year - in this subject - is internships. In the UK, these internships were undertaken during the summer. (...) And they counted the fourth year, my Masters, together, so that it is a Bachelor. (...) I preferred to lose the Masters, and am now a BA' (EU4).

Some graduates also reported missing networks in their destination country and thus failure to enter the labour market, especially to academic posts (EU4, EU6, EU7). One graduate reported problems in communicating to employers the skills and qualifications she had obtained in the UK.

'The companies there did not know what the Bachelor's degree is, so I had problems, as the companies said: We don't really know what she actually did in her studies and in a foreign language as well, so we'd rather pick someone who did a degree at a local university.' (EU7)

6. Conclusion – Lessons learned so far

The study had set out to gain a greater understanding of the transferability of skills and knowledge gained in a UK HEI within other European countries against the background of the newly created Higher Education Area.

It could be shown that graduates from higher socio-economic status and those who had studied at highest and high tariff access HEIs were more likely to be mobile. Graduates holding a graduate job were more likely to be mobile. The activity history section showed that whilst UK home graduates in a different country were more likely to be in employment (compared to other groups of EMG), a higher proportion of returners and other mobile graduates were enrolled in further study. Compared to those who remained in the UK, a higher proportion of graduates, especially of other mobile graduates, reported spells of unemployment. However, the proportion of employees in non-graduate jobs of all EMG was clearly lower compared to those who had remained in the UK.

Most interviewees valued both the traditional academic skills and the employability skills they gained during their education in the UK as suitable for their current employment or further study. More specifically, apart from subject specific skills, interviewees referred to multilingualism, critical thinking, research skills, communication/presentation skills, teamwork/collaboration skills developed during their higher education experience in the UK. According to a recent study on global

³ Greece has not ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

graduates, these skills can be characterised as 'global competencies' by UK recruiters (Diamond et al., 2012) in addition to second set of skills such as cultural agility/dexterity, openness, awareness of own culture and other perspectives, adaptability, flexibility, self-awareness and ability to relate to others (see also Behle and Atfield, 2013). Interestingly, our interviewees raised nurturing or enhancing this second set of skills not only in the context of higher education degree but as part of their mobility experiences. It is difficult to disentangle how and to what extent all these skills were developed as competencies acquired in higher education and mobility experience are often considered together. However, one might argue that a highly international education experience (such as a UK degree) alongside with experiences of mobility are two important conditions for current graduates to develop competencies that are highly valued in a global workplace.

In terms of skills missing, some graduates, however, would have welcomed more opportunities for work experiences. Especially returners and other mobile students criticised existing careers services as being too focussed on the UK and omitting other options, especially in other European countries.

The extent to which graduates experienced significant barriers to the recognition of their degrees was surprising, five years after the Lisbon Recognition Convention and more than ten years after the Bologna declaration. Although the sample of (qualitative) interviewees was very small it is still indicative of the challenges that mobile graduates confront in their pursuits of further study and careers. Despite the enormous and long term efforts through the Bologna Process and subsequent political regulations to develop a set of tools that would facilitate mobility in European countries for studies and/or employment, there are still significant barriers such as the limited recognition of degrees both of employers and HEIs which, in the long-term, could discourage mobility. More research in this area is needed, however, to gain further understanding and, most importantly, to identify the representativeness of our findings.

7. Activities undertaken and ongoing activities

The following list shows the activities undertaken in the SRHE-funded project. Even though the project has come to an end, the work on publications based on the project findings is ongoing.

Quantitative Analysis of Futuretrack data

- Identification of EMG in the existing Futuretrack sample; comparison with those remaining in the UK; identification and distinction of three different groups of EMGs.
- Estimation of logistic regression models
- Creation of Activity History and Employment History

Qualitative Follow-up of Futuretrack respondents

- Design of Interview guide; identification of possible interview partners.
- Field phase: Email invitations to take part in the study (19 invitations were send out; 12 interviews were realised)
- Field notes were produced using tape recordings from the interviews and interviewees' CVs.
- Analysis of qualitative data.

Presentations

Work, Employment and Society Conference; 3rd – 5th September 2013, University of Warwick, Behle and Tzanakou: 'Brain drain', recession-induced mobility, or simple mobile European citizens? Migration to a different European country after graduation in the UK.

IER Workshop for IER staff and students; 5th of November 2013, University of Warwick.

Behle and Tzanakou: The transferability of (under-) graduate knowledge gained in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) within the European Higher Education Area.

Society for Research into Higher Education; Annual Research Conference 11th – 13th December 2013, Newport, Wales.

Behle and Tzanakou: Who are the mobile graduates? Similarities and differences between Intra-European mobile graduates and those remaining in the UK after graduation

1st international conference 'Higher Education and Mobilities'; 19th -20th December 2013, Grenoble, France.

Behle: What do Graduates from the UK do after migrating to other European countries? The early career of European Mobile Graduates

Submitted Papers

Behle, H. (forthcoming, 2014): European Mobility of UK educated graduates. Who stays, who goes? *Higher Education Quarterly*

Tzanakou and Behle (2014): The transferability of (under-)graduate knowledge gained in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) within the European Higher Education Area. *IER Bulletin*. Currently under review

Ongoing activities

Behle and Tzanakou (2014): Mobility Capital of UK-educated Graduates (working title).

Behle and Tzanakou (2014): Skill development and barriers to the transferability of degrees gained in the UK (working title).

Behle (2014): Employment and Further Study of European mobile graduates (working title).

Conference Paper for IZA workshop 11th IZA Annual Migration Meeting (AM2), May 30 - June 1, 2014, has been produced and submitted.

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