

Helen Higson, Jane Andrews

Aston University, UK

Is Bologna Working? Employer and Graduate Reflections of the Quality, Value and Relevance of Business and Management Education in four EU Countries (0039)

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This paper focuses on the relevance of undergraduate management Higher Education from the perspectives of recent graduates and graduate employers. Drawing upon the findings of a qualitative study in which data was collated and analysed in four different EU countries (Austria, Romania, Slovenia and the UK), the views of recent graduates and employers in the four countries are discussed. By critiquing the study findings in a European policy context, the paper draws attention to the implications for management education in terms of curricula development and pedagogy. The paper concludes by noting that whilst many Higher Education institutions are beginning to introduce work-based learning, there is still some way to go before all undergraduate students are provided with the opportunity to acquire cultural capital whilst testing the applicability of what they have been taught within a real-life work situation.

The diverse nature of each country's socio-economic and educational background meant that the researchers were able to gain a wide-range of different perspectives and insights into graduate employability thus adding to the uniqueness of the study. The study focused specifically on management and related programmes. In examining the curricula of Business Schools in each country, it was determined that a similar core content of business-related discipline specific undergraduate programmes is offered at institutions across Europe. Such similarities suggest that on the surface, European Business Schools are moving towards the Bologna principle of similar, transferable qualifications. However, other similarities between the institutions in all four countries were more difficult to conceptualise with 'undergraduate' programme lengths varying from 2 years for a 'sub or part' Degree, to 6 years full time study for a Magister qualification. Whilst the UK institutions had traditionally followed the 'three-tier' cycle as depicted in Bologna, this was still a relatively new concept in the other countries. As such partner institutions from Slovenia, Austria and Romania were in a state of 'transformation', having recently introduced, or being in the process of introducing, Degrees which adhered to the three-tier cycle (to include Bachelors Degrees) - whilst still offering a programme reflective of the two-tier cycle with undergraduates receiving a Magister level qualification.

The notion of graduate employability is a contentious issue that is both difficult to conceptualise and measure. In parts of Europe, interest in graduate employability reflects the massification of Higher Education over the past two to three decades. Conversely, a practical focus on the 'work-readiness' of recent graduates as a means of guaranteeing economic competitiveness in an increasingly global market-place, has meant that the concept of graduate employability has been given little attention (Little, 2003) and is thus an under-researched, but much discussed area.

The study comprised two distinctive stages, the first an extensive analysis of the nature of Higher Education in each respective country, and a literature review focusing on graduate

employability. The second stage comprised 20 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with employers and recent graduates in each country. Using purposive sampling techniques (MAXWELL, 1996) management graduates were selected from partner Institutions' alumni. Graduate participants had all completed their studies in the two years prior to being interviewed and had achieved a Bachelors, or sub-Bachelors (Higher National Diploma or equivalent) level qualification. The reason for the sampling approach reflected the need to maintain comparability across the four countries. Thus, employers were purposively selected for their linkages with each institution's career or employment services. In order to promote comparability across the sample, employers were selected from three different areas of the economy; Public Administration (Local/ Regional Government and Civil/Public Service); Finance and Banking; and Local Industry.

Two semi-structured interview guides, grounded in themes and issues identified during the literature review, were developed. Commencing with demographic details, the employer interview guide focused upon: the nature of graduate employment within the interviewees organisation (including recruitment and training policies); organisational links with Higher Education Institutes; the skills and competencies required of graduates in order that they succeed in the workplace; the organisational benefits and challenges of employing a graduate; the application of theoretical knowledge to the workplace. Graduate interview guides were more detailed, with background questions articulated in such a manner that would prompt a comparative analysis in accordance with the grounded theory methodological approach. The themes addressed in the graduate questionnaires were: the perceived value of business and management undergraduate level education in relation to the usefulness of theory and knowledge in a work situation; the value of Higher Education in respect of the acquisition of wider skills and competencies (including communication skills, teamworking, presentation skills; the advantages of undertaking a period of work-experience whilst in Higher Education – including paid and unpaid periods of formal work placements, internships and volunteering; and the manner in which graduates are able to link education to employment.

The interviews focused on three areas of Higher Education relevant to Business and Management graduate employability: Discipline-specific business skills and knowledge: 'Soft-skills': Work-based learning. The interviews were recorded and data analysed using grounded-theory techniques. In the course of the analysis a fourth theme pertaining to graduate employability emerged; the 'added-value' of Higher Education.

In conclusion, the study findings lead to the suggestion that to meet the ever-changing needs of a global workforce, European management programmes should consider introducing a period of formal work-based learning within the Business School curricula. This would enhance the development of 'softer skills' required by employers such as communication and presentation skills, business acumen and the ability to see the bigger picture. The paper argument reinforces Bourdieu's arguments in relation to cultural capital, field and Habitus (REAY, 1998) and supports the notion that Higher Education has a responsibility to equip graduates with cultural capital whilst providing them with the tools with which they are able to actively participate in an increasingly global workforce (McGREW, 2000). Whilst many Higher Education institutions are beginning to introduce work-based learning, there is still some way to go before all undergraduate students are provided with the opportunity to acquire cultural capital whilst testing the applicability of what they have been taught within a real-life work situation.

