

PROMOTION AND FOLLOW-UP OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Education and training systems play a significant role in tackling youth unemployment and further developing graduates' employability potential. In the framework of the European Lifelong Learning Programme, a project under the acronym "FOLLOW" was launched to address the question how and to what extent higher education institutions contribute to the employability of their graduates. Four universities and polytechnics located across Portugal, Belgium, Spain and Italy were participating in this project. Current practices that promote and monitor the employability of graduates were examined at an institutional level. Each institution has multiple actors involved in employability matters. Promotional activities are the main focus for the majority of the university employment or career offices, while monitoring of graduate employability is, in general, managed by external institutions. The most prevalent institutional initiatives to promote graduate employability are the provision of recruitment opportunities for students and graduates, professional and career guidance and job events in cooperation with companies. At least one internal office of each participating institution is implementing each of these practices and, remarkably, these particular practices are also fairly similar across our higher education institutions. Furthermore, all involved institutions promote graduate internships and placements in companies. In addition, some institutions provide incentives promoting entrepreneurship among students and graduates while other institutions are maintaining strong alumni links. In the field of monitoring graduate employability, employability observatories are most common. In Portugal, Spain and Italy agents undertake detailed national analysis of graduate employability often intended to compare employment levels of graduates of different higher education institutions. Though

it is not claimed that one size fits all, lessons could be learned from sharing practices and equivalent initiatives could be taken by other higher education institutions in other countries.

Keywords: graduate employability, current practices, promotion, monitoring, higher education

1 INTRODUCTION

IN the European Union, Member States are confronted with increasing youth unemployment rates. In 2011 the youth unemployment rate in the European Union had reached 21,4 per cent. In December 2012, according to Eurostat, 23,4 per cent of persons aged 15 to 24 in the European Union (EU 27) was unemployed. In 2012 countries such as Spain and Greece have been confronted with a pronounced rise in youth unemployment rates, now suffering rates of over 55 per cent. In Portugal, Italy, and eastern European countries such as Slovakia more than one third of persons aged 15 to 24 is unemployed. The lowest youth unemployment rates, i.e. below 10 per cent, are recorded in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and several nations in Northern Europe also demonstrate relatively low unemployment rates. In Belgium, Luxembourg and UK around 20 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 was unemployed in December 2012, comparable to the European average. Generally speaking youth unemployment rates in the EU are substantially surpassing unemployment rates of other, adult, age groups. Although university graduates tend to have the highest employment level in each age group, highly educated young people have a much higher unemployment rate than people with the same education in elder age groups (Potestio, 2011). Moreover, long-term youth unemployment is on the rise in the European Union (Eurofound, 2012). As a result of these troublesome trends, the importance of the transition from education to work has grown and discussions about the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in this transition process are on-going for some time. In this debate, the Council of the European Union (2012) stresses the pivotal role of higher education institutions in the development of the employability of its graduates. The issue of graduate employability should be a primary concern of higher education institutions as the Council (2012, p. 3) holds that “ensuring that young people leave education and training with the best possible support to obtain their first job is critical.” In 2011 the European Commission has approved and co-funded a project integrated in the Lifelong Learning Programme, sub-programme Erasmus, for the exchange of good practices of promotion and follow-up of graduate employability in higher education. This resulted in a transnational partnership between four higher

education institutions located in western and southern Europe. In this project, under the acronym FOLLOW, four universities of CLUSTER¹ (Consortium Linking Universities of Science and Technology for Education and Research), namely Instituto Superior Técnico, KU Leuven², Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya and Politecnico di Torino of the partner countries Portugal, Belgium, Spain and Italy, were involved. The main goal of this project was to explore the practices of higher education institutions in the area of promotion and follow-up of graduate employability. To begin with, we will discuss graduate employability across Europe and the latest EU policy statements on this matter. Next, we will elaborate on the methodology used in the FOLLOW-project and the results of the work package for which KU Leuven was responsible. In this respect, we will discuss examples of current practices and activities within HEIs to promote or monitor graduate employability. Finally, we will conclude our preliminary findings.

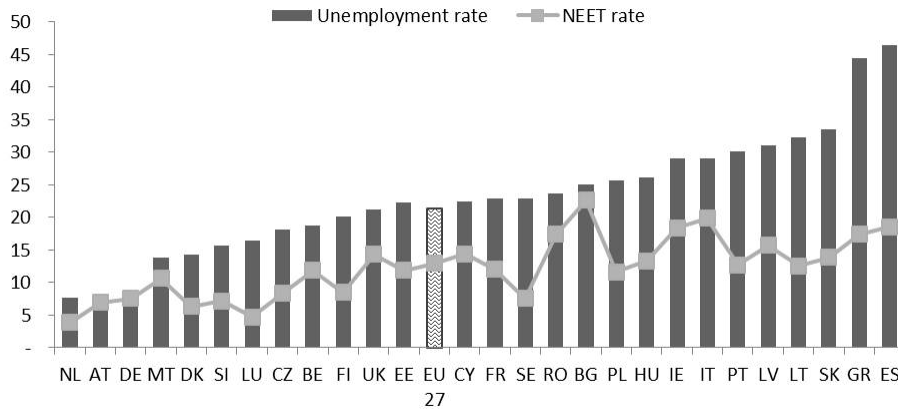
2 GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN EUROPE

The Council of the European Union (2012, p. 4) defines employability as “the combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or enter employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their career.” However, employability is a complex concept, involving factors related to the individual as well as external factors. Possible external factors are population characteristics, labour market regulations, the structure of the economy and the overall economic climate (Council of the European Union, 2012). A term that is frequently used at European level to refer to young people neither in employment, nor in education or training is the “NEET” concept. This concept covers people aged between 15 and 24 years and is considered to be a reliable indicator of youth unemployment. The NEET rate differs from the youth unemployment rate in that the latter only takes into account the share of the economically active population not able to find a job. In contrast, the NEET population is constituted by the total population of young people. As a result, the NEET rate is generally lower than the youth unemployment rate (Figure 1) yet a more accurate estimate of youth unemployment (Eurofound, 2012).

¹<http://www.cluster.org/>

²For KU Leuven, the Faculty of Engineering Science was directly involved in the project.

Figure 1: *Unemployment and NEET rates (of population 15-24 years) in EU 27 in 2011*



In 2011, according to Eurostat, 12,9 per cent of people between 15 to 24 years old in the European Union (EU 27) were NEETs. The size and characteristics of NEETs vary greatly among Member States, even though different nations can be grouped together. The highest NEET rates, up to 10 per cent higher than the EU average, are recorded in Italy, Spain, Greece and eastern European countries such as Bulgaria. Relatively high rates slightly above the European average are found for north-eastern European countries such as Slovakia but also for United Kingdom. Belgium, France and Portugal experience NEET rates just below the European average. Continental and Nordic countries such as Denmark, Austria, Germany, Sweden and Finland have a NEET rate of below 10 per cent. Lastly, NEET rates in the Netherlands and Luxembourg are only half as high, below 5 per cent. In 2012, as part of the European Union's Europe 2020 Strategy, the Council of the European Union adopted a new European benchmark addressing the common challenge of the employability of graduates. The aim is to raise the average employment rate of recent³ European graduates between 20 and 34 years old to 82 per cent by 2020. This implies an increase of 5,5 per cent for this age group as compared to 2010. The new European benchmark, however, is not a national target to be achieved by individual Member States. Instead, the benchmark paves the way for more cooperation and partnerships between education and training providers, identifying effective education and training policies and institutional employability strategies. The benchmark could also serve as an impetus for stronger

³The term "recent" means that graduates have left education and training no more than three years (Council of the European Union, 2012).

links and interaction between higher education institutions, labour market institutions and employers in order to take greater account of job market needs in study programmes (Council of the European Union, 2012, Schuetze, 2012). The new European benchmark on graduate employability has been included in the strategic framework for European cooperation in Education and Training for 2020 (“ET 2020”) determined by the EU Member States and the European Commission. Furthermore, the European Commission has recently announced the adoption of the Youth Employment Package outlining measures to help Member States counter high youth unemployment, including by promoting apprenticeships, traineeships and a first work experience. The Commission recommends that young adults up to age 25 should become employed, find an apprentice or traineeship or continue education within four months of leaving formal education, training or employment⁴. In this context, the European Commission proposed to increase the supply of high quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual education systems that enable young persons to combine education with employment through company placements⁵. Finally, the European Commission supports promotion of youth mobility in the European Union. All of these initiatives should be integrated in Member States’ employment policies, ensuring graduates leaving the education and training system a successful transition into work (EUbusiness, 2012; European Commission, 2012).

3 FOLLOW FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The Lifelong Learning Programme-project FOLLOW, launched in 2011, is a partnership between the universities and polytechnics Instituto Superior Técnico, KU Leuven, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya and Politecnico di Torino. These HEIs have joined forces in an attempt to create a network of higher education institutions to document and exchange current practices of promotion and follow-up or monitoring of graduate employability. These objectives are in line with the Council of the European Union’s demands for more cooperation and partnership between education and training providers. **Moreover, this project could help to identify and highlight best practices in higher education institutions** to further enhance the employability of our graduates. The FOLLOW-project

⁴The European “Youth Guarantee” is one of the cornerstones of the Youth Employment Package.

⁵These measures are part of the intended “Quality Framework for Traineeships” and the “European Alliance for Apprenticeships” set up in the context of the Youth Employment Package.

was divided into four work packages (WP), each one having a responsible institution (Figure 2). The work package for which KU Leuven was responsible was concerned with “experience exchange” and more specifically, the mapping of current employability practices. First, each of the partners examined which performing agents inside or outside their higher education institution are involved in employability. The next step was to create an overview of the range of practices currently carried out by these internal and external agents in the field of promotion and monitoring of employability and to determine their specific area of intervention. The central questions in this work package focused on the type of practices and were formulated as follows:

- How do higher education institutions contribute to the employability of graduates? More specifically, which practices are being done at the level of HEI that promote the employability of graduates?
- Which practices are there at the level of HEI that allow monitoring of the employability of graduates?

For the two types of practices (promotion and monitoring) so-called “areas of intervention” were defined in which each of the specific practices was classified. These areas of intervention served as a basis for comparison. For promoting graduate employability, we distinguish a diverse range of initiatives including initiatives promoting internship opportunities, initiatives allowing students to search jobs, initiatives allowing companies to disseminate its vacancies and job opportunities (jointly called “recruitment opportunities”), professional and career guidance initiatives, initiatives promoting entrepreneurship among students, initiatives focusing on skills and education match, events strengthening the link and collaboration with companies and events strengthening alumni links. For monitoring graduate employability, we differentiate between studies monitoring graduates’ search for employment, studies monitoring the number of job vacancies, studies monitoring and evaluating internships, studies monitoring employability within companies and graduate employability observatories. In Table 1, the different areas of intervention are summarized for promotion and monitoring.

In addition, for each practice our aim was to examine the human and material resources⁶ required as well as its specific impact⁷ on the transition from school to work. If students’ and graduates’ participation in

⁶As regards human resources we allude to the number of persons (counselling staff, academic staff and other providers) being involved in each practice and the estimated time spent by them on each practice in a one-year period. Material resources refer to the needed infrastructure and logistics.

⁷This includes all results, deliverables and main effects recorded for each practice.

Table 1: *List of possible areas of intervention for promotion and monitoring of graduate employability*

Areas of intervention	
<i>Promotion</i>	<i>Monitoring</i>
Promotion of internships	Follow-up of job search
Promotion of job search by students	Follow-up of job vacancies
Promotion of job vacancies by companies	Follow-up of internships
Professional and career guidance initiatives	Follow-up of employability within companies
Promotion of entrepreneurship	Graduate employability observatories
Promotion of skills and education match	
Promotion of link with companies	
Promotion of link with alumni	

employability activities was monitored, these results were also included in our analysis.

4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS BY PARTNER

4.1 Performing agents

On average each partner identified two to three internal agents involved in employability at their institution, while on average three external agents were identified. The internal agents of **Instituto Superior Técnico (IST)** are involved in monitoring as well as promotion of the employability of IST graduates. Frequent areas of intervention in the field of promotion are professional and career guidance initiatives, promotion of entrepreneurship, internships and recruitment opportunities. In the “Career Weeks” of the Technology Transfer Office of IST, students and companies cooperate to create an event where students reflect on their professional future and employers disseminate their activities. Furthermore, IST organizes observatories to monitor graduate employability and to make a comparative analysis between higher education graduates’ employment levels at a national level. The main external agents are public organizations, such as the

Institute for Employment and Professional Training, promoting internship opportunities and student exchanges. These practices are intended to strengthen graduates' socio-professional skills to facilitate a successful entry into the labour market. For **KU Leuven**, internal agents' practices are emphasizing promotion of graduate employability rather than monitoring. The Study Advice Service mainly offers advisory services, such as information sessions for last year students on employment in different sectors (cultural sector, media, public services, diplomacy, working at the EU and UN, working abroad and in developing countries). However, professional and career guidance, recruitment opportunities and company collaborations are increasingly being provided by this agent. In comparison, external agents and associations are monitoring graduates' employability through graduate employability surveys and, in general, surveys of the working population. The career and salary survey of the Royal Flemish Society of Engineers could serve as an example. **Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC)** is composed of various schools which are focusing exclusively on promotion of graduate employment. The different schools have taken a similar approach, offering internships for students and posting job offers. UPC Alumni is an association planning career development sessions and workshops as well as events in cooperation with companies and employers to augment employability possibilities. The external Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency implements monitoring observatories of graduate employability at Catalan universities. Finally, Barcelona City Council's local development agency called "Barcelona Activa" fosters youth employment through promotion initiatives allowing companies to disseminate recruitment information as well as through occupational training. **Politecnico di Torino** has identified different internal and external agents offering services to students and school leavers as well as companies and employers. A key internal agent, supporting promotion of graduate employability, is the Stage & Job unit of Politecnico di Torino. This agent contributes to graduate employability by dissemination of internships and recruitment offers, career guidance and partnerships with companies. Politecnico di Torino also participates in I3P, a non-profit association promoting entrepreneurship. The main external agent AlmaLaurea, supported by the Ministry of Education, University and Research, is run by a consortium of Italian universities and occupied with both promotion and monitoring tasks. On the one hand, AlmaLaurea conducts graduate employability observatories and on the other hand AlmaLaurea has adopted the innovative practice of collecting information on graduates' curricula that are gathered in a databank. The AlmaLaurea-databank can be consulted online by hiring companies. It included more than 1,700,000 curricula in November 2012, involving 78 per cent of Italian graduates from 64 Italian

universities. Every year about 150,000 units are added to the databank.

Although the partner institutions in our project may take different approaches or strategies towards graduate employability, the analysis of the different types of performing agents involved in it has shown striking similarities. Both IST and Politecnico di Torino have established career service offices within their institution aimed at improving the transition from higher education to employment. Hence, these internal offices mainly concentrate on promotion of graduate employability. For instance, the Technology Transfer Office of IST aims to enhance the employability of graduates through school guidance activities and collaborations between students and employers. The Stage & Job unit of Politecnico di Torino specializes in developing employability skills in students by offering internships and job positions. Furthermore, this agent offers professional and career guidance, specific training and collaborations with companies. In comparison, the other partners do not have a central unit dealing exclusively with graduate employability or the transition of graduates to the labour market. KU Leuven, however, has evolved from providing tutoring services to incoming and first-year students only to guidance of students during their entire graduate career, until their transition to the labour market. For instance, the central student services offer career information, advice and orientation activities that could have a positive impact on students' career development and development of employability skills. Though, these internal agents do not have the explicit objective to enhance graduate employability. IST, UPC and Politecnico di Torino have agents conducting national comparative studies and analysis of graduate employability in common. The Employability Observatory of IST undertakes an analysis of IST graduates' employability as well as the employability of graduates from other national higher education institutions. The ultimate goal is to provide a national benchmark and to promote IST programmes as leading to high levels of graduate employment⁸. The public AQU Catalunya is dedicated to quality review studies at institutional, programme and course level. Furthermore, the private AlmaLaurea in Italy examines the employment condition of graduates. For each university, faculty and degree in the consortium a number of factors is analyzed and particular attention is given to the effectiveness and added value of the study programmes. In Flanders, the Public Employment Service aims to facilitate and improve access of people to the job market and closely monitors graduates' employment situation. Nonetheless, the Flemish Public Employment Service does not conduct a comparative analysis between higher education institutions or programmes and its scope is limited to the Flemish region. Moreover, in

⁸Up to 55 per cent of IST students is employed before completing their programme of study

contrast to other partners such as Portugal, there is no legal demand or requirement in Belgium to report figures concerning the employability of graduates. Finally, the mission of the Flemish Public Employment Service, the external Institute for Employment and Professional Training in Portugal, Barcelona Activa in Spain and the Centro per l'Impiego della Provincia di Torino in Italy is quite similar. To illustrate, each of these agents offers services not only to job seekers, but also to companies. Lastly, each of these agents participates in the European Employment Services (EURES) network.

4.2 Practices

Most internal agents within our partner HEIs engage in numerous practices and multiple areas of intervention, while most external agents concentrate, in general, on fewer areas of intervention. The type of practices most frequently employed are concerned with promotion rather than monitoring, especially for internal agents. External agents tend to be responsible for monitoring performance of HEIs in the area of graduate employability. The most common institutional initiatives to promote graduate employability are the offer of recruitment opportunities, professional and career guidance activities and events strengthening the collaboration with companies. First, recruitment opportunities include initiatives allowing students to search jobs and initiatives allowing companies to disseminate its vacancies and job opportunities to students. Examples of these practices are online job platforms, online jobs databases, job services, mailing lists and graduates databases accessed by companies. These services are offered online to current students and graduates as well as companies. Second, professional and career guidance activities are delivered to current students in workshops or group sessions and only occasionally on an individual basis. These interventions also comprise initiatives focusing on professional skill development across or outside the curriculum to ensure that graduates are well equipped to enter the world of work⁹. To illustrate, most internal agents offer career sessions and seminars, career guidance activities, job training or career counselling services, workshops or orientation programmes, . . . On the whole, there are plenty of initiatives geared towards CV and cover letter writing, interview training, soft skills training, negotiation skills training and job searching techniques. Third, events strengthening the collaboration of HEIs and students with companies and employers are also common to promote graduate employability. These events range from job events, job fairs, on-campus events, recruiting visits, company presentations

⁹The area of intervention "Professional and career guidance initiatives" was grouped together with the area "Promotion of skills and education match".

and company visits to on-campus interview days. Overall, these initiatives enable students and employers to get in touch with potential employers and employees. At least one internal agent within each participating HEI in our project provides employability activities and services in the above mentioned areas of intervention. The vast majority of practices in these areas are also quite similar. For instance, the career sessions of IST are comparable to the job training services provided by KU Leuven central services, the career counselling offered by Politecnico di Torino and the orientation programmes and seminars offered by the alumni association of UPC. Furthermore, all partner institutions have internal agents that have implemented initiatives promoting internships. In this respect, the practices carried out by the Stage & Job unit of Politecnico di Torino could be cited as an example, since 10 per cent of internships in 2010-2011 ended with a job offer and this rises to 24 per cent if the internship was optional or extra-curricular. This finding suggests the importance of extra-curricular activities in enhancing graduate employability and career prospects. Another finding is that each partner has a student or alumni association taking a significant role in promoting graduate employment. For instance, the Student Association of IST manages an online job platform for recruitment opportunities, while the Student Association of the Faculty of Engineering Science at KU Leuven performs a similar service offering jobs and internships. Further, these student associations organize various events in collaboration with companies such as annual job or career fairs to introduce students to potential future employers. Table 2 provides an overview of the most common areas of intervention per type of practice and higher education institution. The table indicates that IST and Politecnico di Torino are the only institutions in our partnership of which an internal agent is occupied with initiatives promoting entrepreneurship among students. Indeed, the Technology Transfer Office of IST launches initiatives to promote and support potential entrepreneurs. Likewise, the Innovative Enterprises Incubator of Politecnico di Torino promotes the creation of new science-based start-ups from inside or outside university. Finally, UPC is the only institution in our partnership with an internal alumni association organizing events maintaining strong alumni links. In comparison, the most common initiative in the field of monitoring graduate employability is the graduate employability observatory. Every institution in our partnership has an internal or external agent implementing graduate employability observatories (Table 2). The graduates survey and the national unemployment analysis are the most important practices conducted by IST. Likewise, the alumni career research of KU Leuven central services allows gathering knowledge on graduates' employability. In Spain and Italy, the external AQU Catalunya and AlmaLaurea are responsible for conduct-

Table 2: *Overview of the most common areas of intervention per type of practice and institution*

	IST	KUL	UPC	POLITO
<i>PROMOTION of graduate employability</i>				
Promotion of internships	x	x	x	x
Recruitment opportunities	x	x	x	x
Professional and career guidance initiatives	x	x	x	x
Promotion of entrepreneurship	x			x
Promotion of link with companies	x	x	x	x
Promotion of link with alumni			x	
<i>MONITORING of graduate employability</i>				
Follow-up of internships				x
Follow-up of employability within companies		(x)		
Graduate employability observatories	x	x	(x)	(x)

x: practice carried out by internal agent

(x): practice carried out by external agent

ing graduate employability observatories. It seems that other monitoring studies and initiatives are fragmented and exclusive for each partner or agent and dependent of the different realities, government policies and legislation in each country. Lastly, there were no practices classified as monitoring graduates' search for employment or monitoring the number of job vacancies.

5 CONCLUSION

The European Union, and by extension the world at large, is facing a growing youth employment crisis. Recent statistics show that more than one in five of 15 to 24 year olds are currently unemployed in EU 27. The newly adopted European policy, such as the benchmark on graduate employability, serves as a trigger for collective action among European Member States. It also calls for education and training providers to cooperate since high quality education and training systems remain key to enhance graduate employability and to counter high youth unemployment rates in the European Union. In an effort to explore and exchange current practices of promotion and monitoring of graduate employability in higher education, Instituto

Superior Técnico, KU Leuven, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya and Politecnico di Torino joined forces. In the FOLLOW-project we observed that the institutional approach of these HEIs is characterized by two or three internal agents within each institution being involved in the graduate employability subject. In this respect, promotional activities are much more common than monitoring since monitoring is often a primary responsibility of external institutions. The most prevalent institutional initiatives to promote graduate employability are the provision of recruitment opportunities for students and graduates, professional and career guidance and job events in cooperation with companies. At least one internal office of each participating institution is implementing such practices and it should be noted that these particular practices are also fairly similar across higher education institutions. Furthermore, all institutions involved in this project in some form promote graduate internships and placements in companies. In addition, Instituto Superior Técnico and Politecnico di Torino provide incentives promoting entrepreneurship among students and graduates. This entrepreneurship focus could be incorporated in other higher education institutions' practices and policies. Lastly, well-established alumni relations could also be used in developing graduate employability. Graduate employability observatories are most common in the field of monitoring graduate employability. In Portugal, Spain and Italy agents undertake detailed national analysis of graduate employability often intended to compare employment levels of graduates of different higher education institutions. In contrast, there is no tradition in Belgium to collect and report employability figures, possibly due to a lack of a legal demand in this regard. It may be speculated that employment analysis and, in general, employment strategies are particularly important in these countries given the severe economic conditions and unprecedented youth unemployment that confront them. To conclude, the FOLLOW-project offers a clear insight into the remarkably similar practices currently being implemented at the higher education institutions in our transnational partnership. Though, these preliminary findings should be treated with some caution as these have limited generalizability. In the future, research ought to go one step further in order to identify criteria for selecting and spreading best practices in promotion and monitoring of graduate employability in higher education. Finally, it is highly recommendable to expand the scope of this project and to involve more partners from all over Europe and beyond.

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