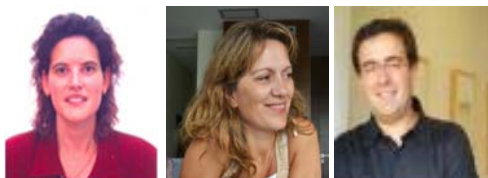


The Challenges of Higher Education: Improving Graduates' Employability and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

This article describes how higher education (HE) can contribute to the economic and social empowerment of young graduates, which will drive innovation and socio-economic development, and social and cultural change in Europe. We propose that the concept of competence should be enriching with the integration of the professional, social, cultural and political aspects. We suggest that improving HE graduates' competencies and capabilities will affect their self-perception and status, and increase their employability, income and wealth, life success, resources, mental and physical energy, and social relations and encourage engaged citizenship, all of which will shape individual living conditions.

Keywords: Employability, Competencies and Capabilities, Social Empowerment, Well-Functioning Society, Higher Education

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1. Introduction

Universities and the Catholic Church are the institutions with the longest history in Europe. The mission, structure, and processes of universities have changed radically since their origins in the 6th century (Patterson, 1997), and at the beginning of the 21st century, universities are facing major disruptive challenges (Newman et al., 2004; Odin and Manicas, 2004; Collini, 2012).

According to *The Economist* (June 28, 2014a, 2014b), the forces fostering this revolution are rising costs, changing demands, and technological advances. The cost of higher education (HE) in both public and private institutions have grown all over the world (“fees in private non-profit Universities in America rose by 28% in real terms in the decade to 2012”, *The Economist*, June 28, 2014a), and higher education institutions (HEIs) are justifying this rising cost by an increase of their production (e.g. degrees, certificates, etc.), although there is a deep concern that most HEIs are increasing their production at the expense of quality (NCES, 2012).

Changing demands are also affecting universities. Traditionally, investment in HE was considered good individual investment and translated into better jobs and higher salaries compared to individuals without HE (“the lifetime income difference between those who have a University degree and those who have not is as much as US\$590,000”, The Economist, June 28, 2014a). However, a university degree is no longer a guarantor of a good career. The 2008 crisis has increased the probability of employment not matching qualifications. The first few years after graduation can be difficult, although most graduates find a job that suits their qualifications three years after graduation (Reflex, 2007; ILO, 2012). At the same time, technology is having an impact on the education process (The Economist, June 28, 2014b). For several centuries, education involved groups of young people and one wise scholar meeting physically, in the same place over the course of a few months. Traditions, beliefs, values, practices, and local knowledge were passed orally from person to person. This education system forced students to be in direct contact with their instructors and the review of information was limited to rote memorizing (Baroncelli et al., 2014). The Internet and computer technology have disrupted this process and are allowing students access to knowledge and scholars, at any time, at low cost (or for free), across the world. Current technologies are having important consequences for students’ class attendance, class composition, and academic outcomes (Baroncelli et al., 2014).

In addition to these three main forces, in the context of Europe, we can add two political and normative changes, and the question of efficiency, both of which are changing HE. There is a need for an effective European HE space that will generate political and normative changes that affect the pedagogical dimension (how to teach) and the organizational structure (who, where, and when to teach). The cost and impact of HE is also a huge concern. What kinds of skill, knowledge, competence, and values

should be taught, for what objectives, and at what cost? The answers to these questions will affect the individual opportunities related to professional life (employability) and engagement with society (empowerment). HEIs must be aware of this reality and must adapt their teaching and training methods and course content, and focus on both individuals' economic productivity and the contribution they can make to increase life quality and living conditions of themselves and others in society.

Despite the increased access to HE, the Bologna process, and associated curriculum reforms aimed at making HE more transparent, there are still problems related to the match between the competencies acquired by graduates and the competencies required by employers in the labour market (García-Aracil and Van der Velden, 2008; Humburg and Van der Velden, 2014). The report *Employment in Europe 2010* (EC, 2010a) points out that new, young labour market entrants have borne the brunt of the economic crisis and have an increased risk of long-term unemployment. The current situation for European youth is difficult: according to Eurostat, youth unemployment rate have reached some 50% in some Member States such as Spain, and while the crisis has generally reduced the protective effect of education (Eurostat, 2014). The transition from education to the labour market has become more difficult and is involving longer jobless periods, and a higher incidence of temporary contracts and jobs that do not match qualifications. This is leading to a delay in embarking on an independent life, and lack of motivation to start a family or to participate actively in the society. In the long run, it is affecting future earnings, and increasing the risks of poverty and loss of human capital. As a result, Europe is faced with the emergence of a new “lost generation”, whose life perspectives are bleak, and whose situation can have dire long-term economic and social consequences leading to a decrease in the wellbeing and human development of all its citizens.

Against this background, this article discusses the basic features required to increase HE graduates' employability, and the role of HE in achieving this. The paper is structured as followed. Section 2 describes the role of HE in the knowledge-society. Sections 3 and 4 consider the concept of employability to obtain a better understanding of HE graduates' employability and some measures of graduate employability such as employers' requirements in the form of competencies, and graduates' job satisfaction which contribute to employment and progress in the workplace. Section 5 concludes with some thoughts about the challenges of HE in the knowledge society beyond the goal of preparing for entry to the workforce.

2. The Role of Higher Education

Debate on the role of education has always been central in society. This is because education, and in particular HE and its link to innovation (Odin and Manicas, 2004), play a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and the provision of highly skilled human capital and articulate citizens needed in society for economic growth and prosperity. In the move towards a knowledge society, an effective system of HE is crucial for the economy and society. However, ambiguity about what is meant by the knowledge society is being reflected in the tensions among the demands from the various stakeholders with an interest in "modernizing" HE (EC, 2013).

The HE landscape is becoming more and more diversified. The globalization and internationalization of HE is responding to a large-scale structural reorganization of the sector following agreement among European governments (the Bologna Declaration), adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and inclusion in the European Research Area which are requiring changes to the management and accountability of HE (Neira, 2013).

Within this framework, the European Union (EU) communication *A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (EC, 2010b) acknowledges that the HE system is essential for developing a more competitive and cohesive Europe, and that enhancing the performance of European HEIs is key to building a more competitive economy and a more cohesive society. The EU has a stated goal of 40% of all young people undertaking HE by 2020 (EC, 2010b). Currently, in some European countries, more than 50% of their young people, from a diversity of cultural, social and economic backgrounds are enrolled in or have graduated from HE. However, despite these positive moves towards a knowledge society, there are continuing problems related to access by vulnerable groups especially women in developing countries (Fundación Mujeres, 2009; ILO, 2012; Neira, 2013).

The mission of HE has always been to seek and share knowledge, and to provide professional education in order to improve the wellbeing of society and provide solutions to social problems (Barber, 1991; Newman et al., 2004; GUNI, 2008; Collini, 2012). Coit Gilman, the founder of Johns Hopkins University in the US maintains that HE will: “make for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in the schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospitals, less fraud in business, less folly in politics” (Harkavy, 2006: 10). This statement has been critiqued and the role of HE continues to be debated.

The role of HE in society’s development goes beyond different specific objectives, and presupposes reflection on the ideals of humanity and society (UNESCO, 1998, 2010): “Higher Education should be preparing humanity to deal with contemporary issues that, in their complexity, represent clear threats to sustainable ways of being” (Bawden, 2008: 65). From this perspective, a central issue is whether HEIs are performing adequately, especially in relation to training excellent professionals. We

need to analyze the impacts of HE on different life dimensions: cognitive and practical (learning and learning to know), social (learning to live together), and self-fulfilment (learning to be) (García-Aracil et al., 2007; Lozano and Boni, 2013). Excellent professionals and success in life are not just a question of good technical skills which attract high salaries, but also involve technical, social (or interpersonal), and personal (moral) skills.

In recent decades, more attention has been paid to the impact of HE on economic development and technological progress than its influence on social cohesion. Although some research studies consider social cohesion and democratic citizenship as positive effects of HE, they are addressed as secondary issues and positive externalities of the key objective of increasing human capital (Rychen and Salganik, 2003; NCEE, 2007; Reflex Project, 2007; ILO, 2012; OECD, 2012).

The impact of HE is multilevel and multidimensional. On the one hand, HE impacts directly on the lives and wellbeing of every individual, and on all the dimensions of her/his life - work, politics, social and cultural activities, cognitive and affective development, health, etc. On the other hand, the impact of HE is social and intergenerational. It benefits society at large by increasing economic development, social participation, social capital, and democratic systems, and reducing criminality (Neira et al., 2009; OECD, 2010). It is intergenerational because of the effect of educated parents on the opportunities available to their offspring child, including physical and health development (OECD, 2007).

One of the main indicators of the positive impact of HE is employment: “Higher levels of education generally lead to better prospects for employment across OECD countries” (OECD, 2012: 120) and around the world (ILO, 2012). However, it is not just the numbers employed, it is also the quality of the work and the salaries paid that

matter (EEOR, 2011; Malo, 2011). People with tertiary education enjoy more autonomy at work, are able to develop more innovative and creative activities, and earn between 23% and 55% more than workers with only basic or secondary education, and the gap widens with age (Reflex Project, 2007). Tertiary education also has a positive impact on reducing inequality in salaries, and particularly narrowing the gender gap in earnings (García-Aracil, 2008).

HE contributes to a safer, healthier, and fairer society:

Education can enhance social outcomes by helping individuals make informed and competent decisions. Education imparts knowledge and information, improves cognitive skills and strengthens socio-emotional capabilities, such as conscientiousness, self-efficacy and social skills. As such, education can help individuals pursue healthier lifestyles and increase their engagement in civil society. (OECD, 2012: 205).

HE empowers youth and allows its involvement in public life and politics (Reed, 2004; Nussbaum, 2010): “Adults with higher levels of educational attainment are, generally, more likely than those with lower levels of attainment to engage in social activities, exhibit greater satisfaction with life and vote” (OECD, 2012: 203).

In relation to equality and social cohesion, one of the objectives of the Lisbon agenda (2000) and the Europe 2020 strategy (EC, 2010b) is social cohesion. HE is considered to be a public good and a public responsibility. HE enhances social outcomes and social mobility and generates cultural values and norms conducive to social cohesion (OECD, 2010).

As a result, the reality of HE is not clear cut in relation to the economic and social dimensions. However, considering these dimensions makes it easier to identify the potentials and weaknesses of the contribution of HE: “The task of universities is to

create new knowledge and to educate people to be creative in their personal development, in their economic activity at the workplace and as citizens of a civil society” (EUA, 2011: 1).

Following Barnett’s (2000) notion of a radically unknowable world and super-complexity in society and economy, HE systems should be cosmopolitan, should be beyond institutions, should be guided by the principles of collaboration not competition, should seek to critically reflect and meet the goals of all in society, should enable virtual organization and delivery, should build links across and beyond institutional barriers, should exploit new technology, should be oriented to exploit synergies, should enable transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, should develop new partnerships, should support creativity across all disciplines and practices, should be daring, confident and forward looking, should promote freedom of speech, should respond to criticism, risk, debate, and dialogue, and should be responsive to the needs and desires of the community.

3. Employability of Graduates

3.1 Concept of Employability

The Bologna Process understands employability as "the ability to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market" (Bologna Follow-up Group, 2009: 9). Therefore, employability implies three abilities for graduates: gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required (COM, 2013). So, employability refers to the capacity of graduates to function in a job, and should not be confused only with job acquisition. Employment is synonymous with having a job, whereas employability is associated with possessing the qualities that facilitate and enhance employment opportunities.

This new paradigm of enhancing graduates' employability is changing the HEIs across Europe. Given the rapid changes in the labour market and in required competencies (types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes), employability refers also to the updating of competencies by those already in employment, and therefore does not concern only recent graduates. In this context, HEIs have an important role in continuing education and training (COM, 2013).

Employability differs depending on the country and subject area. Employers interpret employability in ways that give more emphasis to the individual's work experience, work placement characteristics, and on-the-job training. A student embarking on HE straight after secondary education, has a different understanding of employability to someone returning to HE after several years of active work life. Thus, the concept of employability is dynamic and does not correspond only to being employed but also includes self-employment, and skilled workforce mobility. One of the main challenges related to the Bologna Process is to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA by raising the level of initial qualifications and maintaining and renewing a skilled workforce to foster its employability.

Thus, although the notion of employability is generally understood as the propensity for graduates to obtain jobs, there are some alternative indicators following Harvey's (2001) proposal, which include employability based on graduates' competencies, and graduate satisfaction with their jobs, both of which are used as indicators of employability related to individuals' needs to maintain employment and to progress in the workplace.

3.2 Employability based on competencies

The OECD signaled in their 2012 report that without adequate skills, technological progress will not translate into economic growth, and countries can no longer compete

in an increasingly knowledge-based global society. In the context of the economic crisis, and high level of young unemployment, skills are the key to the success of an education system (OECD, 2012). Europe's 2020 strategy aims to achieve a 75% employment rate by 2020. Despite the trend towards more highly skilled jobs being slowed by the current lower economic growth, the forecast is that the share of jobs employing higher-educated labour will increase (CEDEFOP, 2013).

The role of HE is "to equip students with the knowledge, skills and competencies that they need in the workplace and that employers require; and to ensure that people have more opportunities to maintain or renew those skills and attributes throughout their working lives" (Bologna Follow-up Group, 2010: 9). This involves the acquisition of generic skills and competencies such as analytical skills, communication skills, ethical awareness, the ability to assess risk over a longer time perspective, and the capacity to reason at a level of abstraction that enables further learning. The balance between knowledge on the one hand, and transferable skills on the other hand, is a delicate one since good professional knowledge and understanding remain the sine qua non for employment (Humburg and Van der Velden, 2014).

According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), skill is the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems (COM, 2014). In the context of the EQF, skills can be cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive, and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools, and instruments).

Policy makers have recognized the importance of investing in education and training to improve existing stocks of skills, and there is increased awareness of universities as a key actor in the provision of skills. This emphasis on skills is reflected in the EU 2020 strategy, which aims at "smart, sustainable, inclusive growth" through improved

coordination of national and European policy (COM, 2010b). Key targets include raising population employment levels, increasing investment in research and development and innovation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing school drop-out rates, and reducing poverty, all of which directly or indirectly imply an improved knowledge base.

A flagship initiative of the 2020 strategy is “New Skills for New Jobs”, which aims to stimulate key stakeholders to better anticipate changes in the skills required, to achieve a better match between the available skills and those required in the labour market, and to bridge the gap between the education and work worlds. Only 50%-60% of graduates across all countries and fields of study indicated that their study program had provided a good basis for entering the labour market and developing new skills on the job, with some 15%-20% indicating the opposite. Individuals with the lowest level of foundation skills are 1.8 times more likely to be unemployed than individuals with the highest level of foundation or so called “21st century skills” such as the “4 C’s” of Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication, and Collaboration, and others essential for absorbing knowledge and good work performance (OECD, 2012; Humburg and Van der Velden, 2014).

Employers highlight team working, sector-specific, communication, and computer skills, in addition to good reading, writing, analytical and problem-solving skills, and the ability to adapt to new situations (Humburg and Van der Velden, 2014). Formulation, synthesis, analytical, and argumentation abilities can be developed within a wide range of curricula and mix of pedagogical approaches (Humburg et al., 2013). Teamworking ability especially in interdisciplinary teams, and the capacity to apply knowledge in practice are proposed by the Tuning Report (González and Wagenaar, 2003) as key elements in convergence to the EHEA. Allen and Van der Velden (2012)

point out that these 21st century skills do not exist in a vacuum, but form part of a complete interdependent package comprising basic and specific competencies to increase graduates' employability.

3.3 Employability based on job satisfaction

While employability audits are based on different conceptualizations of employability, graduate satisfaction surveys can be useful tools aims to measure parts of Harvey's (2001) definition. There are a few comparative graduate surveys that deal with employability and job satisfaction in Europe, respectively CHEERS (*Careers after Higher Education – A European Research Survey, 1999*) and REFLEX (*The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society, 2005*) projects (Teichler, 2007; Reflex Project, 2007).

In its general formulation the human capital theory treats education as an investment that can produce several different types of returns. The relationship between education and earnings has become a fundamental tool but it has been found that the explanatory power of the simple human capital earnings model increases when non-monetary benefits are taken into account (Mora et al., 2007). Non-monetary job benefits are difficult to identify and measure because most are subjective, that is, they depend on personal preferences. However, they are real benefits because they add to worker's general wellbeing and quality of life, and consequently, must be taken into account for a rational analysis of educational investment.

One way to consider monetary and non-monetary benefits is by analyzing job satisfaction. Locke (DATE and page) defines job satisfaction as “a pleasure or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences”. Satisfaction has been said to depend variously on the individual's expectations, needs (physical and psychological), and values (Locke, 1976; Landry, 2000). Researchers

propose two general explanations of job satisfaction. The first attributes differences in job satisfaction to the characteristics of the job; the second attributes them to the characteristics of the worker. These two models have been described as job conditions versus worker attributes, situational versus dispositional determinants, job rewards - - which includes the various types of benefits and utilities that people obtain from their jobs versus work values which reflect not only the importance that individuals place on these rewards but also the centrality of work to one's life and identity (Mora et al., 2007).

CHEERS and REFLEX are multi-country data sets based on major representative surveys that compare the situation of graduates from HEIs in several European countries including Italy, Spain, France, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Portugal, Belgium and Estonia. Both surveys are based on written questionnaires which ask about the relationship between HE and employment. The respondents are individuals who graduated from tertiary education four/five years prior to the survey.

Both surveys ask the respondents: Overall, to what extent are you satisfied with your current job? Scores range from 5 (very satisfied) to 1 (very dissatisfied). The data show that the level of job satisfaction is quite similar across countries (on average 3.7 points for all the European countries included in these surveys). This finding is surprising if we expect graduate job satisfaction to be determined by similar employment and work situation characteristics across countries (e.g. unemployment rates, annual gross income, proportion of temporary contracts, etc.).

Job satisfaction among different European countries seems to be relatively stable despite great differences in the labour market situations of their young graduates. This result confirms that job satisfaction, as a personal perception, is closely related to job

expectations. Individuals compare their situation with that of those in their immediate environment, and draw conclusions based on their relative position. This makes it rather surprising that the national unemployment rate is positively related to individual satisfaction (Mora et al., 2007; García-Aracil, 2008), and suggests that employability evaluations need to indicate areas where the emphasis should be on acquisition of particular skills.

4. Challenges for HE in the knowledge society: Beyond preparing graduates for the workforce

While education can enhance human capital, people benefit from education in ways that go beyond preparation for the workplace and include enhanced wellbeing and freedom, improved economic production, mobilization of resources, and influence on social change. This is because education, and HE and its links with innovation in particular, play a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and articulate citizens required in Europe to create jobs, and promote economic growth and prosperity.

In line with the Europe 2020 strategy, HE is being challenged to provide a broader engagement – to provide economic as well as civic, environmental, social, and cultural development. The recent *Rethinking Education* (COM, 2012) strategy, challenges HE to confront and satisfy the demands of a society constituted by difference and conflict, and to respond with actions and ideas that critically engage and encourage diversity. This suggests that the nature of knowledge and the ability to understand new societal demands – which stress “contestation”, “fragility”, “innovation”, “entrepreneurism,” and “creativity” – indicate that modern societies’ demands are underpinned by a desire for a diversity of values, opinions, and paradigms. These attributes and skills can be acquired by students through awareness of difference, engagement with conflict, and

search for collaboration across disciplines or transdisciplinarity. This collaboration must be brave enough to engage with the context surrounding HE, and the engagement that crosses institutions, industries, modes of communication, and national borders. This suggests a world in flux – that is neither constrained nor ordered, - but rather is critically engaged and augmented.

In the context of these new societal demands, future HE graduates will need to be creative, autonomous, reflexive, innovative, entrepreneurial, confident, collaborative, and connected in a multicultural context. They must be able to apply critical thinking to knowledge, action, and self-reflection, and act in contexts that span the epistemological, economic, social, individual, and international dimensions.

In the case of these demands and challenges, we consider that a urgent complete the mainstream competence approach with the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 1997; García-Aracil and Van der Velden, 2008; Lozano et al., 2012). The capabilities approach considers that education should be aimed at developing the individual's capacity to be “fully human” (Nussbaum, 1997, 2002). The complementarity between competencies and capabilities is both a theoretical and a practical issue. The competencies for professional success and civic ability are strong related. Professional education (competences) and global citizen education (cooperation) are often seen as being opposed but can be combined in HE. In developing these competencies and capabilities HEIs can empower young people to become active agents in their lives (personal and professional) and develop their ability to act as agents of change in their social context.

We would suggest that improving graduates' competencies and capabilities can alter their self-perceptions and status whilst also increasing their employability, income, wealth, achievements, resources, mental and physical energy, and social relations and

encourage engaged citizenship, all of which contributes to shaping individual living conditions. Developing these competencies and capabilities in HEIs is a way to empower graduates to become active agents in their lives (personal and professional) and to develop graduates' abilities to act as agents of change in their social contexts. A major attribute of an efficient professional and autonomous citizen is the capacity to adapt to a plural and dynamic context and also to implement change. This requires graduates to be flexible and adaptable but also strong enough to forge their own path through a complex world. HEIs need to take account of these essential demands in their contribution to supporting economic development and social empowerment of their graduates.

5. Conclusions

Increasing graduates' employability requires comprehensive and forward-looking competencies and capabilities strategies; this is particularly urgent in the context of the global economic crisis which has led to many HE graduates facing significant barriers to employment. It is clear that efforts to achieve a better match between the competencies acquired in HE and those needed in the labour market may not per se be sufficient to improve the labour market prospects of all graduates. These efforts must be complemented by economic, social, and cultural policies to promote stronger and more sustainable growth in graduate employability.

While education can enhance human capital, people benefit from education in ways that go beyond preparation for the workplace and include enhanced wellbeing and freedom, improved economic production, better mobilization of resources, and influence on social change. This is because education and HE and its links to with innovation in particular, play a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and

in providing the highly skilled human capital and articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth, and prosperity.

HE has many purposes beyond the acquisition of concrete skills required in the workplace. It develops the ability to reason and debate critical questions and issues, to place facts in a broader context, to consider the moral implications of actions and choices, to communicate knowledge and questions effectively, and to nurture habits that promote lifelong-learning behaviors outside the formal academic setting. We suggest that the concept of competence should be enriched through the integration of the professional, social, cultural, and political dimensions.

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