

Key Findings of Tracer Studies in the Past and Future Challenges

Contribution to the International Conference
“Experiences with Link and Match in Higher Education.
Results of Tracer Studies Worldwide (EXLIMA)”

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This Conference Brings Together

- Experienced experts of graduate surveys and of the use of the results of graduate surveys
- New experts involved in graduate surveys and the interpretation of the results
- Policy makers and practitioners in higher education interested in drawing conclusions from the results of graduate surveys

The Keynote Speakers of this International Conference, Ulrich Teichler and Harald Schomburg,

- are members of a research team at the International Centre for Higher Education Research of the University of Kassel (INCHER-Kassel), Germany,
- are involved in graduate surveys in Germany for 30 years,
- have initiated the first international comparative graduate survey and cooperate closely with experts of graduate surveys in many European countries and Japan,
- have been involved in training programmes for graduate surveys in many countries world-wide.

We Can Tell You

- optimistic stories and
- pessimistic stories

about opportunities and problems of conducting graduate surveys, analysing and interpreting the findings, and drawing practical conclusions.

A Short Terminological Note

Different terms are customary for the same thing:

- Graduate surveys
- Alumni surveys
- Tracer studies
- More recently even: tracking graduates

Growing Public Interest

The public interest in the employment and work outcome of higher education has grown over the years in Europe as a consequence of

- *higher education expansion*, because the expanding lower level programmes and graduates are expected in most European countries to be more directly prepared for the world of work (cf. in the *Bologna Process* the “employability debate” and the concern about the professional relevance of university bachelor)
- *growing utilitarian expectations* harboured with research to higher education (cf. in the *Lisbon Process* the call to make Europe the “most competitive economy” with the help of knowledge enhancement)
- *increasing pressures to provide evidence* about proper processes and desirable outcomes (cf. the popularity of terms and measures such as “evaluation”, “accreditation”, “accountability” or “evidence-based policy”).

Increasing Importance as Feedback on Meso-Level

Nationally representative graduate surveys have been complemented recently by studies addressing graduate employment and work of graduates from individual universities and study programmes

- Feedback for university management
- Feedback for those in charge of study provisions and conditions
- Feedback for prospective students and actual students of the individual universities and study programmes

The Value of Graduate Surveys

- Information on graduate employment and work as general feedback to HE
- Understanding the diversity of graduate employment and work instead of “match” vs. “mismatch” dichotomy
- Information how graduates view study conditions and provisions retrospectively
- Understanding links between learning, competences, job requirements and work
- Measuring determinants of employment/work success
- Providing feedback for specific institutional profiles and for various values

The Value for Different Actors and Persons

- For students' choices and actions
- For institutional quantitative-
structural strategies
- For institutional profiles
- For curriculum development
- For evaluation
- For career counselling and other
career services
- For alumni relationships

Simplistic Information

A small range of “objective” data on

- employment (employment status, occupational category and income), and
- higher education (type of higher education institution, level of degree, field of study and individual institution)

is too simplistic because analyses want to discuss

- generation and utilisation of knowledge
- the extent and the dimensions of professional impact of higher education

Therefore, simplistic data are constantly over-interpreted.

Highly Ideological Interpretations

- “Vertical match” paradigm
- “Horizontal match” paradigm
- “Vocationalism is beautiful” paradigm
- Neglect of power of professions and organisations
- Neglect of systemic limitations of information
- Neglect of cultural variety between countries
- Over-interpretation of the role of HE in generating the graduates’ competences
- The misinterpretation of elements of HE having professional impact

Two Major Ambivalences in the Worldwide Debates on Higher Education and the World of Work

The quantitative ambivalence:

- On the one hand: Expansion of higher education is beneficial for economic growth
- On the other hand: “Over-education” (employment problems faced by graduates)

The functional ambivalence:

- On the one hand: Call for professional relevance of study programmes and study or for “employability”
- On the other hand: Concerns about too little emphasis on academic learning, general education, and benefits beyond the labour market, about sub-ordination on current employers’ and neglect of critical function as well as of preparation for indeterminate work tasks and of innovation in general

Actors in HE are Likely to Misunderstand the Data and the Possible Conclusions to be Drawn

Most frequent misunderstandings:

- Belief in the “match” – “mismatch” dichotomy
- Belief in the “employability” approach
- Wish to imitate “world-class universities”
- Over-estimation of general competences

The “Match” – “Mismatch” Dichotomy

- Expectation of a close “vertical” link: between “level of educational attainment” and income/position
- Expectation of a close “horizontal” link: between field of study and occupational category
- Accepted or deliberately promoted expansion of higher education surpasses growth of “typical graduate jobs”
- Dynamics of the world of work undermines chances of a close horizontal link
- Rapid growth of graduates in jobs neither indicating “match” nor “mismatch”
- What are the potentials of graduates in such situations?

The “Employability” (Mis-) Understanding

The inclinations:

- Adaptation according to characteristics of the most successful graduates
- Adaptation to the whereabouts of graduates from most prestigious universities
- Adaptation to presumed employers’ expectations

Instead:

- Broader function of universities: cultivating personality, innovative value of non-instrumental teaching and learning, educating change agents
- “Fitness for purpose” approach

Character of Good Graduate Surveys

1. Various criteria of employment and work success
2. Collecting information suitable to challenge ideological approaches (“match”, “employability”, etc.)
3. Including retrospective students’ views of study conditions and provisions
4. Approaching the links between learning, competences, and job requirements
5. Measuring determinants of graduate employment and work
6. Providing information relevant for the specific profile of the individual HEI or study programme
7. Having the diverse values of students and of higher education institutions in mind

Criteria of Employment and Work Success

- Smooth transition: length of search, efforts in the search project)
- Major objective measures of employment “success”: income, occupational category/position
- Employment conditions: e.g. part-time contract, short-term contract, social benefits
- Work success: e.g. interesting work, demanding work, changes of further learning
- Links between study and employment work: appropriate employment, utilisation of competences
- Links between orientations and actual work
- Job satisfaction

Links between Learning, Competences and Job Requirements

- Various types of competences and job requirements to be addressed (disciplinary and professional specialisation, general competences, values and approaches related to work)
- Comparison of competences at time of graduation with current job requirements
- Reflecting respondents' biases
- Analysing links between study conditions and provisions as well as study activities on the one hand and competences on the other hand

Measuring Determinants of Graduate Employment and Work

- Socio-biographic background
- Prior schooling and competences at entry
- Study provisions
- Study conditions
- Study behaviour and life as student
- Motives and orientations
- Credentials (institution, fields, grades, etc.)
- Competences at graduation
- Search and transition

Providing Information Relevant for the Specific Profile of the Individual HEI or Study Programme

- Realistic benchmarks for employment success: comparison with HEIs of similar profile and quality as well as similar labour market conditions
- Specific questions related to the institution's/programme's profile: Examining "fitness for purpose"

Having the Students' /Graduates' Values in Mind

- Links between orientations and actual work situation for various orientations/values
- The homo oeconomicus and the status seeker
- The “professional”: expectation of interesting work and high status
- The specialist/expert: utilisation of knowledge
- The academically minded person: Interest in research and HE
- The person wishing to improve the world
- The work–life balance seeker
- The comfortable life fan
- Etc.

Conclusion

We need

- Relatively long questionnaires
- Relatively complex data analysis
- To employ specialists for the operational dimensions of graduates surveys
- To employ specialists for the interpreting and drawing conclusions
- An intensive discussion among the various actors (employers, managers, academics, students, career officers) in order to interpret the results appropriately
- Strong management support for making all this happen