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Employability of non-traditional students and graduates – a comparative report between countries

This comparative European report arises from an Erasmus + project entitled *Enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in HE (EMPLOY)*. In this report policies concerning employability vis-à-vis higher education (HE) with a special interest for non-traditional students are compared and discussed. The report includes EU policy issues and policies related to the different national contexts of the countries involved in the project, national statistics and relevant research for each country. It is based on country reports from Ireland (Finnegan & O’Neil, 2015), Poland (Czubak-Kock, Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2015), Portugal (Fragoso & Valadas, 2015), Spain (Gonzalez-Montegudo, Padilla-Carmona & Liñán, 2015), Sweden (Bron & Thunborg, 2015) and the UK (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015). By non-traditional students we draw on our definition of non-traditional used in a previous EU project on access and retention entitled RANLHE. By non-traditional we mean students who are under-represented in HE and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, those who are first in their family to enter HE, students from low-income families, those from particular minority ethnic groups, those living in what have traditionally been low participation areas as well as mature students, women and those with a disability.

The concept of employability

The employability of higher education graduates is a concept used in relation to European policy as well as in the different countries, and is becoming a priority in HE policy debates. In the OECD, as well as in the EU, there has been a shift from the concept of employment towards the concept of employability. According to Fejes (2010), it also means a shift from the state and employers’ responsibility for issues of employment towards an individual responsibility for his or her own employability. Even if this shift relates to ongoing changes in Europe as a whole, and especially decisions made in relation to the Bologna process and its development, there is no consensus about the definition of employability. This is verified by the Eurydice report (2014), and by Yorke (2006) as well as by the different partner countries’ reports involved in the EMPLOY project. As the Eurydice Report (2014, p. 62) states:

Employability is a complex concept encompassing many definitions and approaches... However, the emphasis is on: - the importance of employability for all students and graduates, and also” placing “employability within the widening participation agenda, and the potential role of higher education institutions in enhancing employability.

In the Eurydice Report (2014), employability is defined in relation to graduates' transition to the labour market after finishing higher education. There are two main perspectives, an employment-centered and a competence-centered perspective. The employment-centred perspective focuses on “a combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or enter employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their career” (p.4). Similarly, within the Bologna Process, the term is understood as:

... the ability [of graduates] to gain initial meaningful employment, or to become self-employed, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market (Working Group on Employability 2009, p. 5). (Eurydice Report, 2014, p. 62).

The competence-centered definition instead focuses on “the skills and competences higher education students gain during their studies”. Yorke (2006, p. 8.) for example defines employability as:

...a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations'. Such skills and competences are usually understood as needed (and required) by employers. In essence, the 'student exhibits employability in respect of a job if he or she can demonstrate a set of achievements relevant to that job (Yorke 2006, p. 8) (Ibid. p. 62).

The Eurydice report (2014) claims that some European countries use the employment-centered perspective, others the competence-centered and still others a combination of the two perspectives. In figure 1 different EU countries are related to the two perspectives.

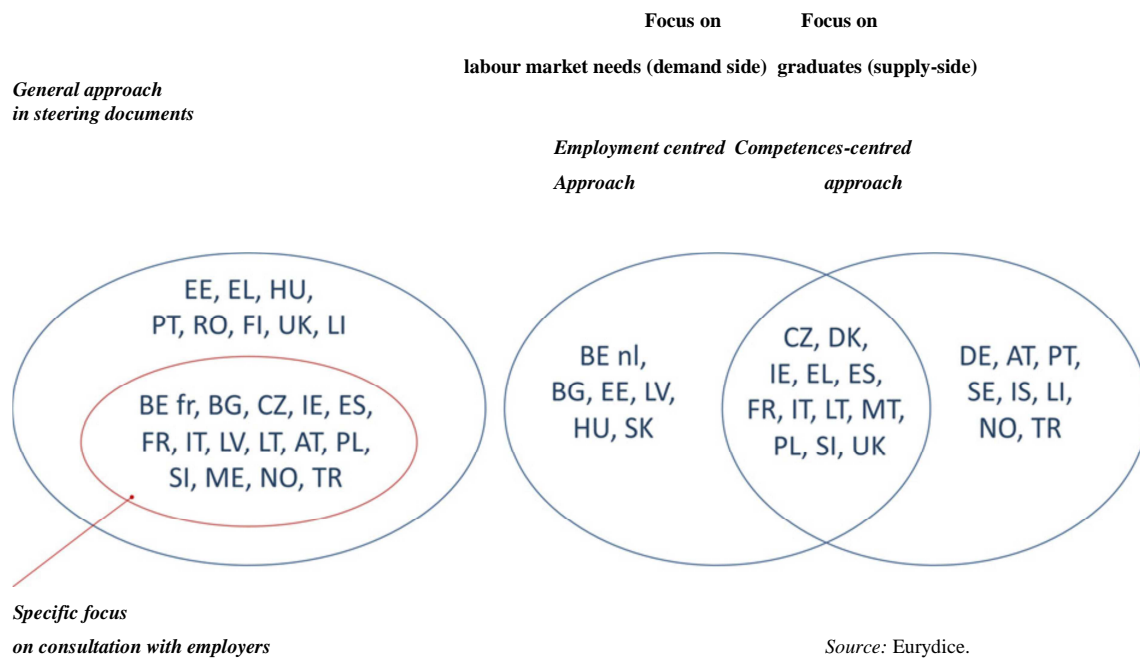


Figure 1: Perspectives and approaches on employability in higher education, 2012/13 (Eurydice, 2014, pp 65)

The figure shows that most countries within the EU, and most of the countries in our project, combine two perspectives on employability, i.e. UK, Spain, Poland, and Ireland. However, Portugal and Sweden use a competence centred approach. (Eurydice, 2014).

It is stressed, however, that *employability* is not the same as *employment*, even if the employment-centred definitions sometimes blur the difference, when using employment rates as proxies for measuring employability. Competence-centred definitions – especially if formulated as in Yorke (2006) helps to clarify the relationship between employability and employment: where certain skills and competences make graduates 'more likely' to gain employment, but that is not a guarantee". Indeed, employment certainly does not only depend on the quality of education graduates received during their studies. Concerning the different perspectives on employability there are differences concerning how countries measure employability performance and how they encourage HEI's to improve their employability performance:

The most common way is through quality assurance: the majority of systems now require higher education institutions to submit employability-related information in quality assurance procedures. In addition, several countries have established incentives for higher education institutions to improve their employability performance, with one prominent mechanism being to make employability-related information public for both current and prospective students. In some countries, public funding levels are linked with employability performance. (Eurydice, 2014, p. 11).

The Eurydice report looks at how European countries reflect on employability concept in their steering documents for higher education and stresses that “very few countries define employability directly or use the term explicitly. Even translating the originally English term into many other languages might be difficult” (Ibid, p 63). In the country reports there is evidence that the concept of employability is not well defined even if sometimes used in policy documents. The **Irish team** describes the situation in Ireland in the following words:

In the articles and reports cited here ‘employability’ is used in a very simple and somewhat uncritical manner to denote the decisions and choices individuals can make to improve their prospects and outcomes in the labour market by acquiring certain credentials, skills and dispositions. Also nearly all the examples we can find of the use of the term in an Irish context assume employability is necessarily linked to education and training”...”Therefore employability is best described as an emerging policy term in Ireland which remains quite ill-defined. (Finnegan & O’Neill, 2015, p. 1)

The Spanish team takes their point of departure in looking at policies of employability in regards to non-traditional students. However, the term employability is taken for granted and is in opposition to being unemployed. (González-Monteagudo, Padilla-Carmona & Liñán, 2015). In **the UK report**, we read that “However, there does not appear to be a consensus as to the meaning of the term employability. At a conceptual level there are also differences in approaches” (p. 6). Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos (2015) continue:

Most of the definitions focus on the individual student but as Brown et al. (2002) assert a student does not exist in a vacuum but interacts with others and also institutions in particular contexts. Any definition of employability needs to take into account the micro, meso and macro levels. Employability and securing a job in the graduate labour market has also to do, and drawing on Bourdieu’s work, with the levels of cultural, social and economic capitals a student brings with them to the university and develops while they are there (Ibid. p.8).

Employability is also about managing the transition from learning to earning, from education to the world of work, although for adult students this may not be the first transition into work. Students feel increasingly the need to be 'employable' and to prepare themselves for firstly finding a suitable job and ensuring that they are capable of doing that job (Clarke, 2008) by assembling a portfolio of skills, knowledge and experiences. It is stressed that in post-industrial societies a job is no longer for life and research by Leathwood (2006) indicates that graduates are expecting the labour market to be uncertain and unpredictable. Learning to be employable and flexible in the labour market will, for many, not be confined to something you prepare for in universities but will continue throughout working lives to enable them to prepare for future career transitions. Graduates need to be lifelong learners and engage in professional development throughout their lives if they are going to survive and thrive in the labour market at a particular level. (Ibid. p.8).

The Portuguese team addresses the issue of definition in the following way (Fragoso & Valadas, 2015):

The immense public visibility of the term employability is recent, although the concept itself is used in different senses for some decades now, as we can see in Gazier (1990). The centrality of employability in a number of different contexts depicts the severe crisis of the labour market all over the world, the reduction of employment and the increasing precarious character of work (Helal and Rocha, 2011). So employability became an issue not only in economy, but also in the labour market debates. In recent years, the concept has gain centrality in educational policies, especially in higher education (HE). (Ibid. p.2)

Thus, employability is treated here as the term, which involves individuals' pursuit to get employment.

Even **the Polish team** (Czubak-Koch, Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2015) describes employability in terms of employment as being a general indicator of the usefulness of a degree, but also as graduates' employment in long time perspective they do not seem to define it either.

In **Sweden** a competence-based perspective is used in relation to the need of the labour market. However, there is no explicit definition of employability by the Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) in Sweden (Bron & Thunborg, 2015). From the UKÄ, however, it is stated that:

...the majority of the graduates who gained a footing in the labour market in 2009, about whose occupation there is information had, jobs that were closely linked to the field in which

they qualified” (UKÄ, 2013 p 43). From this statement, employability seems to be related to students’ establishment at the labour market 1–2 years after the award of qualifications. (Bron & Thunborg, 2015, p. 4).

The conclusion is that employability seems to be a policy concept vaguely and differently used in different countries claiming the importance for the individual student to be responsible for his/her own employment by having the right skills for the labour market or increasing their chances of getting employment (Fejes, 2010). There also seems to be an issue for HEIs to enhance employability for the students through a closer cooperation with the labour market. Moreover, and irrespectively of the emphasised perspectives, European countries usually discuss employability-related concerns from the perspective of higher education institutions or the student population as a whole. There is no definition focusing directly on non-traditional students nor the relation to widening access of higher education and its consequences for employment.

European and national policies for employability and non-traditional students in HE

Despite the fact that there is no consensus concerning the definition of the concept of employability, there is an increasing interest for employability in higher education policies on a European as well as at national policy level. In this section we firstly, discuss employability in relation to the Bologna process, further developed through the Louvain la Neuve Communiqué (2009), the Budapest Declaration (2010) and the EU agenda 2020. Secondly, we discuss the policies of employability in relation to widening access to HE and the student population and its relation to issues of employability. Thirdly, we discuss the issue of employability in relation to challenges in different countries mostly concerning economic and social changes in Europe and its implication for HE.

Employability within the Bologna process

The aim of the Bologna process was to create a European Higher Education to promote mobility, employability and attractiveness of Europe as an education region by establishing a common structure and a common credit system and as Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos (2015) point out: “it is of a central concern for EU, national governments and HE institutions and for the Bologna process (The European Higher Education, 2012: Bologna Implementation Report) (ibid. p.1). The Bologna Declaration, established in 1999 has led to the creation of a European Higher Education Area with the aim of creating a more unified system of higher education

across Europe while still respecting national and cultural diversity. In EU (2009), it was clarified that:

... employability is defined as the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market. Employability has been one of the main objectives of the Bologna Process from the very start. Each cycle of higher education should be relevant to the labour market. Further dialogue is needed between public and private employers, students, academics, higher education institutions and governments, especially related to first cycle qualifications in order to realise this goal fully (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015, p. 2).

According to Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos (2015):

The determination to change the nature of universities within the European Union was further enhanced at the Leuven and Louvain la Neuve Communiqué in 2009. It stressed the need for universities to 'equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills, competences they need throughout their professional lives' (2009: 2). To achieve this, a closer partnership is advocated between universities, employers and governments. Economic changes at a national, European and global level, as well as an increased economic competitiveness and a move towards knowledge-based societies (Castells, 2001) has thus created a closer relationship between higher education and the labour market (Morley, 2001) (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015, p. 1).

In the Bucharest Communiqué (2012):

The centre of the priorities was "enhancing graduates' employability, meaningful implementation of learning outcomes and coherent implementation of structural reform (qualifications, frameworks, recognition, QA, transparency and improving cooperation between employers, students and higher education institutions, especially in the development of study programmes that help increase the innovation, entrepreneurial and research potential of graduates" (Czubak-Koch, et al. 2015, p. 2).

Finally, there is, according to Bron & Thunborg (2015) the agenda for Europe 2020 with five headline targets related to employment:

In the agenda for Europe 2020, the EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, five headline targets relates to employment and two of them are directly focusing the higher education sector, i.e. Research and Development and Higher Education respectively. It is claimed that 3 per cent of GDP is to be invested in research and development, the other headline target concerns raising the level of educational attainment in the EU. One of the quantitative educational targets is that at least 40 per cent of the 30–34 age cohort have at least two years of tertiary education in 2020 (Bron & Thunborg, 2015, p. 3 & p.10).

Even if the top priorities in the Leuven and Louvain la Neuve Communiqué in 2009 were related to both the widening of participation in HE and employability they were not specifically related to each other and thereby non-traditional students were not focused.

National policies for employability

In looking at the policies from the partner countries, it seems like HE is the solution to all economic and social problems of society. In several of the country reports it is stated that students with an undergraduate degree from HE are better off in relation to being and staying employed, to have a better income and a better life. It is also obvious, in most policy document reported from the countries, that this is related to issues of widening access to higher education. In some countries, as for example Spain and Portugal, policies are related to policies for unemployment in general, whereas other countries focus especially on the policies for HE and the thoughts behind them.

According to Eurydice Report (2014, p. 62):

The policy issues related to employability have a dual aspect. Firstly, it is crucial to strengthen employability for all students, and this has been identified as an issue of importance for all public authorities as well as for the EU 2020 agenda. Secondly, that employability is an integral element of the widening participation agenda in higher education (Thomas and Jones, 2007). Widening participation does not stop at providing access to students from underrepresented groups (or in other words, to 'non-traditional' learners), but has to include measures ensuring that such students complete their studies and have a successful transition to the labour market (Ibid.). This highlights the complex role of higher education institutions in the context of employability. (Eurydice, 2014, p. 62).

Furthermore, there are only a few countries focusing on non-traditional students in their national policies for employability. These are Estonia, Greece and the United Kingdom. In Estonia, there are measures, for example, for extending the study period for students not

proficient enough in the official language, and for people with disabilities or small/disabled children. In Greece, specific actions aiming to increase students' practical training include special arrangements for students with special needs, minorities, foreigners or students coming from other vulnerable social groups. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), students with disabilities have specific access to careers education, information and guidance. In addition, in England, in 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided funding for a programme to support internships for disadvantaged students with the aim of widening access to the professions". However, different countries have different concerns relating to policies concerning employability and non-traditional students.

Ireland

From the Irish team (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015) the policies concerning employability is described as follows:

... knowledge is viewed as the key source of competitive advantage in today's advanced economies (GOI, 2010, p. 8). This notion of knowledge and human capital is part of the conceptual underpinning of a range of policy documents including the *National Development Plan 2000-2006*, the *National Development Plan 2007-2013*, the *Strategy of Innovation and Science, 2006-2013*, *Investing for Growth and Jobs, 2010-16*, *Building Ireland's Smart Economy*, *Action Plan for Jobs*. Right at the heart of this vision of the knowledge society stands the modern university which, we are told, was crucial to Ireland's economic growth in the 1990's and needs to now evolve into more productive, flexible and inclusive space. It has also noted repeatedly that HE graduates are better paid and less likely to be unemployed than people without these credentials (Cassells, 2015) (Ibid. p. 4)

Poland

According to the Polish report (Czubak-Koch et al. 2015), the Polish HE system has radically been transformed, but their policies were not changed until 2011 when a new law concerning HE started to be implemented:

The HE system was reformed in Poland 2011, after three year of negotiations with different relevant stakeholders. It focused on the lack of pro-quality schemes in the funding system, low level of internationalization, inappropriate structure of study programmes run at the Polish HEI's, complicated scientific career paths, deficiencies in the management system and weak linkages between HEI's and the labour market. This was followed by an improved reform the year 2014. (Ibid. p. 2) ... When a new law on higher education came into force on the 1st of

October 2011, its key pillars were: programme autonomy, learning outcomes oriented teaching and learning process and linkages between HEIs and the labour market. Increase of programme autonomy and learning outcomes oriented education was built in relation with better fit to the European market areas due to the connections between National Qualification Framework, based on a comparable to the European one (Ibid. p. 3.).

More specifically, the linkages between higher education institutions and the labour market were introduced consisting of a stronger orientation towards the market with a more practice-oriented profile, more flexibility regarding teaching staff, involvement of employers in shaping curricula, and dual education models where half of the study programme is delivered in the workplace, special councils with representatives of the regional authorities and the regional business community, tracking graduates' employment outcomes, ombudsman for graduate affairs and a focus on career centres (Ibid.).

From the Polish report (Ibid.) HE policy seems to a high extent to be related to expanding the relationship with the labour market and despite the idea of autonomy central requirements seems to have increased.

Portugal

In Portugal, the agenda for employability could be related to two different policy agendas, one for unemployment and the other for HE, i.e. Active Employment Policies and policies for implementing the Bologna process. Furthermore, the Bologna process gave an opportunity for the Portuguese state to apply two central measures for control of the HE system. Fragoso and Valadas (2015) states:

The Active Employment Policies consisting of defining new measures to keep workers active, creating new jobs, increasing the employability or forcing an occupation of the ones unemployed. The state tends to assure processes so that individuals can have a fast adaption to the challenges they face. That is, there is an individual responsibility of workers regarding their success in the integration to the labour market (Valadas, 2012) Activation can therefore mean all social policy initiatives to promote the participation of workers in the labour market and stimulate employability, including the reinsertion of people who live dependent on subsidies" (ibid, p. 2). ... A number of authors state that in Portugal the implementation of the Bologna process forced the approaching of HE to the labour market, aiming the creation of better conditions or perspectives of graduate employability (CRUP, 2015), sometimes as a consequence of new policies for student of graduate mobility (Goncalves, Carreira, Valadas

and Sequeira, 2006). (Ibid, p. 3) ... The process of Bologna was also an opportunity for the Portuguese state to apply two central measures. The first was supported by the idea that university's autonomy had the consequence of "producing" too many degrees and, hence too many graduates could find a job because of the mismatch between universities and the labour market. So a new state agency was created to control HE offer (Ibid. p. 3).

A conclusion of Portuguese policy is that HE policies, to a large extent, relate on the one hand to the Bologna process and on the other to the policy for unemployment. Furthermore, the Bologna process has put emphasis on how to evaluate and control HE in relation to the needs of the labour market.

Spain

In the country report from Spain the policy of employability relates both to policies for employment in general and HE more specifically. Spain is described as a relative complex general governance structure, which is highly decentralized. According to González-Monteagudo et al. 2015):

Regions enjoy a notable degree of autonomy in several aspects including employment and their labour market policies (Weishaupt, 2014) (Ibid. p. 3.)

The National Employment system consists of a state public level (SEPE), a regional level and local governments and initiatives (Ibid.).

... the function of the SEPE includes arrangement, development and monitoring of the labour market policy, including the coordination of the National Employment System. The delivery active measures, in turn, are the responsibility of the 17 Regional public employment services have been demonstrating that they are totally inefficient when searching for jobs. Right now, they are only controlling the unemployment benefits and registering unemployed people who need a subsidy. (Lenart et al, 2014). It is also important to mention here the career guidance services for the adult population, because they are expected to contribute to workers and the employability of the unemployed. (Ibid. p. 4)

Sweden

According to the Swedish report:

Employability is on a policy level discussed in relation to political intentions of expanding HE, widening participation, higher the quality of education and the supply of courses related to the needs of the labour market, the students and the society as a whole. At the same time the central goal for HE is still to be of international high quality and efficient. It is not clear to what extent these issues of quality and efficiency are related to issues of employability (Bron

& Thunborg, 2015). The Swedish policy for HE also relates to the Europe 2020 Agenda, for smart sustainability and growth, with five headline targets relating to employment are formulated whereas two have direct bearing on the HE sector, i.e. Research and development and Education. The target concerning research and development states that 3 per cent of GDP should be invested, raising the level of educational attainment in the EU and concerning education, that 40 per cent of the 30–34 age cohort should have at least two years of tertiary education in 2020 (UKÄ, 2014, p. 11).

In the policy debate, it is of national interest to both regulate the supply of courses and evaluate the quality of HE, something under constant investigation in relation to the decentralised HE system.

UK

In the UK report HE policies concerning employability are discussed in the following way:

The concern with employability has led to a closer relationship between industry and University at both a policy and a practice level within the UK. Yet, despite this according to Little (2003), conceptual and contextual differences exist between university and industry, which makes it difficult to assess whether graduates are meeting the needs of employers. This has changed the fundamental nature and purpose of the university and critics point out that this situation entails a shift away from the social purpose of a university to what Gumpert (2000) calls an industry. (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015, p. 2).

Conclusions

The Bologna process has had a great impact on national policies for employability in higher education. In all countries, employability is used as a key concept for describing changes in higher education. In some of the countries, the supply of courses, the content or the quality is related to the needs of the labour market. In others, there are more specific demands for cooperation with the labour market.

There is a change from employment towards employability moving to focusing on the individual as responsible for being employable, but there are also country reports relating employability to policies for employment more generally.

In some of the country reports the autonomy of HE institutions versus the national control of quality, efficiency in HE is raised. Even if policies state autonomy for universities to create flexible courses to the labour market, there is an increased demand for controlling and measuring the outcomes in relation to employability.

Finally, it is clear from the countries reports that most countries do not have specific policies concerning non-traditional graduates and employability. Even if the countries have policies for widening access for non-traditional students and policies for employability these do not seem to be connected. One reason for this could be an implicit conclusion, that HE reduces inequalities and make students equally employable, a conclusion worth questioning, according to Moreau & Leathwood (2006), claiming that 'non-traditional' learners (based on their ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability or other characteristics) are systematically at a disadvantage when looking for jobs in the graduate labour market (see also Gorard et al., 2006).

Challenges for employability in different countries

The economic crisis in Europe has affected the state of the art concerning employability in Europe. According to Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos (2015):

There is also emerging evidence to indicate that there is a growing north-south divide in Europe in relation to this issue due to the economic crisis. Consequently the patterns of employability is different across countries (EC Employment and Social Developments, 2012) For example in Germany the employment rate of graduates is high while in Portugal there is hardly any difference in the unemployment rates between those with a degree and those with low level skills ... in Spain it is also difficult for graduates to gain employment. In many countries, there is a lack of opportunities and pathways from vocational training into higher education to increase their employability and job mobility. This situation again affects largely non-traditional students by limiting their study choices (OECD, 2012, p. 2). (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015, p. 2).

The Spanish team (Gonzalez-Monteagudo et al., 2015) claims that the economic crisis has led to an increased access to education both in post-compulsory secondary education and in HE but that the path to employment is still complex and difficult:

The level of education is associated with not only a higher employment rate and a higher salary level; it is also a factor of protection for people against the loss of employment, even in times of crisis (MECD, 2014). Moreover, as the educational level increases, the probability of being affected by material poverty becomes less (Frutos & Solano, 2014). But after finishing university studies, joining the labour force is complex, as the transition from university to the work market as patterns which are the moment longer and more uncertain. (Ibid. 2015, p. 2).

The Portuguese team relates to the economic recession and to other changes in the Portuguese society where an undergraduate degree in Portugal is not what it used to be:

Whilst some decades ago, in Portugal, to possess a tertiary diploma was an assurance for reaching higher positions in professional careers, the changes that took place recently questioned deeply the relationships between HE diplomas, social positions and income. The loss of this once linear relationship has turned graduate employment into a social and political problem (Alves, 2009). Higher education has been therefore dragged into the centre of a public, visible debate and is being scrutinized, understandably, by a set of social actors, students and their families, worried about the crisis and the future (Fragoso & Valadas, 2015)

The Irish team note that the crisis led to mass unemployment and mass emigration (the number of people in the 15-24 age group dropped by 138,000 between 2006 and 2012). The unemployment rate has begun to drop but they note that studies suggest that since the crisis employment conditions have also worsened since the beginning of the crisis (in terms of hours, type of work and contract, opportunities for training and development, plausible career progressions, level of precarity etc.) (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015, p. 6). I

From the reports from the three countries above, it is clear that employability in HE is affected by the economic crisis and that it is far from a solution for students to graduate from HE to become employed. In the other partner countries, economic as well as social forces have challenged the HE system in relation to the policy of employability. The **Polish team** claims that the radical institutional transformation of the HE system:

In Poland, higher education is one of the most dynamically developing areas of social life. Within the last twenty years, it has undergone sudden quantitative and institutional transformation. Non-state university level institutions have emerged, and non-state education forms have been introduced, which has resulted in increasing the number of students five times. This has however not been accompanied by a policy aimed at serious improvement of the qualitative factors. (Czubak et al., 2015, p. 1).

The Polish team also claims that there is a mismatch between labour market needs and the qualifications of the graduates on a national level:

An important indicator of the labour market prospects of graduates is vertical mismatch, which occur when there is a discrepancy between graduates' level of education or skills and the level of education or skills required by their job (Cedefop, 2010, p. 13). It suggests diverse forms of inefficiencies in how the education system responds to labour market needs. The relatively high proportion of over-qualified but not over-skilled people suggest that many stay too long in the education system while not receiving extra skills and competences. This can also indicate that tertiary education institutions were not able to provide graduates the skills necessary for a better labour market position. However, social and economic phenomenon, such as a sudden drop in labour market demand, labour market imperfections, discrimination etc. are not always in the higher education institutions' control. (Czubak, et al., 2015, p. 12).

For **the UK** both the closer relationship between employers and universities and the external economic and social forces have changed not only the universities but also the perspectives of the students:

External and social forces which lead to transforming the purpose and nature of the university have in turn impacted upon the perspectives and expectations which students bring with them to their undergraduate studies where students are considered themselves employable graduates' viewing HE as an investment in their future lives in the labour market. They realise that it is a competitive world out there and that to get the best graduate jobs they need to offer more to employers than just their degree qualification (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015, p. 2).

The challenge concerning employability in **Sweden** seems to be related to the mismatch of qualifications in relation to on the one hand students choices and labour market needs on the other. Sweden is also challenged by an immigration of HE graduates, which is an interesting factor effecting employability:

In Sweden, the general picture is that students with a diploma from higher education have a better chance to become employed than people with lower educational level, and will be during the next years, even if HE is expanding. However, the challenges for Swedish HE are related to a mismatch between students' choices of educational programmes and the needs of the labour market. Firstly, the labour market seems to employ HE graduates to positions earlier occupied by people graduated from upper secondary school or less. This could be seen as a vertical mismatch where HE graduates become overqualified for the work tasks at the labour market. Secondly, there are 55 different educational areas defined by UKÄ (2014), most of them requiring HE, that lack qualified graduates, while students seem to choose

educational programmes, where they have to compete for positions on the labour market. This creates a high competition among students and a crucial situation for the labour market not being able to employ people with the right competencies ... Finally, the population of HE graduates increases in Sweden because of migration from other countries. One challenge is to validate their diplomas for making them employable but according to UKÄ (2013), only 5000 out of 20.500 people have applied for a validation. Migration could thereby be seen as affecting the degree of employability in Sweden, which means a more qualified population, but this could also create higher levels of unemployment for HE graduates (Bron & Thunborg, 2015, p. 12)

A conclusion so far is that it seems likely that the countries suffering the most from the economic crisis are facing challenges related to unemployment whereas the other three countries are challenged with a mismatch between competences required by students versus the labour market and the competition amongst students in HE for getting the right employment at the right level. Another interesting conclusion is that migration is seen as a strategy for employability in both the Irish case and the Swedish, which could be seen as part of globalization.

Widening participation and non-traditional students and employability

European HE has changed from elite to mass education under the 1990's due to different political reforms. In the UK country, report Merrill and Bilgen-Fatos (2015) write about European policy in the following words:

Expansion of European higher education has enabled a higher percentage of people to enter and participate at degree level (OECD, 2001). For Redmond (2006) expansion is associated with the need for a more highly educated workforce to enable Europe to compete in the global and knowledge-based economy. Between 1998–2006 the average participation rate in HE increased by 25% while in some countries, such as Poland, it increased by 90% indicating a move towards more knowledge-based societies. The range of programmes offered has also expanded so that adults can participate on full or part-time degree programmes. At postgraduate level there has been a growth in short Continual Professional Development courses as well as courses focusing specifically on issues of employability, particularly at undergraduate level. The labour market is also changing. Between 2010 and 2020 the proportion of jobs requiring academic skills will rise from 20% to 34%, while low skilled jobs will decrease from 23% to 18% during the same period (EC Rethinking Education, 2010) (Ibid. p.1).

Furthermore, the UK team (2015) points out that the perspectives of students have changed:

The external economic and social forces, which have led to transforming the purpose and nature of the university, have in turn impacted upon the perspectives and expectations which students bring with them to their undergraduate studies, (Ibid. p. 1).

Finally, the relation to non-traditional learners:

In the context of the widening participation agenda, it is also important to highlight the role of higher education institutions in enhancing the employability of non-traditional learners. According to Thomas and Jones (2007, p. 23), besides providing access to relevant work experience for students with 'nontraditional' backgrounds, higher education institutions have a particular responsibility to ensure that non-traditional learners can receive (targeted) advice and career guidance throughout the whole student lifecycle (i.e. from the very beginning of a student career). Such guidance can contribute to: 1) developing students' awareness about employability; 2) improving the confidence and self-esteem of students; and 3) developing the appropriate job search and application skills (Ibid.). In this way, guidance can help bring down the 'indirect' barriers non-traditional learners can face on the labour market: the fact that due to their background and earlier education opportunities, they might not evaluate labour market reality and their own competences well, and as a consequence, they often exclude themselves from getting the matching graduate jobs (Thomas and Jones, 2007).

National statistics concerning employability for HE graduates

The available statistics concerning unemployment in the OECD countries as well as the EU countries shows that the unemployment rate for people with higher levels of education is much lower than for people with lower levels of education. The OECD report (2012) states that:

On average across all OECD countries, 83.6 per cent of 25-64 year-olds with a tertiary education were employed in 2009, compared to 56.0 per cent of 25-64 year-olds without an upper secondary education – a difference of 27.6 percentage points.” (OECD 2012, Education indicators in focus, p. 2).

In the OECD report it is also stated that:

A higher level of education provides excellent insurance against unemployment, for staying employed, and for maintaining earning power in difficult economic times. (Ibid. p. 4)

The above statement is also evident in figure 2, where a comparison between the partner countries concerning unemployment is presented.

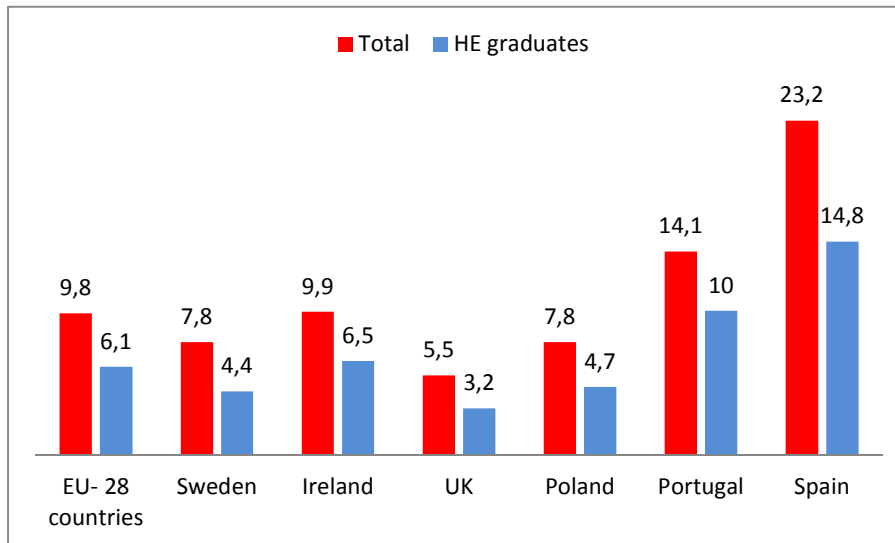


Figure 2. A comparison between unemployment in the countries involved in the project divided between graduates and the population in general (Gonzales-Monteagudo, 2015)

From the figure, there is a difference between the percentage of unemployed in total and the percentage of unemployment for HE graduates. Figure 2, however, also shows differences between the European countries concerning unemployment, which could be related to the economic crisis and the above-mentioned divide between countries. From the Eurydice report (2014) it is apparent that it is hard to get reliable and comparable measures concerning employment both on a European as well as a national level:

Evaluating the impact of existing measures is not straightforward. One successful way of doing so is through graduate surveys at both national and European level. Currently such surveys do not exist in all countries, and where they do exist, they are not always undertaken regularly. Irrespective of the approach and measures taken in relation to employability, countries tend to target students or graduates as a whole, without concentrating on specific – disadvantaged – groups of students. This indicates that there is often a need for the widening participation agenda to be followed through to cover retention issues and also employability policies and practice. (Eurydice report, 2014, p. 12).

In the following section, we are going to present the national statistics in the partner countries to see, if it is possible to make some comparison. The statistics we have been looking for is one relating to participation in higher education and employment after HE, in relation to non-traditional students. There seems to be a lack of statistics concerning non-traditional students as far as employment is concerned. In some countries, however, there are statistics concerning employment for HE graduates related to degree programmes (Poland, Sweden and UK), in others there are statistics about non-traditional students involved in HE (Sweden, UK).

Ireland

In the Irish report (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015) it is stated that there is statistics concerning the access of special target groups to HE, and data about employment and unemployment, but not a connection between them:

The Irish Higher Education Authority – which manages funds and directs HE policy – collects a range of data including annual reports on recent graduates and on non-traditional students. It does not link this data at all and we have very little to draw on which explicitly looks at the relation between employability and non-traditional students. (Ibid. p.7)

Students with disabilities, students from underrepresented socio-economic groups and mature students are focused on as special target groups in access policies in Ireland:

Data is now collected on the participation levels of these groups and assessed against pre-set targets for the sector as a whole. Over the past four years more detailed equal access data has been gathered by HEIs and there are currently plans to link some of the funding to individual HEIs to the achievement of access targets. However, most of this data is not available. (Ibid. p. 8)

Access has has changed the composition of the student body but :

despite several decades of rapid growth Irish HE remains quite traditional. The majority of students are young and advantaged. (Ibid. p.4)

Finally, there are stastitics concerning employment and unemployment in Ireland:

Quantitative data is collected regularly and systematically on the labour market and there are extensive statistics and studies available on employment, unemployment and sectoral growth[...]. Of particular note for a study of employability is the work of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) established in 1997 (Ibid. p. 11)

Poland

According to the Polish report, there are statistics concerning unemployment for HE graduates related to different professions:

Poland provides the statistics about students and graduates unemployment (Czubak-Koch et al., 2015). In the year, 2013/2014 there was 438 HEIs with 1.549.900. In 2014, 12, 4% HE graduates were unemployed. In the same year 1, 3% of all unemployed in the cohorts are HE graduates under and of 27 years old (i.e. 23.000). In 2014 the highest unemployment rates were among the following professions (1) educators/ teachers/ specialist in pedagogy (11,6%), public administration specialist (11,4%), economists (6,7%) (Ibid. p. 7)

There are, however, no national statistics available regarding the employment of non-traditional students.

Portugal

In the report from the Portuguese team (Fragoso & Valadas, 2015), there are statistics concerning enrolment in HE as well as unemployment of HE graduates. Concerning the enrolment it is stated that:

...in the academic year 2012/2013, 378,453 students were enrolled in HE in Portugal. The total number of students enrolled has been decreasing in recent years. The highest number of students ever was reached in the academic year 2010/11, which registered more than 403,000 students. ... The growing number of students allowed the gradual qualification of the Portuguese population, with the percentage of resident population with an increased top grade of 0.5% in 1960 (49,065 individuals) to 12% in 2011 (1,244,742 individuals) (Source: PORDATA). Despite of this progress, currently only 17% of the Portuguese population aged 25-64 has a higher qualification. This value is less than half the average of OECD countries, where 32% of the working population has a higher grade. Within the OECD countries, only Italy and Turkey have a smaller percentage of graduates (Education at a Glance, 2013). (Ibid. p. 5)

Moreover, they state that the unemployment rate is high in Portugal and for HE graduates as well, but also that those with higher grades seem to have lower unemployment:

In June 2014, 77 541 unemployed with a higher education grade were registered at employment centres. Analysis by level of education shows that: 35 237 had no academic qualification, 137 623 possessed the 1st cycle, 100 821 the 2nd cycle, 123 989 the 3rd cycle and 139 771 secondary school. (Ibid. p. 7) ... among the graduates with a higher education

qualification, it appears that those with higher grades tend to have lower unemployment rates, suggesting a valuation by the market of these additional qualifications. Also, to note, the existence of a relatively high variability in the unemployment rate for the different areas of education and training (Cardoso et al., 2012). (Ibid. p.8)

Finally, there are no statistics concerning non-traditional students neither in HE enrolment, nor in relation to employment:

Contrarily to a number of European countries, we can therefore conclude that the importance of non-traditional students in HE in Portugal is very recent. The research around the theme is barely beginning; the statistics concerning non-traditional students are lacking; and we have not been able to discover studies concerning non-traditional students' employability. (Fragoso & Valadas, 2015, p. 5)

Spain

In the Spanish report (Gonzalez-Monteagudo, et al. 2015) there is a lack of information, considerations and explanations about non-traditional students' progress in HE as well as in relation to employment, there are however statistics concerning unemployment in general. However, the team state that there are differences between different parts of the country:

According to the data for the first quarter of 2015, the rate of unemployment in the country is 23.78%, although this national data masks important regional differences and inequalities. While in autonomous regions such as Navarre and the Basque Country the unemployment rate is 15.66% and 16.43%, respectively, in other regions it is double, as is the case of Andalusia (33.62%) and the Canary Islands (30.81%). (Ibid. p.10)

According to the Spanish report, the official statistics are not divided by non-traditional student graduates. However, general statistics of the population unemployment in relation to age, gender and nationality is available:

...the official statistics offered by the EPA do not differentiate the university graduates according to the variables, which are relevant to character rise non-traditional students. We have to turn to general statistics (of the whole population, irrespective of their educational level) to see the influence of variables such as age and nationality. (Ibid. p.10).

By differentiating the unemployment rate by age and gender the Spanish team provided the following statistics and explanation.

It stands out that young people always have greater unemployment, both if we speak about the under 25 years old (51.4%), and if we differentiate between the sub-group of 16-19 years old (70.5%), and those who are between 20 and 24 years old (47.7%). Unemployment is in general higher for women, although in some age groups it is below the male rate (especially the 20-24 year old group). (Ibid. p.11) Furthermore, within the group of young people (20-24 years old), the lower the level of education unemployment is considerably greater. Thus, those who have only completed compulsory education have an unemployment rate of 56.10%, while this goes down to 35.01% in the case of young people of the same age with higher studies. Regarding nationality, the unemployment rate for the foreign population is 33.65%, [thus] 9.87 % higher than for the whole population. There are not official statistics of the employment/unemployment rate for people of different races (for example, the gypsy population, which is approximately 1.87% of the Spanish population), or for disabled people. This lack of data prevents us from knowing to what point the level of education is a positive factor of employability for all university graduates, including those who are non-traditional. (Ibid. p.11)

Sweden

According to the Swedish report (Bron & Thunborg, 2015) there are statistics related to employment for HE graduates, enrolment in HE divided into age, social class (i.e. parents educational level) ethnicity (measured as foreign background i.e. born or having both parents born in another country) and gender provided by SCB and UKÄ. There is also statistics concerning students with disabilities getting special support. According to the national statistics, Sweden has already met its main target for HE 2020:

Sweden's target is that 40–45 per cent of 30–34-year-olds will have at least two years of tertiary education by 2020. Because of the expansion of higher education in the 1990s and the early years of this century, the educational level among young people in Sweden is being raised continually and, according to the EU follow-up of the targets, 41 per cent of 30–34-year-olds already had at least two years of tertiary education in 2007. Since then the figure has continued to rise and according to Eurostat's preliminary data, 48 per cent attained this level of education in 2013. (UKÄ, 2014, p. 11). (Ibid. p. 2)

Relating to employment UKÄ states that:

Higher education matters as “generally speaking, graduates from higher education are less likely to be unemployed than those who have only completed upper-secondary or lower-secondary education” (UKÄ, 2014:10, p.44). (Ibid., p. 4)

However, there are still differences in relation to non-traditional students' participation in HE. In the UKÄ, report it is stated that:

During the academic year of 2012/13, 37 per cent of HE entrants under the age of 35 had parents with advanced educational qualifications, i.e. one parent who had completed at least three years of tertiary education. This can be compared to the 24 per cent of HE entrants whose parents lacked advanced educational qualifications (no more than two years of upper-secondary education). In the population as a whole aged 19–34 (data from 2011) the situation was the opposite: 24 per cent had parents with advanced educational qualifications and 40 per cent parents without. These comparisons provide a rough illustration of the social bias in recruitment to higher education and show that students whose parents have advanced educational qualifications are overrepresented while students whose parents lack such educational qualifications are underrepresented. (UKÄ, 2014, p. 25). (Ibid. p.3)

The differences concerning class is also apparent in the choices of degree programmes where 70 per cent of HE entrants in Medicine had parents with advanced educational qualifications, 55 per cent of the law students and 54 per cent in Masters' programmes in Engineering (Ibid). UKÄ provides statistical analysis about gender aspects of employability:

There is an interesting finding in the data concerning female and male. In the population as a whole, there are more women who are qualified than men. Overall fewer women are gainfully employed than men are, but, according to Statistics Sweden's unemployment survey, a larger proportion of the women with higher education are employed than men. In 2012 4.5 of the women with tertiary qualifications were unemployed, compare to 5.2 per cent of the men. This difference is largely due to gender differences in various educational and vocational fields. Women are overrepresented in professional programmes that lead to employment in education and social and health care, where there has been no shortage of jobs in recent years. (UKÄ; 2013, p. 41). (Ibid. p.7)

A final statistical analysis is done from the prognosis between the supply and demands of educational programmes from the labour market. According to the statistics, areas like teaching and health care are having high demands in the next couple of years, which will affect the employability of non-traditional students:

Vocational teachers which is considered to have the highest demands according to UKÄ, also have the highest degree of students' with parents having a low educational level, namely 47 per cent of the students. Even pre-school-teachers have high demands and a high population of students with parents with low educational level (41 per cent) (UKÄ 2015:8). ... Furthermore vocational areas such as dentists, biomedical laboratory science and dental hygiene with high demands, have a high representation of students with another background than Swedish which according to UKÄ (2015:8) consists of students that either are born abroad or are born in Sweden with both parents born abroad. According to UKÄ 59 percent of students in dental hygiene, 55 per cent of the dentist students and 49 per cent of the students in biomedical laboratory science have another ethnical background. The conclusions from the UKÄ about gender issues could with regards to the prognosis also concern class and ethnicity the next couple of years. However, these conclusions are not drawn by the UKÄ. Consequently, the labour market will be even more segregated in relation to class and ethnicity (Ibid, pp. 8-9)

Even in Sweden the national statistics do not explicitly focus on non-traditional students in relation to employability even if gender is somewhat focused.

UK

In the UK report (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015) it is stated that there are national statistics from different sources in the UK:

National statistics on employability and the employment of graduates are available from a range of sources in the UK notably the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Office for National Statistics, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. (Ibid. p. 3)

There are some statistics available which relate directly or indirectly to non-traditional students and employability but these could be more extensive. These include statistics on ethnicity, age, qualification on entry, gender and regions in relation to HE and employment. Statistics are also available by type of university which indicates that those who graduate from the Russell group universities (the top universities) enter the top jobs with fewer entering such jobs from the post 1992 universities. The latter universities have a higher percentage of students from a working class background and from ethnic minorities.

It is also stated that UK has the lowest unemployment rate since 2007 for the population in general and for HE graduates. There are, however, differences in unemployment concerning age differences for HE graduates:

Overall, the figures show that employment prospects for graduates are good and that graduates continue to earn more than non-graduates do and are also more likely to be in high skill jobs. The employment rate for working-age population graduates is currently (2015) 87.5%. This is the highest it has been since 2007. The unemployment rate of young graduates is also at its lowest since 2007 at a rate of 3.9%. Non-graduates aged 21 – 30 have higher unemployment rates. (Ibid. p. 3)

There is also statistics of employment in relation to different work sectors:

Further data from the Office for National Statistics (Full Report – Graduates in the UK Labour Market, 2013) indicates that there were there were 12 million graduates in 2013 in the UK. According to this survey over 40% of graduates worked in the public administration, education and health industry. Graduates with a degree in medicine or dentistry are the most likely to find employment and also earn the highest salaries. (Ibid. p. 3)

Research concerning employability and non-traditional in HE

According to the countries reports research concerning employability can be found in relation to different levels of analyses and perspectives. On a macro level, there are analyses of the concept of employability, which mostly concerns a critique towards the individualistic perspective claiming the individual's responsibility to become employable in relation to the labour market. There are also analyses of employability in relation to theories of human capital.

On a meso-level research concerns HE generally and HE institutions specifically to generate the appropriate skills needed or demanded by the labour market. Here research concerning employers' perspectives as well as perspectives of HE professionals are available and sometimes contrasted. Here research about the mismatch between labour market needs and the role of HE is discussed. There are also studies related to the role of career offices and guidance services as well as internship and other ways of trying to enhance the employment for HE graduates.

Finally, there is research concerning students' transition from HE to the labour market including students' perspectives on their studies in general and their expectations for future employment. Some of these studies use a quantitative approach, whilst others are qualitative; some of them also focus on non-traditional students, even if they are very few. As Tomlinson

(2008) claims, there is a lack of research in relation to non-traditional students in relation to employability, even if there are a few studies or discussions (Merrill & Bilgren-Fatos, 2015).

In the following section, we give a brief overview of the research in the different partner countries.

Ireland

According to the Irish report (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015) there is research concerning the labour market and research concerning non-traditional students but no research that explores the relation between them. In the Irish report there are five issues presented that could be discussed in relation to previous research:

There are at least five issues with the literature; first of all the majority of research on non-traditional students has been quantitative taking a systemic 'god's eye view' of patterns and trends with scant attention to student and graduate perspectives; second of all the overwhelming focus in the literature on non-traditional students has been on access in terms of entry with some literature exploring progression and retention and very little on graduate outcomes; thirdly, and this is related to the last point, there is very little properly disaggregated quantitative data on graduate destinations; fourthly there is almost nothing looking at non-traditional students/graduates and employability; and fifthly the work which does look at employability is theoretically very thin. In other words if we look at the extant research the university remains a black box in which both the experience of non-traditional students and its medium term impact on the lives and careers are not properly understood (Ibid. pp. 11-12).

The Irish team refers to some studies concerning the perspectives of non-traditional students graduating from HE and shows that the students had higher expectations about what graduation would mean concerning financial rewards, easiness to find employment, which also relates to being a non-traditional student. Furthermore, they claim that there is research identifying the employer perspective on important criteria when recruiting.

Poland

The Polish team (Czubak et al., 2015) discusses three types of research concerning employability issues in Poland. Firstly, studies concerning indicators measuring labour market success, a multidimensionality of the phenomenon employability including graduate employability, indicators of quality of the workplace, the average length of job search and links between major and subsequent employment (qualification mismatches) and graduate long-term employability has been conducted.

Secondly, research concerns studies of human capital in Poland aimed at tracing the changes in the structure of competencies in the labour market. The study was conducted longitudinally firstly in 2010 and secondly in 2013 with a quantitative approach based on large statistical material.

Finally, there are local job market studies in Lower Silesia as part of European project concerning students' employment.

Portugal

The Portuguese team (Fragoso & Valades, 2015) especially focuses on a study by Alves (2007; 2009) that both provide a critical voice to the concept of employability and a study of the professional insertion of graduates into the labour market and its processes of identity formation. Other research concerns employability indicators, different perspectives on employability, and furthermore a relation to socio-demographic characteristics of graduates and the training efficiency of different educational programmes in relation to gained competencies. The Portuguese team concludes as follows on Alves (2007, 2009) research:

From the analysis of the Portuguese situation regarding unemployment, social exclusion and employability, some of her conclusions are the following:

1. Portugal insists in a model of economic specialization that still build it competitive advantage in the low costs of the labour force,
2. The strategic of recruitment of enterprises value mainly the motivational and behavioural profile of workers, that is, their capacity of subjective investment in work, which is simultaneously a synonym of employability and permeability to new forms of work exploitation,
3. Mainstream discourses and policies cover the role of models of training in reproducing social inequalities, focusing in arguments that are presumably neutral, such as economic, competitiveness, fighting unemployment and social exclusion and more recently, increasing employability. (Ibid. p. 10).

Spain

According to the Spanish report (Gonzalez-Monteagudo et al. 2015), research on employability is a rather new phenomenon and the first publications was published in 2008. Research concerning the transition from HE to the labour market both consists of quantitative and qualitative studies, of students and graduates' perspectives as well as the perspective of other stakeholders. Research about employability in Spain also covers sociological studies about the economic crisis:

Some studies, particularly those developed from sociological approaches, have pointed out issues about social exclusion, poverty, unemployment, inequalities, long-term unemployment and increasing precariousness as a result of the economic crisis and its consequences (Fundacion FOESSA, 2014; Arnal, Finkel & Parra, 2013; Langa & Rio, 2013; Laparra & Perez, 2012; Santos, 2004) (Ibid. p. 19).

Finally, studies about the transition from university to the labour market are also related to the role of internship, career offices and guidance services for the employability of graduates'. From the Spanish team it is however argued that:

Several contributions have focused on career offices and guidance services. In a meta-analysis (Martinez, Martinez & Perez, 2014) made from reports produced by university guidance services there are some interesting data regarding labour insertion of university students and graduates: the most frequent ways to find a job, the graduates used to be personal and family contacts, the Internet and self-application, while the less-used are public employment services and labour exchanges (Ibid. p. 20).

Sweden

The Swedish team (Bron & Thunborg, 2015) refers to studies concerning discourse analyses of employability, studies on students' perspectives of the transition between HE and the labour market in relation to both different educational programmes and to non-traditional students and research concerning the tension between higher education and the perspectives of students in relation to future employment.

UK

In the UK report it is stated that:

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus and concern on the issue of employability and undergraduate students and the role of universities in this. This process has generated research in this field in the UK, which has largely focused on areas such as defining employability, conceptual and theoretical approaches, issues of inequalities and policies, strategies and practice. Research on inequalities and employability focuses particularly on non-traditional students and the disadvantages they experience compared to middle students in relation to engaging in employability activities (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015, p. 6).

Research illuminates that non-traditional students are more affected by graduateness than other students (Brown & Helsketh, 1994, Reay et al 2005). In practice this means that it takes them longer to obtain a job and when they do it's often at a lower level job. Class inequalities

are reflected in the employment process. Brown and Scase, (1994) drawing on Bourdieu's work, point out that in the UK:

When employers reject candidates as unsuitable it could be argued that they are being rejected for lacking 'cultural' capital. There is absolutely no doubt that this happens when people are seen to have the wrong accent, dress inappropriately at interview, or do not know the rules of the game when candidates are invited to a formal dinner to meet company employees (2002: 28).

Employers also favour graduates from the top universities – Oxbridge and the Russell Group or what a recent study by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2015) call 'poshness'. Working class younger and adult students can also be disadvantaged and penalised by work placements /internships which are advocated by employers as many of these are unpaid and such students need to earn money during the university holidays. Employability is, therefore, experienced in unequal ways in the UK.

Discussion and conclusion

As it can be seen from the comparative report the issue of employability seems to be central in European Higher Education policies even if there is a lack of consensus concerning how to define the concept, and how to use it in different national contexts. Research concerning employability also concerns a critique towards the individualistic perspective and discourse (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2002; Fejes, 2010) claiming that it is the individual's responsibility to become employable in relation to the labour market. The view of HE is to a large extent that it is a means for growth and sustainability as well as for reducing social inequalities. Sometimes it seems like HE is the solution to all financial and social problems in society.

Overall, the different ways of defining employability in our country reports make it hard to compare different countries with each other. However, there are some issues, which are crucial in some of the cases that can contribute to interesting comparative conclusions. For example, the issue of migration is seen, in both the Swedish as well as the Irish case, as an important issue in exploring graduate destinations and employability. In the Irish case since the crisis the emigration of graduates has risen, whilst in Sweden the immigration of people with a HE degree raises the employability as well, meaning that the educational level in the population increases.

The EU policies and the policies in most of the countries aim equally towards widening access and enhancing employability. However, there is no focus on the relation between them. One conclusion is that HE is seen as a means for social equality and that all graduates are starting at the same level. Nevertheless, the prognosis at the same time seems to give some evidence that social inequalities persist. This is evident in the choices of degree programmes in relation to age, social class, ethnicity and gender as well as in employment. Concerning disabilities there seems to be an even more deficiency of statistics and research.

The challenges that different countries face concerning employability seem to be different. One of such challenges is the economy. Thus, the economic crisis has affected employment and made a divide between countries in Europe. In the countries suffering most from economic recession, the university degrees are required for less qualified jobs. In other countries, the problem of matching HE degrees with the more powerful labour market seems to be the demand for HE institutions.

Some country reports claim that the focus on employability changes the students' perspectives and attitudes towards their studies, and even more importantly the lack of interest for non-traditional students' and their perspectives. In relation to policy perspectives, research and statistics concerning employability of non-traditional students they are invisible.

Another important conclusion from the country reports is that many empirical studies of employability are based on quantitative approaches, (with the exception of the UK) by using huge databases for analyses. Thus the reports point towards a need for more qualitative research concerning students' perspectives, attitudes of HE professionals as well as of employers to understand better how employability is interpreted in practice. What is more there is a lack of studies on non-traditional students which makes EMPLOY project even more important.

Finally, the demand from the labour market seems obvious: one wants to have graduates who are professionals and specialists and not necessarily socially engaged in studying scientific knowledge, including doing research or contributing to theory. How does HE respond to these changes, i.e. labour market and state policy demands as well as students demands is the question for further research to explore. Still another issue is how do non-traditional students response to these changes?

From the comparison of country reports we can draw a conclusion that an unintended

consequence of mass HE in Europe is that more students choose an educational path based on future employment. While this narrow focus contributes to both the economic production and growth in the labour market of the specific nation, and the human capital held by the individual, it does not necessarily contribute to the goals of social engagement and the creation of new knowledge. In other words, HE institutions in this context by benefiting financially (high economic capital) are losing intellectually (low cultural capital) when they only focus on educating students for employment.

Summing up, as the UK team (Merrill & Bilgen-Fatos, 2015) claims, we can say that:

Employability is now firmly part of the agenda of European universities and a closer link and engagement between universities and the employment sector is a by-product of this, Universities, national governments and the EU all agree that it is a good thing to develop the employability skills and competencies of their students. While there is some evidence of good policy and practice there is still a long way to go in achieving this across the system as a whole. At present, we have an unequal system whereby some graduates are at an advantage because of their class, gender and ethnic backgrounds and cultural and social capitals so that the white middle class male is more likely to end up the most prestigious and well paid graduate jobs. Surveys show, for example, that women earn less. The odds are also stacked in favour of those who go to a top or elite university and are younger rather than older and also white, male and middle class. Work placements and internships, for example, should be accessible in the UK to all those who want to participate so that those from low-income backgrounds are not disadvantaged. It also raises some key questions. Who is benefitting from employability schemes – employers or students (and only certain students)? (Ibid. p. 14)

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