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Employability skills of higher education graduates: Little consensus on a much-discussed subject

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Abstract

The expansion of higher education (HE) has given rise to research on skills that smooth transition and benefit the careers of graduates. We examine literature that attempts to inform HE institutions and policy makers about the skills required in the labor market. A variety of methods have been implemented to collect data on employability skills. It has been acquired directly using hiring criteria but it has also been gleaned indirectly on the basis of employers' satisfaction with graduates' skills. The evidence shows little consensus on which skills actually foster employability. Wide agreement exists on the need for relational skills, namely interpersonal, communication and teamwork abilities, which are reported in almost all papers. Moreover, the literature suggests that some employers find graduates are poorly prepared for teamwork but they recognize the good level of IT skills. We are concerned about the lack of agreement on the necessary skills as well as the perception that graduates are poorly prepared. Conceptual issues and methodological solutions are likely to have generated results that contain some degree of ambiguity. Researchers and policy makers therefore remain uncertain about graduate skills that match workplace requirements and foster employability.

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1. Introduction

The expansion of higher education (HE) and the Bologna Process reframed the political debate and placed the smooth transition from school-to-work and the employability of graduates at the forefront of education policy (Schomburg and Teichler, 2011). HE is called upon to prepare graduates for the world of work and universities are pressured to meet standards on that employability. The basic assumption of policy makers is that HE ought to play a decisive role in society and contribute to sustainable growth and job creation in Europe (COM, 2011). Therefore, HE institutions should be aware of the needs of the economy and subsequently adjust their programmes to ensure greater compatibility. Considerable research on these subjects has attempted to respond to policy requirements.

This paper explores literature on the skills required for graduates in the labor market. We examine the variety of methods used in research to collect data on employability skills and consequently inform policy makers and stakeholders of HE. However, the agreement on employability skills is negligible (Tymon, 2013), which raises questions about the empirical evidence achieved so far.

It is therefore relevant to ask why there is so little agreement about the required skills for graduates. The answer to this question necessarily leads us to a conceptual discussion and the methodological issues associated with skills. We suggest the definition of skill is far from straightforward and the variety of methodological solutions used to collect information on required skills have served to increase rather than decrease uncertainty on labor market demands for graduate skills.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly discusses the problematic nature of the concept of competence/skill. Section 3 is devoted to methods implemented to detail employability skills as well as the particular set of skills most valued by employers. Some concluding remarks are presented in Section 4.

2. Competence and higher education reform

The concept of competence has acquired a prominent position in the HE reform in an attempt to improve graduates' integration into the labor market. Despite its relevance, there is a lack of consensus on the concept and measurement of competence (Le Diest and Winterton, 2005 for conceptual discussion). However, there is agreement on the following definition: competence presupposes the utilization of acquired knowledge and skills in the workplace to achieve a goal or to solve a problem (Reynaud, 2001); it has the merit of connecting education and job requirements (Boon and van der Klink, 2002).

Furthermore, competence is not directly observable; it is an output of evaluation (Eymard-Duvernay e Marchal, 1997). Research within the French economics of conventions tradition recognizes the role of judgment in the definition of competences. Accordingly, competence is an output of judgment by multiple actors; this judgment is supported by a variety of assessment methods. The competence-model often includes two main ingredients: a catalogue of skills previously defined by researchers or practitioners, and their subsequent evaluation. It is the judgment that transforms acquired knowledge and skills into competence. Not surprisingly, researchers often use *skill* instead of competence to address both acquired and required skills. Only enactment and judgment create competences. Consequently, we will use skills to refer to attributes that increase the employability of graduates.

The assumptions of economics of conventions have considerable implications for HE. According to Bailly (2008) the skills acquired during the time spent in the education system, i.e. the educational outputs, are no longer self-evident. Within the human capital model, education imparts useful skills that increase employees' productivity and consequently entail higher wages (Becker, 1964). Nowadays, these productive skills are no longer taken for granted.

The recent and persistent debate on the quality of HE emphasizes the judgment of the output using multiple approaches. Beliefs and evaluation by economic agents become crucial in economics of education and replace the substantialist approach (Bailly, 2008). The assessments are made by the stakeholders of higher education, namely graduates and employers. The output of these assessments is the information about the set of skills that makes a graduate more employable. The underlying assumption is that employers transform employability into employment (Harvey, 2001), so their requirements represent the most useful source of information on employability skills. Therefore, the close ties between HE and the world of work dominate political discourse and stimulate the scholarly discussion on how to ascertain employers' demands for graduate skills.

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