Reading Between the Lines of Graduate Employment

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ABSTRACT This paper comments on findings from a European survey of graduate employment and shows the difficulty of trying to make international comparisons of higher education’s contribution to graduate employability. In the process it is suggested that comparison within the United Kingdom is also problematic and evidence is provided of the impact on employability of factors outside higher education institutions’ control. The conclusion is that employability figures are not trustworthy indicators of higher education quality.

Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education continues to be a subject for debate. Approaches to quality assurance vary, although most will consider inputs to higher education (for example, the quality of academic staff and learning resources), processes of learning and teaching within higher education and outputs from higher education. One obvious output measure of the learning and teaching function of higher education is the quality of graduates emerging from higher education. One dimension of ‘graduates as output’ that has come increasingly under the spotlight in recent times, particularly as governments cast a critical eye on publicly-funded higher education providers and expect them to be accountable for their use of public funds, is new graduates’ employment rates, subsequent to completing higher education. Alongside this relatively straightforward notion of what graduates ‘do’ on graduation (be it go into employment, continue with further study, or something else) has come the idea of ‘graduate employability’.

One reason for the emergence of ‘employability’ as a dimension of quality has been the recognition that in many sectors of the economy the nature of jobs is changing rapidly and completely new sectors are emerging. In consequence, graduates not only need to be able to do a set job now but also to have the personal capabilities for dealing intelligently with change and challenging situations, so that they can manage their relationship with work and with learning throughout all stages of their life (Hawkins & Winter, 1995). Employers want graduates who can quickly adapt to the workplace culture, who can use their abilities and skills to evolve an organisation, and can use higher-level skills to facilitate innovative teamwork (Harvey et al., 1997). But is employability anything more than just another big idea, rather like lifelong learning? Both ideas are bandied about as ways of ultimately increasing a country’s competitiveness but, as has been noted elsewhere, ‘turning the rhetoric into anything that can serve as a firm base for action can be frustrating’ (Tamkin & Hillage, 1999, p. ix).

Research in the United Kingdom into employers’ views on employability found that while employers talk a lot about employability, relatively few went far beyond exhortation
Table 1. Relationships between higher education and work (adapted from Brennan et al., 1996, p. 2)

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<tr>
<th>Dimensions of higher education relevant to work</th>
<th>Linkages between higher education and work</th>
<th>Dimensions of work relevant to higher education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quantitative and structural developments</td>
<td>Labour market, intermediary agencies and transition</td>
<td>Employment</td>
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<td>Curricula, training and socialisation</td>
<td>Regulatory system</td>
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<td>Educational provisions and students’ options</td>
<td>Lifelong education and work</td>
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(Tamkin & Hillage, 1999, p. xii). Even if we did have some clearer definitions of graduate employability, would we be in a better position to use measures of employability to gauge the quality of higher education, let alone to improve it? In his review of issues surrounding graduate employment, Brennan suggests that indicators of employability of different groups of graduates might be broken down into those relating to obtaining a job (for example, speed into employment, range of job types entered, job level or seniority, work demands, and earnings) and those relating to suitability of preparation for a job (for example, the match between degree course and type of job, graduate perceptions of knowledge or skills deficiencies, graduate perceptions of course relevance) (Brennan, 2000).

So if graduate employability is multi-dimensional, we need to have a good understanding of these various dimensions before we can try to begin to use graduate employability as one indicator (among many) of the quality of higher education. We also need to understand what influence higher education institutions can have on their graduates’ employment destinations.

However, the relationship between higher education and the world of work is also not one-dimensional. In their book Higher Education and Work, Brennan et al. (1996) identify three strands, which together describe the relationship (Table 1).

This article focuses on the first two strands of the relationship between higher education and work: dimensions of higher education relevant to work and linkages between higher education and work. Findings emerging from a recently-completed large-scale European study on higher education and employment [1] will be used to highlight some areas. Implicit assumptions, about what constitutes normal practice or unusual practice, could well have implications for how the dimensions within the strands are seen, and hence how notions of quality might be brought into question in relation to graduate employability. In particular, the findings relating to the UK will be considered alongside findings for other countries in Europe, or Europe overall, as a way of illustrating the similarities and differences.

It will become apparent that higher education systems and circumstances in Europe are far from homogeneous, which implies that employability is, at best, a quality indicator to be understood in specific national contexts only. Even within national contexts, it may be that measures of employability are best used as a means of prompting other questions relating to quality issues, rather than providing any absolute measures.
Dimensions of Higher Education Relevant to Work

Brennan et al. (1996) note that higher education plays a role in the employment system by providing job-related knowledge and competencies, and in pre-selecting students for future jobs. However, the ‘pre-selection for future jobs’ function might not operate uniformly, and different types of higher education institutions might have very different relationships to the world of work. It is also the case that this function might operate differently depending on the extent to which selection has already occurred, earlier on in a country’s (compulsory) education system.

For example, in setting out a typology of access to higher education in different countries, Teichler notes a number of different models (Teichler, 1988). On the one hand, in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands pre-selection for different types of higher education effectively takes place during secondary education so that by the time of entry to higher education those who have the required entry qualifications select primarily between fields of study—the prestige of universities is more or less equal. In contrast, in Norway, Spain and Italy there is only low-key selection, where entry to higher education is open to most school leavers and most can enter the type of institution they want; although even here, choice of institution may be constrained by the range of subjects offered by particular types of institution. Teichler also identified a two-stage process of selection for higher education: first in secondary education and again on application to higher education in systems where there are prestige differentials between institutions or fields of study.

The UK is an example of a multi-stage selection process, with selection at entry to higher education also affected by grades achieved at Advanced-level public examinations (or equivalent): the more prestigious the higher education institution, the higher the ‘A-level’ grades required. So in trying to interpret data on graduate employment for particular groups and sub-groups of students, one needs to be aware of both the higher education system’s role in pre-selecting for future jobs, and the selection process (if any) that might have already come into play even before students are in higher education.

However, even in countries where different higher education institutions have different levels of prestige, does this influence a student’s choice of institution? Are students aware of the possible role higher education institutions might play in pre-selecting them for future jobs? Findings from a UK study into prospective students’ choice of full-time higher education, in particular their choice of institution, found that the students’ priority was choosing the right subject of study (Connor et al., 2000). Of course, in certain professional areas of employment the choice of the ‘right’ subject might be crucial in determining whether the student will, in due course, even be eligible for applying for a job in that profession. At a more general level, where ultimate choice of employment might not be so dependent on initial subject choice, and where students are able to choose amongst higher education institutions, do they look at the graduate employment rates of particular institutions as indicators of educational quality? As part of the Europe-wide study on higher education and employment, researchers in each country interviewed a small number of graduates from across the range of institutions. They were asked to think back to their time in higher education (3 or 4 years previously) and consider how they felt about it now.

Some of the responses from UK graduates were as follows:

I’m really glad I did it … I had a great time. I did learn a lot … if I had to choose my degree all over again, I would do the same thing and the same place. I deliberately chose to go somewhere that was completely different from my home
and my school environment as part of the ‘growing-up process’. (Fine arts graduate, originally from market town area in south of England who went to a large university in an industrial area)

Would recommend higher education to anyone most certainly ... it’s good fun, it gets you away from home ... if you come from a small insulated environment ... you go back and see the people who didn’t escape and you think ‘oh, poor souls!’ ... it’s a great thing, I learnt a lot not just about the subject but about life ... the people you meet from different walks of life outside your own small area ... a different bunch of people (at university) that’s what you need ... I think it works for people from any background really ... you need to see all aspects of life even if you don’t want to be that ... you need to be aware ... (Civil engineering graduate, originally from small island community who went to a large university in an industrial area)

As these quotations suggest, these graduates’ choice of university was influenced by their desire to go and live and study in environments very different from those in which they had been educated, ones that would offer exposure to a much more diverse mix of cultures and people than they had experienced at home. Little is said about the actual reputation of the institutions themselves or about employability as a salient issue in choice of degree programme. These sentiments may of course reflect a post hoc rationalisation of the situation in which they ended up. Moreover, they may also reflect the well-known characteristic of British (or at least English) life in which, traditionally, students have moved away from home to pursue higher education. This situation may be changing slightly with the recently-introduced changes to the way in which students fund their higher education. They do show that, in choosing institutions, students may not be too influenced by their future employment prospects: they do not try to discriminate on the basis of this sort of quality.

A second dimension of higher education relevant to work is the centrality of provision of job-related knowledge and competencies. Higher education curricula vary in their relationship to work: for example, they might be geared closely to specific occupations; they might be geared towards preparation for research and knowledge creation; they might be geared towards the general development of an individual’s personal attributes and skills as well as higher order cognitive skills. Moreover, in some countries there has, traditionally, been a closer match between higher education and work than in others.

In the survey of graduates across Europe, UK graduates regarded their degrees as a less useful preparation for their current employment (3 years after graduation) than did their European counterparts (49% UK graduates rated usefulness of studies as preparation for current employment highly, compared to 61% graduates overall) (Brennan et al., forthcoming). So, the UK appears less successful than Europe as a whole in preparing graduates for employment. But is this a fair interpretation? It is necessary to remember that, historically, the match between higher education and work has tended to be much looser in the UK than in other countries, so one should not be unduly surprised to find these lower ratings: as such, they seem to confirm what was already known about national differences in the linkages between higher education and work, rather than indicate anything about the quality of higher education in the UK compared to the rest of Europe.

Earlier, some findings about the skills and competencies that employers want from graduates were mentioned. This can be compared to graduates’ own perceptions of the extent to which they possessed certain skills and competencies on graduation. For all graduates across Europe, learning abilities, working independently and written communi-
TABLE 2. ‘Top 10’ competencies possessed by graduates across Europe at the time of graduation (adapted from Brennan et al., forthcoming)

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<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Learning abilities</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Working independently</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Written communication skills</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Loyalty, integrity</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Getting personally involved</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Field-specific theoretical knowledge</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Power of concentration</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Tolerance</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
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cation skills were, as might be expected, rated highly. For UK graduates ‘working in a team’ and ‘working under pressure’, ‘oral communication skills’ and ‘problem-solving ability’ also appeared in the 10 most highly rated possessed competencies. However, none of these appeared in the ‘top 10’ list for European graduates overall. Table 2 shows the ‘top 10’ list across Europe.

What do these findings suggest? It is tempting to think that as far as UK higher education curricula are concerned, institutions have been responding to UK graduate employers’ demands for a graduates who are easily assimilated into employment situations that require flexible and responsive people who can solve problems, work in teams and under pressure. Or maybe, debates about general ‘skills’ development have been louder in the UK than elsewhere, and so skills development has tended to be more explicitly emphasised within higher education. Whatever the background, such straightforward listings of self-ratings of skills and competencies can tell us little about quality. At the very least, we might want to look closer at the relationship between knowledge and skills held at time of graduation and those currently required in employment.

Linkages Between Higher Education and Work

The second strand in the relationship between higher education and work is that of ‘linkages’: comprising the labour market for graduates (including the role of intermediary agencies and processes related to transition from higher education to employment); regulatory systems (through which explicit government initiatives might be aimed at improving the linkage); and considerations of lifelong education and work.

Any employability performance indicator that relates to the transitions between education and work should be treated with care. For example, how does it account for those graduates who are already in the labour market whilst they are studying, and so are not entering the labour market as such once they graduate? Within the UK, almost 9% of undergraduates study in a part-time basis and a recent survey of part-time students in the UK found 80% were in full-time or part-time paid employment whilst studying (Brennan et al., 1999). The largest provider of part-time undergraduate study within the UK is the Open University and almost 70% of its undergraduates remain in full-time employment throughout their studies. Furthermore, the proportions of part-time students are not evenly distributed across the UK’s higher education system. So any employability indicator that referred to ‘transition’ would need to be interpreted with care, particularly for those
institutions with much greater (or smaller) proportions of students already in the labour market.

Looking across Europe, graduates in some countries have a much greater propensity to continue in further study or professional training after initial graduation than in other countries. Almost 70% of the graduates surveyed had been predominantly in regular jobs since graduating 3 years earlier: in France and Spain this proportion fell to less than half. On first reading this might look rather surprising and might raise questions about the balance between the supply and demand for graduates in these countries. However, in these countries, large proportions of graduates had been undertaking further study since graduating in 1995 (46% of Spanish graduates and 60% of French graduates said this had been the case). So it would seem that in these countries transition into the labour market is not necessarily the obvious next step after graduation. Consequently, any comparisons of country-specific data on graduate transition into the labour market need careful interpretation.

Do employers behave like rational consumers when employing graduates? Class, region and ethnicity might all be associated with labour market access in different countries but it has been noted that the impact of social and cultural capital (independent of education) on the operation of the labour market for graduates varies by country (Brennan et al., 1996). Certainly, for some countries the socio-economic background of graduates might be less of an issue for future employment prospects than in others. For the Europe-wide survey of graduates, a common questionnaire was used: however, there were a number of optional questions which individual countries could choose to include or exclude. Question concerning parental occupation was omitted by several countries and one can only assume that for these countries the impact of socio-economic background on graduates’ labour market opportunities was not seen to be an issue. In the UK it is very much an issue. There is evidence to suggest that, although there has been some progress made in extending access to UK higher education to various disadvantaged groups (for example, ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic groups), graduates from such groups do relatively poorly on entry to the labour market. So, in looking at indicators of graduate employment, like needs to be compared with like: for example, an institution’s seemingly poor rate of graduate employment might say more about the make-up of that institution’s student population than it does about the quality of its higher education provision. This is not to say that such data should not lead to further questions but these questions might be more to do with employers’ recruitment practices than about the higher education provision itself.

Age on graduation may also be a factor on the operation of the graduate labour market. The survey data revealed, not surprisingly (given the earlier age at enrolment and the shorter length of degree course), that UK graduates tend to be younger than the average in Europe, although there was also a significant sub-group of ‘mature’ UK graduates, that is, those aged 30 or more (20% compared with a European average of 15%). However, does age on graduation really matter in the graduate labour market? Research carried out in the UK that aimed to investigate employers’ recruitment processes and attitudes towards the increasingly diverse graduate labour market found that the older new graduates are the more likely they are to have difficulty convincing employers they are the best candidates in a highly competitive graduate labour market (Purcell et al., 1999).

Moreover, older students are not evenly distributed across institutions and the survey data show that, across Europe, they are more likely to go to vocational or lower status institutions. In the UK, employers (especially the larger ones) still tend to target particular institutions for recruitment: the key factors being the track record of graduates within the
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company, the reputation of the institution, and the relevance of the course (HEFCE, 1999; personal transcripts of employer interviews). So older students face a ‘double whammy’. First, older graduates are likely to have difficulty convincing employers of their worth. Second, older graduates are also more likely to be at those institutions that are not part of large employers’ targeted recruitment practices, and thus are less likely to have immediate access to those employers’ fast track management training streams. So employability indicators relating to job types entered, job level or seniority and earnings might tend to favour particular types of higher education institutions at the expense of others.

Employers’ interest in graduates from particular institutions, based on the track record of previous graduates (and co-incidentally the potential for networking between current and past students), was clearly described by some of the graduates we interviewed. For example:

My university was geared towards finding employment for its graduates, and because ... of the success of previous graduates ... they then get back to the university ... either as themselves as recruiters or their line managers ... So it starts to snowball ... there’s a network of (former graduates of this university) out there in top blue-chip companies and dot.com companies who you can use to your benefit ... (Transport management young graduate from a large technology university in an industrial area of England)

The networking does not necessarily stop on finding the first postgraduate job. Since conducting the interview, this graduate indicated that he has changed job and company again, following a ‘tip-off’ from a friend from his former university.

Graduates from different higher education institutions are differentially employable and employers do not necessarily choose new graduates on a rational basis, often using non-formal means (such as networks) to employ new graduates.

To what extent do employers’ actions match up with their exhortations to higher education institutions about the type of qualities they are looking for in graduates? For many years now there has been much debate about skills development within higher education. Within the UK, various initiatives aimed at enhancing undergraduates’ skills development have been funded by central government. In the course of a recent study (funded jointly by national policy-making bodies) researchers noted that the purpose of the claim that higher education helps students to acquire or improve employability skills was to meet (some of) the criticisms that employers made of higher education institutions and their graduates. However, they noted that it was difficult to find any hard evidence that employers actually preferred graduates who had received employability skills training over those who had not (CVCP, 1998). So one must question whether employers’ behaviour is rational in the ways that debates about employability would presume.

In fact there is evidence that recruiters are most interested in the personal qualities of individual graduates (HEFCE, 1999). In the survey of graduates, both UK graduates and graduates across Europe ranked personality as the most important criterion in getting a first job on graduation: field of study was ranked as the second most important criterion. However, at present (at least in the UK), it seems to be a moot point whether these personal qualities are being enhanced by particular skills-development initiatives being undertaken within higher education curricula. Indeed, it is not clear whether higher education can intentionally make much of a difference here.

From the foregoing it is clear that seemingly straightforward measures of linkages between higher education and work are very likely to conceal a number of factors that may have an important impact (both individually and collectively) on the relationship between
the supply and demand side of the graduate labour market. Such measures cannot be taken as simple ‘proxies’ for indicators of the quality of higher education. An understanding and appreciation of the intervening factors is needed in interpreting information on graduate employment, rather than taking any such figures at face value, especially when trying to infer anything about the quality of higher education from such bald statistics.

**Graduate Employability and Quality**

So what can we learn from the foregoing about how measures of graduate employability could be used to best effect in gauging one aspect of the quality of higher education? Should all such measures come with a ‘government health warning’, to be used with caution? It has been suggested that to have any validity, indicators of graduate employability need to be seen as multi-dimensional and to distinguish between factors relevant to obtaining a job and factors relevant to preparation for work. Experience, from the publication of ‘league tables’ of institutions (so loved by the press in the UK), shows that there is a temptation to try and aggregate these many dimensions into a single indicator, which can never do justice to the complexity of graduate employability. Even within one country, different groups of graduates might have very different relationships with the world of work, depending on institution attended, subject studied and age on graduation. So, interpreting a simple metric of graduate employability, such as the percentage of students employed after 6 months, as if it were an indicator of the quality of higher education is not necessarily a straightforward and easy task. When carried into the arena of international comparisons of quality, the task of interpretation becomes far more problematic.

Of course, measures of graduate employability are of interest to higher education institutions and to governments. Moreover, in the UK, as prospective students become more aware of the financial ramifications of higher education funding arrangements and likely levels of personal debt on graduation it may be that measures of graduate employability will become more important in their decisions about which discipline to study and which institutions to choose. However, the real worth of measures of graduate employability may well lie in the further questions and issues they then raise, which in turn prompt debates about how these issues might be addressed through particular policy initiatives, rather than in any direct links between measures of graduate employability and measures of quality of higher education provision.

In all the debates about how multi-dimensional measures of graduate employability relate to higher education quality, we should not overlook the views of students and graduates themselves. Within higher education institutions, student views on a range of aspects that have a bearing on quality are often taken into account in an institution’s quality assurance mechanisms. What about their views after the event, once they are some way removed from the undergraduate experience and have had time to reflect on it? The following are two contrasting views, taken from the interviews conducted with UK graduates who had graduated 3 or 4 years previously.

**Fantastic time ... great for networking ... and making friends for life ... you think about study time and that probably wasn’t the major part of higher education ... there was a lot of socialising but ultimately when it came down to exam time everyone knuckled down and made sure they did the work. (Transport management young graduate from a large technology university in an industrial area of England)**

**It’s the biggest let-down I’ve ever experienced ... going to university ... because**
the background I came from it was supposed to be a really big thing to do ... and you expected to meet all these clever people and have clever conversations and all the rest of it ... and there were just a bunch of immature people running about ... conversations were about Neighbours [a network soap-opera] ... intellectually I liked it and my own work ... I actually chose to go there ... wasn’t something I fell out of from school 6th form straight into university ... but the actual ‘whole’ university experience ... I feel quite disappointed ... thought it was going to change my life by being around clever intelligent people, talking about all sorts of different subjects ... I thought I’d learn a lot other than about my own particular degree subject ... (Environmental biology older graduate from a small university in leafy suburbs in south of England)

Clearly, each had very different expectations of what higher education was going to be like, and had gone to university with different motivations. Each had their own idea of ‘quality’, which had an effect on how they viewed their university experiences. Perhaps we should remember this when trying to interpret the bigger picture of quality of higher education as reflected through measures like graduate employability.

Note

[1] The study of graduates’ experiences of higher education and employment was funded by the European Commission through its Targeted Socio-economic Research Programme. The study is based on over 36,000 responses from people from 11 European countries who graduated from higher education in 1995.

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