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Employability, Mobility and the Labour Market

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Editorial

For almost the first two millennia of their history, institutions of higher scholarly learning and the world of work were unlikely bed-fellows. In fact, the two spheres functioned practically in parallel universes, where knowledge for knowledge's sake was the antithesis of knowledge for work. Work was seen as thoughtless and routinely practical, and, outside of elite leadership, brawn not brains, were the accepted tools of trade and industry. In the latter half of the twentieth century this divide began to narrow, evolving into a late twentieth century predication that brains (i.e., knowledge) were the new tool. Consequently, knowledge itself became an industry charged with quenching the thirst of knowledge-based societies and workforces around the world. As Ridderstråle and Nordström (2002, p. 288) put it,

The new acid test of what is valuable, is whether or not it hurts when you drop it on your toes. If it does, you should start rethinking the way you operate. Things that used to be in demand used to consist of a little knowledge and a lot of stuff; the new valuables are made up of a little stuff and a lot of knowledge.

Adjusting to this shift has been a challenging endeavour for labour markets and higher education institutions alike. Gradually, or suddenly in the cases of over-night ideological shifts, the nature, purposes and uses of knowledge haven taken on significant new meanings and import. Rapidly knowledge was required to be applicable for all stakeholders: students; researchers; employers; parents; governments; and most importantly the traditional purveyors of knowledge – universities. As social development increasingly depended on economic growth, economic growth likewise depended on knowledge workers, and employers began to demand a new knowledge profile of graduates, who, regardless of their area of specialization, had the complement of knowledge, skills and competencies to assure that organisations stayed on top of their games. The employability of higher education graduates no longer relied on traditional knowledge but on a package of new specific complements of skills and knowledge.

Similarly, with ever greater numbers of people accessing higher education, both immediately post-secondary education and later in life, often with substantial personal investment, so they have in turn begun demanding value for money and an increasing return on their investments (financial and time), and questioning whether an institution's courses in all three cycles (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral degrees) will stand up to the scrutiny of an internationally competitive job market.

Institutions of higher education are themselves not immune to the employability equation: today they not only need great researchers and future Fields medallists, they also need great teachers, who are also competent managers and potential leaders, and who therefore need the same employability skills of the non-academic sectors, since they too are part of the new knowledge industry labour market.

Indelibly tied to this new use and purpose of knowledge for employability is knowledge for a globalised world, as knowledge workers are on the move like never before. Where the knowledgeable were once limited to a narrow geographic remit or a narrow specialization, today they are being recruited across disciplines, nations and continents. Just as the labour market increasingly knows no boundaries, neither does the knowledge worker, and so the re-designing of knowledge and skills now needs to be adaptable not only to a local labour market, but to national and international labour markets. A young scientist today not only needs to be eminent in their field, but is also required to be a trainer/mentor, an effective manager, team leader and adaptable to a mobile career in international contexts and cultures.

This issue of *Higher Education in Europe* brings together the new knowledge worker trinity of employability, mobility and the labour market. Prokou examines the changing role of universities in Europe as they are called upon to make students more employable and being forcing down the road to a ‘market driven or pragmatic’ vestige of their former missions. While Andrews and Higson, followed by Gomezelj Omerzel and Trunk Širka discuss the new types of graduate knowledge and skills now emanating from higher education, Lindberg takes up the issue from a graduate and new lifelong learner’s perspective in the context of higher education-to-work transitions. Guth’s analysis of the east–west mobility of early career scientists offers some sobering realities about the ‘free movement’ between labour markets in the EU – particularly in academia, and the whole-scale mobility of economies from planned socialism to a free-market and free-labour market are the subject of Smirnov’s reflections on Serbia, where higher education still often lags behind the new *real-politik*, resulting in some disillusionment among ill-prepared graduates entering the labour markets.

The focus of this issue’s Tribune is on the changing teaching methodologies and pedagogies fuelled in-part by the need for the transferable and flexible skills dictated by the knowledge labour force, and, in the case of France, how these trends have been cascaded to the far-reaching French reforms at the heart of teacher training practices and expectations.

Finally, as timely and erudite as ever, Professor Gilder parallels two publications in our Book Reviews section, prompting a thought-provoking reflection both for academia on their own vocations and their labour market; and for learners on the potential futility of the whole employability debate, citing Raines and McAdams’ assertion that “The unsaid of education is that the arbitrariness of birth and of class origin is today more and more important in terms of how life chances work out in our society” (2006, p. 47).

From Serbia to Finland, and from the implied to the explicit, the ramifications of the new knowledge-worker world-order require urgent attention in and by higher education institutions. High expectations indeed, yet a reality which academic leaders and policy makers would ignore at their peril, for no man, graduate or institution is an island – gainfully employed or otherwise.

References

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- RAINES, J. and MCADAMS, C.B. “College and Social Class: The Broken Promise of America”, *Cross Currents* (Spring 2006): 46–57.