

Life after graduation: The Role of Graduate Employment and Tracking Systems for Continuous Curricula Development and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education

A joint initiative of the UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES)
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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Rise of Quality Enhancement

The advent of mass higher education during the past decade has opened up opportunities for more people than ever before to benefit from post-secondary learning in order to contribute meaningfully to knowledge societies around the world. With this increasing demand for higher education has come an increase in supply, with traditional higher education institutions enrolling new students, establishing new and diverse study programmes, courses and modules, and the creation of new learning pathways and study modes. At the same time new institutions and colleges have emerged, many of which, particularly in Central, Eastern and South East Europe have a private status. This increased supply has inevitably and rightly lead to a greater call for quality assurance measures and transparency across the whole higher education sector; from teaching and learning, assessment practices and curricula development, to financial, resource and quality management, as well as increased attention to research assessment exercises. All of these quality monitoring and enhancement processes have largely focused on internal procedures and practices, to support student learning and institutional value.

The External Dimension of Quality Processes

However there is now increasingly a need to look beyond the internal quality environments in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and to take seriously not only student and learning quality, but the quality of graduates, their ability to make a qualitative contribution to society, and to their personal professional fulfillment. Following the careers, and choices of graduates provides HEIs with vitally important feedback and input to the continuous development of curricula across all discipline, feedback which is equally as essential for any institutional quality assurance process as student and internal stakeholder tracking.

It is often incorrectly presumed that only graduates of the social sciences (e.g. Law or Business Management) can be tracked and/or provide useful information on their employability upon graduation.

It is just as important for HEIs as part of their whole institutional QA processes to maintain contact with and get feedback from their graduates of history, medicine, engineering, education, drama, languages, etc., the experiences of whom, in whatever career paths they eventually follow, provides an institution with an important (yet often overlooked) second or external dimension of data on which to steer its institutional short, medium and long term strategies. A third dimension which an established graduate tracking system also address is an opportunity to interact with learn from the experiences and opinions of the employers of an institution's graduates – hospitals, schools, other universities, engineering and architecture firms, media organizations etc – are all vital to informing and ensuring that HEIs programmes/courses continue to keep a pace with the ever-changing demands for skills and competencies in the workplace of a knowledge society.

Graduate Tracking for Short and Medium Term Strategies

The value of following the careers and employability of graduates as well as interacting with their employers over time not only provides essential information for the continuous improvement of undergraduate and post-graduate courses, it also generates the information HEIs need to design and offer relevant programmes for lifelong learning opportunities. Tracking graduates provides vital hands-on information about the new skills and competencies that graduates need five, ten and twenty years after graduation in order to take their careers forward. Such information helps HEIs to identify and cater for the needs of the workplace and to therefore develop medium strategies for offering re-skilling modules, courses, programs and degrees for its own graduates, graduates from other institutions, and non-traditional student groups such as migrant workers and non-graduates.

THE AIM OF THE JOINT UNESCO-CEPES/LBUS PROJECT

Tracking graduates is however not easy and demands an investment in time and resources. The models and approaches for tapping this invaluable resource are varied – from the complex and costly, to the modest and simple. The Joint UNESCO-CEPES/LBUS Project on “*Life after graduation: The Role of Graduate Employment and Tracking Systems for Continuous Curricula Development and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education*” aims to look at a cross-section of successful systems from various regions of the world and at different types of institutions, and to share with HEIs in South East Europe how they are used at institutional level to contribute to short and medium term quality enhancement strategies. As a starting point the project will address three questions:

- What are the benefits of having an institutional approach to graduate tracking?
- How can a graduate tracking system be put into place, and what are the resource implications?
- How should an institution use the data from a tracking system?

These key questions will be addressed and expanded on at an International Seminar to be held in Sibiu, Romania in May 2011 at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, bringing together experts in graduate

employability and representatives of good practice institutions with well established tracking systems. In addition student services departments, career counselors, quality assurance and curricula development offices from HEIs in the region will be invited to participate, as well as graduate and employer representatives. Following the international seminar, a practical “How to ...” tool kit will be produced including examples and models of good practice as well as a starter software programme for institutions to set up their own graduate tracking system.

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