

Bologna Process Beyond 2020: Fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area

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The Bologna Process and the demands of the Labour Market

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Abstract:

The Bologna Declaration was a starting point for several European governments to reorganise and modernise the higher education system in their countries. In the Bologna declaration, as well as in the communiqués from the ministerial conferences, employability is mentioned as an important aspect for HE programs. It is especially linked to the first cycle degrees, which should be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification, but it is of course linked to all three cycles. It is also linked to life-long learning and the ability to broaden the competences for individuals when the labour market needs are rapidly changing.

The word “employability” has been criticized. This must be seen in the light that many HE systems had first degrees of 4-5 years before adjusting to the Bologna process. The criticism can also be related to a criticism for too direct linkage to the labour market needs, not allowing the unforeseen demands in society, which more general studies might assure. “Usability” has been mentioned by students as a more appropriate term. A too strict link to the existing labour market can be conserving our societies instead of developing them.

At the same time, we have to be aware that our governments sometimes seem to be impatient with the higher education institutions - and students - when it comes to the supply of competences compared to the labour market needs. We also have to be aware of the existing allocation of study programs between different fields. The allocation might still mirror the historical facts. Programs in the humanities and social sciences often attract more students compared to the SciTech fields. There is a gap in the supply of graduates competences and the demand from parts of the labour market, which is discussed not least by enterprise associations. *The main message in this keynote is to focus more on the transversal skills in all study programs and also assess them. In this way the future needs of the labour market will be met more properly.*

In the recent call for European universities, the requirements for long term cooperation covers many aspects, among others practical and work-based experiences to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and civic engagement.

Keywords: Employability; Skills gap; Digital skills; Transversal skills; Assessment of transversal skills

This session, *Careers and Skills for the Labour Market of the future*, is about the future. However, I start by looking back, as it is a 20th anniversary. Twenty years ago, many governments in Europe needed support to tackle modernisation of universities. The Bologna Declaration was a starting point for several European governments to reorganise and modernise the higher education system in their countries. The establishing of the European Higher Education Area was, among many other things, also oriented towards the requirements in the labour market. In the Bologna declaration, as well as in the communiqués from the ministerial conferences, employability is mentioned as an important aspect for HE programs. It is especially linked to the first cycle degrees, which should be relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification, but it is of course linked to all three cycles. The demands of the labour market also included a stronger focus on the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), life- long learning, the ability to broaden the competences

for individuals when the labour market needs are rapidly changing as well as a broader recruitment of students with diversified backgrounds. The means was to restructure the higher education sector to be more alike between countries in Europe and thereby make it easier to understand the labour market outside one's own country. The redesign of curricula with learning outcomes in focus was also a way to accentuate the different types of skills demanded in many work places.

The word "employability" has been criticized. This can be seen in the light that many higher education systems had first degrees of 4-5 years before adjusting to the Bologna process and difficulties to think of a shorter first cycle degree as suitable for the labour market. The criticism can also be related to a criticism for too direct linkage to the labour market needs, not allowing the unforeseen demands in society, which more general studies might assure. "Usability" has been mentioned by students as a more appropriate term. A too strict link to the existing labour market can be conserving our societies instead of developing them. With a close connection to research, higher education programs can be influencing the labour market with new ideas.

Parallel to this, there has been a modernisation agenda in the EU structure with reports and a High Level Group. The focus has been how you learn, how you teach and the digital competences needed in the society. Also the skill mismatches between the supply of graduates and demand from the labour market has been discussed. In both approaches, the wider Bologna Process community and the EU agenda, the employability versus the utility of studies are discussed. Is the concern only to adapt to the labour market needs or is the concern also to influence the labour market?

Anyhow, there is a skills gap between supply and demand of higher education trained people in certain areas, especially the STEM fields, but also others. The gap exists locally, regionally and nationally. The digital gap is challenging in almost all fields. There is concern from politicians, from the business sector and employer organisations about these gaps, but also from the higher education sector. But the gap is not only related to the situation in the higher education institutions; it is also about the conditions on the labour market and the lack of attractiveness in certain fields – which can vary from country to country.

How can you tackle these gaps? Several kinds of measures are necessary. The working conditions in certain fields must be ameliorated, not only linked to salary but also wider. The most difficult issue is to influence the attitudes among young people towards certain jobs/fields. There are efforts, like the Technological Leap ("Tekniksprånget") in Sweden which is an opportunity for young people directly after secondary school to spend half a year at an enterprise in order to find out what kind of jobs there exist – and thereby hopefully influence these youngsters to choose a suitable higher education program. The same aim has different summer schools at higher education institutions.

The challenge when it comes to the digital skills gap is that these gaps are of different kinds: technical and professional competences, generic IT competences and soft supplementary IT competences (OECD "Skills for a digital world", 2016). Not least the last type of skills gap is about supplementary learning in the field, where new knowledge and new approaches are necessary as the labour market changes. So, the automation and artificial intelligence will change the skills needed in the work force in many different directions. The challenge is to combine the human cognitive capacity with new cognitive and intelligent instruments given. Therefore, a broad supply of different educational offers for life-long learning is important, in which also higher education institutions can contribute.

We have to realize that the skills gaps exist. The gap in the supply of graduates competences and the demand from parts of the labour market is discussed not least by enterprise associations. And we have to be aware that our governments sometimes seem to be impatient with the higher education institutions - and students - when it comes to the supply of competences compared to the labour market needs. They take action – different actions from country to country. Sometimes the existing allocation of study programs between different fields is questioned. The allocation might still mirror the historical facts. Programs in the humanities and social sciences have many students, as these programs often are without restricted admission and hitherto cheaper than programs demanding lab resources. These fields often attract more students compared to the SciTech fields. Higher education institutions also take action. Among other things, as restructuring the curricula, internship in different work places during the higher education studies is used as a measure to easier get a job direct after graduating.

In a broader spectrum, what kind of competences do we need in the future labour market? When meeting these requirements, we also tackle the skills gap. Above all, we need to train students in skills enhancing the employability of students. The language skills must be broadened to several languages. The labour market of the future – but also of today – is requiring transversal skills, both connected to the field of study and generally. Which are these transversal skills? Actually, they are skills we train in higher education, but we do not always put them forward as essential, as they are not always assessed. It is about communication skills, both orally and written. It is about analytical skills and ability to critical reflection. It is also about ability to think in new directions, entrepreneurial skills. But it is also very simple things as ability to plan one's work and to make decisions. You can say that some of these skills are a question of personality, but we can train our students to be better off. The digital skills have also to be included in how the field is approached.

The labour market of the future is also a labour market in a globalised world. Therefore, and as many nations have an increasingly heterogeneous population, international and intercultural skills are needed more broadly. These skills are the transversal skills applicable to an international context: to be open-minded, aware of cultural differences, have intercultural understanding and be adaptable to new perspectives. It can include the preparedness to work in an international setting. The entrepreneurial skills might be emphasised after an international experience, which make increased mobility an important means for training students in these skills and international and intercultural skills.

The learning outcomes of different study programs are nowadays, thanks to the Bologna process, expressed in a way which includes transversal skills. Students are not always aware of the importance of transversal skills when they market themselves in a job interview. In order to make the training of all these skills more important for higher education institutions as well as for students, the training has to include more thorough assessment of the transversal skills. If anything has to be further examined in order to meet the labour market of the future, it is different approaches and experiences to examine these skills.

In the European Union, there is an initiative inside the Erasmus program, which is approaching some of the challenges of the labour market of tomorrow: the European Universities starting in the autumn of 2019. This initiative is a linkage between local and national and European needs, it is a means of strengthening and deepening recognition and mobility, it has a focus on inclusion and the civic society and also on the entrepreneurial approaches and innovation in a broad sense. The European University is meant to be long term cooperation between several higher education institutions covering all regions in Europe. The labour market issue is of course important for these initiatives. Among many other things,

practical and work-based experiences to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and develop civic engagement are mentioned in the recent call. Innovation, local relevance and community development are focussed in the same time as cross-national cooperation. The assessments of transversal skills might not be on the agenda. However, the assessments of the transversal skills have to be discussed and tested.

The Bologna Declaration was an instrument to refresh higher education in different countries in Europe in order to modernise higher education and make it more in line with requirements of the labour market. The European University initiative is an instrument to contribute to the competitiveness of European universities by wide cooperation covering students, staff, curriculum design, governance, innovation and other societal interaction programs and inclusiveness to neighbouring societies. This is a new effort to influence higher education institutions to do their best for the society and the labour market in a European setting. However, the training and assessment of transversal skills inside the study programs is the most important instrument to meet the future demands of the labour market and to increase the usability of higher education.