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students' skills, employability and the teaching of european studies: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Skills and employability are increasingly viewed as crucial issues in curriculum design and teaching, while simultaneously perceived as potentially detrimental to academic standards. This article comparatively analyses the current European employability agenda, and how it was implemented in Britain and the Netherlands. Additionally, this article critically reflects on the challenges and opportunities of integrating such an agenda into an EU studies curriculum, by drawing on practical examples from the universities of Maastricht and Newcastle.

Keywords Employability; Skills; European Studies; Bologna Process

INTRODUCTION

Recent debates about higher education (HE) in Europe have increasingly focused on graduate skills and employability; issues which have been perceived by university staff (mostly negatively) as an outcome of the Bologna process. While sector-specific skills have always been part of curriculum design, teaching and assessment strategies, particularly in vocational degrees like medicine or engineering, the new agenda has given emphasis to the acquisition of soft or transferable skills. This matches the demands of EU graduate employers. A Eurobarometer (2010) survey of employers found that the skills they deemed most important in graduates were team-working (67 per cent very important), sector specific skills (62 per cent) followed by communication skills, computer skills and adaptability (all 60%). Strong literacy skills (59 per cent) and problem-solving / analytical skills (58 per cent) were also felt important; interestingly employers were much less concerned about numeracy (40 per cent) or foreign language skills (33 per cent). However, academics have often opposed this agenda. Part of the problem is that both the lists of desirable transferable skills, and the concept of employability, are both vague and contested. Additionally, some critics fear that rather than enabling graduates, this agenda ignores the structural barriers to employment within the labour market such as discrimination, nepotism and a lack of jobs (Wilton, 2011; Moreau and Leatherwood, 2006) and instead, constructs a model of the ideal skilled, flexible European graduate that excludes more graduates than it includes (Fejes, 2008). Moreover, it is not proven that the possession of skills can be equated with graduates' ability to find suitable employment (Knight and Yorke, 2004). The aim of this contribution is, however, not primarily to reflect on and question the utility of integrating skills in undergraduate education (i.e. *why* skills and employability), but rather to investigate *how* two different HE systems reacted to this demand, in terms of creating institutional frameworks and in teaching and assessment practice.

The article begins by offering a brief overview of the Bologna process's involvement in and British and Dutch responses to the skills agenda. We then engage with the critical academic discourse arguing that even if we accept the need (as lecturers) to respond to the employability agenda by mainstreaming the teaching of transferable skills into our curriculum design and teaching and assessment strategies, there are still challenges in terms of how to implement this objective in practice. Firstly, we suggest that rather than being a new phenomenon, the critical discourse about the Bologna agenda has its roots in an older debate about the role of universities, which requires reflection. The current debate is framed by the administrative terminology of the Bologna process but is not new (Teichler, 2008). Secondly, we argue that, if skills are to be more prominently embedded into our teaching, it is necessary not to diminish the scholarly rigour with which we teach European Studies. Indeed, as we argue in this article, European Studies is well-suited to the incorporation of employability skills into the existing curriculum. Lastly, we want to emphasise that the skills agenda must be integrated into teaching and assessment in ways that do not alienate students, so that skills are taught as an integral part of university education embedded within the context of a specific subject.

SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY: AN OLD AGENDA IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT?

THE POLITICAL OBJECTIVE OF A EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

In response to internal and external challenges to European HE systems, in the 1999 Bologna declaration, ministers agreed to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 to increase the comparability and quality of European HE systems. The Bologna declaration saw graduate employability as a goal that would be achieved with the establishment of 'easily

readable and comparable degrees' (Bologna Declaration, 1999). In 2004, ministers called for 'a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their HE systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile'¹. A 2005 follow-up conference adopted an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QFEHEA)² and states were asked to develop, and self-certify their own compatible national qualification frameworks for the three cycles (Bachelor, Master, PhD) by 2010. In terms of providing common definitions of competences, skills and employability, the documents cited above are vague and reiterative. The Dublin descriptors³ focus on the following categories of competences: knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgments; communication skills; learning skills. An increased standard of achievement in these areas is expected in each educational cycle. The framework of the Bologna process provided impetus, institutional support and a forum for exchange on skills and employability to which the Netherlands and the UK responded.

Debates about reforming HE in the Netherlands began in 1995 when the educational council (Onderwijsraad) advised the government to actively support reforms offering greater choice for Dutch students and internationalisation. The reforms envisaged by the Bologna process from 1999 onwards were in line with this agenda and acted as a framework for the reform-minded to bring their ideas into reality. The Dutch Higher Education Qualification Framework was approved in October 2008 (Dutch Self-certification 2008) and externally verified by an independent international expert panel in February 2009. Despite criticism from employers of the new Bachelor-Master system and the new assessment criteria, the Netherlands has been considered a Bologna frontrunner, although joint degrees and diploma supplements have proved difficult (Westerheijden, 2011). The adoption of the Dublin Descriptors though was considered to support international recognition of the quality of

Dutch HE (Dutch self-certification 2008: 3). The Dublin descriptors were adopted for the three cycles of bachelor, master and PhD by direct transposition into the DHEQF (Dutch self-certification 2008, Annex 3: 24). HE programmes have to show compliance with the framework when they seek accreditation or reaccreditation.

The debate about skills and employability in university curricula in the UK also predates the Bologna Process. The 1997 Dearing Report was particularly influential in shaping the ways in which British universities have responded to the employability and skills agenda. Dearing (1997, paragraph 5.20) argued that alongside the intellectual attributes learnt through their degrees, graduates should, along with improving ‘the key skills of communication, numeracy and capability in communications and information technology’, acquire the employment skills of being flexible and adaptable, able to ‘work in teams, and to manage their own development and career’. Another legacy of the Dearing Report (1997) was the tasking of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to set a HE qualifications framework⁴ and subject level benchmark standards. The 2001 qualifications framework outlined the levels of achievement and attributes of those obtaining Bachelor, Master and doctoral degrees and, after some revision in 2008, was deemed compliant with the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA in 2009. Britain, unlike the Netherlands, did not therefore need to use the Bologna process as a way to frame reform. The benchmark for Politics and International Relations (QAA, 2007) alongside setting basic expectations of graduate knowledge and understanding of the subject, prescribes that Politics and IR BA graduates should possess generic intellectual skills⁵ and personal transferable skills⁶. Compliance is monitored through periodic internal subject reviews for reaccreditation. Additionally, many universities have developed their own graduate skills frameworks, and each module and degree programme must show how they provide opportunities to improve

and practice these skills⁷. While the skills and employability agenda is firmly embedded in British HE, it has also been criticised. Firstly, a series of studies such as Wilton (2011) and Moreau and Leatherwood (2006) have argued that the development of employability skills does not overcome structural disadvantage in the labour market, and that factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, disability, class and prior educational achievement are more important determinants of employment outcomes than the graduates' skills. Secondly, it has been argued that it is questionable how well employability skills can be taught in a classroom, and that the resources would be better spent on employment-based experience and employer involvement in courses, which Cranmer (2007) argued, produce better outcomes.

Both the Dutch and the British are considered to be early adopters of the skills agenda although the role of the Bologna process in shaping a response is much more important in the Netherlands. While both countries share a similar reaccreditation system to check compliance, the UK has been much more prescriptive in defining the skills that universities should teach. In both countries, however, this has left individual universities and course leaders considerable leeway in how they will adopt the skills agenda. Their responses have also been shaped by debate within universities about the desirability of such an agenda.

REACTIONS TO THE POLITICAL DEMAND: THE END OF A HUMANIST HIGHER EDUCATION?

The employability and skills agenda as pushed by the EHEA and taken up by national governments has been met with strong criticism that it subjugates the humanist educational aims of a classical higher education to utilitarian ones of producing future employees (Collini, 2012). Or, as Ashe (2012: 132) phrases it, 'the emergence of an employability agenda framed around the needs of business raises concerns about the erosion of higher

education's traditional liberal philosophy and the increasing encroachment of a business-led agenda'. Yet, is this really anything new? Most notably in Germany but also elsewhere, the critique is based on the Humboldt myth (Ash, 2006; Sauter, 1989), which glorifies the university, as an entity with absolute external independence from state, church and economic pressures that creates space for autonomous individuals to discover truth through rationality and in a comprehensive manner. Zöllner (1975: 35) argues though that even during Humboldt's time, universities were struggling with the tension between the ingrained different objectives of educating civil servants (exogenous demand) and combining research and education (endogenous motivation). The need to equip students with skills and competences for their future jobs is, therefore, not a new demand. But has the pressure to take employers' needs into account crossed a threshold that tips the required balance between different objectives too far into the direction of fulfilling business needs? Ashe (2012: 129), for example, claims that it is 'particularly problematic for lecturing staff working in critical subject areas such as politics and sociology' to take on board employer demands, while government and business actors abdicate their own responsibility to help graduates to navigate a complicated and difficult labour market. Is this agenda particularly problematic for such subjects?

The employability agenda does demand increased training in generic and transferable skills. But is this demand really different from what we teach anyway? The skills framework developed in the Bologna process was not designed in a top-down manner, defining a new set of skills that are deemed relevant in a changing working environment. Rather than seeing politics as a subject where the skills agenda is particularly problematic, Wetherly and Barnett (2005: 362-363; for a similar argument see Robinson 2013: 148-149) suggest that adding a politics perspective to a business curriculum enables the teaching of transferable skills; three

of their arguments are key to this discussion. *Firstly*, they claim that political science strengthens the liberal demand for ‘education for citizenship’ that should equip all HE graduates to participate in the political life of societies. A similar argument is made by Detjen (2002) who suggests that education generally should equip the citizen to be a ‘reflective observer’⁸. *Secondly* Wetherly and Barnett (2005: 363) suggest that a politics perspective trains students in ‘different ways of looking at the world [...by *integrating*] important analytical concerns (e.g. a focus on power) and normative considerations (e.g. the nature of good society) to the study of business’. And lastly, they claim that a politics perspective raises students’ awareness of skills ‘such as negotiation, dialogue and leadership’, which are crucial for working efficiently in business management. In other words, to outsiders a politics perspective is valued for its ability to contribute to generic skills training rather than being problematic.

Proponents of active learning in the social sciences also see these disciplines as well-suited to the embedding of skills training. Peters and Beeson (2010: 774) claim that the emphasis on using different tools in the search for knowledge, equip students better: discussions ‘facilitate the articulation of ideas, development of responses and evaluation of evidence’, while other forms of debates ‘develop critical thinking skills and challenge students’ existing assumptions’ (Peters and Beeson 2010: 774). Clark (2011: 136) argues that by using active learning, special emphasis is put on the training of ‘intellectual skills such as critical thinking, data analysis, numeracy, teamwork, and problem solving’. It is, therefore, possible to view the traditional attributes of a university education, such as critical engagement with the evidence base and its analysis, and the acquisition of transferable skills as being mutually complementary (Atkins, 1999). We would argue that for European Studies in particular, students have been encouraged for many years to actively engage with the EU policy environment through study trips, simulations and public policy-based modules. The

skills agenda is, therefore, less threatening than first thought. Our argument is strengthened when we compare actual practice in teaching and assessment at the universities of Maastricht and Newcastle.

IMPLEMENTING THE SKILLS AGENDA: EXPERIENCES FROM MAASTRICHT AND NEWCASTLE

MAASTRICHT

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University started its three-year interdisciplinary Bachelor in European Studies (BA ES) in 2002. The programme is fully taught in English and integrates law, politics, history, economics and cultural aspects. The whole programme is based on the alternative teaching method of Problem-Based Learning (PBL). While ‘employability’ as keyword does not figure in the curriculum design discourse, the training of students’ skills is considered a comprehensive layer that is streamlined into all educational activity by the use of PBL. Additionally, students follow skills training in writing and research methods, and can choose between an Erasmus stay and an internship in the first half of their third year.

PBL is the constructivist answer to shortcomings of traditional lecture-based learning by emphasising three main preconditions for a successful and comprehensive learning: learning is most sustainable if it is student-centred, collaborative, and involves an active process of knowledge construction. Students meet in small groups supported by academic staff twice a week, and each session develops into a short research process. The starting point is a ‘problem’, which should raise curiousness, motivate students and build on their previous knowledge. After clarifying what the task is about, students brainstorm, discuss, and structure their ideas to agree learning objectives for the session. The group determines what existing knowledge the new puzzle can be linked to, and how they have to proceed to answer the

posed questions. With these learning objectives in mind, students consult the (academic) literature during a self-study phase. In the next session students report back to each other, and by comparing their results they discover misunderstandings and misperceptions. Students thus actively define the content of their learning processes, while they are also in charge of their group learning process: students always act as chairs, minute-takers and whiteboard persons. The academic staff member provides feedback on content but also on group and learning dynamics.

Staff members identify as strengths of PBL that it fosters student responsibility, provides an active and stimulating learning process, and enhances the training of important skills and teamwork. The collaborative element develops and strengthens students' ability to communicate and work in a group. Students discover not only their self-responsibility for learning, but researching becomes very natural to them, because students constantly mimic research processes, by practicing formulating questions, developing hypotheses based on existing knowledge, looking for reliable evidence and confronting their group members with their independently discovered answers that often also contradict each other. This forces students to reassess their understanding of different issues. Generally, these skills overlap smoothly with the skills asked for by the Dublin descriptors.

While the whole programme is based on the PBL logic, experience showed that this approach to active learning has to be used flexibly: first year courses use the PBL approach in a very structured manner to get students acquainted to this way of learning, while courses in the second and third year use the PBL rationale in a more flexible manner, because by then students are accustomed to the self-motivated way of inquiry practised in the first year. Various exchanges of experiences among staff members, however, also showed that while most colleagues enjoy teaching in this PBL system, it is exactly the strengths of PBL that are

often also considered as challenges, if not implemented correctly and purposefully: the different role of the tutor as facilitator, the importance of group dynamics and especially the challenge of providing useful feedback on skills development can hamper the successful learning process of students. New staff members need training, especially in order to be able to provide feedback to their students on the skills dimensions. Course designers also have to provide enough time for feedback and reflection on the learning process and align the chosen assignment form with the specific skill to be trained. Hence, while problem-based learning seems a suitable tool to train skills in a sustainable manner, its implementation needs to be well set-up, and there is a strong need for aligning course structure, course assessment and desired course objectives in terms of both content and skills.

NEWCASTLE

Newcastle University offers a small, specialised four year BA degree programme in Government and European Union Studies. All students must study a European language alongside Politics modules, and must spend a year carrying out a Politics-focused Erasmus study or work placement between the second and final years of the course. The degree attempts to find a balance between delivering transferable skills through employment-based experiences and skills training delivered through individual modules. In terms of employment-based experiences, the degree offers students the choice of taking a Career Development module (worth 10 ECTS), which combines training delivered by the Careers Service and a voluntary or paid work placement. Students can also opt for a Politics-focused Erasmus work placement for their year abroad rather than the traditional study placement. The decision was taken that yearlong placements should be Politics-focused to ensure that the placement experience allowed reflection on and application of the academic content of the degree programme (Curtis, 2011). Employment-based experiences, therefore, require the

students to specifically opt in, so that those who prefer a wholly academic degree experience can pursue that option instead. This tends to mean that students opting for an employment-based experience are highly motivated.

The skills training provided through academic modules follows two main tracks. Firstly, Politics research skills training is delivered through a compulsory module (10 ECTS) in both the first two years culminating in a dissertation (20 ECTS) or project (10 ECTS) in the final year. Alongside training in quantitative and qualitative research methods, these modules include transferable skills activities, for example, activities based around teamwork, oral and written communication in the first year, and a small project in the second year. For this method to be successful in helping to mould students' generic skills, it is important that such methods courses remain broadly-based and do not, for example, just concentrate on quantitative methods training. Secondly, through three compulsory modules in EU politics (one in each year), communication and teamwork skills are practised and assessed. In the first year, this is through mini-simulations, in the second year through group briefing paper presentations and in the final year through a longer Council negotiation simulation. Newcastle therefore, unlike Maastricht, has largely opted to embed the skills agenda through innovative assessments rather than a set approach to teaching. This allows individual lecturers rather than the institution to determine *how* skills training is integrated into modules. EU politics has proved one of the easier areas to develop innovative but relevant and rigorous assessment strategies. Students are sometimes resistant to group-based assessments but if the aims are explained, and they are given some choice of who they work with, problems can be minimised.

The second year module, the Politics and Policy of the European Union, is specifically designed through its assessment to prepare any students taking the Erasmus work placement option for the type of work they might carry out in a Brussels-based internship

(based around the skills required in the internship advert for a placement providers). Although 50 per cent of the assessment is a written exam, the other assignment is for small teams of students to write and orally present a briefing paper on an issue currently under negotiation in the Council. The students are required to outline the issue at stake, give an overview of the negotiating stances of key actors and to develop recommendations for a proposed way forward. They are expected to use a range of sources, including official documentation, and to show that they understand what constitutes a reliable source (information literacy). The assignment tests teamwork, written and oral communication skills and information literacy, but more importantly through several linked seminars develops the idea of professional writing, the concept of briefing managers and officials and the need for accuracy and reliability. They also encourage students to actively engage with the EU policy environment. After some initial scepticism, students have responded well to the assessment and produced some excellent work. These modules taken together as a compulsory core ensure that the programme meets the QAA Politics and International Relations subject benchmark. Student responses to the National Student Survey in 2012 showed a higher level of confidence that their communication skills had been improved by the programme, than students claimed on other related programmes. The Newcastle experience confirms Robinson's (2013) assertion that skills training is only useful if students understand what skills they are developing through innovative assessment.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the EHEA and especially the framework for qualifications integrating the Dublin descriptors in terms of the employability agenda has informed change in most European HE systems. While compliance was relatively straightforward for the UK, given the employability and skills agenda was already embedded in a largely compliant system, the Netherlands was able to complete some desired reforms by framing them as the Bologna

agenda. The national approach to skills, competences and employability did not change considerably in either case. In both countries, universities remain responsible for integrating skills and competences into their programmes, which governments ensure through reaccreditation processes. In the UK additional subject benchmarks have been set.

To reflect more comprehensively on how European Studies lecturers might respond to the HE skills and employability discourse, we responded to the academic criticism of the employability agenda, questioning whether current developments are substantially different from earlier debates about the role of universities struggling to satisfy different demands. Additionally, we proposed that European Studies is well-suited to the incorporation of teaching transferable skills, because engagement with the policy environment is already embedded in mainstream understandings of how to teach the subject.

The way in which the two universities, Maastricht and Newcastle, have designed the teaching of European Studies in response to the employability agenda is naturally different, but it is clear that the objectives are similar. Both universities attempt to increasingly combine academic knowledge transfer (knowledge and understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, making judgements) with the training in transferable skills (communication skills, learning skills) that should help our students to demonstrate their competence to potential employers. Both degree programmes have attempted to mainstream this into compulsory EU modules and research training modules, rather than offer specific skills training, although work-based placements are offered in both Newcastle and Maastricht. In this way, both universities hope to maximise the benefits of the skills agenda for students without diminishing the academic rigour of their degrees.

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Notes

¹ Berlin Communiqué 2004, p. 4, available at http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF

² Adopted text see: http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/BASIC/050520_Framework_qualifications.pdf. For a preparatory report see http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

³ For a comprehensive background of their origin see A Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, available at http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/Articles/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

⁴ There is a second framework for Scotland to recognise their different education system.

⁵ Generic intellectual skills are defined as being able to: ‘gather, organise and deploy evidence, data and information from a variety of secondary and some primary sources; identify, investigate, analyse, formulate and advocate solutions to problems; construct reasoned argument, synthesise relevant information and exercise critical judgement; reflect on their own learning and seek and make use of constructive feedback; manage their own learning self-critically; recognise the importance of explicit referencing and the ethical requirements of study which requires critical and reflective use of information and communications technology in the learning process’ (QAA, 2007: 7).

⁶ Personal transferable skills are defined as being able to: ‘communicate effectively and fluently in speech and writing; use communication and information technology, including audiovisual technology, for the retrieval and presentation of information, including, where appropriate, statistical or numerical information; work independently, demonstrating initiative, self-organisation and time management, progressing through the degree programme to become a mature, independent learner; collaborate with others to achieve common goals through, for example, group work, group projects, group presentations, etc’ (QAA, 2007: 7).

⁷ Newcastle University’s Graduate Skills Framework: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/quilt/assets/documents/str-gsf-framework.pdf>

⁸ Detjen (2002) distinguishes in his reflections on democratic and civic education between cognitive competence (knowledge about politics), procedural competence (combining knowledge with competence to realise how to impact political process, how to formulate own political goals and defend them with clearly structured argumentation), and habitual competences (recognising the importance for the rule of law, fairness and other salient concepts). Subsequently, he develops four different types of citizens: 1. Politically not interested citizen 2. Reflective observer 3. Intervention-able citizen 4. Political elite = active citizen.

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Heidi Maurer is Assistant Professor in European Studies at Maastricht University. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna. Her main research interests include European Foreign Policy-making as well as teaching and learning research, especially on Problem-based Learning.

Jocelyn Mawdsley is a lecturer in European politics at Newcastle University. Her main research interests include the Common Security and Defence Policy and the political economy of defence and security. Her interest in teaching and learning research focuses on employability and placement learning.

Key Quotes

1. European Studies is well-suited to the incorporation of employability skills into the existing curriculum
2. a politics perspective is valued for its ability to contribute to generic skills training
3. students opting for an employment-based experience are highly motivated.
4. should help our students to demonstrate their competence to potential employers.