

# **Professionalism and Quality in European Business Courses: Utilising Research to Enhance Student Learning and Promote Employability – A Pan-European Study<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a comparative analysis of Quality Management and standards in four European countries, (the UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania) and in doing so addresses the gap in academic knowledge about how the introduction and implementation of Quality Management Strategies can both facilitate and enhance student learning within Universities.

## **1. Introduction**

The increasingly important role played by Quality Management in teaching within contemporary UK universities is reflected in the academic literature (Hedley et al. 2002, Koch 2003, Srikanthan and Dalrymple 2003, Chambers and Fernandez 2004). Such quality is particularly important given recent trends towards the 'internationalisation' of education across the globe with growing numbers of overseas students adding a diversity and richness to the learning environment within many contemporary European higher educational institutions (HERO 2006, UKCOSA 2005). However, cross-national studies aimed at identifying and conceptualising the generic skills and competencies required by employers of graduates in different European countries are rare. Furthermore, there exists a significant gap in literature pertaining to the relevance and applicability of undergraduate learning to a successful transition into what is an increasingly mobile and trans-European work environment (Elias and Purcell 2004, Mason 2004).

In order to address this gap this paper commences by providing a brief comparison of the higher education sectors in four European countries: Austria, Romania, Slovenia, and the UK. From providing a critique of the relevant literature, the paper then proposes a universal set of generic skills and competencies that may be relevant to the employability of business and management graduates within a European setting. The discussion draws upon the emergent findings of the UK contribution to the wider European research project. By identifying the importance of employer, graduate and educational perspectives of the relationship between undergraduate teaching and graduate employability, this paper makes a significant contribution to current academic debates in this area.

## **2. Background**

Each of the four countries involved in the study have very different higher education sectors. Slovenia has the smallest sector with just over 67, 200 students (EIU 2005a) enrolled at three state-owned and managed universities and seven private higher education institutions (Doling 2005). Austria has

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around 200,000 students (EIU 2004, 2005b) enrolled in 112 higher education institutions (HEIs) comprising a mixture of universities and *Fachhochschulen* (vocationally focused higher educational institutions). Of the four countries, Romania has the most complex HE Sector with over 1.5 million students enrolled in 112 public and private universities and colleges (Arsene 2005). Higher education in Romania is delivered by six different types of HEI comprising universities, academies, polytechnics, institutes, colleges and postgraduate schools (Miroslav-Valeriu et al. 2002). The United Kingdom has the largest sector with around two million undergraduates (Lightfoot 2006) enrolled in 197 HEIs (SCIT 2006). While the majority of higher education in the UK is delivered by state-owned universities, the sector also incorporates 47 public university colleges, eight international colleges and universities, five postgraduate and professional institutions and one privately owned university (SCIT 2006).

Demographic differences between the countries are exaggerated by social and economic disparities. Thus, similarities between each of the four educational sectors are somewhat hard to find with the emphasis given to monitoring and evaluation of quality in teaching and research varying greatly between each country. While Slovenia is in the early stages of establishing quality-control mechanisms (BFUG 2005), the UK, Romania and Austria all have formal, independent quality assurance agencies. The main purpose of such agencies is to assess and evaluate the quality of higher education within each country. Although the function and ethos of each of the three quality assurance agencies appear to be similar, the authority and scope of each agency to facilitate and deliver improvements to higher education vary greatly (AQA 2006, CNEAA 2006, QAA 2006). However, when examining the diversity and uniqueness of each country's educational systems, a comparison can be made between the Austrian *Fachhochschule* and the now defunct UK, non-university HEIs – polytechnics (Pratt 1994, Pechar 2002). It is ironic that the Austrian non-university sector, which was modelled on its UK counterpart, was introduced in the early 1990s at the same time that UK higher educational reform resulted in the demise of British polytechnics, the majority of which became universities (Pechar 2002).

### **3. The Project**

The study, termed the MISLEM Project, focuses on the relationship between the quality of business and management undergraduate teaching and graduate employability. It aims to identify and conceptualise a universal set of core competencies and skills required by employers of business graduates in all of the four countries. In doing so, it is anticipated that one of the main outcomes of the project will be the development of harmonious educational performance indicators that will be applicable across a pan-European setting. The academic partners involved in collecting the data for this the project are: Aston Business School (Aston University, UK); FH Joanneum Gesellschaft (Graz University, Austria); Berufsforderungsinstitut Steiermark (Fachhochschule, Austria). University of Primorska (Slovenia); and the University of Kraoiva (Romania).

The project comprises two main stages. The first is a qualitative study aimed at identifying key graduate competencies and skills within each country. The second stage of the project consists of the administration of 200 quantitative questionnaires. However, the data and issues discussed in this paper are drawn strictly from the qualitative phase of the project (stage 1).

The aim of the qualitative study is to analyse how skills and competencies acquired while in higher education act to facilitate the individual graduate's successful transition to the work environment by effectively meeting the needs of the employer. There is a growing awareness in the UK of the importance of higher education to the development of a knowledge-based economy (Harvey et al. 2002). Moreover, universities across the globe are increasingly required to produce highly skilled graduates who are able to respond to the ever-changing, and complex needs of the, contemporary workplace (Weil 1999, Sleezer et al.: 2004). In addition to this, the rapid expansion of higher education across Europe over the past two decades has resulted in questions being raised about the quality of the graduate labour market and the ability of graduates to meet the needs of employers (Teichler 2003, Elias and Purcell 2004, Mason 2004). Indeed, serious concerns have been expressed about a widening 'gap' between the skills and capabilities of graduates and the requirements and demands of the work environment in an increasingly mobile and international work environment (King 2003, Yunus et al. 2005).

Conversely, graduate under-employment, manifested by an under-utilisation of skills and qualifications, has also been identified as a serious and growing problem within the UK. Many graduates are denied the opportunity to gain appropriate employment where they can make use of their skills and education (Nabi 2003). Thus it is apparent that the need to equip graduates with appropriate and high-quality transferable skills is, in many respects, a generic problem in higher education. However, differences in perceptions of what is required of graduates vary across Europe and between different sectors of the economy, depending upon the field of employment (Teichler 2003, Elias and Purcell 2004). Thus the 'problem' of the perceived graduate-skills 'gap' remains a highly contestable issue – an issue that needs addressing at institutional, national and international levels.

### *3.1 Graduate Skills: The Requirements of Employers*

Research suggests that nearly two-thirds of all graduate vacancies are open to graduates from any discipline with the type of skills required, dependent upon the role to be carried out within a particular organisation (Raybould and Sheard 2005). However, for the purposes of the first stage of the MISLEM Project it was necessary to identify what credence and priority employers and graduates give to certain 'generic' skills and competencies. Thus the interview questions focused upon a set of key skills and competencies drawn out of the literature and deemed to be relevant to the employment of business and management graduates throughout Europe. These key skills and competencies (adapted from McLarty 1998, Tucker et al. 2000, Nabi 2003, Elias and Purcell 2004, and Raybould and Sheard 2005) were:

- reliability
- professionalism
- an ability to cope with uncertainty
- the ability to work under pressure
- the ability to plan and think strategically
- the capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking
- good written and verbal communication skills
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills

- creativity and self-confidence
- good self-management and time-management skills
- a willingness to learn and accept responsibility.

Having determined which skills and competencies may be conceptualised as being generic to the requirements of employers, two interview protocols were developed: one aimed at business and management graduates, the other at employers. Open-ended questions focused on three main areas: background details (demography, education and employments), experiences/perceptions of higher education, and the transition from education to employment. The graduate interview protocol was also used as a guide to gauge the views of academics responsible for teaching. In sum, the qualitative research conducted for the first stage of the project aimed to provide a detailed insight into graduate, employer and academic perspectives.

### *3.2 Measuring Graduate Employability*

In the UK, university league tables indicative of new public management have become an increasing part of public policy (Flynn 1993, Parsons 1995). Such tables focus mainly on examination performance and quality measurement in teaching and research. While such league tables have become part of everyday life in education, it is difficult to see how they relate to the actual requirements of employers. One study which did, however, look at the measurement of graduate employability was conducted by Smith et al. (2000) who developed a method of measuring graduate employment outcomes based on cohorts of UK students since 1992. By categorising graduate employment into four different areas, a set of graduate employment performance indicators were proposed (see Smith et al. 2000) based upon the number of graduates who:

- enter employment
- proceed to further education or training
- are unemployed and seeking work or further study
- are inactive – unavailable for employment or further study.

The performance measures developed and utilised by Smith et al. revealed that at an individual level the probability of unemployment or inactivity six months after graduation is influenced strongly by the individual's class of degree, subject studied, prior qualifications and social class background (2000). Thus it would appear that in addition to the quality of the degree and the level of transferable skills possessed by graduates, other factors come into play in determining employability.

One of the objectives of the MISLEM Project is to identify the importance of such factors in shaping graduate employability in a pan-European setting. It is evident at this stage that the intangible nature of socially and economically determined factors, many of which are beyond the control of individual HEIs, make the need to promote graduate employability a political, social, individual and educational responsibility – irrespective of geographic or demographic location.

## **4. Discussion: Emergent Themes**

This section of the paper provides a critical discussion of the data acquired in the UK alone. The international nature of the project, combined with the fact that it is a work in progress, means that data from the other three countries is not yet available.<sup>2</sup>

## **5. Employer Perspectives**

### *5.1 Skills and Competencies*

The three employers interviewed at this stage of the project have high expectations of graduate employees. Graduates are presumed to have reached a certain level of employability prior to commencing their chosen careers paths. Generic skills and competencies identified by employers include: flexibility and the ability to learn and think quickly; excellent oral communication skills manifested by the ability to make a positive contribution to team and group discussions and the capability to lead presentations to senior colleagues and/or clients; an ability to network effectively; high levels of written communication skills, particularly in respect of report writing and general administrative duties; management potential reflective of leadership skills acquired whilst at university; a mature approach to work; a willingness to accept high levels of responsibility; and excellent personal management skills including good time management and self-discipline. All of these skills and competencies may be summarised as the ability to work, with minimum supervision, as an effective and efficient part of a team or organisation.

In addition to the above generic skills and competencies, employers also identified certain business-related skills required of business graduates. Such skills include: a high level of subject knowledge; specific vocational skills in certain areas dependent upon the field of employment (accounting, human relations, marketing, etcetera); and a high level of ICT skills. While a good level of degree is usually a prerequisite to employment, one of the employers interviewed (a major employer of UK graduates) stated that the number of points scored at a pre-university level ('A' levels) are given equal weighting when determining which graduates will be allowed to apply for their graduate training scheme.

### *5.2 Added Value of Higher Education*

One of the most interesting issues to emerge out of the research is the 'added value' of higher education. Such added value is reflective of the additional skills acquired while taking part in various extra-curricula activities offered by universities. In many respects the nature of the activities undertaken is deemed to be almost irrelevant: what is important is that individual graduates are able to show they have a wide range of interests and abilities outside the 'day-to-day' educational environment. It was noted that sporting activities are often viewed as being a good indicator of the ability to be part of a team, while undertaking paid or voluntary work at the same time as studying suggests good individual time management skills, and a determination to succeed and contribute either to their own life circumstances (financially) or to society as a whole (in the case of volunteer mentors or other voluntary work).

While part-time paid or unpaid employment was identified as being particularly important to employers, the value of work-based learning cannot be overstated. Graduates who have undertaken a 'work placement' as part of their degree course are deemed to have high levels of skills and competencies and are viewed as being extremely employable.

## **6. Graduate Perspectives**

### *6.1 Transferable Skills and Competencies*

Eight graduates from Aston University in the UK, and two young people who had completed a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in business at a local college were interviewed. Each interview utilised grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss: 1968) and lasted about an hour. It should be noted, however, that the emergent issues and themes discussed in this paper reflect only the perspectives of the graduates.

All of the eight graduates interviewed have made a successful transition to the work environment. Similar generic skills and competencies were identified by the graduates as those discussed by employers. However, graduates had differing perspectives about the importance of a university education in the acquisition and manifestation of such generic skills.

The most frequently issue raised by the graduate participants was the importance of oral communication skills — particularly in relation to the need to make oral presentations while at work. All of them had been required to make some oral presentations as part of their coursework while at university. However, on the whole they all felt ill-prepared when it came to undertaking presentations at work. Most accepted such 'un-preparedness' was partly their own responsibility as they had deliberately avoided taking part in classroom presentations. However, the study suggests there is a clear need for students to be taught presentation skills in a deliberate manner. Such teaching could focus on oral communication skills and could effectively teach students how to 'pass on their learning and knowledge' to others in a formal and measured manner.

Each of the graduates felt that university had prepared them for other work-related tasks where the ability to communicate orally was important. In this respect the 'social side' of university was identified as being particularly important. Each graduate felt that the 'social' opportunities afforded to them while at university, resulting in the formation of long-lasting friendships and networks, proved invaluable both in their work and private lives. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan and multicultural nature of the university environment gave the graduates a wider understanding of different cultures to their own. Each graduate spoke about the positive aspects of being able to learn from and mix with (and, in some cases, live with) people from all over the world.

All of the graduates were required to undertake a certain level of written or administrative duties in the course of their employment. Each one discussed the importance of the skills they had learned at university in relation to their ability to: write reports; formulate a critical argument; review written documents and provide a synopsis of such documents; analyse and summarise different written perspectives and arguments. However, some of the graduates felt that they would have benefited from being given the opportunity to use 'real-life' examples or case-studies in their university studies. The value of the 'business-game' was repeatedly discussed and the suggestion made that all business and management undergraduates could have benefited from a similar (additional) exercise in their final year.<sup>3</sup>

Seven of the eight graduates had undertaken a year-long work-placement as part of their degree programme. All but one of these graduates described an overwhelmingly positive experience in which they were given the opportunity to acquire a wide range of work-related skills and competencies while widening their social skills and life experience. The value of work-based learning and

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work experience when seeking, and making the subsequent transition to, employment was discussed in detail by all seven of the graduates who had completed a placement while at university.

### *6.2 'Graduateness'*

All but one of the graduates felt that being a graduate played an important part in their work life and future prospects. Notably, the graduate who felt his degree was immaterial was employed in a graduate position with a high level of fiscal and managerial responsibility.

All of the graduates interviewed were extremely ambitious; each one had set themselves clearly defined work-related and personal targets for the future. Each individual displayed a high level of personal maturity and a positive attitude to their employment. Of the eight graduates interviewed, only two (that is the HNC holders) were not in a managerial position.

It was evident that the guidance and advice provided to undergraduates by the Aston University Careers Service was of paramount importance to those graduates who were employed on a designated 'graduate training scheme'. Moreover, those not employed on such schemes had also used the Careers Service in the final year of their degree. In addition to providing assistance with the practicalities of finding a position (such as filling out application forms), the other services provided by the Careers Service (such as employer presentations and graduate employment fairs, open days and exhibitions) also proved useful to the graduates in their search for suitable employment.

In summary, the 'graduateness' of those interviewed represented more than their individual educational attainments: from a holistic perspective it reflected the whole university experience manifested by well-rounded, hard-working and conscious graduates who were keen to continue learning and progress in their chosen career paths and personal lives. Thus it would appear that 'graduateness' represents a positive attitude towards life combined with a willingness to work hard and a desire for life-long learning.

## **7. Educational Perspectives**

### *7.1 Content and Context*

Two university lecturers from Aston University were asked to give their perspectives of the emergent findings. The first, a highly experienced and respected lecturer, felt that it was not the university's responsibility to teach students presentation skills, but that the acquisition of such skills should be the individual student's responsibility, developed over the course of their education by participation in tutorials and group discussions. This lecturer agreed with the graduates about the importance of the 'business game' and stated that there are tentative plans afoot to introduce a similar reality-based game module into the final year of the business and management courses.

The second lecturer interviewed was less experienced, with four years teaching practice (mostly as a graduate student working on a sessional basis). This individual believed that more attention should be paid to assisting students develop verbal communication and presentation skills. Moreover, she felt that formal guidance for lecturers, in respect of how to facilitate student learning in order to assure they are given the opportunity to acquire a 'defined' set of generic skills and competencies, would be extremely useful to them.

## 8. Conclusion

One important factor to note is that the eight graduate participants of this study were selected on the basis of previous reports they had made to Aston University about their employment experiences. This, combined with the small size of the sample, means that the results of this study are not necessarily generalisable to the graduate population at large. However, it is anticipated that the findings discussed in this paper, combined with the findings of the research conducted by the project's other partners, and knowledge gained from the literature will provide sufficient material upon which to build stage 2 of the Project.

The second stage of the project aims to measure the value of the generic skills and competencies acquired while in higher education in order to develop empirically grounded performance indicators aimed at monitoring and measuring the employability of business and management graduates throughout Europe. In conclusion, it is hoped that the implementation of harmonised, empirically grounded, pre-defined standards across Europe will enhance student learning while guaranteeing a level of homogeneity in university teaching and learning.

## Notes

1. This Project is funded by European (Leonardo) funding. It forms part of the MISLEM Project and will represent research conducted by all Project partners.
- 2 Emergent findings: this paper reflects a 'work-in-progress' written for presentation at an educational conference. However, the presentation itself discusses the emergent findings from all four countries. After presentation, the paper will be updated and submitted for publication.
3. The Business Game: the 'business game' forms an integral part of 2nd-year undergraduate teaching at Aston University. It is a compulsory module, sponsored and monitored by industry, in which students develop practical and transferable business skills and acumen.

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