



Global Opportunities for English Language Graduates for International Employment- Conceptual Study.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Research paper is to provide English departments with information about the employment prospects of their graduates and some of the ways in which these might be enhanced. It draws on existing research and statistical evidence as well as exploring some of the initiatives to improve graduate employability taken by English departments and departments in cognate fields. The contribution of higher education to economic prosperity has been a driving force behind higher education policy in recent years. It has justified the massive expansion of student numbers and has provided the rationale for a whole series of Government supported interventions to make higher education's graduates more employable. The resultant pressures in many institutions have been to develop curricula emphasizing strong employment relevance, to demonstrate the employment relevance of courses (often as a marketing ploy), to strengthen careers services and to produce 'add-ons' to the student experience such as work placements, mentoring schemes and so on. In this paper I am going to discuss about the global opportunities for English graduates in the international context.

KEYWORDS

employment, higher education development, opportunities, government support.

INTRODUCTION

Many discussions about English graduates employability fail to distinguish between factors associated with 'getting a job' and factors associated with 'doing a job'. Employability is multi-dimensional and whilst this is recognized in principle, in practice discussions are often influenced by the annual first destination statistics six months after graduation. These provide only limited information about what graduates are doing at a very early point in their post-university careers. A comparison of the 'generic/graduate' skills mentioned in the English benchmark statement with those of seven other subject areas shows that two are specific to English: 'planning/execution of essay/project work' and 'understand/develop intricate concepts'. Four are common across all subjects: 'literacy/communications skills', 'team work', 'IT skills', and 'time management/organization'. The one skill mentioned in five of the seven statements but not by English is 'problem-solving'. Taking into account the investigation of website messages, the generic/graduate skills mentioned reflect those of the English benchmark statement, although the full range of skills is less in evidence.

In analyzing English graduates perceptions of the skills they possessed at the time of graduation, the main strength was in 'written communication skills'. This reflects messages given out on websites and included in the English benchmark statement. However, English graduates feel they are particularly weak at 'working under pressure', 'time management'

and 'fitness for work'. In comparing these perceptions with the English benchmark statement, there is a mismatch in terms of developing 'team work', 'time management/organization' and 'IT skills'. While the evidence presented in this report is limited, it suggests that English graduates in the past may not have developed the full range of attributes and capabilities outlined in the benchmark statement.

THE EMPLOYER VIEW ABOUT THE ENGLISH GRADUATES.

Employers' views of English graduates are very difficult to investigate, not least because English graduates are spread over a broad range of employment sectors and occupations. English graduates also tend to take jobs where an English degree is not a prerequisite. Employers therefore are unlikely to distinguish between graduates in English and graduates in other Arts and Social Science subjects. One recent study of six large graduate employers reported that employers felt that Arts and Humani-

ties graduates could lack certain essential skills (teamwork and project work with presentation elements). The study (and many others) found that a lack of work experiences — rather than the content of the degree — could hinder graduates.

Another study (CIHE, 2002) found that 26 employers felt English graduates lacked analytical competences, pro-activity, relationship building, time management and organizational skills. However, experts in this field (Teichler, 1998) tend to question the reliance that can be given to statements made by employers. They question whether employers' recruitment practices are consistent with their statements and on what basis they are able to make links between skills possessed by graduates and work tasks required of them. Few employers appear to monitor systematically the career progression of graduates of different types.

THE GLOBAL EMPLOYABILITY EXPECTATIONS FOR ENGLISH GRADUATES.

There are a number of ways in which this external climate affects the inner lives of higher education institutions. First, there is pressure in many institutions to develop curricula that emphasize strong employment relevance. This may be done through the introduction of new programmes — for example, a geography department turns its hand to producing a tourism course — or by emphasizing the employment-related skills and competences that existing curricula can produce when accompanied by appropriate pedagogies — e.g. more team-work, more emphasis on presentational skills. Subject benchmarks and their associated programme specifications have supported this concentration on the generic, employment-related skills that academic programmes produce rather than, for example, on mastery of the subject or cognitive development.

Second, there is pressure on institutions and subject groups within them to demonstrate the employment relevance of their courses in order to ensure healthy student recruitment. This pressure affects some institutions more than others — depending not only on market position but also on institutional leadership and culture. This pressure may lead to nothing more than changes in the vocabularies that are used to market courses but it can also lead to modifications to curricula and can affect resource flow within institutions. One might also add that changes in the vocabularies used to describe courses can affect those courses by influencing the aspirations and the expectations of students who are recruited to them.

Third, most institutions have been strengthening their careers services and are producing various add-ons to the student experience — work placement opportunities, mentoring schemes, career development curriculum modules, mock job interviews, help with CV drafting etc. These kinds of developments may not affect subject groups directly although the participation of students in such activities may well be influenced by the levels of support shown for them by their academic departments. They also pose large questions for the relationships between academic departments and various central student services. As in most areas of higher education policy, the evidence base for many employability initiatives is quite thin. Notwithstanding the expansion of higher education in this country and elsewhere, it is clear that graduates remain privileged actors within the labor market. Thus, graduates are unlikely to experience long-term unemployment;

- are likely to earn substantially more than people with an upper secondary education;
- are likely to experience high levels of job satisfaction and responsibility in the long term;
- increasingly likely to experience a transitional period of several years between leaving higher education and entering 'long-term' graduate employment;
- will have different experiences in the labor market according to what and where they have studied, as well as according to a wide range of other educational and socio-biographical characteristics.

COMPARISON OF THE ENGLISH BENCHMARK STATEMENT WITH OTHER SUBJECTS

For the second approach to this part of the research, a comparison was made of the English benchmark statement against those of seven other subjects; these include Languages and Related Studies, Politics and International Relations, Sociology, General Business and Management, Law, History and Biosciences. In comparing the benchmark statement with the other seven subject statements, only non-subject specific skills were compared for obvious reasons.

These skills were labeled in a variety of ways and differed between each of the eight subjects; some of the terminology included the following: generic, transferable, intellectual, cognitive, graduate, key, practical, interpersonal skills. Moreover, each subject had different ways of describing these skills, which made comparisons difficult. What is presented below is an attempt to interpret the skills' statements presented by each of the benchmark statements.

SELF-REPORTED SKILLS AND COMPETENCES OF ENGLISH GRADUATES

The third approach to this part of the research paper involved looking at the data collected from the survey of graduates mentioned above in Section 2 — 'Higher education and graduate employment in Europe'. In particular, an analysis was undertaken of graduates' perceptions of the skills they possessed at the time of their graduation¹⁰. According to their own judgment, the major strengths of English graduates were:

- Written communication skills (with far the highest value)
- Documenting ideas and information
- Learning abilities
- Working independently
- Creativity
- Oral communication skills
- Tolerance, appreciating different points of view
- Critical thinking

When, however, competing for a job with graduates from other fields, it is not necessarily the absolute level of the skills that matters but rather the relative one. In other words, it is worthwhile investigating how English graduates compare with other graduates.

More importantly, though, there are some areas which, although not at the bottom of English graduates' skill-list, can still disadvantage them when they compete with other graduates. The areas English graduates reported significantly lower levels of competency than most of their counterparts include:

- Problem-solving ability
- Working under pressure
- Working in a team
- Time management
- Fitness for work
- Planning, co-ordinating and organizing
- Computer skills

In some of these areas all the Language and Humanities graduates are doing relatively poorly compared to other graduates. However, there are certain areas where English graduates perceive themselves to be particularly weak:

- Working under pressure
- Time management
- Fitness for work

CONCLUSION.

Like graduates from other non-vocational courses, English graduates enter a wide range of employment areas and it may take them a few years to obtain suitable employment. However, there is no evidence of long term unemployment among English (or other) graduates. Indeed, on a number of dimensions, English graduates compare rather well with their peers from other disciplines. Nevertheless, the reported gap between aspirations at the time of entry to higher education and employment achievements three years after graduation may give some cause for concern. Statements made by English departments about the career opportunities open to their graduates may not always be backed up by hard evidence. Survey data on graduate employment suggest that English graduates may go into an even wider range of job types than are envisaged in prospectuses or web-sites. But employment is likely to be in the public or voluntary sectors.

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