

Meeting of the Working Group on Employability London, 31 October 2007

Draft minutes

Participants

	Name	Country / Organisation
1	Elisabeth Ferentschik-Doppler	Austria
2	Teo Matkovic	Croatia
3	Josef Koubek	Czech Republic
4	Germain Dondelinger	Luxembourg
5	Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski	Poland
6	Maria-Jose Viera	Spain
7	Keith Andrews (Chair)	United Kingdom
8	Rachel Green	United Kingdom
9	Agnieszka Kmin	United Kingdom
10	Irene Seling	BusinessEurope
11	Brian Everett	Education International
12	Bruno Carapinha	ESU
13	Howard Davies	EUA
14	Roland Pelurson	EURASHE
15	Peter Wells	UNESCO-CEPES
16	Cornelia Racké	Bologna Secretariat

1) Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed the participants and opened the meeting. He informed the group that a German representative was still expected to come and that apologies had been received from Belgium/French Community, Finland and France.

The Chair asked the participants that were present to briefly introduce themselves, to explain why they had joined the group and what they expected as an outcome. During this round of introductions, the following objectives were mentioned:

- To consider the impact of employability on curricula and the teaching profession.
- To define the term "employability" more clearly and to help people understand its meaning.
- To come up with ideas as to how to learn from the experience of others and to share best practice, keeping in mind that in each country the particular issues to be addressed will be different.
- To raise awareness at various levels and among various stakeholders (higher education institutions, academic staff, students, and employers).
- To address the issue of employment of Bachelor graduates, which appeared to be a major problem in most of the countries represented in the group. The large majority of Bachelor's graduates go straight into Master's programmes, since Bachelor degrees lack acceptance among employers, academics, graduates, and society as a whole.

As Peter Wells (UNESCO-CEPES) pointed out, of the three cycles, the Bachelor's is the one that creates most problems and it does so on three levels: (1) at the level of *higher education institutions* - their curricula are supposed to be relevant for the labour market but are often not developed with the labour market in mind. (2) *Employers* often do not understand and do not recognise Bachelor's degrees. (3) *Students* also have the perception that those first cycle degrees are not valid on the labour market and therefore continue with their studies.

The Chair concluded that employability of Bachelor's graduates appeared to be a key issue across Europe but also reminded the group of the mandate from the London Communiqué to look into employability for all three cycles.

In response, Rachel Green (UK) raised the question whether it actually made a difference. In her view, the same sort of skills would be expected from graduates of all three cycles, just in varying degrees. A number of participants pointed out that at least in the employers' perception there was a difference and that this was one of the reasons for not accepting graduates with a Bachelor's degree. Howard Davies (EUA) finally explained that the skills acquired in the three cycles were not the same, which was not only reflected in the curriculum but also in the related pedagogy and assessment methods that differed from level to level.

During the discussion, several participants stressed that employers, professors, students and civil servants did not seem to accept a Bachelor's degree as relevant for the labour market, since they were used to the old system with study programmes of four to five years. The group recognised that there were notable differences between different disciplines, with the finance sector being more inclined to employ Bachelor's graduates than, for instance, the engineering sector. Even in the UK, where Bachelor's degrees are generally accepted, nobody would be able to work as engineer with a three-year degree. Similarly, a holder of a Bachelor's degree in law would need at least another two years of training before being able to practice as a lawyer.

The group concluded that there was a strong need for more dialogue with employers to explain what a Bachelor's degree is and therefore decided to focus on the first cycle.

According to Bruno Carapinha (ESU), it was not only a problem of perception but higher education institutions were not accustomed yet to deal with employability. Curricula were not designed to lead to degrees that would be relevant for labour market, which in many cases led to rather artificial exit points at the end of the first cycle.

Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski (Poland) added that universities would like to bring everybody to Master's level, whereas the labour market might not need that many Master's graduates. At the same time, the issue of lifelong learning had to be taken into account, where people change positions more often, new professions arise etc.

2) Terms of reference

In preparation of the meeting, the Chair had prepared and circulated draft terms of reference. He asked the participants if the proposed terms of reference captured what the group should be doing and suggested to add something on employability in the context of lifelong learning.

Howard Davies (EUA) supported this addition, arguing that in 2025, the main bulk of students would not be full-time students but those already in the labour market. He also suggested adding the issue of self-employability/self-employment.

According to Bruno Carapinha (ESU), one of the priorities of the working group should be to define the concept of employability and what is exactly meant by it.

Rachel Green (UK) proposed to say more about the key stakeholders: What does employability mean for employers, higher education institutions, students? There should also be more clarity in the terms of reference about what the ultimate product would be, namely a report to Ministers in 2009, and not just a report to BFUG. This report should explore the issue of employability and give a number of examples of good practice, without prescribing anything. Some practices might work in some countries but not in others; ultimately the decision what to do with the ideas from the report would be up to the individual countries.

During the discussion, several participants highlighted the **need for awareness-raising**: with higher education being restructured across Europe and more and more students graduating from Bachelor's programmes, it is vital to make higher education institutions, students and employers aware that Bachelor's graduates are employable.

Irene Seling (BusinessEurope) added that big companies and global players usually were aware, in stark contrast to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that employed the largest number of graduates. She therefore urged for awareness-raising especially among SMEs. Ways to raise awareness and to involve employers more closely are curriculum design and career services but also membership in boards of trustees.

The group agreed that there was a necessity to improve communication between higher education institutions and employers, and that the initiative for involving employers, and in particular SMEs, had to come from higher education institutions or even individual departments, e.g. when designing curricula.

At the same time, governments also have a responsibility. They need to talk to the employers but also to set a good example with employment in the public service.

Roland Pelurson (EURASHE) suggested the group should try to identify the skills, which can be expected from students.

Josef Koubek (Czech Republic) distinguished between two approaches to employability: either employers expect generalists that are able to do many different things or they expect people to be specialists in a certain field who will then be trained on the job.

Bruno Carapinha (ESU) highlighted the need to build trust on both sides, on the employers' side and on the higher education institutions' side. The group should therefore try to find good examples of employer involvement that is not perceived as threatening by higher education institutions.

Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski (Poland) reminded the group that the labour market differed from country to country, as did higher education institutions, which is why there was not just one single solution to ensure employability. The group could try to find commonalities, such as elements that need to be in every curriculum, and could then share good practice how to ensure graduate employability, mainly at the Bachelor's level and maybe also at PhD level.

It was agreed that:

- The Chair would rewrite the terms of reference after the meeting so as to put more emphasis on awareness-raising and to add something on the definition of employability and what it is supposed to mean for higher education institutions, staff, students and employers.
- The original bullet points were still considered important but a point on lifelong learning and possibly another one on self-employability would be added.
- The new version of the terms of reference would be circulated among the members of the group for a last round of comments.

3) Work Programme

From the discussion on the terms of reference it had emerged that **the prime objective of the working group was to raise awareness, and that part of their product would be presenting cases of good practice**. Taking this as a starting point, the Chair asked those that had put forward specific proposals for action to briefly present those.

Marie-José Viera (Spain) informed the group about an EU-funded project called Reflex (see www.reflexproject.org). 15 European countries participated in the project that

examined the situation of graduates, who had completed their studies in 1999/2000, five years after graduation. Marie-José Viera presented the results for Spain and agreed to circulate the PowerPoint slides by e-mail. The results of the other national surveys should also be readily available but the general report was not completed yet.

With her presentation, Marie-José Viera (Spain) emphasised the need to take into account the perspective of graduates, for instance when designing curricula, and she called for a clear definition of "employability". In her view, it implied a fit between what is required by the labour market and what is acquired at university.

Given that there are many studies of graduates and employers, Marie-José Viera (Spain) recommended the working group to have a look at those studies and to analyse them.

A number of participants raised the concern that the information on employability of graduates would probably be available at institutional rather than national level and that there would be great differences in terms of methodology and coverage – the kind of questions asked, who is asked and when (e.g. 6 months after graduation or 2-3 years). It would therefore be very difficult to compare the results.

The group could try to get an overview of the available data and identify gaps, also to be able to provide meaningful input for the stocktaking. Since the template for the national reports will be adopted at the BFUG in March 2008, the group will have to come up with proposals concerning the stocktaking on employability very soon.

Germain Dondelinger (Luxembourg) reminded the group that Eurostat will also look into the question of employability as part of the data collection exercise. More particularly, they will come up with employment rates five years after graduation, differentiated according to disciplines. Questions addressed will include: when did the graduates get their first job, how long did it take to get that job, in which area do they work etc. In other words, Eurostat will not look at competences but at employment patterns. Their main source of information will be the Labour Force Survey that makes use of standardised methodology and therefore is able to produce comparable data. A lot of this data is already available through the Eurostat website, as Teo Matkovic (Croatia) informed the group.

Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski (Poland) asked for care when drawing conclusions on employability. If 26% of engineers are employed in the banking sector, this can be considered a bad sign, whereas in his eyes it shows that they are employable.

Marie-José Viera (Spain) offered to look into the existing national surveys on employability in order to identify the definitions used and the underlying approaches to employability. This could then help the group to formulate questions for the stocktaking.

In addition, Rachel Green (UK) suggested encouraging countries to collect data on employability, if they were not doing so yet. Tomasz Saryusz-Wolski (Poland) added that national surveys were also an important tool for awareness-raising at national level, since they provided an incentive to think about employability.

Roland Pelurson (EURASHE) informed the group about a survey that had been conducted in eight European countries. Hundreds of companies had been asked what they expected from graduates. One of the results was that the labour market seemed to harmonise at European level, at least what concerned the expectations employers had of graduates in terms of skills and qualities: discipline and rigour tend to disappear, whereas language and communication are becoming more important. The detailed results would be circulated by e-mail.

Germain Dondelinger (Luxembourg) offered to organise a conference in 2008 aimed at awareness-raising among employers, graduates and higher education institutions. The conference would address issues of curricula design, generic competences, but would

also ask employers how they react to the changing higher education environment. The invitations would be sent to employers at CEO level, from small to big companies, including international ones. The civil service would be addressed as well, since a survey conducted for 23 countries had shown that there was a serious problem with the acceptance of Bachelor's graduates.

Bruno Carapinha (ESU) explained that ESU had submitted a proposal to conduct a survey among the members of BusinessEurope on the level of involvement they would like to see, what skills they expect and how they perceive the status of employability at the moment. In addition, ESU considered it useful to have instruments to disseminate information, such as a website and brochures.

After the presentations from Spain, EURASHE, Luxembourg and ESU, the group discussed the concrete tasks that could be taken on board by the working group. It was agreed that it would not be feasible to conduct national surveys but the group could try to give an overview of the existing surveys in various countries.

To ensure the working group was on the right track, looking on the right issues, Rachel Green (UK) suggested contacting also those BFUG members that were not represented in the group, asking them a few questions. The group accepted the proposal and agreed that each member of the employability working group would contact 2-3 BFUG members to ask three or four questions along the following lines:

- 1) Is there a dialogue between employers and higher education institutions in your country? If so, where does it take place (at national level, regional level, institutional level)? What sort of issues does the dialogue cover?
- 2) What are the main challenges for your country? What would you like to see as a result of the work of this working group?
- 3) Are there examples of good practice in your country that are worth sharing with others?

The purpose of this little "survey" is not to come up with hard and comparable data but rather to ask for assessments, to get an impression of what the issues are across the whole Bologna area and what the trends might be. Moreover, the survey can help to set up a dialogue among BFUG members.

It was agreed that:

- The Chair would circulate draft questions by e-mail, giving the group the opportunity to react.
- Once finalised, the questions would be sent to BFUG members from all Bologna countries. Each working group member would take care of three or four countries, which implied e-mailing the questions, possibly followed-up by a phone call for better understanding, analysing the results, and then feeding them back into group.
- The results should be circulated among the members of the working group by Christmas to give everybody the chance to think about them in preparation of the next meeting.
- In addition, the members of the group should try to find out if any surveys on employability existed in their country. This question could possibly also be added to the list of questions sent to BFUG.
- Brian Everett (Education International) would circulate the questions among the education unions of Education International, asking them to respond as well.

In this context, the group also discussed the question of how to measure employability. Several participants mentioned employment rates as possible indicator, if the figures distinguished between Bachelor's and Master's graduates. Moreover, the figures had to be put into context (e.g. general labour market situation). Bruno Carapinha (ESU) argued, however, that employment rates would not indicate whether employability concerns were met. He also criticised that too much emphasis was put on the individual, while employability was also a question of creating employment opportunities.

The relationship between business and higher education institutions might serve as another indicator for employability of graduates, although it possibly excludes the self-employed. Given that big firms often have contacts with higher education institutions at various levels (high level dialogue, apprenticeships, collaborative research, etc.), it is however difficult to separate employability out of this complex interaction.

One way to address these issues might be to ask for examples of good practice and to extrapolate from there.

It was agreed that:

- The group would focus on awareness-raising.
- The final product would be a report with examples of good practice.
- The group would also try to give input to the stocktaking.

4) Seminars

To ensure a high turnout, the Chair suggested having only one seminar and the group agreed that this seminar would be organised by Luxembourg (see above). For organisational reasons, Germain Dondelinger (Luxembourg) would prefer a date in November 2008. To make it easier for employers to come, he also proposed to organise the seminar on a Friday (from 9.00 to 17.30 hrs, with a welcome dinner on Thursday). The exact date will depend on the availability of the conference centre (most likely: 6-7 November 2008). An overlap with other official Bologna events should be avoided.

5) Dates of future meetings:

- Late January 2008
- July 2008
- September 2008
- January 2009

It was agreed to have the next meeting late January 2008, also in London. At this meeting, Germain Dondelinger will present a first outline of the seminar, asking the group to give feedback and to provide further input.

The meeting should also be used to have a thorough discussion on the results of the survey among BFUG members and on the concept of employability, and to collect some first ideas on the structure of the report for the ministerial conference.

If the group would like to provide input for the stocktaking, it would also have to be discussed at the meeting in January 2008.

At the meeting in July 2008, the group will discuss in more detail what the final report will look like.

6) Any other business

Since there was not other business to attend to, the Chair thanked the members of the group for their participation and closed the meeting.