

# Opportunities and Problems of Drawing Conclusions from Tracer Studies for Innovation in Higher Education

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# The Value of Graduate Surveys

- Information on graduate employment and work as general feedback to HE
- Understanding the diversity of graduate employment and work instead of “match” vs. “mismatch” dichotomy
- Information how graduates view study conditions and provisions retrospectively
- Understanding links between learning, competences, job requirements and work
- Measuring determinants of employment/work success
- Providing feedback for specific institutional profiles and for various values

# The Value for Different Actors and Persons

- For students' choices and actions
- For institutional quantitative-structural strategies
- For institutional profiles
- For curriculum development
- For evaluation
- For career counselling and other career services
- For alumni relationships

## Simplistic Information

A small range of “objective” data on

- employment (employment status, occupational category and income), and
- higher education (type of higher education institution, level of degree, field of study and individual institution)

is too simplistic because analyses want to discuss

- generation and utilisation of knowledge
- the extent and the dimensions of professional impact of higher education

Therefore, simplistic data are constantly over-interpreted.

# Highly Ideological Interpretations

- “Vertical match” paradigm
- “Horizontal match” paradigm
- “Vocationalism is beautiful” paradigm
- Neglect of power of professions and organisations
- Neglect of systemic limitations of information
- Neglect of cultural variety between countries
- Over-interpretation of the role of HE in generating the graduates’ competences
- The misinterpretation of elements of HE having professional impact

# Vagueness of “Demand” and “Requirements”

- Employers’ views are short-term and biased toward concrete skills and “extra-functional” skills
- “Credentialism”: belief in credentials, reputation of institutions etc.
- Income differentials are strongly shaped by socio-political factors, other fuzzy signals
- Graduate labour markets change quickly
- International comparison de-mystified national beliefs in “requirements”
- Graduates do not understand the role of general, abstract knowledge
- “Qualification paradox”: Graduates have to be over- and under-educated
- Higher education prepares for sceptical rationality, indeterminate work tasks, innovation
- Contrasting future scenarios

# Two Major Ambivalences in the Worldwide Debates on Higher Education and the World of Work

The quantitative ambivalence:

- On the one hand: Expansion of higher education is beneficial for economic growth
- On the other hand: “Over-education” (employment problems faced by graduates)

The functional ambivalence:

- On the one hand: Call for professional relevance of study programmes and study or for “employability”
- On the other hand: Concerns about too little emphasis on academic learning, general education, and benefits beyond the labour market, about sub-ordination on current employers’ and neglect of critical function as well as of preparation for indeterminate work tasks and of innovation in general

# Actors in HE are Likely to Misunderstand the Data and the Possible Conclusions to be Drawn

Most frequent misunderstandings:

- Belief in the “match” – “mismatch” dichotomy
- Belief in the “employability” approach
- Wish to imitate “world-class universities”
- Over-estimation of general competences



# The “Match” – “Mismatch” Dichotomy

- Expectation of a close “vertical” link: between “level of educational attainment” and income/position
- Expectation of a close “horizontal” link: between field of study and occupational category
- Accepted or deliberately promoted expansion of higher education surpasses growth of “typical graduate jobs”
- Dynamics of the world of work undermines chances of a close horizontal link
- Rapid growth of graduates in jobs neither indicating “match” nor “mismatch”
- What are the potentials of graduates in such situations?

# The “Employability” (Mis-) Understanding

The inclinations:

- Adaptation according to characteristics of the most successful graduates
- Adaptation to the whereabouts of graduates from most prestigious universities
- Adaptation to presumed employers’ expectations

Instead:

- Broader function of universities: cultivating personality, innovative value of non-instrumental teaching and learning, educating change agents
- “Fitness for purpose” approach

# Typical Problems of Graduate Surveys (I)

1. Small range of information (“black box” regarding causal explanations)
2. Disregard of the varying information needs of the different “stakeholders”
3. Over-emphasis on employment and status in measuring professional success
4. Over-reliance on a concept of perfect “match” (disregard of flexibility and indispensable imperfections, other functions of HE, innovation etc.)
5. Neglect of intervenient labour market variables (regional conditions, recruitment criteria, relative autonomy of transition, etc.)

# Typical Problems of Graduate Surveys (II)

1. Neglect of students as determinants (socio-biographic background, prior education, study behaviours, values and orientations, labour market behaviour)
2. Disregard of the diversity of goals in higher education (“fitness for purpose”)
3. Neglect of country specific context and setting
4. Disregard of specifics of fields, occupations etc.
5. Methodological problems (to be discussed below)

# Consequences

- Questionnaires of graduate surveys have to address a relatively broad range of themes
- There is a need of complex data analysis for identifying the relationships
- There is a need for expert assistance on the relationships between higher education and employment/work, when actors want to interpret the results of graduate surveys and to draw practical conclusions
- Reasonable use of the results of graduate surveys is possible only, if intensive communication among various actors takes place, because each actor group has expertise about some aspects of the HE-work relationships
- Graduate surveys are useful, if HE managers are committed, all actors are interested, and if there are “institutional researchers” or other “higher education professionals” serving the process of information collection, analysis, interpretation and drawing conclusions.