

Enhancing Student Employability:

Higher Education between Scylla and Charybdis

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Stephan Laske and Maximilian Egger, Innsbruck

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The Employability Discourse in Higher Education

- Accountability, massification, competition, efficiency, etc: HE-systems are **under pressure** – almost worldwide.
- **Employability**: The university's (re-)discovery of students and their role in society. Among other things, the competition for a (nationally) decreasing number of students forces universities to enter into a public discussion of how to make graduates fit for their future jobs and the job market. (This ranges from "equipping" students with the necessary skills to the establishment of employment agencies.)
- **Employability: In search of ... 'transferable skills'** – There is much dispute what exactly is meant by these skills or, to use British humour, "much rhetorical potency" (Duke: 2002: 11)
- **Employability: New wine in old bottles?** Creativity is frequently nothing but insufficient knowledge of the relevant literature: In the field of vocational education this issue was discussed as early as in the 70s under the term "extra-functional qualifications"; however, even back then, experts pointed out that these "extra-functional qualifications" ensure the ability of personnel to function in the first place, and are therefore highly functional ...
- **Our focus: critical analysis of a pilot scheme**: This presentation is meant to use the concrete case study of an Austrian university to illustrate which chances and difficulties arise from a systematic promotion of "employability" and how universities must – over and over again – cope with the dichotomy of academic educational goals and the future employers' wishes for usability on the job.

Patenschaftsmodell Innsbruck - The pilot scheme (1)

- Founded in 1986 at the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences (University of Innsbruck)
- Focusing on improving theoretical understanding, problem-solving competence and social or other transferable skills
- The more or less systematic development of the graduates' employability
- The transfer of knowledge from the university to the community
- Improving the status and the image of the University and the Faculty

Patenschaftsmodell Innsbruck - The pilot scheme (2)

- **Structure:** five actively involved institutes ('private' association)
- **Products:** cooperative projects with "real-world" partners (profit and non-profit organizations), discussions with business people, entrepreneurs as lecturers, skill training seminars (e.g. rhetoric; conflict training; project management; problem solving techniques); courses in organization analyses
- **Financing:** self-funding by fees and donations (plus some seed money at the very beginning).

Quantitative Results

- 198 **skill training seminars** with nearly 3,000 participants
- 137 **discussions with business people** and more than 3,000 students
- 42 **presentations of potential employers** (most of them global players) with approximately 2,500 participating students
- 550 **cooperative projects** with about 600 students

- 160 students received an additional "employability certificate" acknowledging their special commitment in preparing for the labour market
- Some students created their own jobs through projects in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Qualitative Experiences

The activities had the following *qualitative effects* (results of an evaluation):

- Improved co-operation between the founding institutes and their staff
- Significantly improved image of the university and the faculty on the regional level
- Companies, associations and public administration have recognized the benefits of cooperating with the university – knowledge transfer
- Enhanced employability for the graduates even in SME's – many students got a job through these activities and, in the meantime, find themselves in influential positions, from where they, in turn, approach the university with projects. Consequently, the model has become a highly appreciated structure for on-campus recruiting.
- As an aside: regional consultants regard this as threatening competition.

Risks and challenges

- ***The students' point of view:***
 - Relatively early adaptation to (frequently short-term) employer interests (risk of domestication) or: the production of people that can be "managed" easily (Kappler)

- With limited resources (time, personnel) the promotion of employability frequently leads to lower academic standards
- Especially in co-operative projects, the students are frequently forced into the dilemma of deciding between good "how-to approaches" and a good "critical approach to current practices" (Duke 2002: 141)

- ***From the instructors' point of view***
 - Bewilderment and a potential threat to their self-perception and their identity as researchers
 - Necessity of thinking in a discourse that is strikingly different from their own discipline (professional fear)
 - Do the instructors themselves have sufficient transferable skills?
 - Possible conflicts with individual interests regarding co-operations, income
 - Risk of increased "mainstream teaching"

- ***From the institution's point of view***
 - Risk of creating a separation between instruction and research and, consequently, threat to the research culture of the institution
 - Threat to the identity as an academic institution – especially, when external (business) organizations or other lobbies exert a strong influence on curriculum design
 - The university is being pushed into the role of a "boiler" (with the main tasks of bringing graduates to the right "operation temperature")

Conclusion: HE between Scylla and Charybdis

- In principle, the promotion of the graduates' employability (in the sense of job fitness) is part of the universities' societal mission. Therefore it must be anchored in the curriculum and supported organizationally.
- A university that does not sufficiently deal with the "hidden curriculum" of employability misses another significant part of its societal mission, namely, to act as a critical authority in this society.