

## Enhancing Graduate Employability

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The purpose of this paper is to deepen the understanding of the development of student employability competences and indicate possible solutions to improve the employability potentials of graduates in the case of a faculty of tourism. We carried out a cohort study on the competitiveness of students entering the labour market and desk research on the activities of the institution in this field. The research yielded areas of limited students' competences and some deficiencies or challenges within the institution.

*Keywords:* employability, labour market, graduate, higher education, case study

### Introduction

Graduate employability has become increasingly important during the recent and current economic crisis; high youth unemployment rates are exacerbated by an increased number of graduates from higher education institutions (HEIS). It appears that the era of job security from post-graduation to pension is over. Moreover, many graduates have to settle for jobs for which they are formally overqualified or with precarious and intermittent employment without job security or predictability.

Therefore, HEIS have to pay particular attention to graduate employability-related issues and adopt a strategic approach to the employability development of students. Additionally, new employability skills are required due to changing labour markets, organizational and technological advances, intense global competition, as well as sound anticipation of likely future workplaces.

Employability is not a contemporary phenomenon; it (re)appeared on agendas with human capital theories (Becker, 1975) emphasizing the obligations of governments to stimulate conditions for the development of human capital as a key competitive priority of

a knowledge-based society and economy. Therefore, the development of employability in graduates has become a significant expectation that the state governments have imposed on higher education systems (Knight & Yorke, 2002).

This paper provides in-depth insights into the subject of graduate employability in the case of a faculty of tourism. Tourism continually generates new enterprises, new workplaces, and occupations; it is an industry of high potential. Nevertheless, regular employment after graduation is not so easy to obtain. The global economic downturn combined with a grave crisis in the Slovene tourism (hospitality subsector) has resulted in a decline in demand for skilled workers. Close cooperation between HEIS, students, and employers is necessary regarding the transition from the university to working life. Understanding the range and type of skills required by the tourism sector is important to both students and education providers (Harkison, Poulston, & Kim, 2011). Thus, this survey provides data on students' preparedness to enter the labour market combined with data on faculty guidance and measures to serve students anticipating employment.

### Theoretical Background

Professionals and other experts have provided several definitions for employability that can be divided into two general groups. One relates to the capability of the student to obtain and maintain a job after graduation and develop within that job. The other set is concerned with enhancing the student's attributes (skills, knowledge, attitudes and abilities) and ultimately with empowering the student as a critical life-long learner (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Harvey, 2001). These definitions provide different ways of discussing the concept of employability. For the purpose of the Bologna reform (The European Higher Education Area, 2012), employability is defined as the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move within the labour market. Additionally, Allison, Harvey, and Nixon (2002) stress the capacity to move self-sufficiently into and within the labour market, to fulfil potential through sustainable employment. Thus, we believe that the term employability includes not only the ability to get a job but also longer-term employment, indicating that one can manage a career and continue professional development. We agree that employment must be qualitative: fulfilling, rewarded in accordance with the study choice and level through promotion and learning prospects.

Harvey (2003) notes that employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, simply because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques, or experience solely to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a certain career. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on 'employment' and more on 'ability'. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the qualities of the learner. Employability is the relevance of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through training to what the labour market/profession requires. Thus, Kramberger (Kramberger & Pavlin, 2007) ascertains that employability is a prerequisite for employment.

Employability is also an important outcome of higher education, although measures of employability with recent graduate employment rates (usually six

months after graduation) are crude measures (Harvey, 2001) and subject to pragmatic pressures from governments to 'keep employability simple.' Nevertheless, there is a global tendency for the employability of graduates to be used as a benchmark to measure the quality of higher education (Cai & Shumilova, 2012). Thus, high graduate employment rates help HEIS market their study programmes, create their image and enhance their prestige.

Employability, therefore, is not a product but a process of learning. For HEIS, the employability of graduates is of paramount importance; the development of employability skills must be embedded in their intra-, co-, and extra-curricular activities. The preparedness of students to enter the labour market includes equipping them for professional practice with relevant knowledge, skills and other attributes, helping them recognize the value of all forms of learning, and teaching them how to articulate the impacts of learning and promote themselves in the labour market. Finally, the world of work evaluates the students' achievements and the HEI activities that enhance employability. Lindberg (2007) argues that the greatest change that has taken place in the research of the relationship between education and working life is probably related to the adoption of the concept of the 'education-to-work transition.' Clearly, the quality relationships between education and the world of work depend highly on the active involvement of both partners in curricula development, evaluation, study processes, placement, career services, and recruitment.

### Employability Components

As shown in Figure 1, there are three key factors involved in graduate employability:

- Students' individual capabilities, achievements, investments, and endeavours;
- HEI activities (intra-, co- and extra-curricular, career service, research);
- Labour market conditions.

Primary prerequisites for employability are knowledge, skills, personal characteristics and other attributes of an individual, mobility, career planning, as well as the willingness to change occupations/vocations and

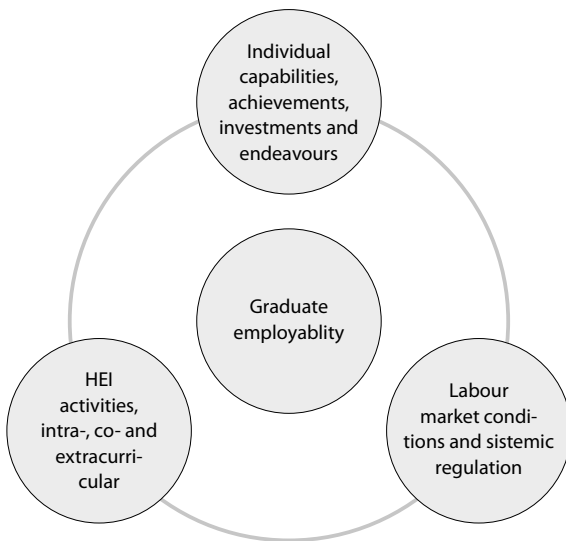


Figure 1 Factors of Graduate Employability

to follow trends within professions. Students need to maintain their desire for lifelong learning (LLL) and raise awareness of the need to improve and upgrade their competences, particularly work experience, engagement in non-formal learning, and international mobility.

Employers need flexible staff to be able to adapt to constantly changing and dynamic market conditions, and their consumers' requirements and habits. Job search patterns are also significant: students have to be proactive and diversify their ways of searching for employment, for instance by making use of networking. Finally, students have to develop their self-presentation and self-promotion skills to market their competences.

HEIs provide opportunities to develop competences needed to obtain, maintain, and develop employment and a career. Following Harvey (2002, p. 6), activities of HEIs can be categorized into four broad areas:

- Enhanced or revised central support (usually, via the agency of career services) for undergraduate and graduates in their search for work;
- Embedded attribute development in the programme of study often as the result of modifica-

tions to curricula to make attribute development explicit or to accommodate employer input;

- Innovative provision of work experience opportunities within, or external to, programmes of study;
- Embedded reflection on and recording of experience, attribute development and achievement alongside academic abilities, not least through the use of progress files.

The third component comprises labour market conditions, an external factor influencing graduate employability through social reforms, educational reforms, and labour legislation.

We claim that the responsibility for students' employability rests with both the students and the HEI. Thus, in this paper, we survey and discuss the students' role in employability development as well as the role of the HEI in providing opportunities for students to develop their skills and experience.

Conditions in the labour market are out of the control of students and the HEI and thus our focus as well, though they may play a major role in the processes of searching for employment.

### Research Methodology

The single case study research method was used. As Merriam (2002) illustrates, a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. Our first survey was a cohort study that started in the 2012/2013 academic year, was repeated in 2013/2014 and in 2014/2015. Each year, we surveyed qualitative data obtained from the students in their second or third year of study concerning their formal qualifications, skills, participation in non-formal learning, certificates, licences and other records, their work experiences, their participation in international mobility, personal traits, and their promotion capabilities. We present results regarding the quantity and quality of obtained student competences and their job marketability skills in order to identify areas of limited competences. As we observed no specific differences among the cohorts, we present the results for all three cohorts in one.

The second survey examined the attempts in the

Table 1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Category		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Undergraduates	2nd year	-	77	-	77
	3rd year	116	-	65	181
Type of study	Full-time	72	74	65	211
	Part-time	44	3	-	47
Gender	Female	85	48	51	184
	Male	31	29	14	74

Notes Undergraduate professional programmes: (1) Tourism Destination Management, (2) Tourism Enterprises Management, (3) Cross-Cultural Mediation in Tourism, (4) total.

field of employability-enhancing activities within the HEI. A desk study was conducted analysing the implementation of employability competences development in the curricula, strategic documents, and internal acts. Additionally, we surveyed data about international mobility, central career services, LLL programmes, and cooperation with the industry; thus, we aimed to identify the areas of the institution's weaknesses and challenges and form a basis for strategic planning regarding the issue of employability development.

#### Participants

The analysis included three cohorts of undergraduate (second and third year) students of professional study programmes for a three-year bachelor's degree, thus using a non-probability sampling technique and purposive sampling.

The whole population consisted of 313 students; 258 produced data that were useable ( $N = 258$ ), yielding a response rate of 82%; 55 students did not participate. Table 1 shows descriptive characteristics of the sample. Out of the total sample, 29.8% were second-year students, 70.2% third-year students, 81% of them were full-time students; 71% were females; 2.1% were international students.

All data regarding one's employability competences are recorded in the curriculum vitae (CV) and a cover/motivation letter. Thus, each respondent completed a CV and enclosed a motivation letter for an employer

chosen as a target for the purpose of placement or a future workplace. These documents were prepared both in Slovene and in one foreign language. Before-hand students were taught how to communicate with potential employers in a short session, prepared to write CVs and cover letters for an internship/job. Students uploaded these documents in the e-classroom. A CV had to follow the Europass CV structure and template, concentrating on essential information that would bring added value to the application. We chose the Europass CV because it provides a clear, systematic picture of the candidate, is popular among employers in the tourism sector and is utilized in other countries. Exceptions to this rule were allowed in case of work settings where an innovative and creative approach was desired or even required. Motivation letters had to follow the usual correspondence structure and rules; students were encouraged to show originality and innovative approaches to adapt the text to suit the post applied for and the employer's specifics. Furthermore, it was suggested that they stress their assets that were not included in the CV.

#### Results and Discussion

Graduate employability is a multifaceted phenomenon, and a match between the graduate and the employer depends on many variables. We drew up a framework for a strategic approach to the development of graduate employability, as shown in Figure 2.

Next, we arranged and analysed the obtained data following their relevance as follows:

##### Generic Competences

Generic skills are those that apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are also known by several other names (Table 2), including soft skills, key skills, core skills, essential skills, key competences, necessary skills, transferable skills and employability skills. The tourist industry's preferred term is employability skills (National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2003). In Slovenia, the most common terms are generic, soft and transferable skills.

Experts from the International Labour Organization (2001) observed that although the diversity of the

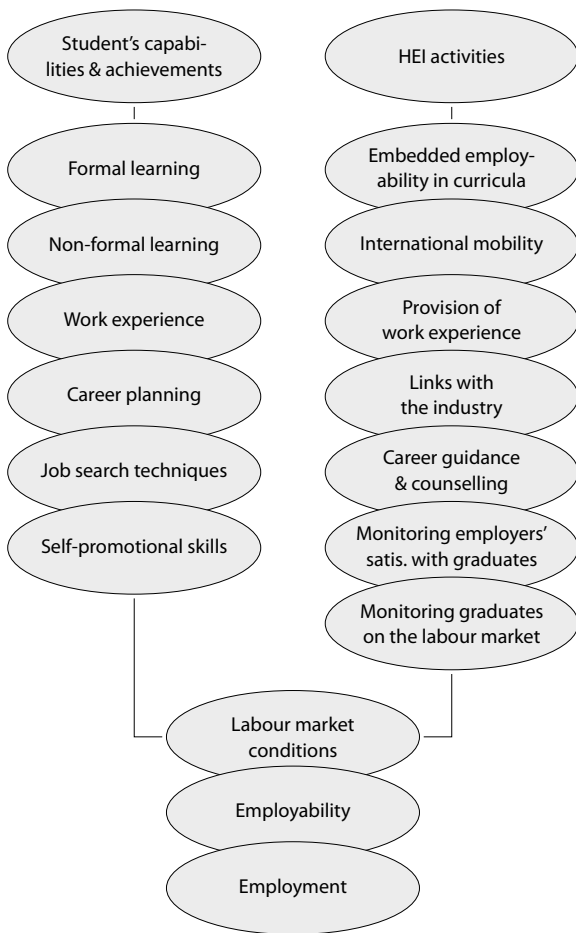


Figure 2 Conceptual Framework of Graduate Employability Components

industry and its subsectors provide working opportunities for a wide array of skills, in recent years there has been a shift within Europe from specific skills towards more generic competences. Similarly, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) indicated that ‘employers are not looking for oven-ready graduates’ (in Harvey, 2002). Training has a short shelf life, and it is far more important for employers that graduates have a range of attributes that empower them as lifelong learners (Harvey, Moon, & Geall, 1997).

Therefore, students should pay more attention to exposing their (eventual) team-working skills, communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, ability to work under pressure, self-man-

Table 2 Terms Used in Various Countries to Describe Generic Skills

Country	Terms used
Australia	Key competences, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
Denmark	Process independent qualifications
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications
New Zealand	Essential skills
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary goals
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
United States	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how

Notes Adapted from National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2003).

agement, and other skills. The faculty should attach more importance to entrepreneurial skills, abilities to identify opportunities in business, to planning, exploring, and evaluating opportunities. Weligamage (2009) emphasizes such skills as time management, diversity management, leadership skills, risk assessment management, analytical, critical and reflective abilities, as well as stress management. Atkins (1999) noticed that it is difficult to maintain that academic progress is not enhanced by high standards of literacy and numeracy, by a range of communication skills and the ability to work in groups or teams, and by learning how to learn. In short, descriptions of generic competences vary from one author to another.

Our survey revealed that although respondents defined several *generic competences* they possess, more information about the source of these skills was expected:

- ‘When working in catering I had to practice conflict management skills; I can be empathetic, am a good observer and have team-management skills.’
- ‘I am persistent in stressful situations, flexible, and a good organizer. If things turn bad, I adapt and improvise.’

- 'I performed mentoring tasks with novices and also as a dancing teacher. I organized several events for our relatives from abroad.'
- 'I gained good organizational skills as an assistant in managing events, as a tourist information clerk and receptionist; during my studies, I organized various events for students and the local community.'

As for *communication skills*, they are believed to be vital for success in the service (Andrews & Russell, 2002; Kátay & Rátz, 2007) sector. Our respondents were aware of their importance but did not go into detail. We expected information on mediating skills, presentation skills, intercultural understanding, report making, and similar.

- 'My advantages are fluent communication in foreign languages, ability to critically present and argue my views, and constructively accept critiques; I am open-minded.'
- 'I gained communication skills when I worked in an insurance and estate company where I faced various problems and was in direct communication with partners and customers; I could practice negotiating skills as well.'
- '[...] public speaking and performance skills: gained while participating in various competitions and through my experience as a musician in front of an audience.'

Surprisingly, no one mentioned generic skills that we found in syllabuses (e.g. entrepreneurial skills, preparation for self-employment, project planning, business plans or development of ideas into innovations. We presume that students were not sufficiently empowered.

Regarding entrepreneurial skills, the institution organizes workshops and regularly encourages students to join the activities of the university incubator. Students also are advised to test and realize their business ideas through other projects. Their self-employment competences should thus advance, especially organizational skills, creativity, skills in making business plans, initiative taking, and similar. Unfortunately, students show very limited interest in entrepreneurship.

This remains an underutilized potential for a career in the tourism sector and a challenge for the institution.

Regarding *linguistic competences*, the results were not encouraging: all students can communicate in English, but other languages are far less common (only those with perceived levels B1/B2 (independent user) and C1/C2 (proficient user) were considered): German 24%, Italian 15%, Croatian 13%, and Russian 3%. We assert that they should possess more foreign language competences as candidates for careers in the tourism sector.

Concerning *computer skills* students listed mostly competences with the World Wide Web, Microsoft Office programmes (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), Gantt-project, Photoshop, Publisher, Wordpress, Video Maker, Corel Draw, and Windows Moviemaker. Some students reported that they had mastered computer systems in travel agencies or hotel reception areas.

These results indicate that the HEIS should do more to prepare the students to be able to reflect on learning content, interpret competences correctly, and record their attribute development and achievements.

### Work Experience

Employability is not only about generic competences since it also includes work experience. Several authors (e.g. Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002) reveal that the majority of employers in the tourism sector consider only work experience to add value to an individual's competitiveness. Harvey (2001) reminds us that there is a growing tendency to recruit from students who have had some work experience with the organization. Trbanc (2007) claims that a deficit in work experience can be recognized as the main competitive disadvantage of young people.

Thus, we analysed students' work experiences and found that they reported work experience in various areas: food and beverages (28%), front office (46%), event management (5%), travel agencies (19%), tourist information centres (4%) and casinos (4%); 46% of them fulfilled a mandatory placement in the tourism sector prior to faculty enrolment. The data show that 13% of students had no work experience in the tourism sector, 19% worked three months or less, 36% from

three to six months, 10% from six to nine months and 19% more than nine months. Other work experience was from students' work in shopping centres, administration, manual labour, and similar; 4% of students reported work experience in voluntary organizations.

Unfortunately, 3% of students had no work experience at all; the question arises as to how they plan to obtain employment with this deficit. Students with prior vocational education in tourism and hospitality have a major advantage over others. Not only because they possess several work-related skills, but they are also well-acquainted with the industry; moreover, there is the importance of the development of networking relationships. Research among Slovene employers in the tourism sector showed that they place a high value only on those candidates with professional experience in the field (Rok, 2013). In the case of experience outside the sector, work in other service jobs is also appreciated. Even performing manual, routine work can be a signal to employers that students possess good working habits, and a willingness to work.

Other authors (Šušteršič, Nastav, & Kosi, 2011) warn that students are not selective when they look for work. Thus, only one third of their work experience contributes to their professional growth. We assume they choose work that is well-paid regardless of opportunities to broaden and upgrade their competences.

#### Work-Specific Competences

Experts (Pavlin, 2012) indicate that the responsibility for the development of professional competences rests as much on the HEI as on the employer. Although students listed several work experiences in the tourism sector, they were not so deft when they had to articulate what competences they had gained. They, surprisingly, listed a poor selection of these skills, e.g. 'experience in working at the front desk,' 'reception tasks,' 'administration tasks,' 'competences in organizing events,' 'marketing skills,' 'I am acquainted with travel agency work.' Given the considerable amount of their practical experience in the tourism sector, students could learn to reveal more skills related to their posts and tasks.

#### Non-Formal Learning

The analysis reveals that very few students participate in non-formal training. We found that several of these opportunities were organized by the faculty, most of them were free, and for some of them students could get ECTS (e.g. interviewing skills seminar, tour guiding seminar, entrepreneur workshop). The interest on the part of students was surprisingly poor. If workshops, seminars, and training are not obligatory, students tend not to participate. Although students assert that they are willing to learn, the evidence does not comport with that. Only 9% of them obtained licences for local tour guiding. Furthermore, according to the data bases of the national reference point (see <http://www.nrpslo.org/index.aspx>), they do not possess any of the NVQS (national vocational qualifications) although there are 22 of them for the tourism sector in Slovenia.

Obviously, the students' awareness of the need for LLL has not been developed yet. While the OECD (Stacey, 2015) points out that introducing a culture of lifelong learning can both help to raise skill levels and to enhance career development opportunities, some of the students who are about to search for jobs, ignore the help provided by the institution.

#### International Mobility

The study shows that some students were internationally mobile; 20% of them studied abroad or/and 15% fulfilled an internship, most of them with a grant from the Erasmus or NFM funds. Our research reveals that since the year 2000, the faculty's international office has recorded an annual 3–5% increase in the student and staff mobility. These data are encouraging since other research (Allen, Pavlin, & van der Velden, 2011) reveals that Slovene students are not as keen to participate in exchanges as other EU members' students are. Only 12% of Slovene students participate in these exchanges, while in Finland, Austria and Poland one third of them undergo this kind of study or internship.

Undoubtedly, the lack of such experiences does not contribute to the student's flexibility and competitiveness in the labour market. However, international mobility has to be interpreted appropriately; we found that students do not know how to interpret the impacts

of such exchanges so that the employers see the benefits.

Furthermore, the research of Flander (2011) suggests that the key point is in preparation for mobility (counselling, guidance, linguistic and culture workshops). Indeed, stereotypes, prejudices and culture shock may have a very negative influence on the students' experiences in a foreign country. However, our research reveals that the international office applied very few organizational measures to prepare students for international mobility.

#### Personal Traits

Respondents listed their virtues, character traits and other personal advantages in their motivation letters. These should be linked to the identified philosophy and visions of the employer. Candidates have to present themselves as potential contributors to the company. Thus, they need to attract the attention of personnel clerks who select the promising applicants. Authors (Scottish Centre for Employment Research [SCER], 2004; Harkison et al., 2011) reveal that employers are interested in personality, aesthetics, and self-presenting skills, in particular for the staff in front-line positions. Our respondents emphasized features such as 'positive energy,' 'loyalty,' 'sense of humour,' 'tolerance,' 'enthusiasm,' 'tidiness,' or 'reliability.' We concluded that they are too humble, lack self-promotional skills and competitive spirit; but firstly, most of them have not made an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses.

#### Career Centre

A career centre is not a faculty-based activity; it operates within the university administration offices and far from the faculty. This is a serious disadvantage; students need the permanent presence of such a service; if a career centre is not a stable part of the faculty but a counsellor is present only once a month, the centre services are not effectively recognizable or particularly useful.

We found that the career centre organized several workshops with employability purposes (about stress management, motivation, job interviews, etc.), visits to some significant employers and career days during

which some major employers in the region presented their companies and recruited interns. Unfortunately, the interest of students was poor. It is obvious students do not consider co- and extra-curricular contents if they are not obligatory. Students are not motivated to take advantage of the centre's guidance and counselling. The need to plan their career is not their priority until they graduate.

We posit that the implementation of this service into the study process is necessary; closer cooperation between teachers, career counsellors, and other faculty service staff is recommended to inform and encourage students to make use of the career centre and training for the benefit of their career development.

#### Other HEI Activities and Regulations

Furthermore, we explored whether graduate employability is embedded in the institution's strategy and other internal documents. Graduate employability is subject to the quality assessment of the institution and study programmes. When they are re-accredited, graduate employment rates are examined closely.

Graduate employment and employability analyses were performed in 2011 and 2012 at the university level and repeated in 2014 at the faculty level. They yielded results about graduates on the labour market, positions they held, the usefulness of the knowledge gained at the HEI and skill shortages. Job search patterns were investigated, waiting times for their first employment, and data about eventual job searches abroad. Data revealed that the situation of graduates in 2014 worsened in comparison to previous surveys (rates of unemployed graduates, their satisfaction with their employment, appropriateness of their jobs, rates of those employed outside the tourism sector, etc.). Mekinc, Mušič, and Sedmak (2015) reveal that weaknesses identified in 2011 and 2012 were not improved.

During this survey, we came across a persistent problem concerning the availability of industry representatives to participate in surveys about their satisfaction with study programmes and competences of graduates. Similarly, their interest in cooperation with academics in curricula creation and modification is limited. As Zgaga (in Komljenovič, 2010, 13) mentioned: '[...] Employability is not equal to employment



– it seems that employers are fairly uninterested in participating in discussions about study programmes and their execution.’

In accordance with the national quality assurance agency’s (NAKVIS) recommendations, the institution has to prepare a new strategic plan. We checked the draft and found that graduate employability and employment are included (declaratively); evaluation of graduate positions in the labour market, enhancement of international mobility, activities for strengthening links to industry, and similar. These activities must be systematic, and interventions must be prompt.

We also surveyed the curricula and syllabuses in order to find data about the development of the employability competences of students. We were interested in generic competences, links with the industry, practical training and innovative teaching methods and techniques. There were hardly any mentions of them. It seems certain, however, that some teachers implement them in their lectures, seminar work, and training. We suggest that future studies could go into details about these implicit contents in a survey among teachers.

### Conclusion

The analyses reveal that the transition of graduates from the university to employment calls for further steps to make the necessary improvements. Both analyses pose enormous challenges, offering both threats and opportunities to the institution for the benefits of the graduates. The results call for an intensification of current measures and additional measures in the development of the students’ employability competences.

The aim of the study was to identify deficiencies in students’ employability competences. These are:

- Students’ awareness of the need to broaden and upgrade their competences;
- Students’ motivation for lifelong learning;
- The contribution of student work toward their employability;
- Interpretation of the impacts of mobility and work experiences on employability;

- The value of international mobility and preparation of students for exchanges;
- Development of self-presentational and self-promotional skills of students;
- Entrepreneurship as an alternative career choice.

First and foremost, we agree with Redmond (in Reichwald, 2012): ‘Employability cannot be done to people, students have to engage and take responsibility.’ Students need to improve their competitive edge by striving to compile greater competences both in quality and number and to increase their competitive spirit so as to enhance their future opportunities in the job market.

As to the HEI, we identified several weaknesses (or challenges) to be considered:

- Embedding employability competences development in syllabuses;
- Soft skills development (intra-, co-, and extra-curricular);
- Transfer of knowledge into practice;
- Work experience provision, sourcing work placements and volunteering opportunities;
- Enhancement of international mobility;
- Implementation and promotion of the career centre services into the HEI activities;
- Strengthening links with industry.

On the organizational level, activities on the development of employability are sporadic, left to individual teachers and other staff, their initiative and inspiration. Their attempts and those of other stakeholders should be integrated within the overall long-term employability strategy, combining curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular cooperation. However, we suggest further research focusing on organizational measures and exploring (explicit and implicit) employability competencies development in syllabuses that would provide additional valuable information about the flexibility and innovation potentials of the higher education institution.

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