Graduate employability and educational context: a comparison between Great Britain and the Netherlands

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Within policy circles, graduate employability remains a problem. It is often understood as an individual phenomenon, overlooking the influence of the organisation of higher education on the competition for graduate jobs. This article explores and compares how graduate employability is socially constructed within Great Britain and the Netherlands. It provides an analysis of both Dutch and British systems of higher education and explains how they shape the positional competition for graduate jobs. In addition it shows how perceptions of employability of final year university students relate to these two educational systems. The article is based on an empirical study on graduate employability in both countries using both micro analysis as well as contextual analysis. The article shows a fit between educational structure and employability strategies. The educational context shapes graduates’ understandings and expectations of the competition for graduate jobs.

Introduction

For a transparent system, in which clear information is available to all students about courses, qualifications and careers is one in which more people can really make the most of what higher education can offer: socially, financially, academically, intellectually. (David Willets, UK Minister of State for Universities and Science, 2011)

In today’s competitive labour markets, employability for university graduates has become of great importance. Students entering the labour market nowadays do not only face competition from an ever-growing pool of British graduate entrants, but they are also told that in the global economy they need to have ‘world-class skills’ in order to be employable (Leitch, 2006). How and why people invest in higher education has often been simplified by assuming that those entering higher education make decisions within a social vacuum.

They are envisaged as market consumers investing rationally in their own human capital. This article examines the relationship between perceptions of graduate employability and organisation of higher education in two countries: the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. It analyses how the educational context shapes the...
competition for graduate jobs by examining some of the structural features of higher education in both countries. In addition, it will argue that this institutional context fundamentally shapes the way students think about the competition for jobs and their own employability. Government strategies to increase participation or fairness need to examine the competition for graduate jobs in a social framework.

In order to understand how students make decisions in relation to their careers and educational trajectories, an understanding of how higher education is structured is necessary. This is because an analysis of the structure and characteristics of the national forms of higher education can elucidate how the competition for graduate jobs is framed by institutional opportunities and restraints. For this reason the article provides a comparison of the institutional organisation of higher education between the Netherlands and Great Britain. Higher education in the Netherlands and Great Britain share similar features but there are specific national attributes that create a distinct relationship between work and education within each of the two countries. In doing so the article’s main contribution is to show that students make labour market decisions regarding their own labour market within a constructed educational context which makes certain choices more likely than others. Here, it aids our understanding of employability as it makes explicit its relationship with educational structures as well emphasizes its social nature.

This paper does not intend to review nor give an extensive overview of the institutional features of both countries. Instead, it concentrates on how the function, structure and outcomes of higher education mediate the labour market competition for graduate jobs. It also does not provide a strict variable-orientated comparison but uses comparative concepts as common points of reference. It uses various sources to show how similarities and differences in higher education in both countries lead to different labour market outcomes. The article analyses differences and similarities in two areas:

(1). Access and selection. Who can enter which higher education institutions (HEIs) or course on what grounds? How do HEIs select their students? What reasoning do these rules signify and what effect do the differences in access and selection have on the competition for graduate jobs?

(2). Differentiation in institutional status and function. What kind of hierarchy between institutions and types of higher education exist in Great Britain and the Netherlands? To what extent is there differentiation in function within higher education? What effect has the differentiation between HEIs have on the competition for graduate jobs?

The article is built up as follows. First it will elaborate upon the notion of graduate employability. After this it will give an introduction to both educational systems of higher education discussing access and selection in and differentiation within higher education in more detail. It will then explore the social construction of employability by students in both countries. It draws on semi-structured interviews with Dutch and British final year undergraduates, as part of a wider study into graduate employability in Great Britain and the Netherlands (Tholen, 2010). The concluding discussion aims to synthesize the analysis of higher education with the views of the students.
Graduate employability

It’s now widely accepted that advanced capitalist economies have entered a new knowledge-based era (Drucker, 1993; Burton-Jones, 2001; Stehr, 2007). Western economies are thought to be making a transition from physical capital and raw materials as the major determinants of industrial development and living standards to one in which knowledge and intangible capital are increasingly recognised as being the dominant factors for economic development. In this knowledge or knowledge-based economy, the debate around employability has become of increasing importance in the public and political realms. A vast and rapidly growing body of literature on employability has emerged in the last 15 years across both the academic and popular management literature. Within government policy circles the debate about how to raise the overall employability of the workforce has been in the forefront of attention (see BIS, 2010).

Employability and individual skill development has been of growing importance for most Western (as well as non-Western) nations. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for example actively aims to place employability at the forefront of national educational and labour market policies (see OECD, 2004, 2007). The OECD stresses that ‘Human capital accumulation is an important determinant of individuals’ earning capacity and employment prospects, and therefore plays an important role in determining the level and distribution of income in society’ (Blöndal et al., 2002, p. 5). The OECD emphasises that it is the government’s role to provide the opportunity to develop the skills needed for the labour market (especially via increasing access to higher education).

The European Union has also integrated the concept of improving individuals’ employability in its labour market, skills and education policies especially in order to tackle the issue of reintegration of unemployed and older workers into the labour market. The European Union’s Lisbon goal for 2010 was ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council, 2000, p. 3). Improving the quality and effectiveness of, and widening the access to, education and training was a major part of reaching that aim.

Also in Great Britain, a perceived lack of graduate employability has been an important policy issue. Recently, due to the recession and its effect on the labour market, growing worries about the employability of graduates has been widely publicized in policy documents and in media stories (see BIS, 2009; UKCES, 2009; Hilbert, 2010; Baker, 2010; Grosvenor, 2010; Manzoor, 2010). The implicit promise of ‘learning is earning’ is certainly not being met for those who face unemployment after just having left higher education. The response from opinion-makers, politicians, employers and experts to combat this problem ranges from increasing students’ ‘employability skills’ to increasing their entrepreneurialism, to just lowering their expectations.

Britain’s coalition government has responded by emphasising that it is the role of the university to make sure that their students would have the skills and abilities needed to succeed in the labour market. As a trade-off for universities imposing...
higher tuition fees, institutions should be more transparent towards would-be students about their employability after finishing their degrees. As UK Minister of State for Universities and Science David Willetts (2010) explained:

The aim is to have the statements in place by the end of August, to enable university applicants for the academic year 2011/12 to make better-informed choices. This work is consistent with the Coalition Government’s belief in transparency—to make more information available to prospective students about the cost of different university courses, as well as related graduate earnings and student satisfaction—and we will be pressing universities to do more in the coming months.

It is believed this will be beneficial for both employers and graduates and the latter will leave university equipped with a wider range of employability skills (which benefits them and business). Universities now actively need to demonstrate how their institution prepares its students for employment. This information should help students choose courses that offer the greatest returns in terms of graduate opportunity (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2009, p. 8).

Here we can see how students are positioned as neoliberal subjects: market consumers, rationally selecting the best education and aiming to maximise their educational investment. In the education market, consumers need complete information to make the choices that optimise their outcomes. This view is widely shared, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, for example American educational expert Mark Schneider (2010) writes, ‘For most students, college is as much an investment strategy as anything else’ (p. 2). Maximising student’s employability means letting the market do its work and connect demand and supply (i.e., let both employers [demand] and students [supply] find an equilibrium that provides an optimum for everyone, given their preferences). The issue addressed in the rest of the article is how educational context influences the competition for jobs and its influence on students’ employability strategies. Here, it assesses whether students really act like rational consumers or whether they understand and act upon different type of rationales in managing their employability.2

**Access and selection**

Through accessibility and selectivity it is decided who can obtain particular educational credentials and certifications and also who is able to acquire particular skills needed in the labour market. This means that access to higher education and the selection process of HEIs determines who can have access to specific segments of the labour market (like the graduate labour market or the labour market for medical doctors or solicitors).

The structure of higher education has a significant influence on who can capitalise on scarce educational resources and therefore gain a superior position in the graduate labour market. Individuals who can secure scarce or exclusive qualifications might see their efforts rewarded in the labour market. Likewise, the structural barriers can give certain individuals privileged positions. Both opportunities and barriers can frame the strategies or ideas individuals have in succeeding in the labour market. A cross-national comparison by Usher and Medow (2010) shows that attainment
rates for the population aged 25–34 are slightly higher in the Netherlands (34%) than the UK (29%). It also showed that the Dutch student body is relatively similar in socio-demographic characteristics to the overall population whereas the UK student body is slightly more ‘elite’ than the overall population. Affordability of higher education was significantly higher in the Netherlands. All this indicates accessibility to higher education is higher in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands

In Dutch secondary education, pupils are selected and divided into different educational tracks at an early stage in their educational career. After the first orientation year (brugklas), pupils are streamed into one of those tracks according to their academic abilities and interests. This means that access is limited by structure rather than by institution. The large majority of pupils in secondary education are not required to compete with other pupils for access to universities. In other words, there is little selection as for most subjects people with the corresponding high school diploma have the right to enter the course of their choice.

Access to higher education in the Netherlands is not organised through the mechanism of competition but through set pathways (based on proven ability), most notable that of VWO (preparatory scientific education) to university and from HAVO (hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs—literally, ‘higher general continued education’) to HBO (explained below). Also within HAVO and VWO pupils have to specialise in one or more of four ‘profiles’ at the start of their third (HAVO) or fourth (VWO) year of study. These profiles prepare students for distinct areas of higher education. Generally, Dutch pupils are able to study at whichever institution they wish once they have the qualification to enter WO and/or HBO.

In general, admission to a higher professional education is open to anyone who holds either a HAVO, MBO (middelbaar beroepsonderwijs; literally, ‘middle-level applied education’) or VWO certificate and admission to universities to anyone who holds either a VWO diploma or a hogescholen propaedeutic (first year) certificate. HBO graduates also have the right to enter university. Often universities offer fast-track two-year Bachelor programmes and give entrance to their Masters’ programmes.

HBO and WO provides open access to anyone eligible. But there are some exceptions. For a limited number of programmes there is also a numerus fixus. Depending on capacity or labour market demand some academic programmes limit the number of places they provide (e.g., medical programmes). A growing number of other degrees have been introduced in recent years, often in relation to their natural educational capacity. Sometimes there is qualitative selection as better performing pupils can have direct access based on performance.

Figure 1 presents the Dutch education system, summarised and simplified. The minimum age of participants is presented on the Y-axis. It shows the separate characters of secondary and tertiary education. Access depends on acquiring the matching educational certification.

There is structured selectivity in the binary system. HBO institutions recruit more students from HAVO and MBO than VWO. University students in general have a VWO background, although a growing number of HBO students continue their
studies at the universiteit. With the introduction of the bachelor/master’s system in 2002, increasing numbers of courses, though still small in size, apply additional selection methods to decide who can enter certain master’s programmes. The so-called top master’s (honours) programmes are designed to lift the academic standard by selecting a limited number of higher achieving students. So selection is becoming more prevalent. Recently institutions have been given more autonomy to exercise selection procedures to raise quality standards in these master’s programmes. Selective programmes seem to be in great demand so it seems that institutions can be critical in deciding who can enter.

Whatever the positional competition is based on, it does not seem to be engrained in the organisation of educational institutions. Students cannot keep other students out from taking the same course; they cannot capitalise on the exclusivity of their education. Educational trajectory is therefore not seen as getting ahead of others but as an individual route to professional success.

**Great Britain**

Although students at higher education institutions have been selected from a wider range of backgrounds over recent decades and in particular in the last 15 years, selectivity remains an abiding characteristic of British higher education. There have been numerous initiatives and policy attempts (such as the Aimhigher initiative) to increase participation, especially for people with non-traditional and minority backgrounds. Great Britain has a longstanding history of debate regarding what the function of higher education should be and whether widening participation is needed or desired (Baber & Lindsay, 2006).

The Blair government’s educational policies demonstrated a clear commitment to increase the number of young people to participate in higher education (DfES, 2003, 2006). It was claimed that British education has entered an age of socially inclusive education, guaranteeing education to all. In 2003 an explicit target was set: that 50%
of all 18- to 30-year-olds should be engaged in some form of higher education by 2010 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003). Brown and Lauder (2001) have argued that New Labour’s aim for higher education is not to square social inequalities but to give each individual the opportunity to become successful in finding high-skilled, well-paid employment. In 2004 the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group wrote:

It is not the task of higher education admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage. But identifying latent talent and potential… is a legitimate aim for universities and colleges which seek to recruit the best possible students regardless of background. (Schwartz, 2004, pp. 5–6)

The quote shows that no student would be excluded to participate in the competition for elite jobs but higher education cannot provide equal opportunity to compete.

In Great Britain, access to a higher education course is granted via a formal application procedure in which the higher education institution decides whether to offer the applicant a place. Selectivity is increased by the status of the institution or department. The competition for the top universities remains fierce as these universities keep students numbers relatively low. Murdoch (2002) shows that the majority of British high school graduates with very high grades end up in the three most selective institutions. This does not mean individuals from all backgrounds have similar education opportunities. From the start, selection is an inherent feature of British education; the course and quality of an individual’s educational trajectory depends not only on their individual performance but also on privilege. Access to independent schools seems to enhance one’s educational chances. Leading universities recruit a disproportionately high number of pupils from independent schools (Judd, 2000). For example, more than half of university students attended independent secondary schools, but only a quarter of students from state schools went to Russell Group universities (National Equality Panel, 2010, pp. 362–363).

In 2009, it was reported that:

For the first time, more than 50 per cent of A levels taken by privately educated pupils scored an A compared with 20 per cent of those in state schools, widening the gap and prompting claims that attempts to break the middle-class stranglehold on entry to higher education have failed this year. (Curtis, 2009)

A government report in 2009 also showed that private education and privileged access to university remain of key importance in order to enter well-paid professional positions (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). Access to the better-performing independent schools is still highly related to the socio-economic position of a student’s parents. This means that although formally the competition rests on performance, exclusive educational opportunities mediate the distribution of educational opportunities.

The perceived ‘quality’ of the educational institution, course and degree, and alumni also depends on its exclusivity. The institutional organisation signals relative performance as the guiding principle. Students’ chances in education and the labour market depend on how well their performance compares with others. In general terms, access and selection are thus strongly linked to performance, competition and exclusivity within the structure of higher education.
Comparison

Access to higher education in the Netherlands and Great Britain is clearly organised different. In the Netherlands there are absolute standards as the VWO diploma gives one access to most courses at all universities, and the HAVO diploma gives access to most HBO courses for all hogescholen. Pupils’ educational trajectory is structured by streams or levels within the educational landscape. The trajectory is moreover based on choice (where a student would like to study) and long-term performance (finishing the VWO or HAVO course).

In Britain most HEIs select their students according to secondary education performance. Access thus relies on competition. Universities choose the best (or best-suited) students from all the applications they receive from UCAS. Students need to compete with other students from all over Britain as there are no absolute standards about who can enter which institution or course. It also means that parents and secondary education institutions play a role in the competition. They are able to use their resources to promote pupils’ chances of obtaining access to the institutions of their choice (through private education, tutoring or cultural capital). Help from secondary schools and parental influences often precede access to elite universities.

It must be noted that the selectivity of the British system is mutually constituted by institution and student. Murdoch (2002) relates the differences between national higher education systems in selectivity to heterogeneity of entry grades at individual and institutional level. As no institutions can legally select students in the Netherlands, the student population between institutions is homogenous. The author also shows that the pool of Dutch students is relativity homogenous in terms of entry grades. So higher education in the Netherlands is homogenous at the individual and institutional level.

For Great Britain, the opposite is true; the differences in student populations between institutions are limited, but the pool of students applying for university is much more varied (or heterogeneous). In Great Britain ‘the most selective institutions... seem to “cream off” the graduates with the highest grades from a relatively heterogeneous pool of students’ (Murdoch, 2002, p. 389). Selection is therefore a vital element in British higher education as it maintains the differentiation between institutions as well as the differentiation of diplomas and graduates.

Differentiation in institutional status and function

The second area of comparison is differentiation within higher education. Differentiation between institutions can arise in many areas from size to function to structure. This section will mainly focus on differentiation in status and function as they could have an impact on how the labour market is segmented in terms of skills and education. It will examine how institutions are categorised in terms of status and what kind of hierarchy between institutions and types of higher education exist. Differences in status between educational institutions have a large impact on all stakeholders. For example, pupils might choose a university based on its status and reputation. Differences in status can also signal perceived differences in quality. Academics likewise might have an interest in working at a prestigious institution.
The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, entry to higher education is seen as an entitlement, available by right to anyone who obtains the threshold entry certificate. The Dutch state commits itself to ensuring that universities are more or less equivalent, so that students are not locally disadvantaged. As a consequence, differentiation in status between institutions in the Netherlands is low. There are only a few examples of attempts to rank HEIs (such as Elsevier magazine).

Where differentiation does exist in the Dutch higher education system it relates to functionality. The dual system separates higher education into two branches (WO and HBO), which have distinct functions. In addition, some HEIs specialise in an academic or vocational area. At WO level there are universities like Wageningen University (life sciences), Delft University of Technology and Eindhoven University of Technology. Several hogescholen also specialise in for example arts, hotel management or real estate. There used to be more specialist schools but many of them have merged into larger institutions over the last decades.

Great Britain

Great Britain has vast differences in status, reputation and perceived quality within its university landscape and likewise places a lot of value in measuring it. Every year a number of different institutions and sources, such as several newspapers, explicitly rank all the HEIs to establish the relative quality of each institution. Another important mode of differentiation in perceived quality and status is based on the Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2014).

The differences in access criteria of HEIs (as described in the previous section) have caused a distinct differentiation of student populations. There is a relative homogeneity within student populations based on individual A level performance. Students in elite universities are more likely to achieve first and upper-second-class degrees than students from lower-status universities. Also there are other distinct differences in student populations. A large share of students of elite universities have higher social economic backgrounds and have been privately educated, whereas lower ranked universities consist of relatively more students of lower class background (from state schools) (Sutton Trust, 2011). Likewise a relative high share of students in lower ranked universities is from ethnic minorities (Richardson, 2008).

British HEIs are differentiated not only in reputation and population but also in function. The British government encourages universities to focus on a particular area of activity. It is envisioned that certain HEIs (e.g., old universities) will specialise on knowledge production; others will focus on ‘knowledge transfer’ (Jones & Thomas, 2005, pp. 623–624). However, many lower status HEIs have the ambition to present themselves as emerging research institutions, not settling for being primarily teaching universities.

British higher education institutions have become more and more diversified. Taylor (2003) observes that after 1992, when the binary system in British higher education was abandoned, institutions increasingly diversified as institutional self-determination had become an important policy focus. The author shows convincingly that
institutions have increasingly diversified in terms of funding, profiles, student numbers, etc. Research activities have been subject to a highly ‘selective funding methodology’ (p. 287) created by Britain’s research councils. In addition there has been a widening gap in perceived quality. Competition between institutions can lead to segmentation but also to large inequalities (Leathwood, 2004).

Comparison

The variations in differentiation between the two countries can be linked to larger systematic demarcations. The Anglo-Saxon higher education system has traditionally been hierarchical. There are clear differences in prestige, perceived quality and selectiveness. On the one hand, Great Britain (and the USA) has over time created a hierarchical system where institutions have clear differences (Teichler, 1988; Bleiklie, 2005). On the other, German and Scandinavian systems traditionally have been considered examples of non-hierarchic arrangements in which all universities (or institutions within any given category) are considered roughly equal in prestige and quality. Dutch higher education has developed in the same way. The widespread ranking of institutions on their performance in research or teaching has not only resulted in increased competition between HEIs but also made perceived differences in the value of credentials and perceived quality of students more explicit and intense. The relative egalitarian relationship between Dutch HEIs eschews status competition.

The systems also have dissimilar functional differentiation. This is still a characteristic of the Dutch system: hogescholen provide professional education and universities provide strictly academic education. Although the functional difference of HEIs in Great Britain became less obvious after 1992, many HEIs in reality prepare their students for entering practical professional occupations. Yet it is not formally acknowledged in the structure of higher education.

In the Netherlands, there is far less differentiation in status and perceived quality. This means that the resources students can use to compete in the graduate labour market are less associated with the credibility of the relevant HEI. This difference is very important for the competition for skilled jobs as it shapes the rules of competition for individuals. For example, Dutch pupils and students would not be able to differentiate themselves by the perceived status or exclusivity of an institution. The functional differentiation is more a guiding feature. For British students the high differentiation in institutional status emphasises credential distinction. Scarce credentials signal quality and therefore provide labour market value. Higher education in Great Britain is institutionally organised to rank and exclude.

Systemizing higher education

How can we define both types of higher education in relation to the competition for graduate jobs? Numerous academics have created approaches to distinguish national labour market systems in its relation to education. Theorists like Marsden (1999), Shavit and Müller (1998) and Maurice et al. (1986) have made a distinction between ‘qualificational’ and ‘organisational’ types of systems. In the former, skills are learnt in a vocationally or applied oriented schooling system and employers select employees
based on these assets; skills in the organisational system are mainly acquired on the job and education functions merely as a screening device (Van de Werfhorst, 2004, p. 316).

Vocationally oriented tertiary education standardises the signalling process to the employer:

In countries with highly stratified, vocationally specific, and standardized educational systems, such as the Netherlands, education-work linkages are stronger than in other countries; high levels of stratification and vocational specificity make it possible for employers to select employees with detailed vocational qualifications; and higher levels of standardization makes the signals provided by education more reliable. (Van de Werfhorst, 2004, p. 317)

The educational output is more standardised in the Netherlands than it is in Great Britain, for example. Van de Werfhorst stresses that in comparing systems of higher education, the transparency of competencies HEIs offer to students should be emphasised. Do systems give specific information to employers about what skills they provide? This strongly regulates the relationship between education and labour market.

The Dutch educational system can be described as a highly standardised but particularly highly differentiated system with different streams leading to different categories and levels of education. The Dutch education system makes sense only in the context of a labour market system which is also highly occupationalised and segmented. The tight link between education and labour market seems to be central here. Hannan et al. (1996) state that in the Netherlands the link between higher education and the labour market is made through a ‘collinear linkage’:

... where a substantial occupational labour market exists, training for specific ‘occupational positions’ takes place in second level schools and colleges, but where there is little or no joint delivery of training for young people moving from school in the labour force. In these cases, education and training requirements are specified and clearly known to the schools. (Hannan et al., 1996, p. 16)

Although the British education system is also quite standardised, it is less differentiated. The playing field for HEIs was held to be level after the 1992 eradication of the distinction between polytechnics and university. This means that there was supposedly no direct link between higher education and the labour market, yet labour market signals are ‘strong, reliable and standardised’ (Hannan et al., 1996, p. 16). Employers use output of school types, institutions and certificates as signals in their decision-making process for establishing employability or suitability of candidates (Keep and James, 2010). Research on how employers’ valuation of degrees shows that many employers do not include graduates from lower status universities (see Hesketh, 2000; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Morley & Ainsley, 2007). University ranking or reputation becomes a proxy for the applicant’s quality within their generic employment strategies. In addition, the British educational system ‘is oriented towards rather general curricula and programmes, and a great part of vocational education has been substituted by the firm-specific trainings’ (Kim & Kim, 2003, p. 62). It must be acknowledged that Great Britain is moving towards a closer coupling between degree and occupation. With the expansion of higher education and occupations graduates move into some higher education institutions have continue to
develop vocational courses. However perhaps due to the bad reputation of vocational education, academic degrees are often seen as the gold standard by pupils, parents and schools.

Having defined the two educational contexts, it is now possible to establish an ideal type characterisation of both higher education systems and their relationship with individual students. Figure 2 presents these ideal types of British and Dutch higher education together with how they affect positional competition.

The upper two boxes summarise the characteristics of higher education explained in this chapter. The lower boxes sum up the main points of how the positional competition in the graduate labour market is shaped by the institutional set up of higher education.

The competition for graduate jobs is strongly influenced by the close relationship between higher education and jobs. The egalitarian organisation of Dutch higher education is driven by the societal need for high skills. In other words, there is a concern to match the demand for skills with the supply of skills. The vocationally oriented schooling system aims to provide this match. This means that the competition for jobs by individuals is strongly based on absolute criteria: skills and abilities. The British educational system is more directed by market mechanisms than the Dutch system. The weak link between higher education and the labour market causes the positional competition to be played out by individuals aiming to compete on (generic) credentials. As one employer put it recently:

I think the purpose of university is not necessarily to go to university to get a job; it’s more about personal learning, personal endeavour and becoming more mature with a different outlook and learning those broad level skills. I’m not bothered by what subject they did; it’s more about what they learn along the way. (Gilleard, 2012)

The social construction of employability

Higher education provide different social spaces in which student make decisions. This influences how students think about the competition for jobs and the concept of
employability. One of the major outcomes study into graduate employability in Great Britain and the Netherlands was that there was a tight correspondence between structural characteristics and social construction of employability. The study used semistructured interviews to uncover student’s view of the labour market and their strategies to gain employment after they would graduate (for methodology see endnote 4). Described in more detail elsewhere (Tholen, 2010), I shall briefly give an account of the perceptions of the students in relation to their educational context.

The Netherlands

Employability is socially constructed by Dutch students as a process of finding the match between one’s ‘labour market’ persona (skills, abilities, interests, experiences and choices) and the right opportunity in the labour market. Students’ employment strategies are based on a reflexive project that encompasses their interests, strengths and weaknesses. The value of choice and agency is expressed in the detailed accounts of the students about where they fit into the labour market or types of jobs. Dutch students tend to define the transition between education and work as an ongoing trajectory. Students construe their own personal path from education to the labour market. Whereas within the educational trajectory potential is cultivated, the labour market is the place where it will be utilised. Education is seen as the unfolding of potential to be realised in the labour market.

These narratives of choice and individual pathways are mediated through interaction with an educational context that distinguishes levels and areas of competition. Both higher education and the graduate labour market are segmented in function and level. The students seem to incorporate the professional nature of the labour market by linking their opportunities to a distinct part of the labour market. This means that their reflexivity is both constrained and enabled by the segmented nature of the labour market. Employability is geared towards the type of job that matches the individual qualities of the person, not towards an implicit hierarchy of jobs or a generic competition for graduate jobs.

The needed skills, knowledge and experience are developed during the students’ university years, through schooling and their academic experiences. These students perceive employability to be a very personal choice, as within the structure of education, different individuals use different types of human capital to progress within the labour market according to their own ‘plan’ or choice. So the positional competition based on absolute performance, choice and skills is mirrored in the way the students construct the competition for jobs and manage their employability.

Great Britain

The high differentiation in status of British higher education is demonstrated through the narratives of the students who feel that employability is constructed as a relative competition. The use of degrees, educational institutions and grades as a basis for exclusivity is thought to be a defining feature of the competition for jobs. The education system functions similarly. British higher education institutions signal the quality of their graduates in a manner that is not strictly based on ‘serving’ the skill needs of
the labour market. The result is that there is very little coordination between labour market demands and the skills provided. This relationship between skill investment and skill demand becomes somewhat blurred as the aim to outsmart other students in the competition becomes the main goal for students. The generic competition hinders the development or investment in specific skills or credentials.

In general, employability is seen as depending on the efforts of others. It depends on the package of human capital that can be signalled. Students measure their employability by exclusivity and distinction. The university degree provides extracurricular activities or other signifiers of competence, which are all used to enable students to stand out from other graduates. The students position themselves in the labour market. They understand the competition as demand driven and therefore their employability strategies are geared towards what they understand employers to be valuing. As it is often unclear what that is, ambiguity becomes a part of employability. The ideal of a well-rounded graduate, that many see being sought after by employers, strengthens the notion that employability relates to adaptability, flexibility, generic knowledge and skills. Like in the Netherlands, the social construction of employability in Britain reflects the positional competition embodied in the organisation of higher education. The importance of individual pathways, relative performance and the competition for generic signifiers are co-created by its educational context. The next section will examine more deeply both Dutch and British education context in order to make sense of the perception of the students.

Conclusion

Educational context is only one factor that influences how the positional competition for jobs is set up. Issues of for example, class, gender, age, ethnicity and/or personality are likely to intersect any influence the organisation of higher education may have on students’ approach of the labour market. It is therefore not possible to isolate the effect of social structures on graduate employability. What we can learn from through the comparative angle of the study is that students act within an educational context (which is partly nationally organised). The educational context does not merely provide information about what is or will be of value in the graduate labour market but helps to define the general rules of competition. These rules shape an intersubjective framework on how to understand the competition for jobs.

The educational context is not a neutral arena whereupon students can maximise their labour market outcomes by investing in the right education and gaining the right credentials. It serves as a background that facilitates certain choices over others as the parameters of higher education shape the positional competition. The students in this study do, in general, not adhere to the rational neoliberal subject as projected by the Coalition and previous governments. Students do not know the full conditions of their circumstances and weigh all options when making decisions. Within their social context students make choices that make sense. They embody the social structure without being driven by it (Bourdieu, 1990).

The lack of labour market opportunities for graduates will not go away with only supply-side solutions. We can make graduates more and better skilled or better aware of employer’s demands. But this does not deal with the realities of higher education.
and its relation to the positional competition for graduate jobs. In the Netherlands any policy attempt to fully utilise the skills and abilities of graduates needs to be in line with the segmented and professional nature of Dutch higher education. Likewise for Britain, efforts to increase graduate employability will have to deal with an educational context which is built on exclusivity and differentiation. This will be reflected in how students increase their employability. Providing students with the tools to make better informed choices about university courses might certainly be helpful for many students; yet it is not likely to change students’ employability strategies. A policy focus aiming to increase more and better graduate jobs or to improve structurally the coordination between higher education and employers’ needs is much more likely to be more successful.

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NOTES

1 There has been debate on what employability skills exactly are and if indeed employers demand them as much as claimed (Martin et al., 2008; Keep, 2012).

2 It’s important to note that different stakeholders have different views and definitions on what employability means. This study follows Brown and Hesketh’s (2004) definition as the relative chances of getting and maintaining different kinds of employment (p. 25).

3 There is far less emphasis on increasing the quality and flexibility of higher education rather than its size within the Dutch policy landscape (see OCW, 2011).

4 Thirty final year students in each location were interviewed (60 in total, of which half were female, 14 Dutch and 16 British). The semi-structured covered a variety of topics such as educational history, career objectives and employability strategies. The students were selected from one university in each country. Both universities are internationally established institutions and can be considered relatively equal in status. Ten students from three different degree courses—history, business studies and applied sciences (engineering, applied physics, technical engineering, industrial engineering and management)—were interviewed at each university. Students from multiple courses were chosen to insert heterogeneity into the sample. The majority of the students were a few months away from entering the labour market or entering a postgraduate course.

References


Keep, E. (2012) Youth transitions, the labour market and entry into employment: Some reflections and questions. SKOPE Research Paper No. 108 (Cardiff, Cardiff University, SKOPE)


