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Less time to study, less well prepared for work, yet satisfied with higher education: a UK perspective on links between higher education and the labour market

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This paper explores graduates' views on the relationship between higher education and employment. It draws on a major European study involving graduates five years after graduation and highlights similarities and differences between UK graduates' experiences and their European counterparts. Specifically we address questions raised in the study about subjects studied and their relevance to entry into the labour market, if the academic level obtained was appropriate, whether graduates, with hindsight of five years, would choose the same subjects or the same institution again, and if they were satisfied with their current job. Such specific questions relate to broader perspectives such as the perceived value of higher education study in relation to initial employment and future life histories. These have to be seen in the context of cultural differences in higher education systems at the time of the research and, perhaps increasing convergences in light of the Bologna agreement.

Key words: higher education, employment, graduate transition, (mis)match between higher education and work

Introduction and contexts

Findings from a comparative study of European graduates indicate that in the UK undergraduates spend less time in higher education, enter the labour market with lower level qualifications and feel less well prepared for their jobs after graduation. Yet five years later their employment and salary levels are comparable to those achieved by graduates in other European countries (Brennan and Tang 2008). In other words, most UK Bachelor graduates with an average of three years of study achieve,

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in the long run, the similar levels of employment as their European counterparts who have studied five years or longer, and who have graduated, in most cases, with a Masters degree or equivalent. These findings, based on a major EU-funded survey “The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society” (REFLEX) (2000-2005) involving 11 European countries, raise questions about higher education systems and their traditions; about the relationship between higher education and the labour market; and about the ways higher education prepares students for employment. Such questions are embedded in wider socio-economic and cultural contexts which are both country-specific and part of the global market economy within the so-called European Higher Education Area. In the words of Teichler (2007a), the relationship between higher education and the world of work is far from satisfactory, yet it is high on the agenda of public debates in most countries and merits further investigation.

In this paper, however, we are not concerned with the study as a whole since its findings have been reported elsewhere (Allan and van der Velden 2007, Brennan and Tang 2008; among others). Instead, we focus on a small section of it concerned with graduates’ views on the relationship between their higher education study programmes and employment, five years after graduation. Questions raised here investigate the type of education, study programme and relevance for entry to work; whether or not the study programme had been a good basis for work; what additional study, training or work experience they had experienced and if, five years later and in their view, there had been a mismatch between higher education and the area of work.

Our focus is primarily on the UK graduates’ perspective, in comparison with those in other European countries, for two reasons. First, the UK has a rather different pattern of higher education provision, wherein the main exit qualification with which graduates enter the labour market is a Bachelors, rather than a Masters degree. Second, given the ongoing processes intended to harmonise structures and qualifications across European higher education the UK case may have wider relevance across Europe. Whilst the REFLEX study findings outlined above may raise questions about structures and qualifications and the potential match or mismatch between higher education study and the subsequent area of work, they may also reflect values attached to higher education study and academic qualifications obtained across a range of very diverse European countries.

Comparative reflections

Cultural differences and intellectual traditions in different countries, however, are not easily overcome. Educational historians have traditionally referred to the ‘Humboldtian’, the ‘Napoleonic’ and the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ traditions within European higher education (and exported around the world during the colonial period). Gellert (1993) refers to them as the ‘research’, the ‘training’ and the ‘personality’ models. While these models refer effectively to the elite higher education systems of more than a century ago, they may still have relevance to an understanding of differences in the relationships between higher education and employment in different countries (Brennan 2008). In Germany, indeed, as in all countries whose tertiary education was based on the German model of higher education, the tension between *Bildung* (personal development) and *Ausbildung* (training) was, and still is, a cause of concern. Humboldtian values, referred to by Ash (2006) as a ‘myth’, embrace academic freedom to teach and research together with the freedom to learn without much interference from policy-makers. Such values, according to Maurice, Sellier and Silvestre’s (1982) typology, embrace an occupation-led education system coupled with occupation-specific competences, leading to content-specific qualifications. It is a system which is still marked by institutional stratification and distinct boundaries between vocational education and training and university higher education. In continental Europe, therefore, vocational credentials and qualifications tend to be more tightly linked to the area of work, to vocational institutions and their traditions – though even here palpable change in their informal status and a significant shift in traditional universities can be noted (Scott 2008).

But structural boundaries are not easily eroded. In the continental Europe’s stratified binary systems of post-compulsory education entry to many professions is highly regulated through precise qualification requirements generally obtained within the education system. A number of points flow from this observation: since many employment destinations are ‘known’ within higher education more emphasis can be placed on subject knowledge and preparation for the ‘right’ entry qualification for work. This may also mean that for graduates there will be fewer obstacles to overcome in the transition from study to work of an appropriate level since many will have been on defined career tracks while completing higher education. Continental European graduates, therefore, when leaving higher education may be more fully

formed as professionals than those in the UK (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007). Where concerns are expressed, they are more likely to be about the need to introduce greater flexibility, both in the use of credentials and in the quality of the graduates themselves.

The Anglo-Saxon model of tertiary education, by contrast, is characterised by a less developed system of vocational education and training, and a higher education system which, in the main, provides a broad educational 'liberal' base with less emphasis on subject-specific skills-related content; it is a system with a 'loose fit' between higher education and the area of work, and one which is not generally geared towards entry into particular professional occupations (Little 2001). However, the UK in common with most other European countries has witnessed unparalleled higher education expansion in recent years. In the current context, it can be described as a heterogeneous mass higher education system in which the status of academically and socially elite universities continues to be maintained. To use the phraseology of some educationalists, official attitudes have become more instrumentalist and vocationalist (Mayhew, Deer and Mehak 2004). It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been a longstanding concern about the connection between higher education and the labour market, in part because of the perceived skills deficit and also because of ingrained elitist assumptions about what constitutes an 'appropriate' job for a graduate. It seems that getting the right people with the right skills into the right jobs is seen as essential for business (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Yet, it can also be argued that the UK system of higher education allows graduates to be flexible workers who can operate in a variety of different settings with ease (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007). A 'loose fit' therefore can be seen as an advantage, particularly in times of economic and social uncertainties.

Despite such diverse cultural traditions, most higher education systems across most countries in the globe are concerned with three core elements: professional training, personal development and research. All operate with an awareness of the pressures exerted by the global market economy and, in Europe, the policies determined by the 1999 Bologna Declaration. Signed by 46 European countries to date, 'Bologna' has as its principle aim the establishment of a common structure of higher education systems across Europe, and for this common structure to be based on two main cycles,

undergraduate (culminating in a Bachelors degree) and graduate (leading to a Masters degree) in order to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 and to promote the European system of higher education worldwide. Individual mobility, transparency, flexibility and employability are its catchwords. At the time of the REFLEX study referred to here, the implementation of the 'Bologna' reforms was at different stages of development in a number of countries. To Anglo-Saxon audiences, long-accustomed to the shorter Bachelors degree, these changes are not regarded as significant. But to countries where undergraduate study of five years, or longer, leading to a Masters equivalent were the norm these reforms were, and are, far reaching and, indeed, fundamental. That said, we should note that the graduates surveyed as the main part of the REFLEX study had completed their initial higher education in 2000, that is before any changes arising from the Bologna reforms had been introduced.

Rationale and methodologies

The research presented and discussed here is based on findings which have arisen out of a major international study on graduate employment. The REFLEX study was funded by the European Commission as part of its Sixth Framework programme, Priority 7 'Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society' for initially 11 European countries, though the number of participants or countries has since increased to 15, with more keen to participate. The project was co-ordinated by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands (see <http://www.reflexproject.org>). The project aimed to explore the demands that modern knowledge societies are placing on graduates and the extent to which higher education institutions were developing graduates' competencies to meet such demands. Whilst acknowledging that higher education should not be viewed solely in terms of economic and employment imperatives, the REFLEX study specifically focussed on the relationship between higher education and graduates' employment situations a few years after graduation. The UK part of the study was undertaken by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University. The study had three strands:

- A country study highlighting the main structural and institutional factors that shape the relationship between higher education and work (2004).

- A qualitative study (undertaken 2004).
- A survey of graduates five years after graduation (2005).

In this paper we address graduates' views relating to the evaluation of the study programme – five years after they graduated. From time to time we also refer to the qualitative study undertaken in five out of the eleven countries: Norway, Germany, France, The Netherlands and the UK (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007). The results of the survey covered graduates from Austria (AT), The Czech Republic (CZ), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Italy (IT), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Spain (ES), Switzerland (CH) and the United Kingdom (UK). It involved 35,000 graduates, including 1,578 UK graduates. For the UK sample this represented a response rate of 23% while the overall response rate was 30%, varying from 20% in Spain to 45% in Norway. The samples were selected to be representative of the various higher education populations who graduated from 'first degree' or equivalent programmes (ISCED 5A programmes) in 1999/2000. In practice, this meant that the vast majority of UK REFLEX respondents (93%) had completed their initial higher education with just a Bachelors degree, whereas in other countries the vast majority of respondents had completed their higher education with a Masters degree: 92% of Italian graduates had completed a Masters level programme, as had all the respondents from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. In fact, other than the UK, it was only the Netherlands and Norway samples that included significant proportions of graduates who had completed Bachelor-level programmes (67% and 64% respectively). In reporting overall the substantive findings of the study distinctions are made between ISCED 5A programmes that do not provide direct access to doctorate programmes, and those that do (Allen and van der Velden, 2007). Key sampling variables were field of study and type of institution. The extensive questionnaire comprised 11 sections which included educational and related experiences, transition from study to work, employment history since graduation, current work, competencies needed for work and evaluation of study programme. In recent years three major trends have been identified that affect the demands that higher education graduates face: the increasing emphasis that has been placed on education and training in the light of what is termed the knowledge society; changes in the labour market processes, that is, transitional labour, increased mobility and flexibility coupled with a

de-standardisation of the life course; and finally, the internationalisation and globalisation of product and labour markets and their impact on higher education (Allan and van der Velden 2007). These three areas underpinned the research design and questionnaire.

Implementing the graduate survey was anything but a straightforward process. The countries involved collected graduates' data differently, depending on the availability of national, central databases containing graduates' contact details. For example, in Switzerland, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office was able to supply graduates' addresses, and similarly in the Netherlands researchers were able to use a national register (the Informatie Beheer Groep) from which to draw their sample. But in many other countries (for example, Finland, Germany and the UK) researchers had to rely on the co-operation of individual higher education institutions (and their interpretations of data protection issues) to access graduates' contact details.

Furthermore, translating survey questions from one language into another caused endless problems (and for one partner, the survey had to be produced in three national languages – German, French and Italian). While project partners had agreed on English as a working language, the sheer variety of languages involved, though enriching, nevertheless lessened the efficiency of working across the teams.

Reciprocal explanations of terminology were time consuming and difficult to realise, though sometimes, it has to be admitted, partners of a monolingual country were equally confronted with divergent ideas. Words such as “job” or “occupation”, even “profession” carry different meaning in different cultural contexts. The term “profession”, for example, is complex because in the Anglo-Saxon meaning it often refers to a qualification accredited by, and providing entry to, professional bodies, usually after graduation, while in many other countries this accreditation role is assigned to the universities. It can be argued, of course, that any study involving several countries invites numerous comparative thoughts and questions which cannot easily be addressed. Care, however, has been taken to place findings into their specific cultural and educational contexts and to highlight convergences and divergences where they seem meaningful in relation to the questions discussed.

First employment after graduation

The relationship between higher education and work can be understood (and analysed) in relation to a number of different dimensions. Brennan, Kogan and Teichler (1996) identify three main aspects: dimensions of higher education relevant to work; linkages between higher education and work (including labour markets and regulatory systems); dimensions of work relevant to higher education. It can also be understood in terms of a 'transition system which describes features of countries' institutional arrangements which shape young people's education-work transitions' (Raffe 2008, 277). Such transition systems might be understood in terms of three functions of education: skills production; selection and allocation (Van der Velden 2001) but such educational functions also need to be viewed alongside labour-market structures within different countries. Ideally, they should also be considered alongside other factors such as graduates' work values, and motivation to work which may be not taken into account (Cassar 2008; Quintano, Castellano and d'Agostino 2008).

The theoretical perspective in relation to specific questions addressed here is based on an assumed match or mismatch between higher education study and subsequent employment. Despite strenuous efforts by policymakers undertaken in the past to harmonize the quantitative demand and the supply of highly qualified labour, a mismatch between supply and demand is believed to be widespread and endemic (Schomburg and Teichler 2006). It can be argued that higher education institutions are increasingly expected to be responsive to labour market needs. However, such needs are often difficult to predict in times of growing uncertainties, economic difficulties, often rapidly changing labour market demands (Schomburg and Teichler 2006) and often time consuming complexities involved in curriculum development (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007).

Støren and Arnesen (2007) extend the notion of 'mismatch' further and consider the mismatch between the level of education acquired and the level required at the place of work either immediately following after graduation or, within the context of this research, after five years' work experience according to the following typology.

Graduates:

1. are employed at the appropriate level relevant to their field of study (no mismatch)

2. may work at the appropriate educational level but not within their own field of study (horizontal mismatch);
3. may work within their own field of study but not at the appropriate educational level (vertical mismatch);
4. may be both vertically and horizontally mismatched;
5. may be unemployed.

Within Støren and Arnesen's typology, there is a presumed rank ordering of severity of mismatch from none at all (category 1 above) through to being unemployed (category 5).

To sum up, aspects we want to address here concern the relationship between higher education, the subjects studied, and subsequent jobs undertaken. To what extent was the study programme a good preparation for work? Looking back, would those surveyed choose the same study programme again, at the same or a different institution? Such questions, even within a survey, cannot adequately be answered without reference to employment histories, personal and professional development experienced in the course of five years. Furthermore, it should be noted, respondents' answers given within the limitations of the survey are self-reporting; they reflect individual opinions, attitudes and personal life histories.

As noted in an earlier European comparative study of graduates' transitions from higher education, graduates' own values and orientations can play a crucial role in shaping job roles and work outcomes (Teichler 2007b). All are cloaked in socio-cultural and economic contexts prevalent at the time of data collection. For example, OECD data quoted for countries involved in the REFLEX study show employment rates ranging from a high of nine% or more in France, Germany and Spain to a low of 5% or less in Norway, Switzerland and the UK (Koucky, Meng and van der Velden 2007). Despite such differences graduates, according to our data, seem to have fared well. Across all participating countries at the time of the survey, some five years after graduation in 2000, the vast majority of all graduates, 95%, were employed; of those in paid employment only 5% were self-employed.

But the transition from higher education study to employment and the first job in the labour market after graduation is rarely straightforward (Raffe 2008) Often graduates have to settle for the first best opportunity and accept what comes their way, even if below expectations and despite having achieved graduate status. Here marked differences between the UK and other European countries can be noted. (Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Level of education appropriate in first job relative to study programme, Europe, and by country (%)

[Figure 1 to be inserted here]

When asked “*What type of education do you feel was appropriate for this work?*” UK graduates were the most likely to say that their first job did not require higher education: more than one third (38%) believed that their job needed someone with an education below tertiary level. This was much higher than the European average of only 18%. A relatively good match between education level and job requirements, on the other hand, was to be found in Germany: only 8% of Germans believed that their first job was below tertiary level while 91% felt that the level of education was appropriate for the first job - bearing in mind that most German graduates, at the time of the survey, had entered the labour market with a Masters degree, or equivalent. Quintano, Castellano, and d’Agostino (2008) see a relationship between the length of time studied, that is five years or more, which also has a bearing on entry to the labour market, employers’ expectations and graduates’ levels of satisfaction. Given the extent of labour market regulation in many mainland European countries, perhaps it should not surprise us that German companies as well as those in the Netherlands and many other European countries, still pay a salary according to the higher education qualification obtained rather than matching the pay to the requirement of the job – even though, as one Dutch expert interviewed as part of the qualitative study admitted, it is virtually impossible to have graduates performing only university-type tasks all of their working time (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007).

In the UK, however, other changes are being noted. Experts interviewed as part of qualitative study expressed concerns about the mismatch between education and employment. As a company director noted, many secretaries are graduates while not

so long ago, a graduate probably would have never applied for a secretarial post, leading to a concern that “*we should not end up with a situation where a window cleaner needs a Bachelors degree*” at a time when there are too many under-achievers anyway (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007, 17).

However, despite the perceived vertical and horizontal mismatches experienced by UK graduates, when asked: *To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for starting work?*” the answers provided do not point to noticeable differences between the various countries involved in the research (see Table 1 below). It may be, of course, that UK graduates had not expected more in terms of finding work which would relate directly to their area of study but this cannot be confirmed here.

Table 1. Graduates' ratings of study programme as good basis for starting work, Europe, and by country (scale of answers from 1='not at all' to 5='to a very high extent')

[Table 1 to be inserted here]

In relation to the first job after graduation, respondents were also asked: *What field of study did you feel was most appropriate for this work?* 35% of UK graduates could not relate their field of study to their first job with 10% working in a completely different field; again remarkably higher than the European average (13% and 6%, respectively). Figure 2 below provides the detail. UK data from other sources seems to corroborate this seemingly low level of match between subject (s) studied and subsequent employment. For example, analysis of the first destinations of 2002-03 UK first degree graduates shows a third of graduates reporting their job does not require a specific subject (HEFCE 2008a).

Figure 2. Most appropriate field of study for first job, Europe, and by country (%)

[Figure 2 to be inserted here]

Figure 3 below examines data relating to what graduates could offer to their employers in terms of knowledge and skills, and to what extent work demanded more knowledge and skills than could be offered. Once again, UK data, when compared to

that of other countries, indicates that graduates in their first employment feel undervalued in terms of higher education achievements. Graduates were asked “*To what extent were your knowledge and skills utilised in this work?*” and “*To what extent did this work demand more knowledge and skills than you could actually offer?*”

Figure 3. Utilisation and demand for knowledge and skills in first job, Europe and by country (%; responses 1 and 2, rated on a 5-point scale where 1= ‘not at all’)

[Figure 3 to be inserted here]

Here again 33% of UK graduates made little or no use of knowledge and skills gained during higher education in their first job. This compares, at the other end of the spectrum, to 9% of Norwegian, 17% of Dutch and 22% of French graduates. Using this single measure, UK stakeholders could well question the value of higher education were one not to consider other data relating to five years later. However, the table also shows that in the UK and four other countries (Italy, Spain, France and Switzerland) around half the graduates reported that in their first jobs, the work hardly (or did not) need more knowledge and skills than they could offer. From this we might question whether employers are being sufficiently demanding of their graduate employees.

These data seem to indicate that the link or ‘fit’ between higher education and graduates’ initial employment is generally good for European graduates overall (and very good in the case of Germany). But the data also show that on all the measures listed above, the UK is rather distinctive. UK graduates feel they are overqualified for their first jobs (a vertical mismatch), and the jobs are not ‘tied’ to their own fields of higher education study (a horizontal mismatch). Of course, this need not be seen in a negative light. Rather a ‘looseness of fit’ (Little, 2001) between subject of study at higher education level and subsequent job may demonstrate a certain amount of flexibility on the part of graduates and employers. But equally it might reflect some lack of clarity amongst UK graduates about ‘what’ type of job and in ‘which’ employment sector they wish to find employment after graduation. As noted above,

transitions to work might be smoother for mainland Europe graduates since more of them will have been on rather clear employment tracks from much earlier stages in their education careers.

Five years after graduation

So far we have seen that higher education experiences in relation to the first job obtained after graduation were less significant to UK graduates when compared to those of other European countries involved in the study. But how did graduates fare five years after graduation? Have their views changed?

With reference to the overall outcomes of the REFLEX study British and Spanish samples indicate the highest level of mismatch at the time of the survey (see also Marzo-Navarro, 2007, with reference to Spain) while the Finnish and Norwegian samples are among those with the lowest percentages of those who are mismatched, horizontally and vertically.

More specifically, graduates were asked: “*What type of education do you feel is most appropriate for this (current) work?*”

Figure 4. Level of education appropriate in current job relative to current level of education obtained, Europe and by country (%)

[Figure 4 to be inserted here]

As we can see from Figure 4, there is now a somewhat better match between the type of higher education and the perceived demands made by the employers. Five years after graduation only 15% of UK graduates are now in jobs where an education below tertiary level would be most appropriate, and the majority (78%) report their jobs require a higher or the same level of education they had. While one might, of course, argue that 15% remains relatively high, it is worth noting that the European average is 10%, while France and Spain record 17 % of graduates reporting that an education below tertiary level was the most appropriate for their current work. It is outside the scope of this paper to seek explanations which may not amount to very much anyway. The point to bear in mind here is, however, that UK graduates have, it seems, caught

up with their European counterparts and are no longer so 'different' – the extent of vertical mismatch is no longer so striking.

A possible horizontal mismatch is embedded in the question “*What field of study do you feel is most appropriate for this work?*”

Figure 5. Most appropriate field of study for current job, Europe and by country (%)

[Figure 5 to be inserted here]

As we see from Figure 5 almost seven in ten UK graduates now consider their own or a related field is needed for their current employment (compared to just over half who thought so in relation to their first job). However, a fifth of UK graduates considered their current job did not need any particular field (much higher than other graduates). It can be argued that UK graduates are more flexible and accept that the transition to work is not a straightforward process. The trend towards a closer 'match' between higher education and employment some five years after graduation may reflect an uneasy initial transition phase for graduates moving on from higher education to work. It may also reflect periods of training and staff development that graduates have experienced during their time since initial graduation.

According to the data, irrespective of levels of initial higher education, almost two thirds of all graduates had done some work-related training 12 months prior to data gathering, with 69% of UK graduates having done so (Little 2008). And though the incidence of work-related training varied by employment sector, further analysis of such training shows that for each of the main sectors of employment (business, education, health and social work, manufacturing, public administration) UK graduates were more likely than graduates overall to have undertaken some form of training (Little 2008, 386). The data, however, do not indicate whether this reflects UK graduates' greater need for such training, or UK employers' greater interest in continuing workforce development.

Notwithstanding such ongoing development, most graduates in the survey were reasonably satisfied with their initial choice of institution and subject(s) studied.

When asked “*looking back, if you were free to choose again would you choose the same study programme at the same institution of higher education?*” 63% of the overall total answered: “Yes”. This breaks down in the following way:

Table 2. Graduates who would choose the same study programme at the same institution, Europe and by country (%)

[Table 2 to be inserted here]

Spanish respondents seem much less satisfied with their initial choice than all other graduates, while the French and Swiss graduates recorded the highest scores, though again we cannot offer a reasonable explanation here. When asked if they would have chosen a different study programme in the same institution only 12% overall answered that they would have chosen a different study programme at the same institution with the UK and Spain scoring the highest (16% and 20%, respectively) while 8% overall would have chosen the same study programme at a different institution – again with hindsight of five years. Only 2% would have decided not to study at all. Overall, it seems that most graduates were happy with the study programme and the institution they had chosen. Similar data reporting positive feelings towards the higher education experience are reported elsewhere (Brennan et al. 2001; Schomburg and Teichler 2006). Equally, in the UK, the annual National Student Survey (NSS) shows that students have a high and sustained level of satisfaction with their experience of higher education. In the 2007 survey, for example, overall 81% of students were happy with their experience at university or college (HEFCE 2008b).

Whichever way one might look at the data it is clear that the majority of those surveyed felt positive not only about their programme of study but also about the institution in which they studied.

Additional factors

Looking back over five years since graduation, UK graduates seem to have found their niche with 69% now reporting that they are working exclusively in their own or a related field (see Figure 5). So what happened in the interim period? Can all data be

explained simply in terms of higher education and work? Again, some country differences are to be noted. Five years after graduation around four in ten of all graduates are in the same employment as they were when they first entered the labour market with over half from Italy and the Czech Republic being in this position, and with UK and Spanish graduates less than a third. Asked about the number of employers respondents have had since graduation until the time of survey, answers ranged from an average of 1.7 employers for the Czech Republic to 3.1 for Spain; UK graduates averaged 2.6 employers, close to the overall European average of 2.2 (Brennan and Tang 2008). Periods of unemployment, however, were recorded by all; 62% of Spanish graduates had experienced some period of unemployment since graduation in 2000, compared to just 22% of Norwegian graduates; 34% of UK graduates had done so – comparable to the overall figure for Europe of 37%. Such data are, of course, heavily dependent on the prevailing economic climate in the respective countries concerned. In Germany, for example, at the time of high unemployment, most large multi-national companies were inundated with graduates applying for jobs. As one personnel director, when interviewed, commented,

“The problem for very large and well-known companies is that they receive far too many applications, often 10,000 or even 100, 000. It is quite difficult to differentiate between graduates.” (Arthur, Brennan and de Weert 2007, 16).

Faced with the question *How satisfied are you with your current work?* only 4% saw themselves as *very dissatisfied* compared to 27% at the other end of the scale who were *very satisfied*. Figure 6 below shows graduates’ overall levels of satisfaction with their current work. Austrian and Norwegian graduates seem most likely to be satisfied - around three quarters of them – whereas only 58% of Italian graduates are satisfied with their current work.

Figure 6. Extent of satisfaction with current work, Europe and by country (%; responses 1 and 2; 4 and 5 rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = ‘not at all’ and 5 = ‘to a very high extent’)

The picture which emerges five years after graduation is that, in the main, most graduates seem satisfied with their circumstances. They were also asked about their

values and orientations in terms of job characteristics, and the extent to which such values currently applied to their work situations – on the assumption that five years after graduation they will have had work and life experiences which would invite some kind of reflection.

Figure 7. Job characteristics ranked ordered by importance, and by applicability to current work, all graduates (%; responses 4 and 5 where 1= ‘not at all’ and 5 = ‘to a very great extent’)

[Figure 7 to be inserted here]

Data presented in Figure 7 above show, in broad-brush aggregate terms, graduates’ ratings of the importance of certain job characteristics, and the extent to which these are applicable to their current work situations. Overall, we see that six job characteristics were considered important by around three quarters or more of the European graduates: the opportunity to learn new things, and work autonomy were rated most highly, and job security; new challenges; enough time for leisure activities; and good chance to combine work with family tasks were important for three quarters or more of all graduates. When we consider such importance ratings by country (see Table A in appendix for detail) we can see that graduates across 11 quite different countries with different cultural, social and intellectual traditions seem to share similar views about a number of values in relation to work, though work autonomy seems to be more important to the Germans and Austrians with UK graduates noting the lowest score. It may be that they work already fairly autonomously; in which case it was not an issue for them.

Social status, too, seems to matter less to the UK and Norwegian graduates than to most others. The chance to combine work with family tasks also seems to matter much less to UK graduates; the 44% rating this as an important job characteristic was again noticeably lower than the proportion for all European countries (72%) while to Spanish graduates with 89% it was very important. It may be here that the age differences between graduates in the different countries account for some of these variations. For example, UK graduates in the survey were both younger and older at entry to higher education compared with Europe as a whole. Such age differences,

when aligned with the longer duration of study programmes elsewhere in Europe, result in UK graduates being much younger than European graduates generally. The majority of UK respondents (72%) were aged 20-24 on graduation, compared to just 40% of graduates overall (Little and Tang 2008).

Figure 7 also compares the incidence of important job characteristics and the extent to which these characteristics currently apply. Although the 'rank order' of currently applicable job characteristics is very similar to their importance, the proportion of graduates reporting them as currently applicable is much lower. In fact, the only important job characteristic applicable to three quarters of graduates' current jobs is 'work autonomy'. And for many of the characteristics identified (in the survey) the difference between graduates' values (in terms of importance) and their applicability in their current job is rather large (20 percentage points or more). For example, only around a third (or less) of graduates report having good career prospects or high earnings - whereas such characteristics are important for around six in 10 graduates. Interestingly, UK graduates, and those from the Czech Republic are much more likely than European graduates overall to indicate their current jobs offer good career prospects (see Table A in appendix for detail).

So whilst as noted earlier, graduates seem happy with their lot, for very many there are disparities between what job characteristics they personally value, and the extent to which such characteristics apply in their current jobs. Further, a more sophisticated analysis of the data (controlling for more detailed facets of the graduates' current employment situations) could reveal different patterns of 'mismatch' between graduates' values and their current work situations.

Concluding remarks

The data have shown that in some instances UK graduates, when compared to their European counterparts, initially fare less well than might be expected. They do less well when entering their first employment after graduation. They take longer to settle into a career with relatively good earnings. However, mismatches (both vertical and horizontal) can occur for different reasons such as educational backgrounds, parents' education, indicators of social networks, and other social and cultural histories.

Studies in other countries acknowledge similar concerns (Marzo-Navarro 2007; Quintano, Castellano, and d'Agostino 2008). As Tomlinson (2007) points out, students nowadays no longer anticipate a clear link between their merit in education and its reward in the labour market. Furthermore, individuals' experiences of work are subjective, and this is likely to influence actual labour market outcomes and further shape their propensity for employment.

We should also note that the data presented above are based on an aggregation of graduates' responses grouped by country. Whilst we have compared such aggregated data and have shown differences as well as similarities in graduates' experiences by country, some five years after graduation, it is likely that more detailed analysis would also show differences in graduate outcomes *within* certain countries, as well as between countries.

Such *within-country* differences may well reflect the nature of social policies on welfare provision in specific countries and their impact on the structure of society and the levels of social equity. For example, in the neo-liberal countries, such as the UK, we generally find relatively high levels of inequality; in the corporatist countries, including Austria, Germany, Italy and France, median levels; and in social democratic countries, Norway, Finland and the Netherlands the lowest levels of inequality among European nations (Esping-Anderson 1990). Data, for example, published in 2006 finds that social mobility in Britain remains lower than in many other developed countries and that this can be in part attributed to the relationship between social class, poverty and low educational achievements (McGivney 2006). Brown and Hesketh (2004) also note that there remain many inequalities among UK graduates and that not all are benefiting from their investment in higher education.

With reference to continental Europe the question remains to what extent Bologna with its shorter cycle Bachelors degree – rather than the Masters degree or equivalent - will impact on graduates' entry to the labour market. As we have pointed out, most UK graduates start work having obtained a Bachelors degree. About a third will aim for a higher degree, often after a period of work. Our data indicate that after five years in employment UK Bachelors graduates may well have caught up with their continental European counterparts in terms of career and general job satisfaction. So

what value is attached to the Bachelors degree? Will it suffice in continental Europe? Accepting the Bachelors as entry to the labour market challenges precarious relationships between higher education, the labour market and professional bodies, thereby shifting the heavy burden of professional development from higher education on to the employer, something long practised but not easily understood in the somewhat complacent Anglo-Saxon world. Yet while all countries are striving towards a more neo-liberal agenda of higher education, deep-rooted cultural traditions remain. However, as Scott (1998) reminds us, in most developed countries higher education also fulfils an important social function. As agents of social mobility universities are distributors of life chances as well as, in partnership with the rest of the educational system, enhancing the life-chances of everyone. Our data indicate that European graduates consider that overall universities have fared well in the completion of their tasks.

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Figure 1. Level of education appropriate in first job relative to study programme, Europe and by country (%)

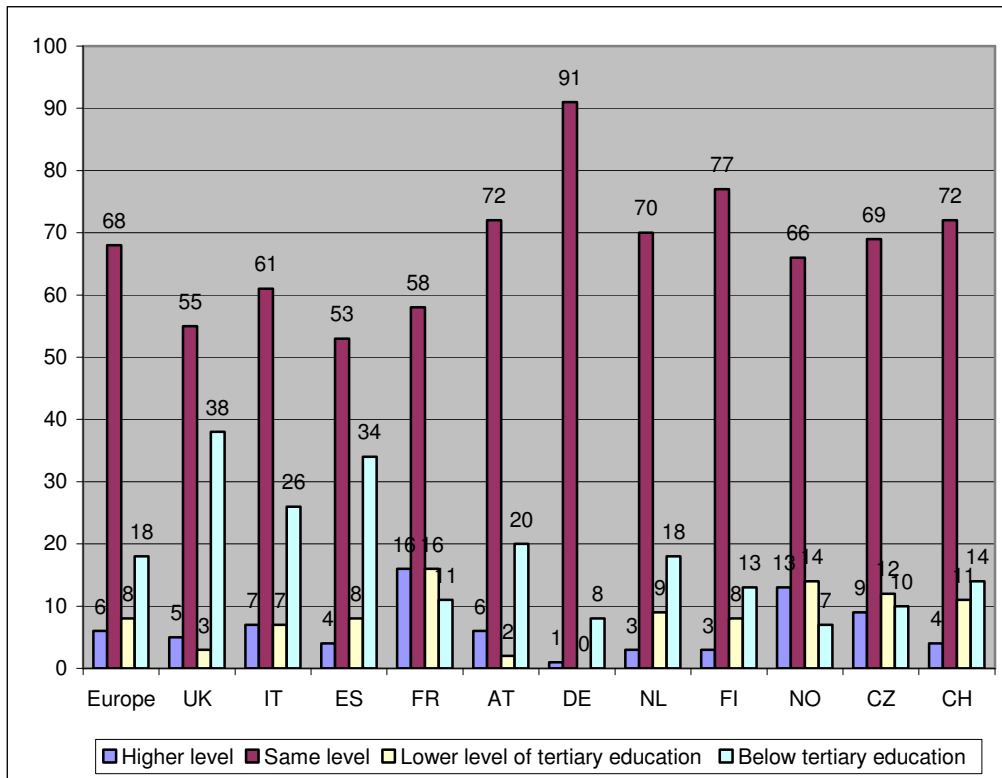


Table 1. Graduates' ratings of study programme as good basis for starting work, Europe and by country

Europe	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
3.6	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.5	3.6	3.7	4.2	3.6	3.6

Scale of answers from 1='not at all' to 5='to a very high extent'

Figure 2. Most appropriate field of study for first job, Europe and by country (%)

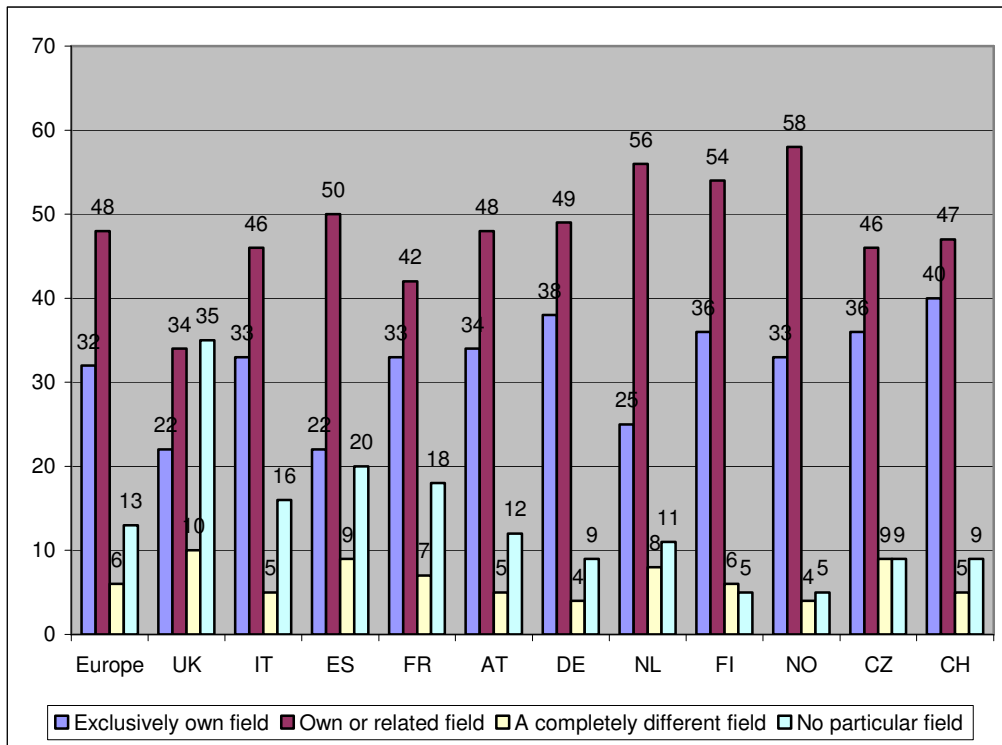


Figure 3. Utilisation and demand for knowledge and skills in first job, Europe and by country (%; responses 1 and 2)

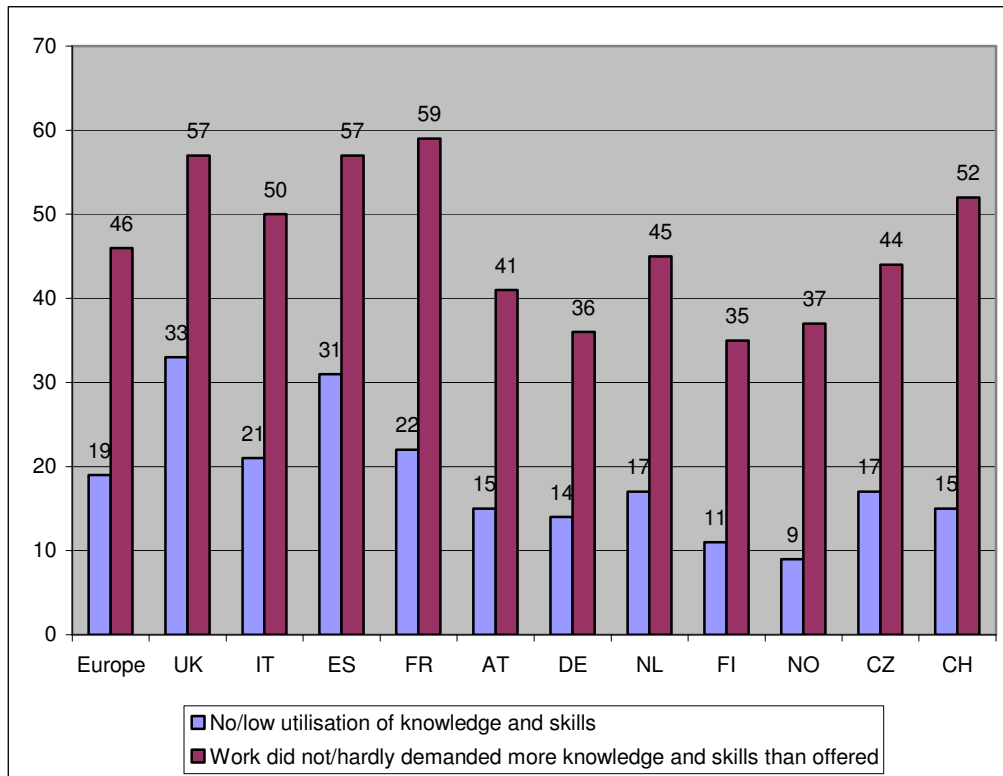


Figure 4. Level of education appropriate in current job relative to current level of education obtained, Europe and by country (%)

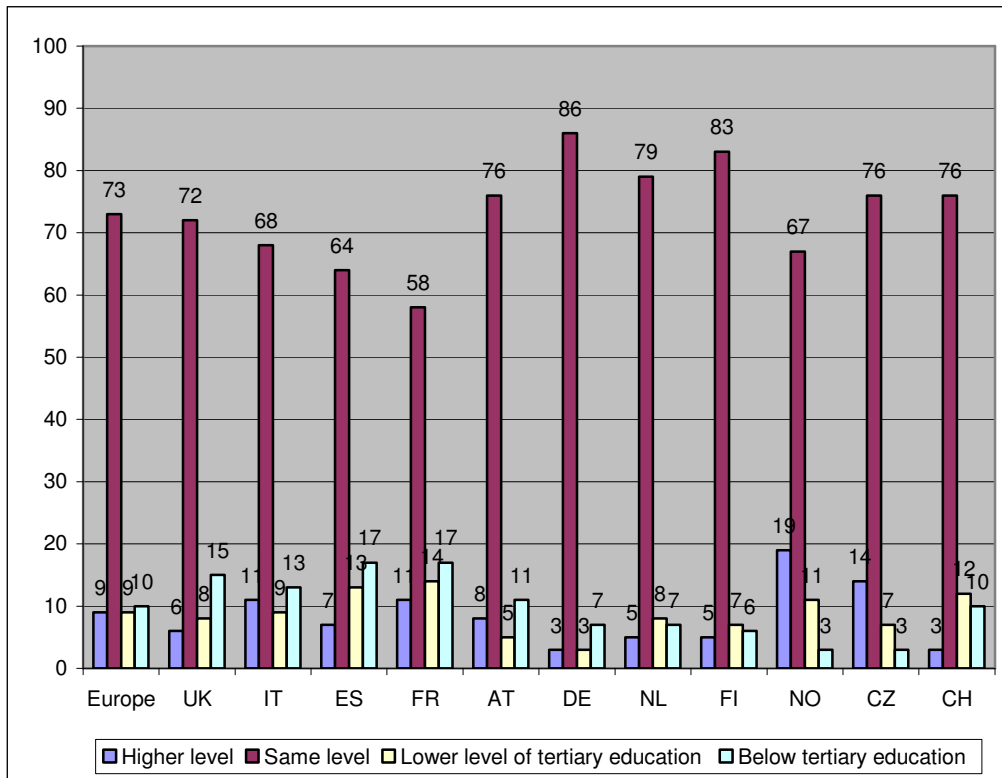


Figure 5. Most appropriate field of study for current job, Europe and by country (%)

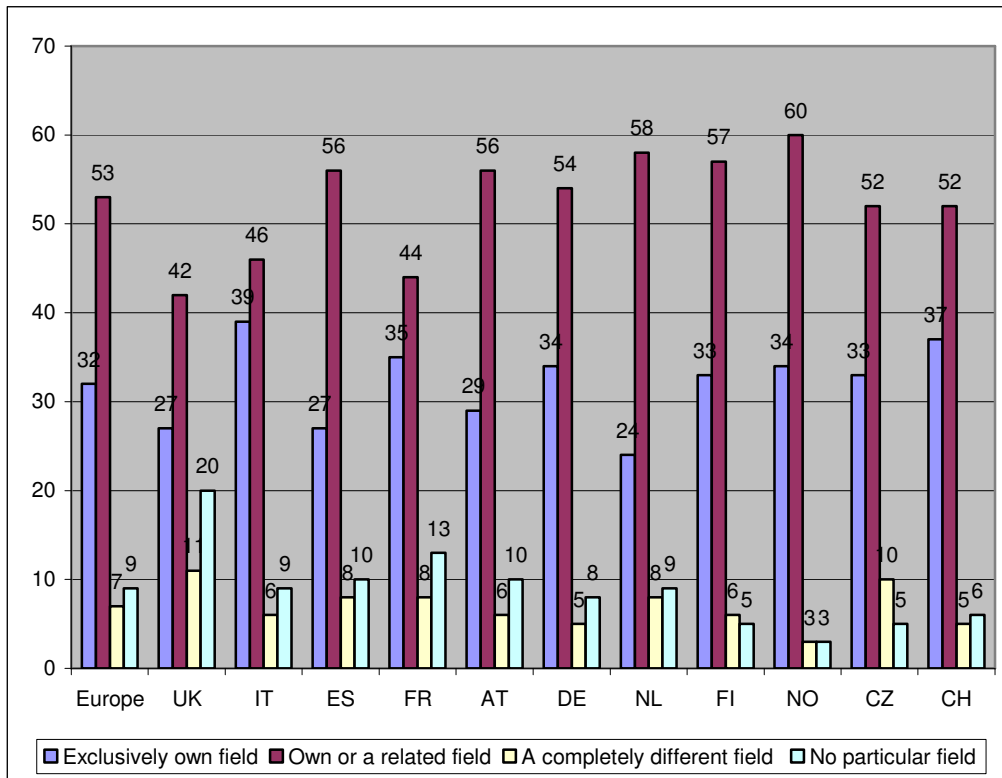


Table 2. Graduates who would choose the same study programme at the same institution, Europe and by country (%)

Europe	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
63	65	65	49	71	66	58	62	59	64	64	69

Figure 6. Extent of satisfaction with current work, Europe and by country (%)

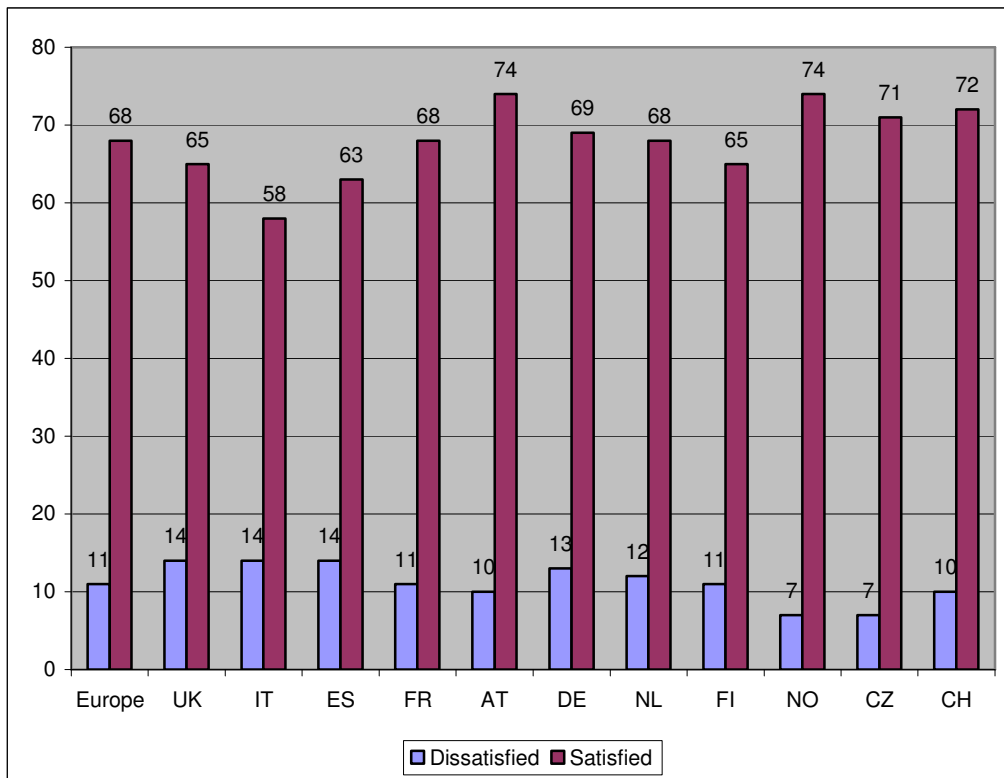


Figure 7. Job characteristics rank ordered by importance, and by applicability to current work, all graduates (%)

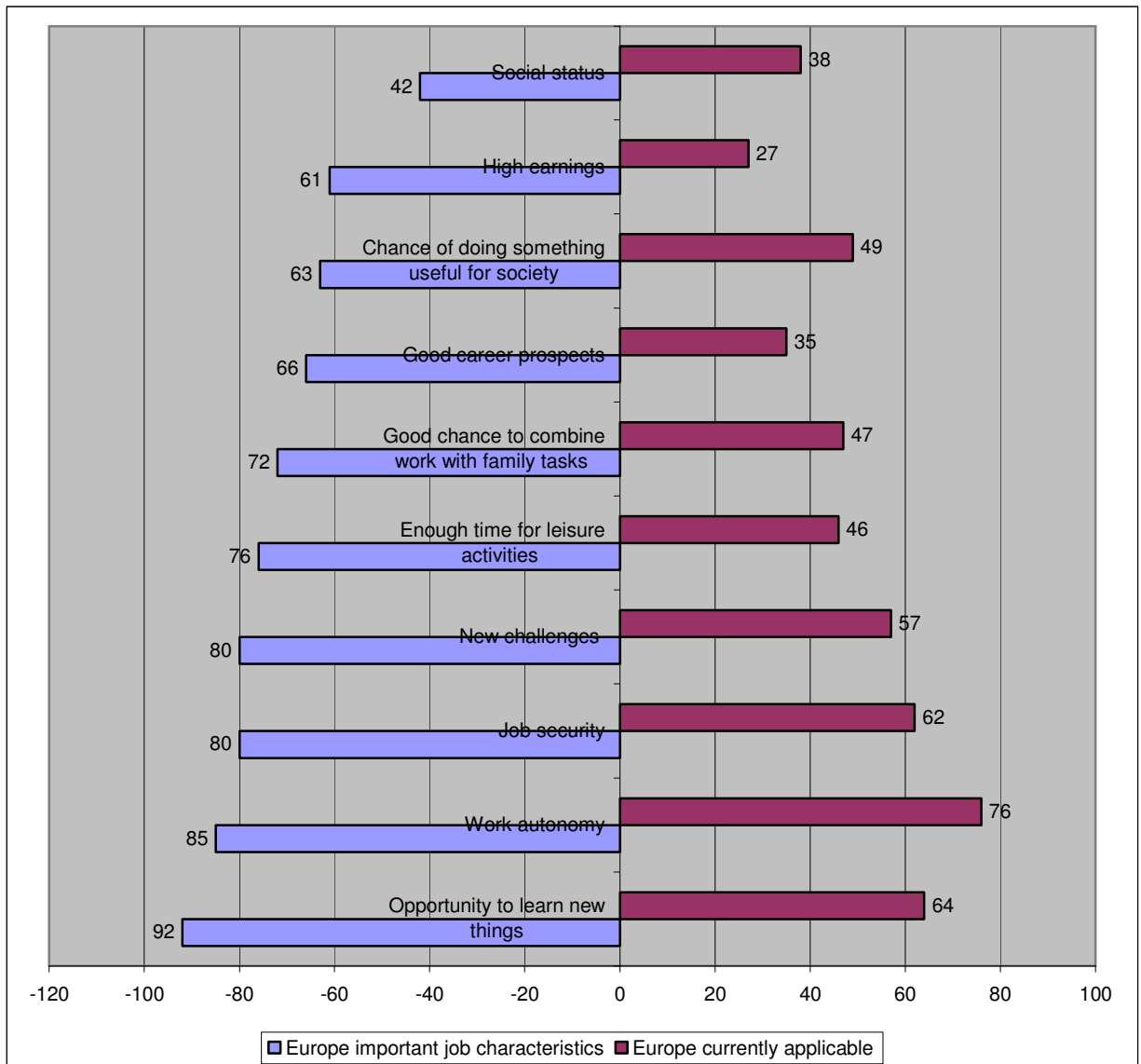


Table A. Job characteristics rank ordered by importance, and by applicability to current work, Europe and by country (%)

	Europe		UK		IT		ES		FR		AT		DE		NL		FI		NO		CZ		CH	
	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable	important job characteristics	currently applicable
Opportunity to learn new things	92	64	89	64	93	64	94	60	93	59	93	69	87	62	91	63	92	70	92	65	90	68	93	64
Work autonomy	85	76	70	60	85	61	85	66	87	75	97	90	94	90	73	65	87	71	84	82	86	85	93	86
Job security	80	62	79	66	84	57	94	61	72	57	75	58	81	57	74	65	85	61	83	70	82	70	70	59
New challenges	80	57	85	61	76	51	81	51	66	44	86	64	77	60	88	57	82	63	87	67	69	51	83	59
Enough time for leisure activities	76	46	79	48	74	42	88	47	71	49	72	46	63	38	80	54	88	52	78	50	72	40	76	44
Good chance to combine work with family tasks	72	47	45	30	82	46	89	46	83	54	66	45	63	42	66	52	84	56	77	57	77	44	63	41
Good career	66	35	78	51	77	38	89	45	66	30	59	28	46	20	64	34	56	25	52	30	86	53	55	26

prospects																								
Chance of doing something useful for society	63	49	63	48	73	44	76	45	71	55	62	49	52	46	59	49	50	43	62	62	63	51	62	47
High earnings	61	27	61	32	78	26	76	37	59	18	61	30	55	29	48	26	64	22	57	24	-	-	52	28
Social status	42	38	34	32	47	38	53	37	47	41	47	46	39	41	35	35	35	34	27	33	63	50	38	37

Question: Please indicate how important the following job characteristics are to you personally, and to what extent they actually apply to your current work situation. (Rated on a 5 point scale from 1= 'not at all' to 5= 'very important'.)