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# GRADUATE COMPETENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LABOUR MARKET: THE UK CASE

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**Abstract:** The paper compares the early employment experiences of graduates from the shorter UK bachelors degree with those from the somewhat longer masters programmes to be found in continental Europe. The UK graduates appear to be less prepared for entry to employment and to find their degrees to be less appropriate to that employment. However, many of the differences between UK and other European graduates in the labour market have largely disappeared five years after graduation. And there are many similarities in the perceptions of graduates from different countries about the competences required by employers. The paper sets these differences and similarities within the context of the different higher education and labour market traditions of the UK and the rest of Europe and raises questions about the consequences of greater labour mobility across Europe and the Bologna harmonisation of qualification structures.

**Key words:** Competences, graduate employment, qualifications, higher education, degree programmes, work preparation.

## 1 Introduction

Public funding of expanded higher education systems has in most countries its main justification in the belief that this is necessary to meet the requirements of the labour market. However, and notwithstanding this widespread emphasis on economic need, expansion in the numbers of graduates also encounters periodic cultural scepticism about whether the necessary jobs actually exist and whether the growing numbers of graduates in the working population are able to find suitable employment which meets either their own or society's needs. Thus, we encounter concerns about graduate unemployment and about whether graduates are in fact obtaining 'graduate jobs' or something less suited to their competencies and aspirations.

The concern about the 'suitability' of jobs is frequently matched by a concern about the 'suitability' of the graduates. Do graduates possess the knowledge and competencies that employers need? In the UK, many of the studies of graduate employment in recent decades have had as their prime focus questions about whether graduates obtain jobs, about the kinds of jobs they get, and whether they are competent to perform them (e.g. Purcell and Elias, 2004, Purcell et al, 2005).

The focus of this paper is less on *whether* graduates get jobs but on *why*. It is less about the characteristics of the jobs (wages, status, employment sector) and more about what it is that

graduates bring to them – their knowledge, competences and dispositions. And the focus is upon graduates from universities in the United Kingdom who have obtained employment in that country. Their experiences, however, will be compared and contrasted with those of graduates from other European countries. In doing so, it will draw heavily upon two separate EC funded surveys of graduates. One was a twelve country survey of graduates three years after their graduation in 1995 (Brennan et al, 2001, Schomburg and Teichler, 2006, Teichler, 2007) and the other is the more recent 'REFLEX' study based initially on an 11 country survey of graduates five years after their graduation in 2000<sup>1</sup> though with additional countries added subsequently.

In focusing on the UK case, we are of course reflecting our own contexts and origins. However, we believe that the UK case possesses a wider relevance in Europe at the present time. The reason is of course 'Bologna'. The process of harmonising structures and qualifications across European higher education initiated by the Bologna agreement is initiating changes across the continent with implications for universities, their students and for the future employers of those students. We are aware, for example, that in many parts of Europe there is some concern about whether the new three year bachelor qualification will meet either student or employer needs.

However, within the UK, Bologna has received scant attention. This is because, superficially at any rate, the Bologna model of a two stage bachelors and masters structure fits the British tradition and does not require radical change. It is what we are already familiar with. Insofar as there is discussion about qualification structures, it concerns whether students actually 'need' the three years to complete a bachelors degree and two-year or other fast-track alternatives are being given consideration in some quarters. (And we already have a two-year degree qualification in terms of the Foundation degree, a work-related vocational qualification though used by many students as a first phase of a longer higher education.)

The relative brevity of UK higher education for most students is, therefore, the starting point for this paper. (As well as the structural brevity, it is also worth noting that the majority of UK students complete their studies 'on time' and also that they seem

<sup>1</sup> (i) Careers after Higher Education – a European Research Study (CHEERS) was an EU funded study within the Targeted Socio-Economic Research Programme. (ii) The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society (the REFLEX project), an EU 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme.

to spend fewer hours per week on their studies than their continental neighbours, (Brennan et al, 2009)). If UK students study 'less', does it follow that they know 'less' and can do 'less' when they enter employment?

## **2 Some key features of higher education in the UK and its relationship to employment**

We have already noted the tradition of the three year bachelor degree as the standard qualification for the majority of students (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland though not in Scotland). The curriculum content of such degrees has developed over recent decades, moving from a disciplinary emphasis on academic study of a single subject (the traditional 'single honours' degree) to more thematic and interdisciplinary degrees, often claiming employment relevance without necessarily constituting a formal professional entry qualification. (Some vocational degree programmes in areas such as medicine and engineering have always been and continue to be over a longer duration.) But a characteristic of the UK bachelors degree is that although there is increasing emphasis on employment preparation, the employment destination is relatively open for many students. There is a much 'looser fit' between qualification and employment than is typical in many other countries (Brennan, 2008).

A separate but related feature of the UK system lies in the rather steep status hierarchy of its institutions, constituting a strong example of what Teichler has referred to as 'vertical differentiation' (Teichler, 2006). A consequence of this is that a student's employment prospects may be more affected by 'where' he or she studies than by 'what' has been studied. And because employers are consequently unable to assume a common knowledge base among their graduate recruits, there may therefore be more emphasis upon 'on-the-job' training and induction within employment.

We will consider shortly how these features affect the preparedness of UK graduates to enter the labour market. But before doing so it is perhaps worth referring to one of the claimed virtues of the UK system, namely the reasonably high degree of flexibility in the labour market. Since entry requirements for a lot of graduate jobs are not rigid in terms of the subjects studied, this gives more choice to both graduates and to employers in recruitment decisions. It does, however, raise questions about the relevance of what has been learned in higher education to job requirements once in employment.

## **3 The importance of tradition**

While the economic importance attached to higher education and its graduates is today given 'global' attention through notions of knowledge societies and economies, meanings and practices associated with graduate employment also reflect local and

cultural traditions and histories. 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 has referred to them as the 'research', the 'training' and the 'personality' models (Gellert, 1993). 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 today. Thus, then and now, professional training at a Grande Ecole provides entry to French elites far more effectively than does going to university. Whereas in England (though not necessarily all of the UK) it is the 'character formation' or 'liberal education' provided by the 'collegiate ideal of education' (Halsey, 1961) at a few elite universities that has been prized and provides a similar route to elite entry. In Germany, education through research was seen as central to the Humboldtian tradition whereas in England research was not even a necessary attribute of university life<sup>2</sup>.

Of course today research, professional training and personality development are features of all higher education systems. But there remain differences in emphasis. It is interesting that there has not been as much debate about 'employability' and 'graduate skills' in continental Europe as in the UK. One explanation is that in the UK it has been necessary to compensate for the historical 'character formation' tradition of higher education (Brennan, 2008). As higher education has expanded, consuming ever more public funds, it has been forced to justify itself in terms of economic pay-off. This was perhaps more difficult to do for the 'personality' focused English model than for many of its European counterparts.

## **4 Why graduates get jobs**

The implications of the 'knowledge economy' and the 'need' for greater numbers of graduates are that graduates get jobs 'because they are graduates', i.e. because of the content and level of knowledge they acquired in higher education and which was certificated through the award of a degree. At best, this is only a partial answer and particularly so for graduates from the UK.

Drawing on the recent European graduate survey (REFLEX), we can see that a substantial proportion of UK graduates did not believe that their initial graduate employment required education to degree level. The 38 per cent of graduates who held this belief is a much higher figure than the average for other European graduates (18 per cent) and is higher than the figure for any of the other ten countries that took part in the survey (Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> The Humboldtian research tradition reached the UK circuitously via its initial export from Germany to the US.

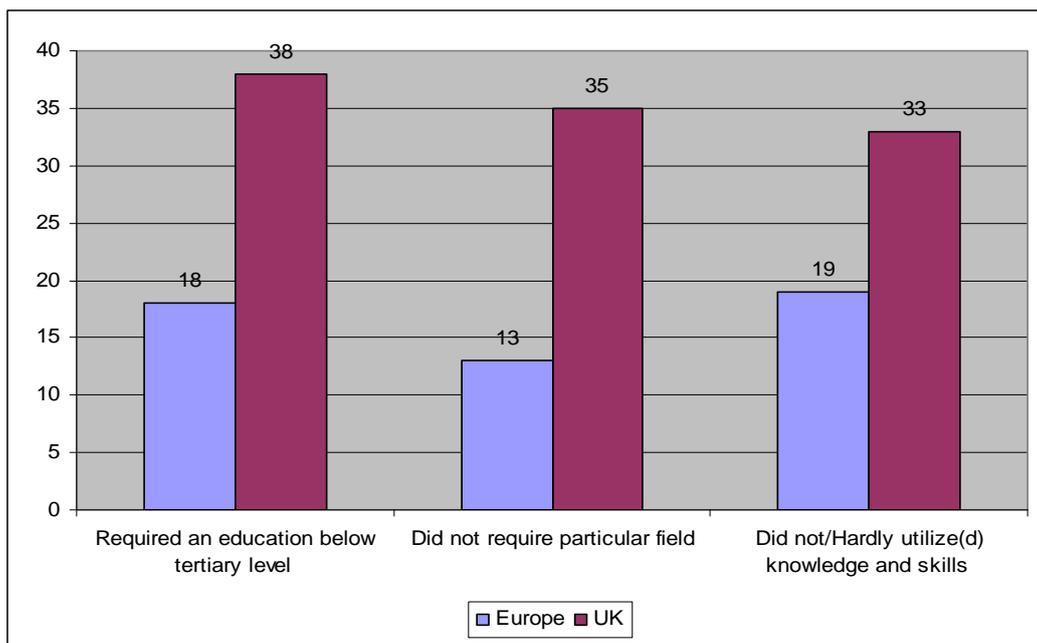


Figure 1: The relationship between higher education and the first job after graduation (%)

If the level of education required by the job was often less than the level of education which the graduates possessed, the content of that education was also often not 'required' by the job. As also illustrated in Figure 1, 35 per cent of UK graduates thought that their first jobs did not require a particular field of study. And again we see a huge difference with the rest of Europe where only 13 per cent of graduates thought the same way. (The next highest figure to the UK 35 per cent was Spain with 20 per cent of graduates holding this view.) In terms of the utilisation of knowledge and skills acquired in higher education, in comparison with the rest of Europe, UK graduates were nearly twice as likely to believe that their first jobs after graduation had not utilised their higher education (33 per cent against 19 per cent across the rest of Europe).

In making comparisons of this sort, it is important to remember and to emphasise that a clear majority of UK graduates (in common with European graduates as a whole) believed that their first graduate jobs *did* require a tertiary level education, *did* require study in a particular field, and *did* utilise the graduate's knowledge and skills acquired in higher education. But UK graduates were much less likely to believe these things than their European counterparts.

In exploring the reasons for and the consequences of these relatively weak relationships between courses studied and subsequent employment, it is of course necessary to consider both supply and demand factors. Is the relationship a function of higher education traditions and their implications for the supply of new graduate labour? Or is it more a function of the

characteristics of employer demand for new labour, perhaps reflecting a greater concern with factors such as 'who you are' rather than 'what you know'. Supply and demand factors are of course intimately connected. In particular, employers must adapt their recruitment practices to the characteristics of the supply of new graduates from universities. And, in the specific UK context, debates about the employment readiness of graduates have tended to emphasise the more generic skills and competencies that might be expected of graduates irrespective of what they have studied.

A first job is of course just that. The REFLEX survey also asked graduates to report on the level of education required by their current jobs, i.e. the jobs held five years after their graduation. Here (Figure 2) we can see that for UK graduates, the proportions in 'sub-graduate' level employment had dropped (from 38 per cent to 28 per cent) and, moreover, it was only one per cent higher than the European average (27 per cent). Although it must also be noted that this European average hides some rather large differences between individual countries.

These figures could suggest a) that there is a somewhat different division of labour between higher education and employers in the UK and the rest of Europe in preparing and training students for working life (with UK employers taking a greater share of the responsibility), and b) that there may be greater flexibility in the UK graduate labour market arising from the lower specificity of the education/training required by employers. In other words, there is still some evidence of the continued existence of the UK tradition of a 'broad general education' as part of a first degree

followed by more professional education provided by employers themselves or by postgraduate courses or by some combination thereof. And this contrasts with the traditions of more professional, occupation-linked higher education courses found in some other European countries.

If these figures suggest that UK graduates take less employment-related knowledge, skill and competence into the labour market, there is also evidence to suggest that UK employers require less of their graduate entrants. Thus, UK graduates were more likely than other graduates to believe that they were ‘not utilising their knowledge and skills in their first job’ (31 per cent against 18 per cent), were slightly less likely to believe that their work ‘demanded more knowledge and skills than one could offer’ (22 per cent against 27 per cent), and far more likely to believe that a much lower level of education would be most appropriate for their current work (36 per cent against 17 per cent). In other

words, they were suggesting that they might be rather ‘overqualified’ rather than underqualified for the jobs they were getting.

Not only does this suggest that the lower amounts and levels of higher education of UK graduates, plus its less professional focus, do not appear to present a problem for UK employers, it suggests that these could be lowered even further without detriment to the apparently ‘low-skill’ needs of many UK employers. To complete the picture, we find that UK graduates are more likely than other graduates to feel that their work is being closely monitored by their superiors (48 per cent against 41 per cent) and less likely to believe that they have a lot of autonomy in their work situations (59 per cent against 76 per cent). They are also less likely to believe that their work colleagues rely on them for ‘authoritative advice’ (51 per cent against 61 per cent), perhaps because they have less to give?

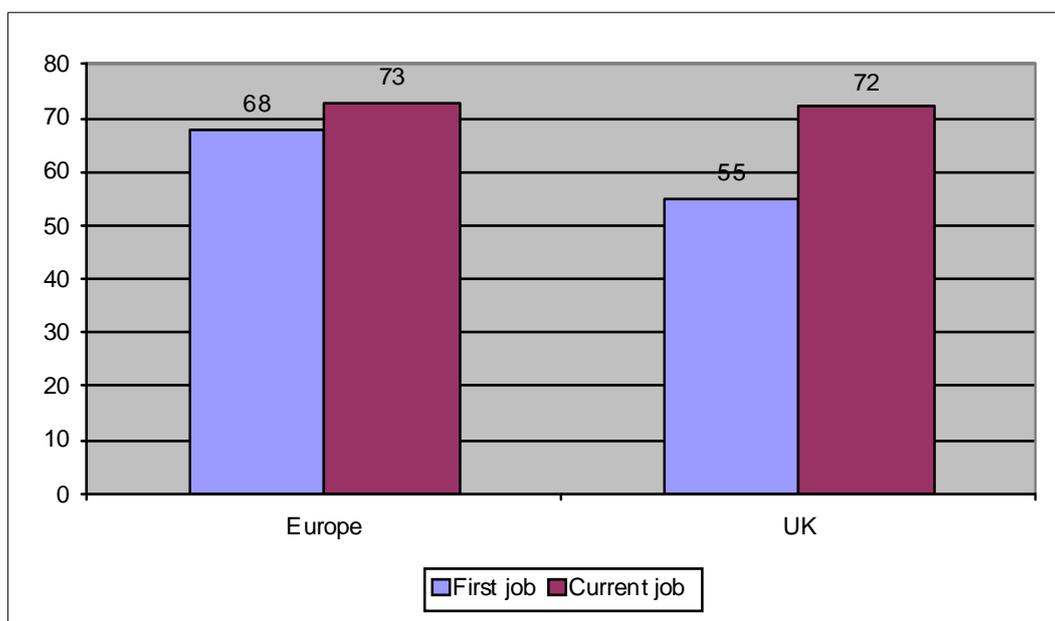


Figure 2: Graduates who felt the level of education was appropriate for first and current job (%)

The earlier European study (CHEERS) shows a similar but more complex picture and one in which differences between the UK and other European countries again stand out. In this study, we again note a convergence, this time four years after graduation, between the UK and other European graduates with, here, a slightly higher proportion of UK graduates than the European average believing that their current work was ‘completely appropriate to their level of education’, with 40 per cent of UK graduates believing this against a European average of 36 per cent (Figure 3). The latter figure again hides some important country differences with, for example, only 19 per cent of Italian

graduates feeling their work was appropriate to their education against 55 per cent of Norwegian graduates who felt this way.

However, in answer to a rather different question, concerning the usefulness of their degree courses as preparation for their current jobs four years after graduation, only 49 per cent of UK graduates rated this highly against 61 per cent of European graduates as a whole. Again, country differences can be discerned with the European average figure hiding a high of 76 per cent among Swedish graduates and a low of 41 per cent among French graduates.

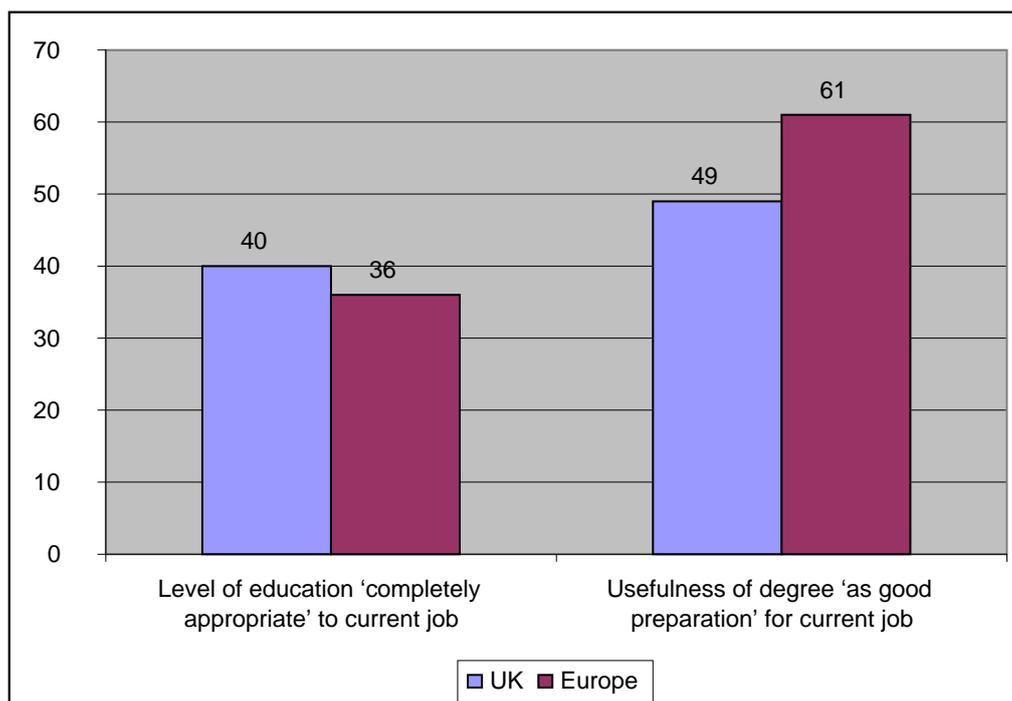


Figure 3: Relationship between higher education and current employment four years after graduation ('CHEERS' data) (%)

We can in part account for the discrepancies between the two sets of figures by making the distinction between the 'job' and the graduate's 'preparedness' to undertake that job. The types and levels of jobs available to graduates will reflect a whole range of factors – not least the nature and performance of the national economy at the time of the student's graduation – whereas the graduate's preparedness to perform the job will reflect the nature of the education and training experienced by the graduate, not just within higher education of course, but from a whole range of experiences – work-based and other – which will have been obtained before, during and after higher education. It is in this latter respect that other data indicate differences between the UK and other European countries. Thus, only 56 per cent of UK graduates compared with 81 per cent of European graduates regarded their field of study as the 'most appropriate' to their current work four years after graduation and only 39 per cent of UK against 50 per cent of European graduates believed that their higher education was a good basis for performing their current work tasks (Schomburg and Teichler, 2006).

We might summarise the differences between UK and other European graduates rather provocatively as being (i) 'underqualified' in comparison to their continental counterparts, (ii) 'overqualified' (in terms of perceived employers' requirements) for the jobs they get, and (iii) more closely supervised by their employers. On the other hand, they may be more flexible, less tied to particular jobs or fields of employment and possessing rather more by way of generic and transferable skills. (We must note, however, that surveys of employers tend

to come up with a rather different views about the employment-readiness of UK graduates, e.g. Hobsons, 2006.)

As we have noted, higher education helps to *prepare* new entrants for the labour market. But it also helps employers to *select* new entrants to the labour market. Within the UK, competitive entry to a steep hierarchy of higher education institutions helps employers to select – employers seeking the 'best' graduates tend to assume that they are concentrated in a limited number of 'top' universities. Thus, 'screening' may be more important than 'human capital' theories to explaining the relationship between higher education and the labour market in the UK.

All of this suggests a somewhat different division of labour between higher education and employers in the UK than in other European countries with employers taking greater responsibility for initial professional education and training. Higher education provides the raw material for that training by identifying and selecting the 'most able' and providing them with a strong education foundation on which subsequent work-related training can be built.

## 5 Are UK graduates 'less competent' than those in other European countries?

In the above, we have described differences between UK and other European graduates' views on the relationship between their higher education and current employment. We have also suggested that though UK graduates may be both 'underqualified' and 'overqualified', they may be more flexible,

less tied to particular jobs and may possess more generic and transferable skills. In fact, within modern economies there is an expectation that highly qualified workers will both have specialised knowledge and skills to undertake specific professional roles *and* will be sufficiently flexible to adapt to new challenges in work situations not necessarily related to their field of study.

But regardless of the possession of such knowledge and skills, a further question is whether these are being put to good use in graduates' current jobs. The REFLEX study provides some data

on this, from graduates' perspectives. In broad brush terms, two thirds or more graduates considered they were using their knowledge and skills to a large extent in their current work (five years after graduation) – and UK graduates were no different in this respect. Of course, such 'usage' is related to what graduates' current jobs entail, and what competences are required in these jobs. Graduates were asked to indicate the extent to which some nineteen competences were required in their current jobs. In Table 1 below we show, for each of the competences the proportion of graduates indicating it was highly required.

Table 1: Graduates' perceptions of highly required competences, rank ordered by overall, and detailed by country (%)

	All	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
Ability to use time efficiently	81	87	81	80	81	86	87	80	84	75	82	76
Ability to perform well under pressure	80	84	79	73	71	88	89	77	81	78	81	81
Mastery of your own field or discipline	78	73	81	71	72	88	86	78	70	77	84	76
Ability to work productively with others	77	85	80	75	73	82	81	78	78	69	78	75
Ability to rapidly acquire new knowledge	76	70	78	71	69	82	82	68	79	64	86	71
Ability to coordinate activities	76	80	75	73	68	84	82	71	75	71	82	73
Ability to make your meaning clear to others	76	82	71	81	81	72	73	78	77	81	78	65
Ability to use computers and the internet	76	75	78	70	60	84	80	66	81	64	88	76
Ability to write reports, memos or documents	71	69	75	68	60	74	73	60	64	68	80	70
Ability to come up with new ideas and solutions	70	64	72	71	60	73	74	71	73	61	74	66
Analytical thinking	69	65	73	58	73	76	73	66	63	49	77	73
Willingness to question your own and others' ideas	65	64	69	58	56	61	64	68	64	59	73	60
Ability to negotiate effectively	60	58	68	56	45	64	61	51	60	45	73	54
Ability to mobilise the capacities of others	60	61	68	58	58	63	64	65	62	58	57	53
Ability to present products, ideas or reports to an audience	59	52	65	56	55	68	66	51	58	49	63	59
Ability to assert your authority	58	62	64	61	60	57	62	52	47	55	66	49
Alertness to new opportunities	57	56	70	49	36	71	67	64	65	59	50	54
Knowledge of other fields or disciplines	45	37	47	41	37	53	51	39	43	35	55	40
Ability to write and speak in a foreign language	43	9	46	31	29	52	41	31	54	30	56	52

Source: Little, Braun and Tang, 2008, Table 1

As we see, over three quarters of graduates rated the following competences as highly required in their current job:

- Ability to use time efficiently, to perform well under pressure;

- Ability to work productively with others, to coordinate activities and make your meaning clear to others;
- Mastery of own field and ability to rapidly acquire new knowledge;
- Ability to use computers and the internet.

Such requirements lend some weight to the rhetoric of ‘flexible professionals’: good specialist knowledge and the ability to acquire new knowledge (which could be construed as being adaptable in terms of continually updating one’s own knowledge), a professional attitude to mobilising their own capabilities (in terms of using time efficiently and performing well under pressure) and mobilising the capacity of others (in terms of working productively with others, coordinating activities, making your meaning clear to others) were all rated highly by a large majority of the graduates as requirements of their current job.

Other competences rated as highly required by a majority (60 per cent or more) of graduates were:

- Analytical thinking, ability to come up with new ideas, willingness to question your own and others’ ideas;
- Ability to mobilise the capacity of others and to negotiate effectively;
- Ability to write reports, memos or documents.

Such competences can be seen as characterising aspects of innovation and knowledge management (for example, ability to come up with new ideas, willingness to question your own and others’ ideas) and mobilising others. Thus it seems that graduates need a range of general and arguably transferable skills. But there seemed to be less of a requirement to assert authority and to be a generalist, in terms of having knowledge of other fields or disciplines (with less than half of the graduates rating this requirement highly).

There were only three competences which UK graduates rated as being required in their current work *to a greater extent* than the rest of the sample (a five-percentage-point difference in those rating

them highly): using time efficiently, working productively with others and making your meaning clear to others.

On the other hand, lower levels of competence requirement than the whole sample (again based on a five-percentage-point difference in rating) were identified by UK graduates for:

- Mastery of own field, rapidly acquiring new knowledge, knowledge of other fields;
- Coming up with new ideas and solutions;
- Presenting products, ideas or reports to an audience;
- Foreign language competence.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the above, though it would seem that UK graduates’ current job requirements tended to emphasise aspects of mobilisation of resources (using time efficiently, working productively with others, making meaning clear to others) more than aspects of professional expertise (in terms of subject knowledge per se). Such findings might suggest that UK employers require a rather different set of competences from their graduate employees than employers in other European countries, one which fits the more generalist traditions and more open relationships between credentials and employment in the UK labour market.

But alongside questions of competences required in graduates’ current jobs, there is a further issue of whether the graduates considered they possessed the required competences. Although the majority considered their current job did not need more knowledge and skills than they could offer, around a quarter did feel their jobs required much more knowledge and skills than they possessed. Table 2 below lists the ten most common deficits in competences, as perceived by the graduates.

Table 2: Ten most common deficits in competences, overall and for UK, France, Germany

All	UK	France	Germany
1 Using time efficiently	1 Using time efficiently	1 Asserting authority	1 Using time efficiently
2 Asserting authority	2 Mastery of own discipline	2 Mastery of own discipline	2 Asserting authority
3 Negotiating	3 Asserting authority	3 Making meaning clear to others	3 Negotiating
4 Mastery of own discipline	4 Negotiating	4 Using time efficiently	4 Presenting products, ideas, reports
5 Presenting products, ideas, reports	5 Making meaning clear	5 Negotiating	5 Foreign language competence
6 Mobilising others	6 Presenting products, ideas, reports	6 Foreign language competence	6 Mobilising others
7 Making meaning clear	7 Mobilising others	7 Mobilising others	7 Making meaning clear
8 Foreign language competence	8 Knowledge of other disciplines	8 Presenting products, ideas, reports	8 Alertness to new opportunities
9 Knowledge of other disciplines	9 Alertness to new opportunities	9 Coming up with ideas and solutions	9 Mastery of own discipline
10 Alertness to new opportunities	10 Coming up with ideas and solutions	10 Working with others	10 Knowledge of other disciplines

Source: Little, Braun and Tang, 2008, Table 6

The biggest deficit for graduates overall was in using time efficiently (affecting 15 per cent of all graduates) and only 9 per cent of all graduates perceived a deficit in being alert to new opportunities. There was little difference in the lists of top ten deficits between the overall sample and the UK. Although graduates perceiving deficits represented only a minority of the graduates overall, certain aspects of professional expertise (in the

shape of asserting authority and mastery of own discipline) were among these competence deficits.

On the other hand, rather larger proportions of graduates considered they had more by way of certain competences than were currently required in their jobs. Table 3 below provides the detail.

Table 3: Ten most common surpluses in competences, overall and for UK, France and Germany

All	UK	France	Germany
1 Performing well under pressure	1 Performing well under pressure	1 Performing well under pressure	1 Performing well under pressure
2 Foreign language competence	2 Foreign language competence	2 Use of computers and the internet	2 Foreign language competence
3 Questioning ideas	3 Writing reports, memos, documents	3 Foreign language competence	3 Questioning ideas
4 Alertness to new opportunities	4 Questioning ideas	4 Alertness to new opportunities	4 Knowledge of other disciplines
5 Use of computers and the internet	5/6 Use of computers and the internet; Presenting products, ideas, reports	5 Knowledge of other disciplines	5 Presenting products, ideas, reports
6 Knowledge of other disciplines	7/8 Alertness to new opportunities; Knowledge of other disciplines	6 Acquiring new knowledge	6 Use of computers and the internet
7 Presenting products, ideas, reports	8 Writing reports, memos, documents	7 Writing reports, memos, documents	7 Mobilising others
8 Writing reports, memos, documents	9 Acquiring new knowledge	8 Questioning ideas	8 Negotiating effectively
9 Acquiring new knowledge	10 Coming up with ideas and solutions	9 Coming up with ideas and solutions	9 Writing reports, memos, documents
10 Coming up with ideas and solutions		10 Presenting products, ideas, reports	10 Asserting authority

Source: Little, Braun and Tang, 2008, Table 5

There were no differences between the top ten lists of surpluses for graduates overall, and graduates in the UK.

The proportion of graduates overall perceiving surpluses was quite large with the main surpluses, namely capacity to perform well under pressure, and foreign language competence being identified by almost a third of all graduates. Additionally, around a fifth of all graduates perceived surpluses relating to:

- Innovation and knowledge management (questioning ideas, alertness to new opportunities, use of computer and the internet);
- Functional flexibility (knowledge of other disciplines, acquiring new knowledge);
- Communication capabilities (writing reports, presenting products, ideas, reports).

We have previously suggested that, in comparison with European graduates overall, UK graduates might be rather ‘overqualified’ for their jobs. But the above description of competence deficits and surpluses suggests that it may not only be UK graduates who are ‘overqualified’ and by implication, underused. Rather, the above data seems to suggest that for a fifth (or more) of graduates overall, employers are not necessarily tapping in to the graduates’ full range of capabilities., whether

these were acquired in the longer masters programmes common in continental Europe or the shorter bachelors programmes in the UK.

## 6 Different routes or different destinations?

As we have seen above, there are large differences between UK graduates and those of other European countries in their preparedness for their first jobs after graduation and in their perceptions of its appropriateness. The latter differences have largely disappeared five years on while the former differences remain. How do we account for these differences and why do some of them disappear?

Taking the first of the above questions for the moment, it may be that the differences reflect the effects of some of the deep-rooted traditions and characteristics of UK education and society pointed to by writers such as Gellert (1993). Thus, the UK traditions of a ‘broad liberal education’ imply a somewhat looser relationship between that education and subsequent employment requirements. Within such a tradition, employers may seek to recruit graduates for the ‘kinds of people they are’ rather than for the ‘knowledge and skills they possess’. Of course, where the focus is the former, it raises the question of whether the people

characteristics have been formed during or prior to higher education, in other words whether higher education has performed a 'socialisation' or a 'screening' function. The two are not mutually exclusive.

All of this suggests that UK universities are playing a smaller role in the preparation of their students for entry and performance in the labour market. There is some evidence to support this view. UK graduates were more likely to experience an initial formal training period from their employer when they obtained a job (23 per cent in the UK compared with 15 per cent in Europe) and such periods tended to be longer (11.3 months compared with 8 months in Europe).

We might characterise the differences in routes to employment taken by UK and other European students and graduates as being between a) a two phase sequence of a relatively short phase of higher education followed by a phase of work-related education and training provided by both employers and educational institutions in the UK, and b) a considerably longer single phase of education and training in Europe which, although higher education based, is likely to contain substantial periods of work placements and internships. Thus, by their late twenties, UK graduates may not be too dissimilar from other European graduates in terms of the levels of jobs they have obtained although their competence to perform those jobs may owe less to higher education than would be the case for their European counterparts.

## 7 Conclusions

Most graduates obtain good jobs (notwithstanding periodic media scares to the contrary). Most of these jobs appear to be appropriate to the level and content of education obtained by the graduate. This appears to be true across Europe. But UK graduates are less likely to use their knowledge and skills from higher education and appear to need greater supervision and training from their employers during their first few years in the labour market. They are also on average likely to be significantly younger.

These and other differences in the way people are prepared for jobs in the 'knowledge economies' of different European countries raise a number of questions. Are the differences related to distinctive features of the economies of different European countries, for example the balance between mainly manufacturing and mainly service economies? To what extent do they reflect different social and educational traditions and cultures of these countries? And do the differences have consequences? Is one model superior to the other?

The looser fit between higher education and the labour market in the UK may be advantageous in terms of allowing greater flexibility and adaptability to changing labour market

requirements. It may reduce the dangers of both shortages and surpluses of particular kinds of graduates. On the other hand, there may be a cost to employers of the UK model in that they may need to invest more time in the education and training of their graduate recruits than would be necessary for their European competitors. For the latter, higher education has done more of the job for them. Whether it has done a 'better' job than they could do themselves is another matter. And which has done a 'better' job for the long-term labour market needs of the economy and the long-term career needs of the graduate is a question which only long-term experience, and possibly, further research will answer.

Data on graduate employment across Europe produces some contradictions. As we have seen, graduates from the shorter bachelors programmes which are traditional within UK universities are more likely to feel ill-prepared for their employment after graduation and more likely to find their employment inappropriate to their qualifications. Yet, the UK graduates did not differ significantly from other European graduates in their perception of the competencies required of them and the extent to which they were possessed. We might surmise that there is an inevitable element of accommodation by employers and universities to the labour market traditions of their host countries. Whether greater labour mobility between countries and attempts at harmonising qualification structures will upset existing forms of accommodation is something that remains to be seen.

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