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## Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning


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## Proposal

**Title: Learning for employability: Integrating employability into professional bachelor programmes and quality assurance in four higher education systems**

**Abstract (150 words max):**

The paper reports on a comparative study, conducted in 2013-14, of four higher education systems (the Netherlands, Flanders, North Rhine-Westphalia and Ireland), which aimed to find out how higher education institutions integrate learning for employability into professional bachelor programmes in three different knowledge areas (mechanical engineering, social work and tourism), and how external quality assurance attended to employability aspects. Case studies of 24 selected, well-performing study programmes identified good practices as well as commonly-used elements and strategies, organised throughout the whole education cycle of input-process-results (output) and its quality assurance. Findings included that the studied professional bachelor programmes give sufficient attention to learning for employability, but that ways to do so differ by country and by field. Attention for employability differed across quality assurance systems as well.

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

### 1 Introduction and methodology

Employability of its graduates is perhaps the ultimate test of any professionally-oriented bachelor programme. How do study programmes that are performing well in terms of employability connect to the professional field? Their good practices may inform the development of employability-related practices in study programmes and in may inform quality assurance systems in developing effective criteria and procedures. We made an explorative, international comparative study, to gain insight into realisation, organisation and securing the connection between professional orientated bachelor programmes and the labour market. This paper reflects on the findings reported in the studyôs full-report by Kolster & Westerheijden (2014).

*Professional bachelor's programmes* are defined as first cycle study programmes, on EQF-level 6, that educate students to independently perform a profession.

*Employability* describes the degree to which people are trained and educated to utilize their capacities, with which they can attain and secure employment. Employability has been discussed in academic literature since five decades (Yorke, 2006), and continues to become more relevant by the year (Glass, 2013). Employability also is a reflection of the context or environment and the employers, and of the work environment they created (i.e. the extent to which personal development and learning are stimulated and facilitated). However, most factors with respect to employability relate to the individual. Individual factors associated with employability are competences, attitudes and availability (Van der Heijden, 2005). This individual perspective can also be found in the employability definition by Yorke (2006 p. 8): employability is ôa set of achievementsô skills, understandings and personal attributesô that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations,

which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economyô Our research project is not about defining and testing the term ôemployabilityô it rather aims to learn -how the concept is used in professionally-oriented higher education in different countries. Yorkeôs ôachievementsô might be equated to intended learning outcomes, which ôdescribe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learningô (European Communities, 2009 p. 13). Moreover, ôlearning outcomes are verifiable statements of what learners who have obtained a particular qualification, or completed a programme or its components, are expected to know, understand and be able to do. As such they emphasise the link between teaching, learning and assessmentô (ibid.). Learning outcomes may be formulated by internal and external stakeholders (e.g. study programme representatives and professional field advisory boards). The required learning outcomes including the competences for a profession can be expressed in an ôemployability skills frameworkô(Precision Consultancy, 2007).

Four higher education systems were selected: the Netherlands, Flanders, North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany), and Ireland.[1] These four higher education systems all have an extensive and long-established professional bachelorôs education sector separate from ôtraditionalô research universities. At the same time, these systems hold enough variation to make a comparison interesting (McQuade & Maguire, 2005; Schomburg & Teichler, 2011; de Weert, 2011).

In Flanders, 20 university colleges enrol just under half of all students entering the system in their professional bachelor programmes, which allow graduates to enter the labour market after completion of a three-year study (180 ECTS). Gaining practical work experience is an integrated part of the study programmes.

In the Netherlands, the four-year (240 ECTS) bachelor programmes in the 39 publicly-funded universities of applied sciences attract around 2/3 of all entering students. The third year usually consists of internships.

In Germany, of the total six (180 ECTS) or seven (210 ECTS) semesters of first-cycle study programmes in universities of applied sciences, students normally spend one or two semesters in internships. Overall, Germanyôs 216 universities of applied sciences enrol 1/3 of students annually; in North Rhine-Westphalia, the most populous state, there are around 35 universities of applied sciences (Kaulisch & Huisman, 2007).

Ireland, finally, has 14 institutes of technology, enrolling around 40% of all students. There are two types of first cycle degrees. Ordinary bachelor degrees take three years (180 ECTS). Honours bachelor degrees can be completed in three or four years (180ï 240 ECTS). Education offered by the institutes of technology is referred to as higher education and training programmes with a vocational orientation.

Our study focuses on three distinct knowledge domains: mechanical engineering, social work, and tourism, covering a range of hard and soft study areas, enrolling large numbers of students, and showing diversity in the ownership (public/private) and size of companies employing the graduates.

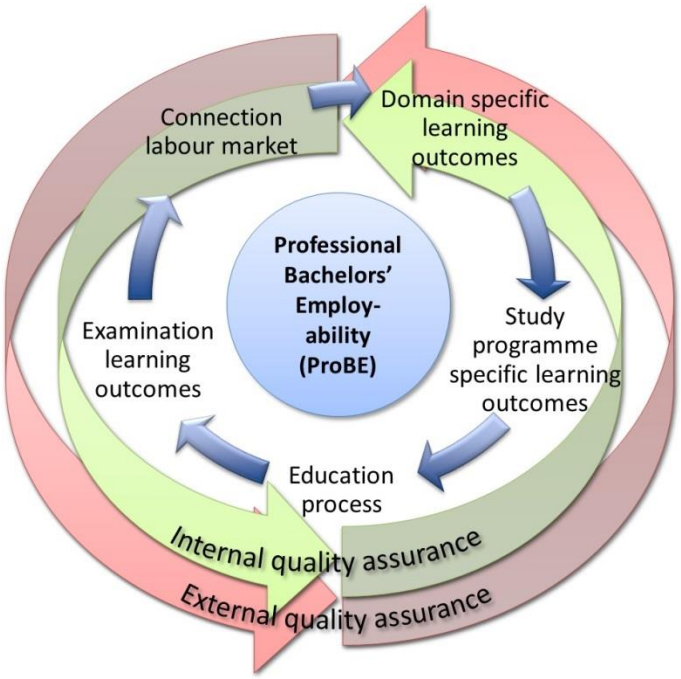
Two study programmes were selected for each domain in each country. Selection of the study programmes was based on their known and if possible proven incorporation of employability. To select promising cases we consulted studies and rankings on employability outcomes of studies, and quality assessment reports. We focused on full-time, publicly funded institutions and study programmes.[2]

Information on how connection to the professional field was maintained was analysed in four phases of study programmes (see Figure 1):

- Phase 1, Input: input from the professional field for the design of the study programme
- Phase 2, Process: link to the professional field in educational delivery and examination
- Phase 3, Results: outcomes of the input and process phases in terms of employability

[1] For ease of reading (and writing) we will often use the term ‘country’ when denoting the higher education system level.

[2] Exceptions are courses related to tourism in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) because these are almost exclusively provided by private (state-recognised) higher education institutions.




- Phase 4, Process management and evaluation: link to professional field in (internal and external) quality assurance

Our explorative study used a combination of desk research and interviews. Desk research included a literature review on employability in (professional) higher education, evaluation reports, reports on learning outcomes, studies or surveys about employability of graduates held among alumni and employers; and quantitative and qualitative information related to the connection between graduates of professional study programmes and the labour market. In addition, interviews were held with experts in quality assurance agencies (in the four higher education systems), experts from consultative structures on domain-level (e.g. professional field representative organisations), and study programme experts (e.g. programme coordinators and programme directors) within the 24 study programmes and

**Figure 1: Learning outcomes in the education and quality assurance processes**

higher education institutions.

## 2 Findings on employability in professional bachelor study programmes

Concerning the input phase we found that the study programmes take the professional field to a large extent into account. Study programmes included employability into study programme design through a number of methods that related to:

- Internal consultations: teachers with professional experience, professional field advisory boards,[3] and making links to the institutionôs profile.
- External consultations: particularly with employers in the region, professional field representative bodies on the national level and international consultative bodies.
- System level standards and policies: domain-specific learning outcomes, national qualification frameworks and innovation policies are applied where they exist.

The methods in the input phase were strongly related to the different countriesô established quality assurance requirements. Thus, all Dutch study programmes were involved in the establishment of domain-specific learning outcomes, which they translatedð in some cases with additional input from the (local) professional field and/or their professional field advisory boardð into their study programmes. Two of the three study domains in Flanders also had established domain-specific learning outcomes, though not directly together with the professional field. Perhaps this was one of the

[3] We use the term 'professional field advisory board' also if the study programmes use different terms, e.g. industry representative board, or professional field advisory committee.

reasons why the Flemish study programmes developed rather extensive consultation processes to gain input from their (local) professional field or through their professional field advisory board. The interviewed German study programmes had a high degree of autonomy, which reflected in their opportunity to make their programme either more academically-oriented or more professionally-oriented. The latter programmes were often in contact with local employers. The two German tourism programmes, which were offered by private higher education institutions, had developed far more formal linkages to the local, national and international professional field than their public-sector compatriots. The approach of Irish study programmes to a large extent depended on whether the professional field granted professional titles or required registration. If there was controlled access to the profession, the field or governmental authority could establish domain-specific learning outcomes, which study programmes needed to translate into their curricula if they wished their graduates to be eligible for the professional title or registration. In all cases, input for the study programmes was collected by formal or informal consultation with (local) employers. Whether a formal or informal approach for contacts with the professional field was chosen appears to be largely depended on the size of the study programmes and institutions. It could also be a tactical decision, as some study programmes argued that formalisation of contacts might negatively affect the willingness of employers to participate.

The process phase concerns how study programmes arranged links with the professional field in educational delivery and examination. Common methods in this phase included: internships, projects or project-based learning, teachers with professional experience, guest lectures, field trips, and elective modules. The professional field was also involved in examination of the projects, internships, graduations, role-play assessments, and sometimes in thesis juries.

Through strong linkages with the professional field, many study programmes made continual curriculum adaptations to include the latest trends and developments of their sector. Flexible adaptation to the latest trends appeared to be especially relevant for study programmes in tourism. Across all domains studied, study programmes taught employability-relevant transferable skills next to field-specific skills. Transferable soft skills included: communication, job attainment training (e.g. interview skills, networking skills, professionalization of online presence), and language skills (particularly taught by tourism programmes). Some institutions operated dedicated centres, outside study programmes, to facilitate studentsô acquiring job-related skills. Internationalisation could aid employability of students, however, many study programmes mentioned that they could give more attention to internationalisation. Initiatives specifically established to enhance the employability of incoming, degree-seeking international students appeared to be largely absent.

Regarding the results phase, in general the study programmes and stakeholders appeared satisfied with the achieved employment of the graduates. However, the results were strongly related to the economic situation of the particular domain and country or region. The labour market situation in Germany and to some extent Flanders appeared generally better than in Ireland and the Netherlands. Irish graduates more than others seemed to use international mobility as an alternative way into the labour market, perhaps reflecting cultural patterns (centuries of Irish emigration, and higher education institutions strategically focusing more on international labour options), perhaps reflecting the advantage of being native English speakers.

In terms of knowledge areas, mechanical engineers had the most favourable labour market prospects. For social work graduates governmental budget cuts made the situation less promising especially in the Netherlands, Ireland and to some extent Flanders. The area of tourism was in a turbulent reorientation, which fragmented the traditional labour markets. Other factors that affected the employment results included (urban) location of the institutions, graduates finding employment outside the field for which they were educated (especially prominent in tourism), and graduates continuing their education partly to avoid entering a bad labour-market situation.

Study programmes deployed different monitoring strategies to get insight into the employment results of their graduates and into the satisfaction and future needs of employers. Some programmes or the institutions to which they belonged surveyed alumni and employers regularly, while others did not do this systematically or used more qualitative methods (e.g. monitoring LinkedIn profiles). Alternatively, alumni surveys could be organised nationally, as in the Netherlands (HBO-monitor). Particularly tourism programmes needed to be aware of the quantitative (demands on labour market) and

qualitative (need for specialisation) developments. Such information was used to inform important strategic decisions of study programmes, e.g. to move towards broader or rather towards more specialised programmes. Both strategies were used. Overall, we saw a virtuous circle in which increased contact between programme and professional field led to higher mutual satisfaction.

In the final phase (process management and evaluation) that we distinguished, we found that internal quality assurance practices related to employability differed per institution. Particularly the larger institutions had formal procedures to elicit input from the professional field, to involve the professional field in education and examination and to collect employability statistics. A good practice was to have PDCA-cycles defined for the different phases which included contacts with the field explicitly. We saw that the quality assurance practices of smaller institutions were more informal: e.g. meetings with the employers were organised ad hoc and (qualitative) employability information was gathered through face-to-face contact with alumni.

The study programmes were largely satisfied with the amount of attention given to employability in external quality assurance, although the practices and intensity of the employability focus differed across countries. Most study programmes found a stronger focus on employability in external quality assurance unnecessary. Alternatively, programmesð especially those in tourismð indicated that external quality assurance should focus more on the achieved academic level and on what the programmes had done to create linkages to the professional field.

## 3 Discussion: commonalities and differences in ensuring employability

The different strategies and approaches to enhance employability of students largely related to the country-specific context, the domain-specific context and institutional characteristics.

Country-related aspects included, for example, whether input for the curriculum design was structured through system-level domain-specific learning outcomes, and whether it was obligatory for the programme to collect employability statistics. Also the quality assurance arrangements might imply demands on the way study programmes included employability elements. In this perspective, the Netherlands appeared the most centralised higher education system, while North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) was least centralised. Ireland stood out in our study as the system with most regulatory influence from the professions.

In the domain-specific context several relevant factors appeared. First, we noted the different diversity and dynamics of the sector. We found contrasts especially between the relatively stable and well-defined engineering cases and the fragmented and turbulent tourism sector. Second, employment perspectives differed across the knowledge areas as we described above: engineering with its stable and positive industry, social work being more dependent on fluctuating public policies. Again the contrast was most marked between engineering (positive, stable, and mostly regional) and tourism (uncertain, fragmented, and more international). Third, there were differences in the level of cooperation among study programmes in the same domain. Finally, the knowledge areas exhibited different degrees of accountability that the programmes felt for the employability of their graduates. The predictability of the labour market seemed to be the explanatory factor once again, with mechanical engineering and social work having more well-defined ideas about graduatesô needed skills and competencies and how the study programmes were responsible for inculcating them in students, while in tourism the most specific statement, from one study programme interviewee, was that the study programme needs to know the developments in the different relevant markets and should theorize the developments, so as to give students the needed learning outcomes, but none of the programmes felt accountable for their graduates gaining employment in the tourism sectorð which was difficult to define.

Approaches to employability were also influenced by institutional characteristics, in particular the size of the institution and the programme in number of students, which influenced the degree of formalisation of contacts with the professional field. Likewise, important was the balance between local, national and international orientation of the institution and programme, which seemed to be a strategic choice of the institution (sometimes of the programme). Moreover, the institutionôs profile influenced the focus on particular competences and learning outcomes, e.g. foci on sustainability or entrepreneurship across all programmes taught in the institution.

The strategic changes that study programmes considered to ensure their continued relevance to society, to the professional field and to students also appeared to be influenced by aspects related to the country, domain and institution. The main strategic options chosen in our sample included:

- Broadening: e.g. inclusion of more general and transferable competences in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- Specialising: e.g. offering elective specialisation modules.
- Academic orientation: e.g. inclusion of more academic competences
- Professional orientation: e.g. inclusion of more vocational competences
- Geographical (regional, national or international) orientation: e.g. if regional employment perspectives were poor, attention in the input and process phases could shift to national or international employability.

Related to changes in contexts, study programmesôstrategic approaches appeared likely to shift over time. Although we did not have the opportunity to directly observe changes over time, our impression gained especially from retrospective questions in the interviews was that employability-enhancing aspects were becoming better embedded in the study programmes. Clear examples involved increased involvement of the professional field in examinations and increased attention for employability in internal and external quality assurance.

Our study suggested that study programmes as well as policy makers on the system level were facing important challenges with respect to employability. First, while national definition of domain-specific learning outcomes ensured attention to employability, some interviewees voiced fear that programmes might become too uniform, leaving too little room for differentiation and profiling. Second, the employability mechanisms in the input phase were mostly tailored to the regional or domestic labour market (e.g. consultation of national professional field representative bodies). However, to the extent that the international labour market was gaining importance, current input mechanisms might no longer be fit for purpose. Third, study programmes had to take into account an increasing number of stakeholders on a variety of levels. These stakeholders had different and sometimes conflicting demands, amongst which study programmes were to find the right balance (i.e. not everything can be included in a 180 or 240 ECTS programme). However, getting the balance wrong might have serious implications for the employability of students and for the reputation of the study programme and its institution. Finally, uncertainty due to sectorial employment dynamics triggered study programmes to utilize different strategic approaches to curriculum development with an eye to employment.

Our study did not look into which strategic approach was best; answering that question would require more research, and would probably conclude that there are contingencies (i.e. there is not one best way in all circumstances). Similarly, the higher education systems and the study programmes within them that we studied varied with regard to their intensity of attention to employability aspects. It was not in the scope of the project to emphasise a particular model as best. Rather, good practices were highlighted in our full report where we encountered them. By doing so, we hope to contribute to study programmesô ambitions to enhance employability, and to what stakeholders can expect from professional bachelor programmes. In this way, our study aimed to contribute to emphasising employability aspects in internal and external quality assurance.

**Endnote**

This paper is a short version of the research report: Kolster, R. & Westerheijden, D.F., 2014. Employability of professional bachelors from an international perspective. Study commissioned by the NVAO.

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**Questions for discussion:**

1. There appears to be another ótriangleô among state regulation (national qualification frameworks and sectorial domain-specific learning outcomes as basis for curricula), market coordination (professions making regulations for access to the labour market) and voluntary cooperation of study programmes to define common employability requirements;
    a. Are these three corners of the triangle equally valuable, or do we see different pros and corners of these forms of coordination?
    b. In a context where graduate employability is of utmost importance (knowledge economy, economic recovery, etc.), who is ultimately accountable for the employability of graduates? The roles of the study programmes, the role of the external quality assurance, and the role of the government.
2. Some stakeholders (e.g. the European Commission) plea to give more attention to employability in external quality assurance. Is this desirable, and if so, how can this be achieved? Should the external quality assurance use fixed guidelines and indicators to assess incorporation of employability by study programmes? Should this only be aimed at professionally-oriented programmes or also at more academically-oriented programmes?

**Note about the discussion:** This study was commissioned by NVAO. It is intended that the third presenter, Mark Frederiks, will lead the discussion, together with NVAO Board members present at EQAF and who were involved in supervising this study.