Introduction

Mary Gobbi

Editor

This edition of the Journal shows how different strategies – whether at the macro or micro level – are employed by Higher Education Institutions to address the 'soft' or 'employment' skills and experiences that prepare (post) graduates entering the labour market. While it is expected that graduates have acquired the necessary subject specific and generic competences associated with their field of study, these papers discuss how it is increasingly important that graduates can make positive transitions into the different dimensions of the employment market: be it at local or global level. In their paper, '*Analysis of curriculum processes for the development of competencies in engineering education',* Graffigna, Ghilardi, and Dávila aptly note that 'this means linking academic life with the social context and workplace'. The concept of 'workplace' is itself of interest in so far as we sometimes neglect to apply the concept to the academy itself. Is this because it is 'politically incorrect' to view the academy *as a workplace?* Does this 'demean' an ideological worldview of the academy as the 'ivory tower' of an intellectual elite? However, when we consider entry into the labour market of the university itself, we are then challenged to question the extent to which our own programmes prepare the post-graduate for all dimensions of future academy life: researcher, educator, administrator, or entrepreneur. Edinova alludes to this when she debates the three-fold purpose of a reformed PhD programme with a history of poor completion rates in '*The characteristics of PhD programs at Saint-Petersburg State University (SPSU)'*.

Typically workplace transition and preparedness for employment is viewed from the perspective of the young adult as typified by the work of Moreno, Esteban, and Barranco: '*Young people's uncertainty about the future: education system, training and transition to employment in Spain'*. Using a case study of one city, in an area of high unemployment for 16-24-year olds, the authors explored the perceptions and experiences of these young adults, relevant stakeholders and civic actors in the local environment. The study revealed dissatisfaction amongst all participants with elements of the current strategies that prepared the young people for a challenging labour market. Interesting differences were exposed related to domestic

circumstances and the differential influences of maternal and paternal educational backgrounds, as well as the relative autonomy of young people with respect to their economic and living arrangements. Here we see that a failure to address these socio-economic contextual effects means that the efficacy of the training programme is itself diminished. A key learning point from this paper is the necessary engagement of all local actors – be they civic, private, public, or social stakeholders – in the development of meaningful strategic policies to address areas of inequality, enhance labour market entry and provide avenues for mobility. The role of the University here is crucial as both research institute to analyse the problem and propose solutions, and as a responsible educator of local citizens.

National level Higher Education reforms, and their impacts at institutional level, form the basis of three papers. In each case (Argentina, Russia, and Vietnam) the authors debate various initiatives whose aim is to improve generic and subject specific competences that have related socio-political and employability goals. These three case studies span the realities of programme development and competence for all undergraduates in a university (Vietnam), professional accreditation (Argentina) and doctoral programmes (Russia). As we shall see in the papers, a common theme between these studies is the importance of structural communication channels and networks between the relevant participating actors.

From Argentina, Graffigna, Ghilardi, and Dávila outline their in-depth mixed methods evaluative case study that analysed the process whereby a university managed and experienced a curricula reform process. This was driven by the implementation of a revised national accreditation framework process within seven engineering disciplines and programmes. The authors argue well the different ways through which the educational actors needed to respond, on an individual personal level, through relational practices in aligning seven different programmes and at a macro level with respect to policy and subject discipline requirements. Data included documents, regulations, surveys, participant observations and cultural situational analysis. What is striking in this paper is the structured, thoughtful methodological approach to data gathering and analysis. The process includes a step by step approach that other researchers may find helpful when faced with similar projects. For example, *Table (1) Institutional development proposal for adaptation to second generation standards*. Curricula process analysis revealed four categories of courses with respect to the extent they were chosen by the professors as relating to their own course. Central courses were nominated by 40% professors, peripheral comprised 20-40%, atomized less than 20% and isolated courses were not selected by anyone. Similar

strategies were used to identify which generic competences were central to each educational programme. Clearly, it is too early to evaluate the impact of these reforms on graduate attributes, competences, and preparation for the workplace. However, what this study demonstrates is the complexity of significant reform within an institutional setting. In particular, the modes of communication engagement had varying degrees of success. It also reminds us that the impact phase from which change can be evaluated is several years in the case of professional programmes like engineering.

Edinova's paper also revealed the critical importance of communication and co-ordination channels between the various stake-holding groups when national goals are translated at institutional level. The impact upon institution, programme and student is critically debated in *'The characteristics of PhD programs at Saint-Petersburg State University (SPSU)'*. In this case study, the national economic goals to increase Russia's competitiveness, and consequently stimulate its knowledge economy, are realised in policy initiatives to modernise the curricula, improve the quality of higher education, and better prepare young people for the continued demands for innovation and societal change. In this reform, drivers from the state included the necessity to develop generic and subject competencies for the PhD studies that addressed both the subject specific competences and 'soft' skills required for the wider labour market that employs, in this case, post-doctoral political science graduates. The focus of the study was the generic competences. Here, the labour market includes the University academies as well as other sectors where graduates and researchers in this discipline are historically and currently employed. The empirical work comprised documentary analysis of key policy drives and surveys with an extensive range of national stakeholders including subject experts, policy makers, employment, and educational agencies. Within the institution, academics, graduates and students were engaged. This study reveals how the completion rates and motivations of students changed because their new model "Researcher. Teacher-Researcher" addressed the different facets of working life as a post-doctoral graduate. Core competences that were identified included the development of systematic and critical thinking, project management, and cooperation skills.

In Mai's Vietnamese example, the backdrop was a policy transition from a centrally planned economy to a more market orientated system**:** *The case of graduates of Vietnam National University, (VNU) Hanoi*. As a recent participant in the Tuning Asia South East (TA-SE), Mai was able to augment the Tuning methodology to elicit stakeholder perceptions of the general competences, employability, and transferable skills of the 2018 graduating cohort at VNU. These findings were then compared with those of the TA-SE

project. This extensive project gleaned significant information using semi-structured interviews with current students, alumni, and employers. For the latter, useful insights were gleaned as they often reported having insufficient time to participate in surveys. Interestingly, both students and alumni expressed concern with "showing initiative", "planning", and "organising". It was suggested that this was because their university course had not developed these skills. Overall, results were like other studies where employers, alumni, and students evaluated the importance of some general competences more highly than the perception of graduate achievement. Points of learning in this study were that (1) generic competence development should commence earlier in student curricula; and (2) there should be a greater focus in the latter stages of the curriculum when subject content took priority.

Finally, operating at the micro-level within the professional classroom is Mubayrik's small scale study: '*Investigating the effect of clicker use on problem-solving among adult learners in dental classrooms: A cross-sectional survey*'. Clickers are a form of audience/classroom response system enabling immediate feedback between the organiser and the participants, in this case instructor and dental students. The aim of this control trial, based in Saudi Arabia, was to enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills to prepare them for decision making in their subsequent dental practice. Literature review and study findings report that 'clickers' enable immediate anonymous feedback without threat to public review. Mubayrik found that the classroom response system (clickers) helped to improve problem-solving, knowledge application and cognitive skills within the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. There was also evidence that students improved their confidence in self-assessment and presenting professional arguments: critical attributes to develop to prepare students for their subsequent professional dental practice and the necessity for lifelong learning. As a recommendation for further studies, Mubayrik proposed that a qualitative dimension to the study may garner more detail on student perspectives and the impact of the clickers on learners' experience.

As a collection of papers from different countries, disciplines, and level of academic or professional achievement, common themes are evident. First, it is critical that there is robust engagement with all relevant actors/stakeholders/partners in the development not only of the academic subject specific competences, but, more crucially, the generic competences *as they apply* to the particular labour market settings that typical graduates enter. Second, it is evident that a diverse range of structured communication modalities are necessary, individualised to specific stakeholder groups.

Third, in depth mixed method evaluative case studies help illuminate the process and outcomes of substantial reforms generating learning points for all stakeholders – whether at the micro (individual teaching strategies) or macro (organisational and policy) level. Finally, each paper points out, albeit in different ways, that the development of appropriate employment-related skills requires significant contextual understanding of the labour market itself, related socio-economic political factors and other 'soft' influences which impact upon the motivation and learning journey of the graduate. Thus, preparing students to acquire relevant employability skills remains a challenge, demanding effective communication and negotiating skills from the academic staff themselves. The studies also reveal the institutional resources required to enable staff to fulfil their role as curricula developers equipped to deliver novel educational strategies informed by stakeholder engagement.

Looking forward to the future, we are all aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has already had a major impact upon higher education. In some cases, it has triggered or accelerated reforms, for all it has led to change and provoked a range of responses to the management of institutions, staff, students, actors and stakeholders. It would be timely therefore for us to reflect, discern and hypothesise upon the extent to which higher education is equipped to address the short, medium, and longer-term consequences of the pandemic. In particular, the roles and responsibilities of higher education towards the 'common good' of contemporary and future society are worthy of significant attention. We intend that future editions of the Journal will seek to address some of these thorny issues, dilemmas and challenges that span our diverse countries, institutions, disciplines, economies and cultures. Please consider whether you can make a contribution to this dialogue.

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