ERASMUS+: Employability in Programme Development (EPD) Project

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Key findings and recommendations for how best to inform employability practice by surveying employers

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1. Background

In the UK, and in other countries, universities are increasingly judged not only by the quality of the academic education provided, but also by how many students find graduate employment after graduation. As a result, universities nowadays have a strong focus on employability, by providing career services to help students with career consultations, job search skills and general skills that are sought after by employers.

To effectively prepare graduates for work, universities need information about employers' preferences for both technical and general skills and how employers may be willing to trade off one set of skills for another. Such "labour market intelligence" can be gained from publications that are regularly produced by organisations such as for example the Institute of Student Employers, High Fliers, or The Economics Network in the UK. These publications, however, often only provide general information that reflect the general nature of the surveys carried out. Hence, in some occasions, labour market intelligence is collected by direct cooperation between universities and local or national employers. More rarely, information is collected by surveying alumni about their perceived employability skills and their relevance within their workplace. For this project we collected labour market intelligence directly from employers.

2. Comparison, of data collection strategies

We gathered information from employers both via focus groups and surveys. Labour market intelligence collected via focus groups and in-depth discussion is qualitative in nature and allows the identification of shared experiences among participants. In addition, semi-structured discussions allow participants to provide new information and insights that were not initially considered by the researcher.

The results from focus groups are based on small samples and are possibly more difficult to generalise. Results from surveys tends to be more quantitative in nature and, given the relatively large number of participants, allow the identification of statistical patterns and relationships as well as generalisation to non-participants. However, although open questions may provide new and unexpected insights, the type of information gathered from surveys tend to be more structured and tied to the specific questions asked by the researcher.

As focus groups often require a large time commitment for participants compared to surveys, it was more difficult to find employers willing to participate in the focus groups than finding employers willing to spend 10-15 minutes completing an online survey. Depending on the method for dissemination, surveys are likely to reach a larger pool of employers compared to focus groups. For this project the survey was disseminated via university networks; other forms of dissemination, such as administering the survey to more expensive online panels such as Prolific could be considered as well.

When it is not possible to use a combination of both focus groups and surveys to collect labour market intelligence, focus groups with a careful selection of participants seem a good way to collect information and are especially suited in situations where universities aim to foster regular connections with employers, since surveys tend to be impersonal. Most importantly, a proper design and update of the curriculum, requires labour market intelligence to be collected at regular intervals.

3. Results

In this project we collected information on the academic and non-academic general skills that employers value when hiring new graduates using both focus groups and surveys. The results of the focus groups are remarkably similar across employers and the preliminary results of the survey tend to confirm the findings of the focus groups.

Both survey and focus groups suggest that graduates need to possess basic industry/occupation-specific professional skills and knowledge; however, as jobs are constantly evolving, employers also require graduates who, besides the main basic technical skills, also possess a wide range of general skills (only a minority of employers consider technical skills more important than general skills). Among the general skills required are adaptability, organisational skills and a commitment to lifelong learning. Graduates who possess these skills are able to continuously learn and improve their knowledge to perform new (constantly evolving) jobs. New hires

often receive on-the-job training in the more technical skills necessary for the job and many jobs require regular training after that.

Students also need to learn how to communicate, work with others, and to be autonomous, self-motivated, and independent. When we asked survey respondents to select the three most important skills from a list provided, oral communication: i.e., the ability to express complex ideas and results was selected by 36% of respondents as one of the three most important skills they require in their graduates, and 34% also selected initiative, critical thinking and problem solving.

4. Employability dashboards

Reports summarising the results of the focus groups, the description of the survey and its preliminary results will be included in the EPD project employability dashboard #1. The dashboard is a search engine using AI to allow users to search for material related to employability using natural language queries as well as keywords (see Intellectual Output 3 for a more detailed description). Figure 1 shows an example of the natural language query, while Figure 2 shows an example of results from the query.
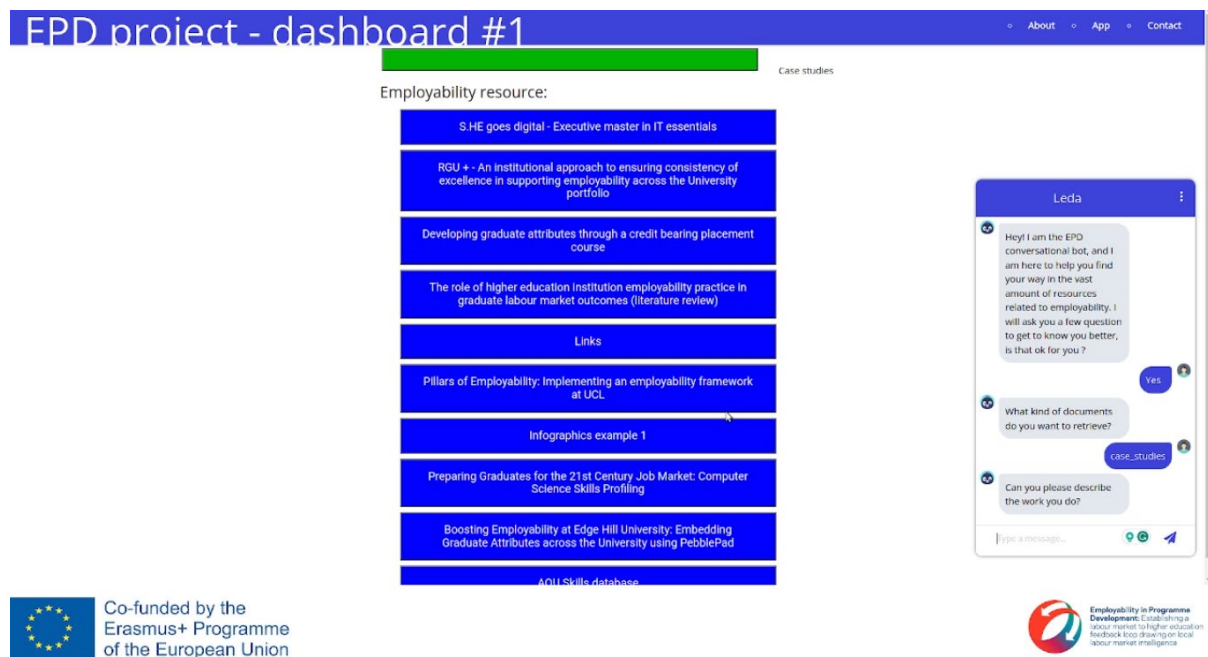

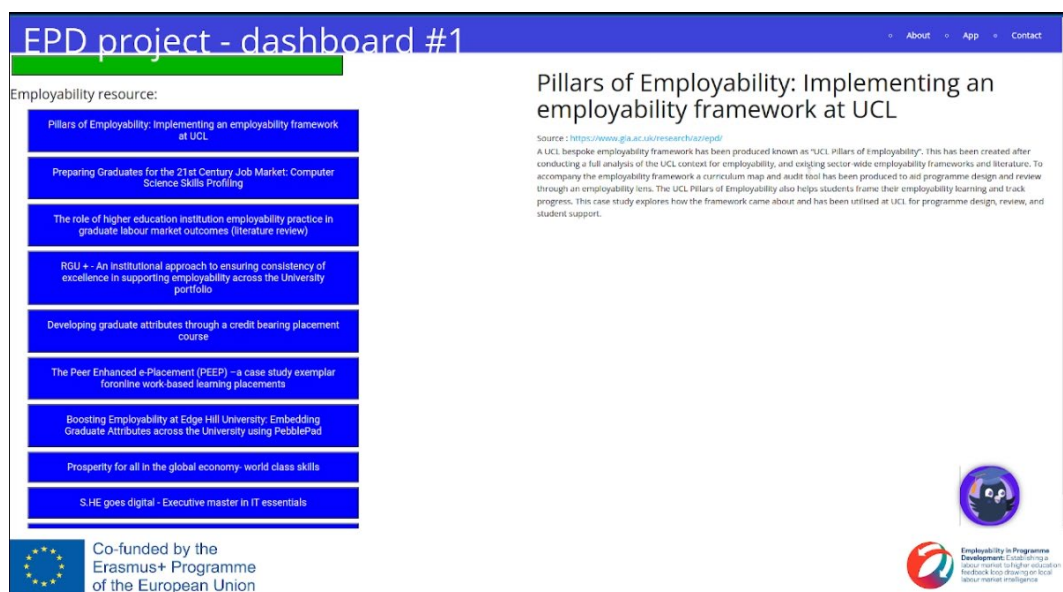Figure 1: EPD project employability dashboard #1:example of queries

Figure 2: EPD project employability dashboard #1:example of results

5. Conclusions

To support the development of teaching programmes that improve student employability, universities and their career services need to have information on what skills employers require in the new graduates they hire. This sort of information can be either qualitative and collected via interviews and focus groups, or can be quantitative – or a combination of the two – and collected via surveys.

Interviews and focus groups appear to be the most immediate way to collect information since information can be gathered relatively quickly and does not require specific quantitative skills for their analysis. Despite differences between surveys and focus groups in terms of reach and representativeness, our preliminary findings suggest that quantitative survey and focus groups give consistent results. In particular, we confirm the importance of basic technical skills, but also that employers require general skills such as adaptability, organisational skills and a commitment to lifelong learning, as well as communication skills such as the ability to express complex ideas in a simple way.