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The global window on higher education

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**HE Events Diary**

## EUROPE: Needed: flexible professionals

Writer: Jane Marshall

Date: 13 July 2008

More than a quarter of Europe's working graduates say the skills they learned in higher education are under-used by their employers, according to a wide-ranging study into the role of universities within the knowledge society. But researchers also found that higher education graduates generally do well in the labour market in most European countries.

The report, *The flexible professional in the knowledge society*, presents findings of a survey of 70,000 graduates from 16 countries about their qualifications and employment in 2005, five years after leaving higher education. It investigates the skills needed by graduates to function adequately in the modern knowledge society, the role played by higher education institutions in helping them develop these skills, tensions that arise as graduates, institutions and employers strive to meet their objectives - and how to relieve those tensions.

The report was prepared as part of Reflex (Research into Employment and Professional Flexibility), a European Commission initiative chiefly financed under the EU's Sixth Framework Programme.

Reflex is a joint collaborative project between institutes in 16 countries - Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

The 312-page graduate report covers 13 of the 16 partner countries, omitting information about Japan, Portugal and Sweden. First published by French online publication *EducPros*\*, the report was edited by Professor Rolf van der Velden and Dr Jim Allen of the research centre for education and the labour market at the University of Maastricht in the Netherlands.

It notes the recent emergence of three major trends affecting the demands that higher education graduates face: increasing emphasis on education and training, increasing volatility of labour market processes, and increasing internationalisation and globalisation.

These trends have led to "new demands on the competences with which individuals need to be equipped", it says. "In addition to the more or less traditional demand on higher education graduates to become experts in their own professional domain, [they] face an increased need to be flexible to ensure employability over their entire career."

The European Union's Lisbon goals implied stronger innovative capacities in Europe's economy, and globalisation of the economy and society also required graduates to be much more internationally oriented than before, the report says.

Graduates needed to be competent in at least five areas of professional expertise: functional flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, mobilisation of human resources and international orientation. There was evidence from the 13 countries these demands were "more or less universal" and most graduates appeared to be adequately prepared to meet them, though there were differences between countries.

In general, the report found graduates in most European countries fared well in the labour market, and most "fulfil roles in jobs that require generalist or specialist tertiary-level training". But more than 25% of graduates surveyed said their skills were under-used in their work, a response most common among those with humanities or social science degrees, those from southern countries and, more unexpectedly, the UK.

The report concludes with policy proposals aimed at the five principal interested parties - the European Commission, national governments, employers, higher education institutions and students.

Its recommendations include:

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The icy wastes of the Arctic are an unlikely setting for a higher education teaching initiative, but Canada's Saint Mary's University, Halifax, is developing an innovative teaching programme involving flying lecturers to the country's far north territory of Nunavut. See UWN business for full details. Photo: Tom Weber.

\*more measures to improve foreign language proficiency among students;  
\*encouragement such as extra credits and adequate grant or loan systems to students to take on work 'relevant' to their studies;  
\*employers should be aware of, and use, the large reserves of untapped human capital at their disposal, and they should introduce better policies to accommodate women graduates;  
\*higher education institutions should develop more demanding study programmes, and these should focus on strengthening professional skills;  
\*institutions should not overestimate the positive effect of internships and work placements; researchers found these provided a smooth transition to employment through contacts rather than advanced professional expertise.  
\*'External flexibility' - graduates taking on a number of posts - should not necessarily be regarded as undesirable, but could be seen as a source of further skill development.

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