



Higher Education and the Area of Work: Issues, Challenges and Responses in Norway and Germany

REFLEX Working paper 3

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Introduction

Globalisation is widely understood to be a market-driven concept which engulfs almost all aspects of our daily lives. It is a contentious term which in academia has led to a plethora of literature (Giddens 1990, Beck 1997, Robertson 1992 among others). In one sense it refers to both the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole. In another it can be seen as a convenient tool to push through neo-liberal policies for the sake of competition in the global economy. Tony Blair, for example, in a speech to the European Parliament wants European universities to embrace private-public partnerships. With reference to India and China he challenges European universities to report on "how we get more private-public partnerships into sustaining them, and more graduate schools, linking business and the academic world across the European Union" (PM speech, 26th October, 2005).

In response higher education, particularly in the developed countries, has undergone significant change, even transformation in recent years albeit with different pace and levels of intensity. Increasingly, the needs of the employers in a changing labour market are a key consideration for curriculum development and institutional support. The notion of graduate employability is part of the policy agenda across Europe and elsewhere. Nowadays graduates in the labour market are expected to be flexible, to direct and steer their own work as well as that of others, to take responsibility and to mould jobs to make best use of their competencies in the global market economy. Most will need to have transferable skills, the ability to communicate effectively and to master the ever-changing new technologies (Brennan et.al., 2005). Thus globalisation of higher education implies the application of market forces towards increased individualisation, competition, and a closer link with the world of business, at the heart of this discussion.

Cultural differences and intellectual traditions in different countries, however, are not easy to overcome. German approaches to education and academia in the *Humboldt* tradition have influenced numerous universities across the globe (Altbach, 1998). In Norway as in Germany, indeed, as in all countries whose tertiary education was based on the German model of higher education, the tension between *Bildung* (personal development) and *Ausbildung* (training) was, and still is, a cause of concern. *Humboldtian* values embrace academic freedom to teach together with the freedom to learn. For example, students should be free to learn without being spoon-fed or constantly tested. They should be able to take their examinations when they feel ready to do so rather than at a fixed point in time at the institution's request. It is a set of values which was suitable for an 'elite' but no longer suitable for the mass higher education system (Prichard, 2004). In Norway and in Germany, as elsewhere, the 1999 Bologna Declaration together with the huge increase in student numbers and high drop-out rates have led to far reaching structural reforms aimed at delivering a better qualified workforce for the knowledge society in a relatively short time. The Bologna Declaration, signed by 45 European countries to date, has as its principle aim to establish a common structure of higher education systems across Europe, and for this common structure to be based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate (Bachelor and Masters degrees) in order to create a European Higher Education

Area (EHEA) by 2010 and to promote the European system of higher education worldwide. Individual mobility, transparency and flexibility are its catchwords. While to UK audiences these changes are not regarded as significant, to countries not familiar with the new structures the reforms are, indeed, fundamental. For Norway and Germany with traditions rooted in the *Humboldt* approach to education, the Bologna Process means adopting the Anglo-Saxon model of higher education. Both countries offer the opportunity to illustrate different, or similar, responses to shared challenges posed by the knowledge society and globalisation.

Rationale and conceptual framework

The research described here arises out of a larger EU- funded project involving graduate surveys in 11 European countries and Japan and qualitative research taken in some of the countries involved (REFLEX, 2005). The latter set out to investigate the expectations and experiences of employers and university leaders in, in this instance, Norway and Germany. The qualitative study focuses on the kinds of knowledge, skills and competencies that are required of graduates in the knowledge society, the extent to which these requirements are being met and the kinds of changes that are needed in order to achieve a better match between what is required in employment and what is produced in higher education. Its aim is to address the following key questions:

- What competencies do employers expect of their graduate workers?
- What role is ascribed to higher education providers in producing them?
- How do higher education institutions see their responsibility for the employability of their graduates?

Conceptual issues raised concern the match between supply and demand for new graduates (Brennan, 2004; Teichler, 2004). For example, we asked whether graduates occupy a distinctive set of ‘graduate jobs’; about the importance attached to subject studied and institution attended; about any anticipated changes in the demand for graduates; if society needed a system of mass higher education or one that is geared towards the elite (Trow, 1974, 2005). A second set of issues concerned the competencies employers expect of graduates in the workplace. For example, we asked whether we need more graduates who are subject specialists or more who possess broader cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills; about the balance required in different types of jobs between subject expertise, functional flexibility, knowledge management and mobilisation of human resources (Brennan, 2004). A third set of issues concerned the extent to which higher education perceived its responsibility for the employability of its graduates. For example, we asked about the division of labour between higher education and whether the academic profession should be more responsive to issues of graduate employment.

Connected to the notion of employment is that of ‘employability’. The term has been widely accepted with its various interpretations in the context of higher education and reform. In general, it emphasises the relevance of higher education study

programmes to labour market. In the UK, for example, there has been a longstanding connection between higher education and the economy, mainly because of the perceived skills deficit (Yorke, 2004). Employability means that graduates are expected to be flexible workers who can operate in a variety of different settings with ease. They are expected to be generalists rather than subject specialists, or generalist with some subject specialism (Brennan, 2004). In the Anglo-Saxon world with some exceptions higher education does not prepare for entry to a profession. In the German language, however, 'employability' causes confusion. Undergraduate study by law is intended to be a *berufqualifizierender Abschluss* (a qualification preparing for entry to a profession). While some German university academics may not regard 'employability' (*Berufsfähigkeit*) at the core of university education, the term itself is often misunderstood because the German word *Beruf* refers to specific areas of core professions or similar high level work roles with a defined set of competencies and social status. In the German language the term 'employability' can, therefore, be understood as closed rather than open concept. (Kohler, 2004, Teichler, 2004). It can also be understood as almost in opposition to the German occupation-led vocational education and training system widely admired in many countries across the globe (Dehmel, 2005).

Yet even in the British sense the term 'employability' can be misleading if used in connection with graduate employment since they are at a very much lower risk of unemployment than other groups (Brennan, 2004). Whichever way one might want to interpret the word, the focus is invariably on the individual and getting the right kind of people for the right kind of jobs as essential to business (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). More pragmatically, higher education in all European countries uses the term employability with regard to helping students to gain employment and career guidance, and general preparation for work, issues which are part of this study.

Methodological considerations

The research described here consists of (i) interviews with leading experts from stakeholder organisations who have a broad overview of higher education and the expectations and needs of employers and (ii) interviews of focus groups with representatives of employers and higher education with expertise on graduate employment in particular European countries. All were selected for their specialised knowledge in their field and their general overview of educational matters, particularly in higher education and employment. There were 6 such in-depth interviews in Norway and 8 in Germany involving one/two or three interviewees at a time as well as focus group discussion with 15 experts at senior level from industry/commerce, higher education and related umbrella organisations. All interviews lasted between one and three hours. Discussions were based on a semi-structured questionnaire. They were conducted in English in Norway and in German in Germany, recorded and subsequently transcribed. It is important to note that, in common with qualitative research, answers provided reflect opinions, feelings, knowledge and experience of those interviewed. It can be argued that expert views expressed by relevant stakeholders influence government strategies and educational policies; they therefore merit consideration.

Any study involving two countries invites numerous comparative thoughts and questions some of which this paper seeks to address. There are difficulties, however, when comparing small countries to larger ones; Norway and Germany are such examples. Here Guy Peters (1998) advises to discuss complexities of real life issues. Furthermore, the purpose of comparing higher education policy involves tracing of particular concepts, ideas or explanations across frontiers and into different regions (Neave, 2001). The comparison may be, in the words of Husén and Postelthwaite (1994), ‘implicit’ or ‘explicit’, though within the interpretive paradigm it is by nature ‘implicit’. Here the researcher does not give equal attention to both phenomena compared but seeks to exercise his or her own judgment on the basis of knowledge and experience. Arthur (2001), Crossley and Watson (2003) stress the need for contextualization within the hermeneutic-interpretive paradigm. With reference to Norway and Germany, care has therefore been taken to place findings into their specific cultural and educational contexts and to highlight convergences and divergences where they seem meaningful in relation to questions discussed.

Norway: higher education contexts

Almost all discussions in Norway - a small country with a population of just 4.591 million - refer to notions of a welfare state, the massive income generated from its oil, the general wealth in the country and relatively low unemployment (around 4%) and very high levels of participation (62% in 2001) in higher education with the highest rate of graduates in Europe (OECD, 2003). Norway’s economy is based on welfare capitalism with a blend of free market activities and government intervention (Esping-Anderson, 1990). There is a strong tradition for all governments, irrespective of party politics, to involve the social partners in policy formulation and in social, educational and legislative reforms (Skule, *et.al*, 2002). It is worth noting too, that wage differentials between those who have a university education and others are perceived to be not particularly marked. Yet the Norwegian mass higher education system, as in so many Western countries, has been caught up in the shift towards individualisation, differentiation, and privatisation in order to be seen as relevant for producing competitiveness in the global economy (Welle-Strand, Tjeldvoll, 2002). This shift has impacted on most areas of education.

There are six universities, 26 private higher education institutions and 26 state university colleges or state colleges, the latter are vocationally oriented. About 90% of all students attend state institutions. There is no tuition fee and policy makers are reluctant to go down that path. All institutions come under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Research and are subject to Universities and Colleges Act of 1995 and its various additional amendments. Norwegian higher education institutions underwent a stringent and comprehensive Higher Education Quality Reform introduced in 2001 and completed 2003. This was an outcome of various policy-related enquiries and a major White Paper in 2001 which aimed at changing a higher education system built on the Germanic *Humboldt* system to one akin to the Anglo-Saxon model. The reform can be seen as an attempt to achieve efficiency through the devolution of some powers from central government to the institutions with a stronger emphasis on leadership and management, increased internationalization, the setting up of an independent accreditation and subject-related

evaluation body, new curricula and a new funding model which for the first time also attaches some funding to higher education pass rates.

Norway, though traditionally regarded as a ‘reluctant reformer and ‘slow learner (Olson, 1996), was one of the first European countries to implement the two-cycle degree structure. All undergraduates now study for a Bachelor degree with the majority expected to complete the Masters too. On the other hand, the Norwegian binary system of higher education is gradually being eroded since colleges increasingly have the right to develop research degrees, to appoint professors and to engage in pure as well as applied research, placing colleges alongside universities (Nyborg, 2005). Worth noting too is that, unlike in Germany, in Norway there are no policies aimed specifically at enhancing employability of university graduates which may be due to relatively low unemployment in the country overall (Vabø, 2005). Nevertheless, the expectation concerning employability is very high. It legitimises the reforms undertaken.

With arguably the highest quality of life worldwide, all of those interviewed in Norway worried, almost excessively so, about the country’s future and the time when oil and gas would run out - expected to be in about 20 years time.

“The oil is of course a good thing to have when it comes to developing industry, marketing of supplies and a lot of knowledge-based industry, and advanced engineering. However, the income from the oil is not necessarily a good thing. In some ways we would want the industries but not the revenues, because it is too much money”. (NBU)

It was pointed out, however, by one expert on higher education, that not all Norwegians are prosperous, that there were poor, and less well educated people: *“We have many people who can’t read, ... about 70 000 Norwegian cannot read and there are still many people who drop out from high school”* (NHU). Fewer people from the countryside enter higher education; many more people from the West of the country go to university than from the East and many more from Oslo than from North Norway.

Germany: higher education contexts

Germany, with a population of 82.431 million, is considered to be an affluent and powerful economy, the fifth largest in the world; however, the country now has one of the slowest growing economies in the euro zone. Perhaps not surprising, those interviewed were less concerned about the future, but much more with present difficulties in light of relatively high unemployment of around 10%, an ageing population and structural rigidities of social security systems which have been pushed to an unacceptably high level.

Germany’s higher education policies are marked by political and structural tensions between the 16 states (*Länder*) and central government (*der Bund*). There are 314 institutions of higher education including 88 universities and colleges, often referred to as universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) in addition to 126 profession-specific universities, 45 academies for art, music and literature together with a handful of private universities and colleges. It is regulated by the 1976 Framework Act for Higher Education

and its various amendments between 1998 and 2002 which sought to regulate regional autonomy and to restrict the federal government from further intervention in institutional or regional matters as well as greater freedom to collaborate with the private sector for the sake of enhanced flexibility. Perhaps noteworthy, too, is that the 1976 Higher Education Law sought to strengthen the relationship between education and employment by stipulating preparation for employment in a variety of professional contexts (*Berufsfähigkeit*.) A further point to note is that traditionally Germany's higher education curricula, in comparison with many other countries, emphasise relatively narrow subject expertise as preparation for specific employment areas rather than broad, general studies which may be of relevance to many areas of work (Schomburg, Teichler, 2003).

While in Norway higher education reforms are completed most German higher education institutions are still in the process of significant structural and institutional changes as part of the Bologna Agreement. Here the development began with varying levels of intensity and commitment in 2003 and is destined to be completed in all *Länder* by 2010. In essence this means converting the German *Diplom* programme to the two-cycle Bachelor/Masters model of undergraduate and postgraduate study together with, for example, the ECTS credit system, the Diploma Supplement, institutional quality assurance schemes and accreditation akin to the Anglo-Saxon model of higher education. It should not surprise anyone that in Germany as well as in Norway such reforms, which have called into question almost all aspects of higher education, were not and are not undertaken without opposition, skepticism and anxiety by at least some members of teaching staff. The move towards modularization of courses and learning outcomes together with accreditation and quality assurance systems was seen as very labour intensive at the expense of time for research and related academic activities.

“There was not much resistance, but a lot of concern particularly during the years 2002/2003 when we first introduced the modular structure. Now members of the teaching staff do not have the same freedom in terms of curricula planning as they had before, and students nowadays do not have the same freedom to choose the courses they want. Then there is much more intensive pastoral care for the individual student, which again is time consuming and hence costly.” (GH)

Progress remains slow. The acceptance of the Bachelor degree among the country's wider population including employers has not yet been proven although student numbers of those opting for the new structure are increasing. During 2004 close to 12 000, or 5.5% of Germany's student population obtained either a Bachelor degree (2.8%) or a Masters (2.7%). The take up of Bachelor/Masters degree programmes is across all disciplines with engineering taking the lead. When analysed according to Land, it is no surprise that universities in conservative Bavaria remain the most reluctant reformer (HRK, 2005).

In Germany, however, structural reforms in the light of Bologna have had to take place at no additional costs to the taxpayer with the inevitable consequences of cuts and redundancies. In Norway, on the other hand, it is important to note that central government funds were made available for the transition which made the whole process much easier to complete.

Graduates in society

The interviews covered the following issues: graduates in society, that is the match between supply and demand for new graduates; employers' expectations in terms of competencies graduates should have and the importance attached to institutions attended; the diversity of higher education provision and the balance of demand for different qualifications; the extent of higher education's responsibility for the employability of its graduates and the relationship with employers. In Norway questions around future demands of graduates and why the society needed more graduates within the context of a knowledge society provoked responses about the pressing need for more scientists and mathematicians. There was concern that Norway – like Germany - had not achieved high PISA ratings, just below the half-way mark in the league tables of countries (OECD, 2004) and that generally Norway performed less well in international statistics than other Nordic countries. It was stressed over and over again, that Norway needs to be more research intensive in terms of international business. Nevertheless, *“there is a sense of complacency...the truth of the matter is that we are not in such a privileged position... It is a real challenge, but we should not be complacent”*, (NHU).

In Germany, there has been wide concern in policy-making circles and in the media that relative few school leavers enter university in any one year, considerably lower than in many other industrial countries, 32% in 2001 (OECD 2003). Rather like responses in Norway, it was argued that the area of work has become increasingly complex mainly because of advances in technology and internationalization. Many companies are now more customer-oriented, which means that work has to be organized in a way which would allow more spontaneity and flexibility, as one German business director commented though similar sentiments were expressed in Norway,

“We have to think much harder about international contexts if we want to remain competitive. This requires intercultural sensitivity, knowledge and understanding, quite apart from foreign language skills.” (GB)

Some German interviewees, while stressing that more rather than fewer graduates were needed in future, expressed concern that the push towards the higher end of the educational ladder would leave too many behind at the lower end.

“We should not end up with a situation where a window cleaner needs a Bachelor in order to do his job... Banks, for example, no longer employ people without Abitur... We have too many people who are underachievers... this might present a danger for society as a whole.” (GH)

Most large national or international companies have highly structured recruitment procedures whereby those with a Masters degree are selected to enter a fast track training programme. The same applies to the civil service. In Norway more than 50% of graduates enter the public service. Nordic universities have traditionally followed the Prussian model of higher education, by which universities were expected to serve as producers of the 'elite' and only those with a Masters could enter the higher levels of civil service.

“In the public sector there is much more focus on formal qualifications than in the private sector... where you ask a person what it is you know rather than which school certificate you have. The best graduates enter the public service sector ... the traditional industries such as fishing, shipping, the oil industry have not needed universities in the past but this is changing rapidly “ (NBU).

In Germany it is difficult to know to what extent the Bachelor/Masters model will challenge traditions, although most companies welcomed the move towards the two-cycle system (Bergs, Konegen-Grenier, 2004). Smaller and medium-sized companies are much more flexible in their employment policies with hiring staff according to job requirements. Germany, however, suffers from high unemployment. Many large German companies, particularly those with a high profile, receive far too many applications from graduates:

“The problem for very large and well-known companies is that they receive far too many applications, often 10 or even 100 000, it is quite difficult to differentiate between graduates.” (GB).

It is an inevitable by-product of a massively expanded higher education system, that there is substantial a number of graduates who do not find the kind of work they expect given that there are also graduates who do not respond well to work expected of graduates. It was not just a question of employability but also one of student motivation and expectation. For the time being, according to some German business experts, Bachelor graduates are likely to earn less than those with a Masters degree particularly in large companies, although increasingly it is the job that matters and graduates are matched to positions available, particularly in smaller and medium-sized companies.

In Norway, too, it is difficult to know to what extent the Bachelor/Masters model will challenge traditions. Smaller and medium-sized companies are much more flexible in their employment policies by hiring staff according to job requirements. The assumption is, if graduates experience problems with getting a job, it is because they have a degree that is less relevant to business - media studies, for example. While there is no unemployment among teachers, there is a great shortage in nursing. Indeed, nurses have to be hired from other countries.

Employers' expectations

Most business organisations do not believe that it is the job of higher education to prepare students for specific jobs or professions, leaving aside exceptions such as medicine and law, but to develop human beings who have to cope with all the demands made by modern society, including work. Asked about the competencies employers expect graduates to have obtained during university study, interviewees in both countries perceived this to be a complex question. In Norway, with its concern about its future, it was acknowledged that some parts of business will need *“narrow expertise, bio-technology for example, nano-technology, or marine... ocean biology ... in other areas of business a combination of general business expertise combined with some expert knowledge.” (NBU).*

In Germany, too, the need for graduates with a broad range of skills and areas of knowledge was considered to be very important by most employers (Bergs, Konegen-Grenier, 2004). The German Railway, for example, is now looking in the main for engineers who have also studied economy and hence have a broader base than was previously the case.

“Lets put it this way: In the Railways, the focus is no longer just on one wheel, or even one type of engine, we are now looking for people who understand a train and all vehicles connected with the railway industry. Graduates should have a basic understanding of technology but also of the economy as a whole. So they need to be less narrowly specialized and have a broader view on a range of technology related matters. In that sense we need specialists who are also generalists.” (GB)

As far as key competencies are concerned, employers in both countries look for analytical skills, social skills, management skills, communications skills, the ability to learn, foreign language skills (mainly English), presentation skills, strategies for lifelong learning, among many others. They are less concerned about specific employment-related knowledge since this can be taught in employer training programmes. It matters more to employers what the applicant has done before, during and after studies such as taking on added responsibilities outside studies.

All accredited study programmes in Norway and in Germany teach key skills or competencies either integrated into the curriculum or separately in special courses organised by career services, or other relevant university departments bearing notions of employability in mind. Much depends on the subject and discipline. Norwegian as well as German employers, but particularly those in Norway, stressed the importance of graduates having studied abroad, having had international experiences, and having the ability to communicate well in English. However, one Norwegian business expert doubted if competencies could be taught: *“Yes, these are skills that you cannot put on paper, the interview is very important, much depends on the personality.” (NBU)*

German employers, like Norwegian employers expect the Bachelor to be more relevant to the workplace, despite shorter time for study. However, there was concern that from the business perspective not many university courses considered ‘employability’, despite the rhetoric. Higher education should work more closely with employer organisations, according to many of those interviewed from the business side. While there were numerous examples of close co-operation between higher education institutions, these tended to be based on personal relationship and were discipline-specific.

Differentiation

Interviewees in both countries were asked about the need for an ‘elite’ or ‘mass higher’ higher education system akin to the American or British model with ‘elite’ universities on the one hand, and lower status mass education provision, on the other (Trow, 2005; Brennan, 2004). Such distinctions carried different meanings in Norway and in Germany where higher education was at one time geared towards the elite. Norway’s success story, however, has been in mass education, and though there is a marked push towards

excellence in research, particularly in the sciences and technology, there is still a desire to hold on to its values.

“We do not become so pre-occupied with elite, that we forget our successes. We have been better than many other countries when it comes to giving higher education. We have been more interested in lifting the masses than producing Nobel Prize winners.” (NHU).

In Germany at the time of the interviews, the creation of ten ‘elite universities’, or ‘elite disciplines’ in a few selected institutions was at the forefront of political debate. Negotiations ran into difficulties, however, because of different executive/ advisory powers for higher education in the states and central government. With the advent of the new government in November 2005 these have now been resolved. The intention is to create about 40 graduate schools, and 40 discipline specific ‘excellence clusters’ together with lead research universities by the year 2011 with substantial grants from both the federal government and the states (BMBF, 8/12/05). Preliminary selection of potential elite universities and discipline clusters were announced early this year.

Asked if there should there be greater differentiation in the provision and quality of higher education neither German nor Norwegian interviewees felt there was a need for greater differentiation. Indeed, as one German business expert commented, there is already too much differentiation, so that it is difficult for many employers to have an overview.

“You are likely to need a Masters or PhD in understanding the qualification jungle. We have 10 000 different degrees; it is very difficult for employers to make sense of it all. It would help if we had a much simpler structure, to concentrate on the more general Bachelor which should be harmonised across subjects and institutions with specialisation at Masters level.” (GB)

Asked about the importance of the institution attended or the final grade achieved in terms of future employment respondents in both countries stated that with some exceptions neither mattered a great deal unlike in the UK, where more emphasis is given to ‘who you are’ than ‘what you know’ and ‘where you studied’ to ‘what you studied’ (Brennan, 2004). However, there are exceptions, particularly in the sciences and engineering. In Norway, for example, the best engineers come from the University of Trondheim. In the main, engineers, mathematicians, scientists, and advanced technologists are expected to have a Masters degree with a high degree classification. In other subject areas, the institution attended or the final mark matters considerably less.

Similar questions in Germany raised another concern in view of the impact of student evaluation and ranking, *“The final grade achieved will be less significant, mainly because of student evaluation of their lecturers, who are likely to offer good grades whenever possible as it happened in the US, for example.”* (GH)

Nevertheless, in the main, employers are not fixated on final grades achieved by their applicants. Experiences outside studies, personality factors, general attributes, and additional qualifications carry equal if not more weight.

Higher education responses

In Norway there are problems in relation to being a small country. Most university lecturers at the University of Oslo, for example, were educated there, so they do not have much work experience outside university which is badly needed, according to views expressed by those in business. There was still a marked gap between higher education and the private sector of employment, although the Quality Reform has ensured that representatives of the private sector sit on the Council of Universities.

“The companies are not coming to Higher Education saying we must have this or that, we don't get from our members what kind of higher education they want... they adapt to what is there” (NBU).

In Norway universities and many state colleges have set up career guidance services for their graduates and are keen to develop key skills across all disciplines. This was a new development but it is considered to be a very important one. In the words of a university rector,

“We are working, hopefully, towards having better students. We worked hard in redesigning our programmes and giving students more information...we do marketing now to recruit students which means we have been able to reverse the decline in numbers we had since 2003, when the new programme came on stream. For the past two years we have increased by 55% which means that some programmes now have entry requirements... this is a significant change, so we have a different student body.” (NH).

Comments made by German higher education experts referred to the 1990s when there was a huge demand for IT specialists, die *“wurden uns aus der Hand gerissen”* (they were grabbed away from us). At that time IT students were able to attract huge salaries, even before finishing their studies. There are many similar examples across a range of disciplines. It is argued therefore that it was difficult for those in higher education to predict employment needs of the future. Furthermore, it was a long process to develop new curricula; this could not be done overnight to suit the needs of industry and commerce. In other words, universities could not always respond to demands made by employers, and perhaps they should not do so anyway – which is why a broad, more practice-based, non-specialised Bachelor degree and the development of key competencies were more important than specific work-related subject knowledge imbedded in the *Diplom*. As one trade unionist put it,

“At the heart is the naïve assumption that employers always know what they want but often employers do not have a clue.” (GHU)

Comparative reflections

From a comparative perspective a number of issues have emerged that are worth noting even though it is increasingly difficult to make general statements about higher education and its graduates. Higher education in both countries has moved towards convergence. It has been subjected to stringent reforms with a move towards individualization of study,

marketisation of programmes and increased competition across institutions. Asked if society needed more or fewer graduates, all respondents were keen that admissions should be increased. Higher education interviewees noted that those studying for a Bachelor were more focused and motivated than students on drawn-out *Diplom* programmes, and that in both countries overall retention rates in the shorter first degree are improving. Higher education experts were keen to stress the need for better career guidance and a closer link to the area of work, although some experts remained skeptical that this was easy to achieve. Diverging trends, however, can also be noted. These relate, above all to political, structural and economic differences between both countries as indicated above. German business experts were concerned that employees with a broad-based Bachelor degree would need more subject-specific training in the workplace thereby shifting costs away from the university to the already hard-pressed employer. Smaller and medium-sized companies would be less able to cope. Such concerns were less pronounced in Norway, nevertheless, they were not ignored. All those representing the world of work welcomed with teaching of key skills and competencies together with the more practice-orientated Bachelor degree. The need to have good foreign language skills, not just English, was considered to be hugely important in both countries, although it seemed to be of particular concern in Norway where most undergraduates are expected to also study abroad if they wish to enhance their employment prospects.

In Germany, where Bologna Process is not yet completed, interviewees expressed concern about the increasing '*Verschulung*' (spoon-feeding, rather like in school with, for example, a fixed sequence of course elements) of undergraduates and the lack of choice embedded in the old *Humboldt* system. However, German industry with an increasingly strong client orientation, it was stated, needs fewer graduates who are the traditional subject specialists and more who are generalists able to cope with wide ranging of demands and situations. Norwegian experts, on the other hand, with a concern about the country's long term future expressed the need for highly skilled scientists, IT specialists or mathematicians, indeed, those who are subject specialists rather than generalists, although one should resist oversimplification of complex matters.

To conclude: both countries are striving towards a more neo-liberal agenda of higher education in view of demands made by the global economy and the knowledge society. Germany's and Norway's higher education institutions are not quite "on the way to the Anglo-Saxon system of higher education" (Eissel, Grasse 2001) although they are heading that way. In Germany, the path is laden with numerous obstacles and the end is not yet in sight. The Norwegian one appears to run more smoothly but it is perhaps not so different from the previous one. Scott (1998), however, reminds us that in most developed countries higher education also fulfils an important social function. As agents of social mobility universities are distributors of life chances as well as, in partnership with the rest of the educational system, enhancing life-chances of everyone. It would not be right to forget that educators in both countries shared these sentiments, even though they were not at the foreground of discussion.

Abbreviations indicate background of experts cited:

GB (German business)

GBU (German business, umbrella organization)

GH (German higher education)
 GHU (German higher education, umbrella organization)
 NBU (Norwegian business, umbrella organization)
 NH (Norwegian higher education)
 NHU (Norwegian higher education, umbrella organization)

The author takes full responsibility for translations from German into English.

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