

Transition from higher education to labour market: graduates and employers perspectives

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Abstract

In this work, we study the transition from higher education to labour market in Galicia (NW-Spain). The main goal is to analyse the adequacy of university graduates to the need for human resources in different economic sectors, both from the point of view of graduates and employers. The relevance of this type of studies has become clearer in recent years, with their inclusion in the Official Statistics Program of Galicia.

Introduction

The transition from school to work has been a major research topic over last years. Increasingly high youth unemployment rates since the eighties have justified many research projects in Europe (CHEERS: *Career after higher education: a European reserach study*; REFLEX: *The flexible professional in the knowledge society*) and specific programs in different countries and regions (ACSUG 2004, 2005). In the particular case of Galicia (NW-Spain), different actions have been taken by higher education institutions, like the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC) through its Social Council, and the Agency for the Quality of University Galician System (ACSUG). The ACSUG promoted the projects PIL1996-2001 and PIL2001-

2003, in order to explore the university graduates' (from 1996 until 2003) view on their actual job, as well as the problems they confront in their access to labour market. On the other hand, the USC promoted a different research, whose main concern was to know the impressions from the other side of the labour market: the view of the employers on graduates' qualification. There is no doubt in the importance of carrying out this type of surveys, since results obtained in these studies provide us with valuable information for the development of the University, specially at this changing point in the design of higher education degrees after Bologna Declaration. In addition, a growing demand for general, specific and even social competencies has also been emphasised by employers in recent years. An example of the relevance of this kind of studies is that the project promoted by ACSUG has become part of the Official Statistics Program of Galicia government since 2007.

The aim of this work is to compare the results obtained in the studies conducted by the USC and the ACSUG in order to highlight the different points of view that graduates and employers have on the professional capacity that graduates should have when entering the labor market. The outline of this work is as follows. In Section 2, we provide a brief summary of the ACSUG and the USC projects. In Section 3, we show the results of both studies, focusing on the assessment that graduates and employers make on graduates' competencies.

ACUSG and USC projects.

We will consider results from the most recent study from ACSUG (PIL2001-2003). The survey was carried out during November-December 2004. In this case, 4.145 graduates from the three public universities in Galicia (University of Santiago de Compostela, University of A Coruña and Univesity of Vigo) were interviewed by phone. These graduates had obtained their degrees from 2001 until 2003. They were asked to answer a questionnaire on the relationship between higher education and employment. A broad scope of questions were asked related to graduates socio-biographic background, study paths, transition from higher education to labour market, early career, links between study and employment, satisfaction with their jobs and a retrospective view of higher education. Specifically, this project intended to find out to what extent competencies are required in graduates' jobs.

In the project promoted by the Social Council of the USC, 828 representatives of the human resources areas in different businesses (those ones who collaborate with the USC in a professional training program) were asked about similar topics, but from the perspective of the employer. The survey was carried out in August-October 2005. Questionnaires were sent and received by regular mail.

Assessment of graduates' competencies.

Professional competencies are the combination of abilities, aptitudes and knowledge required for an effective job performance. It is not easy to summarise all the possible competencies that a graduate may need for performing a job. A global division can be made in three blocks: knowledge (e.g. foreign language), skills (e.g. social skills) and attitudes (e.g. leadership). Once we have defined a list of competencies in each of these groups, we would like to know, among other issues: Which skills are important, from both graduates and employers perspectives, for the performance of the job with the required efficiency level.

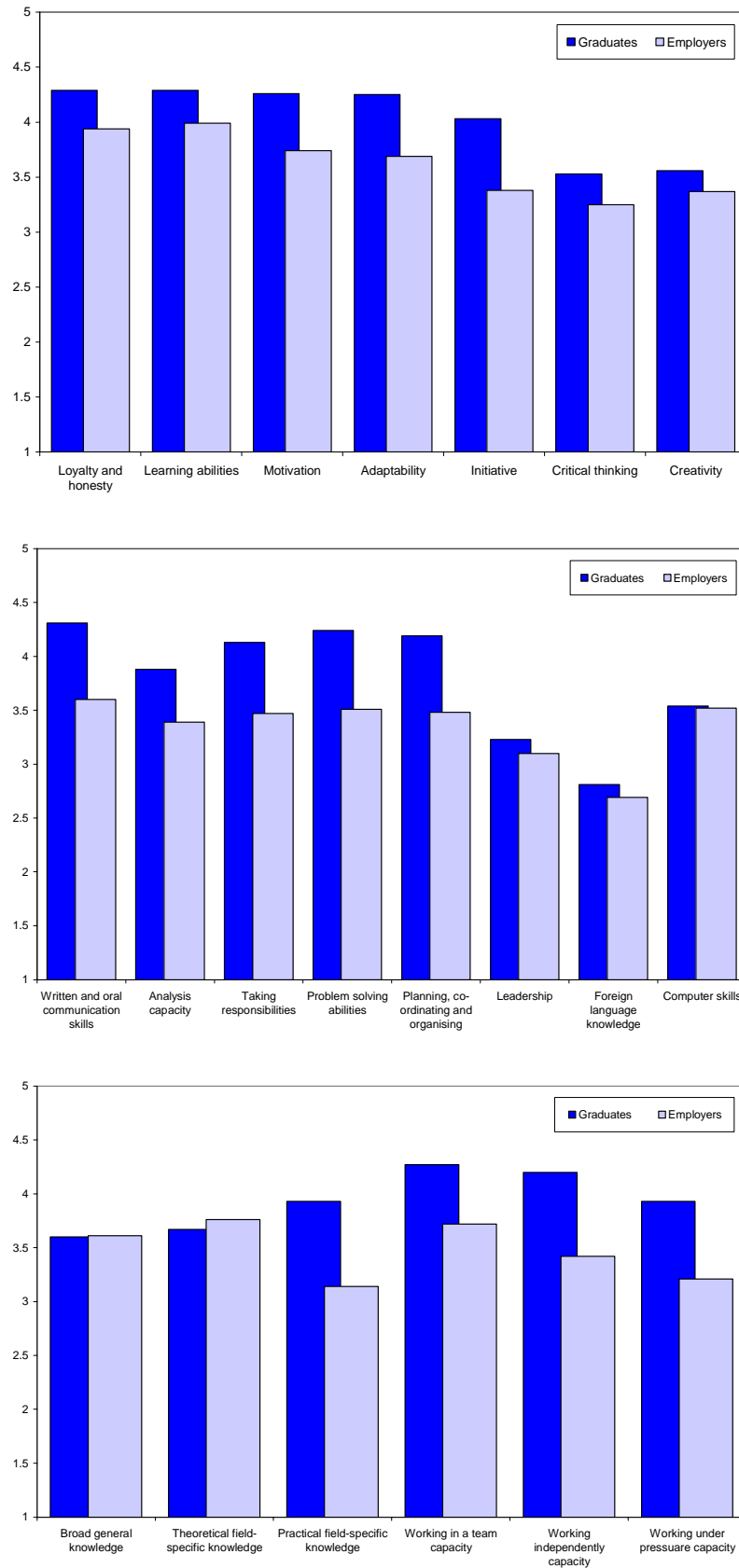


Figure 1. Mean values of competencies assessments by graduates and employers. Scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

Evaluation of competencies involves finding answers to other questions. The PIL projects intend to find out to which extent these competencies are required in Galician graduates actual jobs. Graduates were asked to assess a series of competencies in terms of their need for an efficient job performance. Our graduates consider that *Written and oral communication skills*, *Loyalty and honesty*, *Learning abilities* jointly with *Motivation* and *Adaptability*, are the most important competencies required in their job (all of them with a valuation over 4, in a scale from 1 to 5). However, they consider that *Foreign language knowledge* and *Computer skills* are not substantially relevant for their adequate performance. The explanation for the poor assessment of *Foreign language knowledge* is found in the structure of Galicia's business market, which primarily consists of Small and Medium Enterprises.

On the other hand, employers were asked to assess the competencies that their recently-hired employees show. From the employers' perspective, *Loyalty and honesty*, *Learning capacity*, *Theoretical specific knowledge*, *Motivation* and *Team work* are the competencies which collect a higher mean value. The lowest values correspond to *Foreign language knowledge* and *Leadership*.

Examining results displayed in Figure 1 (divided in three plots), it seems that both graduates and employers agree that graduates have the adequate preparation in *Computer skills*, *Broad general knowledge*, *Theoretical field-specific knowledge* and *Foreign language knowledge*. The largest discrepancies between what graduates "need to know" and what employers say "that graduates have", are given in the assessment of *Practical field-specific knowledge*, *Working independently capacity* and *Problem solving abilities*. In these three cases, values given by graduates are higher than the assessment provided by the employers.

For the last two items (*Working independently capacity* and *Problem solving abilities*) graduates say that these two abilities are quite important for their job performance (values over 4). However, employers give an intermediate mark to them, implying that working independently and problem solving abilities are not strong capacities in their employees. At least, graduates are conscious about that. Employers give the worst mean value to *Practical field-specific knowledge* (3.14 over 5). Unfortunately, in this case, graduates do not consider this ability as a crucial one for their job performance (3.93 over 5).

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