

Career services for international students: comparison of case studies of higher education institutions in Europe

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The rising number of international students and their successful transition from higher education (HE) into the graduate labour market is a challenge for students but has also become a critical factor for host higher education institutions (HEIs). This development and general lack of quality in careers service provision for internationals raises strategic and service issues. Based on case studies generated from three European HEIs, I provide a contrasting analysis on careers service provision by taking current trends and developments and the views of careers representatives on the expectations of international students into account.



Introduction

During the increasing progress of globalisation, there has been significant growth in international student numbers¹ in HE. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students has more than doubled from 2.1 to 4.5 million (OECD, 2013). The anglophone countries, including the UK, are still preferred destinations. However, other countries have been catching up in recent years. Besides the UK, which has a worldwide market share of 13%, Germany and France, with 6% market share each, have become popular European destinations (i-graduate, 2014).

From the view of international students, the top motive for studying abroad is international recognition

¹ International students are those who have crossed borders for the purpose of study as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

of qualifications. However, other factors, such as financial considerations and starting a career in the country of graduation, have become more important in their decision-making process (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2014). For instance, in Germany, a growing percentage of over 50% stated that they would prefer to develop their careers in Germany after graduation (Ripmeester & Pollock, 2013).

The growing number of internationals who are highly interested in developing international careers is a challenging situation for the students but also for the host countries. For HEIs, it means that the provision of careers services and career and cross-cultural-related learning itself can take on greater significance. The economies of the host countries, including the companies and institutions, are interested in gaining a highly skilled workforce. The government and its policies are driven by diverse interests, economic factors, and political ideologies, which influence the framework conditions of HEIs. For international students, these circumstances have a high influence on entrance conditions into the labour market and their integration, and they affect the opportunities of careers centres and the emphasis of their service provision.

If we review European countries, different trends and conditions that the international students and careers centres must deal with can be identified. In the UK, there is a trend of tightening border restrictions, including relatively complex visa regulations for international graduates, whereas in Germany, regulations for non-European graduates are less complex and offer better chances for integration at first glance.

Besides the visa regulations and labour market restrictions, there are further barriers for a successful integration into the labour market in the country of graduation, such as a lack of foreign language skills, a lack in the careers service provision for international students, etc. In Germany, a lack of German language skills is the most crucial problem for internationals for setting up their careers in Germany but there is also a perceived lack in careers services (Ripmeester & Pollock, 2013). This is also obvious in the UK. Even though the satisfaction of international students with careers services is at a high level, there is also a relatively high level of dissatisfaction (Equality Challenge Unit, 2012).

Obviously, in both countries, there is a need for developing new methods for careers services for international students. Further research results for Germany imply that there is a need for better service promotion and a bilingual service provision (Ripmeester & Pollock, 2013). Therefore, I included the Netherlands in the research where bilingualism of services in HE and in society in general is at a high level.

Other factors that influence the careers provision for HEIs are financial constraints or opportunities which raise the question of how careers services have evolved differently in HE in each country. In the UK, the first careers services were set up in the late nineteenth century (Cambridge University Careers Service, 2002). In Germany and the Netherlands, a minority of careers services were established before 2000, and the majority have been established afterwards (Career Service Netzwerk Deutschland, 2014).

With reference to these environmental conditions and developments, I attempted to gain deeper insight into careers provision for international students in the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany. Based on three case studies conducted in cooperation with three internationally oriented HEIs, I explored the current state of their careers provision and how they support the career development of their international students.

Research Strategy

To gain more in-depth knowledge of the careers service support for international students, I endeavoured to find one HEI as a cooperation partner

from each of the countries of Germany, the UK, and the Netherlands. My aim was to explore the range of services and to describe the existing services more profoundly. As a second step, I analysed the findings by comparing the results generated from each HEI. Therefore, I chose the research strategy of multiple case study (Yin, 2009).

Using a convenience sampling procedure (Biggam, 2008), I identified HEIs with a high number of international students, including evidence of specialised services. Throughout the acquisition process, I selected three HEIs where interviewees were fully engaged in the careers department and could therefore provide fuller and richer information and views from a similar angle, which made the description, comparison, and contrast easier.

Data Collection Methods

In terms of triangulation (Denscombe, 2007), I selected three different sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). First, I partly integrated the results of desk research in the initial literature review and used it as a resource for developing the semi-structured interviews. Second, I conducted a content analysis of semi-structured audio-recorded face-to-face interviews with one careers representative from each HEI.² Third, I also conducted a content analysis of data from other relevant written sources, such as the web-pages of HEIs and further material taken from brochures, training handbooks, flyers, etc. The opportunity to make use of three different sources enabled me to obtain a fuller picture of the services offered to internationals and put me in the position to write a comparative analysis.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis encompasses the services that are explicitly offered to international students and how these services are embedded in the overall programme, including the institutional establishment and strategy, followed by marketing of services, environmental trends and developments, expectations of students, and financial aspects and outlook.

² Interviewees were representatives of careers centres, and I guaranteed them and their institution full confidentiality and anonymity.

Institutional Establishment, Services and Strategies

The UK HEI

About a quarter of the over 30,000 students of a top-ranked UK HEI are internationals. The university has received several awards for careers provision for international students. In 2011 the University Executive invested significantly in the employability services in order to match the growing expectations of graduates for first class career destinations. This led to a rise in staff numbers from 20 to 70 and the department rebranding to become a global, first-tier careers service. Consequently, the careers provision has become highly differentiated with a broad range of functions, such as career guidance, employer relations, work experience, mentoring, and widening participation.

Due to the recognised gap related to cultural differences, UK business life, and a lack of careers services in students' home countries, the role of a designated specialist was established, who operates independently and functions as a connecting link to the five existing faculty teams. The organisational form of the 'hub and spoke' model allows a higher specialisation and a more in-depth careers provision for all students. The international careers specialist does not carry out one-to-one services. However, the careers consultant is responsible for the overall programme offered to international students and carries out workshops dealing with job-seeking strategies, preparing students for recruitment fairs, networking skills, UK business etiquette, and intercultural awareness. A second part of the workshop series is conducted by guest speakers and comprises visa law, applying for internships, job seeking in Asia and China, etc.

Additionally, the careers consultant is supported by the student ambassador team, consisting of nine international PhD students, who are hired for about three hours per week and are trained professionally to support workshop activities, marketing services, and managing the careers club, which is a monthly meeting during the term where career and study issues are discussed in an informal setting. For further international career information and training

opportunities, the HEI offers free access to the website passportcareer.com or the internal virtual learning environment student portal.

The Dutch HEI

The Dutch HEI was established in the 1970s. Half of its students have international backgrounds, and most of the courses are offered in English. The careers service was founded in 2007, and the team was formed out of a combination of existing psychological counsellors and library support staff. Because of the high percentage of international students and the fact that the careers staff can carry out the services in Dutch and English, there was no extensive need for offering separate services for internationals, although UK careers services functioned as organisational role models.

Similar to the UK HEI, there are two different forms of one-to-one careers sessions. First, there is 'quick careers advice', a 20-minute careers session, followed by the opportunity for in-depth counselling if needed. Each counsellor is responsible for a certain faculty or a range of subjects. Students can also use the online career library, which provides several career links about work and study, video interviews with experienced professionals, country-specific career information and vacancies through the website goinglobal.com, and information on the top international companies and organisations via vault.com. The contents of the workshops are similar to the UK HEI but are offered in English, Dutch, and German due to the high number of German students.

Student learning and studies are delivered in the light of the so-called problem-based learning approach (PBL), which involves more than simply acquiring knowledge. Students develop their own ways to solve problems or deal with tasks within their studies. The PBL approach is part of the HEI strategy and implemented into the careers service provision.

The German HEI

The German HEI is a member of TU9, which is an alliance of leading institutes of technology in Germany. More than 15% of the over 40,000 students are internationals. The internationalisation strategy published in 2010 also focuses on the enhancement of the service support and career development for

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international students and scholars. The centralised careers service, founded in 2007, sees itself as a hub for building the students' capacities in terms of their career and professional development. The strategy includes networking by bringing the labour market on campus. The emphasis of the careers services for international students is strongly focussed on integrating them into the German labour market by strengthening their employability skills. In addition to the central approach, there are some employability advisers working in some of the nine different faculties for certain target groups or special purposes, such as an employability adviser for female students in mechanical engineering or a careers adviser, who is directly placed at the faculty of arts and humanities. More in-depth career-related workshops are offered to students from the Dean's list, which is a list of the 5% of the students with the best study performance in their year of study.

The central careers services consist of three pillars. Soft skills training, application practice and know-how, and network events are on top of the employability agenda. Due to limited human resources, many of the offered services are organised or carried out by external partners like the recruitment fairs, workshop series, and careers week. One-hour one-to-one careers sessions are offered by the central careers service and comprise curriculum vitae and cover letter checks or developing job-search strategies. Other issues, such as financial, psychological, or visa problems might lead to referral and are covered by other internal or external specialists.

Additionally, there is an exclusive service offer for international students. In cooperation with the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BfA), the national governmental body of job centres in Germany, the careers service offers a programme that is conducted once a year for a group of 30 internationals with good prospects to integrate successfully into the German labour market. The careers service is responsible for its marketing and the pre-selection of students, who must apply for the programme. A final selection is made in cooperation with the BfA. The programme is conducted by external suppliers of the BfA and consists of workshops and one-to-one sessions.

Marketing

All HEIs use similar channels to market their services, including newsletters, social networks, and hard copies or posters that are distributed on campus. All interviewees responded that word of mouth is most likely one of the most successful methods of marketing services. To raise the attention of internationals, there was a consensus that targeting the local international community, such as the Chinese, can make a difference. If you take these considerations into account, then the international students' ambassador team of the UK HEI could be seen as a role model to market the services to the international student community effectively.

Environmental Trends and Developments

During the process of tightening border restrictions in the UK, non-European graduates normally must leave the country directly after graduation and, only in some cases, can stay up to six months after graduation. Therefore, other services have become relevant, such as the provision of information for global careers, cooperation with recruiters from the students' home countries, and the offer of more internship opportunities for internationals alongside studies.

The dominating environmental factor of a declining job market in the Netherlands is a challenging situation for those students who are planning to set up their careers in this country. Surprisingly, it does not change the strategy of careers services. This is because of the PBL philosophy of the HEI, which is also part of the counselling approach. In relation to border restrictions, the visa and labour market legislation in the Netherlands is right in the middle of the UK and Germany. Graduates from non-European countries can stay up to one year after graduation to find a job that meets the requirements of a highly skilled migrant or a labour migrant job, and the Dutch language skills of internationals need to be on a sound level, depending on the international level of the hiring company and the regional culture.

Germany has slightly loosened its border restrictions for international graduates. Those graduates affected

by visa restrictions must prove the coverage of their living costs during their further stay in Germany and are then allowed to stay up to 18 months after graduation. The duration offers a better chance to find a qualified job that meets certain requirements for a long-term stay but also offers graduates the chance to gain some more international (work) experience. The political and public discussion in Germany is influenced by the need for certain kinds of qualified professionals, especially for engineers and technical staff. However, there seems to be a gap between this identified need and what most employers expect from graduates. These high expectations comprise perfect German language skills and a German 'habitus', whereas legislation creates opportunities, there are significant challenges of language and cultural gaps. Some workshops deal with these issues such as 'working or applying in Germany' or 'marketing one's own migration background successfully'. The programme of the BfA offers an additional chance for managing the transition process.

Currently, each state offers its international graduates different timeframes for entering the labour market successfully. However, the statements of the interviewees illustrate that even though there are different timeframes in each country international students still must deal with the same kinds of challenges and obstacles, such as a lack of foreign language skills, cultural differences, and prejudices determined by employers.

Expectations of International Students

Career representatives expressed a variety of different expectations of international students derived from observation:

- Gaining work experience in the host country after graduation;
- Careers advisers are often perceived as recruiters;
- High pressure to succeed in studies is influenced by family expectations and because of a lack in language skills and cultural awareness;

- Career dreams of working as an engineer in Germany are derived from famous brands (e.g., BMW and Audi), the outstanding reputation of German engineering, and the slogan 'Made in Germany'.

The statements above demonstrate the different expectations and experiences of international and national students in terms of receiving careers services and their career planning during studies and after graduation. Most international students of the HEIs are highly interested in gaining work experience in the host country after graduation. The statements regarding the last three bullet points have been more often observed in relation to non-European students.

The challenge for the careers services is to deal with these expectations effectively by explaining to students what they can deliver and what is not included in the services and in providing a shift in the career planning by raising the international students' awareness of global careers and opportunities for a successful re-integration into their home country.

Financial Aspects and Outlook

The budget for international careers services of the UK HEI is part of the departmental budget and is centrally funded. There is a strong commitment for carrying out careers services, especially for international students. Career-related workshops are for free, which is different to the Dutch and German HEIs, where students must pay low fees. The Dutch careers services are also centrally financed. This has not always been the case. At the beginning, services finances were decentralised through faculties, but it has turned out that the existing structure of today is appropriate for delivering these services more effectively. The careers provision of the German HEI is financed in several ways. There is the centrally funded careers service but some faculties make use of the option to offer more specialised services, which are financed through the respective faculties. Finally, there is the BfA programme for internationals, which is externally funded by the German government.

In terms of plans for future services, interviewees mentioned the following initiatives and directions:

- UK HEI - stronger global and international focus, including strategic cooperation with international recruiters from overseas and expansion of UK internship opportunities alongside studies;
- Dutch HEI - closer collaboration with faculties, integration of career content into curricula, and targeting students at an earlier stage of their studies;
- German HEI - expansion and strengthening of centralised services to satisfy high demand for one-to-one sessions and workshops as well as hiring a careers specialist for international issues.

The given financial opportunities align with the current developmental state of each HEI. The internal structures and procedures of the careers services of the UK HEI are on the highest institutional level; therefore, the current focus is on developing and creating external relations, partnerships, and opportunities for internationals in the UK and overseas. The Dutch HEI has also finished the internal development of its structures for delivering its services to international students, whereas the German HEI has the biggest potential and is on the way to developing more on-site services for their international students.

Conclusions

The different expectations of international students regarding their own careers and the careers service provision are challenging and require a customised careers service and proper marketing, especially for those who are coming from different continents. The three cases illustrate highly developed career service programmes for students and international students in their countries. My interview partners have clarified potential gaps, needs, and plans for future activities and development of the careers services for international students.

Because careers services at each HEI are exposed to completely different environmental conditions regarding the design of course programmes, the labour market, visa legislations, financial means, cultural differences, or evolution of careers services itself, it is of great value to compare the services

for professionals to gain deeper insight into how contextual factors have an effect on careers service provision and how careers centres have successfully been setting up their services. Consequently, a contrasting analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the different systems widens horizons, leads to new insight regarding awareness, ideas, and opportunities for careers provision, and raises critical issues for discussion.

For instance, the question arises regarding under what circumstances an implementation of a dedicated careers specialist for international students can bring an advantage to the whole system of any internationally oriented HEI and how this kind of additional service can be carried out successfully. Furthermore, it is of great interest how a mix of proper marketing of careers services and contextual factors, such as the designed course programmes of the German HEI, including compulsory internships for students, lead to an outstanding demand for career-related workshops and one-to-one sessions among students. Other issues arise through a change in environmental conditions and the professional opportunities of international students or graduates regarding potential labour markets because careers staff at HEIs in general and, in particular, at participating HEIs do not always represent the proportion of international student population, and consequently, there is a lack of awareness and skills of current careers staff regarding cross-cultural competencies, including potential links to international recruiters from home countries.



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