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Promoting the Relevance of Higher Education

Executive Summary

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Promoting the Relevance of Higher Education

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The objective and structure of the study

Europe's knowledge economies need high-level skills, the capacity to innovate and to support democratic societies. In this perspective, the main objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relevance of higher education and how this is promoted in various countries in Europe and beyond. The evidence, conclusions and recommendations are intended to support EU Member States in developing and improving policies that promote the relevance of higher education: for students; for graduates; for employers; and for society. On the basis of a review of relevant literature, policy documents and databases, consultation with national experts and eight in-depth country case studies (Canada [Ontario], the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain) that included interviews with many national stakeholders, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How is the relevance of higher education defined in different member states?
- Which policy levers do member states use to promote higher education relevance?
- Which national policies concerning higher education relevance appear to be effective and good practice examples?
- Which indicators are informative in assessing higher education relevance at system level?
- How can an analytic and diagnostic tool be designed and developed that can provide a systematic assessment of the relevance of higher education systems?

Key findings

Higher education is relevant when it contributes to personal development, sustainable employment and active citizenship

Relevance is understood differently by different stakeholders in higher education. These understandings can refer to the competencies of individual students as well as to their collective outcomes for society. To analyse national policies concerning higher education relevance, and indicators to measure this relevance, we adopted the three main objectives of higher education formulated by the Council of Europe (2007): personal development, sustainable employment and active citizenship.

Personal development relates to individual growth at the psychological, cognitive, social and moral levels. In terms of **sustainable employment**, higher education provides students with the skills to secure and sustain suitable employment. **Active citizenship** encompasses the development of (inter)cultural skills, a sense of citizenship, and political literacy and participation. In addition, higher education relevance relates to different "users" of higher education: students, graduates, employers and society.

Countries differ in the priorities they give to the three higher education relevance dimensions and the different higher education user groups. **Sustainable employment** receives the most explicit attention, primarily as a result of the increasing emphasis on the contribution of higher education to the knowledge economy and because it is arguably easier to measure than personal development and active citizenship. The latter two dimensions are addressed more implicitly in most countries as they are assumed to be embedded in higher education practice. Compared to most other studies, this report broadens the concept of relevance beyond employability.

Countries utilise a variety of policies to address higher education relevance

The eight case study countries promote higher education relevance using a wealth of policy levers, categorised for the purposes of this study into one of the following four groups: regulation, funding, organisation and information policies.

Personal development

Personal development is more often addressed implicitly than explicitly. Explicit levers include the integration of personal development in the learning outcomes of degree programmes (**regulation**), financial support for under-represented student groups to secure equal access (**funding**), supporting students' mental health (**organisation**), and through student satisfaction and engagement surveys (**information**).

Sustainable employment

Sustainable employment receives strong policy attention in most countries, particularly through the "hard" policy levers of regulation and funding. **Laws and regulations** in several countries include a link between the number of study places and labour market needs, or define explicit labour market functions and learning outcomes for specific higher education sectors. Quality assurance and accreditation regulations often explicitly refer to sustainable employment criteria. Typical **funding** policies to promote sustainable employment include:

- Performance funding (rewarding graduation and employment outcomes)
- Scholarships and loans to stimulate graduation and particular professional fields
- Strategic investment programmes guided by quality and employability criteria.

Sustainable employment is often promoted by **organisation** policies such as the establishment of career guidance centres; integrating employers' representatives in programme advisory bodies and accreditation processes; offering new types of degrees or programmes; and regulated access for specific target groups. Finally, **information** policies address employability by means of student, graduate and employer surveys. In addition, platforms to inform students' study choices increasingly include employment information.

Active citizenship

Overall, the active citizenship dimension of higher education is primarily supported through regulation and funding. **Regulations** for active citizenship often include:

- The obligation to educate students for active citizenship
- The facilitation of student participation in higher education governance
- The stimulation of flexible curricula that enable students to engage in civic activity.

Active citizenship is promoted by **funding policies** that:

- Aim to expand access by providing financial support to students from poor socio-economic backgrounds
- Funding, recognising and awarding credits for involvement in student organisations

The only **organisational policy** used to promote active citizenship is the Irish "Campus Engage" initiative, which stimulates students to volunteer with local organisations as an extra-curricular activity. Finally, **information policies** include student surveys that measure how students are integrated into civic activities and how this affects their social values.

Insight into the impact and effectiveness of HE relevance policies is limited

Overall, there is limited knowledge about the effectiveness of policies used to promote the relevance of higher education in the eight case study countries. In most countries, the efficacy of policy levers is neither systematically evaluated nor monitored. If evaluations take place, they often focus on implementation rather than on outcomes. However, the limited evidence available (endorsed in stakeholder interviews) demonstrates that:

- Labour market information allows students to make better educational choices (Spain)
- Extra funding can increase the attractiveness of STEM disciplines for female students (Germany)
- Organising part-time studies for the unemployed increases their employability (Ireland)
- The introduction of associate degree programmes and excellence education tracks show positive effects for all three relevance dimensions (Netherlands)

- A comprehensive policy approach to promote employability in various ways creates strong awareness and relevant activities (France)

More evaluations are needed to obtain enhanced insights into the effectiveness of policy levers and the reasons behind their success or failure. Based on the evidence available we can conclude that:

- Policy instruments need to be designed for their specific national contexts
- The level at which policies need to be developed (national or institutional) has to be carefully considered
- Policy effectiveness improves when relevant stakeholders are involved in policy design and implementation processes

Higher education relevance is assessed by many different indicators across Europe, however, the information gathered is scattered and its value not realised by most stakeholders

There are **many readily available indicators** that offer insights into the relevance of higher education. Our main conclusions on the available data are:

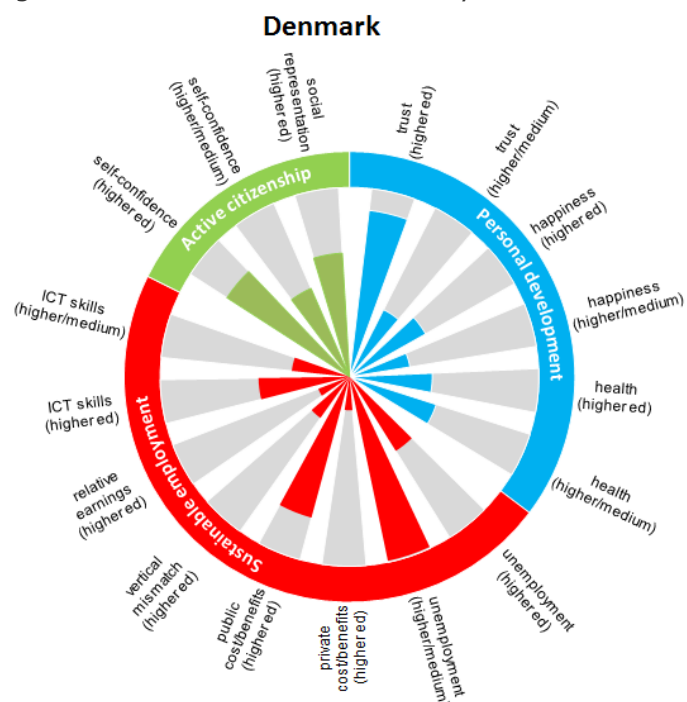
- Although various indicators exist for each of the dimensions of relevance, most indicators suffer from a lack of periodicity and/or limited geographical coverage which prevents longitudinal and international analysis
- Despite a variety of indicators that address sustainable employment, in most countries these do not cover key aspects such as labour market transitions, graduate careers, skills mismatches or graduate and employer views
- While various aspects of personal development are measured in several countries – including happiness, perceived health, trust in others and motivation - there is limited awareness among stakeholders of such indicators
- Indicators in general provide an impression of the overall performance of a system rather than evidence of causal relationships between higher education and its societal outcomes and impact.

An analytic and diagnostic tool can be used to monitor national performance in higher education relevance and to stimulate transparency and policy debate

We have developed an analytic and diagnostic tool in the form of 'country score cards' that provide per country a 1-page overview of the state of the art regarding the relevance of higher education. The 'country score cards' present:

- The main system characteristics (first time entry, attainment, and educational expenditure)
- The main national policy levers (regulations, funding, organisation and information) that are utilised
- A selection of valid and comparable indicators per relevance dimension

Regardless of the limitations of using monitoring indicators – such as limited scope and availability of robust, reliable time series data, and difficulties of causality – the insights gained from the selected indicators



imply positive effects of higher education in many countries. Skills levels and private and social returns are positively related to higher education and seem to be good measures of relevance.

The indicators of the 'country score cards' are presented in a '**wheel chart**'. These can guide the actions of higher education decision-makers. Indicators for personal development include the level of trust in other people, happiness and perceptions of health. The indicators for sustainable employment are unemployment, private and public returns, relative earnings, vertical mismatch, and the distribution of ICT skills. The indicators selected for active citizenship are efficacy in political participation and social background.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of this study we present a number of recommendations for national and EU policy-makers to promote the relevance of higher education.

Governments should develop more explicit policy designs to boost relevance

Though most policy makers and stakeholders across the eight case study countries agree that the relevance of higher education is related to the dimensions of personal development, sustainable employment and active citizenship, most countries give explicit policy attention to sustainable employment, while aspects of personal development and active citizenship are often addressed implicitly. Relevance policies can be made more explicit in the following ways:

- National policy mixes should target a proper balance between the three dimensions of higher education relevance;
- Governments should be clear and explicit in defining and communicating the specific relevance dimensions, aspects, goals and targets that they regard as important, including the reasons for these priorities;
- National policy levers need to be explicit about the expected roles of different stakeholders.

The eight case studies point at several examples of instruments that "work". These can guide national governments in developing their own policy instruments:

Sustainable employment

- Provide extra funding for study programmes that address labour market shortages;
- Undertake graduate and employer surveys to monitor the graduate labour market;
- Involve labour market representatives in advisory committees and the quality assurance of education programmes;
- Organise/improve career orientation and guidance.

Personal development

- Provide targeted funding for under-represented groups;
- Integrate personal development explicitly in programme learning outcomes;
- Measure levels of personal development in student (evaluation) surveys.

Active citizenship

- Allow credit to be awarded for extra-curricular activities and prior learning (non-formal learning);
- Measure levels of active citizenship in student (evaluation) surveys.

Stimulate the collection of evidence on the effectiveness of higher education relevance policies, and monitor, share and adopt successful policy practices

To improve the limited attention for policy evaluation and monitoring, the European Commission and national governments should take the following actions:

- To initiate more systematic national and international comparative empirical research on the impact and effectiveness of higher education relevance policies;
- To link the higher education relevance agenda to other higher education policy areas, for example, modernisation, quality assurance and internationalisation;
- Use good practice examples to inspire national practices, e.g.:
 - Mandatory evaluations of national policies (Denmark and the Netherlands);
 - The use of indicators addressing all three relevance dimensions (Germany: adequate employment of graduates, satisfaction of graduates and employers);
 - Share objective and experience-based information about study programmes at a central study portal (Studiekeuze 123 in the Netherlands).

Governments as well as the European Commission should stimulate the collection of more robust data on the relevance of higher education

It is desirable to organise coordinated action across national borders to build up a more solid knowledge base derived from commonly defined relevance indicators.

- National governments should systematically collect information on the indicators of HE relevance using internationally shared definitions and should monitor outcomes;
- Interaction between decision makers, practitioners and data providers at European and national levels could improve the quality and awareness of available data;
- The European Commission and national governments should invest more effort in international studies that enhance the international knowledge base on the dimensions of HE relevance. Initiatives such as the recent recommendation of the European Council on tracking graduates, including the European pilot graduate survey (EUROGRADUATE), are promising steps in this direction;
- The analytic and diagnostic tool designed and developed within this project is a useful starting point for the systematic monitoring of relevance indicators and can serve as an input for a qualitative policy debate on higher education relevance;
- Linked to the analytic and diagnostic tool, national governments should be encouraged to utilize existing indicators on the personal development and active citizenship dimensions, such the level of trust in other people, level of happiness, self-confidence for political participation, and levels of social representation;
- The European Commission and member states should supplement statistical indicators with in-depth analyses to improve the understanding of the relationship between higher education and its outcomes.

A feasible approach to develop an explicit policy approach to all three dimensions of relevance is for national governments to gradually adopt various elements of these recommendations, while carefully integrating them into their specific contexts.

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