

The Intra-European transferability of graduates' skills gained in the UK

Abstract

Mobility has been seen as the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with student and graduate mobility being promoted and facilitated through the Bologna process. This paper follows the experiences of twelve UK educated mobile graduates of British and other European Union (EU) nationality and analyses both their skills gained by studying at a UK higher education institution and the obstacles they experienced to transfer their UK qualification to a different country. We demonstrate that graduates not only developed – as part of their course and within the opportunities that the UK higher education environment offers – but also used various skills ranging from subject specific to language and generic skills in their current activities. While a UK degree is reputable and well known in other European countries, there seem to be limitations in relation to its transferability and recognition for studying and working beyond the UK which contribute to unequal treatment in the local labour market between domestic and foreign educated graduates. More than a decade after the inception of the Bologna process and the introduction of tools to facilitate mobility, structural barriers still exist which prevent the smooth recognition of skills and qualifications of mobile students and graduates within the EU. This has implications for further study and employment outcomes for mobile graduates but also for mobility decisions before and after higher education.

Keywords: mobility, graduates, skills, barriers, transferability.

Introduction

International student mobility has become very common in an increasingly globalised world. Student mobility is frequently conceptualised in two ways: exchange students spending part of their degree abroad and degree mobile students completing a full degree in a foreign institution. Enrolment of students in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased from 1.3 million in 1990 to 4.3 million in 2011, reflecting an average annual growth rate of approximately six per cent (OECD, 2013). English speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States remain popular destinations for international students. Together, these countries host 38 per cent of all foreign students enrolled in tertiary education worldwide (see Börjesson, this volume).

Since 1999, the Bologna process has aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that would facilitate mobility across HEIs in different European countries. Subsequently, it would lead to the formation of a European labour market and the enhancement of European citizenship and identity (Van Mol, 2014). In this effort, Bologna tools have been established to increase transparency and facilitate the transferability of qualifications such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS - a credit transfer and accumulation system); the Diploma Supplement (document about the nature, context, content and status of studies); and the Qualifications Framework (overarching system which shows how individual qualifications fit) (EUA, 2007). Mobility has been a hallmark for the EHEA and, by 2020, at least 20 per cent of those graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training period abroad (Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve Communiqué, 2009) to increase students' employability. In general, there is a growing emphasis on graduates' employability in Ministerial Communiqués (ibid; London Communiqué, 2007; Bucharest Communiqué, 2012; Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). In this context, the mutual acceptance of qualifications, both by employers and other higher

education institutions (HEIs), is a necessary pre-condition for students' and graduates' mobility. In legal terms, the acceptance of higher education degrees has been regulated in the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, usually referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This convention which was ratified by most European countries states that comparable qualifications of school-leavers and graduates obtained in a different country should be recognised, unless there are substantial differences between national education systems.

At the national level, mobility has been of paramount importance for higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe as it facilitates international knowledge transfer, increases institutional reputation and, for some countries such as the UK, is a potential source of income. Many HEIs have introduced a range of activities to support their internationalisation agenda including international student recruitment campaigns, participation in international higher education networks and fairs, strategic partnerships with a select number of foreign institutions, and international marketing (Sursock, 2015, 32). In the UK specifically, there has been a growing emphasis to increase the attractiveness of UK HEIs for international students since the 1990s (for more on UK policies on internationalisation see Findlay et al, 2011; Brooks et al., 2012). In the academic year 2013/2014, about 73,000 European Union (EU) students and more than 137,000 non-EU students were enrolled on undergraduate courses in the UK suggesting that such degrees are highly regarded (HESA 2015). The main countries of origin of the EU students in 2013/2014 were Germany, France, Italy, Greece and Cyprus (ibid).

From 2012/2013, English HEIs were allowed to charge up to £9,000 tuition fees for both domicile and EU students, with variable (higher) amounts for other international students (BIS, 2011). Against expectations, the overall number of European students has not decreased (HESA 2015) and UK HEIs have welcomed EU and students from third countries

as a funding stream to address public funding cuts. The commitment of UK HEIs towards this goal is reflected in their student recruitment strategies and the expansion of their international offices and services (Findlay, 2011).

Despite increasing financial investment, the individual benefits of mobility are expected to be manifold, including improved language skills and intercultural competencies (Krzakleska and Krupnik, 2005; Wiers-Jenssen, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), transnational academic capital abroad (Munk, 2009) career advantage in domestic labour markets (Waters, 2006; Rizvi, 2000); and personal development gains (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; authors, 2013; Bracht et al. 2006; Crossman and Clarke, 2010; authors, 2013; Messelink et al., 2015), among others. The underlying expectation is that the skills gained whilst studying abroad are of equal or even higher value in a different European country in both employment and further study contexts. However, despite the high financial investment of students to get qualification and skills from UK HEIs, it is still unclear whether this indeed improves their employability in a different European country. The question whether and how skills gained and/or certified in a different country are transferable to a different context and improve the ability to gain, sustain and progress in employment is vastly under-researched (King et al., 2010). Given the political expectations in terms of a smooth transition in between different national HEIs and employers, and the large number of mainly young people expecting higher employability skills, it is surprising that only a few studies evaluated the mobility of the highly skilled within Europe. It remains unclear whether mobility has implications on graduates' employability skills *per se*, and whether these skills are directly transferable to a different European country. Ideally, a European graduate survey would allow researchers to track graduate pathways both within their home country and outside, and thus analyse their outcomes for further study and on the labour market. Whilst the implementation of such a

survey is currently discussed (Mühleck et al., 2015), it is not yet in place to identify potential skill gains and barriers experienced for a representative sample.

This paper is aimed at both researchers and practitioners both within the UK and in other European countries. Especially in the UK context, it will be valuable for the Careers and Employability Services to provide guidance to graduates who plan to move to a European country after their degree completion in the UK. It contributes towards this gap in the scholarly literature using a small sample drawn from a cohort of UK educated mobile graduates of both EU and British origin in order to identify which skills mobile graduates especially value and which types of barriers they might experience. While the UK is part of the EU, graduates in this study are distinguished between 1) UK and 2) EU (EU nationality ie. excluding UK nationals) to enhance simplicity and allow for comparisons.

This paper addresses two main research questions. First, which skills did graduates from UK universities develop and to what extent can they use the acquired skills in their current activities outside of the UK? Second, which barriers did graduates with a UK degree experience when they move to a different European country to pursue further study or employment?

In order to address these two questions, our paper is organised as follows. The first section outlines previous research in relation to the transferability of qualifications and relevant theoretical approaches, followed by a second section which provides information on the methodological approach used. Qualitative findings are presented in the third section in relation to the skills that graduates gained during their studies in the UK and their transferability to other European countries. In the fourth section, barriers experienced in various national and institutional contexts are discussed. The final section concludes.

Theoretical framework and Literature Review

Comparable to previous studies, this study draws on human capital theory and the concept of

transnational informational capital (Wiers-Jennsen and Try, 2005; Munk, 2009). Human capital theory postulates that individuals who invest more in their education will yield more benefits (Becker, 1964) in terms of earnings (Mincer, 1958) and productivity (Lucas, 1988). In a context characterised by mass higher education systems and credential inflation, mobility for, during or after higher education could enable individuals to stand out in an increasingly globalised labour market (Findlay et al., 2012) and can result in inequalities in educational outcomes (Bilecen and Van Mol, this volume). But will any kind of mobility offer this? Munk (2009) uses Bourdieu's informational capital – in its institutionalised state exemplified by education credentials – adding a transnational dimension to it. Transnational informational capital captures individuals' investment in obtaining academic qualifications abroad, which could confer positional advantage to their holders especially when they are obtained in elite foreign universities. This capital is comprised of a) academic capital, in the form of accumulating knowledge and developing intercultural skills and b) symbolic capital in the form of 'signaling' prestige and social class (Munk, 2009). Furthermore, this study is informed by signalling theories with international educational qualifications becoming a 'signal' for distinguishing graduates, mainly used by employers when they look for employees. Whilst the increased skills obtained in higher education are usually undisputed, it is unclear whether this capital will be transferrable to a different country, and if it will result in improved employment prospects. Consequently, we included mobile graduates from both the UK and EU countries to investigate the transferability of UK qualifications to other European countries. Although UK based graduates were unlikely to acquire any mobility capital during their studies, their mobility after graduation might 'signal' holding skills and attributes in demand by potential employers or seen as an asset for further studies in a different country.

Research on Intra-European international student mobility has been preoccupied with

exchange students, focusing mainly on the impact and policy implications of the ERASMUS programme. Few studies have concentrated on or included returning and mobile graduates – to some extent due to the lack of appropriate databases and registries to track this group, see introduction – and managed to draw comparisons between different groups of mobile and non-mobile students (Brooks et al., 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011; Jahr and Teichler, 2002). When it comes to examining the relationship between mobility and labour market outcomes and the transferability of skills and qualifications across borders, there seem to be contrasting views.

Studies of immigrants in the labour market beyond Europe, for example, reveal that education from abroad has been less favoured than education from the host country as evidenced in the US (Borjas, 1995, Zeng and Xie, 2004) and Canada (Krahn et al., 2000). These studies thus suggest significant challenges in relation to the transferability of skills across borders. In Europe, studies from Norway, Sweden and Finland showed that, compared to home educated students, degree mobile students with a foreign degree experienced prolonged periods of unemployment and over-education when they returned to their home country, explained by their lack of professional networks, country-specific capital and limited familiarity of both students and employers in the domestic labour market (Wiers- Jenssen, 2011; Garam, 2005). Furthermore, comparative research in Nordic countries demonstrated that exchange students (such as ERASMUS) experienced a smoother transition from study to employment compared to degree mobile students. While employers value international experience, they seem to prefer graduates who combine this experience with local professional networks and qualifications that they are aware of (Saarikalio-Torp and Wiers- Jenssen, 2010; Zadeh, 1999). When it comes to the benefits but also the challenges that study mobility entails, it is important to distinguish between exchange students who gain a qualification from a national HEI and degree mobile students who graduate with a foreign

qualification. While both groups have been found to be more likely to hold an international job and work abroad than non-mobile students (Jahr and Teichler, 2002), returning degree mobile students face more difficulties than exchange students in the integration to their home labour market.

In the British context, Brooks et al. (2012) concluded that even in cases where UK students completed degrees in prestigious universities abroad, their cultural capital did not necessarily transfer across national borders in an unproblematic manner. This limited transferability of qualifications might be explained by the different geographies of mobility reflecting different understandings and perceptions of foreign qualifications in different labour markets (Brooks et al. 2012; Lianos et al. 2004).

In contrast to the studies outlined above, the focus of this paper lies on the type of skills mobile graduates gained in higher education in the UK and value in their current activity; and if and what kind of barriers graduates experienced when trying to transfer these skills and qualifications to a different European country. Quantitative analysis of a longitudinal study of students and graduates from UK HEIs – where this sample was drawn from – demonstrated that the majority of UK and EU graduates were employed in graduate occupations (Behle and Tzanakou, 2014, Behle, 2016). UK graduates were less likely to pursue further studies compared to European graduates (Behle, 2016, 2014). However, the quantitative analysis failed to provide information on graduates' skill use and the barriers they might have experienced when searching for employment and/or further study in a different European country. This study concentrates on the Intra-European transferability skills and qualifications gained at UK HEIs, as experienced by graduates of both British and European origin. It allows for an evaluation of the value of the UK degree in different European labour markets and the barriers that graduates face during their transitions to work or further education.

The Empirical study

Methods

This paper is based on a qualitative study comprising interviews with twelve UK-educated mobile graduates with British and European origin identified through the Futuretrack survey. Futuretrack was a representative longitudinal study of all applicants to higher education in the UK in 2006 (for an undergraduate degree) (see for example, Purcell et al., 2013). Based on Futuretrack's final wave, a subsample of 644 graduates were identified who had completed a first degree in various UK and had moved to a different European country after their degree. This subsample was then categorised into the following two groups of graduates. First, European movers who comprised of European graduates (from EU-28 countries including graduates with a British nationality) who moved to a different European country after their degree (referred to as European movers, accounting for 64% of subsample). It was considered to divide further this group into British and non-British but the latter consisted only for 15% of the subsample and the qualitative study did not show any differences between these two groups. Second, European graduates (from EU-28 countries excluding the UK) who returned to either the country they previously lived in when applying to UK HEI in 2006 or in their country of birth (referred to as European returners, accounting for 36% of subsample). Seven interviews were conducted with European movers and five interviews with European returners, who returned to their country after completing their undergraduate degree in the UK.

These interviewees represented a diverse group of graduates (in terms of subject of degree, current activity, nationality, destination country) who pursued geographical mobility after the completion of a UK undergraduate degree in various UK HEIs. The purpose was to get perceptions of graduates with a UK undergraduate degree – irrespective of their nationality –

regarding the development, use and transferability of skills to various higher education and employment contexts beyond the UK but within Europe. The inclusion of UK nationals in the sample was decided on the basis of identifying any similarities or differences in transferability of the UK degree in European countries (other than the UK) compared to the European graduates with a UK degree. We included interviewees from a range of subjects from natural sciences to arts, humanities and social sciences. Seven interviewees reported employment as their current activity and five were enrolled in further studies. All interviewees with a degree in natural sciences were undertaking further studies. Nine interviewees were female and three were male. Most had studied in well-known UK universities and came from privileged backgrounds (based on parental occupation) with four out of five UK domiciled interviewees having a managerial and professional parental background. (For an overview of the characteristics in the interviewees of this study, please see Table 1.)

The interviews were semi-structured telephone interviews with each one lasting between 30 minutes and an hour. They were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Both authors read and coded the transcribed documents carefully, identifying two main themes with sub-themes which is reflected in the structure of the findings section. In contrast to the quantitative analysis which dealt with the activities of Intra-European graduates, the initial focus of this qualitative study was to investigate the skills gained during higher education in the UK and their transferability to a different national environment. As part of the transferability questions, we asked about barriers which quickly emerged as a theme which was later comprised of barriers to further study and barriers to employment. These themes were checked against the educational and family background information of the interviewees to explore any potential patterns that would explain their experiences. The researchers were of European origin and had experience of Intra-European mobility which

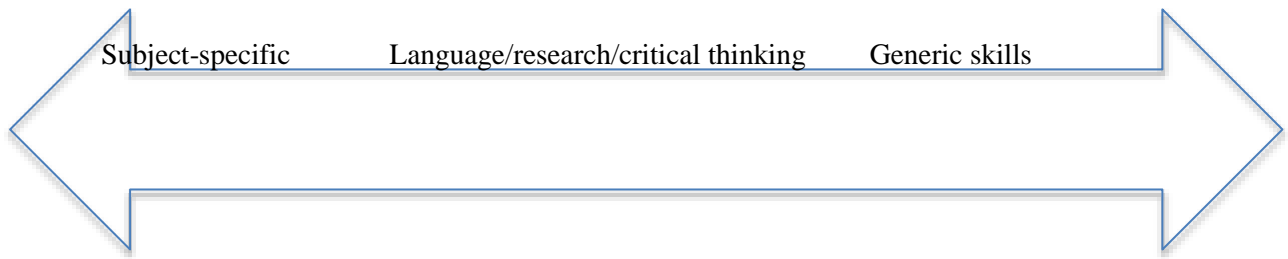
enabled building rapport with interviewees and sometimes understanding the national context they were referring to.

While quantitative studies report on recognition issues of foreign qualifications in Europe (Grabher et al., 2014; ESU, 2012), they lack in presenting contextualised accounts of the individuals in relation to this topic. This study contributes to this gap presenting personal experiences from a diverse group of graduates that shed light into the transferability of the UK undergraduate degree in various European higher education and employment contexts.

Results

Development and use of skills in current activity

Researching ‘skills of graduates’ or ‘graduate skills’ has been problematic (James et al., 2013) for various reasons including the confusing plethora of terms for such skills which seem to be used interchangeably (Clanchy and Ballard; 1995; Sumsion and Goodfellow; 2004). Resolving this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, thus a comprehensive classification was employed. Skills were categorised into subject-specific skills (developed through a specific subject context) and generic skills (developed through the general higher education environment) since these terms have been widely used in the literature (Wilton, 2011; Felstead et al., 2007). However, classifying skills such as critical thinking, research and language skills was not as straightforward since the latter could be developed in both abovementioned ways.



Hence, a continuum was considered appropriate to reflect how such skills fit together. For example, language skills could be viewed both as subject specific skills if an individual studied languages for their degree and as generic skills if they acquired them in highly international academic environments as the UK.

All interviewees in natural sciences such as physics, geography and chemistry were pursuing further studies and were thus more likely to develop and use subject specific knowledge and skills that they gained during their degree such as report writing, lab work, or computer programming. For example, Chris, a European mover, utilised his general scientific background and computer programming from his first degree in his PhD in Geography in an Austrian institution. Similarly, Maria pursuing a PhD in Chemistry in Switzerland used the knowledge from her lab course in the UK in relation to working with different tools and software.

The majority of interviewees emphasised the research and critical thinking skills they developed during their studies in the UK irrespective of their disciplinary background. Graduates were encouraged to challenge concepts, arguments, and ideas as part of their course. They were also taught emphasised how to present their research skills and were able to reflect on the ways that these skills enabled them to carry out their daily job tasks. Hannah who worked in Czech Republic as a customer service agent commented:

‘The thing I put in my CV is that history taught me to research, compile and present the information’ [...] (the most important skills in my current role) is researching and gathering information’

[Hannah, ¹female, European mover, employee]

A European returner, Alexandra, highlighted how her knowledge about the research process had enhanced her confidence in undertaking conservation work in Greece. Likewise, a European mover working in an international organisation in Belgium reported that she streamlined her current role due to her capability to evaluate research articles.

Unsurprisingly, language skills were invaluable for most respondents irrespective of their disciplinary background and their current activity. Apart from those few interviewees who had studied languages as part of their degree, many European graduates (both movers and returners) commented that they benefited from studying for a higher education degree in the UK in advancing their English language skills on top of their disciplinary knowledge. In alignment with previous research (Jahr and Teichler, 2002, Wiers-Jenssen and Try 2005), almost half of the interviewees were working in international teams or had tasks that required multilingualism covering a range of jobs from customer service agent working with European customers in the Czech Republic, manager in an expatriate agency in Spain to European and international organisations in Brussels and Geneva. Those interviewees with international roles were mainly found in large multicultural cities such as Brussels, Geneva and Madrid. This suggests that such cities offer international opportunities and/or present fewer obstacles than others due to the high influx of international workforce and the need for employers to adjust and accommodate their needs to the existing labour supply. For example, Jenny reported that her language skills, her various mobility experiences and the highly

¹ Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees.

international environment at university in the UK enhanced her cultural awareness and was of paramount importance in getting her current job in a prestigious international organisation. Even graduates engaged in further studies (often doctoral candidates) reported how their English language skills helped them in conferences and in engaging in dialogue with academic colleagues from different cultures.

Many interviewees reported that they developed generic skills such as presentation and communication skills, organisational, teamwork and people skills not only through their higher education courses but also through their extracurricular activities. The emphasis of UK degrees on generic skills in the past decade (see for example Wilton, 2011; author et al, 2015) seems to have been noticed by HEIs and welcomed by mobile graduates both in further study and employment contexts.

‘Presentation skills, and the team work, that was really emphasised in my course, and we did not really do that at school, so that was really developed during these three years.’

[Alison, female, European returner, further study]

Interviewees who had experience of non-UK higher education systems were able to compare and find similarities and differences with the UK higher education. For example, Maria, a European mover, highlighted the importance of transferrable skills in standing out from the crowd compared with other students:

‘I think in the UK in general, you have to do a lot of presentations and a lot of transferrable skills which I think are pretty useful because I noticed here when I took some courses with master students (different HEI, in another country), they are really

bad at presenting, they have a lot of knowledge, they knew everything about their topic but they were just not able to sell it well.'

[Maria, female, European mover, further study]

In terms of extracurricular activities, two interviewees emphasised how their election as presidents for university societies enhanced their organisational and people skills, which were indispensable for their current employment. For example, Laura, a UK graduate working as a manager in an agency for expatriates considered that her previous role as President of a university society enabled her to develop organisational and management skills for her current workplace.

In addition, Jenny reported how she managed to enhance her communication skills and her confidence during her studies in the UK by talking to people she did not know '*without being afraid to put out my ideas*'. She acknowledged the significance of the international higher education environment in the UK which had familiarised her in interacting with people from multicultural backgrounds:

'The greatest skill was the environment, being surrounded by so many different people with cultural backgrounds and interact positively with those people'.

[Jenny, female, European mover, employee]

Our results hence suggest that a UK undergraduate qualification offers a plethora of skills graduates can transfer and utilise in their subsequent activities in various national contexts. All interviewees in the natural sciences were pursuing further studies and were thus more likely to comment on the development and utilisation of subject specific skills in their Masters or PhD, while those in social sciences and arts/humanities highlighted the

significance of critical thinking and research skills in fulfilling their daily employment tasks. Pertinent to the development of these skills is not only the academic quality and content of the UK courses but also the highly internationalised student/staff population of UK HEIs and the availability of miscellaneous non-academic activities to students which were instrumental in enhancing and acquiring skills. This is exemplified by the abovementioned advancement of generic and language skills of interviewees who secured employment in a different country by being able to demonstrate evidence of their multilingualism and their organisational, communication and management abilities. The following section will look at the barriers that mobile graduates experienced.

Barriers in the transferability of the UK degree to different national contexts

About a third of the interviewees did not experience any kind of barriers due to their previous regional employment experiences and established networks and/or employers' need for specific linguistic or cultural skills. As one interviewee mentioned, '*Brussels employment world is rather international and a UK degree is very reputable*'. The majority of interviewees reported that a UK degree was well known in both further study and employment contexts beyond the UK. In a few instances, recruiters were British or had studied in the UK themselves and were aware of what the degree involved. Despite these findings and somewhat surprisingly, the rest of the interviewees experienced barriers of variable significance, including the European graduates that returned to their home country.

Barriers to further study

As discussed in the introduction, the Bologna process and the Lisbon Convention were implemented to enable mobile students and graduates to have a smooth transitions between degree cycles across different HEIs. However, a report by the European University

Association exploring the implementation of Bologna tools concluded that there are still concerns about superficial or inconsistent application across and within HEIs, institutions and countries (EUA 2010). This study confirms these findings and provides specific accounts of mobile graduates within Europe who experienced barriers such as the lack of information about general and higher education related regulations. Graduates reported highly bureaucratic procedures in their efforts to pursue further studies - for example:

“For the university application I had to provide a lot of documents. But because the documents were not in German, and apparently Britain is not signed up to some treaty, I had to have them all signed off by a solicitor to say that they are genuine. (...) That was a bit of hassle, and time, and money.”

[Chris, male, European mover, further study]

John, a European returner, found it challenging to obtain information about whether a four-year undergraduate course from the UK would render him eligible for PhD enrolment, while Craig, a UK graduate, particularly criticised the difficulty of comparing the content of courses between countries:

“It would be very useful to do that, and I imagine, competitive, because it would allow you to actually compare and see what they want in their courses.”

[Craig, male, European mover, further study]

In terms of admission to further studies, European HEIs in this study did not seem to use the available European tools or follow consistent approaches towards prospective applicants with foreign and domestic degrees.

For example, Maria, pursuing her PhD in a Swiss institution, reported that she negotiated with the institution on the basis of the marks in her UK degree and managed not to take an otherwise compulsory entry exam for her PhD. As she explained, local graduates from the Swiss institution were not required to be examined either. In contrast, one of her classmates from the same course in the UK was required to take the exam. She concluded:

“The process seemed to be very ‘individualised’. There are no official criteria.”

[Maria, female, European mover, further study]

Alison, a European returner, could not access the labour market in her home country and decided to apply to a local university to increase her likelihood of finding employment. Her application was rejected and her UK degree was not recognised by any national HEI she applied to:

“So I thought I’d do a Masters’ degree at my local university, and the combination of my UK BA degree and the Masters’ degree from the local university should be fine. And then, after I had applied, I got a letter from the local university. The letter stated that the UK University I studied at was not sufficient enough to allow me to study at a higher level at a German university.” [After describing her rejection from Master courses at other universities] “They all said that the degree from my university was not enough”

[Alison, female, European returner, further study]

These examples reflect perceptions of the UK degree qualifications as potentially limited in providing the appropriate background for further studies. John, a European returner described a disappointing situation in his home country. When he enrolled for a Masters' degree, he realised that his subject-specific knowledge and skills from his UK degree were not sufficient enough to continue his Master studies. Thus, he had to attend the third year of the Bachelor's degree offered in the Belgian institution in order to gain the necessary subject-specific knowledge and skills. Interestingly, he also mentioned the requirements for doctoral enrolment based on ECTS credits, which were mainly linked to duration of degrees rather than learning outcomes. According to the institutional website, doctoral candidates would need to have completed a Bachelor's and Master's degree lasting at least five years and worth 300 ECTS credits. That meant that the completion of a Bachelor's and Master's degree in the UK would not have made him eligible for a doctorate in his home country. It should be noted, though, that in terms of the three-cycle system of the Bologna process, graduates with a UK Bachelor (high mark) can enrol in doctoral programmes in the UK without completing a Masters' degree which is not the case in other European countries.

In alignment with research evidence showing ongoing recognition issues of student mobility (Grabher et al., 2014; ESU, 2012), graduates in this study drew attention to problems finding necessary information as well as barriers experienced in the admission process and during their studies. Based on the abovementioned experiences of the interviewees, accessing further studies after completing a Bachelor's degree in UK universities was not a straightforward process. It entailed negotiations and, in some cases, frustration for the graduates as their qualification or their level of skills was not seen as appropriate for further study.

Differences in the higher education systems across countries seem to account for this. UK higher education courses put less emphasis on subject specific content providing a broad

liberal base (Little, 2001). In a comparative study of graduates, it was suggested that UK graduates ‘learn less’ than their European counterparts due to shorter and less intense study programmes and the former were more likely to report the development of generic skills rather than ‘mastery of own field’ (Brennan and Tang, 2008). This is not surprising considering that the UK graduates enter a more flexible labour market in the UK, accessing generalist graduate jobs often with a Bachelor rather than a Master’s (Little and Lore, 2010). However, there is a risk that an undergraduate degree from the UK limits the participation of UK educated graduates in the EHEA.

Barriers to finding employment

When it came to barriers regarding employment, especially European returners expressed dissatisfaction as their qualification was regarded as less reputable compared to graduates from the domestic higher education system.

For example, Jenny working in Switzerland would not consider returning to her home country, France:

“If I (...) had a job interview with a French person in front of me they would always ask me why I did not even considering study in France. (...) The original idea would be that I was not good enough to get into one of the French schools. [After describing a failed job interview] It basically made me realise that I should not even try to get into any job in France. My profile does not fit into the system anymore so I don’t even bother trying”.

[Jenny, female, European mover, employee]

This indicates either the ‘different positioning of UK degrees’ in various domestic labour markets (Brooks et al., 2012) or/and the limited awareness and resources of employers to find information of degrees beyond their national context (Wiers-Jennsen and Try, 2005).

Similarly, Alison, returning to her home country, Germany, described how the recent implementation of the three-cycle degree system had aggravated the transferability of her UK degree.

“The companies there did not know what the Bachelor’s degree is, so I had problems. As the companies said: We don’t really know what she actually did in her studies, and in a foreign language as well, so we’d rather pick someone who did a degree at a local university”.

[Alison, female, European returner, further study]

Alexandra, a returner to Greece, after completing an undergraduate and a Masters’ degree in two UK universities reported that these qualifications were recognised as an equivalent Bachelor’s degree in the Greek system. In addition, she had to pay a fee for the degree recognition.

“You need four years of degree in the UK to be recognised, which does not make sense because the fourth year in Greece - in this subject - is internships. In the UK, these internships were undertaken during the summer.”

[Alexandra, female, European returner, employee]

In her case, lack of degree recognition entailed implications in terms of accessing employment opportunities since the Greek Ministry often procures relevant vacancies and requires a certificate of degree recognition by the Hellenic National Academic Recognition Information Centre (DOATAP). These recognition difficulties could be explained by Greece's non-ratification of the Lisbon Convention about the recognition of foreign degrees.

As shown above, graduates returning to their home countries with a UK degree, faced difficulties in accessing labour market opportunities for various reasons ranging from lack of legislation and non-ratification of international agreements (for example Lisbon Convention), to lack of employers' awareness about foreign degrees and preferences towards local graduates. This could also imply different positioning of home qualifications against foreign qualifications.

Looking closely at these data, only European returners reported employment barriers. European movers either had through previous experience already developed networks and/or pursued international jobs where language and interpersonal skills were very important. At the same time, a couple of them had only moved to the country after getting an employment offer.

Conversely, European returners seemed to arrive to their home country full of expectations about the standing of their reputable UK degree in their home labour market without considering 1) the degree of awareness of employers regarding foreign and domestic degrees and following on from this 2) their competitive advantage in jobs with international components compared to jobs where they compete with domestically educated graduates. This group of students invested financially and personally in studying in institutions abroad to enhance opportunities in the international (King, 2010) and the local labour market. However, after their mobility experience, they found themselves to be in an unequal position in the local labour market compared to the domestic educated graduates (Guth and Gill,

2008). Further research with a larger sample is required to explore whether these are isolated examples or common for mobile graduates.

Conclusions

To date, academic studies preoccupied with the relationship between mobility and labour market outcomes concluded that mobility entails benefits in personal development, language proficiency, cultural skills, academic skills and employability skills (Bracht et al., 2006; authors, 2014; 2013; Wiers-Jennsen, 2002). The findings in this article confirm these results and add that – in most cases – that students benefited by investing in higher education in the UK and by accumulating academic capital in relation to developing skills and enriching knowledge. More specifically, and in relation to the first research question posed about skills development and utilisation in different national contexts, both UK and EU graduates highlighted the development of a range of skills including subject specific, critical thinking and research skills, language skills and generic skills such as team working, presentation and communication across different cultural contexts. While these skills were developed as part of degree courses and/or within the opportunities that the UK higher education environment offers, graduates have used these skills to a great extent to access and utilise in subsequent employment or studies.

Regarding research question two about the barriers that graduates with a UK degree come across, this study showed that graduates faced obstacles in relation to pursuing further studies or employment in European countries other than the UK. The transnational dimension of this capital was variably interpreted in domestic labour markets and higher education systems across Europe. In terms of further studies, the different higher education context in the UK in relation to undergraduate study programmes (duration, intensity and degree transition) points towards a problematic transfer of qualifications to further studies beyond

the UK resulting in rejection of applications, requirement of exams and attendance of lower level of courses for graduates that completed a UK degree. Bureaucratic procedures and a lack of clarity regarding required documents and qualifications for enrolment were also challenges for those graduates who wanted to undertake further studies in a HEI in another country. This study shows that the transferability of foreign qualifications is still challenging in the EHEA. Thus, it raises questions about the implementation of Bologna process tools and concerns about their intended impact. Our findings are in accordance with a recent European-wide study confirming a national '*tendency for countries to see their own systems and students more positively than those elsewhere*' (Crosier et al., 2012, p.166). Furthermore, a report by the European University Association exploring the implementation of Bologna tools highlighted concerns about superficial or inconsistent application across and within HEIs, institutions and countries (EUA 2010).

In terms of employment, the transferability of higher education degrees did not only depend on the skills and knowledge that graduates acquired but also on whether and how foreign qualifications were interpreted in labour market contexts. In alignment with other studies on the positioning of western degrees and different geographies (Brooks et al., 2012; Waters, 2006; Lianos et al., 2004), the UK degree was considered as both an advantage and a disadvantage. While most respondents reported that the UK degree was reputable and well known, only two indicated that it gave them a positional advantage in the respective domestic labour market. However, mobility experience and its linked intercultural and language skills was advantageous for some UK and European graduates in getting international jobs. Employers thus favoured graduates with these types of skills if they were looking to fill international jobs. However, was not the case for other types of posts where foreign educated and local graduates compete (Saarikalio-Torp and Wiers-Jenssen, 2010). European movers and UK graduates in this study faced no difficulties in finding jobs with international

components, suggesting: first, employers with roles that require language skills and transferrable skills are interested in graduates with transnational qualifications and second, having previous work or study experience in the receiving country and looking for roles where a foreign qualification is welcomed by employers can alleviate potential barriers for transferability of qualifications. On the contrary, European returners did not necessarily look out for roles with an international component in their home labour market, possibly due to their expectation of having qualifications of equal or higher value to those carrying domestic qualifications. In addition, the interdependence between higher education and the labour market at national level results in some employers preferring local graduates (Wiers-Jennsen, 2011; Wiers-Jennsen and Try, 2005). Employers' behavior is not informed by signaling theories either because they are not aware or have limited resources to actually find information for degrees beyond their national context. If this is the case, it would be interesting to explore further which employers are interested in mobile graduates.

This study suggests that there is not always a positive relationship between student mobility and employability. We identified cases of returners being at a disadvantageous position in the local labour market, contributing to inequalities of outcome and employment disparities between foreign-educated and domestic-educated graduates (see also Bilecen and Van Mol, this volume). Questions are thus raised about how far investment in foreign education can be justified in terms of enhancing employability since the mobility experience for returners was not acknowledged or welcomed in specific sectors and jobs in the local labour market.

Considering that this study was based on twelve interviews with European mobile graduates, there are obvious limitations in terms of its representativeness. It is not possible to make claims that can be generalised to the respective population and it is not clear to what extent UK degrees or degrees from other countries would bring about similar problems.

However this study offers insights into the difficulties entailed in mobility after graduation in a country other than the country of education which come in contrast with a European promoting discourse about mobility as a positional advantage with high expectations attached to it.

This study has implications for prospective students, graduates, HEIs, employers, and countries if the abovementioned difficulties apply to a higher number of individuals. Prospective European students will be discouraged from moving abroad for a higher education qualification to avoid difficulties in degree recognition beyond the country of education. This will affect negatively the numbers of degree mobile students and, at the systemic level on higher education institutions, employers, and countries who miss out on developing a diverse and highly mobile workforce with high intercultural skills which are increasingly required to operate in a globalised world. Currently, many UK HEIs compete for a share in the market for European students to maintain the funding for their institution. However, whilst much effort is undertaken to advertise and praise the skills mobile students can acquire at a UK HEI relatively little is done to ensure the transferability of these skills in a different national system. If the UK wants to remain one of the most important providers for international education more efforts need to be focused on providing information for employers and HEIs beyond the UK borders. At the European level, mobility difficulties will blur the vision of a European Higher Education Area, a European labour market and a European identity. While prospective European students need to ensure that their foreign qualification will be recognised and ‘transferred’ beyond the country of education, more needs to be done to safeguard smooth mobility transitions (between HEIs and higher education to work) of European students and graduates within Europe. As one of the interviewees reported, prospective students in Europe will benefit from a comprehensive

guide for retrieving information about enrolment and recognition of qualifications and comparing higher education courses across institutions and countries.

At a time where mobility and employability are strategic objectives from the EHEA, it is of great significance to investigate whether individuals benefit from their experience abroad especially in terms of the transferability of qualifications and skills in countries beyond their country of education. It is suggested that graduates educated in the UK (both EU and British) – despite the reputation of the UK higher education system – come across systemic barriers and difficulties when they move beyond the UK (but within Europe) to pursue further studies and/or find employment. The study has identified the need for further mixed methods research (comprised of representative large-scale quantitative research and qualitative follow up research) on the transferability of skills and qualifications within the EHEA that would allow addressing systematically the variability of barriers across different destination countries in Europe in relation to international degree mobility.

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Table 1

Alias	Gender	Age	Type of mobility	Current Activity	Country of current residence	Subject studied in the UK	Country (where they applied to HE from)	Occupational parental background
Maria	Female	26	European mover	Further study	Switzerland	Chemistry	Czech Republic	Managerial and professional
Kate	Female	28	European returner	Employed	Denmark	Event Management	Denmark	Intermediate
Alexandra	Female	31	European returner	Employed	Greece	Conservation	Greece	Intermediate
Lynne	Female	28	European returner	Employed	Portugal	Creative Arts and Design	Portugal	Managerial and professional

John	Male	25	European returner	Further study	Belgium	Physics	Belgium	Intermediate
Jenny	Female	25	European mover	Employed	Switzerland	Politics	France	Managerial and professional
Alison	Female	27	European returner	Further Study	Germany	International business	Germany	Intermediate
Hannah	Female	26	European mover	Employed	Czech Republic	History with German	UK	Managerial and professional
Chris	Male	25	European mover	Further Study	Austria	Geography	UK	Managerial and professional
Olivia	Female	25	European mover	Employed	Belgium	History and English	UK	Managerial and professional

Craig	Male	25	European mover	Further Study	Sweden	Politics and Philosophy	UK	Routine and Manual occupations
Laura	Female	26	European mover	Employed	Spain	French and Spanish	UK	Managerial and professional
