

# **Graduate recruitment and graduate attributes in European labour markets: a comparative study of four countries**

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**Graduate Recruitment and Graduate Attributes in European Labour  
Markets: a comparative study of four countries**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of higher education and the graduate labour market in selected European countries in order to establish the extent to which a European wide model of graduate recruitment can be developed. It starts with the assumption that there is a gap between the demand for and the supply of graduates in the European labour market. Expectations and experiences of graduating and graduated students from a number of European (collaborating) universities are sought and analysed in order to find out if European universities are producing graduates with the knowledge and skills needed by European employers. The main research question is that: ‘since more and more students are graduating from universities of other countries and are likely to be employed in their home or third countries within the European Union (EU), will it be possible to have a common qualifications structure and similar graduate recruitment procedures?’. To answer this question, secondary data, which have been collected through an extensive review of relevant literature, and primary data, which have been gathered through the use of questionnaires, have been used. The analysis of data collected has revealed the use of a wide diversity of approach among the countries studied. Despite being part of an ever-closer union, there are still many differences in education systems and in the graduate recruitment policies and practices used by graduate employers. There is a lack of awareness from both employers and graduates in one country of employment choices and education systems available in other countries. It is concluded, however, that in light of the increasing economic, political and legal integration among the EU member states, the high level of collaboration among many institutions of higher education, the willingness of member states to meet the objectives of the Bologna declaration, and the expanding presence of many multinational companies in Europe, it would be possible to develop a European model of good practice in graduate recruitment and selection, despite the current differences in education systems and labour market trends.

**Introduction**

Recent studies of graduate recruitment and employability in a number of EU (European Union) countries have concluded that there is a mismatch between the demand for and supply of graduates in European labour markets (CIPD 2007a; Eurostat 2007; Weitzel et

al. 2008; Hurrell et al., 2011; Wilton, 2011). Many graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to gain appropriate employment at a time when they have freedom of movement and a choice of jobs in over twenty countries. The supply of graduates exceeds the demand for graduate employment in most of the EU labour markets. In the UK, for example, a study of labour market trends between 1986 and 2006 identified a surplus of about one million graduates who cannot find jobs relevant to their degrees (Festead et al., 2007). Competition for graduate jobs has been the toughest ever while recruitment is still in the increase as companies attempt to recruit the best talents they can have (*The Times*, 2010). Graduate underemployment has become a real problem, as many graduates are unable to utilize their graduate knowledge and skills (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Hurrell et al., 2011). The challenges that graduates face in a large and highly competitive labour market partly arise from the fact that there are different higher education (HE) systems awarding a variety of qualifications that are supposed to enable their holders to enter the graduate labour market. On the supply side, the European labour markets reflect a wide variety of educational systems, qualifications and academic disciplines, but the graduate jobs that are available - the demand side - are relatively homogeneous, limited in scope and increasingly competitive. Some studies have attempted to explore this phenomenon (Anderson and Witvliet 2008; Sackett and Lievens 2008; Broadbridge et al., 2009; Hurrell et al., 2011) in different sectors of the economy but have mainly concentrated on the relationship between the applicant (person) and the recruiter (organization), and have overlooked the role of HE institutions (HEIs) that prepare the person for work in the organization. Higher education has become widely available as EU governments aspire to produce highly talented graduates to meet the demands of a knowledge economy and to reduce social and economic inequalities. However, as Wilton (2011: 85) asserted: 'the relationship between employability and employment is far from straightforward' despite the improvement in employability skills through higher education there are still problem of graduate employment.

The person-organization fit analysis that has dominated the literature on graduate recruitment has restricted the scope for analysing and, hence, understanding the process of graduate recruitment because it excludes the role that HE can play in the transition from study to workplace. Moreover, as far as European labour markets are concerned, there is limited information about the type of methods organizations throughout Europe use to select graduates from different countries, or about the extent to which such methods have been successful in attracting graduates who possess appropriate attributes that meet the needs of current and future needs of employers. This study aims to go beyond the person-organization fit perspective by exploring the organization (university)-graduate (person)-organization (employer)-relationship. Graduate recruitment is a two way process that is influenced by a third factor. The two opposing factors are graduate attributes and organisational features. The thirds factor is higher education institutions. Graduate attributes are the product of years of higher educations. Universities' programmes and learning experience are expected to contribute to the development of graduate attributes or characteristics such as becoming confident thinkers, determined employees, etc. Higher education is supposed to prepare students for the world of work and to provide employers with the choice of talents for their operations. 'Higher education provides the raw material for that training by identifying and selecting the 'most able' and providing them with a strong education foundation on which subsequent work-related training can be built' (Brennan and Little, 2010: 5). Organisational and job features are various and wide ranging from the reward package to reputation and caring for employees. Graduates 'have a drive for career success and linear promotion, wanting to meet their own personal goals,

develop themselves and take personal responsibility for their own career. To this end they will seek training opportunities and professional development. As graduates they want to use the knowledge they have gained in their degree and would like to be fast tracked, or seek higher entry levels to an organization than non-graduates. They have high expectations of their employers: they want to work in a good working environment and desire their bosses to be supportive, open and positive.....' However, they like 'a more balanced lifestyle (although they are willing to sacrifice work-life balance in the short term if this supports their career); both men and women value work and home life, wanting to work to live (rather than live to work)' (Broadbridge et al., 2009: 406). With these attributes they have their own perceptions of their future employers. 'They favour an inclusive style of management; wanting a fair compensation and wanting to work within a positive company culture'. Career expectations vary from one individual to another and may include the reward package, employability opportunities, company attributes and employee-employer relations.

Before discussing the study and its findings, a brief overview of current European labour market trends and HE systems will be provided.

### **Context and content of European Labour markets**

European labour markets differ in size and composition but as EU integration progresses they have become more alike in their employment regulations, policies and practices, and in the composition of the workforce. The adoption of the Social Charter and the implementation of an increasing number of directives have over the years led to similar labour market trends despite the fact that some countries such as the UK are less regulated than others such as France and Spain. Common labour market trends include the increase in the services sector and the decline in the manufacturing and industrial sectors, the growth of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), and increasing levels of investment by non-European multinational companies (MNCs). While these changes have affected graduate recruitment as more graduates have had to seek employment in the services sector, SMEs and in non-European MNCs (CIPD 2007a; Anderson and Witvliet 2008) large European organizations are still the employers most preferred by graduates.

Other characteristics of the EU labour markets are the use of flexible working practices, the increasing participation of women, and the increasing employment of migrant workers. The use of flexible working practices is common across the EU (Brewster, 1998) and has traditionally been used for low level jobs, mainly benefiting women balancing work and family commitments (Straub 2007). Today all employees are expected to accept flexible working arrangements. Many graduates have had to start their first jobs on short-term or project-based contracts or on a part-time basis (Terjesen, Vinnicombe and Freeman 2007; CIPD, 2007a). In addition, university students are increasingly entering the labour market as part-time employees before graduation, working on average about 19.8 hours per week (Swain, 1999).

These trends have had a significant impact on how employers attract and select future employees. Methods used in the 1990s are significantly different from those used today. A study of graduate recruitment in the UK (Keenan 1995) found that application forms, interviews and references were the most popular methods. By 2007, the use of the Internet, assessment centres and interviews were the most popular methods (CIPD 2007a). Elsewhere in the EU the selection of graduates was usually based on direct contacts with

graduates, through internships, word of mouth, and unsolicited applications. The submission of a CV, copies of qualifications and a letter asking for employment were the norm (Dany and Torchy, 1994). This is changing because of advances in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Anderson and Witvliet (2008) found that the use of application forms and online recruitment are on the increase. In Germany, the most popular method of recruitment in the top 1,000 companies is electronic recruitment. More than 89 % of German companies use their company websites to advertise job vacancies and only 27 % use print media (Weitzel et al. 2008). However, many employers are still using traditional methods of recruitment and selection. For example, in the UK where the Internet is widely used more than 75 % of employers still advertise their job vacancies in local, national and/or specialised journals and magazines (CIPD 2007a) as well as online.

Direct contacts with applicants through graduate recruitment fairs and visits to universities have been common methods of recruitment in the UK and other European countries (Stewart and Knowles 1999; Jung 2006). In Germany, the Metro Group introduced the 'meeting Metro' concept (Krings 2006) to attract graduates to a career in retailing. This annual event includes presentations, interviews, entertainment activities, debates, personal meetings and information packs. Establishing links with universities through internships, guest lectures, or sponsorships is another albeit often under-utilized way of having direct contact with graduate applicants. The use of graduate recruitment agencies is on the increase throughout the EU but still the least preferred method of recruitment in Germany and Scandinavian countries (Jung 2006). In the UK and Ireland university-based career services play a significant role in supporting final year students, acting as the interface between students and potential employers (AGCAS Scotland 2008).

While the methods used in graduate recruitment are changing the selection methods are still the same but vary significantly from one organization to another and from country to country. For example, a recent study by Anderson and Witvliet (2008) of reactions to personnel selection methods in France, Holland, Portugal, Singapore, Spain and the USA found that the most popular methods among the respondents were interviews, work sample tests, and CVs, and that the least popular methods were graphology, personal contacts, and personality tests. The use of psychometric testing is most popular in Finland, Portugal and Spain, and least popular in Germany and the UK (Dany and Torchy 1994; CIPD 2007b). Psychometric tests have become increasingly popular where organizations have to select from a large number of applicants. Moreover assessment centres are most popular in the Netherlands, Finland, Spain and the UK. Graphology is on the whole not popular but still used by some companies especially in France, Germany and Spain. References were less common in Spain and the Netherlands and most popular in Sweden, Norway, Ireland and the UK (Dany and Torchy 1994; Burgess 1997). It is also common in France, Belgium, Germany and Spain to select applicants by competitive examination, or by requiring them to pass an induction or training course.

### **Higher education: systems, changes and challenges**

It is often argued that the main role of HEIs is to prepare students for employment (Nabi and Bagley 1998). However, it has been also argued that the main aim of HE is to "develop the knowledge, skills, moral values, and understanding required in all aspects of life rather than knowledge and skills relating to only a limited field of activity" (Reid and

Barrington 1997: 47). It is suggested that university graduates already possess inherent abilities and skills acquired from experience and from previous education on which higher education builds by providing opportunities for further development of such knowledge and skills, the enhancement of which is then normally achieved through employment (Gush 1996a). The responsibility for graduate skills' development can therefore not solely rest with higher education but the role of the latter cannot be underestimated. The widening participation in higher education, giving wider access to universities over the last twenty years, was expected to reduce differences between classes in society and to provide employment opportunities for all. EU governments' policies have been geared towards the mass production of graduates in order to achieve high levels of graduate employment and hence improve economic productivity and reduced social inequality. In the UK, for example, the recent paper on *Higher ambitions, the future of universities in a knowledge economy* by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) clearly stressed the need for wider access of those from underprivileged backgrounds to highly selective universities. Such policies have been aimed at increasing the number of graduates to meet the needs of increasingly competitive knowledge economies. However, skill shortages are still evident in some sectors of the economy, especially for jobs that require high levels of numeracy skills (*The Times*, 2010). The move from elite to mass high education over the last twenty years has created a supply of highly qualified (degree holders) but not necessary talented and skilled labour. It is also argued that despite the wider access to higher education, social and economic inequalities still exist (Purcell et al., 2005; 2006).

Different HE systems and qualification frameworks still exist throughout the EU despite recent harmonization efforts under the Bologna agreement. The British HE system is different from that of most of other European countries as it is much closer in structure and organization to the US system, with a broadly similar pattern of Bachelors followed by Masters and then Doctorate degrees (Archer and Raban 1995). In comparison, the Spanish HE system is divided into three cycles: *Diplomado* courses last for three years, *Licenciado* courses last for five to six years, and the final cycle is called *Doctor*. Normally the *Licenciado* is equivalent to the British Honours degree and is offered by university faculties (*Facultades Universitarias*). In Germany, HE is delivered in academic universities and applied universities (*Fachhochschulen*). Universities provide traditional academic education while the *Fachhochschulen* provide courses in applied sciences. Entry into HE has become more competitive as strict selection criteria have been introduced for different disciplines. These three examples illustrate the divergence of educational systems in EU member states but changes are still in progress as the Bologna initiative is implemented. The other distinction in higher education systems is that they differ in their reputation in relation to their age, location and size. Old universities are perceived to be better than the old ones, the ones in big cities are better than the ones in small ones, and the large universities better than the small ones. Therefore graduate employment prospects are very often affected by where rather than by what the graduate studied. In France, for example, education at a Grande Ecole gives direct access to elite professional career far better than studying in a university (Brennan and Little, 2010).

In a meeting in Bologna in 1999, EU ministers of education agreed to work together to achieve greater compatibility between European HE systems by establishing, by 2010, a common European HE system that would be more transparent and internationally competitive (Rauner 2008). The Bologna declaration included a number of initiatives such as the encouragement of students and staff mobility between the EU member states

through joint and exchange education programmes. It also envisaged easier mobility of students within the EU to study and broaden their experience (Department of Education and Skills 2007). All EU member states have signed up to the Bologna objectives, and more than 45 countries worldwide have recognized the proposed education structure and its qualifications. In this respect, Brennan and Little (2010:1) commented that ‘the process of harmonising structures and qualifications across European higher education initiated by the Bologna agreement is initiating changes across the continent with implications for universities, their students and for the future employers and those students’. The UK did not have to undergo major structural changes to meet the Bologna objectives while other EU countries the adoption of a two-cycle bachelor’s and master’s degree structure posed significant challenges. The Bologna model of a two stage education structure is not too different from the current system in the UK. So far it is too early to assess the extent to which the objectives of the Bologna declaration have been met by individual EU member states.

## **The study**

The research for this study was based on a combination of secondary and primary data. Secondary data were collected through the review of relevant literature, mainly in English, on human resource management, labour market trends, higher education systems and graduate recruitment in the countries studied. A number of studies from countries outside the EU on personnel selection in general and graduate recruitment in particular have also been consulted. Primary data were collected from four countries (France, Germany, Spain and the UK) through the use of questionnaires. Two types of questionnaire were used; one to gather data from graduate employers (recruiters) and the other to collect data from final year students (potential employees). The questionnaires were produced in English and then translated into the relevant European languages.

The employers’ questionnaire was divided into five sections aimed at collecting information about the organization and its activities, the methods of recruitment and selection used, the graduate attributes and skills required, the provisions for graduate employment and career progression, and the problems encountered in recruiting appropriate talents for their operations. A total of 500 questionnaires were sent by post to employers in the UK, selected randomly from the Prospects Directory, the Graduate Employment and Training (GET) Directory and the Times Top 100 Graduate Recruiters. About two thirds of employers contacted were large multinational companies and one-third small and medium enterprises. The response rate from the British sample was just above 30 percent (152). Also 220 questionnaires were sent by e-mail or distributed by post or by hand (depending on what was possible) as follows: 100 questionnaires to employers in France, 70 questionnaires to employers in Germany and 50 questionnaires to employers Spain. The samples represented a mixture of different organizational sizes and sectors of the economy. The response rates varied from 46 percent (France) to 58 percent (Germany) and 20 percent (Spain). The overall response rate was about 35% as 249 questionnaires were returned and only 242 questionnaires were usable.

Final year students’ questionnaires were designed to collect data on graduates’ expectations from their potential employers and on their experiences of applying for graduate employment. The main interest of collecting these data is to explore students’ experiences and expectations of the graduate recruitment process. The questionnaires were distributed via career services in 10 universities in the UK where a number of European

students on exchange programmes were pursuing their university education and also distributed directly through colleagues to final year students in five universities in France, three universities in Germany and one university in Spain. More than 1500 questionnaires were distributed but the majority (900+) were distributed to home and EU students at UK universities. The response rate was very good as 1185 usable questionnaires, about 78 %, were completed.

## **The findings- Graduate recruitment and selection**

The analysis of the data collected has revealed a number of similarities as well as some differences among the four countries studied. There are signs of emerging convergence in the practice of graduate recruitment despite the prevalent differences in education systems and levels of industrial development. Basically, most of the variations in the recruitment and selection methods used depended on the number of graduate vacancies created each year and the resources available for graduate recruitment. The findings are presented below under recruitment methods, selection methods, reasons for the methods used, employers' expectations, and graduates' expectations and experiences.

### ***Recruitment methods***

As it would have been expected, the most popular method of graduate recruitment was the Internet. This is hardly surprising but the use of the Internet differed in nature and by type and organizational size from one country to another. In the UK, the most popular method was the company website followed by graduate recruitment sites. Some organizations also used university websites and careers services' sites. The second most popular method was the use of graduate recruitment literature such as *Prospects Directory*, the *GET Directory* and *Prospects Today* in the UK, *Berufstart* and *Der Hobsons* in Germany, and *El Pais* and *ABC* in Spain. These were used by 89% of the respondents and, significantly, by 78% of employers with less than 500 employees and by 95% of larger employers. It seems that the Internet has complemented rather than replaced the print media advertising of job vacancies.

Apart from the above methods, respondents differed widely in relation to the use of other methods such as the 'milk rounds', work placements and graduate recruitment fairs. In the UK, the so-called 'milk round' was used by 45% of respondents, but appeared however to be less popular than methods such as graduate recruitment fairs (55%). In other countries, the 'milk round' was confused with recruitment fairs because it was not known to be different. Moreover, only 37% of the UK respondents preferred universities where graduates undertook work placements as part of their studies whereas in Germany all the respondents rated work placements as their main method of graduate recruitment and that was their main contacts with institutions of higher education. The British employers rated the use of guest speakers as their main contacts. The least popular method of graduate recruitment in the UK was the use of recruitment agencies - the most popular method in France and Spain. About 45% of the German respondents said they used career services. Here Germany and the UK (42%) were similar, and strikingly different from Spain (16%) and France (10%).

### ***Selection methods***

The respondents were asked to rank nine selection methods from 1 (least important) to 9 (most important). All rated the interview as the most important method of selection. In general, the results show that more than half (62%) of the respondents had employment

application forms designed specifically for the selection of graduate applicants. The use of CVs was relatively popular with 57% of the respondents requiring them. About 30% of the respondents indicated that they preferred a combination of CV and covering letter. The least important method was the use of graphology, except in France where personality tests were the least important method.

Short-listing in Spain and France was mainly based on the CV and the covering letter, but in the UK and Germany the normal procedure started with the sifting of application forms depending on whether they were standard application forms, a job specific forms, or just a CV or a combination of both. In Spain and France, the standard application form was not widely used but the applicant is expected to submit a CV and a letter of application that include the qualifications and personal identity documentation such as a birth certificate. In the UK interview methods varied, with more than 50% of respondents indicating that they had used more than one interview and about 40% indicating that they used both single and panel interviews. Most of the respondents used two interviews and over 60% of them involved two or more interviewers. The use of panel interviewing was less common in Spain, with only 12% of the respondents using it. More than half (53%) of the Spanish respondents said they had used a single interviewer and about 35% said they used a combination of interviewing techniques. The use of telephone interviews is on the increase as more than 70% of the British, 60% of the German, 43% of the French and 26% of the Spanish respondents indicating that they had used it because it had been convenient, cheap and timesaving. In the UK, a significant number of employers (72%), mainly large companies, used aptitude tests and 50% used assessment centres. While aptitude tests were common in France (62%), Germany (56%) and Spain (52%), assessment centres were hardly used in France (10%), Germany (5%) and Spain (2%).

Although more than 90% of all respondents indicated that they requested references, a significant number of them (34%) did so only after offers had been made. This means that references were not used as a selection tool but to confirm information submitted by candidates. The most common qualities asked for in references were honesty, reliability, time keeping, punctuality, and confirmation of details, character, attendance, suitability, teamwork and performance.

### ***Reasons for the methods used***

The respondents (employers) were asked to indicate their reasons for using such methods of recruitment and selection. The correlated data analysis shows an overall agreement among employers in the four countries. For example, the employer application form was seen as the most accurate and fair method by which relevant qualities for the job can be established. Application forms were used because they were designed to gather information, to provide assessment against company competencies, and to show consistency and ease of use in the selection process. The CV and covering letter were seen as cost-saving methods and as useful means of attracting a wider pool of graduates because it was often stated that many graduates might have found it easier to send CVs and letters than to fill in an application form. Interviews were rated as the most important method of selecting graduates because of their two-way interaction and the ability to fill gaps and validate information given in candidates' application forms. More than 78% of the respondents felt that interviews were used for their fairness and only 20% thought they were used for their accuracy.

### ***Employers' expectations***

Employers' expectations varied depending on their organizations' size and nature of operations, but it was interesting to note that the majority of the British and German respondents expected newly graduated students to have good transferable skills rather than excellent academic grades, whereas the majority of the French and the Spanish respondents emphasised excellent academic qualifications over transferable skills. In the UK only about 21% of the respondents stated that the degree level (undergraduate, postgraduate) was more important than the degree subject. However, about 87% of the respondents thought that the degree classification was important and had considered only those applicants with at least a lower second-class honours degree. Employers were also asked to rank from a list of 14 criteria the five most important qualities that they looked for in graduate applicants. The most required qualities were 'the desire to achieve and motivation', followed by 'teamwork'. Most of the respondents expected their potential employees to have good communication skills, team working skills, leadership skills, social skills and IT skills. They looked for graduates who would be reliable, punctual, committed, energetic and creative. German employers added professional competence and the ability to manage change. Spanish employers rated language skills and the willingness to learn as important factors as well. However, French employers rated good knowledge of the job and qualifications as important.

The respondents were asked whether the place of higher education attended by the candidate would influence their chance of employment with the company. More than a third (38%) of the UK, more than half (53 %) of the Spanish, and more than two thirds (78 %) of the French, but only about 26% of the German respondents said 'yes it would'. However, of those who stated that it would, the British had no specific preferences because they either stated the 'top universities in the country' or 'universities offering relevant courses', whereas the French were more specific because most of them preferred graduates from the *Grandes Écoles* or *Écoles Supérieures*. In general graduating from such institutions is a passport to professional and highly rewarded posts in prestigious civil service and industrial organizations. The Spanish respondents were less specific in their replies with equal numbers of respondents preferring colleges of higher education, old universities, technical schools, specialised business schools and universities with high reputation. It can be concluded that most employers take into consideration the type and place of higher education attended by the candidate.

### ***Graduates' expectations and experiences***

The analysis of data collected about the expectations and experiences of final year students revealed more similarities than differences between the graduates from the four countries studied. In general, career development and training opportunities, and good rewards and benefits were among the most expected factors from potential employers. The majority of students from the UK sample considered training opportunities and the reputation of the company as highly important. More British and Spanish than French or German respondents thought that pay and benefits were important. The respondents were also asked to list in order of importance the four things they expected employers to look for when they applied for jobs. The British and the French respondents rated degree classification as number one, followed by work experience and then transferable skills. The British and the German respondents rated transferable skills gained during work placements as number one, followed by qualifications and attitudes, whereas the Spanish respondents rated qualifications as number one, followed by fluency in a foreign language and work experience.

In terms of graduate recruitment experience the majority of the respondents found the use of the Internet a convenient way of finding graduate jobs but this varied slightly from one country to another. More German and French than British and Spanish students used the Internet regularly to look for jobs. Most of the British students said they became aware of job vacancies via literature such as *Prospects* and *GET* whilst newspaper advertisements were the most common method in Spain. Other ways by which students became aware of vacancies in Britain included word of mouth, networking, recruitment agencies and previous employees. However, in Spain and France word of mouth and the use of friends and relatives were more popular than in Germany or the UK.

Most of the respondents found the use of the CV and covering letter cost effective, the use of application forms time consuming, and the use of interviews a daunting experience. However, most of the respondents felt that interviewing was important for both the candidate and the employer. Over 50% of the respondents stated that their lack of interviewing experience made them unable to answer certain questions. The impressions they had at the interview affected their decision to accept or reject the offer of a job. Most of the French and Spanish respondents found interviews too formal and intimidating. By contrast, most of the British and German respondents found interviews informal and friendly, and they learnt a lot from the experience.

Most of the respondents found that aptitude tests were stressful and not an accurate reflection of ability, and that they had little relevance to real life activities because of their subjective nature. Assessment centres were found to give a good overall evaluation of applicant performance because they use a variety of selection methods but they were found to be tough, highly demanding and stressful especially for those who found socialising and working in a group difficult. Work placements were found to be very useful and rewarding, especially by the German and the French respondents, to both the candidate and the employer. However, some students from the UK and Spain felt that work placements had not been used for developmental purposes especially when the student was treated as an extra employee to do trivial and repetitive tasks.

In terms of employability and qualifications attained, about 30 percent of the UK respondents did not see the need for a degree to get into a managerial job and a similar percentage (32%) thought that their first job did not require a degree in a specific discipline.

## **Discussion**

When the above findings are considered in the light of the current labour market trends and systems of higher education in the EU a number of issues arise for discussion. Among such issues are the following:

### ***Graduate recruitment practices are socially and culturally biased***

It seems that the students' choice of their potential employer and the employers' perception of graduates are still influenced by common stereotypes of each other. There is a tacit assumption and common perception among graduates that certain jobs in certain sectors of the economy are not rewarding to graduates and therefore they are not worth applying for. For example, many students prefer to work in large multinational companies than small

and medium size enterprises, in the private than in public organization, in profit than in non-profit organizations, in professional than in non-professional jobs, in industrial and financial than in retail and hospitality sector. Although there is a surplus of graduates who have skills appropriate for doing work in voluntary and charitable organizations, many non-profit organizations have difficulties in attracting graduates. Hurrell et al. (2011: 350) argue that the reason for this kind of mismatch is 'because of misperceptions about the sector among potential graduate recruits due to voluntary sector failure to adequately communicate information about the sector to graduates'. Similarly a study by Broadbridge et al. (2009: 408) found that jobs in retailing were not attractive to graduates. They found that 'many students associate a graduate career in retailing with attributes such as 'uninteresting', 'unappealing', 'poor working hours', 'poor salary' and 'limited advancement', many were unaware about what a career in retailing actually entailed'. In an earlier study by Broadbridge (2003) found that 'many students had a distorted view of the retail industry and the opportunities it can provide to graduates' (see Broadbridge et al. 2009: 408). It seems that the sector has not done enough to attract graduates to a long term career in retailing despite the increase in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes dedicated to teaching the knowledge and skills of retailing at many universities. Similarly in the financial sector, employers still recruit graduates from the elite or top universities for their managerial positions (Browne, 2010). Browne (2010: 324) concluded that 'competition for jobs and rewards, and the allocation of individuals to positions in the occupational structure, is still based on fundamental differences in power, status and the cultural capital of the individual employees newly recruited to these organisations'. There are methods of recruitment and selection which seem to be part of the country's employment culture such as the use of interviews in the UK, graphology in France and poaching in the USA, for example. A study by Hodgkinson et al. (1995: 68) found that 'the traditional interview was almost universally used by the respondents' organisations'.

### ***Graduate recruitment is influenced by a cost and benefit analysis***

Cost seems to be an important factor in determining the type of methods and procedures used in graduate recruitment and selection throughout the countries studied. The success of the recruitment process was often judged in financial terms because more than 67% of the respondents among employers thought that filling a vacancy at a minimum cost was one of their objectives. Therefore, in search for more efficient and cost-effective methods of graduate recruitment many organizations are using the Internet to recruit and when possible to select their potential employees. The increasing use of the Internet in recruitment is because it is convenient, easy to use and above all not expensive. By contrast, assessment centres are not widely used in any of the countries studied, not just because they are relatively new but also because they are comparatively expensive to use. Although they are the most appropriate venues for the selection of graduates because they offer a variety of tests to assess the applicant's current knowledge, skills and competences, and future development potentials, many employers do not use them because they cannot afford to use them regularly.

### ***There are different perceptions of the relationship between degree and career***

The distinction between degree and career is not clearly made in most European countries. In the UK, for example, a degree is regarded as being a basic means to future career development and most jobs are open to graduates of 'any discipline'. Hence, many graduates follow careers that are not necessarily related to the subject of their graduate degrees. However, in other European countries, such as France and Spain, employers tend

to expect their applicants to have a relevant degree and relevant work experience. French and German students study for a career because they believe that their university education would prepare them for a career in the future, whereas British students study for a job because they do not believe that their university education would equip them for a stable career progression. 'The factors that respondents consider to be more important in their longer term career include 'upwards promotion', 'good pay', 'job security', 'self-development', 'positive company culture', 'having clear career goals', 'a clear promotion/advancement path', 'a good work-life balance', ...' (Broadbridge et al., 2009: 413). 'The students were concerned with their personal career development and the training and development opportunities available to them. They expect to have a linear career path with good pay, whilst at the same time wanting a good-life balance, thus reflecting the notion that they 'want it all' (Martin, 2005)' (Broadbridge et al., 2009: 414).

### ***Graduate recruitment is a process of matching graduate attributes to organisational features***

It has been often evidenced that the type of recruitment methods used can influence the applicant's choice of employer (see Boswell et al. 2003). For example, the conduct of interviews can leave positive or negative impressions of the organisation on the candidate. For example, organizational reputation can have significant influence on the applicant's decision in the process of graduate recruitment. Many applicants may see financial rewards as important determinants of their choice of employer but most of graduates with strong need for achievement may see the reputation of the employer more important than the financial package being offered. 'As job seekers inform themselves about specific organizations and the job offering, the relative importance weights of organizational and job-related attributes may shift throughout the recruitment process, with reputation increasing in importance' (Montgomery and Ramus, 2011, 11).

### ***There is a need for stronger links between employers and higher education institutions***

This study has revealed that the link between employers and HEIs is paramount for the development of appropriate approaches to graduate recruitment and selection. Graduate recruitment is not a matter of person-organization fit but an organization-person-organization relationship. HEIs play a significant role in preparing graduates for future employment. In countries such as Germany where such links are well established through work placements, both graduates and employers know what to expect from each other and therefore the process of graduate recruitment becomes a mere formality in the transition from HE to the world of work. Graduate recruitment should be seen as a holistic approach to the recruitment and selection of a graduate or a graduating person with newly acquired knowledge and skills to work in an organization that requires them for its current and future operations. European employers should have an active role in developing and implementing models of best practice within universities through partnerships, training programmes, scholarships, and sponsorships.

## **Conclusion**

Although there is an increasing and apparent degree of convergence in the European labour markets and institutions of higher education there are still significant differences in the approach to graduate recruitment and in the perceptions of graduates' attributes. However, the current differences in HE systems do not imply major differences in graduate recruitment systems. The findings from this study would suggest that although differences between the recruitment and selection procedures exist, these are not at

opposite ends of the scale. All countries studied are found to use similar methods but to varying degrees. It would be possible to combine procedures to develop a common system with some nationally based variations. Higher education systems in the European Union are still different but they are undergoing substantial changes, among which the commitment to meeting the Bologna declaration objectives is the most significant one. With the implementation of the Bologna declaration it will even become possible to have a common degree structure and to develop a pan-European model of graduate recruitment and selection. This study will be of use to graduates of all nationalities who wish to seek employment in the European Union and to graduate employers who wish to have a wider pool of graduate applicants with a variety of skills and abilities.

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