

Crossing borders of employability

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IMPACT PARAGRAPH

Crossing Borders of Employability: The Career Preparedness of Dutch Liberal Arts Graduates

Milan Kovačević

This section provides an overview of the scientific and societal impact resulting from the dissertation. In scientific terms, this research advances our understanding of how university colleges prepare students for the demands of the modern job market, with implications reaching into broader educational and labour market studies. From a societal standpoint, the findings offer valuable insights and recommendations, benefiting not only stakeholders in liberal arts education, but also the wider higher education community.

Scientific Impact

This thesis began with the observation that the discourse surrounding liberal arts education in Europe lacked a crucial element—empirical evidence. The identified research gap underscored the need to investigate and substantiate the various theoretical arguments regarding the suitability of the liberal arts model in preparing students for the challenges of the 21st-century job market. The main goal of this dissertation was to address this gap and provide the missing empirical evidence. Through comprehensive data collection and rigorous analysis, the dissertation has successfully fulfilled its ambition. It systematically explored areas lacking prior empirical examination, bringing to light concrete evidence on graduate outcomes and employers' perspectives.

The research revealed that the learning environment of Dutch university college programmes benefits the development of career-relevant skills. Despite having less subject-specific knowledge, LAE graduates also proved to be well-prepared for specialized master's studies. Moreover, employers neither favour nor disfavour university college degrees over other educational backgrounds. Finally, the labour market outcomes of university college graduates are comparable to those of their peers with conventional bachelor's degrees. Through these findings, this thesis significantly advances our understanding of the effectiveness of liberal arts education in preparing students for the challenges of the contemporary job market. Therefore, the major scientific contribution of this dissertation is the creation of new knowledge about the labour market preparedness of Dutch university college graduates.

Beyond its primary goal of advancing the understanding of liberal arts education in Europe, the dissertation has also made significant contributions to broader academic debates. Firstly, the research highlighted the crucial role of pedagogies and programme features in facilitating skill development within higher education. Secondly, it delved into the purpose and structure of the undergraduate curriculum, exploring the balance between general and specialized education. Thirdly, the dissertation investigated the labour market significance of generic skills, providing valuable perspectives on their influence on employment outcomes. Furthermore, it examined employers' hiring preferences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the graduate job selection process. The thesis also considered the relative weight of a bachelor's

degree in determining the employment outcomes of master's degree holders, uncovering a relatively low priority of undergraduate credentials in recruiters' assessments. Lastly, the dissertation examined the intricate process of how a new type of education becomes accepted in the labour market.

By addressing these aspects, the scientific impact of this research extends into the broader realm of education and labour market studies. In doing so, the dissertation not only provided answers to existing questions, but also stimulated further inquiries, opening avenues for continued research in this field.

Impact on Society

The dissertation's findings about the career preparedness of university college graduates not only contribute to the academic knowledge base but also offer perspectives that are of considerable importance to society. Given the focus of this research, its results are particularly valuable to LAE stakeholders, including current and prospective students, career services, educators, and alumni. The questions it deals with are also of interest to the wider higher education community, which may benefit from insights into the dynamic relationship between academic programmes and the demands of the job market.

A key aspect missing from the evaluation of university college programmes was a reliable account of their capacity to prepare students for the labour market. Although university colleges have been widely recognized for their teaching quality and commitment to academic excellence, concerns about the career prospects of their graduates have been raised by both LAE critics and stakeholders. In light of the unconventional nature of university college programmes, many students and their parents expressed worries that a LAE degree might expose them to unemployment risks. By emphasizing the connection between LAE degrees and professional life, the findings of this dissertation contribute to easing these concerns. They provide students with confidence in their educational choices, dispelling the misconception that LAE graduates are faced with limited career opportunities.

Evidence on the labour market preparedness of LAE graduates is particularly valuable when considering the societal role of university colleges, the recognition of which is another important outcome of this dissertation. Initially envisioned as excellence programmes for gifted students, university colleges also address a major problem in European higher education—the pressure on high school graduates to make a definitive decision about their study field at a young age. As a response to this challenge, the LAE model plays a crucial role in assisting individuals who are uncertain about their preferred field of study. By virtue of their open curriculum model, LAE programmes provide these students the opportunity to explore a broad spectrum of academic disciplines and discover their true interests. In doing so, university colleges fulfil a significant social function, aiding the formation of their professional identity. Moreover, the prevention of wrong study choices eliminates the financial costs, psychological strain, and time loss associated with dropping out. As these costs are borne by both individuals and society, knowing that LAE programmes offer a way to avoid them without compromising the students' future specialization abilities and labour market prospects is a finding of great

importance. It shows that university colleges effectively serve their purpose, playing a valuable role in the education system and society.

This dissertation's findings also revealed several areas where LAE programmes need to focus their attention. Firstly, university colleges should address the issue of LAE graduates facing lower chances of obtaining employment in STEM occupations. To enhance the employability of their students seeking a career in this sector, university colleges may consider providing more opportunities for them to acquire additional STEM-related skills, such as coding and data analysis. This can be achieved by integrating more STEM courses into the LAE curriculum, fostering collaborative interdisciplinary projects with other programmes, and establishing partnerships with companies to provide internships. Furthermore, there is a need for university colleges to enhance the visibility of the liberal arts educational model among employers, especially those in STEM fields, as a vast majority of them remains unfamiliar with LAE. In order to achieve this, university colleges must actively connect and engage with employers, demonstrating the value and professional relevance of liberal arts education. This may include participation in industry-specific events, conferences, and career fairs, as well as organizing panels, forums, or information sessions for employers. Additionally, colleges can facilitate collaborative projects between LAE students and industry partners, engage with employers through social media, and leverage alumni networks.

University college students would also benefit from tailored career guidance that recognizes the unique context of being a liberal arts student. This approach would address the specific challenges LAE students face in the labour market, underscoring both the strengths and weaknesses of liberal arts education in transitioning from university to the world of work. Providing counselling that accounts for their academic background, skillset, and desired career path could help university college students to build a compelling professional narrative and convincingly present themselves to employers.

Finally, as an inquiry into the capacity of a non-career-oriented undergraduate programme to prepare students for the professional world, this dissertation also contributes to a long-standing debate about the role of higher education in society. At the heart of this discussion is an assumed trade-off between learning for the sake of learning and learning as a means to career success. The findings of this thesis question this dilemma, as the example of Dutch university colleges has shown that career preparedness can be achieved without sacrificing other valuable roles of higher education. In an era marked by unprecedented complexity and challenges across all domains, it is vital to acknowledge that higher education can—and indeed must—prepare students not only for participating in the workforce, but also for participating in society. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive. A well-rounded education that fosters a holistic understanding of the world can also serve as a stepping-stone to a fulfilling career, equipping students with the skills and knowledge required in the contemporary job market.