

REDEEM

WP3 Qualitative part; focus groups and interviews



WHY? The quantitative data tell only part of the story



METHODOLOGY: Focus group-sessions and interviews



TARGET GROUPS:

1 - Alumni 2 - Designers 3 - Current students 4 - Employers



UNIVERSITIES INVOLVED: 7



QUESTIONS: 9



PARTICIPANTS: 141 persons

In order to gather a different input compared to the written survey the project also had decided to run Focus Group-sessions and interviews. Focus Group-sessions were performed with the three stakeholder groups Designers, Alumni and Current Students. In the Focus Group-sessions a free and open exchange of views were encouraged. The aim was not to reach a majority opinion, or to convince others of one's opinion, but rather to share personal reflections on joint master programmes. The leaders of the sessions had a passive role in order not to steer the discussion.

With the stakeholder group Employers interviews were performed instead of Focus Group-sessions since it was not possible to gather a number of representatives from employers in one room at one time.

Generally invitations were sent to ask representatives to attend. For example for the session with Designers the members of faculty and university administration who were known to be or to have been active with dual master programmes were invited to attend. At TUD in Darmstadt it was not possible to get together a group of alumni for a Focus Group-session, and instead individual (face-to-face or telephone) interviews were performed. UCL in Louvain-la-Neuve did not have funding for this work package but did interviews with employers.

In all universities the sessions were done with one stakeholder group at a time, except at Politecnico di Torino where all groups were gathered at the same time and in the same venue but seated separately.

Participants by university in numbers

STAKEHOLDERS	IST	KIT	KTH	POLITO	TUD	UCL	UPC	TOTAL
EMPLOYERS	2	1	2	7	1	5	5	23
DESIGNERS	4	3	8	7	6	0	5	33
ALUMNI	5	13	9	8	7	0	3	45
STUDENTS	7	6	12	5	6	0	4	40
TOTAL	18	23	31	27	20	5	17	141

Designers

The feedback by designers is mixed with some designers underlining more the life experience that the graduates have obtained in an international program, and others valuing the DD for their contribution to the internationalization of the institution, its visibility, and recruitment benefits.

Attention is still focused a lot on the mobility component and on the complementarity or compatibility of the programmes (much more than in the case of the graduates) and curricula and the heavy administrative burden to create and manage DD-programmes seems to be a deterrent on the academic side.

Keynotes from the Designers

VALUE: personal experience vs internationalization of the institution

FOCUS on mobility and compatibility with the partner university

ADMINISTRATIVE BRUDEN is the main deterrent

EMPLOYABILITY ASPECT often neglected and seen as shortsighted

MAIN KEY for employability is represented by the university reputation

FUTURE FEATURES OF DD PROGRAMMES:

- ✓ EXTENSION OF NOMINAL DURATION
- ✓ MULTIDISCIPLINARITY
- ✓ COMBINATION OF LOCAL PROGRAMMES
- ✓ ACCOUNTING AND MANAGEMENT AS MANDATORY

Some academics seem to be not that much concerned about the employability component of their programmes and knowledge related to the profession of academic researcher is still valued more than

soft skills. As a hypothesis this is so in a gradual scale from the most theoretical and research oriented programmes over to the most applied programmes, that is programmes that aim towards an already existing and mature industry as their working market. Moreover, academics seem to consider the reputation of the university as the discriminating factor for students to be more employable.

Employability is seen as one of the components of the provided education but not the main one and often expressed as being not the primary duty for the Research Universities that need to avoid focusing too much on applied knowledge. The notion of employability is seen as too focused on the student landing her or his first job. This view was expressed by several designers. In second cycle education, according to this objection, students develop skills and knowledge that will serve them and develop over their careers. According to many developers, focusing too much on the companies' needs would lead to a very shortsighted approach to education in a specific field and would end up in providing a limited number of heavily applied skills that are currently needed. DD:s have an impact on the employability of the graduates because they carry a higher level of adaptability, show initiative and drive and the extra national degree should give added value. In this sense the point of view of the developers on this topic is very similar to the perspective of the students. Incorporating internships and other features together with industry is widely seen as attractive and sought after but also as very difficult to achieve in practice. This difference in time perspectives between developers and employers – the world of business being short term and the world of academia long term - is often mentioned as something problematic. The internships is a case in point. The designers often express frustration that employers suggest that the education should be more connected to the working life, while at the same time they are not so willing to offer the internships that would provide just that.

Many academics feel that future DD-programmes will need to include a nominal extension because it's difficult to provide all the needed contents in one academic year only. This shows that the academics don't see DD as integrated products and this point of view goes against the opinion of the majority of the graduates on this topic. Other relevant elements to take into consideration for the coming years are multidisciplinary, for example introduction of accounting and management as mandatory disciplines, as well as learning the national language or languages.

Better communication of the added value of DDs seems to be a priority for the academics as well as the introduction of mandatory internships in the DD-programmes. Finally, slow and heavy administrative procedures and lack of harmonization of the DD-policies in Europe are mentioned by the academics as negative elements to correct in the future.

Alumni

The alumni in all countries underlined both the added value of the double degrees in terms of personal development and the fact that often universities develop them for their own purpose of visibility.

The longer duration of the study abroad period is seen by the majority of the students as an added value as well as the complementarity of the study pattern and the possibility of accessing specializations not available at the home university.

Little if no importance has the fact of holding two degrees when applying for a job abroad but for all the students who did this in the hosting country, holding the national degree was seen as a positive discriminating factor.

Specific support and information material should be made available for DD students that are instead mistakenly treated either as exchange students or as regular local students.

Key notes from the Alumni

FOCUS: Personal Development vs University Prestige

ADDED VALUE: Deeper experience abroad + Complementarity

EMPLOYABILITY: 1) Holding two degrees vs holding a national degree; 2) Employability of DD perceived differently in different countries; 3) Decision to enroll not linked to employability objectives (few exceptions)

SPECIFICITY OF THE CATEGORY: no local and no exchange

TRENDS: More agreements with non-EU partners + soft skills

NEGATIVE ASPECTS:

Prolongation of the nominal duration

Value of the joint degree

Reputation of "study abroad" for employers seen as often negative

IMPROVEMENTS: Direct involvement of companies, specific career days, real life cases, practical info on local work environment, local language, more flexibility, mandatory internships as part of the curriculum

The perception of employability is perceived as very different in different countries: in some countries the focus is on the hard skills gained, in others on the university that issued the degree, in others on the soft skills gained. It is in these latter countries that the DD experience with the consequent personal development is highly appreciated by the employers.

In terms of trends the graduates underline the fact that partnerships with "new" countries outside Europe will probably be needed, that DD:s will become more and more common which will help the companies to get more familiar with this category of students and their real value, and that more soft skills will be introduced in the curricula.

Some potentially negative aspects in terms of impact of DD:s on employability are the partially negative reputation that studies abroad (and in particular Erasmus) have for employers, the fact that a joint degree is considered as of a lower value than the national degree or rather a higher degree of uncertainty, and that the extension of the studies might mean missing opportunities for students from countries with a strong economy and fluid labour market especially when the studies are prolonged.

In general most alumni have not selected a DD-programme for being more employable in the future and after graduation they do not feel that the DD gave them a clear advantage in this sense with the exception of students coming from countries with weaker economies who were very focused on finding a job in the country or region of destination. An exception in Europe seems to be France where DD is more known nationally as giving an advantage in the job hunting.

Alumni feel that no further focus on employability is needed when designing DD-programmes since the real value is in the experience itself and it would be wrong for companies to dictate the contents according to their immediate needs since the labour

market structure changes rapidly and the competence and expertise of the available teaching staff also needs to be taken into consideration.

The missing elements to be introduced (or the weak ones to be strengthened) are according to the alumni the following: closer cooperation industry-academia and in particular in terms of participation of experts from companies in the teaching and extra-curricular activities bringing the companies to the students and the students to the companies. Specific career days for the DD students should be organized to give visibility to these programmes and their added value. Other elements that should be introduced according to the majority of the alumni are: cross programme collaborations, better information of the host country and its professional values, structures, ethics, how to apply for work etc., more flexibility in the study path, making the proficiency in the local language mandatory and in particular and by a large majority the introduction of mandatory internships in the hosting country as recognized curricular activity.

When asked what they would modify in the existing DD-programmes, most of the alumni seemed to be generally very satisfied by the followed programmes but a large majority of them mentioned that the extension of the studies has not been of any concrete help and that the last semester, if really needed, should have been replaced by an activity bringing them closer to the employer instead of insisting on theoretical knowledge.

In conclusion, three key elements have been underlined by the graduates about the added value of DD in terms of impact and employability: development of soft skills, being fluent in the local language, holding the national degree from a respected university. It is remarkable that almost none of the interviewed alumni mentioned the hard skills acquired at the hosting institution as relevant.

All the interviewed alumni would recommend their DD-programmes to other students but many of them underlined the fact that they would not do this with employability in focus, not because DD:s do not lead to a higher degree of employability but because the main added value is represented by the acquired soft skills and personal development.

Current Students

The students indicate the cultural aspects of the experience (mind opener, understanding a new culture, discovering, challenging oneself, etc.) as the key element of the double degree experience while learning a new language or getting a second diploma are not seen as very relevant.

The vision of the students on the future trends to keep into consideration when it comes to joint programmes is very diverse ranging from higher integration of the curricula to learning how to developing a company, involvement of international companies.

Key notes from current student

SIMILAR ATTITUDE as the graduates with few exceptions

VALUE: personal development more than language and two diplomas

MORE CRITICAL on employability as a focus when designing DD

Getting a **BROADER PERSPECTIVE** more relevant than higher specialization

SECOND SPECIALIZATION VS BEST EDUCATION from the two universities

FUTURE: extra-curricular activities involving companies + local language

NEGATIVE ASPECTS:

QUALITY ISSUES DUE TO POOR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Students seem to be quite critical about the concept of employability as a key factor in the double degree programmes in the sense that they think the focus should be more on getting the best possible education from the two universities and the personal development aspects related to the experience. A large number of students stated that too much focus on the employability would be harmful and counterproductive. Many respondents stated a too high level of specialization demanded by the employers in the curriculum would harm the basic and general knowledge that is as important for an engineer to have a broader understanding of the field.

When asked how double degrees are supposed to improve employability, most of the students answered that the soft skills developed through these kind of programmes are the most valuable factor (better understanding of different cultures, capacity to adapt quickly). Obtaining a degree from a local university is the discriminating factor for those planning to look for a job in the hosting country. Technical expertise, holding two degrees and learning a new language are mentioned but don't seem to represent discriminating factors. Surprisingly, very few students mentioned the second specialization obtained at the hosting institution as crucial for better employment opportunities but it's not clear whether this is due to the fact that most double degree programmes seek for compatibility instead for complementarity or for other reasons.

The answers of this group to the question on how employability can be improved by reforming double degree programmes are very similar to the ones provided by the alumni with an emphasis on more extra-curricular activities bringing experts from companies to the classroom and bringing the students to the companies also through internships and master thesis topics developed jointly by industry and academia. Students mentioned also the fact that offering mandatory language courses to learn the language of the hosting country should be included in double degree programmes taught in English.

A problem mentioned by many respondents on the negative elements identified in the DD programmes is the poor English proficiency of some professors who are excellent in their field but cannot properly transmit their knowledge in a second language. The result is a lower quality of the programme.

Double degrees should be promoted internally as specific "products" not to be mixed with the shorter credit mobility programmes. The extra specialization offered by the hosting university and not available at the home university seems to be the real added value of Double degrees for most of the current students.

Students would recommend these programmes to other students willing to self-develop as individuals or those seeking access opportunities to foreign labour markets but not to those looking for a clear advantage in terms of employability or specialization.

Employers

The two key elements that you need are: Sharing the risk, and this is something lacking in many people, and the capability to present yourself "on a stage" in front of the external world. Indeed, these two elements will allow you to work as a team with people who do not know you and perhaps will even never see you.

-Bruno Schröder, National Technology Officer at Microsoft Belux

Most companies ignore the real value of double degree programmes and the national degrees are still the main factor while the second degree is usually neglected during the recruitment process. Nevertheless, those employers who are aware of double degrees value the fact that those graduates adapt easily to new situations, are not scared of change, have acquired personal skills that will facilitate teamwork with people from different cultures and are generally more versatile.

The value of holding two degrees is for the employers in most cases not crucial and limited to the soft skills that the graduates have probably developed during their stay abroad (more flexibility, stronger will, independent thinking, showing curiosity, language skills etc.).

In spite of these considerations, when asked about the definition of employability, the employers mentioned skills and competences typical of students who have graduated from a double degree programme. Innovation is also mentioned as a key element that is not properly covered by master programmes.

Keywords from Employers

Real **ADDED VALUE OF DD** still not perceived

EXPECTED SKILLS are the one typical of DD graduates but not directly linked by the employers to these programmes

FOCUS: personal development + reputation of the local university

DD: Second diploma still largely neglected

EMPLOYABILITY CONCEPT very different from the one of the developers

IMPROVEMENTS: multidisciplinary, broad knowledge, basic engineering skills, soft skills, teamwork, foreign languages (not specialized skills)

TRENDS: more hands on activities in the curriculum, mandatory internships, project based work simulating real life scenarios and lectures by experts from industry as part of the curriculum.

This is also true when it comes to the trends to keep in mind when designing future double degrees. Multidisciplinary, broad knowledge, basic engineering skills, soft skills, teamwork, foreign languages are mentioned by the employers much more than specialized skills which are perhaps taken for granted.

Unsurprisingly, the companies see no harm in double degree programmes focusing on employability but they stress again the fact that by this they mean that the soft skills mentioned above should be addressed as much as the technical skills needed to perform a specific job. Better language and social skills are mentioned by the employers as the elements acquired during the double degree programmes that will improve the graduates' employability.

In order for future double degree programmes to be more effective in terms of employability, universities should consider introducing more practical applications in the curriculum, mandatory internships, project based work simulating real life scenarios and lectures by experts from industry as part of the curriculum.

There is a strikingly huge discrepancy between the designers view on the value of their DD-students on one hand and the employers' view on the other. The designers typically view the DD-students as a very select, ambitious, energetic and academically strong group of students, and on the other hand the employers' generally untroubled view of finding the students who are best prepared for what they describe as demanding positions in their companies.

Although company representatives don't seem to be aware of the real outputs of double degree programmes, after having listened to the main structures and components they wish they had more students with such a profile applying to their jobs since they would have an immediate advantage on the other applicants due to their soft skills, proficiency in at least one foreign language and possibly a specialization that is not offered by the home university and having showed a willingness to accept to be stationed abroad. For these reasons they would recommend double degree programmes to the prospective students.

Several employers also express frustration over the perceived ever increasing speed of change in the world of education. Universities, in this view, overestimate the knowledge and interest outside their own organisations about what is going on in terms of new programmes and collaborations. Representatives of corporations that handle large numbers of applicant often expressed uncertainty in their capacity to value a master degree from a university that is outside their usual circle of providers of employees. "I know KTH and the academic areas they have, but when applicants come with a degree from a university in Italy or Spain... how should I be able to value the quality of all those universities?"

Annex

Qualitative Questionnaire

The following questions were used by all partners in the focus groups/interviews

1. If I ask you to define (using a single word, image or an expression) what like your DD looks like, which one would you use?
2. Using your own words, how would you define employability?
3. Do you think that your DD contributed in improving significantly your employability? If so, can you explain specifically how? (impact on skills and results – earning, stability, opportunities and so on -)
4. Do you believe that putting the focus on employability could harm the DD programmes?
5. Would you recommend a double degree for better employability? Tell us your reasons for yes or no
6. Tell us two actions (be as specific as possible) you recommend in order to improve the employability aspects of your DD programme
7. Would you remove something in order to improve the employability aspects of your DD?
8. What trends should a DD take into account in order to guarantee the employability of their future graduates?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?