



Preparing graduates and lifelong learners to an ever-changing job market

Coimbra Group input to the European Commission's Call for Evidence for an EU Quality Jobs Roadmap

Preamble

The Coimbra Group (CG) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the upcoming **EU Quality Jobs Roadmap**. As key actors in education and training of the future workforce, universities play a central role in preparing graduates with the skills necessary to enter the job market, as well as with elements to recognise what constitutes a “quality job”.

The voice of universities is essential in ensuring that employment and social policies reflect and at the same time inform academic offerings, and in ensuring that societal needs at large are taken into consideration. For this, open dialogue and continued cooperation between academia and enterprises is fundamental, in order to allow universities to adapt and improve their offer according to market needs, but also for businesses to better understand and appraise the skills that graduates acquired during their studies.

To gather insights and experiences and elaborate our network's position, the 42 CG universities, all long-established research-intensive leading higher education institutions, located in 22 European countries, were consulted through their representatives in the Employability Working Group.

The first section of this paper presents a set of considerations and university-specific challenges, when it comes to preparing students and graduates to quality jobs, followed by concrete recommendations on the main needs and priorities identified by our member universities to support the development of an EU Quality Jobs Roadmap.

Considerations

The Coimbra Group (CG) is committed to advancing careers and employability services across our member universities, including providing access to quality jobs opportunities for their approximately 1.5 million students and graduates across Europe. The [Employability Working Group](#) (37 members from 27 universities) brings together expertise and experience in careers and employability, enterprise engagement, and flexible educational offerings in an integrated way to support student success, skills development, and to advance strategic enterprise and social partnerships, with the goal of ensuring that our students are prepared for the rapidly evolving workplace. It also pays attention to ensuring that its work is aligned with changing global employment trends, labour market needs, and national and international policies on employment and skills.



CG universities focus on exposing their students to, and preparing them for, the graduate labour market from the outset of their studies, encouraging persistence while also helping them to construct realistic paths toward a fulfilling career. This helps students and graduates to:

- Develop the tools for active career management throughout life;
- Navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic labour market and make informed decisions about their career paths;
- Map out the steps to develop the skills and qualifications required for their career goals, fostering a commitment to lifelong learning;
- Reflect on life experiences and transferrable skills which can be applied to a work setting;
- Access employment opportunities and build networks.

We also promote both **internationalisation** and **interdisciplinary learning** as particular opportunities to develop future-oriented skills, fostering a practical understanding of how various skills apply in different contexts and across different disciplines. Different job settings and career stages demand varying skills sets; therefore students and academics need to be encouraged to continually evolve their knowledges and capacities, and participate in lifelong learning.

All CG universities have established career services within their campuses, such as career centres, career counsellors and coaches, placement centres, and so on. The dedicated staff offer a variety of free-of-charge career services for national and international students, tackling key topics such as exploring career paths, developing career readiness and career management skills, preparation for job search and salary guidance, and facilitating connections with graduate employers and job opportunities. This is achieved through both individual counselling, classwork and events such as career fairs or specific sessions on career matters.

Employers have equally regular opportunities to connect with students, through activities organised by or in collaboration with university career services:

- Being part of career fairs on campuses, to showcase job and internship opportunities
- Using the University's job portals to share open positions
- Organising short-format ("speed dating"-style) and long-format (60-90min) career talks with students, sharing tips and insights for job search and job entry after graduation, informing students about their rights and obligations during internships, etc.
- Hosting company visits for prospective interns or employees.

It is crucial to highlight that most CG universities also do **a level of due diligence on job opportunities** that employers request to advertise on their university job boards/online systems. This will usually be set out in their internal policy, which is publicly available to employers and students. Some universities choose not to advertise jobs that do not have a stated salary or are unpaid, or jobs from specific companies. For example, Trinity College Dublin's Policy on Advertising Opportunities with the Trinity Careers Service specifies the terms and conditions that employers need to respect to advertise their job openings and



other career-related opportunities at the College, which also includes a clear list of grounds for rejection: <https://www.tcd.ie/Careers/assets/pdf/employer-pdf/policy-advertising-opportunities-2024.pdf>.

As all CG student populations continue to diversify with a greater focus on widening participation and lifelong learning, universities have a **moral imperative to ensure that all students, regardless of location, socio-economic status, programme or mode of study, have equitable access to opportunities to enhance their employability**, make successful transitions to quality jobs and manage their careers.

Embedding careers and employability in university strategy, teaching and learning policies, processes and practices, particularly in the curriculum, provides all students of the university with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, attributes and achievements that will enable them to make successful transitions and contributions, benefitting them, the economy, and their communities.

Challenges

Supporting students in their transition to the labour market is a clear priority for CG Universities, and is intended as a capacity building process. **Structural and very rapid changes** are occurring both in the labour market, in society at large and within universities themselves, demanding co-ordination and co-operation among all stakeholders .

Making the necessary curricular adaptations and reforms, fostering more and better connections with employers, continuing to develop quality education, are all necessary actions that universities must work towards. Despite efforts to modernise curricula, however, some gaps remain between academic knowledge and practical skills demanded by employers, especially in rapidly evolving sectors like tech, green energy, and digital services.

CG universities have identified a series of **common challenges** when it comes to their students' transition from studies to quality jobs. Their shared nature makes the European level the appropriate one where to address such challenges.

1. The **global and national economic situation at the time of graduation** is a critical factor in the availability of high-quality jobs to graduates. At times of crisis or strain, companies tend to switch to hiring more experienced staff with less graduate hires, so graduates often have to undertake lower-quality jobs until the job that they really want becomes available at a later time.
2. Similarly, often there are a **limited number of jobs available in a country in a specific area**, so graduates have no option but to move to another country to find a high-quality job appropriate to their level of qualification (particularly relevant for PhD graduates), thus contributing to the "brain drain" of their home country/region. If mobility is not possible, graduates are forced to accept jobs below their qualifications, usually with implications on their earnings and overall appreciation of the quality of their job. However, evidence has shown that where graduates enter a role at a lower level, they do rise up the ranks to senior roles more quickly compared to those with a lower qualification level.



3. In some fields, particularly **humanities and social sciences**, students may face even greater uncertainty in translating their academic background into clear career paths, especially when we consider the digitalisation of the labour market. Because of that, more tailored support and more engagement with employers is needed.
4. Certain sectors, e.g. **culture, creative arts, not-for-profit**, can also be challenging in terms of high-quality roles, as they are often very limited in number with a lot of competition and there is chronic underfunding of employment in these sectors in many countries.
5. Some **graduate development programmes** in companies can be set at a relatively low level initially, as large numbers of graduates are being recruited from across many disciplines. Often this is to assess who has staying power, as many of these recruits will leave within 12 months of starting the programme. Those that remain are then often moved into higher quality roles quite quickly.
6. Students have **high expectations of service and support** for their subject-specific and individual career challenges. Moreover, career services and universities face the significant challenge of **finding inclusive ways to assist a diverse student body** in preparing for the labour market. This involves recognising and addressing the unique needs and backgrounds of each student, while delivering support at scale. **Long-term securing of finances and staffing** for professional career service staff is also amongst the most pressing challenges.

Recommendations

CG universities have identified **a series of actions** through which the EU Quality Jobs Roadmap (or related initiatives) could better support the efforts of education institutions to prepare graduates to enter the job market:

1. Policies relating to students undertaking internships, traineeships or apprenticeships in terms of quality and payment
2. Provision of fee subsidies to support learners (incl. university staff) to participate in lifelong learning
3. Structures for universities to engage with enterprise partners at European level in terms of future skills needs, e.g. a European Skills Council
4. Robust and timely global and European labour market information that is accessible and meaningful

Overall, **greater focus should be put on the importance and value of university careers and employability services** in supporting graduate transition to quality employment, and EU funding should be made available to support the implementation of university activities, as well as further research in this area by professionals in these services. European higher education is undergoing a rapid transformation under



the influence of digitalisation, artificial intelligence (AI), and the growing demand for transversal skills such as critical thinking and adaptability. However, teachers and researchers face major challenges: increased workloads, a lack of training in digital tools, and persistent inequalities between institutions. If the EU does not support this transition in a structured way, it risks deepening educational divides and undermining the attractiveness and global competitiveness of its universities, and consequently its inability to attract and retain talents that will then feed into a quality job market.

1. Policies relating to students undertaking internships, traineeships or apprenticeships in terms of quality and payment

Many universities insist that any students undertaking **internships, traineeships or apprenticeships** (hereafter: “internships”, for short) as part of an accredited programme are **remunerated** for their effort, e.g. payments, stipends, etc, and that those payments are at least at national minimum wage level. Internships also need to have **clear hosting agreements** setting out the requirements and responsibilities of both the university and the employer. However, many universities have reported difficulties in sourcing quality internships. In some of countries, the limited availability of paid internships represents a clear difficulty for students, moving them away from such working experiences, particularly when opportunities not located locally.

Internships are often a pipeline to graduate hiring. It is therefore crucial that the question of quality internships is treated together with the wider issue of promoting quality jobs.

One way to do so is to **include curricular internships** in the scope of the upcoming EU directive on Improving and enforcing working conditions of trainees and combating regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships (“**Traineeships Directive**”), whose negotiations between the Commission and the co-legislators are upcoming.

If legislative action at the EU level is not foreseen, the Commission should encourage Member States to ensure a minimum level of quality curricular internships within their own national systems, based on **common European guidelines and minimum standards**.

2. Provision of fee subsidies to support learners to participate in lifelong learning

Much of the Commission’s focus, highlighted in the Competitiveness Compass roadmap and outlined both through the Union of Skills and several funding programmes included in the MFF 2028-2034 (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, European Competitiveness Fund), is on **regular upskilling and reskilling**, on the basis that “learning new skills should be a regular part of people's professional lives to keep up with evolving economies and ensure lifelong learning”. CG universities agree with this assessment, and highlight their role as providers of lifelong learning, particularly through microcredentials, continuing professional development courses, non-degree courses, distance learning, language training, and other tools for continued education.



Opportunities for staff in organisations and companies to upskill/reskill at universities need to be promoted. At the same time, there needs to be **ongoing provision of training subsidies to enable and increase access to such training for all**. This kind of financial support would be particularly useful in peripheral or semi-peripheral regions, or in countries with rigid economic ecosystems and labour markets, where European funding lines and programmes, such as Erasmus+, constitute useful tools to improve and support internship and apprenticeship programmes.

One area in which such continuing education is and will remain crucial is **digitalisation and AI**. Developing digital technology skills is a priority for the EU and its Member States. Advantages include promoting innovation and growth, improving the adaptability and productivity of employees, and improving collaboration and communication. It is crucial to provide **affordable continuing education for the existing workforce**, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises and the cultural sector, which may lack resources. Incentives for collaboration between higher education and relevant sectors can ensure access to quality skills development.

3. Structures for universities to engage with enterprise partners at European level in terms of future skills needs, e.g. a European Skills Council

University engagement with enterprise is a key element of knowledge-based societies and economies. Positive outcomes from academic-enterprise ecosystems and related engagement are wide-ranging and include both increased relevance and innovation in universities, and improved competitiveness and innovation in enterprise partners, job creation and economic resilience, as well as greater innovation in addressing societal challenges.

All CG universities actively work with graduate employers, both locally, nationally and internationally. It is crucial to acknowledge that the **relationship should be seen as a two-way exchange**, and that learning from each other is an important element in the development of quality jobs for graduates.

While such partnerships enable universities to source a broad range of graduate job opportunities across relevant sectors and better **align their academic offerings with evolving labour market needs**, at the same time they also provide enterprises with valuable insight into the structure and content of university courses, and the skillsets students develop by undertaking these courses. This allows employers not only to source qualified graduates, but also to **design graduate-level roles with a clearer appreciation of the knowledge and skills that graduates bring with them to their organisation**. This is particularly important for those companies offering **graduate development programmes** to ensure they have relevant and attractive offerings, as often student expectations of such roles are high.

The focus should be on developing strong and sustained partnerships with relevant stakeholders **to ensure a robust talent pipeline matched to quality job opportunities at all levels and across all disciplines**. This requires a culture of enterprise partnership which embeds sharing and openness and where engagement is nurtured and silos reduced.

Supporting existing or new **University-led Enterprise Advisory Groups**, comprising academic, professional and enterprise representatives, would be helpful in facilitating such discussions in a structured and



continuous way. Moreover, a Europe-wide platform such as a “**European Skills Council**” would help coordinate the actions of national-level Advisory Groups, particularly in the context of free movement of workers and service providers within the Union’s Single Market.

4. Robust and timely global and European labour market information that is accessible and meaningful

Universities are constantly exploring different ways to design and deliver **flexible educational offerings** to meet the needs of learners, and that target areas of identified labour market/skills need, both in the traditional learning space (undergraduate and postgraduate courses) and in the continuing education space (e.g. microcredentials, Continuing Professional Development, etc.). There is an acknowledgement that universities need to be more agile and flexible with an ability to pivot to meet changing labour market needs and those of lifelong learners. For this, **there needs to be clear, timely and robust labour market information available to all to help inform related decision-making and planning.**

In many universities the focus is on having an **enterprise-informed curriculum** that integrates new skills and experiential learning with the development of expertise, knowledge and research facilitated through innovation in teaching and learning methodologies. This can include consultation on course design, increasing internship offerings, co-delivery of sessions with enterprise partners, and the development of real-world assessment approaches. Another way of embedding this enterprise-informed approach is to include a section in new course proposals which requires information on how the course will meet an identified labour market and/or skills need, how relevant enterprise partners were consulted on the development of the new course, and for postgraduate and continuing education, clear identification of the targeted learner audience with a focus on upskilling/reskilling.

Clear and impactful communication is important, with a **focus on role modelling** so students can see a career path and feel that this is open, accessible and relevant to them. Universities need to actively engage with graduate employers to promote job opportunities and career paths to students, and to educate students on how to job search effectively and broaden their horizons. At the same time, employers need to actively communicate to universities their needs, present and future, so that universities can better anticipate and adapt their offer in order to contribute to closing the skills gap.

Another tool that is particularly effective for universities to acquire information on the labour market are **surveys** or “**employability observatories**”, that keep track of graduates’ outcomes. University-owned or national graduate outcomes surveys, which are circulated to graduates at specific times post-graduation, are helpful in understanding the types of jobs graduates enter on graduation. This can include data on contract type, salary data, whether the qualification recently obtained was needed to get the job, the relevance of the course to the job, and to what extent the knowledge, skills or competencies developed during the course is being used in their current work. This data informs both curriculum development and the design of career-readiness programmes.

Some universities also interact with employers through surveys, for example at the end of internship periods, and use the employer’s feedback to refine their academic programmes and better align them with industry needs. This continuous dialogue ensures that our graduates are equipped with the skills that employers value most.



Other (independent) student survey (e.g. Cybil: <https://www.cibyl.com/>) also contribute to highlighting what students and graduates are looking for in terms of employment as this evolves over time and needs to be factored into job design and planning. The most recent Cybil survey reports that the top three things that students are looking for in a graduate role are interesting work, opportunities for career progression, and good work-life balance.

The promotion of **European-level informative surveys** on the model of national graduate outcome surveys could be particularly useful to provide additional information to both education institutions and employers on job-related trends, needs and forecasts across Europe.

The EU should also **promote or support labour market observatories in partnership with universities** to track emerging skills needs and inform curricula developments. For example, the **University of Coimbra** has recently taken part to a meeting in the framework of a project by the OECD to evaluate how different organisations monitor, anticipate and prepare skills for the labour market, considering the rapid changes occurring. Similar initiatives should equally be promoted at the EU level.

Should you have any question, please contact
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