

Higher Education Employment Policy Measures

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Abstract. The employability of higher education graduates has become a major concern in many countries, including Slovenia. In recent years, the inflexibility of higher education institutions has contributed to a mismatch between the skills and competencies possessed by graduates and those required by employers. To address this issue, the Slovenian government, through the ministry responsible for higher education, has implemented a range of policy measures aimed at improving the employability of higher education graduates. These measures include initiatives to encourage the development of transferable skills and competencies, such as internships, mentoring programs, and partnerships between higher education institutions and employers. The purpose of these policy measures is to bridge the gap between the skills and competencies that higher education graduates possess and those that are required by the labour market. By doing so, these policy measures aim to increase the employability of higher education graduates and reduce the level of unemployment among them.

Keywords: higher education, graduates, employability, labour market, Slovenia

1 Introduction

Universities and other higher education institutions play a vital role in society, encompassing the generation of new knowledge and the education of a highly skilled workforce. However, the traditional approach of higher education institutions, which did not require close alignment of curricula with the demands of the job market, has faced challenges in adapting to changing economic circumstances and job market trends. This has become particularly evident as graduate employability is no longer guaranteed, both globally and specifically in Slovenia.

One significant issue within Slovenia's higher education system is the lack of flexibility and slow response to societal changes, particularly in the public sector (EU Youth Report, 2009). This has resulted in a neglect of the evolving needs of employers across both the public and private sectors. Consequently, there is a growing concern about graduate unemployment and a mismatch between the skills acquired through specific degrees and the requirements of available job roles.

To address these challenges, the Ministry responsible for overseeing higher education in Slovenia has initiated the development and implementation of various policies aimed at enhancing the adaptability of higher education to societal and job market needs. These policies are designed to improve the responsiveness of higher education institutions and ensure a better alignment between education and employment.

This paper aims to provide an overview of Slovenia's higher education system, followed by a comprehensive exploration and discussion of the policy measures mentioned earlier. By examining their collective impact, the article seeks to highlight the steps taken by the Slovenian government to make higher education more dynamic and responsive to job market demands. In doing so, it contributes a unique perspective to the existing body of research on graduate underemployment and unemployment, showcasing practical measures that can be implemented by governments to address these issues.

While various organizations and researchers have delved into the topic of graduate employability and unemployment, such as the OECD (2002) and scholars like Kantrowitz (2020), Rivera and Vicente (2021), our analysis offers added value by specifically focusing on the Slovenian example. By examining the policies and actions taken within the Slovenian context, we shed light on potential tools for improving higher education and emphasize the desired features and goals of such measures.

In conclusion, the paper serves as a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Slovenia regarding graduate employability and the responsiveness of higher education to job market demands. It highlights the policies implemented by the Ministry overseeing higher education and provides valuable insights for governments seeking to enhance the adaptability of their own higher education systems.

2 The Convergence of Slovenia's Higher Education and Workforce Market

Slovenia, with a population of 2.1 million, boasts a relatively high rate of tertiary education completion. As of 2020, 44.9% of individuals between the ages of 30 and 34 have completed tertiary education, with a higher percentage among women (59.1%) compared to men (36.8%) (SURS, 2021).

The higher education system in Slovenia encompasses both public and private institutions, including universities, faculties, art academies, and professional colleges. Except for professional colleges, these institutions offer study programs across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. As of recent data, Slovenia has three public universities and four private universities. In addition, there are 40 autonomous higher education institutions, including 17 colleges and 23 faculties, of which only one is public (OECD, 2022).

In the academic year 2020/2021 we witnessed a diverse range of 850 study programs in Slovenia. These programs consisted of 216 academic and 134 professional bachelor's programs, 371 master's programs, and 129 doctoral programs (OECD, 2022).

Enrolment data for the 2021/2022 academic year reveals that out of the 71,094 students in higher education, 64% were pursuing first-level study programs, 31% were enrolled in master's programs and 5% were pursuing doctoral programs. The student population demonstrated international diversity, with over 12% being foreign students from 120 different countries (SURS, 2022).

In 2021, a total of 14,444 students graduated from higher education institutions in Slovenia, with 63.2% of them being women. These graduates were distributed across various levels, with 28.1% from first-level professional study programs, 34.1% from first-level academic study programs, 35% from master's programs, and 2.8% from doctoral programs (SURS, 2022).

However, one of the challenges faced by Slovenia is the issue of unemployment among tertiary education graduates. The number of jobless individuals with tertiary education experienced a significant increase in 2009, rising by 55.9% compared to 2008. The peak of graduate unemployment was observed in 2013, with nearly 19,500 unemployed graduates. Although the number has reduced to approximately 15,000 in 2021, there has been an overall increase in graduate unemployment over the past 15 years. This increase can be attributed to two main factors: the economic crisis, which had a substantial impact on Slovenia with a GDP drop of 7.8% in 2009, and the disproportionate growth in the number of graduates relative to the working-age population. Between 2006 and 2021, the number of graduates increased by over two-thirds, while the working-age population only grew by 3.3% (SURS, 2022).

The labour market transition appears to be particularly challenging for female graduates, as they constitute two-thirds of all unemployed graduates. This disparity may be attributed to the choice of study

fields, including education, humanities, social studies, business, and management, which are traditionally favoured by women but tend to have higher unemployment rates (SURS, 2022).

3 Higher education measures

3.1 Creative path to knowledge (MIZŠ, 2020, 1)

The "Creative Pathways to Knowledge" program in Slovenia is specifically designed to cater to students who are interested in participating in small research projects that integrate multiple academic disciplines or professional specializations to address specific topics or problems. The program places a strong emphasis on providing hands-on experience in real working environments, allowing students to gain practical knowledge and understand the challenges that exist within their chosen fields. Throughout their participation in the program, students are guided and supported by mentors with professional expertise, and the content is tailored to align with their academic studies.

Numerous studies and strategic papers have highlighted the lack of practical skills among young individuals entering the job market. In response to this concern, co-financed incentives are provided to encourage student engagement in project activities during their studies. The "Creative Pathways to Knowledge" program offers several notable benefits. Firstly, it establishes connections and fosters collaboration between students, companies, and higher education institutions. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship, where students gain valuable practical knowledge, experiences, and networking opportunities that can enhance their future career prospects. Companies, on the other hand, benefit from problem-solving collaborations with students and the opportunity to identify potential employment candidates. Additionally, higher education institutions have the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, updating their study programs accordingly to better prepare students for the demands of the labour market.

The program was initially launched in 2014 and 2015 and has since continued under the name "Open, Responsive, and Quality System of Higher Education - Project Work with the Economy and Non-Economy - Following the Creative Path to Knowledge 2016-2020." This continuity demonstrates the program's longevity and sustained commitment to its objectives. The activities of the program primarily focus on strengthening the integration of the higher education system with the environment, including both the economy and the non-economy sectors. By promoting flexible models that facilitate collaboration between education and industry or the non-profit sector, the program aims to achieve several key objectives. These include connecting the higher education system with the working environment, providing students with concrete practical experiences during their education, fostering entrepreneurship and creativity, and equipping young individuals with the necessary competencies to transition smoothly from education to the labour market.

Through its focus on interdisciplinary collaboration, practical experiences, and fostering connections between students, companies, and higher education institutions, the "Creative Pathways to Knowledge" program in Slovenia plays a vital role in enhancing the practical skills and employability of students. It serves as a platform for students to gain valuable insights into their chosen fields, develop transferable skills, and establish professional networks that can significantly contribute to their future success in the labor market.

3.2 Students Innovative Projects for the Benefit of Society – SIPS (MIZŠ, 2020, 2)

The SIPS (Student Involvement in Project Work for Society) program in Slovenia is a response to the recognition that many young individuals lack the practical skills necessary for a successful transition into the labour market. To address this issue, co-financed incentives are provided to encourage young

people to engage in project activities during their studies. The program's main focus is on integrating and cooperating with the higher education system in the local or regional environment.

SIPS is specifically designed for students who wish to participate in small research projects that offer real work environments, allowing them to experience the actual challenges faced in their respective fields. These projects are guided by mentors who are professionals with expertise in the student's areas of study, ensuring that participants receive guidance and support from experienced individuals.

The program has several key objectives. Firstly, it aims to foster creative and innovative solutions for practical challenges in non-commercial and non-profit sectors. By engaging with real-world problems, students have the opportunity to develop practical skills and contribute to finding solutions that benefit the local or regional community. Secondly, SIPS aims to establish connections between faculties, students, and social organizations within the local community. This collaboration promotes mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, and networking, which can lead to future partnerships and joint initiatives. Thirdly, the program focuses on equipping students, professors, and experts with the competence and experience necessary for a smooth transition from education to the workforce. By engaging in practical projects, students gain valuable experience and develop the skills required to thrive in their future careers.

SIPS acts as a bridge between higher education institutions and non-profit organizations, such as associations, institutes, and public institutions. The program provides co-financing for projects conducted in groups of 6 to 10 students, who work under the mentorship of both an academic mentor and a professional associate from a non-profit organization in the local or regional environment. The projects typically have a duration of 3 to 4 months, allowing students to immerse themselves in practical work and gain valuable hands-on experience.

Through its focus on practical engagement, collaboration with non-profit organizations, and the development of real-world solutions, the SIPS program plays a crucial role in equipping students with the necessary practical skills and experiences needed for a successful transition into the labour market. It fosters a closer relationship between higher education institutions and the local or regional community, creating a mutually beneficial environment where students can contribute to the community while also enhancing their own professional development.

3.3 Innovative Learning and Teaching for Quality Careers of Graduates – INOVUP (INOVUP 2020)

The project "Innovative Learning and Teaching for Quality Careers of Graduates and Excellent Higher Education" (INOVUP) in Slovenia aims to elevate the quality of higher education by introducing more flexible and modern approaches to learning and teaching. INOVUP specifically focuses on enhancing the teaching competencies of professors and other university staff to create a more dynamic and effective learning environment.

The project encompasses several key activities that contribute to its objectives:

- Implementation of training and creation of multipliers: Workshops and training sessions are organized to equip professors and staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to employ modern teaching forms, methods, and approaches. Through these trainings, key competencies of students are improved, enabling them to engage in lifelong learning. Moreover, multipliers are trained at foreign higher education institutions, who then disseminate their acquired knowledge within the Slovene Higher Education Area, amplifying the impact of the project.
- Analysis of the current situation: A comprehensive analysis is conducted to evaluate the promotion and utilization of innovative pedagogical approaches, methods, and teaching forms in project partner institutions and other interested higher education institutions. This analysis,

along with other project activities, contributes to the development of a strategic document that outlines the training needs of professors and staff in Slovenia, paving the way for targeted improvements.

- Establishment and operation of the Project Council: A Project Council is established to provide expert oversight and guidance in the implementation of the project. Comprised of experienced professionals, the council ensures that project activities align with the latest findings and best practices in higher education didactics. It also fosters strategic alliances among consortium partners, facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- Development of materials on higher education didactics: Educational materials focusing on higher education didactics are developed for various fields of study. These materials take into account the results of the situation analysis and incorporate modern, flexible, and innovative teaching and learning methods. Trainers and multipliers play a crucial role in disseminating these materials, enabling the adoption of modern teaching approaches, establishing a training system, and supporting the continuous professional development of professors in pedagogy.
- Raising awareness of the importance of higher education didactics: The consortium organizes various events, national consultations, and publishes expert materials on the project's website to raise awareness about the significance of higher education didactics. These initiatives aim to extend the adoption of modern, flexible, and innovative teaching and learning methods not only within the Slovene Higher Education Area but also across other educational sectors, fostering a culture of continuous improvement in teaching practices.

Overall, the INOVUP project strives to enhance the quality of higher education by promoting innovative teaching practices, improving the teaching competencies of professors and staff, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement in higher education institutions. By implementing more flexible and modern approaches to learning and teaching, the project aims to create a dynamic and engaging educational experience that equips students with the necessary skills for successful careers.

3.4 Career centres of higher education institutions (Karierni center, 2022)

Career Centres play a crucial role in empowering students and enhancing their job prospects after completing their studies. These centres offer a wide range of activities aimed at equipping students with the necessary skills, knowledge, and connections to maximize their employment opportunities and successfully enter the job market.

The primary objectives of Career Centres revolve around providing students with opportunities to connect with potential employers during their studies and equipping them with the essential skills and competencies needed for successful career development. To achieve these objectives, Career Centres offer a comprehensive range of services and activities tailored to the needs of students. These services include career counselling, faculty-specific workshops, and career camps covering various topics such as self-assessment, job search strategies, career planning, interviews, written presentations, language and computer courses, public speaking, and project management.

Career Centres also provide consultations on international opportunities, entrepreneurship, and internships, allowing students to explore diverse paths and gain valuable practical experiences. Faculty and academy-specific career days are organized to facilitate direct interaction between students and employers. Additionally, Career Centres offer Skype consultations with career counsellors from abroad, enabling students to access expert guidance and advice beyond national borders. "Speed dating" events with employers and presentations by employers at faculties and academies further facilitate meaningful connections and networking opportunities. Students may also have the chance to visit employer premises, providing them with valuable insights into real work environments.

By actively participating in Career Centre activities, students can benefit in various ways. Firstly, they gain self-awareness of their potentials, career interests, strengths, and opportunities. This self-awareness allows students to plan their careers responsibly and proactively, making informed decisions about their future paths. Secondly, students develop practical knowledge and skills that are important for employability, such as interview presentation skills, effective communication, job search strategies, and other transferable skills. These competencies enhance their marketability and increase their chances of securing desirable employment. Thirdly, students have access to information about study exchanges, internships, project work, and current events relevant to their fields. This information broadens their horizons and opens up possibilities for personal and professional growth. Lastly, Career Centres provide valuable networking opportunities with potential employers and facilitate active participation in community networks. These connections can lead to internship opportunities, job offers, and long-term professional relationships.

It is worth noting that all activities organized by Career Centres are provided free of charge, ensuring equal access and opportunities for all students, regardless of their financial backgrounds. This accessibility promotes inclusivity and ensures that every student has the opportunity to benefit from the resources and services offered by Career Centres.

3.5 Higher education reform for green and resilient transition to Society 5.0 (GOV.SI, 2022)

A reform project funded by the Recovery and Resilience Fund is set to bring significant changes to the higher education system in Slovenia. The primary objective of this reform is to establish a higher education system that effectively meets environmental needs and prepares a highly skilled workforce for future professions. By enhancing the adaptability, resilience, and responsiveness of higher education to environmental demands, the reform aims to improve its role in economic recovery, productivity, social cohesion, and balanced societal, environmental, and economic development.

The reform will be implemented in three distinct stages, taking place from 2022 to 2026. The first stage involves the development of guidelines for the renewal of professional higher education, along with the formulation of an implementation plan. These guidelines will serve as a roadmap for the necessary changes and improvements to professional higher education. The second stage focuses on the implementation of pilot projects that will provide valuable insights to inform a platform on higher education reform. The platform will specifically concentrate on facilitating a green and resilient transition towards Society 5.0. Finally, in the third stage, a blueprint for investment in a green, resilient, sustainable, and digitally connected higher education system will be prepared. This blueprint will cover various aspects, including curriculum development, infrastructure enhancement, and necessary legislative changes.

The reform project draws from previous measures and strategic policies that have shaped Slovenia's green transition and digital transformation. It builds upon the experiences gained from these initiatives and aims to align higher education with the needs and challenges of the present and future. A particular focus is placed on professional higher education, driven by an analysis of graduate employability from 2005 to 2019. The analysis revealed that professional graduates were more vulnerable to unemployment during the economic crisis of 2009-2012 compared to their academic counterparts. The reform seeks to address this mismatch by fostering a dialogue between the expectations of the labour market and the competencies that graduates should acquire through higher education. The ultimate goal is to co-create study processes and curricula that align with the needs of the economy and society, particularly in the context of the green transition towards a low-carbon circular economy. This involves equipping graduates with digital skills and competencies necessary for the evolving job market.

The guidelines for the renewal of professional higher education primarily focus on the green and digital transition. They also emphasize the importance of establishing lifelong learning opportunities, with a particular emphasis on micro-credentials. Higher education institutions are expected to establish mechanisms for obtaining up-to-date information on labour market needs and incorporate scientific research findings into educational content. Furthermore, they are encouraged to adapt study programs to current and future market demands. The reform calls for the establishment of mechanisms to offer short forms of higher education, such as micro-credentials, that are closely aligned with short- and medium-term labour market needs. By implementing these measures, higher education institutions will be better equipped to provide graduates with the necessary skills and competencies demanded by the labour market, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and responsive higher education system in Slovenia.

4 Discussion

Table 1 provides a summary of the measures discussed in the previous chapter, outlining their key characteristics, including their purpose, main features, anticipated outcomes, operational approach, type of measure, duration of implementation and allocated funding.

Table 1: Measures basic characteristics

| # | Measure | Purpose / Activities | Outcomes | Targeted group | Type of work | Type of measure | Time | Mill. € |
|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|-----------|---------|
| 1 | Creative path to knowledge | Students confront work environment challenges | Skills demanded by the labour market | Students, professors, researchers, companies | Small research team projects | Scholarships and postgraduate loans | 2016-2020 | 11.6 |
| 2 | Student Innovative Projects for the Benefit of Society | Students confront work environment challenges | Required skills for the non-profit sector | Students, professors, researchers, non-profit organisations. | Small research team projects | Scholarships and postgraduate loans | 2016-2020 | 7.3 |
| 3 | Innovative Learning and Teaching for Quality Careers of Graduates | Enhanced teaching quality | Flexible, modernized learning and teaching methods | Professors and other employees | HE didactics training and materials | Public call for additional funding of public universities. | 2018-2022 | 3.3 |
| 4 | Career centres of higher education institutions | Students connect with potential employers during their studies | Ensuring maximum employability of graduates | Students | Workshops, counselling and employer networking | Public calls | 2010-2020 | 6.9 |
| 5 | HE reforms for green and resilient transition | Renovation of HE for a green and resilient transition | Closing the graduate-labour market skills gap | Public higher education institutions | Pilot projects | Public call | 2022-2025 | 56.6 |

Starting with the objectives and anticipated outcomes, the majority of the measures implemented in Slovenia aimed to achieve several key objectives. The primary objective was to equip individuals with the skills and competencies that are specifically required by the job market, thus improving their

employability. By focusing on the development of these essential skills, the measures sought to address graduate unemployment and ensure that future graduates are better prepared for the demands of the labour market. Additionally, one of the measures (Measure 3) specifically aimed to modernize and innovate teaching methods to enhance the overall quality of education provided by higher education institutions.

Considering the target groups, the measures were primarily directed towards students, as they are the key beneficiaries of these initiatives. However, it is important to note that professors and assistants also played a role, as they were involved in the implementation and delivery of the measures to ensure their successful execution.

In terms of the nature of the initiatives, the majority of the measures involved project work conducted by small research groups. These projects provided opportunities for students to engage in hands-on learning experiences and develop practical skills. Additionally, training sessions and workshops were also commonly used formats to deliver the measures, providing students with the necessary knowledge and guidance to develop the desired skills and competences.

When considering the types of instruments used, the measures were often awarded to various stakeholders through competitive public calls. This ensured a fair selection process and allowed for the allocation of resources to the most deserving and promising projects. Additionally, scholarships and loans were also utilized to support students financially, enabling them to pursue their education and participate in the initiatives.

Regarding the duration and financing of the initiatives, the measures can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first group spanned from 2016 to 2022, with a total funding amount of €29.1 million. These measures were implemented over a significant period, allowing for the assessment of their long-term impact. The second group covered the period from 2022 to 2025, with a funding amount of €56.6 million. This allocation of funds demonstrated the commitment to continue supporting initiatives aimed at enhancing employability and addressing the skills gap.

To further enhance the understanding of the implemented measures, additional research that focuses on evaluating their impact would be valuable. Such research would provide insights into the effectiveness, strengths, and weaknesses of the measures, allowing for evidence-based decision-making. This evaluation would serve as a foundation for discontinuing ineffective measures, continuing with successful ones, and developing new initiatives as needed.

Ideally, the goal would be for higher education institutions to possess the knowledge and responsiveness necessary to effectively meet the demands of the labour market, making such measures unnecessary. By continuously improving and adapting their programs and curricula, higher education institutions can ensure that graduates are well-equipped with the skills and competences needed to succeed in their chosen fields and contribute meaningfully to the workforce and society at large.

5 Conclusion

In summary, the study brings to light the successful implementation of measures over a 10-year period, which were specifically designed to address graduate unemployment and enhance the employability of students in Slovenia. These measures focused on nurturing transferable skills and competences that are highly sought after in the labour market, resulting in improved job prospects for graduates. The collaborative efforts of higher education institutions, the relevant ministry, and related agencies have played a crucial role in driving these initiatives.

The insights provided by the case study make it an invaluable resource for a wide range of stakeholders, including higher education institutions, ministries, government agencies, companies, and organizations that employ graduates. It offers valuable guidance on effective approaches, methodologies, and measures to be employed in order to equip students with the necessary skills and competences for successful entry into the job market.

It is important to emphasize that the labour market demands a combination of both general and subject-specific competences from highly educated graduates. The ability to apply knowledge across different domains and possess a diverse skill set has become increasingly important. Moreover, the need for continuous education and training throughout one's career has become apparent, as professional requirements and employer needs continue to evolve. This concept of "up-skilling" highlights the importance of fostering closer collaboration between employers and higher education institutions. By tailoring educational offerings to meet employer-specific needs, such as through the development of micro-credentials, graduates can acquire the specialized skills and knowledge required in their respective fields.

While the case study focuses on the impact of existing measures, it is crucial to acknowledge that most of these measures have reached their conclusion, with one still ongoing. As such, it is necessary to develop new measures that build upon the lessons learned and ensure a synergistic approach that encompasses the fields of science, higher education, innovation, and the economy. It is also imperative for these new measures to be responsive to the evolving societal and economic changes resulting from significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the war in Ukraine. These changes have had far-reaching implications, particularly in sectors such as energy and food supply, and have significantly influenced the global economy and society at large.

In conclusion, the study provides a comprehensive overview of the measures implemented in Slovenia to enhance graduate employability. The collaborative efforts and dedication of higher education institutions, the relevant ministry, and related agencies have yielded positive outcomes. However, the journey towards continually improving the alignment between higher education and the labour market remains ongoing. By adapting to evolving needs and considering the effects of global events, Slovenia can ensure that its graduates possess the necessary skills and competences to thrive in a rapidly changing job market and contribute to the country's sustainable development.

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