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The employment and work situation of graduates is one of the issues most frequently referred to in the current debates on the social function of higher education. Irrespective of the views held about the extent to which higher education is expected to pursue the search of knowledge for its own sake or to serve professional training, information about graduate employment and work is generally considered as a core area of knowledge which can stimulate reflections on the function of higher education.

Information on this theme, however, is far from satisfactory. In most European countries, basic statistical information is available on awards of degrees and the educational attainment of the labour force. Statistical data are less satisfactory as regards the transition from higher education to employment. Moreover, international comparison on those issues is hampered by the different ways of defining higher education, course programmes and types of institutions and degrees in the various countries.

A substantial part of the relevant information on the relationships between higher education and the world of work is not covered by the prevailing official statistics. Surveys can fill this gap to some extent, for example by allowing us to analyse the study and career paths as well as ‘the subjective’ views of students and graduates, e.g. their study and career motives or whether they can use their knowledge on the job. But these studies may not be sufficiently representative and focus only on single fields and institutions. They are not conducted regularly as a rule.

The aim of this issue of the Journal is both substantive and methodological. Major findings on study, transition to employment and graduate employment are provided and the articles focus on the strengths and weaknesses of official statistics and surveys. The introductory article by Ulrich Teichler presents the major statistical data on selected European countries as compiled by OECD and discusses the limits of statistical data and surveys. Nine country studies present major findings on graduate employment and work as visible in statistics and surveys. These articles address the pattern of the higher education system, available data on enrolment and graduation quotas, transition to employment, the graduates’ careers and the impact of higher education on graduate employment and work. Most articles study the development since the 1970s and stress the situation in the mid-1990s. They are shortened versions of reports compiled in the framework of the project Higher Education and Graduate Employment in Europe. The CHER project is supported by the European Commission during the years 1998–2000 in the framework of the Targeted Socio-Economic Research
Programme (TSER). These reports aim to summarise major findings available before this major European survey was designed. The survey on higher education and graduate employment and work is based on responses by some 40,000 graduates about three to four years after graduation in 12 countries (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom as well as Sweden, the Czech Republic and Japan). It is hoped that the results will provide insights which go beyond the current state of knowledge.