

EMPLOYABILITY AND TRANSITIONS: FOSTERING THE FUTURE OF YOUNG ADULT GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT: Starting from questions inspired by the tremendous changes taking place in the worlds of education and employment, this research focuses on the role of employability in the building of new skills in higher education contexts. This longitudinal survey conducted on a sample of 52 graduates from the Educational Science sector found certain key characteristics in the transitions to the world of work, allowing reflection on those educational activities whose impact is more favourable to develop job placement.

KEYWORDS: employability, adult education, higher education, competences, work pedagogy.

1. Introduction: from research to the existing state of affairs

In a context of constant and rapid changes worldwide, the quest for meaning that involves universities, and especially Italian universities, puzzles teachers, researchers, and citizens alike. And this quest has become transformed, for the most part, into a question of what knowledge, skills and capabilities will be needed to enable all the students who reach the final levels of higher education to enter the world of work fully informed and accountable for their own future.

Some medium- and long-term drivers are shaping a world that is as much in flux as it is different from the past; suffice to think of demographic changes such as the ageing of the population, but also of globalization or the digitization expressed by the advancement of robotics, Big Data, the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, and the digital platforms that interconnect new forms of cohabitation within the «Smart City» (Brynjolfsson, McAfee 2014; OECD 2017). In the face of these ground-breaking changes that are not so easy to understand, higher education must reflect on its ability to achieve satisfactory educational objectives that will allow its graduates to keep pace. This is especially true in Italy where a growth in access to third-level education, the university, together with an improvement in the quality and relevance of graduates' skills is considered one of the most vital challenges by the OECD, along with the MIUR and ANVUR (OECD Skills Strategy: Italy 2017: 11). In fact, what we know is that, in addition to having a small number of graduates and graduate workers compared to the average in European

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countries, Italy also has a limited flow of graduates arriving in the world of work. Only 20% of Italians graduate between 25 and 34 years of age, compared to 30% of the OECD average (Skills Strategy: Italy 2017: 11). Italian graduates have a lower level of skills (26th place out of 29), in their levels of both literacy and numeracy, i.e. our graduates are at the same level as graduates in countries such as Sweden, Germany, and Finland. It is also necessary to improve the relevance of university studies with respect to the skills required by the job market, the skills gap being particularly pronounced where several companies are struggling to find the required profiles for their business development.

As the OECD report indicates, this urges significant reflection on what are the links between university courses, outgoing competencies, transition abilities, and the capacity to enter the world of work. Too often, the outgoing qualification does not reflect the skills learned and possessed, creating doubts over the possibility of proper alignment and especially the chance of befittingly meeting the supply and demand requisites. On top of this, often the employers themselves have long since left university, if they ever attended it, or are not adequately familiar with the transformation in higher education courses. There is reassuring data coming in when graduates have learned high-level technical, professional, and cultural skills, when their profile is clear, when their preparation is immediately understandable; in these cases, the graduates' applicability and employability become motivating factors, effectively supporting a safe and certain transition (OECD 2017: 12).

The theme of work placement for graduates is consistently linked with that of Italian University courses in the 2000s, alongside the problems of employment for young adults with higher education qualifications, and an Italian job market marred by structural contradictions. If on the one hand, it seems that there is a lack of work, on the other, there are vacancies and sectors struggling to find the best candidates.

As part of the PRIN project on *Employability and Competences*, the University of Florence research unit took its cue from an analysis of the transition of graduates towards their first work placement (Ecclestone 2007; Furlong, Cartmel 2007; Teichler 2007, 2013; Eight, Atzmüller, Berthet, Bifulco, Bonvi *et al.* 2015) with the aim of studying the access methods, the desire for professional advancement, the awareness of the skills acquired and needed for work and daily life, and the tools/techniques/roads useful in defining the professional goal.

It is assumed that, subtended to the theme of *placement*, the dimension of *employability* developed during their education can be found, being a process category related to the educational path more than a product category for the job search. The transition theme is explained, interpreted, and reasoned through that of employability. What we might say is that, in higher education, the transition to work is an *embedded employability*

process. The principal studies on employability were conducted between the mid-1990s and the end of the first decade of the 2000s (Harvey 2000, 2001, 2003; Knight, Yorke 2002, 2003; Yorke, Knight 2006) and attest the commitment that higher education should take to *train/educate* for work, for a profession, but above all to build the capabilities to remain/persevere in view of the transitions of a world in constant evolution and change (Morin 1999, 2001, 2015; Nussbaum 2010, 2011).

2. *From employability to transitions*

The main question of the investigation looked at the problem of understanding the process of transition of young graduates from the taking of their Degree, to their search for a job, and their placement. What deep dynamics underlie the initial transitions to the world of work of young adults (22–29 years) leaving higher education? More specifically: how do graduates look for work, how do they prepare for the transition step, and, above all, how do they go about building employability during their years of university study?

The objectives that emerged from the analysis of the research question concerned: 1) Understanding the attitudes of the young to work; 2) Interpreting life prospects; 3) Mapping implicit strategies for transitions; 4) Observing the range of choices of young people; 5) Acquiring elements to improve university teaching; 6) Looking for the presence of *employability* in the practices of university curricula. In effect, if the theme of the research work focused on understanding the transition process, it appears that this process has been understood as an indicator of the building of *employability*. What we can say is that the main objective was to include a central category for the construction of professionalism.

If the PRIN research as a whole looked at higher education, including *calling, orientation, teaching, internships, and transition to work*, we could say that the category of *employability* underlies a process that has been identified to justify the term ‘Higher Education’. This reflection has been maturing in a historical, cultural, social, and political period in an Italy squeezed between the world economic crisis of 2007 and its inability as a country-system to recover the lost pre-crisis positions, emerging from an economic mire that mainly affected the most heavily disadvantaged and among these, undoubtedly, young adults. In this state of affairs, although the graduates themselves have reacted (AlmaLaurea 2017), it is the structure of the university institution that has shown the principal shortcomings. At present, ministerial recommendations strongly steer study courses towards constructing professional skills, but without these being backed up by cultural reflection to support the transformations that higher education is being called upon to make by law. Employability is

the category that justifies work orientation, conceptualizing the need to acquire skills for lifelong learning, which makes it possible to model traditional teaching on work-related or digital learning. Here, there is a strong link with education of a pedagogical pattern, and with learning processes that are self-directed, organizational, and subject-based.

Studies on employability were developed in the Anglo-Saxon area starting from the 1960s, but only at the end of the '90s did substantial thinking begin to theorize on the centrality of employability in understanding the role of educational institutions for the job market: «In essence, the debate is about what employers want and what higher education institutions can do to enhance the employability of students» (Harvey 2003: 3). The question arose from observation of the demands of the world of work that did not find in UK graduates the skills required to advance production. The problem was not the economic growth of a country, but the education of the students. About 15 years ago, at the beginning of the 2000s, Harvey, the then director of the Center for Research and Evaluation at Sheffield Hallam University wrote:

There is a growing awareness in the UK of the importance of higher education in providing the innovation and creativity for the development of a knowledge-based economy in an increasingly competitive global market. Three major policy initiatives have contributed to this over the last decade: 1. widening participation and improving retention; 2. enhancing employability. 3. lifelong learning. Both higher education and the graduate labour market are changing rapidly. The student intake is becoming more diverse, in age, background, previous educational experience and interests and ambitions, although the government's efforts to broaden the social base of the undergraduate population has recently been characterised as a limited success (Harvey 2002: 4).

A definite sign that a gap of approximately 20 years separates us from other countries when it comes to reflection on employability. A reflection that has grown in various disciplines from economics, to quality assurance, sociology, statistics, and education engineering. The result has been a study of different forms and models using both qualitative and quantitative research.

In general, even in countries where the debate on the presence, monitoring, and evaluation of employability has been more intense, there has been reluctance to include the concept in reflections on the future of universities. To speak of the future is never easy, but even more so in this case. What should the role of the university be in a country? Higher education should, indeed, question the meaning of the transformations it needs to make in a world that is changing, is being transformed, shifting direction. The educational factor is always present even if we are talking about learning. Thus, we must not be afraid to veer towards

the dichotomy «Learning as Education» or «Learning as Training» (Harvey 2003); speaking of *employability* means dealing with Learning and Training in the same breath. Not in opposition but in conjunction. The writings of Harvey, Yorke & Knight (2006) confirm this, and empty the field of erstwhile rhetoric.

Therefore, the models that have followed in recent years, for the most part – since the debate is young – can be summarized in three different visions. One is integrated with and broadens the previous one, providing us with an exhaustive picture of the sense and meaning with which we, today, look at the process of employability as being embedded within every curriculum of studies that steers the educational path towards a natural development from the place of learning to the world of work.

One interesting reflection on the theme of employability in university contexts was conducted by Harvey (2002, 2003, 2006), and at the same time by Yorke & Knight (2002, 2004, 2006) in the early 2000s, even if the whole debate had been extensively prepared by reflection on higher education in the English-speaking world over the previous two decades of the 1990s. Both the prospect of Harvey and that of Yorke & Knight link the concept of employability to higher education and raise the problem of the use and presence of an ability ‘to live’, so that fittingly solid bridges can be built with the world of work. In a social context that demands more and targeted skills for a greater number of graduates to create better growth for countries with a fairer distribution of economic and social resources, reflecting deeply on the category of employability becomes key to understanding in which direction efforts need to be made to improve university teaching, create work placements and internships, and construct specific links with businesses, associations, and the public and private production sectors. Harvey’s definitions, on the one hand, and Yorke & Knight’s on the other, introduced didactic-pedagogical elements and broadened the concept until it founded an innovative way of considering higher education. In 1999, Harvey offered this definition: «The employability of a *graduate* is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit *attributes* that employers anticipate will be *necessary* for the *future* effective functioning of their organization» (Harvey 1999: 4). In fact, the real problem would seem to be the *attributes* that a graduate should possess, which should match those that businesses require. Instead, Harvey stresses that the fundamental problem is the consideration that *employability is a process* and it is this that creates the real problem, in the final analysis:

employability raises fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of higher education. Employability is not about training or providing add-on skills to gain employment. On the contrary, employability is about how higher education develops critical, reflective, empowered

learners. Despite appearances to the contrary, the real challenge is not how to accommodate employability but how to shift the traditional balance of power from the education provider to those participating in the learning experience (Harvey 1999: 13).

Equally inviting of reflection is Yorke and Knight's definition, which is by far the most sweeping and decisive: «a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy» (Yorke, Knight 2005: 3). The work of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) coordinated by Mantz Yorke from the early 2000s, has been a point of reference, unique of its kind, to understand the passage from considering employability as a concept of a hazily economic nature, to a category with a clear commitment to learning, i.e. to the pedagogic-didactic spheres of higher education. Starting from a series of texts, research, and published volumes, processed using evidence-based research methods, the opportunity arises to reflect on the educational paths, teaching practices, and the pedagogical content of the category.

3. The survey method for reflection on transition pathways

The research conducted at the University of Florence followed a qualitative survey method, and used a comparison with two samples of graduates, one interviewed at the University of Padua, during the LM50&57 study course, the other at the University of Würzburg, during the MA course in Educational Sciences. The survey method allowed us to grasp the phenomena to be studied according to a map that was not predetermined, but constantly being modified, as happens when the prospect of work fits a context of ecological research of a pedagogical-educational type, with socio-anthropological characteristics (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Glaser 1992; Guba 1990). Consequently, application of the Grounded Theory approach proved to be a research practice in the field that allowed us to first draw out the analysis categories and then the interpretation, starting from the subjects, or better, starting from the interviewees' experiences. One important trait of the method was the longitudinal data collection.

The research strategy was based on Case Studies, which provided precise indications on the procedures to be followed to conduct the survey itself (Mortari 2007). The Case Study proved useful in a line of inquiry that thoroughly analysed the sample of young adults, all MAs. The survey technique, i.e. the data collection mechanism, was twofold, even if

taken in a single solution, that of the Focus Group for prior knowledge, and in-depth interview to get to know the individuals. The Focus Group form provided some fixed fields for a mutual understanding of the research subjects. The semi-structured interview was then conducted using a second form. The protocol was rigorously developed at each step, in the sense that the contacts, the Focus Group, the period between the first meeting and the subsequent meetings, were steps scheduled temporally and materially in an identical manner over the years of research.

The expected results focused on four fields of reflection: 1) Volition; 2) Skills; 3) Channels; 4) Expectations. The subjects of the investigation included 52 graduates (39 from the University of Florence, 2 from the University of Padua, and 9 from the University of Wuerzburg in Germany). The data collected from the 10 samples of graduates who took part, from June 2014 to July 2016, covered 110 in-depth interviews. The samples were selected from the LM57&85 MA course in Adult Educational Sciences, Continuing Education, and Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Florence; the LM50&57 course in Educational Services Management and Continuing Education at the University of Padua; the MA in Educational Sciences at the University of Wuerzburg. A comparative interpretation of the interviews was carried out jointly by the group of researchers. Some series of metadata or indicators were defined after comparison of the graduates' studies.

Particular care was taken over the role of the interviewer/researcher. Three researchers covered this function flanked by three junior researchers who recorded and photographed the successive phases of the group meetings and interviews. The aim was to obtain constant feedback on the attitude of the researcher when listening, plus willingness to change practices or behaviour where they appeared inappropriate to the research work. Researchers also assumed the role of careful facilitators of the path of 'self-care'; the interview became a means for the graduates to reflect on their past learning and studies, while, in some cases, a series of two or three interviews carried out at a distance of six months acted as appointments for job orientation and the improvement of transversal competencies of the personal kind.

4. The results of the longitudinal survey

The analysis of the data from the Focus Group constituted the reference background from which the working group began to highlight the collocation of each graduate. The Focus Group constituted the first level of knowledge on the theme of the transition to work, and was used as a moment for mutual reflection in constructing the relationship between the researchers and those investigated.

The interviews were transcribed in full and constitute the main corpus of the research data. They were analysed using a metadata template relating to educational characteristics of the subject, the educational actions lived/undertaken, the type of employment taken pre/post-graduation (Training, Apprenticeships, Mobility, Theses, Laboratories, Employment Before Graduating, Coherent/Non-Coherent Employment, Adverse/Supportive/Indifferent Educational Actions, Work-Place Learning Potential – WPLP, Employee Value Proposition – EVP).

The data analysed from the interviews showed that: 1) the transition from university to the world of work involves the way of being young adults in higher education, while the transition itself is a way to call the transformation a modification of the sense of one's own self, one's own interiority, one's vision of the world; 2) the transition does not begin with the degree, but is prepared by previous studies, both in terms of hetero-managed and self-managed educational terms while, within university and secondary school curricula, it has a determinant family matrix; 3) the skills to operate in professions are the result of expertly constructed educational pathways, even if sometimes not fully consciously, developed through specific courses that allow the gaining of experience and make the knowledge already learned applicable; 4) work placements are a constant (jobs, coherent casual jobs, return to education); 5) the existence of a post-graduate degree period in which the young adult gradually becomes aware of their new condition, a path that sometimes lasts 10 months and more; 6) the transition period is lived with the determination to reach a goal coherent with the studies; 7) the gap between the pre-graduation and post-graduation volition is manifest; 8) awareness of the difference between the skills learned and those required by the job market is detectable; 9) informal networks for research work rather than the use of social or formal networks are identifiable; 10) workplaces are considered venues with a high potential for training and orientation.

Research results to be considered: 1) *employability* is a summary category that holds the highest rate of pedagogical knowledge on educational action to be undertaken in the pre-degree and educational process within university curricula, translating a process of change that may occur before graduating, and potentially supporting the process of transition, preparation and delivery; 2) *placement* is the end result of an educational process, we need not worry about how much nor how our students have learned, we need to worry about where they will apply what they have learned; 3) the relationship between education during study courses, university education (mobility, traineeships, apprenticeships, work-related and work-based learning, E-learning and M-learning), and the world of work, needs to be strengthened and developed synergistically; 4) business culture, the culture of professions and knowledge of the job market need to be implemented in university curricula; 5) the location

and development of skills (reports, communication, problem-solving, context analysis, data usage, self-efficacy) can be defined in higher education pathways.

4. Final remarks: interpreting the data

At the end of the research, we might return to reflect on the initial request and be aware that it could be divided into three parts depending on whether the data analysis is going in a *micro*, *meso*, or *macro* direction. At the *micro level*, the question could be reformulated thus: how do young adults face the transition to work? At the *meso level*, we could ask the question: how does the curriculum of the university's educational offering support the transition to work, in terms of skills? At the *macro level*, we could ask the research what the role of the university in the development of *employability* is. The answers to these questions can be considered in these terms:

- 1) *Employability* represents a process of change which prepares and accompanies the transition process. It represents a category umbrella, retaining pedagogical awareness of educational actions that need to be developed to obtain a Degree;
- 2) *Placement* is an educational process that starts far back, it is not nourished by knowledge, but by skills of a technical and transversal nature, acquired in institutional and formal situations, but also in those of non-formal and informal learning;
- 3) The relationships between the study course, university education and the world of work are decisive for the prospects of transitions oriented to faster placements;
- 4) Work culture understood as the preparation for a profession through the acquisition of *transversal skills* is a discriminating factor in the transition after graduation.
- 5) Drawing up an inventory of the skills required by the job market for Professional Profiles in the Educational Sector and the Social Economy: new professionals/entrepreneurs/experts.
- 6) The transition to the first job takes approximately 6-10 months after graduation, and represents only the first of several successive steps. In no case had stable jobs been found, but only fixed-term contracts in the best of cases.
- 7) A close synergy with the world of work is necessary for the creation of competence.

The most obvious problem lies precisely in this last point, which we could call the 'competence supply problem' or how to train good minds for first-class professionalism.

In the past, the issue of competence supply was resolved through the *training of good managers*. This was matched by business models where business schools took care of people's growth. Today most companies theorize and practise more for *lean training models and brain mobility*.

It takes staff with seniority – competent professionals – and short- to medium-term projects. This has consequences on the function and the university of *mismatch problems* faced by graduates who are not first-rate professionals. Rare cases of real unemployment: students are activated. But in all cases, a significant phenomenon which we attribute a symbolic value that forces students to extend by one year the period of training for entry into the labour market: the lengthy period for entering the job market. The year after graduation has a crucial function for the encounter with the job market, with 'coherent' work and investment in training. This is a year in which young people: re-define their professional identity (false expectations) seek alternatives to training, especially when they have begun to work (knowledge of MDL segments), build and exploit networking, use dynamic learning.

In the end, three questions arise from the research in support of graduates' future transitions to working life:

1. Can we bring work culture into the construction of study course curricula (without limiting this to apprenticeships, certain events, or services)? How can we support the construction of a coherent future for professional identity through university teaching?
2. Since a professional future depends less and less on headhunters and more on the social networks (personal, professional, entrepreneurial, institutional) that young people belong to, can the University take this into account?
3. The happiest cases of transition to work found were those in which there was a close relationship between teaching and applied research. How can we encourage this practice in a public university?

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