

# DOCTORATES AND EMPLOYABILITY: NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR DOCTORAL EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** Profound processes of change are affecting doctorates all over the world, above all, to provide broader employment prospects. However, the link between the transformations of a doctorate and employability is complex, and entails re-thinking formative pathways for doctorates by focusing on the professional identity of a PhD.

**KEYWORDS:** doctorate; employability; education, professional identity.

## *1. Introduction*

Despite the centrality of the university in the development of the knowledge society, the focus of pedagogical research for this field is only recent in Italy (Gemma 2006; Orefice, Cunti 2009) and requires more in-depth study. This contribution raises the issue of employability in relation to doctorates in their interconnection with professional identity and educational perspectives. Moreover, it concentrates on the current Italian context, from solicitations coming from supranational organizations and from international trends and experiences. In fact, given the complexity of the various dimensions at stake, it is necessary to consider the issues associated with higher education from a 'glocal' perspective, where overall scenarios are inseparably interrelated with the peculiarities and specificities of national and local contexts (Altbach 2004). Special attention will be given to formative pathways that can be classed under the ERC *Social Science and Humanities* area which, even if included in a common national and international panorama, have peculiarities that nevertheless warrant closer examination, such as: the high number of subjects already working by the time they enter their doctorate programme (many as state employees) and the scarcity of additional employment prospects with respect to academic careers for those who intend to become involved in research on a professional level (Argentin, Ballarino, Colombo 2012; ISTAT 2015). The link between the transformations of a doctorate and employability is complex. If, in fact, failure to employ doctorate holders in the university sector at a worldwide level is one of the main incentives that have led to the modification of formative pathways, on the other hand, the employment prospects are multi-

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faceted and not always linear, at least as far as access to academic careers are concerned in Italy. If, therefore, employment opportunities are an indispensable element for reflection on employability, in our opinion, the approach to the issue needs to be broader and more comprehensive, and therefore include formative pathways and, more specifically, the issue of professionalism and the identity of doctorate holders (hereinafter PhDs).

## 2. *Doctorates in the international Higher Education scenario*

To reflect on the issue, we must first consider the vast transformations that higher education has undergone on a global level over the past decade (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley 2009) and, more specifically, the profound processes of change affecting PhDs (Nerad 2006). As already mentioned, failure to provide academic employment prospects to PhDs has given a significant impetus worldwide to the transformation of doctoral formative pathways. These processes, which have been in place for several decades in many Western countries (Auriol, Misu, Freeman 2013), have led to the issue of employment prospects for doctoral students, both in the field of scientific reflection and on the level of national and supranational policies and strategies.

It is first of all useful to remember the consolidated experience of English-speaking countries where, besides 'traditional' doctorates, there are 'professional' ones (Professional doctorates) (Neuman 2005) with distinct, sometimes even opposing, characteristics in their outgoing profiles (Taylor 2007). This trend is confirmed by the current proliferation of unique pathways: Kehm (Bao, Kehm, Ma 2016) has, for example, identified nine distinct types in European countries.

In Europe, these transformations (Kehm 2010, 2015) have provided a significant impetus, also in the wake of the efforts of supranational organizations. The Bologna Process in particular had such a decisive role that it was defined as a 'collector of interest' on employability (Sin, Neave 2016: 1448). On an institutional level, the European Union has urged universities to «ensure doctoral programmes [...] promote interdisciplinary education and the development of transferable skills, thus responding to the needs of a vaster job market» (Bergen Conference 2005). The importance of professional integration has also been reiterated in numerous subsequent conferences, acting as a stimulus for reforms undertaken in various countries that have joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Within the framework of the reflection on the modernization of Higher Education, the so-called *Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training – PIDT* (European Commission 2011) were also defined, i.e., the strategic elements on which to redefine doctoral training in order to ensure professionalism and a profitable professional integration of the

subjects involved: Research Excellence, Attractive Institutional Environment, Interdisciplinary Research Options, Exposure to Industry and other relevant employment sectors, International Networking, Transferable Skills Training, Quality Assurance.

## 2. *PhDs in Italy*

In recent years, Italy has begun to implement the indications arriving from supranational organizations (Ferrara 2015). In fact, it has rapidly passed from a traditional doctorate model, based on the realization of a research project under the virtually individual supervision of an academic tutor, to more complex formative pathways, including specialized training sessions (Orefice, Del Gobbo 2011) aimed at maturing «the skills required to carry out high-qualification research activities in public and private entities, as well as qualifying them for the liberal professions, contributing to the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area» (Art. 1, Par. 3, MD 45/2013). The benchmark scenario is, however, constantly evolving, and does not always seem to match one single systematic vision (CUN 2017). The most recent instances derive from the implementation notes of the *National Research Plan 2015-2020* on innovative doctorates (Prot. 1059, 31/08/2016) which, on the basis of the solicitations already contained in the PIDT, provide for the possibility of establishing, also as reciprocal combinations and integrations: Intersectoral (or Industrial) Doctorates, Interdisciplinary Doctorates, and International Doctorates, within a framework in which several of the principles indicated by the European Union have been strengthened in a particular manner. On the one hand, these innovative formative pathways seem to offer more specific training proposals, on the other – at least in some cases – they may prove particularly significant for those who do not undertake an academic career precisely because of the greater openness and links with non-academic situations. This approach is consistent with the current working conditions of PhDs in Italy, which it seems useful to briefly discuss.

In Italy, the employment prospects of PhDs are first-rate (91.5% of doctorate holders find work four years after graduation), confirming the permanence of a competitive advantage associated with the qualification, while improving job positions (23.2%) or income (17.9%) affect only a modest part of those already employed before beginning their doctorate (ISTAT 2015). As far as an academic career is concerned, even though almost all (around 98%) of those who follow such formative pathways declare that they aspire to this (CNVSU 2010), only a handful go on to obtain a permanent position at a university (Tiraboschi 2015). Consid-

ering that only 6.5% of the research grant holders will be permanently hired by a university, after a lengthy training, it is easy to understand why the rate of PhDs employed in the university sector is extremely limited (ADI 2016). The situation of students enrolled in doctoral programmes in Italy is, therefore, characterized by a significant share (30–40%) of already employed individuals who will return to their habitual job position (ISTAT 2015). At the same time, only a residual share of subjects will ever enter the academic ranks.

Reflecting on the levels of employment achieved (and presumably achievable) by PhDs, therefore, constitutes an extremely important and significant starting point, especially considering the origin (new graduates vs. professionals) and the heterogeneous working prospects (academic vs. extra academic) of doctoral students. The complexity of challenges on both an individual level (full personal fulfilment through work, the possibility of making a contribution to society...), and on a social level (developing talents, bringing individual excellence to the social, cultural, and economic development of a country, the return of the economic investment made towards education and training...), in our opinion, force us to consider the triangulation between formative pathways, occupational prospects, and the professional identity of PhDs in integrated terms without excessive simplifications and automatisms. A reflection on education and its status cannot be reduced to a merely technical issue, but forces us to consider how, in overall terms, the identity of a professional is built (Golde, Walker 2006; Lisimberti 2006; Milani 2014). To do this, it may be useful to shift the focus of attention from employment to employability, and make use of the vast integrated definitions of employability that include social value and the ramifications of the activities carried out by individual professionals.

### *3. Employability between professional identity and doctoral education*

The debate on employability in higher education developed internationally in the 1990s, in connection with a growing focus on the quality of higher education (Harvey 2001). As far as doctorates are concerned, employment prospects are the subject of constant ever-growing attention, and are often the focus of discussion. The issue of employability, however, seems to be a less-investigated issue, even in the international literature, to the extent that it is not included among the main fields of research (Kehm 2015).

On a conceptual level, in some cases, reflecting on the product (employment) seems to be confused with the process (employability). Let us assume, in this instance, Harvey's view that employability is a process in which the subject occupies a key role (Harvey 2001) and which

leads to employment as a result. From this perspective, employability must, therefore, be investigated by placing the individual at the centre. Focusing on the subjects implies considering them as the active protagonist of their own personal and professional development without disregarding the prevalence of the socio-economic context of reference, the characteristics of the job market, and the crucial role of institutions and training models (Støren, Aamodt 2010). This systemic perspective, which seeks to highlight the complexity of the elements involved, combines well with a pedagogical approach to the issue (Lisimberti 2006), attentive to the dimension of professional development and the professional's identity.

With regards to the development of identity, there is a constitutive link with doctoral training that must be considered. The fruition of a doctoral programme induces profound transformations in subjects who must constantly re-evaluate themselves, renegotiating other roles, such as those of being a student, a researcher, or a professional (Harrison 2008; Crossouard, Pryor 2008). The diversification of outbound employment contexts (Hancock *et al.* 2016) further complicates this process, which is played out in the interaction between university space, personal space, professional space, and workspace (Pratt *et al.* 2013). According to this view, subjects and their professional and identity development must, therefore, be placed at the centre of this reflection, with reference to both the definition of formative pathways and to employability.

Exclusively considering only the employability of the individual is, however, reductive. In this sense, it seems useful to take the approach indicated by Yorke who, in defining employability as «a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy» (Yorke 2006), calls attention to the community and social dimensions of work. Such a concept of employability also makes sense for those who are already employed. After completing their doctoral education, these subjects are unlikely to advance in their careers, but will instead experience significant development in their professionalism, which will also have an impact on their work context. From a pedagogical point of view, social and community development cannot, in fact, be separated from the integral development of the person (Alessandrini 2012), and constitute an end result. Training, from this perspective, must aim towards a full realization of the person. In connection to this, it must also contribute to the development and progress of their immediate community and of society in a broader sense. This scenario forces us to rethink formative pathways for doctoral students in comprehensive terms, to ensure full personal and professional development through employability.

#### 4. Training trajectories for doctorates

Re-thinking formative pathways for doctorates poses problems that are far from insignificant. These are attributable to the inherent complexity of training subjects who are ready for both an academic career and for other professions. In conclusion, we will touch on some aspects that are closely interconnected, and seem useful to consider from this perspective.

Firstly, it seems essential to focus on the subject's professional development project (Lisimberti 2006). This implies the need to refrain from proposing standardized models, but rather to begin from individual needs and the resources to be mobilized. Even formative pathways which lie within common and orderly frameworks of reference should be personalized. In this regard, Green's perspective appears challenging, namely that «doctoral pedagogy is as much about the production of *identity* [...] as it is the production of *knowledge*» (Green 2005: 162). We believe that such attention should pervade every formative pathway. However, it assumes a significant prevalence for those subjects, particularly numerous in the Social Sciences and Humanities area in Italy, who – most likely – after their doctoral studies, will return to performing their previous occupation (suffice to think of teachers). For them, the risk is higher that a doctorate constitutes a hiatus. In contrast, if appropriately thought out and planned, it could bring benefits to both the individual – in terms of skills and professional development – as well as to their current profession and workplace in terms of developing innovation, networking, and connections with the academic world, plus planning capabilities, advanced research, etc.

Secondly, indications from supranational organizations, which incorporate previous scientific and experiential results, might usefully pervade the various doctorates and not merely act as a catalyst in specific courses. In fact, the international literature has highlighted, in addition to the specificities and undeniable strong points, the limits and potentials deriving from the presence of different formative pathways, such as their progressive hybridization and the impoverishment of professional doctorates, often considered inferior in quality to traditional ones (Shulman 2007; Olson, Clark 2009). Equally risky would be the re-proposal of a 'monolithic' model coupled with acceptable yet isolated innovative practices, unable to optimally cope with the needs of employability that originate from the presence of extremely diverse professional and existential trajectories. The open challenge is, therefore, to find applicative strategies that can reduce those elements considered strategic within all the formative pathways.

Among the possible actions it is possible to cite, as an example, transferable skill training, which has a value that is recognized with direct reference to employability, since it makes subjects more flexible in re-

sponse to requests from the working universe (Ashcrof 2004) It also opens up a greater range of job opportunities (Fallows, Steven 2000), and directly contributes to raising the quality of research (OECD 2012). Transferable skill training can therefore contribute to the improvement of all doctorates, regardless of the origin and employment prospects of the subjects involved. Some Italian universities (almost 30%) are already active in this field and, in some cases, have launched innovative formative pathways which need to be studied in greater depth, in terms of critical analysis, also with a view to identifying possible guidelines (Lisimberti 2017).

The aforementioned aspects, together with a solid theoretical reflection, could be the start of further empirical investigations aimed, amongst other things, at identifying and presenting existing good practices and experiences. This would contribute to the creation of advanced and innovative training solutions, useful for the development of solid professional identities, ready to cope with the challenges of employability and, more generally, the knowledge society.

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