

CONTRIBUTO TEORICO

Una revisione critica dell'employability dei laureati. Prospettive teoriche e riflessioni pedagogiche.

A critical review of graduates' employability. Theoretical perspectives and pedagogical issues.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

L'employability dei laureati è un concetto ampio che implica diverse rappresentazioni, incorporate in discorsi, politiche e pratiche volte a sostenere le transizioni degli studenti dall'università al lavoro. Queste transizioni, sosteniamo, non sono lineari e coinvolgono un complesso sistema di relazioni, agenti e istituzioni. Pertanto, meritano un approccio critico e sistemico. Questo articolo presenta una revisione critica della letteratura sull'employability per gettare le basi di una ricerca pedagogica empirica. Attraverso un'analisi esplorativa delle storie che emergono da dodici articoli critici sull'occupabilità, lo studio mette in evidenza quattro aspetti che caratterizzano l'occupabilità come un processo socio-relazionale, dinamico, multi-agente e contestuale. Ciò contrasta con la visione dominante dell'occupabilità dei laureati come una configurazione di competenze possedute dal singolo studente e sviluppate sotto la sola responsabilità delle università. La formazione, pertanto, ha previsto alcune prove autobiografiche-narrative finalizzate all'autovalutazione delle competenze acquisite dai volontari durante le funzioni svolte nell'ambito delle sezioni operative del Centro di Ateneo.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Graduates' employability is a wide concept entailing different representations, embedded in discourses, policies and practices aimed at sustaining students' transitions from university to work. These transitions, we claim, are not linear and involve a complex system of relationships, agents and institutions. So, they deserve a critical and systemic approach. This paper presents a critical literature review on employability to lay the groundwork for empirical pedagogical research. Through an exploratory analysis of the storylines emerging from twelve critical papers on employability, the study highlights four features that characterize employability as a socio-relational, dynamic, multi-agent, and context-based process. This contrasts the dominant view of graduates' employability as a configuration of skills possessed by the individual student and developed under the sole responsibility of universities..

Introduction

Graduates' employability has been in universities' agenda for years now, under the pressures of neoliberal economics and political regulations; this feeds the social expectation that having a degree should guarantee a job position coherent with the attended courses and well retributed.

A misplaced idea, maybe, that clashes with the ruptures, discontinuities, and entanglements that characterizes adult working lives, increasingly marked by unexpected transitions due to personal choices or to forced adaptation to ongoing changes in the working and living contexts. A significant presence of worker-students in universities, especially in master's degree courses, testifies that a nonlinear relationship characterizes the transitions between higher education and work as a cyclic and oscillating one, both in temporal terms, and for the variety of meanings and motivations behind the choice of enrolling in university as well as the subsequent choices in terms of employment, career, and professional identity. Vocational shifts, turns, and second-chance paths are adults' answers to personal or professional crises, to the need for update, and/or to new emerging requirements from employers.

Besides, the university is also rapidly changing. With the Bologna reform and the introduction of Dublin descriptors, the academic trajectories have changed; learning paths are expected to be more centered on competences, flexible, and characterized by discontinuity. Yet, the procedures for universities' assessment, funding, and ranking entice premises of linearity, not least by keeping a longstanding confusion between employability and employment:

At the current time, the terms employment and employability are often conflated; indeed, governments persist in measuring crude employment outcomes and reporting these as graduate employability. ...The uses and definitions of employability, then, must distinguish between job-getting (employment) and the ability to create and sustain work over time (employability) (Bennett, 2019, p. 32).

The dominant idea that university must train students to match job market requirements has been widely criticized as too linear, simplified, and inadequate to represent the diversity of career opportunities and students' profiles, especially when it comes to mature students (Galimberti, 2018). We propose here a critical pedagogical (re)definition of employability as a complex adaptive, recursive, and layered process. Our research (1) aims at achieving a deeper critical appraisal of the concept of employability, whose many and controversial definitions (Williams et al., 2016) clash with a pedagogical reading of the transition to work as a learning process itself. We are interested in the deconstruction of dominant storylines embedded in models and practices that nourish common sense discourses and misplaced ideas based on simplification and normalization.

We consider employability as a pedagogical concept related to the study of transitions in adult lives (Biasin, 2012; Castiglioni, 2011) beyond work-related experiences, to embrace all the domains of living, too long considered separately by research (De Vos et al., 2021). A pedagogical view is needed to feed good practices in higher and continuing education, as well as guidance and career services, to accompany and sustain 'good enough' transitions. A critical approach would orient subjects and systems between the need for adaptation and the right to self-realization and emancipation, recognizing the direct and indirect action of multiple factors.

Employability: a complex concept for critical analysis

Born out of socio-economic studies (Harvey, 1999; Hillage & Pollard, 1998), the term employability undoubtedly suffers from the assumptions and connotations of economist and market-driven reading. The hegemonic metaphor of 'human capital' (Becker, 1964) fuels a storyline that builds the concept in terms of market potential and affects how students' learning outcomes and professional itineraries are conceived (Tomlison, 2012). For example, commodification of higher education is a result of considering (isolated) individuals for their skills as goods to be delivered at the right time in the right place, following or even anticipating market needs (Han, 2009).

As we will show, critical readings on this front are not lacking, opening up new directions of thought while, at the same time, blurring the idea itself of employability, that becomes more fragmented and to a certain degree ambiguous (Forrier et al., 2018). In order to take a distance from reductionism and represent the complexity of the phenomenon, we consider three levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro.

The micro level represents employability from a student-centered perspective in terms of learning outcomes, curriculum, and individual capacity to develop professionalism and an effective strategy in training and job hunting. Hillage and Pollard (1998) define employability as being

able to obtain and hold a satisfactory job; it depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they [students] possess (p. 3).

At this level, the emphasis falls on the students' awareness of their own competences, knowledge of career prospects, and assumption of responsibility towards the achievement of a desired position. The dominant discourse seems to leave aside other considerations related to the micro level, such as the relevance of values, emotions, previous experience, and biographical awareness in shaping self-positioning and strategies.

The meso-level considers employability as a result of interactions, communication, and organization. The university is expected to promote it by organizing competence-centered paths and implementing specific actions and services for students' employability. This, writes Harvey (1999),

raises fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of higher education; it is not about training skills for employment, but about developing critical, reflective and empowered individuals (p. 13).

The formative task of higher education is at stake here.

The macro level offers a broader systemic view in considering employability as the emerging feature of several relationships and circuits between all the agents involved in the transition inside and outside the university. Several agents - employers, institutions, networks of stakeholders, and policy makers - have a responsibility towards the graduates, who represent a relevant societal resource. The macrosystem of training, continuing education, and work-related learning is regulated by laws and rules set by European, national, and local policies, as well as by discourses, representations, moral

pressures, socio-historical and cultural trends, that influence individual experiences, pedagogical practices, and concrete trajectories in direct and indirect ways.

If we look at research on employability, we can find several interpretative models, usually based on the composition of different elements. Among the most often quoted models, there are:

- USEM - Understandings, Skills, Efficacy beliefs, Metacognition (Yorke & Knight, 2006).
- DOTS - Decision learning, Opportunity awareness, Transition learning, Self-awareness (Watts, 2006).
- CareerEDGE - Career development learning (DOTS), Experience (workplace and informal contexts), Degree subject (understandings, skills), Generic-transversal skills, Emotional intelligence (motivation and awareness, teamwork) (Pool & Sewell, 2007).

It is easy to infer from these acronyms that employability is mostly built as a micro level concept, on the side of the students' acquisition of competences, and especially transversal competences, the most valued by the job market. Competences and employability are seen as strictly intertwined in the dominant narrative about higher education and work (Yorke & Knight, 2006), narrowing down a complex and multifaceted issue to the skills that are expected to enable a successful transition. In a market-shaped language, skills are narrated as "goods" or "instruments" possessed by the subjects and equipping them to navigate careers that are increasingly described as unpredictable and "protean" (Hall, 2004). This storyline - a "reduction over reduction" process - risks molding short-sighted and ineffective strategies. The focus on students' competences (micro-level), in fact, steers attention uniquely to the strategies, actions, and teaching methods that universities should adopt (meso-level) to promote the expected competences. Among them: internships, guidance services, active teaching, field experiences, project-based teaching, service learning, and so on (Pegg et al., 2012; Sumanasiri et al., 2015). The dominant storyline, then, neglects the role of the larger system and external agents such as employers and policy makers, or public discourse. The action of context, and its influence on subjectivities, is not considered. Does it make a difference to have a degree in Southern or Northern Italy? In a big city or rural village? In a regulated profession or in an emerging ill-defined job with no clear rules? What are the stories told? How do they affect individual and institutional strategies?

Besides, this approach radically underestimates the role played by the students' background and living context; research on adult education shows the role of inequalities – class, gender, ethnicity, and age - intertwined with cultural and social capital, in shaping learning and working careers (Field, 2008).

In the Italian context, not many studies have considered the construct of employability from a pedagogical perspective. Fedeli, Boffo, and Melacarne (2019) suggest a focus on transversal skills as a way to guarantee a good transition from university to work. Boffo (2019) offers five pedagogical recommendations that would enhance graduates' employability:

- a better interconnection of theory and practice within courses, especially in the humanities, to avoid misalignment of students' learning and expected skills;
- a reconsideration of work as an environment for personal growth and cognitive enrichment, thus a place to be inhabited already during university attendance to facilitate the transition and enrich both the academic and professional environments;
- a dynamic definition of employability as a condition that develops over time, thus not located in the university course but in continuing education, and interweaved with transformative learning;
- a revision of teaching strategies to incorporate constructivist and experience-based approaches, such as design thinking;
- a constant dialogue between university, job providers, and political players.

An emancipatory and critical framework (Kahn & Lundgren-Resentera, 2023; Siivonen et al., 2023) is needed, to illuminate students' diversity and rights to meaningful, liberating learning and full personal development. Higher education has a role to play in this respect, beyond technical-specialist training, to embrace a stronger commitment to social justice and lifelong learning. Our critical analysis is meant to offer food for thought and suggestions to support pedagogical research on graduates' employability. In this regard, a professional is someone who is able to take an active and critical position, not simply adapting to the world in the expected ways, but naming the world and its contradictions (Freire, 1970) so as to be able to make choices and navigate the work experience and professional career in effective, satisfying, and liberating ways. In our view, employability is not only focused on self-fulfillment (the individualistic mantra of contemporary society), but on an ecosystemic and relational perspective on learning (Formenti & West, 2018; Formenti, 2018; Galimberti, 2024).

Methodology: a critical literature review

In the light of the above, we conducted a critical analysis to answer the questions: What are the representations of graduates' employability in the critical international literature? What are the storylines and their contribution to the study of graduates' transitions from and to work? In order to identify critical publications on the multiple representations of graduates' employability in international literature, we applied an exploratory strategy entering a list of keywords (graduate employability, representation, higher education, and critic*) in Prometheus and Google Scholar, then scanned titles and abstracts to identify critical and reflexive papers focused on representations. The first selection brought to 53 papers and a book chapter, covering a time span of more than 20 years: 11 items published before 2015; 11 between 2016 and 2018, and 31 between 2019 and 2023. The scientific journals with at least 3 occurrences in this sample are:

- Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning (7 articles in 6 years).
- Education + Training (5 articles, one in 2007 and 4 in 2021-2023).
- Studies in Higher Education (4 articles in 8 years).
- Journal of Education and Work (4 articles in 15 years, of which 2 in 2022-2023).

- Higher Education (3 articles in 2016, 2020, 2022).

The remaining 24 journals have just one or two papers published. These quantitative data suggest that a critical focus on representations is marginal in the field of employability studies (as expected), but slowly growing. Further analysis based on titles and abstracts led us to categorize papers as follows:

- 27 are not relevant to the research question (thus discarded), since employability is treated only marginally.
- 15 are on employability, but their theoretical framework is poor and not critical; besides, they mostly restrict their considerations to students' representations.
- 12 are very relevant to the research question, as they present clear critical theoretical positions and develop their arguments in relation to the representations of employability.
- Only the latter, then, were coded. Tab. 1 presents the codebook. Tab. 2 presents the results of coding.

TAB. 1: CODEBOOK

Papers	1 - Cheng, Adekola, Albia, Cai (2022) 2 - Sin, Tavares, Amaral (2019) 3 - Bennett (2019) 4 - Fellows (2023) 5 - Lock, Kelly (2022) 6 - Monteiro, Almeida, García-Aracil (2021) 7 - Divan, Knight, Bennett, Bell (2019) 8 - Hora, Benbow, Smolarek (2018) 9 - Abelha, Fernandes, Mesquita, Seabra, Ferreira-Oliveira (2020) 10 - Menendez Alvarez-Hevia, Naylor (2019) 11 - Kalfa, Taksa (2015) 12 - Sin, Amaral (2017)
Theory: level of theoretical depth	1 - Almost absent 2 - A theory is enunciated 3 - Development of (new) theoretical concepts, enhancement of theory
Perspective on employability	M - Mainstream, does not deviate much from established ideas C - Critical, challenges the dominant conception
Study: type of research (1=present; 2=absent)	Emp - Empirical research Lit - Literature review Cri - Critical essay (theoretical)
Method: research tools (1=present; 2=absent)	Int - Interviews Doc - Document study Que - Questionnaire
Stakeholders considered in the paper (1=present; 2=absent)	St - Enrolled students Gra - Graduates Tea - Teachers Uni - Universities Emp - Employers Pol - Politics
Geography: country of the study or (..) author's location	Aus - Australia Can - Canada Por - Portugal UK - United Kingdom USA - United States

TAB. 2: RESULTS OF CODING

PAP	FRAME		STUDY			METHOD			STAKEHOLDERS						GEO
	The	Per	Emp	Lit	Cri	Int	Doc	Que	Stu	Gra	Tea	Uni	Emp	Pol	
1	3	C	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	UK
2	2	M	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	Por
3	3	C	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	Aus
4	1	M	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	(UK)
5	2	C	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	Aus
6	2	M	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	Por
7	2	C	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	Aus, UK, Can
8	1	C	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	(USA)
9	2	M	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	(Por)
10	2	M	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	UK
11	2	C	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	Aus
12	2	M	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	Por

A critical perspective on employability: semantic or substantial critique?

Most papers (eight) present a clear theoretical framework, but not very innovative; they bring empirical evidence to confirm a thesis (2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12). Two papers (4, 8) use theory mainly to present their thesis. Only two papers (1, 3) are theoretically broad, well developed, and bring theory to a further level.

With regard to the critical perspective, six papers (1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11) embrace a mainstream definition of employability, but propose a critique centered on the improper, erroneous, or impoverished use of the concept. The remaining six (2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 12), instead, use a critical framework to challenge the presuppositions of employability, its neoliberal roots and the implications of using it to force the university to be accountable to the labor market, which would undermine the educational vocation of academia.

As for the kind of study, seven empirical papers (2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12) explore at a micro level the representations of students, university teachers and/or employers through interviews or questionnaires or at a meso level the representations embedded in academic and political documents. Three papers (1, 3, 9) are literature reviews contrasting different definitions/representations of employability and bringing a specific focus on stakeholders (macro level). Two theoretical papers (4, 8) present a critical approach on the educational implications of employability and soft skills.

The agents considered belong to three categories and six groups: learners (students and graduates); university (teachers and academic bodies); outsiders (employers and political institutions). In the learners category, five papers focus on students' representations (1, 3, 5, 9, 10) and three on graduates' representations within 5 years after graduation (3, 5, 6).

With regard to the university, four studies (2, 4, 7, 10) explore teachers' opinions and seven analyze documents or actions proposed by academic institutions (1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 12). The external world is less represented: three articles investigate employers' perspectives (1, 9, 12), and only one examines the discursive productions of political institutions (1).

From a cross-sectional look, only two articles consider all the categories of stakeholders, while three focus on two categories and seven only one of them: students or academics. As said above, most papers, also in the larger sample of 53, are centered on students' representations. The geographical distribution shows the dominance of English-speaking countries.

Entering now into deeper content analysis, we identified two different critical approaches in this sample. The first is a semantic critique regarding the ambiguity of the concept and the confusion between employability and employment. Despite multiple clarifications and definitions having been published in 20 years (e.g. Harvey, 1999; Bennett, 2019), employability is still quite ambiguous and used with different meanings by different agents. More practically, it is still assessed mainly through the measurement of post-graduation employment rates, and this produces inconsistency on several fronts; the measurements based on a binary definition (employed/unemployed) neglects the complexity and circularity of the transition from and to work, especially if we consider the increasing dynamism and uncertainty of the job market. Employability cannot be measured through a simple number. Moreover, this reinforces the idea that rates depend on actions taken by universities, that are assessed and receive funds based on those numbers. In fact, the learning trajectories of graduates show, as we shall see more clearly later, the entanglements of many factors, some of which are quantifiable while others appear exquisitely qualitative, and acting at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

Semantic ambiguity reinforces diverse and misaligned interpretations and expectations in the system, e.g. between academia and job providers, or between the university institution and the student component. In this vein, some authors (Fellows, 2023; Sin et al., 2019) seem to embrace the employability discourse but question its primary purpose: is it merely to enable future professionals to adapt to job demands, or a broader and more complex task to steer students' reflexivity towards creating their own self-directed emancipating trajectories? Others, such as a handful of Portuguese scholars in our sample (Menendez Alvarez-Hevia & Naylor, 2019; Monteiro et al., 2021; Sin & Amaral, 2017; Sin et al., 2019) take a more favorable position to professionalization, as a responsibility of the university towards students, especially the less privileged ones, and towards society, not least in the effort to sustain socioeconomic improvement and democratization by political investment on education (as it was the case in Portugal).

Fellows (2023) invites critical educators not to escape the employability discourse by rejecting it *a priori*, but to critically inhabit it in order to promote emancipatory education through a reinterpretation of key concepts:

Critical educators can legitimately respond to the demands of capitalism by framing their liberatory pedagogy and consciousness-raising in the language of employability: teamwork, resilience, communication, and problem-solving (p. 13).

A more substantial critique comes from authors who see the discourse of employability as a potential threat to the autonomy of academia and its founding values, not to mention the capitalist contamination of education (Hora et al., 2018; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Beyond polarization, both sides of the argument have their reasons. Bennett (2019) asks

how can we prepare university students to navigate an increasingly complex world and labor market in which they will need to think in order to live? (p. 52).

In this regard, higher education should form the capacity to think critically and other life skills besides disciplinary knowledge and professional skills. Bringing critical pedagogy into university classrooms would develop autonomous thinking and acting, contrast consumerist drives and capitalist exploitation, and provide students with tools to orient themselves within today's working contexts.

These contributions refuse the mainstream linear and simplified representations of employability; however, they mostly remain within the academic world and prioritize micro and meso factors, i.e. students skills and actions implemented by the university. The role of experienced professionals, professional bodies, employers, institutions, and policy makers outside the university is totally underplayed, however we identified four storylines in the papers and their main references, that offer a more complex and layered interpretation of employability that could inspire future research:

a. Employability as a systemic variable: the socio-relational storyline

As said, the hegemonic discourse tends to frame employability in simplified terms as a set of skills possessed by graduates as an outcome of training and/or supporting actions. This leaves in the background environmental and cultural factors (Brown et al., 2003; Cheng et al., 2022; Sin & Amaral, 2017; Speight et al., 2012) and misrecognizes the diversity of students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Structural inequalities and cultural differences can shape their cultural and social capital, which is predictive of academic and professional success (Davies, 2014; McGinn & Oh, 2017).

The academic initiatives to foster employability typically involve extra-curricular learning and additional courses or pathways (micro-credentials, participation in projects, international exchanges, and so on), the participation to interdisciplinary academic environments, and possibility to build new meaningful relationships with professionals, agencies and places outside the university. However, as Hora et al. (2018) point out, all these possibilities are far less accessible to disadvantaged students belonging to marginalized minorities, student-workers and family caregivers who cannot afford extra hours and commitments, or simply subjects who did not develop the habitus of the dominant classes that is needed to feel entitled to those experiences. The public university is still a place of inequality and discrimination, which inevitably falls back on employability. Hora et al. (2018) take up Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital to denounce that students with more initial potential in terms of employability increase it through university initiatives, while those who start with fewer socio-cultural resources tend not to use these opportunities. The gap is hence increased, not reduced.

Cheng et al. (2022) compare different definitions of employability, beyond the hegemonic models. A less widespread model considers employability as an outcome of social and cultural dynamics in the specific field and community considered (Brown et al., 2003; Sin & Tavares, 2017). A relational-systemic perspective based on the notion of context, enriched with social capital, diversity, and inequalities as determinant components adds complexity to the construct of employability.

This suggests that we will need to understand the relevant political, social and economic contexts, and also how these factors intersect with each other in order to fully understand the concept of employability (Cheng et al. 2022, p. 19).

b. Employability as a process: the dynamic storyline

Each perspective and definition of employability prompts the academic institutions to adopt corresponding approaches and measures. Holmes' seminal paper (2003) identified three perspectives:

- *possessional*, based on students 'having' professional and transversal skills: a storyline that pushes universities to invest on the quality of their teaching, orientation services, apprenticeships, and other actions aimed at improving competence-based learning outcomes to enhance employability;
- *positional*, based on the effectiveness of social and cultural capital, which orients universities towards enhancing and developing the students' relationships with internal and external figures, adopting branding strategies and investing on their reputation, prestigious partnerships, and alumni;
- *processual*, based on the transition from and to work as an ongoing process of identity building (becoming a professional) that prompts a pedagogical attitude weaving theory and practice, dual system initiatives, continuing and workplace education, and lifelong lifewide learning; this storyline values co-design of courses with stakeholders and students, reflexive job placement, and accompaniment after graduation.

The latter storyline entails building strong relationships between academia and external partners to sustain the progressive construction of graduates' professional identity while experiencing the field. Taking care of the transition involves all the agents. A study in 9 Australian, Canadian, and British universities (Divan et al., 2019) found a dominance of the possessional approach and discrepancies between the declared model and actual practices, when a positional or even processual vision is claimed, but the implemented actions prioritize the dominant possessional model.

c. Multiple agents: storylines about responsibilities and roles

Each approach assigns responsibilities and roles to agents in the system of employability. The possessional approach, as seen, limits the responsibility for employability to universities, neglecting the role of other agents. This perpetuates linear common-sense expectations, firstly in the students; if the university is solely responsible for their employability, they become consumers: unawareness and de-responsibilization

hinder self-reflection and the capacity for taking charge of their own learning and reading the context.

In the positional approach, by proposing employability as a “showcase” feature, universities enter a marketing spiral that fuels unrealistic expectations in some students as well as in public discourse. Locke and Kelly (2022) use the metaphor of “gateway, not pathway”, to address the harsh clash with reality experienced by those students who are convinced to “have a profession in hand”, but on leaving university realize that social and cultural factors may be more influential than their actual skills. In this paper, the responsibility of policy makers is also evoked:

There is a silence from the UK government on its responsibility for graduate employability. HEIs appear to have passively accepted this designated role in developing student employability, but limit their reporting in terms of graduate employment rates. The imposed responsibility on HEIs for employability suggests that the government wants to get rid of their political responsibility for student employability, so it shifts the blame for market failures to the consumers and producers of higher education (Locke & Kelly, 2022, p. 25).

A silenced story, in this picture, is about the role and responsibility of employers and how their attitudes, recruitment strategies, or priorities can bring value to graduates’ real knowledge and skills, and concretely enhance their employability, or perpetuate oppression, exclusion, and exploitation. Who should take charge of graduates’ employability in the whole system of adult and continuing education? The storyline of multiple responsibilities counteracts simplification and could help to improve the quality of the learning experience, its outcomes, and graduates’ self-positioning and reflexivity, as well as the awareness and more effective actions by education providers, lecturers, professionals, employers, and policy makers.

d. Contextualizing employability: national policies and professional families

Context is very relevant, at least in two ways. Firstly, the geographical context. As said, most publications in this sample are based in English-speaking countries, where work is flexible, policies seem irrelevant to transitions, and the dominant demand is for transversal skills (Sin et al., 2019). The situation can be quite different in Central and Northern Europe, where the labor market is more regulated by policies, and public institutions take responsibility for the transition; besides, employers insist more on specific technical skills (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Mediterranean countries seem in-between the two, presenting more variations in the skills associated with employability (Sin et al., 2019). Hence, the authors claim, the construct of employability must be contextualized in national policies to avoid the indiscriminate application of a model born in different socio-economic realities.

Another contextual aspect is the professional family: each course of study has its own rules, relationships, and expectations related to work, bringing to uncomparable transition processes as regards required skills, relative influence of social capital, specific steps to entering work, and career paths and stabilization processes over time. Bennett (2019)

compares computer engineering and arts courses, showing different ideas of employability related to the field, hence different supporting initiatives.

Conclusions: towards a pedagogical critical approach

A critical approach to the representations of graduates' employability within and outside the university illuminates the presence of adaptive and emancipatory trends, recognizing a plurality of constraints and possibilities from inner and outer factors, and offering a full consideration of the micro, meso and macro levels entailed by the dynamics of transition. A pedagogical critical reinterpretation of employability as a systemic process is essential to effectively answer the need for understanding, implementing, and evaluating the educational and learning processes implemented in higher and continuing education, and feed a transitional approach in guidance and career services. Narrative/biographical and self-reflexive practices could sustain students, then graduates, in coping with the constant push to self-positioning and (re)configuring one's identity and skills that is proper to the de-standardized modern society (Alheit, 2021). This is a lifelong and lifewide process of self-orientation that takes a cyclic form, far from linear representations and common-sense expectations that connect the acquisition of a degree with consequent access to (good) work.

The narrative of employability often presents polarizations and ideological stances. On one side, the supporters of the absolute autonomy of academia see it as a threat, on the other side, universities are responsible towards the students, especially the more vulnerable ones, and the society. Our analysis suggests to overcome simplifications by combining multiple storylines in a critical, relational, dynamic, and context-based approach that embraces complexity. In order to navigate the system, students must learn not only their subject matter, or identify with a specific profession, but interrogate themselves, the context, and the other agents, to build their multiple identities, learning pathways, and uncertain careers reflexively, in a self-directed way, knowing the constraints and contradictions posed by the system. This self-assured posture is not granted at the end of university studies, and the responsibility of higher education is to create appropriate transformative spaces for learning it.

Fellows (2023) invites critical educators to redefine concepts such as teamwork, resilience, communication, and problem-solving in a direction that fosters emancipation. Critical pedagogical approaches can support the active and autonomous self-positioning of subjects and invite them to take a distance from the dominant discourse. Consumerism, passivation, and capitalist exploitation are realities in the contemporary world, especially for professionals who pay the price of low social and economic recognition, such as social workers, educators, and pedagogists. Hence, the university plays an intentional and explicit anti-oppressive role when implementing reflexive and critical spaces within its courses.

Besides, more investment on experience-based fieldwork, lifelong learning, and continuing education would enable graduates and new professionals to permanent self-orientation and growth.

We proposed a manifold representation of employability based on multiple storylines, not neglecting graduates' skills or universities' responsibility, but recognizing that employability is an emergent feature of a complex system, an entanglement of micro, meso and macro processes. It is socially and culturally constructed by different agents, each with a role and a responsibility (Cheng et al., 2022) that needs to be fully acknowledged:

- the university must guarantee high quality, research-based, and updated education, but also equal possibilities and emancipating experiences for the most vulnerable students;
- the employers and contractors are responsible for the quality of recruitment, induction, workplace learning, updating, and continuing education of their employees, but also fair conditions of work, diversity management, just economic treatment;
- the students, graduates, and professionals at all stages of their careers, and their bodies, are responsible for their own development and choices related to work, but also for taking collective action and ensuring social solidarity beyond individualism and competition;
- the policy makers, at a national, regional, and local level, are the ones who rule the game at a broader level and are responsible for the implementation of lifelong learning and continuing education in job-related policies, and for the narratives that shape them.

The real challenge is working together for employability: networking would be a necessary step to implement a more complex idea, contrasting the unequal distribution of social capital among the students and graduates, and answering to the specific social, cultural and economic features, and needs, of a country or territory (Brown et al, 2003; Sin & Tavares, 2017). There is a gap in literature about this, and good theory and empirical research are needed to overcome the dominant ideology and commonsensical discourses.

As said, we are especially interested in the employability of 'pedagogists', second-level educational professionals in Italy: leaders, managers, and designers of educational intervention who need to understand the dynamics of employability for themselves and for others, to calibrate their knowledge and action in relation to a complex world of work that is rapidly evolving (recently, law 55/2024 recognized the pedagogist as a regulated professional).

We will use the critical approach in a specific context and professional family, then, as suggested by our analysis. There is not much international literature and only a few national studies on employability in the pedagogical field. Cáceres-Reche et al. (2022), in Spain, found that most students in pedagogy did not have in mind the professional profile at the end of studies. A French paper (Eneau & Brémaud, 2023) pointed out the tension between the push to professionalization and the complexity of pedagogical knowledge. Empirical research on the construction of a professional profile, its training process, and the conditions for a good transition still has to be developed. The Remployproject will hopefully bring some insights for the pedagogic community and decision makers, to sustain reflexivity, freedom, and well-being in the dynamics of education-work transition at all levels, contrasting the structural and systemic factors that hinder it, involving all the agents, and not only students and universities.

Notes

- (1) This paper is inscribed in the funded project REMPLOY: Reconsidering Graduate Employability: Educational Pathways for Transitions to Work I PRIN-PNRR Project (2022LTZX-NA).

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