

CAREER PLANS OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF SEVILLE¹

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ABSTRACT

Graduates' employability has become a key objective in the Bologna process. There is little research, however, on the process of transition to the labor market of non-traditional groups. The aim of this paper is to deepen in the career plans of non-traditional students, identifying what they will do when they finish their studies and how they plan to access to the labor market.

The paper is placed within the context of the Erasmus+ European project EMPLOY (Enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in higher education, Erasmus Plus Program 2015-2017), a qualitative, interdisciplinary and biographical research focusing on non-traditional university students and graduates from six European countries (Sweden, Poland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal and Spain). The main project aims are to understand the employability from the perspective of students and graduates, increase knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote or hinder employability, and to explore the impact of age, gender, social class, ethnicity and disability in employment prospects of students.

Six biographical in-depth interviews have been carried out with students of the University of Seville (3 females, 3 males), all of them being in the last year of their undergraduate program. They were selected on the basis of their degrees to represent the different areas of knowledge (from Arts and Humanities to Science and Engineering), as well as on their specific characteristics of non-traditional students: adult and mature students (1), with a disability (2), immigrant (1), first generation (6), and learners with low economic and cultural capital (3). The interviews started with a whole picture of the personal and educational background of the participants, and then focused on their employability and career plans.

Results show that for all participants the next step to take once they finish their current degree is going on studying. Instead of searching for a job in the short-term, they plan to continue their university education, mostly through a master degree, but also improving their English level. The strategies and actions they plan to carry out are surprisingly vague and imprecise, as they prioritise education instead of searching for and finding a job. In

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addition, they have no information nor previous experience with the existing career services, which again means that they are not in an active search of employment.

Discussion focuses in the idea that these findings are related to the obstacles they perceive they will encounter in the near future. Hence, the general perception is that there are no opportunities in the labor market for them. It is not a problem of being more “employable” nor having better competences when searching for an employ, but a simple matter of opportunities in the current Spanish market. Additionally, they mention another barrier: employers usually search for people with previous work experience and they lack it, so they will have to pass through an uncertain process of acquiring this experience before to have real opportunities. A special mention is to be made for students with disabilities because they highlighted the personal barriers derived from their own disability that could hinder their professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Employability of university students is one of the key objectives of the Bologna process. The current economic crisis, the lack of investment in education and the continuous changes of globalised society are hampering the transition to the labor market for graduates of higher education, and especially for the group of non-traditional students.

Research in Spain has focused on the socio-labor orientation (Chisvert, 2014), the profiles of graduates of certain specialties such as ITC students (Aliane, 2006) and the employability from the perspective of the employers (European Commission, 2010). However, we have little information on the actions and strategies employed by non-traditional students to enter the labor market. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors that hinder access to the labor market for non-traditional students as well as to identify the strategies and plans they declare to have in order to be more employable in the near future.

This study is part of the European project EMPLOY, which aims to improve the employability of non-traditional students and graduates and facilitate their transition into the labor market.

LABOR INSERTION OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND GRADUATES IN SPAIN

The socio-economic situation faced by Spain does not offer optimistic perspectives regarding employment. According to data from the Labour Force Survey concerning the last quarter of 2015, 20.90% of the total population is unemployed. However, despite this high rate, the data confirm that college graduates have higher rates of success in the labor market and lower unemployment rates, compared to the total unemployed population. In any case, the strong economic downturn, the public debt and the financial crises have worsened the living conditions of the whole population, greatly reducing the chances to access to a job (Suarez, 2008).

However, it should be noted that these data only reflect statistics on traditional students, because there are not official statistics that collect the specific characteristics of non-traditional groups (migrants, low economic capital, ethnic minorities, mature students, etc.) (González -Monteagudo et al., 2015). The only feature on which we have located some reference is about the employment of disabled students in a recent survey by the National Institute for Statistics on *The employment of graduates* (INE, 2015).

Labor relations are characterized by lack of employment, flexibility, deregulation and discontinuity in work organization. This flexibility destroys any future forecast, eliminating the sense of a career and the accumulated experience. Transitions are becoming more and more frequent, and long-life learning and guidance are legitimated as facilitators of such transitions (Chisvert, 2014). All this, combined with the increase in the access to higher education of students over 30 years, according to a report by MEC (2015), raises the need to regularise and promote new policies on employability adapted to the emerging characteristics of non-traditional students and the labor market needs.

Apparently, there are not specific employability policies for non-traditional graduates. On the one hand, actions aimed at this group are part of the career guidance programs for adults, serving the entire population, not specifically to university graduates, though these policies are mainly targeted to groups at risk of social exclusion (women, immigrants, people with disabilities and youth). Thus, in recent decades, States and international organizations have shown keen interest in career guidance. Also in December 2007, the EU member states decided to establish a European Network Policy Guidance throughout Life, European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2011). This network orientation is conceived as a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and in any situation to identify their capacities, competencies and interests, to make decisions regarding education, employment and personal career. This guidance includes individual and collective actions to receive information, counseling, skills assessment, support and training for decision-making and career management.

On the other hand, it is important to mention the role of universities, as a hinge that allows transitions between training and work. According to ANECA (2009), university education alone is not enough for a successful professional integration. There is some research in the European context (OECD, 2004) that suggest that one of the challenges of career guidance services available throughout life is to ensure universal access, through forms, places and times that respond to the needs of the diversity of users. Also, CEDEFOP (2011) describes some European experiences that introduce guidance as part of a training strategy throughout life, in a coherent and integrated manner.

However, these measures contrast with those of Spain that aim to promote the employability of their graduates, although there are not strategic lines or services specifically targeting non-traditional students and graduates. Counselling services are directed to the general population and, additionally, their funding is on an annual basis which makes it difficult for their continuity and adversely affects the dynamics of work (Chisvert, 2014).

The actions developed by guidance services are articulated through various programs such as the Accompaniment program, the program for Professional Experiences and the Experimental Actions. All these programs have in common the promotion of employment of their candidates by means of promoting professional experience. However, we can

consider that these measures only provide partial solutions to the most urgent needs of the population. This implies that there is not a comprehensive career guidance system with a mainly preventive approach that identifies and develops strategic lines to promote personal and professional development (Suarez, Padilla-Carmona and Sanchez, 2013).

In this line, we deem as important the development of individualised employment plans. These plans are essential to establish actions or measures adapted to the individual characteristics of every person in search of a job. Thus, guidance services could develop appropriate counselling for the unemployed, improve the skills for the search of employment, and facilitate the integration into the labor market. Clearly, insertion plans help to improve the employability of people, since they are a mechanism that facilitates the transition to the labor market for unemployed people.

GOALS

The main aim of the study is to identify, from the perspective of the students, the strategies and plans that they have in relation to their transition to the labor market. In addition, we want to know which the factors that students perceive as obstacles to successful transition to the labor market are. According to these goals, we have analysed these four dimensions:

- Expectations and objectives of non-traditional students when they finish their studies.
- Strategies and actions for entering the labor market.
- Knowledge and previous experience of guidance services.
- Perceived barriers to access the labor market.

METHOD

The methodology we used in this study is based on a narrative approach to analyse in depth objectives and dimensions we have previously raised.

Data collection was carried out by conducting six individual biographical interviews with non-traditional students. In interviews the narrator has presented her or his life and academic career, with a special focus on those aspects related to employability and transition to the labor market.

We have worked with a sample of 3 men and 3 women, with different profiles and characteristics (immigrants, people with disabilities, first generation and persons with low economic capital), to represent the diversity among non-traditional students.

Also, the degrees of the participants represent different knowledge areas: Experimental Sciences (Chemistry, Biology), Health Sciences (Pharmacy), Humanities (History) and Social sciences (Finance and Accounting, Journalism).

The interviews were transcribed and its content was analysed by a system of categories. In the following section the results relating to the four categories indicated previously are presented.

RESULTS

The results are presented in accordance with the four dimensions mentioned previously: Expectations and objectives of non-traditional students when they finish their university studies; actions and strategies to implement to their employment; knowledge and previous experience with career guidance services; and obstacles perceived by students to make the transition from university to the labor market.

a) Expectations and objectives of non-traditional students when they finish their studies

Expectations and goals that all students interviewed point out are to continue their education after completing their undergraduate studies. Most of them state that they would like to pursue postgraduate studies, but they do not rule out improving English or new technologies.

"I want to do a master, if I get a scholarship and, if possible, go ahead with a PhD; and if I do not have possibility to continue my education with the master degree, I'm considering to return to my country My main idea is to make the Masters degree, to finish the master and then I go to my country [...] the question of training in foreign languages is very, very important [...] is highly valued" (Juan)

"I'll make a master, I have in mind the Master of Teacher Training for Secondary Schools, or to be trained as an archivist, and I have not fully decided" (Amarillo)

"Making a Master and continue my education [...] I have thought about doing a masters in social journalism [...]; and try to do something entrepreneurial and innovative, to combine to make a radio or my own newspaper, and supplement it with specific training; continue my education" (Rafael)

"First to finish off the degree [...]; I has always enjoyed teaching and being with children [...] I would like to do the Master of Teacher Training for Secondary Schools, and to apply in the civil service, and working in secondary or high school [...] learn English [...], pursue my professional training" (Nerea)

However, in other cases the students express a desire to insert or stay in the labor market through direct access or civil service examination; and to continue their training ahead to specialize in the job eventually achieved. They do not rule out further training in the long term.

"Now I'm wandering to do the exam for the civil service, but as a university graduate, maybe in a different field, does not necessarily have to be my job, there are pharmaceutical doing other work [...] other areas, for example, in the environment sector of the Andalusian government, or health inspector [...], but I want to be better trained [...]; and I want to be comfortable with my job" (Cristina)

"Ugh, I have not a clear idea, I would like, after all the time I've spent ... start working as soon as possible [...] I would like to go anywhere, if it's possible in Spain, and if it's not then outside Spain, to try to work [...] Perhaps, over time, to make a master, but that I consider it's far away [...] do courses and to improve English" (Elena)

In short, all students interviewed highlight the importance of improving education and training to both access and remain in the labor market. Above all, students highlight the importance and value of additional training in languages and new technologies to facilitate access to the labor market.

b) Strategies and actions in entering the labor market

In relation to the actions the students will develop in entering the labor market, the answers depend on job options, an issue already mentioned in the previous section. There are two distinct trends: the first one is linked to the students that want to work as employees; and the second one refers to the students that would like to undertake an entrepreneurial initiative.

In relation to the first path, students who prefer to work for others have not developed specific plans. The actions to be carried out think are very generic and do not go beyond putting into practice the skills on insertion in the labor market everyone knows and that they have probably received in a specific training: prepare the CV, review online work offers, etc.

"Find work wherever and trying to acquire more skills as to improve languages and new technologies. These aspects will add a plus" (Juan)

"The first action I would undertake would be sit down a morning in front of the computer and start looking for any type of [...] offer, both public and private. If public, I would prepare a competition for the civil service. And if it's private, to send my curriculum" (Amarillo)

"Firstly, to finish the degree [...] and the following steps, to send my curriculum, taking courses [...] and languages [...] go to these agencies where you are given some information or help or support at a professional level [...]" (Elena)

"Right now I have 28 years and I'm very lost, I also think this is due to my personal situation [...] I'm considering competition for the civil service and so on, but it's complicated because there are many people applying for this" (Nerea)

Despite being in the last year of the degree, the student responses show a level of imprecision that could be described as disturbing. They have not even decided whether they will opt for private or public employment. They do not differentiate between "making courses" and "sending out curriculums". It seems as if they had learned that these are the actions that must be done when the degree is over; and therefore they are aware that they must implement them, but have not yet made their own work plans. Also seen in these answers it is evident they speak about future actions, i.e., they not narrate actions that have already started, but they refer to actions that would take place when they finish their studies.

The actions envisaged by the second group of students (those who have in mind entrepreneurship) are also generic and ambiguous, in the sense that they do not go beyond generating "innovative projects", to disseminate their initiatives and, thus, to promote that other companies or media know their case, to facilitate their integration into the labor market.

"For example, I've thought to have my own blog and talk about my personal experiences. Both a personal and journalistic blog [...] divulging all the diversity that exists in society. It is a personal initiative, in order to claim attention from other media about me [...] also, try to do something on the radio, something entrepreneurial and innovative [...] a local radio" (Rafael)

c) Knowledge and previous experience of counselling services

Initially it must be stressed the feeling of confusion of most students interviewed when they are asked about the knowledge they have regarding guidance services, both of the university and from external services.

"I don't know counselling services [...], but it's relevant if these organizations counsel people ... and I think it's a good start in part, so these services help many people who are caught in certain circumstances and do not know how to go out [...]" (Juan)

On the other hand, it is also necessary to point out that none of the students interviewed has knowledge about what service or university body would head for academic or work guidance. However, they recognize that sometimes they have used these services to address specific topics.

"I know more the internal services of my university, such as guidance services for disabled students; but I don't know external services, and I consider I should know them [...]" (Rafael)

"I've resorted to these services in relation to scholarships [...] on my own I've been reporting every time I've had a need [...] such as the International Office [...] when I've been interested in something, I go there and they explain me, but it is not information that you have easily accessible [...]" (Elena)

"Little information; and usually you are said in these services: 'it's all explained in the guide available in Internet or in a brochure[...]" (Cristina)

In some cases, students come to their lecturers as a means of guidance on possible professional positions and thus obtain information on how to develop the transition from university to the labor market. However, this resource may be useful in the short term, but it is too generic for effective results in the medium or long term.

"If you want to get information, go to the department and talk to lecturers. They do help you, but as such there is no specific centre to help you I think in the first moment I finish off my academic training I will make use of them" (Amarillo)

"In my faculty, at least, I think that there is not [...] we had a teacher that informed us a little about the workplace [...] obviously it would be very interesting if in the faculty there is something that counsels and puts you in contact with companies" (Nerea)

"There is a professor who has lost half of the time of a lecture to explain that there are available some positions in the civil service and so on; but he did this within our teaching time. He wanted to help, but he had no idea about it. The lecturers use to tell us: 'Let's have more hours in the curriculum to guide you more [...]' and now you say: 'Hey, I'm interested in this, but to whom to ask' " (Cristina)

Also, only a minority knows external counseling services to university to which go in order to be advised occupationally, such as *Andalucía Orienta* (Andalusia Counsels).

"I know that 'Andalucía Orienta' works, but I do not know if there maybe you be oriented regarding the subject of history, I do not know. [...]" (Amarillo)

"External, the only organization I know is that working with the Employment National Institute" (Elena)

Only one student admits having resorted once an external service guidance, in this case, *Andalucía Orienta*; but despite having gone, he doesn't know how it works.

"The Employment National Institute, I've been there, we had a meeting, and we were said that we should sign up for a specific plan" (Nerea)

However, it should also be noted that, when asked whether they would be interested in receiving information about services and bodies to which they could be addressed to be professionally oriented, all students respond affirmatively. Also they recognize that it would be very useful to use these services to facilitate their employment. We collect this idea in this statement of one of the interviewed: *I think it is useful, of course.*

Finally, we emphasize that most students say they are not aware of the resources and counselling services available to request cooperation and implement strategies to facilitate the transition to the labor market. In some cases, students recognize they have resorted to these services to address specific issues. It seems that being still finalizing their studies, students still do not have a true interest towards the labor market; as a result of this, there is lack of knowledge about the bodies that could be consulted or visited.

d) Obstacles perceived to access the labor market

One of the most influential factors in the transition to the labor market are the difficulties and barriers that students may encounter during the insertion process. In the current socio-economic situation Spain is facing, given the high rate of unemployment in the country, it is conceivable that the first job will not be immediately after completion of studies. On the other hand, working conditions young people can find are far from desirable. This transition process, moreover, could be even more complex and difficult for non-traditional students, because they start from disadvantaged situations.

The answers analysed clearly show that participants are aware of this situation and that the shortage of jobs and employment opportunities will be the main obstacle they will deal with.

"Here employment opportunities are reduced and my country more than anything needs educated people. Here there are enough people who are trained in certain aspects [...] and if you do not know languages it's less likely to be hired, versus one that speak more than one language [...]" (Juan)

"The difficulty I see is that the degree of History is a degree that relies heavily [...] the public sector. It's a disadvantage that maybe there are not exams for the civil service, so not many opportunities" (Amarillo)

"The main thing is the small amount of work available [...]" (Elena)

"The situation in Spain [...] zero chance of finding work" (Nerea)

Another barrier that students summarized as difficulty entering the labor market is the experience of candidates required by employers as well as overvaluation of previous work experience.

"The issue of experience, there are certain businessmen who value too much work experience of applicants. For me, it is the main drawback because the rest is learnt by doing" (Juan)

In the case of students with disabilities, the situation varies from the other students. Disabled students mainly manifest personal barriers resulting from their own disability. These barriers could hinder their professional development if the right to reconcile professional autonomy and care for their basic needs does not occur.

"Difficulties a few, in the sense of my mobility and all that, I depend on a person [...] the company seeks high productivity and a person that does it all with; and my problems cannot do everything; I have to do physiotherapy and other things as well" (Rafael)

"Due to my disease, it also ... apart from having painful outbreaks and almost could not walk far, as leg dragged it; apart from the pain, the need to go to the bathroom, it's not well regulated. Moreover, I usually always have many paraesthesias; and in these situations, of course, it costs be attending [...] I am clumsy to think and commit more mistakes that escape me [...] that you could not control" (Cristina)

In other cases, students believe that lack of social capital and personal networks could be an impediment in their transition to the labor market.

"I don't have contacts who can help me" (Nerea)

"Contacts, I think I have not many contacts" (Amarillo)

One student said that the shortage of labor guidance could hamper access to the labor market due to lack of knowledge students have on job opportunities to access the labor market.

"Lack of career guidance [...] pharmacy has many areas [...] not only pharmacy offices" (Cristina)

CONCLUSIONS

As conclusions, we highlight the fact that all students interviewed expressed their intention to continue investing in their training, compared to seeking short-term employment, giving priority mainly to postgraduate studies (Master) and languages. Thus, the students' narratives pointed to the importance of education and training as an opportunity to increase their skills in order to favor their employability. Students considered that having high qualification allowed them to increase their chances for employment and to get better economic and personal life conditions in the future. In the same line, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport showed in 2014 that the level of training is associated with a higher employment rate and a higher salary level. In addition, the level of training is a factor of protection for individuals against loss of employment even in times of crisis.

In this context, it is evident that graduates do not put in place actions and defined strategies to promote their transition to the labor market; or these strategies are vague and diffuse, resulting unhelpful to boost their employment in a short period of time. Moreover, we conclude that there is a significant level of ignorance about counseling services as referred by students. We wonder if the students really do not know about these services as a consequence of their short-term expectations of continuing their training and, therefore, they do not plan to access to the labor market in the short term. However, in

their testimonies some students mentioned the “Red Andalucía Orienta” (Andalusia Counsel Network). Some even said that they have attended to guidance sessions. In addition, they declared to have visited the services of the University, usually to request information about internships. This seems to show that there are students who may know about the existence of guidance, but do not use the services because their immediate goals are reduced to getting more education.

However, many students referred to have no knowledge about any guidance service or unit, both in the Public Employment Services or in the university. This leads us to think that information about guidance activities is not reaching the audiences it is supposed to be addressed to. A more effective work of dissemination on the side of the public guidance services is to be made if we want to prevent the misinformation or ignorance shown by students in the interviews. In this sense, all students reported that they would like to receive information about the guidance services and resources available for them, and might appreciate their advice and help to promote their employment opportunities.

Finally, following data from ANECA Report (2009), we emphasize that university graduates in Spain have more difficulty gaining access to employment. Furthermore, this gap is more significant in the case of the group of non-traditional students, especially for students with disabilities. In this line, the main barriers perceived as obstacles in their transition to the labor market by the interviewed students are the insufficient employment and job opportunities, the overvaluation that employers put in work experience and the lack of social contacts. However, in the case of students with disabilities the situation is more complex, as they mentioned the personal barriers derived from their own disability. This could hinder their professional development, if the appropriate conditions to reconcile their personal autonomy and their working conditions are not present.

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