

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS DEVELOPED BY NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ALONG THEIR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM¹

María Tenorio-Rodríguez, María Vázquez-Granadero, Teresa Padilla-Carmona, and José González-Monteaudo

Faculty of Education, University of Seville, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper was developed in the context of the 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 project aims are, among others: a) to understand the employability from the perspective of students and graduates; b) to increase knowledge and understanding of the factors that promote or hinder employability; c) to explore the impact of age, gender, social class, ethnicity and disability in employment prospects of students; etc.

In spite of the fact that university graduates are in better conditions when accessing to the labor market, non-traditional students might experience special difficulties related to their specific characteristics. We lack of disaggregated information related to employment rates for higher education graduates and there is not specific research which deepens in the transition process of non-traditional groups. Our study is concerned with identifying which employability skills have been developed by non-traditional students during their stay at the University of Seville. For this purpose we consider the formal learning associated to their syllabuses, the extracurricular training they have been involved in, as well as the previous work experiences.

We have carried out seven biographical in-depth interviews with students of the University of Seville (4 females, 3 males), all of them studying degrees in different areas of knowledge: Pedagogy, Philosophy, Mechanical Engineering, Pharmacy, Biology and Business Management. All participants were in the final year of their undergraduate program. In addition, all of them represented different characteristics of non-traditional students: adult and mature students (3), immigrants (2) and learners with low economic and cultural capital (2).

¹ This paper presents partial results produced in Spain from the the Project “*EMPLOY - Enhancing the Employability of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education*” (November 2014 – October 2017). This project is funded under the Erasmus Plus Programme, KA2 Higher Education, Strategic Partnership (Ref.: 2014-1-UK01-KA203-001842). The team leader is Dr Barbara Merrill, University of Warwick, UK. The University of Seville (Spain) is a partner of this project. The information and views set out in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Neither the European Union institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained herein.

As for the results and following the classification of professional competences raised by Bunk (1994), we note that through the university syllabuses students developed the methodological competence, that is the reaction from previous experiences and problem solving skills. However, work experience and extracurricular activities promoted social competence, one that enables them to collaborate with others in a communicative and constructive way, showing interpersonal understanding. In addition, in the three training fields, the specific skills or qualifications of the job, technical competence, were also developed.

Finally, it can be noted that in the three areas considered in our analysis, there is a lack in the development of the participatory competence, which refers to coordination and organisational skills, leadership and ability to make decisions and take responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The employability of graduates is a key aim of the Bologna process. Although university graduates are more likely to find a job than non-graduates, the current economic crisis has exacerbated the attention paid to the employability of graduates even more (Edvardsson et al., 2010; Tholen, 2012). Research indicates that non-traditional students have specific difficulties in achieving a smooth transition into the work market (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). University graduates often face a lack of concordance between their university degrees and the demands of the work market. This problem is exacerbated for non-traditional students who generally need more time than “traditional” students to find highly qualified jobs (Purcell, Wilton and Elias, 2007). Furthermore, they are more likely to come across jobs which are below their qualification level and that are therefore less interesting and have lower salaries. There is also a mismatch between the graduates’ competences and employers’ expectations or needs.

This study takes place within the EMPLOY project: a European research project in which six universities are taking part and which means to improve the employability of non-traditional university students and graduates (youths and adults) in order to foster a smoother transition into the work market.

Research has until now been about the general topics of accessing the job market and the experiences of non-traditional students who move from university to the work market have been mostly ignored. This is why it is essential to gather opinions, experiences and perceptions of non-traditional students which take into account their points of view and subjective perspectives. To do so, we present the process and results of a qualitative analysis developed from biographical interviews with non-traditional students. This enables us to acquire new knowledge and perspectives concerning the employability of these students, as well as identifying if higher education institutions are responding to these students’ needs and endowing them with the competences necessary to carry out a successful transition to a qualified job.

NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN UNIVERSITY AND THEIR EMPLOYABILITY

The changes in the general state of the economy and the job market are the most significant determinants of work opportunities. A person’s employment perspectives are, however, influenced by many factors. This means that not all graduates have similar job

opportunities despite having received the same education. These factors include the mode of study (full time or part time), location and mobility, graduates who have previous work experience, as well as their age, gender, degree and social class (Harvey, 2001). Regarding the latter series of factors, the discriminatory practices which these graduates could face in the job market are often overlooked in discussions about employability (Morley, 2001).

There are not statistics which shed light on the employability of non-traditional students and graduates. All the studies point to the process of integration into the work market being more satisfactory and successful for university graduates in comparison to the rest of the population. Both if we speak about work participation and the probability of unemployment, work stability or salary incomes, people with a university degree benefit from better conditions.

However, some of the characteristics linked to non-traditional students (disability, mature age, ethnic origin, low socio-economic capital, etc.) could aggravate the situation of this group with respect to their employability. The level of employability of those with new degrees is going to be determined by various factors related to both the economic situation and some personal and social determining factors. It is therefore necessary to investigate what the starting point is in Spain in terms of the statistics and policies of employability for university graduates and to what extent these statistics and strategic lines consider the differential aspects which characterise the population of non-traditional students and graduates.

The research carried out in Spain by Pastor and Peraita (2014) with data from 2007 to 2013 shows that employment has been destroyed for people at all educational levels (including short university cycles), with the exception of graduates, where there has even been a certain growth. Nonetheless, in the samples of these studies the set of characteristics which can affect the probability of having a job (gender, age, nationality, level of studies, the branch of these studies and even the region of residence) are controlled. This is why we lack information precisely concerning if these work benefits can affect non-traditional graduates to the same extent or not.

Another report about the employability of university graduates in Spain comes from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2015). It compiles statistics about the work integration of university students based on the rate of registration in the Social Security² for the cohort of graduates of the 2009-2010 course, for which information is facilitated from 2011 (one year after the students finished their studies), 2012, 2013 and 2014. Working on Social Security registration we can obtain certain information about the quality of the employment (if it is permanent, temporary, full-time and in keeping with their educational level) of the university students.

The first data which we have is that employment increases with the passing of time. Of the university graduates of the 2009-2010 course, 43.4% (42.9% of the women; 44.3% of the men) are registered in the Social Security one year after finishing their studies, 55.6% are registered two years after, 58.6% three years later and 64.4% four years after (64.1% of women; 64.9% of men).

These results vary according to the age section (see Table 1). Those who got their degrees when they were younger (under 30 years old) have registration rates lower in the first year than those who are over 31. Yet this data could be due to the fact that in the higher

² The Social Security registration is measured with a fixed date of March 23rd. of the calendar years following the conclusion of university studies.

age sections it is frequent for students to already be in the work market before finishing their studies. This is why it is necessary to add that as time passes the graduates who finished their studies when they were between 25 and 40 years old are those who attain higher registration rates, while those who finished them when they were over 40 are delayed, their registration rate hardly varying with respect to those who have recently graduated.

Table 1. Social Security registration rates in the first and fourth year after graduation according to age group (MECD, 2015)

	2011 (first year after graduation)	2014 (fourth year after graduation)
Total	43.4%	64.4%
Less than 25 years old	33.1%	63.8%
25-30 years old	48.6%	64.9%
31-40 years old	63.1%	66.6%
Over 40 years old	61.4%	61.3%

In addition to this, the transition from university to the work market is an area explored in several Spanish publications. Calvo and Fernández (2013) studied the programmes of “first young employment” and Alonso (2010) focused on different career patterns, creating several typologies about the ways of navigating from higher education to work. Some studies researched on factors that hinder and enhance good working itineraries (ANECA, 2009; Pastor and Peraita, 2014).

Nevertheless, we lack research which goes thoroughly into the competences of employability and transitions to the job market of non-traditional university graduates. The view point which underlies this absence of a specific focus is that once in higher education there is equality among students, irrespective of their social or family background (González-Montegudo and Ballesteros-Moscósio, 2014). Consequently, we also expect that the university degree will itself eliminate the disadvantageous background which some students have.

AIMS

The capacity of universities to provide their students and graduates with employability cannot be precisely evaluated basing ourselves uniquely on “objective” indicators, such as job and salary perspectives. This data needs to be supplemented by information which sheds light more directly on the graduates’ capacities. That is to say, on their competences, paying special attention to non-traditional students.

Our study means to contribute to improving this situation by increasing the information available concerning the employability of non-traditional students. To do so, we set out from their very experiences. These are our research aims to:

- Analyse how employability skills are developed in relation to three different training settings: work experiences, extracurricular activities, and university studies.

METHOD

The methodological options emerge from our main aim: to understand the employability of non-traditional students. To do this we have followed a qualitative approach in order to analyse these students' perspective of employability. We identify their relation with university education and the factors which foster or hinder it.

We have opted to carry out thorough biographical interviews in which the narrator and researcher have gone deeply into those aspects which are deemed necessary. In this context, the biographical interview is the key axis for the information gathering process.

We have centred on working with a few subjects (seven) whose series of specific characteristics can provide us with a view of the problem which is broad and selected enough. The choosing of the participants was carried out based on a series of criteria which we established as relevant for our study: to be in the last year of the degree course in the University of Seville and to correspond to one or more characteristics of the typical non-traditional profile.

We have managed to represent diverse profiles. We had 3 women and 4 men, each from a different knowledge area (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Health Sciences, Engineering, Architecture, Social Sciences and Law) - except from the latter, as we had an easier access to these students in the other fields.

After gathering the data through biographical interviews, we carried out an analysis of their content. During this process we have kept the aims and questions with which we began the research very much in mind.

Given the characteristics of the questions, it seemed appropriate to undertake a qualitative analysis of the content of the answers based on the identifying of categories. Hence, after an independent reading of the interviews, the different category sets were extracted. These sets fall into three dimensions: a valuation of the university education, the factors which influence job placement and conceptions of employability.

RESULTS

Now we present the results of the analysis carried out about the three previously-formulated dimensions: assessment of the training acquired in connection with work experience, extracurricular activities and university education.

Assessment of the training gained from work experience

First we will analyse the work experiences of students and the training they have acquired from these work experiences. In most cases students have performed these tasks

combining them with university studies; in other cases, students have entered the university education after becoming unemployed or searching for making significant changes in their lives.

All students interviewed have performed informal work, both without contract or social security contributions. These jobs have been done in roles as a housemaid, baby-sitter, or giving private lessons.

We note here a question relating to gender, as these tasks have been traditionally associated with female gender, as people care, education and housework tasks. In fact, some of the male students interviewed had the intention to perform these tasks and they found it was not possible to access them because of their sex:

"Unfortunately in nurseries, even to babysit... babysitting and such, I have not been chosen. More than once, literally, they have told me that the reason was being male. Then my sex apparently was important enough as to prevent value my personal characteristics... I found those difficulties. It is ironic that I have also been discriminated because of my sex ". (Alejandro)

We have observed differences in work experience that have had students because of age. Thus, students over 30 do have these experiences, even we find a student who has had several jobs. However, under 30 years the students have not been employed, with the exception of a student who has recently obtained an employment contract in the company where he made his internships.

In any case, if we focus on the skills they have acquired, the students interviewed, who were performing these tasks, refer to emotional abilities based on emotional intelligence. Specifically, they emphasize the adaptability of the individual to pressure situations:

"You learn responsibility, caring for children is a big responsibility (...) I gained more confidence, and this fact produced that I was left alone with the children. And above all, I know how to deal with difficult situations, as the day when a child choked on a little cake and I had to take him running to the doctor. As I have been working with children, when there are difficult situations I know how to relax myself and react ". (Gracia)

Having developed social skills, it is also highlighted by some of the students, especially empathy and proper behavior in social situations:

"And as you're serving the public and people who normally have a health problem, you develop a psychological part, of conflict resolution, a kind of psychologist, a friend who understands, that helps you, let's say that's what more I have learnt in the pharmacy". (Boti)

"On a personal level, dealing with people, because you empathize with people. And of course, you start to understand that there are a lot of ways of thinking, different of your own thinking". (Botico)

Communication skills, specifically we refer to verbal language:

"I'm learning specially to know better how to explain myself, to have more patience, because working with children involves a lot of patience." (Bio)

Only one student claims to have acquired other skills specifically related to work, such as skills for developing and implementing programs and projects:

"Because I have learned there to carry out programs and projects to meet public administration and how it works. So, here in this degree, the truth is that it has been useful for me; because it's not the same case, I already knew how to design projects, as other students, but they never have developed a project or program". (Boti)

A student belonging to the branch of pure sciences, and who works professionally in this sector, he refers to skills acquired, not so much by the tasks specifically performed, but by training hours that this offers. It refers to specific skills of his professional field:

"But in my business it is important training, because we always have to be in contact with the aircraft. Then they give us training regarding desiccant substances, because we handle chemicals (...) Also we provided us with training in high contexts, i.e., how to put yourself a harness (...) There is also another training on prevention of occupational hazards". (Jose Antonio)

In general, mature students interviewed agree that due to their experience and itinerary, they know how to search for and use the necessary resources to increase their employment opportunities:

"Because maybe one for his career and his age have a little more ears pricked, not because you go with eyes looking to see, reading all the posters, among other things because I have no time for that. It is the simple fact that you care a little more". (Boti)

"If you have taken advantage of the opportunities you've had in your work to meet people, the dynamics of your professional group and that, when looking for a job, you indeed know where you're going, you do not take a stab in the dark. In addition, word of mouth, "networking" (...), that consists of having a good agenda and of talking to your contacts (...) The thing is you're currently working, but at the same time you're looking for the next job". (Botico)

Assessment of the training acquired through extracurricular activities

Another aspect we analyse refers to extracurricular activities that students have made and its contribution to their training. The extracurricular activities refer, on the one hand, to the completion of voluntary work related to hobbies and aspirations; and on the other hand, attending courses and seminars

As for volunteering, we note that all students who have developed these activities belong to the branch of social sciences and humanities. Students do not perform volunteering in order to be recognized in the curriculum or to increase their employability, but they act

according to their personal values, principles and aspirations. These voluntary activities are related to their qualifications or refer to hobbies or activities of interest. They agree in saying that they have acquired social and emotional skills, as well as positive experience as the result of the specific tasks performed within their own professional profile:

"I have been given ability to relate to others in the sense of carrying out specific projects; I have been taught the value of order and organization, to do a project with foresight, set goals, know why I'm doing this; I have been shown the difficulty of carrying out an initiative ". (Alejandro)

"Of course, you always choose what you like best. And as I like politics ... Today social capital and emotional capital are those that give you more powers to develop yourself. And this is not said". (Boti)

"I went every evening to a nursing home; I helped the assistant staff and the psychologist to undertake activities with the elderly. If I find a job in a nursing home, I know that I already have the skills required there. By the time I've been there, besides dealing with people, I know how that (...) works, I know how to make schedules, evaluate people, know about the structure, then it would be one of the places where I would not mind to work in". (Justa)

Within these volunteer activities, an adult student wanted to develop their volunteer work at the university, making use of the resources it offers. This decision coincides with his interest in politics and in knowing how participatory structures of the university work. This student says that this activity brings knowledge and a sense of identity and belonging to this institution:

"Of course, you always choose what you like best. And I like politics. Being student representative, to know from inside how a university operates, how the different departments, know how each department, how the dean team works, meet the Faculty Board ". (Boti)

"Due to the fact that students go through university only four years, the student fails to impregnate the spirit of identity and being part of the university. And I'm sure if we all would gain that, were so, this would greatly help to students, because they would be more competent and would know another context of work and study that would be very beneficial". (Boti)

Attending courses and seminars has not been an option in great demand by students during their university days. In most cases it is due to lack of time or because they do not believe that attending courses have a significant impact on their training:

"I've never liked to do courses because I see such great nonsense; and you'll lose time in doing a course which does not use at all, you invest in a university degree, because this may be useful for you". (Botico)

However, those who have themselves attended, they claim that they have been beneficial, especially to acquire more specific notions in their field of knowledge, to update

knowledge and information. In this context, it is mentioned the development of skills in search and information management as useful tools:

"Especially seminars about current issues, or tax reform, or environmental reform, which are very fashionable too. They are highly topical issues. If they are updated, with seminars you understand everything. I think that to have knowledge of outside is fine". (Gracia)

"I think what has brought me is being able to speak more in public, because we used to do round of questions, we were dealing with many papers and news, this has helped us to know look for journal articles, especially for the final project of the degree, I think I will help me a lot". (Bio)

Assessment of the training acquired from university studies

Finally, we analyse the training the students have acquired from university studies. Some students suggest they have acquired a lot of theoretical knowledge, but they consider this knowledge fails to see reflected in practice:

"If you ask me if you leave with some knowledge when you finish university ... yes, you leave the university with some knowledge, especially theoretical, but you lack practical dimensions, and you need this be explained to you". (Gracia)

However, most students agree in saying that university education gives you the basic tools to solve problems autonomously. That is, although they feel they are not qualified to solve the problems that can be found in their profession, they do know to find the resources to provide with appropriate responses:

"Rather than teach knowledge, the university teaches you a way of thinking that can be useful to develop your career tomorrow. Then in the degree you learn a lot of physics, chemistry, mathematics, a bit of pharmacology and pharmaceutical technology. And you progressively learn to think in that way, in such a way that you know how to deal with problematic situations". (Botico)

"Of course, the university offers enough tools for that one, when you go out of the degree, you can say, "well, I can start researching for myself, I can begin to undertake this and that"; university gives you many tools in personal and intellectual levels, thus you can begin your way". (Alexander)

"The good thing about the degree is that it opens your mind, that you develop, you are faced to problems of theory, and what you have to do is to develop your mind to solve that problem. Maybe you have no idea, but you give ten thousand laps on the one hand, on the other, on the other, until you solve it". (Jose Antonio)

"We do not realize, but we learn a lot to find information. Then that skill is important, because you go to the company, wherever you are going, and you already know how to find reliable information. Then, with the information that can be searched, you prepare yourself well to perform a task or another". (Justa)

One student stressed the acquisition of specific skills for the degree:

"Sure, it has given me many things. Above all, I was not used to working in the laboratory. (...), Then I mime I see myself now able to work in a laboratory, because I know almost all the techniques needed to work there". (Bio)

Another student noted that the degree in itself it is what makes you more employable, beyond the skills you have acquired personally and professionally:

"For me personally, what makes me more employable is a university degree, honestly. Yes, I have more knowledge; yes, I would be able to take the risk of becoming entrepreneur if I was given the chance, alone or with other people; and yes, I would do any job related to my studies". (Boti)

As far as internships are concerned, we have contributions from half of the students interviewed, as students of the branch of pure sciences and health do not carry out internships. In some cases, because the internships are not included in their curriculum, and in others cases, because they are optional. In these cases, students think it would be good to establish them in all degrees:

"In the degree of biology we do not have internships. I think it would be good to have them, because this helps you to work in other areas, not only in university and you get involved more, I think". (Bio)

However, for those students who concluded internship training, they usually consider that their internships did not add important contributions to their training:

"... Really, very few internships have given us something important; only in some cases the internships have been really important, to contribute to improve employability skills related to our university degree". (Boti)

Only one student says the internships have significantly influenced her training, especially referring to her personal contributions and personal rewards received from this work experience:

"Then, the fact of dealing with different people of different ages, trying to teach them something that is no merely to show it, but to teach them, that they get a knowledge of there, to take out a motivation, an approach, or a reflection on education. Then all this accumulation of things has made me grow as a person. Because it's not what I conveyed or what I've learned to treat them, but what they are also able to transmit or communicate to you, and what you learn from them". (Justa)

Vocabulary extension, greater mastery of language and reading comprehension are important skills, highlighted by another student. These learnings involve the improvement of communication skills:

"The first year was very difficult understanding any text, we had to read it twenty times. And today, with once or twice, we have already understood. Also vocabulary. I know that I do not speak as before. I even realize, because sometimes

I'm talking to some people and I have to rethink and say, "no, I cannot say these words, because I will not be understood", so the vocabulary is important is changed, I think this is cultural richness". (Justa)

CONCLUSIONS

Following the first model on the typologies of professional skills proposed by Bunk (1994), we highlight four key skills (methodological, social, technical, and participatory skill), that are integrated into what this author called action skill.

Methodological competence refers to the ability to react applying the proper procedure to the tasks entrusted, dealing with the irregularities that arise. This involves finding ways to solve independently and properly, as well as to transfer the lessons learned to other work contexts. Our study shows that methodological skill is developed prominently in the university. Thus, most of the students interviewed state that university education has given them basic tools to solve problems autonomously. That is, although they consider that at this time they would not know how to play the different tasks or activities required in their professional field, they feel they know to look for resources to find the right answers.

However, if we focus on social skill, students interviewed say they develop it in work experiences and extracurricular activities. We refer to the ability to collaborate with others in a communicative and constructive way, showing a group-oriented behavior and interpersonal understanding.

In the three analysed educational fields, we can see that students have developed specific skills, pertinent to their concrete degree or job they perform, and that are related to technical competence. We refer to the ability to master as an expert tasks and contents of the professional field, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to do so.

Closing the analysis of this classification of professional skills, we note that the least developed skill in the three setting analysed is participatory skill, which refers to responsible and dynamic participation in the organization of the job, for which are required abilities related to coordination, organization, combination, persuasion, decision-making, and leadership. Only in a occasion a student referred to this type of skill, but relating it to personal characteristics and not because it has being developed into one of the three areas analysed.

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