

EMPLOY – Enhancing the Employability of Non-Traditional Students in HE

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Portugal: Country Context

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3. Country contexts

3.1 Policy concerning employability, non-traditional students in HE and the relation between them

During the decades of the 70s and part of the 80s (XX century) national policies that tried to deal with unemployment were based on subsidies, which should compensate the loss of income during the unemployment period, until workers would get a new job. These types of measures were possible and adequate in a context of an economic favourable situation, especially because unemployment rates were very low and there was significant job offers. However, the growing implementation of neoliberal policies, a new model for economic regulation or the increasing pace of globalization, among other factors, printed a shift in this global scenario, turning unemployment into a structural phenomenon.

In fact, the primary foundations of the neoliberal monetary agenda includes government's cuts to restore private markets and, after a period of increasing unemployment, economic growth without inflation should follow (Youngman, 2000). But when barriers to the full functioning of the market – including the labour market – were removed away from the state's control, little restrictions remained to the private initiative to dismiss the workers. Thus “in the name of freedom to act it is possible, for example, to defend that the state promotes unemployment or seek other objectives that would be electorally or socially unwise” (Pimenta, 1996, p. 130).

Gradually, unemployment became structural. In this new scenario the “ancient” compensatory policy of the Well-fare state failed, being substituted by the so-called Active Employment Policies, considered a fundamental milestone, since the 90s, regarding the labour market functioning and the European social policies (Mailand, 2005). Despite the fact that the meaning of active policies is not consensual, the general trend is to define new measures to keep workers active, creating new jobs, increasing the employability or forcing an occupation of the ones unemployed. The state tends to assure processes so that individuals can have a fast adaptation to the challenges they face. That is, there is an individual responsibility of workers regarding their success in the integration in the labour market (Valadas, 2012).

Activation can therefore mean all social policy initiatives to promote the participation of workers in the labour market and stimulate employability, including the reinsertion of people who live dependent of subsidies. Governments found in activation policies an invitation to the diminishment of expenditure and the level of dependency of the ones who receive subsidies. Hespanha and Matos (2000), who analysed Portuguese activation policies especially during the 90s¹, state that this new attitude printed a shift in the social contract between the state and the citizens: the right to be subsidized implicates a correspondent duty to contribute with an activity socially useful, that is, the state should demand something in return of its help. From the analysis of such policies in the Portuguese context, Hespanha and Matos conclude that the activation discourse is seductive and includes important arguments towards basic social rights as the right to work, social security and social insertion. However, they also conclude that the practice

¹ These policies include, for example: 1) the so-called POC (occupational programmes for unemployed workers); 2) the enterprises of labour insertion; 3) a subsidy given to citizens in risk of poverty (today called Social Insertion Income).

of activation raises significant problems due to ethical and financial biases, and bureaucratic functionality, which often overcome the noble intentions of discourse.

There were, of course, further evolutions since the 90s until today, which however did not changed general trends, namely the transference of social responsibility from the state to the private sector, but also to families and civil society. Valadas (2012) states that those general trends were clearly incorporated in the European Strategy of Employment and, further, defines three different phases of evolution for employment policies. From these, we are going to focus only in the last one, which started in 2008: the negative effects of the financial and economic crisis that brought, among others, low or negative economic growth, massive unemployment and the increasing public deficits, exposed the reduced capacity of UE countries to deal with an adverse international situation. Several factors determined that from then on, employment policies were designed under a climate of austerity. As a consequence there followed a new reduction in the social state expenditure and the weakening of the state role as assuring welfare – and at the same time it becomes clear that the “flexibility” of the labour markets is clearly a top priority. When inscribing Portuguese policies concretization into these recent events, Valadas (2012) concludes that the employment centres² were not capable of finding solutions to deal with the massive new unemployed. She stresses that the new restrictions of the new activation employment policies stroke with special intensity more frail groups, as young-adults, women, older workers, immigrants, disabled and those who are precarious workers.

The immense public visibility of the term employability is recent, although the concept itself is used in different senses for some decades now, as we can see in Gazier (1990). The centrality of employability in a number of different contexts depicts the severe crisis of the labour market all over the world, the reduction of employment and the increasing precarious character of work (Helal and Rocha, 2011). So employability became an issue not only in economy, but also in the labour market debates. In recent years the concept has gain centrality in educational policies, especially in higher education (HE).

Whilst some decades ago, in Portugal, to possess a tertiary diploma was an assurance for reaching higher positions in professional careers, the changes that took place recently questioned deeply the relationships between HE diplomas, social position and income. The loss of this once linear relationship has turned graduate employment into a social and political problem (Alves, 2009). Higher education has been therefore dragged into the centre of a public, visible debate and is being scrutinized, understandably, by a set of social actors: students and their families, worried about the crisis and the future; graduates struggling for a career; employers; politicians; and even the media. So Portugal does not escape a tendency (probably happening across Europe) that claims that the external flexibility of the educational system has to answer the needs to increase the competitiveness of national economy, and especially fight young-adults unemployment. For some students, graduates and their families there is still the expectation that tertiary education can result in the access to a prestigious well-paid job. However, the rapid development of the system itself has raised issues related to HE efficacy and graduate employability (Sarrico, Rosa, Teixeira, Machado and Biscaia, 2014). In some discourses the difficulties of the graduates to find jobs is explained by

² All employment centres in Portugal belong to Institute of Employment and Training (IEFP), which is the state agency that implements employment public policies and manage the movements of employment / unemployment.

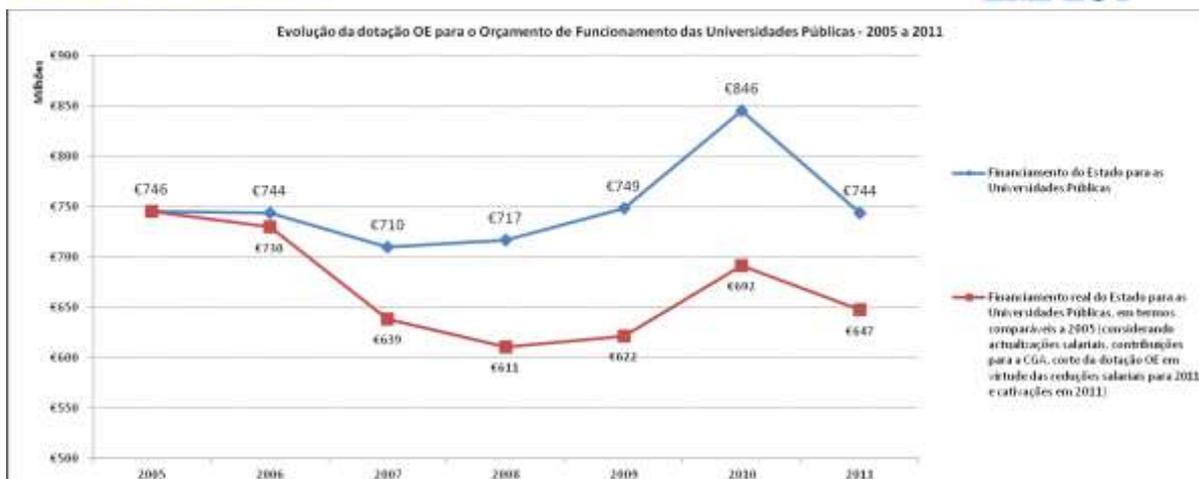
the malfunctioning of HE or HEI: the lack of professional qualifications of graduates; the presumably excessive number of graduates and detachments between the academic offer and the labour market demand; the employers complaints that graduates are not leaving HE with the necessary competences to work; all of this seems to be attributed to HE in Portugal (Alves, 2007), supporting arguments for a major, systemic change of HE in our country.

The promoters of a huge amount of changes in the HE system in Portugal were the Bologna declaration (and its implementation that begun the year 2006) and the new legal regime for HE (published in 2007 and implemented in the two years after), all done within a scenario of decreasing state provision that forced, among other complications, the downsizing of HEI lecturers and staff.

A number of authors state that in Portugal the implementation of the Bologna process forced the approaching of HE to the labour market, aiming the creation of better conditions or perspectives of graduate employability (CRUP, 2015), sometimes as a consequence of new policies for student of graduate mobility (Gonçalves, Carreira, Valadas S., and Sequeira, 2006). Also Leite (2014) stresses that in Portugal the discourse towards quality has developed as a consequence of the institutionalization of the Bologna process. The demands of accountability of HE, through standard criteria that assess and assure quality, turned to be central to the agenda and debates on HE. But the implementation of the Bologna processes in Portugal cannot be separated from the new legal regime of HE (RJIES) which, implemented at the same time, forced HEI to change completely their management bodies and internal functioning, in a managerial perspective. In this RJIES, HE is made accountable over three crucial functions within the domain of employment and employability (Gaio Alves and Chaves, 2014): i) the promotion of better articulations between the academy and the labour market; ii) the direct support to the professional insertion of graduates in the labour market; iii) the production and dissemination of comparable data on the employment of HEI graduates and their professional trajectories. With the new RJIES the State also gained the role to guarantee public access to the information on graduate professional insertion and to assure the quality and comparability of the data.

The process of Bologna was also an opportunity for the Portuguese state to apply two central measures. The first was supported by the idea that university's autonomy had the consequence of "producing" too many degrees and, hence, too many graduates could not find a job because of the mismatch between universities and the labour market. So a new state agency was created (Agency for the Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education, A3ES) to control HE offer. The Bologna process forced HEI to submit to A3ES all their study plans (1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles) to accreditation, from scratch. This agency also performs all programmes periodical evaluation. In this moment universities are autonomous to *propose* study programmes – but the state is, actually, *controlling* the HE offer in Portugal. The second central measure was to take the opportunity of the implementation of the Bologna process, not to transfer to HEI the necessary financial resources that would allow them to perform their new tasks, but to adopt the usual logic of cutting the state expenditures with HE as a system. The next figure is illustrative.

Figure 1. Evolution of transferences from the State Budget to public universities, 2005 to 2011



Source: Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities, (CRUP, 2011), <http://www.crup.pt/pt/ensino-universitario/financiamento>

The blue line shows the transferences from the state budget to public universities in absolute terms – a slight decrease from 2005 (746M €) to 2011 (744M €). However the red line shows the correction of these numbers to the comparable terms of 2005. The conclusion is therefore that in 2011 there was a loss of about 13% regarding the base-year of 2005. This kind of provision means, for example to the University of Algarve, that state funding covers only a little more than 50% of its expenses.

The Bologna implementation processes and this climate of scarcity of financial resources both are important (almost paradoxically) to analyse the situation of non-traditional students in Portugal. Before Bologna, students in Portugal could apply to a special exam called *Ad-Hoc*, which in the case of approval would give access to HE. This was a hard written exam that only a few candidates took. The Decree-Law n° 64/2006 eliminated the former *Ad-Hoc* exams and substituted it by the new form of access for students with 23 years old and more (M23) that included a written test (50%), but also the evaluation of student's professional life experience and training (30%), and an individual interview (20%). The written test can be substituted by the student's participation in 60 hours courses with its own internal assessment. It is also important to say that to apply to this form of access there is no mandatory requirement regarding student's background education. This means that people can apply with incomplete secondary studies. In the first academic years of implementation of this M23 form of access, people responded massively. This was a good new for Portuguese HEI, in the sense that these new waves of students, very different from the traditional ones, represented a surplus of participants and hence a contribution to restore HEI finances (Fragoso, Quintas, Gonçalves and Ribeiro, 2013). Official data coming from the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) show that the percentages of registered M23 students were particularly big in private universities and some Polytechnics (in some cases, literally struggling to survive). And even if the remaining public universities rejected a considerable number of candidates, from 2006 until 2010/11 entered Portuguese HEI more than 80.000 students through this form of access (GEPEAR/MEC, 2011). As we have shown regarding the University of Algarve (Gonçalves et al., 2011) these were mainly working-class students, older mature students, the first of their families to access HE and even some students with

disabilities. In short, maybe for the first time in Portuguese HE, non-traditional students had a chance; and most social actors from HEI begun to realize their student's population was finally getting more diverse.

Contrarily to a number of European countries, we can therefore conclude that the importance of non-traditional students in HE in Portugal is very recent. The research around the theme is barely beginning; the statistics concerning non-traditional students are lacking; and we have not been able to discover studies concerning non-traditional students' employability.

3.2 National statistics concerning employability, non-traditional students in HE and the relation between them

Background

According to information available on the website of the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP, 2015) in the academic year 2012/2013 378,453 students were enrolled in HE in Portugal. The total number of students enrolled has been decreasing in recent years. The highest number of students ever was reached in the academic year 2010/11, which registered more than 403,000 students. Despite this fall, the number of existing students today symbolizes a remarkable change in the landscape of tertiary education in Portugal. In the mid-60s, only about 25,000 students were enrolled in HE, and in 1980 just over 80,000 students. The growing number of students allowed the gradual qualification of the Portuguese population, with the percentage of resident population with an increased top grade of 0.5% in 1960 (49,065 individuals) to 12% in 2011 (1,244,742 individuals) (Source: PORDATA). Despite of this progress, currently only 17% of the Portuguese population aged 25-64 has a higher qualification. This value is less than half the average of OECD countries, where 32% of the working population has a higher grade. Within the OECD countries only Italy and Turkey have a smaller percentage of graduates (Education at a Glance, 2013).

Table 1. Total students enrolled in Higher Education (HEd): 1995-96 to 2012-2013

	1. Public HEd (1.1.+ 1.2.)	Universities	Polytechnics	2. Private HEd	3. Subtotal (ES)	4. Subtotal (CET)	TOTAL (1+2+4)
1995-96	198 774	139 101	59 673	114 641	313 415	-	313 415
1996-97	212 726	147 349	65 377	121 399	334 125	-	334 125
1997-98	226 642	153 951	72 691	120 831	347 473	-	347 473
1998-99	238 857	158 850	80 007	117 933	356 790	-	356 790
1999-00	255 008	164 722	90 286	118 737	373 745	-	373 745
2000-01	273 530	171 735	101 795	114 173	387 703	-	387 703
2001-02	284 789	176 303	108 486	111 812	396 601	-	396 601

2002-03	290 532	178 000	112 532	110 299	400 831	-	400 831
2003-04	288 309	176 827	111 482	106 754	395 063	-	395 063
2004-05	282 273	173 897	108 376	98 664	380 937	294	381 231
2005-06	275 521	171 575	103 946	91 791	367 312	1 259	368 571
2006-07	275 321	169 449	105 872	91 408	366 729	2 253	368 982
2007-08	284 333	175 998	108 335	92 584	376 917	4 811	381 728
2008-09	282 438	175 465	106 973	90 564	373 002	5 832	378 834
2009-10	293 828	183 806	110 022	89 799	383 627	6 214	389 841
2010-11	307 978	193 106	114 872	88 290	396 268	7 177	403 445
2011-12	311 574	197 912	113 662	78 699	390 273	7 064	397 337
2012-13	303 710	197 036	106 674	67 290	371 000	7453	378 453

Source: DGEEC-MEC (2015).

More recent data show that in academic year of 2013/2014, 359 309 students were enrolled in higher education (169 461 men and 189 848 women).

In a recent report of the European Commission (Eurydice, 2014), the concepts of access, retention and employability arise aggregated for the first time. According to this report, several countries emphasise that HEI should respond to the needs of the labour market. There are two sources of information about such labour market demand: labour market forecasts and employers or employers' organisations. Labour market forecasting is a way to anticipate labour market needs in terms of skills, demand and supply and is usually conducted by occupation and qualification levels. Besides a few exceptions (Bulgaria, Croatia, Portugal and Liechtenstein), labour market forecasting exists at national and/or regional levels in most European countries. However, using labour market information systematically in higher education policy planning is relatively rare in European countries. Only 11 countries (Ireland, France, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Finland, the United Kingdom, Montenegro and Norway) reported that their education authorities take into account labour market information in HE planning and management.

In a different perspective, it is important to say that many countries provide financial incentives to HEI and employers alike to increase the number of available traineeships. These initiatives are open to all students, and in most cases, this means that the costs of practical training are – at least partially – covered by public sources (e.g. in Belgium (French Community), Bulgaria, Greece, France, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Finland and the United Kingdom). Targeted initiatives focusing on disadvantaged students exist only in the United Kingdom (England) (Eurydice, 2014). Career guidance is available throughout the whole student lifecycle in HEI in almost all countries. The exceptions are the German-speaking Community of Belgium, where career guidance is only available in the last year before graduation; the Czech Republic, Latvia and Portugal (where higher education institutions are autonomous in their decision to establish career guidance services); Croatia (where only external services are available);

and Malta, where only some students have access to internal career guidance services, but all of them may access external services.

National Data

The systematic characterization of graduates in Portugal is done using data provided by agencies of the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) from the annual responses provided by HEI on the characterization of the universe of graduates (Cardoso, Escária, Ferreira, Raimundo, & Varanda, 2012). These data are collected from the Student Register of Members and Graduates in Higher Education (RAIDES) since 2008, and the DIMAS program since 1997. RAIDES is an annual survey, nationwide, addressed to all higher education institutions, constituting an instrument of the National Statistical System (Law No. 22/2008 of May 13). The information collected through this survey is used exclusively for statistical purposes and answers the mandatory annual public disclosure of official statistics on registered and graduate students. The results of this inquiry are transmitted, after statistical analysis, to international bodies Eurostat, OECD and UNESCO, within the framework of international commitments in the field of Education Statistics. The RAIDES 13 gathered data from students enrolled in the academic year of 2013/14 and graduates of the school year of 2012/13.

The latest data are dated of June 2014 and were based on the information of the INE Employment Survey and the records of the Professional Institute of Education and Training (IEFP). 77 541 unemployed with a higher education grade were registered at employment centres. Analysis by level of education shows that: 35 237 had no academic qualification, 137 623 possessed the 1st cycle, 100 821 the 2nd cycle, 123 989 the 3rd cycle and 139 771 secondary school.

The table below shows the total number of unemployed registered with higher qualifications, by age group – this is a voluntary registration and may not reflect the reality of the unemployed population.

Table 2. Total registered unemployed and registered unemployed with higher qualifications, by age group

Continent -
June 2014

Age group	Total of unemployed		Unemployed with higher academic qualifications	
	N	%	N	%
TOTAL	580 679	100,0	75 020	100,0
< 25 anos	65 322	11,2	10 096	13,5
25 - 34 anos	113 944	19,6	30 978	41,3
35 - 54 anos	277 257	47,7	30 316	40,4
55 anos e +	124 156	21,4	3 630	4,8

Source: Instituto do Emprego e Formação

Graduates that made their journeys without interruption (at least degree + master) are more easily employed.

Table 3. Total registered unemployed and registered unemployed with higher qualifications, by job search situation

Continent – June 2014

Job search situation	Total of unemployed		Unemployed with higher academic qualifications	
	N	%	N	%
TOTAL	580 679	100,0	75 020	100,0
1st job	56 594	9,7	14 810	19,7
New job	524 085	90,3	60 210	80,3

Source: Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional, I.P. (IEFP)

The National Institute of Statistics (INE) is the entity responsible for ensuring the production and dissemination of official statistical information against the background of independence and permanent vigilance with regard to the emergence of new requirements, in a society where such information has become a prerequisite for economic and social development.

When consulted monthly statistics of employment and unemployment, we find the following values (INE, April 2015): the provisional estimation of the unemployment rate for April 2015 is set at 13.0%, meaning that in April 2015 there was 667 800 unemployed people, which represents a decrease of 1.6% over the final value obtained for March 2015 (over an universe of 10 700 residents); the estimation of the employed population was 4.4863 million people, 0.5% more than in the previous month (over 22 100 people). These estimations considered the population aged from 15 to 74 years and the values were previously adjusted seasonally.

The analysis of unemployment of graduates, carried out based on the INE data, revealed an evolution profile relatively distinct, when considering the unemployment rate of graduates and non-graduates: the unemployment rate among graduates always been lower than that of non-graduates. Among the graduates with a higher education qualification, it appears that those with higher grades tend to have lower unemployment rates, suggesting a valuation by the market of these additional qualifications. Also to note, the existence of a relatively high variability in the unemployment rate for the different areas of education and training (Cardoso et al., 2012).

Recently (2014), the Ministry of Education and Science created a portal (<http://infocursos.mec.pt>) with access to all kind of data concerning access (degree option, transfer, M23, etc.), the students' age, sex and nationality, final classification

when graduating, and unemployment. Some data show that 8% of graduates coming from public education are unemployed while 9.5% come from private education - of 231 267 who graduated between 2007 and 2012 in public education, 18 545 were registered in IEFP, in December of 2013. In the private sector there were 5769 unemployed in 60 365. Other data show that 45.8% of students accessed HE in 2012/2013 in first option degrees.

It is possible to know what happened to the tertiary students after one year: if they maintained in the degree, moved to a different degree or institution, or if they abandoned HE. In the case of the private sector, there are 16.3% students who, after one year, were not found in the national HE system. With regard to the public degrees, this number stands at 12.2%.

It should be noted that the unemployment rate for each degree is registered in IEFP and can be compared to the training area and the existing nationwide in the public sector. The platform gathers information on all undergraduates and integrated Masters existent in Portugal, and registered until 31 December 2013. Although data is gathered on both public and private sectors, private institutions provide less information and the two sectors cannot be compared correctly.

In recent years several Employment Observatories have emerged in Portugal, as well as Career Services, intended not only to help students in the final phase of its academic trajectories, but also to do a follow up in the years following graduation. However, available data with respect to non-traditional students is not available.

University of Algarve

Although the University of Algarve has never created career services as such, there are some initiatives related to employment and employability, namely CRIA, the *Alumni* Office and the Job Portal.

The Division for Entrepreneurship and Technology Transfer (CRIA, www.cria.pt/cria/pt) was created in 2003, in order to facilitate technology transfer and the building of an entrepreneurial culture in the academy.

CRIA aims to promote relations between the University and the industry, to increase the technology and knowledge transfer, to support the establishment of new enterprises, to generalise the use of industrial property rights mechanisms and developing technological infrastructures to enhance specific research fields in the Algarve. It represents an attempt to develop advanced business ideas and inventions at the university, which can later on migrate to the market. CRIA also develops European Projects and Studies.

The *Alumni* Office / Career (<http://www.ualg.pt/home/pt/content/apresentacao-42>) is a major mean of dissemination of activities, events and initiatives aimed at *Alumni*. In terms of career opportunities, a range of useful information on job search and preparation for entry into the labour market is available. Overall, it is a privileged space of encounter between the university and its *alumni* in a constant dynamic of mutual aid and conviviality.

The Employment/Job Portal UAlg
(<http://emprego.ualg.pt/detallecontenido/c/candidato/idnoticia/495/dados-sobre-o->

primeiro-ano-de-atividade-do-portal.html) was created in September 2013. It is managed by the *Alumni* office in collaboration with the Schools and Faculties. This is a crucial tool to promote graduates insertion into the labour market and to make the relationships between employers and students/ graduates simpler. In December 2014 the Portal had a total of 1,013 registered users, 180 enterprises, 292 exclusive offers, 1387 exclusive vacancies and 202 applications for employment. Management (n = 45) and Economics (n = 22) were the areas with more applications.

3.3 National research concerning employability, non-traditional students in HE and the relation between them

The studies conducted by Alves (2007, 2009) have two important originalities when inscribed into national research: first, it is a very critical voice towards the concept of employability and its uses; second, she studies the professional insertion of graduates into the labour market in its temporalities and also as processes of identity formation.

Alves (2007) criticizes the notion of individual employability that nowadays assumes a new centrality, because of the need to manage structural unemployment and due to the impossibility of national states to create employment. Governments' field of action was reduced to actions that intervene solely over the side of the demand, either under forms of employment policies, either using educational or training policies. Thus to act over the improvement of individual employability is the only possible political answer within neoliberal ideology, to manage a massive unemployment. Admitting unemployment inevitability as an indispensable condition of the national economy's growing, goes hand-in-hand with the dissemination of a discourse that blames the victims': "and employability is the term that gives it the necessary scientific legitimacy and obfuscates the interests, structurally antagonists, between capital and work" (p. 62). From the analysis of the Portuguese situation regarding unemployment, social exclusion and employability, some of her conclusions are the following:

1. Portugal insists in a model of economic specialization that still build its competitive advantage in the low costs of the labour force.
2. The strategies of recruitment of enterprises value mainly the motivational and behavioural profile of workers, that is, their capacity of subjective investment in work, which is simultaneously a synonym of employability and permeability to new forms of work exploitation.
3. Mainstream discourses and policies cover the role of models of training in reproducing social inequalities, focusing in arguments that are presumably neutral, such as economic competitiveness, fighting unemployment and social exclusion and, more recently, increasing employability.

Alves (2009) analysed the professional insertion paths of graduates from the University of Lisbon. Accepting the postulate that professional insertion is an individual process and yet socially structured, her analysis is based (among others) on what Eckert and Hanchane (1997, cit. in Alves, 2007) call different temporalities (archaeological, procedural and structural). Alves analysis allowed her to identify among the graduates five different types of professional paths:

1. of rapid insertion into a stable job;
2. of postponed insertion into a stable job;

3. of stability in precariousness;
4. of precarious insertion;
5. of exclusion.

Although we have no space to develop in this text the description of these five categories, it remains at least the fact that these results and conclusions could be very helpful to try to comprehend and explain graduates professional insertion paths.

Some of the most significant and recent studies on employability (unfortunately, not specific for non-traditional students) that depict Portuguese reality were conducted by the A3ES Agency³. There are three main studies that should be mentioned briefly:

1. *Employability Indicators*: a study on employability measurement in higher education. It aims to make an inventory and systematization of employability measurement and the methodologies used by HEI (or other organizations) and the critical analysis of the used methodologies. When ready, the study should allow to introduce a methodology to measure employability, to be generally applied in HEI.

2. *Employability and higher education in Portugal* (Cardoso et al, 2012): Throughout this study the researchers claim to have dealt with the different perspectives of the concept of employability: as a criteria and motivating factor that guides the students' choices when entering higher education; as a guiding strategy, for the structuring and review of curricula and study plans carried out by HEI; as a decision guidance for students when faced with the need to manage curriculum options and opportunities to obtain work experience during their training; as the effect or result of a process of choices and options around experiences, skills and qualifications, more or less valued when entering the labour market; and as a process that involves multiple actors and stakeholders, especially students, HEI and employers.

Some of the main findings of this study were the following (Cardoso et al., 2012):

- a) There has been over the past decade an increasing number of graduates in public higher education system and a stabilization of graduates in the private sector. Most students attend 1st cycle degrees, but there is a considerable increase of graduates attending master degrees. Additionally, to possess a master degree gives the graduate better chances of employability.
- b) There are significant changes in education and training areas, suggesting that students are sensitive to the information provided regarding the different scientific areas, particularly employability indicators.
- c) There is a trend for continuity between study cycles, both in terms of area and institution (about half of the students enrolled in master and PhD degrees do it in the same institution where they obtained the previous diploma. It seems therefore that Portuguese mobility patterns are still low.
- d) Employers seem to prefer linear/ continuous paths and choose preferably higher qualifications among those who are trying to enter the labour market for the first time. So those who have advantages in Portuguese labour market are young graduates with

³ The Agency of Accreditation and Evaluation of Higher Education is a private law foundation, established for an indeterminate period of time, with legal status and recognised as being of public utility. The Agency is independent in its decisions, which must take into account the guidelines prescribed by the State. The assessment and accreditation regime to be developed by the Agency is defined in Law no. 38/2007, of 16th August.

master's or doctoral degrees who do not have any intermediate working experience. This is important because it penalizes age, experience and non-linear diverse trajectories – clearly, non-traditional graduates are disadvantaged when competing with traditional students and graduates.

e) The economic activities from the tertiary sector absorb a significant part of graduate employment, especially for individuals entering for the first time in the labour market with higher qualifications – the sectorial advantage goes to business services, various fields of health and social work.

f) The larger companies are more likely to hire workers who enter with higher qualifications: 50% of PhD graduates entering for the first time the labour market are employed by companies with fewer than 50 persons employed, of which 26% by micro enterprises (0-9 persons).

g) Employers react well to graduates who improve their qualifications while already working: workers who increase their academic qualifications after being employed get higher incomes, when compared to the market average incomes for the same period of time.

In a more recent study (Cardoso, Escária, Ferreira, & Raimundo, 2014) the authors present a set of dimensions and indicators considered in the measurement of employability of higher education graduates: sociodemographic characteristics of the graduate and the household; descriptive variables of the family of origin; academic trajectory variables (degree, institution, start and end year of the graduation, classification when accessing higher education, final classification, forms of contact after finishing studies – did not maintain any contact, participation in alumni meetings, collaboration in college projects, frequency of postgraduate courses, participation in scientific events, participation in cultural events and academic ceremonies, use of resources as library, contacts with teachers); satisfaction with the achieved training; further education; facilitating learning experiences (mobility, associations, volunteer, attend vocational training courses or other, curricular and professional experiences); occupational status during the course; career – 1st job / occupation situation before employment (employee / fellow / performing stage / unemployed / full-time student / working student), after a certain period of time (e.g.: 6 months, 12 months or 18 months after completion of the course), degree of difficulty in finding employment, relevant factors, etc.; career - Job path (s) up to the present; Professional career - current job (or last job, in case of unemployment); subjective assessment of the current employment; guidelines and values towards work; expectations and projects concerning future academic and professional life.

3. *Training efficiency and employability* (Sarrico et al, 2013): It was intended to provide an overview of the Portuguese HE system on the main dimensions of the internal and external efficiency. The first part of the study addressed the component of training efficiency (Sarrico et al 2009; Sarrico et al 2010; Teixeira et al 2007), with the aim of identifying factors able to explain the contexts, taking into account the scientific field and the subsector of higher education (university and polytechnic) separately. In the second part of the study, it was considered the external component efficiency by analysing the employability as another of the main results of higher education.

Although the authors considered some limitations related to the tools used to gather data, they found significant differences by scientific areas, subsystem (university vs

polytechnics) and type of graduation, in what concerns employability. With regard to employability of graduates of the university subsector the authors found some interesting results: i) the number of candidates in the first option on the number of vacancies appears to be associated with higher unemployment; ii) the number of graduates placed in first option against the total number of graduates is associated with lower unemployment; iii) the ratio of PhD teachers by total teachers is also associated with higher unemployment; iv) the ratio of students per PhD teacher seems to be also associated with higher unemployment. Clearly the public university subsector appears to be associated with lower unemployment among its graduates. The areas of Social Sciences, Business and Law, and Health and Social Work are associated with more unemployment among its graduates than other areas of education and training considered.

For integrated masters, post-employment regime appears to be associated with lower employability and the area of Health and Social Protection, contrary to what was previously, was associated with greater employability. This may be due to the fact that the masters in this area correspond largely to the integrated master's degrees in medicine that do not have employment problems.

For non-integrated masters, the courses of the public sector appear to be associated with greater employability. The fact that we are considering daytime graduations, and the area (Engineering, Manufacturing Industries and Construction) were associated with lower employability. The first factor may be related to the fact that this regime may be chosen by those already unemployed and takes advantage of the situation to continue studies at the level of master's degrees, while those who are employed will elect post-employment regime. Lower employment was associated with the area of Engineering, Manufacturing Industries and Construction.

Regarding the employability of the students of the polytechnic sub-sector, there is no sufficient data available.

The authors also suggest to consider, in the future, other variables, when studying employability: previous academic success (secondary education), parents qualifications and professional occupation, social support, etc.

It should also be noted that in recent years have emerged all over the country several studies that aim to analyse the professional experiences of graduates five years after completing their studies. This is an ongoing project (Chaves, L., & Gaio Alves, M., 2014) that still has not produced final results or conclusions, but it is expected to do so in the months to come.

In 2013 a set of 13 Portuguese HEI formed the consortium “*More Employability*” to conduct investigations related to employability. The study “Ready to Work?” was focused on the transversal competences as seen by graduates and employers. A survey was launched at national level and these results were then complemented by the content analysis of focus-group interviews. To the survey analysis have been considered the responses of 6,444 graduates (62% female with an average of 29 years old) that concluded their bachelor (67%) or master degree (33%) between 2007/08 and 2012/13; and the responses of 781 employers with ages between 31 to 45 years old, distributed at national level. As to the qualitative part of the study, the consortium has organised 21 focus-group interviews (11 with graduates and 10 with employers). Some major conclusions at the national level are (Vieira and Marques, 2014):

a) About 73% of the graduates are working and the remaining are evenly distributed between those who already worked but are currently unemployed; and those looking for the first job. The majority of the graduates working have unstable contracts to employers; and 44% of the graduates looking for the first job are in this situation for more than one year.

b) *Evaluation of the competences used by workers in their profession:* Graduates and employers do coincide when they stress three major competences to be the most used: Teamwork capacity; lifelong learning; ethics and social responsibility. If we select the five more important competences, then graduates also point technical competences from the specific area of knowledge; and writing communication. As to employers, they stress adaptation and flexibility; and the use of information and communication technologies.

c) *The most important competences in the next five years to come:* there is a convergence between employers and graduates regarding four of the most important competences to a near future: Analysis and problem solving; creativity and innovation; adaptation and flexibility; and planning and organization. As to the fifth more important competence, employers choose Motivation for excellence; and graduates choose Mastering foreign languages.

d) The great majority of the graduates choose continuous training paths; there is only a minority that change scientific area somewhere along their academic path.

e) The focus-group interviews showed that both employers and graduates identify as important transversal competences those focused in the behavioural dimension, such as “qualities”, “predispositions” and “character traits”. All seem to recognise that a “job for life” is but a past notion (in a way, the notion of professional career is changing rapidly).

f) Focus-groups also seemed to reveal important features on the recruitment practices. Although employers tend to use a set of proves more or less uniform, a “personalised management” of recruitment seem to be dominant and based in: i) an academic evaluation of the candidates (via *curriculum vitae* and interviews); ii) extra-curricular experiences; iii) the previous experience of the graduates. But on this last topic, the employers’ opinions are clearly divided: on the one hand, there is a tendency to value internships of different nature or any other sort of professional experience; at the other hand, employers claim to prefer young “purer” workers: the fact that they do not have experience means they do not have, also, any kind of “vices” and they can, simultaneously, be “moulded” by the employers and the working contexts.

Finally one should look at the national research on the theme of non-traditional students in higher education. We have to stress that we have not found any research that connects non-traditional students with the theme of employability, employment or unemployment⁴. On the other hand, there are some articles who have been published with various analysis, but very little have a research project to support authors’ claims. The exceptions follow:

⁴ The only exception goes to an ongoing research project in our own institution, which involves also the University of Aveiro. But this project is currently analysing the results, which will available only in October 2015.

The Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, faced with an increasing diversity of its students due to the M23 programme of access to HE, came to the observation that among non-traditional students certain routines and study skills were not sufficient, leading to feelings of insecurity, anxiousness and lack of ability to learn. Also non-traditional students seemed to need to develop time management strategies to help them reconcile their various roles in life. This has led The Polytechnic of Leiria to launch a programme called Student Support Service, through psychological support and also some support regarding the transversal competences development. According to Seco et al. (2013), and taking into account these services are recent and its impact not enough studied, it is fair to say that both the training developed as well as the psychological support seem to have contributed to improvement of strategies of time management and study skills, increasing non-traditional students' well-being in general.

In the University of Aveiro a project concerning the pluri-lingual repertoires of non-traditional students. The team (Ambrósio et al., 2013) states its aims were to understand how non-traditional students deal with language challenges, influenced by their pluri-lingual repertoire; how these repertoires could be an obstacle or an aid to attending HE; and to understand their perceptions regarding how could the HEI help them to deal with language challenges more successfully. The authors results are the following: non-traditional students with more pluri-lingual experience face fewer difficulties when dealing with language challenges in HE and value previous experience while studying. Students with less pluri-lingual experience have shown more difficulties in dealing with language challenges and think that the lack of language knowledge is an obstacle to his navigation through HE.

The University of Algarve coordinated a study between 2010 and 2013 (the University of Aveiro was a partner in this research) aimed to understand the situation of older mature students in HE in both universities, listening not only to students voices, but also lecturers and management bodies. The first year of the project was dedicated to the application of two surveys (students and professors) and to the surveys analysis it followed a number of non-structured interviews to all social actors involved. Some of the conclusions of the project were the following (Fragoso et al., 2013; Fragoso, Quintas, Gonçalves & Ribeiro, 2013; Gonçalves et al., 2012; Quintas et al., 2014; Santos, Bago, & Fonseca, 2013):

a) Statistical measures of drop-out concluded that among mature students abandoning is a little higher than 30%. A series of variables were tested regarding the average of the grades obtained by students in every course and correlations tested. We have not obtained significant correlations with "success" (as measured only by the student's marks) and gender, income, or academic background – which is important, because it means that students with incomplete secondary studies, for example, showed no difference from the remaining. On the other hand, there was correlation (although not a very strong one) between success and age: younger mature students got lower grades than older mature students. Our qualitative results suggest that there is a difference between approaches to study and learning between younger and older mature students: older students seem not to rely so much in memory but rather in understanding; being more capable of inscribing theory in their wider experience horizon; more capable of critical thinking; more participative and opened to dialogue with lecturers, etc. In a word, more opened to deep approaches to learning, as opposed to strategic and superficial approaches (cf. Richardson, 1994) and this could at least partially explain the statistical results.

b) A number of barriers towards a wider participation of these students in HEI and towards success we identified. Maybe the most common one would be derived from the fact that mature students feel quite often trapped between academic responsibilities, paid work and family responsibilities. Coming to HE triggers generally a set of changes in family balance (although we noticed that in a good number of cases the transition to HE is carefully prepared in more than one way). Constant tiring both at physical and psychological level, stress, feelings of losing control on their lives are common. Feeling guilty is much more common among women, especially is something goes wrong with their sons and daughters. We have no time to describe all the barriers we found; but it is worthwhile to mention that some are related to pedagogy, namely those related with evaluation procedures and the lack of feed-back lecturers give to students.

c) The relationships of older mature students (more than younger mature students) with their professors is usually very good. We have collected a number of accounts stating how important was that students felt that their situation was understood and their presence at HE appreciated. On the other hand, the main factor that acts as a kind of drop-out preventive is the relationships between peers. Mature students – thanks to evening classes –often share the understanding of each other situation and namely the subjective meaning of the difficulties they face. These two mechanisms are clearly important as they seem to relate to self-respect (the former) and self-esteem (the latter), as described by Honneth (2011).

d) Transitions to HE seem particularly difficult during the first semester; to better in the second and gradually fade along the second year of students' participation in their bachelor programmes. The adaptation to the academic demands in HE is understandably harder for those who were away from education for big periods of time (in our case, the average of separation from education was of 11 years...). Drop-out is more likely to happen during the first year. There are important processes of identity building in their paths along HE, noticeable in a number of dimensions. For some students, however, transition is not a problem, but rather a challenge and it is also not a surprise that looking back we find that those same students are the ones who have already been through a great number of different transitions in various occasions of their biographies.

In 2013 we begun another project on the theme and involving the same institutions. This ongoing project has four different research lines: i) the transitions of mature students to the labour market; ii) students from African countries where Portuguese is the official language; iii) students with disabilities; and iv) students from postsecondary vocational training. As mentioned before, these results will only be available in October 2015.

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