

TITLE: PREPARED TO WORK?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET

ASSUMPTIONS IN THIS REPORT

The mission of Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

The mission of HEI entails the development of citizens who are able to critically perceive and analyse the surrounding reality, who are able to actively put into practice a respectful and respect-demanding citizenship, and who are able to continuously learn, therefore, being far from exclusively preparing for work.

Taking into consideration the multiple dimensions of labour “markets”

This study assumes a multidimensional view of labour “markets” based not only on several levels (international, national, regional/local), but mostly on socio-professional inequalities resulting from status, regulations and distinct career projections among graduates. To a large extent, the increasing labour “markets” segmentation is the result of labour deregulation in association with the welfare State regression and neo-corporatism movements anchored in unequal power of the credentials, as well as in its relationships with the State and professional organizations.

Employability and “having a job” are not synonyms

This study assumes employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006, p.8).

Skills as action in context

Skills are “action in context”, they can be learned and developed, but they are not something that is acquired at a given moment and that becomes perennial. Skills are indissociable from the action and from the context that frames them and that influences their potential of activation and their power of transference.

Transversal and professional skills

In this report, transversal skills are seen as a set of personal and interpersonal skills – generally called “soft skills” – but also as technical skills that can be used and that are important in many professions, regardless of the specific area of knowledge.

INSTITUTIONS TAKING PART IN THE STUDY “PREPARED TO WORK?”

This study was developed within the scope of the Consortium “Maior Empregabilidade” (Greater Employability) established in 2013 and formed by Fórum Estudante and thirteen Higher Education Institutions in Portugal: University of Algarve, University of Coimbra, University of Minho, Portucalense University, Higher School of Education of Paula Frassinetti, Institute of Art, Design and Enterprise - University, Polytechnic Institute of Beja, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra, Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Polytechnic Institute of Porto, Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal and Polytechnic Institute of Tomar.

SKILLS PROMOTION PRACTICES – “GOOD PRACTICES” IN HEI

From the non-formal, informal and formal education typology, 78 initiatives and projects promoting skills flagged by the Consortium’s HEIs were analysed. The majority (78%) has a non-formal education profile, that is defined by the organisation of information awareness and sharing sessions, short courses, seminars/workshops, entrepreneurship promotion, job fairs, Summer courses, extracurricular and professional internships, amongst others. The identified informal practices (13%) consubstantiate in voluntary initiatives and in student-prompted associative initiatives. On the other hand, formal practices (9%) take place through specific Curricular Units and internships that are integrated in the official curricula. One must highlight the relevant contribution of these practices to professional inclusion, to the preparation for the labour market and self-employment, but also to the graduates’/students’ active and responsible citizenship.

QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS

Sample and instruments of the qualitative study

The qualitative study is based on 21 focus groups with a total of 155 participants, including 11 focus groups with graduates and 10 with employers from the HEIs that

form the Consortium “Maior Empregabilidade”. Graduate participants were selected having into account the condition of conclusion of their (post-)graduate studies between 2008-2012, gender, field of study and the diversity of statuses (e.g. Working-students and Erasmus mobility experience). The employers (private, public and tertiary sector entities) were selected from different business areas and sectors. Other entities with influence power on employment and education public policies (e.g. professional associations) also took part in the focus group.

MAIN RESULTS FROM THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

Continuous academic pathways and positive evaluation of the diploma

With a strong presence of graduates from the social sciences, commerce and law, but also from engineering and industry, arts and humanities, health, mathematics and computer sciences, and graduates whose field of studies throughout the academic pathway has remained the same, not many choose to change their field of studies or higher education institution. The diploma is largely considered as positive by those who have it and functions as a valuable resource, an “entrance gate” or a “business card” for the labour market.

(Un)certain times to get the 1st job and professional itineraries

Multiplicity of time rhythms to get the 1st job, with an increase on the time average to get the 1st job reaching 12 months or more. Such factors as the course’s field of study, previous professional experiences, and having a curricular internship, play a role in this dynamic. However, the idea of internship remains, for graduates, as one of “an entrance gate” to the labour world, and as one of “probation period” for employers. There is a clear heterogeneity as far as professional itineraries are concerned, along with a weakness regarding relationships and contractual arrangements, including the possibility of “career progress within an organization”.

Behavioural dimension prevails in employability narratives

Both graduates and employers point out the transversal skills that focus on a behavioural dimension, highlighting “qualities”, “predispositions” and “personality traits”, as well as the inexistence of such a thing as “a job for a lifetime”. In employability narratives, the topic regarding the lack of maturity in today’s generation strengthens the importance of continuing to invest in the preparation for the labour market, with the reinforcement of transversal skills.

Transversal skills for the future

In the opinion of graduates, transversal skills for the future entails the application of knowledge to “inputs for the companies”, “constant and lifelong learning”, “flexibility, adaptation and responsibility”, “analysis, strategic thinking, creativity” and “modesty, critical thinking and ethics”. To these, employers add “a business or commercial mind-set”, “intra-entrepreneurship” and “qualified entrepreneurship”.

Bachelor degree or Master degree? The question of extending one's studies

Due to the Bologna process, the 1st study cycle was shortened, and for this reason employers tend to value more the “pre-Bologna” degrees by associating a higher sense of maturity to graduates and the existence of internships. There is not, however, a linear discourse regarding the extension of studies since the preference for “post-Bologna” graduates allows employers to “shape” them to the company's needs. The graduates' view on an investment in the 2nd cycle is more consensual as they acknowledge a specialisation to be a way to better prepare them for the labour market.

“Individual management” when selecting and recruiting graduates

When employers recruit graduates, there is a visible effort to use a relatively standardized “battery of tests”. Nevertheless, a sustained “individual management” prevails in: i) the academic assessment of the candidate as well as his/her behavioural component (e.g. CV and interview); ii) the valorisation of extra-curricular experiences; and iii) the candidate's previous experience. On this last topic, employers' points of view are divided into “mental purity”, shaping the candidate to the job in question, and the demand for the candidate's maturity (e.g. having had a curricular or professional internship).

Hiring graduates: what conclusions?

Acknowledging the importance of hiring graduates, employers present ambivalent conclusions. Many recognise the advantages of having graduates due to the importance of the specific knowledge they get from their scientific education, the transversality in their knowledge and the possibility to play a role in the “renewal of the company's knowledge”. Others mainly stress a low ability to apply knowledge to action, and the graduates' lesser preparation regarding transversal skills, whether at a behavioural level, or at a business and management level.

Collaborative and partnership work in the promotion of employability

Need for preparation regarding the “transition” from the academic to the business world: relevance of collaborative and partnership work with several key-players and stakeholders within the community. The reinforcement of services, projects and career offices aimed to facilitate the transition to work is highlighted.

QUANTITATIVE STUDY WITH HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATES AND EMPLOYERS

Sample and instruments of the quantitative study

The quantitative approach of the study “Prepared to work?” includes graduates and employers surveys. For the analysis of the results were considered 6444 graduates (62% female), with an average age of 29 (standard deviation of ± 7 years), who concluded their Bachelor degree (67%) or Master degree (33%) between 2007-2008 and 2012-2013 in one of the thirteen HEI participating in this study (ranging from Northern to Southern Portugal), and 781 employers (54% female), mostly aged 31 to 45 (58%).

Transversal and professional skills evaluated in the quantitative study

From the literature review that was carried out, twenty transversal (personal, interpersonal and technical) skills have been elected to be assessed in the form of questionnaire and one question about a technical-scientific skill has been added– “hard skills”. Thus, the transversal and professional skills taken into consideration in the quantitative study were: Analysis and problem-solving; Decision-making; Planning and organization; Time management; Risk taking; Oral communication; Active listening; Written communication; Interpersonal relationships and conflict management; Leadership; Creativity and Innovation; Flexibility and adaptation; Lifelong learning; Ability to conceptualize; Team work; Striving for excellence; Diversity and multiculturalism; Ethics and social responsibility; Information and communication technologies; Proficiency in foreign languages and field-specific skills.

MAIN RESULTS FROM THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Relevance of internships and extra-curricular activities throughout the course

The results of this study unequivocally show the role that internships and the participation in extra-curricular activities throughout the academic pathway play in the development of transversal and professional skills.

Difficult transition from higher education to the labour market

About 73% of graduates are working, whereas the rest is divided, in a well-balanced manner, into the group that is searching for a new job (i.e. currently unemployed but who have worked in the past), and the group that is searching for the 1st job. It is noticed that many graduates who work have insecure employment relationships, and 44% of the graduates who are searching for the 1st job are in this condition for more than one year.

Relationship to field of study and satisfaction of working graduates

Over 80% of graduates mention that their work fits their field of study and about 90% are satisfied with their current work.

Skills most used by graduates in their professional activity

All transversal and professional skills evaluated in this study are mildly or widely used. However, *Analysis and problem-solving, Lifelong learning, Team work, Adaptation and flexibility* and *Time management* are those skills most used by graduates at work.

Skills in which graduates feel more confident

Graduates feel "confident" or "very confident" in their ability to use the transversal and professional skills. At the top are the following five skills: *Lifelong learning, Ethics and social responsibility, Team work, Information and communication technologies* and *Active listening*.

Evaluation of graduates on the preparation provided by the HEI

Graduates evaluate positively the Higher Education Institutions' contribution to the preparation in transversal and professional skills. In this context, the following skills are highlighted: *Team work, field-specific skills, Lifelong learning, Ethics and social responsibility* and *Written communication*.

Employers evaluation of graduates' skills

Employers evaluate positively graduates' preparedness in all transversal and professional skills. The five top skills most positively evaluated by employers are *Information and communication technologies, Team work, Adaptation and flexibility, Lifelong learning* and *Ethics and social responsibility*.

Most important skills in the next 5 years

Graduates' and employers' opinions converge as to the four skills elected as the most important for professional activity in the next 5 years: *Analysis and problem-solving,*

Creativity and Innovation, Adaptation and flexibility and Planning and organization. Regarding the 5th skill chosen as the most important for the labour market in the next 5 years, employers have elected *Striving for excellence*, whereas graduates have chosen *Proficiency in foreign languages*.

The place of scientific-technical skills in the field of study

Technical skills in the field of study are in the 9th place of the most used skills by working graduates. When considering the most important skills for the labour market in the next 5 years, *Technical skills in the field of study* are in the 6th place for employers and in the 7th place for graduates.

The value of the Master Degree

The investment in education at the Master level is worth it, both in terms of preparation and opportunity to use professional and transversal skills in the work context. Additionally, the Master graduates in this study showed a higher likelihood of finding a job, when compared to Bachelor graduates.

PREPARED TO WORK?

The combination of both the qualitative and quantitative results of this study, one can say that, generically, the preparation of graduates for the labour market is a positive one, according to both the employers' and graduates' perspective. However, there is ample room for improving the preparation of graduates, which may include, namely: a) the intensification of the use made by HEI of pedagogical practices that may foster the transversal and professional skills identified in this study; b) the increment of student's involvement in extra-curricular activities; c) a better articulation between the academic and the professional "worlds", which should foster opportunities that "take the academic world" to "professional" environments (for example, by means of curricular internships in companies) and which may encourage the reverse movement – i.e. from the "professional" world to that of "academics" - (for example, by means of integrating professionals in curricular restructuring processes). Finally, a reference to the important role that the macroeconomic and the political contexts play in the creation of job opportunities that assimilate higher education graduates. With no intention of underestimate the need for lifelong learning neither the potential for improvement in the development of transversal and professional skills, in general terms this study has shown that graduates are "prepared to work" and that employers acknowledge it.