

HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT: ENGAGING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS INTO CURRICULUM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Viviana Meirinhos¹, Ana Cláudia Rodrigues², Dora Martins³

¹Viviana Meirinhos (ISCAP-Politécnico do Porto, NID_RH, PORTUGAL)

²Ana Cláudia Rodrigues (ISCAP-Politécnico do Porto, NID_RH, PORTUGAL)

³Dora Martins (ISCAP-Politécnico do Porto, NID_RH, PORTUGAL)

Abstract

There is widespread recognition that nowadays human resources development is not an exclusive responsibility of employing organizations. People individually have to assume the task of preparing themselves to the employment world, and for higher education institutions this has risen to be one of the top priorities.

This paper presents a case study of how curriculum design and delivery may support university-business communication, and consequently facilitate the development of employability skills. Employability skills are in this work conceptualised as all the technical and non-technical skills that are desirable to have in order to be proficient in a specific labour market.

Three different experiences on a higher education course are described: a project based curricula, an educational-professional network, and a curricular individual development program. With specific aims each, all the three educational strategies work complementarily as drivers for the alignment of students' development with labour specific needs. Together these curriculum design and delivery options are based on two fundamental foundations, university-business cooperation and students' engagement in skills' selection and development.

Keywords: Human Resources Development, Curriculum, Employability, Higher Education Institutions

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary challenging labour market [1] is extremely demanding. Both for workers already integrated, with the incessant need of continuous learning and development, as – and specially – for those who intend to get into the labour market for the first time. The high level of unemployment and youth unemployment in Europe [2], with a human resources supply much larger than the demand associated to a labour technical configuration characterized by a fast changing, requires a complex task to people facing the employment world.

This new work paradigm is shifting strongly the responsibility of career development from the employers to the individuals themselves, who have to develop a proactive attitude towards their own career. This “individual human resources management and development” framework [3] highlights not only this new approach by people individually but leads as well to the emergence of new professional roles in the labour market: specialized services and professionals supporting individuals to manage and develop their careers.

It is in this context that the debate about the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in developing employable graduates is still strongly increasing [4] since in Europe the Bologna Process elevated employability to the centre of the agenda, assigning with emphasis this new role to HEI, reinterpreting the idea of university education [5]. Even though the appropriateness of employability as a goal of HEI has been contested in the literature, at a global scale HEI have expressed strong commitment towards assuming themselves as a potential and central enablers of employability [6].

Emerging as a very complex construct, employability reveals in research literature two contrasting approaches: first, an individual and intrinsic dimension, encompassing the personal characteristics that

enable individuals to secure and maintain employment; second, an external and wider conceptualization, integrating the personal, social, economic, and labour market circumstances [5]. It is based in these internal and external perspectives that the debate on employability skills has been pointing out a massive variety of necessary skills to be employable [7] [8] [9], discussing the need and the weight of two different types of skills: soft or non-technical skills and hard or technical skills [10]. Considering the individual-contextual and the soft-hard framework, in this work we are conceptualising employability skills as all the technical and non-technical skills that individuals are desirable to possess in order to be proficient in a specific labour market.

An effective address to employability therefore requires a HEI to focus both on students' individual competencies' profile as on context. This demand shifts HEI to the challenge of opening themselves to the employment market and consequently building bridges between content and working environments. Different teaching and learning approaches, considering not only formal curricula, as other co-curricular spaces [4], emerge as relevant as content issues to support the development of employability within HEI.

THE HRM DEGREE OF P.PORTO

The Portuguese Educational System is organized in levels of education, training and learning. Pre-school education is optional and is intended for children aged between 3 years old and the age of entry into primary education. School education is developed in three levels: (1) Basic education - comprises three sequential cycles, the 1st four years, 2 and 3 years; (2) Secondary education - comprises a three-year cycle (10, 11 and 12 years of schooling); and, (3) Higher education - includes university and polytechnic education [11].

Among the higher education, within university and polytechnic education, there is public and private offer, all assessed and accredited by the a governmental agency - Assessment and Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (A3ES).

Human resources degree is part of the Public Higher Education Polytechnic system, in Porto Polytechnic Institute, which has the brand name "P.Porto".

Human resources degree in P.Porto started back in 1996/97 school year, and since then has been the only public offer in the north of Portugal, and being a very appealing degree to undergraduate candidates, always fulfilling the 45 vacancies allowed by the Government, with high classification obtained in the secondary school and higher education first cycle exams access ranging from 14,50 to 15,50 points out of 20.

The degree started with a 3 years intermediate higher education qualification (that no longer exists). Two years later, in 1998 the graduation extended to 5 years and delivered a bachelor degree qualification. Due to the Bologna Process, in 2008, the degree went back to be a 3 year qualification cycle, as most of European undergraduate courses.

Since the very beginning this course coordination was concerned with employability and deliverance to the market of human resources capable of responding to the labour market needs, of adapting to changes, and be an active part of the evolution of the profession and the role of the Human Resources Function in organizations and in the community.

The curriculum of the Human Resources course in P.Porto is based in three intertwined axes: content, design, and delivery. On this paper, we will briefly explain content, and will focus mainly on curricula design and delivery, as ways to promote employability.

On the content, an innovative broad framework of the scientific field of Human Resources (HR) was created, including an HR micro approach (individual and group) and an HR macro approach (organizational and societal), expanding explicitly the field of work of the Human Resources technician.

To give an example of the broad framework adopted, it is only given an overview on the organizational end of the macro approach (not going deeper on the societal end of this approach, nor into the micro approach). Traditionally, undergraduate courses of this field prepare their students for the private sector, where they can manage people with the freedom of a private ownership. But there are also other types of organizations with different and specific constraints that are a very important share of the labour market where these professionals can operate such as public, and 3rd sector institutions.

On the design axe the curricula is constituted by theoretical, theoretical-practical, practical and seminar types of classes; 21 to 23 hours of classes per week organized in 7 modules each semester. Only one of the modules is annual, in the 3rd year, but summing up, there are 7 modules per semester.

The modules were created to respond to different needs, and are categorized in core, contextual, and instrumental.

Core contents refer to nuclear and “substantive knowledge,” while subsidiary contents allude to educational knowledge that enables and facilitates core knowledge [12]. Some examples of core modules are: Recruitment and Selection, Performance Management, Pay and Compensation Systems.

The multidimensionality nature of the HR construct on which core HR educational knowledge relies may explain the claim for subsidiary multidisciplinary approaches, e.g. [13], [14] in order to provide an intensive and extensive understanding of HR as an educational study object. “Contextual” and “Instrumental” contents assume the role of “enabling knowledge” that supports Human Resources higher qualification [12].

Contextual type of modules refer to the frameworks that set the core educational object of study in context. It may vary, for example, from a psychological contextualization to a socio-political frame. The most common courses of this kind in our study sample are business, economic, and psychological contextualization.

Instrumental modules facilitate and enable core HR competencies, by developing cognitive, methodological, technological, and linguistic abilities.

Regarding the delivery methodologies the priorities are university-business cooperation, and students’ engagement in skills’ selection and development. Internships, lecturers with professional background or simultaneous activity in industry, in-door seminars with professionals (mainly P.Porto HR Alumni), and several field trips are some of the strategies. Students’ engagement in skills’ selection and development is accomplished allowing them to choose the topic they want to explore in essays, the specific field they want to research, and selecting the contexts and the process they want to experience in the three different internships that occur during the 3 year qualification.

AN INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

With the specific aim of promoting the final graduate profile of students, the Human Resources degree of P.Porto includes an Individual Development Program (IDP) throughout the three years of graduation. This development program is formally set immediately in the first semester of the first year by integrating explicitly a mandatory core module of the course structure. The IDP assumes a formal role in the module program simultaneously in the program contents, in the learning outcomes, in the learning and teaching strategies, and in the assessment method. Thereby is perceived by students since the beginning as a central assignment of their qualification process (Table 1).

The first stage of the IDP has the purpose of developing self-responsibility for students’ continuous learning and development need, starting immediately from the beginning (and in simultaneous) with the academic graduation process. In this sense students develop a Project with five main activities, which occur sequentially during the semester

The first activity of the project is to assess their current profile, raising their self-awareness. The intention is to identify the competencies that each of the students has in this starting point. Mobilizing lectures on key-contents (such as *competencies*), personal documents analysis (such as *diplomas*), self-reflection techniques (such as *Personal SWOT*), questionnaire surveys and interviews to the different belonging groups the students acquire adequate resources to develop with success this task. As output it is requested that they present themselves to the group, to write their curriculum vitae, and to state all the process and results in the first chapter of the evaluation essay.

After outlining their present personal, social, and professional competencies, students are invited to explore the labour market, both in a global approach as in a specific approach of the specific HR labour market. Researching job adds in the main newspapers, online recruitment agencies, and employment services, students identify contemporary job requirement of the HR profession. This assignment is developed individually and results in a debate session about the actual challenges of the labour market, which conclusions student publish in their second chapter of the evaluation essay.

Individual Development Programme

1st stage – Projet

Activities	Objectives	Outputs
1. Assess competencies profile at the beginning of the graduation process (personal, social, and professional competencies)	To raise self-awareness	- Presentation of the information gathered to the group - Write Curriculum vitae, - Write the process and results in a chapter of the evaluation essay
2. Explore the labour market	To know the current competencies requirements of the labour market	- Debate session about the actual challenges of the labour market, - Write the conclusions in a chapter of the evaluation essay
3. Deep analysis the entire degree content	To gain a more comprehensive and accurate end-graduation profile	- Debate session about competencies they will gain from the degree, - Write the conclusions in a chapter of the evaluation essay
4. Analyse their expected competencies gap at the final of the course, confronting the profile they will have and the profile labour market is demanding	To identify their personal competencies gap	- Self-analysis, - Five-students group work discussion, - Tutorial session with the teacher, - Personal written statement of the gap in the evaluation essay
5. Drawing a self-development plan that bridges the identified competencies gap and promotes the student's personal expected profile	To draw a self-development plan	- Plan designed for 2,5 years until graduation completion (defined on an operational level) - Write the personal plan in a chapter of the evaluation essay

2nd stage – Tutorial Orientation Process

Activities	Objectives	Outputs
1. Volunteer tutorial process	To facilitate the implementation and the continuous updating of the drawn self-development plan	- Seizing opportunities, - Goals' achievements assessment - self-development plan update

Table 1 - Individual Development Program

After outlining their present personal, social, and professional competencies, students are invited to explore the labour market, both in a global approach as in a specific approach of the specific HR labour market. Researching job adds in the main newspapers, online recruitment agencies, and employment services, students identify contemporary job requirement of the HR profession. This assignment is developed individually and results in a debate session about the actual challenges of the labour market, which conclusions student publish in their second chapter of the evaluation essay.

In order to develop a more comprehensive and accurate end-graduation profile, the third activity of the project implies to prospect with a deep analysis the entire degree content. Students review systematically all the modules' rationales, and interview course director, teachers, and students enrolled in the different course modules. With this research, students are able to identify which competencies they will gain from the degree, and add them to their current profile, designing more precisely how they will be presenting themselves to the labour market at the end of the three year academic qualification. This activity ends with another debate session, and with one more written chapter of the final essay.

At this point, students are able to analyse their expected competencies gap at the final of the course, confronting the profile they will have and the profile labour market is demanding. The individual gap is worked by students in four different moments: it starts with a self-analysis, followed by a five-students

group work discussion, posterior tutorial session with the teacher, and ends with the personal written statement of the gap in the final essay.

The last activity consists on drawing a self-development plan to bridge the identified competencies gap and promote the student's personal expected profile. The plan is designed for a two year and a half period and defined on an operational level, ensuring for each competency specific tasks, and schedules. This assignment closes the first stage of the Individual Development Program.

The second stage of the IDP consists of a volunteer tutorial process, which extends itself over the entire remaining length of degree. The aim of this process is to facilitate the implementation and the continuous updating of the self-development plan, drawn in the last activity on the Project: supporting on-going pathways, seizing opportunities, motivating, and assessing goals' achievements. To each student is allocated a tutorial team, composed by teacher and a graduate alumnus. While the teacher has an important role since he is very present in the institutional daily-life of the student, the graduate alumnus has a central role as a role model and a perceived effective link to the profession and the labour market.

The Individual Development Program of the HR degree of P.Porto has been revealing to be a great promoter of transversal and employability competencies, as a complement of the formal curriculum. It is being perceived by students, teachers, and employers as a success driver for the alignment of students' development with labour specific needs. Although the voluntary nature of the second stage of the IPD, it shows a high adhesion of students perhaps due to the fact that the program's 1st stage assignment - where they state their own labour profile gap - is compulsory.

MULTIPLE PROJECT CURRICULA

One of the central strategies to engage employability skills into HR degree is the curricula design founded on three core integrative modules: Project Seminar/ Internship I, II, and III. These three formal and compulsory curricular processes stand as the main modules of each of the three qualification years. Students are required to develop each year a project within a working context, which is framed by an internship and academic seminars. With an increasing number of internship hours and an increasing task complexity, students complete during the graduation a total of 550 on-job experience, three different in-context projects, and get familiar with three different labour-organizations.

The employability development assignment underpinning this pedagogical strategy starts even before the start of the internship, when every student is demanded to find his/hers own Internship Hosting Organisation (IHO). This strategy forces the student to face the labour market, and the effective challenges of contemporary job search. The hard work of finding a placement is one of the most determinant tasks in this employability skills acquisition process. Even though the students are supported by teachers in the academic seminars, students experience the outdoor experience entirely by themselves. Seminars are held during all period of search, project, and internship, developing specific activities for each step of the process. This internship search experience is notably increasingly mature in the second and third year, especially due to the previous year practice.

The individual search for the internship represents an important strategy as well for the university-business positioning, since it develops a random geographic location of IHOs, meaning a wide geographic influence territory for the university. This strategy is reinforced by the timetable established for the internship, which is defined for two-days close to the weekends (Thursday and Friday or Monday and Tuesday), enabling students to select IHO next to their homes.

Table 2 shows the general and specific competencies acquired during the multiple project curricula.

The Project Seminar/ Internship I is a first year module, structured in the second semester. It aims to promote the first contact of students with the HR Labour Market and to master theoretically Project Methodology. The seminar sessions are focused in a) exploring Project Methodology, b) supporting the internship development, and c) discussing the HR function in the organizational context, based on the students' internships sets. Sharing the 45 experiences in classroom sessions qualifies each student to face 45 job-searches processes and to know 45 different HR organizational settings.

The Project Seminar/ Internship II is in the second semester of the second year and has a more specific assignment in comparison with the first year. Students are required to develop an internship, where they get proficient on a particular HR process (of their choice), and to develop an analytical project on the selected process. This task demands theoretical, empirical and normative approaches to critically analyse the process as the founding basis for the process development.

The Project Seminar/ Internship III is an annual module in the last year of the degree and therefore is the major internship (320 hours) and the most complex project. It includes all the two tasks of the previous years' assignments (HR organizational function description and analytical project), adding to these an intervention proposal, with strategic and operational planning.

	General Competencies	Specific Competencies	Methodologies
Project Seminar/ Internship I	To know Project Development Methodology To promote the first contact with the Human Resources Labour Market	To understand the processes on Project development To know how to develop a project (all the procedures) To know the formal and informal structures of organizations To know the Human Resources function in the organizational context	Theoretical sessions Presentations Debates
Project Seminar/ Internship II	To integrate into the organizational dynamic To explore the Human Resources function	To follow the Human Resources Processes To practice a specific Human Resources process To develop a professional attitude To develop a critical approach	Presentations Debates Tutorials
Project Seminar/ Internship III	To promote the Human Resources Management organisational development and innovation. To be able to integrate the organisational dynamics.	To conceive a Human Resources management and development diagnosis. To create a Human Resources project to the Training responsible entity. To develop a professional attitude. To demonstrate the Human Resources function technical competencies.	Presentations Debates Tutorials

Table 2 – General and specific competencies of the Project Seminar / Internships

The three in-work context experiences, supported by organisational framed projects, stand as major drivers for the alignment of students' development with labour specific needs, promoting both the enhancement of technical and non-technical skills.

EDUCATIONAL-PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

Relation to alumni has been considered a key point on strategic HEI management. Downgrading for the level of course and field of expertise, HR course coordination over the years have been valuing alumni in various senses: finding internships for undergraduate students, supporting in employability, being an

important source of information for updating business practices in the profession, and especially as a pair resource for current students. In order to formally use this body of knowledge and potential support in employability, and grounded on the well-known emotional link of the former students to their graduation institution, on the 10th anniversary of HR degree HRNetwork was presented.

Despite of the alumni network available for all the alumni of P.Porto institution, the HR degree provides a specific network for all of its students, teachers and graduate alumni: HRNetwork P.Porto. HRNetwork is a close online group (based on Facebook) with the aim of setting itself up as the primary platform for sharing information and professional support for all the individuals who have or had a formal connection with the degree.

Almost all individuals that graduated in P.Porto are HRNetwork members. Considering a mean of 35 students attending each year and graduating, and considering that the degree is in its 19th anniversary, the potential students and alumni pool would be 665, and since HRNetwork integrates at the moment 644 members, that represents 96,8% of the total of alumni.

Grounded both on the P.Porto HR degree experience, and the interest on HR that binds the group members, this online community is self-fed by all its members, without any need of content introduction by the group administrators: at least one new post per day is released in the group. The use of a social network site, such as Facebook, positively strengthens the network regarding frequency of communication and emotional closeness to the group [15].

Alumni networks feed and sustainability have been motivated both by alumni themselves, and also by their graduation institutions. It has been argued that the motivation for maintaining the ties originated in an educational context lies in the potential to transform the social and cultural capital of the network into real value. On the alumni side related to labour market entry, information, updates, exchange and to career progression. On the institutions end, expectations on keeping in touch allows for using a big data base to sell continuous learning, and to increased alumni donations [16].

Besides the emotional link that alumni have to their graduation institution, their colleagues and their teachers, academic credentials can create a limited access group, and, in some cases, elite networks [16]. As a closed group, HRNetwork acts as an elite network, making members feel special, and a part of a restrict group, as well as it makes them comfortable to post and answer, strengthening the network.

HRNetwork represents a high value for students' employability skills development, since all content posted is of professional nature (such as events announcements, professional training opportunities, jobs adds, technical articles). This setting exposes the students directly and constantly to the labour market, with the enhanced benefit of content coming from pairs. It is very interesting to follow the evolution of the network. The younger members, when entering the labour market, use HRNetwork as seniors: to post job ads, topics to debate, try to know if other colleagues are going to the same external events.

This network is also a great vehicle of communication, and announcements from an institutional point of view.

CONCLUSION

In this paper are presented three different strategies for engaging employability skills into higher education curricula design and delivery.

These strategies are grounded in two guidelines: university-business cooperation and students' engagement in skills' selection and development which, consequently, facilitate the development of employability skills.

Human Resources degree of P.Porto, case study, mobilizes an Individual Development Program, a Multiple Project Curricula, and an Educational-Professional Network to pursue the individual-intrinsic/ social-external and hard/ soft dimensions of the employability goal.

The Individual Development Program develops self-awareness and awareness of the labour market (with an individual plan bridging the self and the context) which sets the foundations of the case here described. Multiple Project Curricula is based on continuous internships along the 3 year graduation process, with increasing time of contact with the labour market and complexity of the projects to be delivered. In the last project, an intervention plan specifically designed for the hosting internship organization must be delivered and formally presented. This kind of contact with the labour market, as

well as the contextual and selected usage of certain knowledge and competencies (according to the needs of each internship context) prepares undergraduates to work in the labour market.

The Educational-Professional Network based in a widely used social media platform is the perfect mean to, not only maintain a relationship with others, but to communicate, share and seek information of technical and non-technical nature with colleagues of the same profession, gaining further competencies and information, and thus enhancing self and others employability.

With specific aims each, all the three educational paths work complementarily as drivers for the alignment of students' development with the working contexts specific needs.

This work contributes towards highlighting the importance Higher Education Institutions' role in human resources development, namely, challenging these institutions to focus not only on students' broad competencies profile, but also on the contextual labour market towards which, they are being prepared. This paper presents a case study and examples on building bridges between academic content and working environments, and on different teaching and learning approaches, considering not only formal curricula, but also other environments which can support human resource development by HEI.

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