The challenge of career education

Gigliola Paviotti[*]

Abstract
In the past, the collective experiences of graduates accessing the labour market and retaining a job were fairly straightforward, but now they have given way to individual, fragmented, and unpredictable career paths. The process of career development should begin early in university studies, or even in high school, in order to support our most educated citizens in finding their place and expression in society through work. This paper seeks to contribute to an increased understanding of the state of play of career development in students and graduates of the Tourism degree program at the University of Macerata, Italy. It reports empirical data gathered from them and explores ramifications of the results for changes in pedagogy.

Key words: Career development; career education; labour market awareness; transitions from education to work; tourism.

Introduction

Studies on transitions from tertiary education to work in Europe describe two main models, *sequential* and *parallel*. The sequential model, as seen in France, Spain, and Portugal, for example, is based on cycles of study (two or three years) that allow passage to the next level of education, according to educational achievements, or to work. The parallel model is based on a combination of periods at the university and on-the-job, and it is well represented by the German universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*), but also by some other countries like Denmark, Norway, and recently in Italy with the Technical High Schools (*Istituti Tecnici Superiori*). In the parallel model, the traditional research and teaching university is a different path, and

[*] Research fellow at the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata.E-mail: gigliola.paviotti@unimc.it.

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students from technical high schools rarely go on to university, and those in technical universities do not usually move laterally to traditional universities, or vice versa. A third, less defined model can be identified in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden, where the boundaries between the secondary and the tertiary levels of education are less clearly defined, since universities also provide further education and a broad range of qualifications in addition to traditional degrees (Muller and Wolbers, 2003).

Until the late 1990s, transitions from tertiary education to work followed common pathways, seen in cohorts of young people as 'cumulative' experiences (Muller and Gangl, 2003). Usually, the choice to attend vocational high school led to technical and specialised positions, while graduates from traditional universities were employed in higher level occupations, often as civil servants. Today, for graduates and youths in general, collective experiences of accessing the labour market and retaining a job have been replaced by individual, fragmented, and unpredictable career paths: a single model of transition can no longer be identified (Raffe, 2011). As market changes have limited the number of long-term job contracts or made uninterrupted career progression a thing of the past, and as the number of university graduates has increased, the value of a university degree, once the gold ticket to access high job positions, has decreased (Garsten and Jacobsson. 2003; Sin and Neave, 2016).

Since the late 1990s, universities have been asked to adapt to the needs of society by re-organising their curriculums, pedagogy and research as well as exploiting their third mission. In particular, they have been asked to support acquisition of skills in their students and to make graduates 'employable', or ready for work, though there is little consensus on the definition of 'employability skills', the set of skills and abilities that should prepare students to be ready for work (Hager and Holland, 2006; Yorke and Knight, 2006; Harvey, 2000; see Suleman, 2016 for a complete analysis). Similarly, there is little agreement on which activities universities should undertake to support the employability of their students: a considerable amount of research focuses on skills, particularly on transversal skills acquisition, through curricular pedagogy (David, 2008; Mergendoller et al., 2006; Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003; Kloppenborg and Baucus, 2004); other works examine support activities like internships and placements (Jackson, 2016) and/or the integration of employability and entrepreneurship at the governance level, as a mission of the university (Higher Education Academy, 2012; HEInnovate, 2017). Nonetheless, it is not a novel idea that educational systems play a role in society and adapt themselves over time to meet societal needs (Nedeva, 2008): in different conditions, systems and institutions meet new challenges in new ways.

The labour market has evolved in terms of functions, organisation, and management of the workforce, following the adoption of neo-liberal policies and revised welfare provisions. Lifetime employment with one corporation as known in the past century will probably cease to exist, at least in Western countries. Career paths have become increasingly unpredictable, and individuals can no longer count on their employer to guarantee a lifetime of steady work or career advancement tied to years of seniority. Much more than before, individuals are responsible for finding and retaining a job, or moving to another one. In the context of the overall cultural change that has pervaded all levels of society, the 'self' is the agent who defines her own pathway on the basis of personal values and capacities (Collins and Watts, 1996). Changes in the construct of work careers has required individuals to adjust the way they prepare for work. Therefore, in order to deal with a labour market characterised by boundaryless[1] or protean[2] careers, people should be equipped with life design abilities, in addition to skills: they need to be able to identify goals, define strategies, and plan activities related to learning or to work choices, in order to reach objectives. This process is known as career development.

This article seeks to contribute to an increased understanding of how career development is pursued during the university years and the effects of this investment in the labour market. Part 1 outlines the theoretical reference framework, while Part 2 describes the methodology applied for collecting qualitative data from a sample of students and graduates to explore their perceived investment in career development over the study years, and how their investment, or lack thereof, impacted access to work after graduation. Part 3 reports and discusses the findings, and Part 4 summarises and offers suggestions for further research work.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Career development

Career development has been defined as "a life-long process of managing learning, work, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future" (Hiebert et al., 2010). The concept includes a

[1] "A career that is not confined to a single occupation or organization but involves movement across traditional boundaries. This will involve changing jobs and employment status and may also include periods outside the conventional labour market, either concentrating on family roles or undertaking a career break" (Dictionary of Human Resource Management, 2017).

[2] "The protean career as one driven by the needs of the individual rather than the organization and characterized by frequent change, autonomy, and self-direction" (Hall, 2001, p. 4).

strong subjective dimension which is fundamental in strategy building: personal interests, values, and work-life balance are intertwined with the process of goals definition and career choices (Stephens, 1994; Higgins, 2001; Van der Sluis and Poell, 2003; Hartung and Taber, 2008).

Career development requires a broad range of skills, abilities and attitudes to be deployed. Researchers from different disciplinary fields have investigated the topic, among them psychology (e.g. Savickas, 2011), organisational behaviour (Hackett et al., 2001), and sociology (Brown, 2002), to name a few. Probably the most significant work in this regard has been carried out in the career counselling field, since career counsellors support individuals' journey toward and within jobs. Following the shift from lifelong careers to boundary careers, approaches to career counselling were reformulated: among the most important contributions to that aim, an international group of scholars proposed "life designing" as a new paradigm for the 21st century (Savickas et al., 2009). Vocational interventions, therefore, "should assist individuals to reflect about their 'key goods' (Parker, 2007) in relation to the context in which they live, in order to resolve problems that may arise as individuals build their lives, by matching their needs to those of the contexts, in particular the context of work activities" (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 3, including citation). Life design in relation to work includes personal reflection on and assessment of one's ambitions and capabilities, and knowledge of opportunities in the labour market and its mechanisms, for example, the characteristics of companies, business culture, and channels for accessing job positions. Therefore, a number of skills should be developed to design and manage one's career. While there is no established 'list' of those skills, it is widely recognised that they should include at least self-awareness of one's identity, values, traits and dispositions, for example, openness to experiences, or the degree of adaptability, that is, "the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances" (Savickas, 2011, p. 254). Equally important are career building skills, for example the ability to find and use information or the capacity to create and maintain professional networks (Bridgstock, 2009).

1.2 Career development in higher education

In the overall framework of employability strategies, it is clear that higher education is expected to support the career development of students.

According to Tomlinson (2013), in the context of employability, the university provides students:

- Forms of knowledge, through curricula to transmit, transform and create new knowledge in a field or subject;

- Credentials of the degree ("legitimisation"), as the university is the main (or in some countries the only) provider of tertiary level degrees;
- Supplementary learning, as higher education institutions provide career counselling and placements, for example through career office workshops and activities.

Two particularly significant dimensions for career development are career education (teaching and learning) and career counselling (supplementary learning). According to Patton (2001), career education includes three main elements: 1) self-awareness; 2) opportunity awareness; 3) decision and transition learning. Self-awareness relates to identification of "values, strengths, potential and aspirations" (p.14); opportunity awareness relates to the knowledge of the labour market and of the context; decision and transition learning relates to the capacity of transfer skills in employment and further learning, and underlines acquisition of career building skills as defined above (e.g. career management activities). Career counselling, instead, usually entails one-on-one or small group support to address individual concerns or difficulties related to work.

Since career development is closely related with employability potential, universities are therefore expected to integrate activities related to career education at all levels. A shared framework on how to integrate employability provisions in higher education has not yet been agreed upon. The reference work in this field, published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s, proposed four stages for integrating employability in universities: 1) defining employability, which includes activities related to awareness within the institution and the formulation of an institutional plan; 2) auditing and mapping, in which review and mapping of available resources is carried out and compared with the plan; 3) prioritising actions, which defines the operational plan; and 4) measuring impact, to check progress of the implementation plan. Ideally, this apparently linear process requires the alignment of all the university's capacities in teaching, learning, and research as well as support services. In practice, however, universities exhibit a highly 'disaggregated system' (Rae, 2007), in which sometimes not even departments in the same institution are connected.

Another suggestion on how to integrate employability provisions, and therefore to provide career education, in higher education comes from the HEInnovate scheme, launched in 2017 as joint initiative of the European Commission and the LEED Forum of the OECD (HEInnovate, 2017). The HEInnovate instrument was conceived as a self-assessment tool for 'entrepreneurial universities', where 'entrepreneurial' refers to the engagement of the institutions as contributors to the development and wellbeing of society, and not to the creation or direct support of business. The framework does not

directly address employability, but considers it as embedded in the overall action. The self-assessment tool proposes analysis of eight dimensions, namely leadership and governance, organisational capacity, entrepreneurial teaching and learning, preparing and supporting entrepreneurs, digital transformation and capability, knowledge exchange and collaboration, the internationalised institution, and measuring impact.

Dimensions 3 (entrepreneurial teaching and learning) and 4 (preparing and supporting entrepreneurs) are included in step 2 (auditing and mapping) and 3 (prioritising actions) of the HEA model, and are concerned with curricula, courses and pedagogies. While the HEInnovate scheme does not provide guidelines for this part, as its goal is different and refers to the institution's role and not to students employability specifically, the HEA in 2006 (updated in 2012), proposed pedagogical approaches for embedding employability through the curriculum. Advice and good practices cover areas such as learning activities, suggestions for implementing active pedagogies, promotion of self-reflection, the need to link lecture-based teaching with experiential methods, work-based and work-related learning to bring graduates closer to the world of work, and provision of different types of assessment including project work and portfolios in order to promote self-reflection and tentative assessment of transversal skills (Pegg et al., 2012, pp. 30-44)[3].

Further research has supported the use of those approaches and techniques for stimulating students to reflect on and take action to further their career development. Studies that have explored the use of experiential pedagogies (Lian, 2018; Tiessen et al, 2018; Coker et al., 2017), work related learning (McIlveen et al., 2011; McIlveen et al., 2011a; Sherman et al., 2008) and reflective forms of assessment (Mallon, 1999; Larkin, 2002; Shroff et al., 2014), indicate that these methods seem to have great impact on student career development.

1.3 Career development in Tourism

Tourism is a peculiar economic field: considered part of the service sector, it has been defined as "a collection of industries operating at a number of different levels" (Ferguson, 2015), which includes public and private companies, differently arranged and managed across countries. It provides very different types of services, from highly luxurious resort accommodations and activities to rural farmhouse experiences. This range and variety makes it particularly difficult to analyse trends and employment perspectives. However,

[3] Others are related to staff engagement, pedagogical skills of teachers, assessment promoting the use of project works, portfolios, etc., and monitoring and evaluation of the overall action.

the OECD estimates that "the sector directly contributes 4.4% of GDP, 6.9% of employment and 21.5% of service exports in OECD countries" (2020).

In 2017, tourism in Italy accounted for 13.0% of the GDP, employing about 14.7% of the workforce (OECD, 2020). The sector is characterised by small companies and strong seasonality: according to the yearly report of Federalberghi for the same year[4], the sector is composed of small firms who employ an average of 6.1 employees, which increases to 6.7 during high season (the report did not include family businesses). In general, 36% of tourism industry employees are under the age of 30, and 24% are aged 30 to 40. About 61% of the work contracts are permanent, others fixed-time, and full time is preferred, particularly in high season (typically summertime, in Italy). It is unclear to what extent these figures also include cultural tourism, rural tourism and other forms of travelling, or how recent accommodation options like Airbnb have impacted the sector.

Italy is the fifth touristic destination in world (UNWTO, 2018). During the first trimester of 2020, at the time of writing, tourism has been among the hardest hit of all economic sectors by the COVID-19 outbreak, and the World Tourism Organisation expects that international tourist arrivals in 2020 will be 20% to 30% fewer than those in 2019 (UNWTO website, 2020). Even so, it can be expected that when the pandemic ends, which of course cannot be forecasted or planned, the tourism sector will resume its significant importance for the Italian economy.

In Italy, preparation for work in the tourism sector is quite varied. For simple jobs like airline ticketing, independent bodies offer formation programs. Entry level positions in the hotel and restaurant industries, such as reception work, waiter or cook's assistant, can be prepared for at "alberghiere" high schools. For higher level positions such as destination or event managers, universities provide qualifications in Tourism through bachelor's and master's degree programs. According to the European Qualifications Framework, an "alberghiere" high school diploma is EQF level 4, while an Italian bachelor's degree is EQF level 6. Italy has 25 such degrees in tourism, offered by 19 universities. EQF level 7 refers to a Master's degree in many nations or a vocational university degree in Germany. Italy has 17 universities that provide in total 18 types of EQF7 degrees in tourism, some more focused on hospitality, other more on destination management, or territorial development. Though Italy has a strong educational offer in the tourism sector, the labour market for tourism is less promising: in fact, the prevalent hiring in the sector is for medium and low skilled occupations, and, in 2016, the hiring plans of firms in the trade and tourism sector included

[4] The report considers hotels, campsites, bars, restaurants, seaside and spa resorts, discos, travel agencies and amusement parks.

only a very small number of university graduates: all told, only 5.9% of all university graduates had been chosen for jobs in the sector, and of these, the most represented group held degrees in engineering or economics (the Italian Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Artisans and Agriculture, 2017).

Given this difficult labour market, students in tourism degree programs must not wait until graduation to work on career development. In addition, given the seasonality and high fragmentation of touristic occupations, graduates should be prepared to face a boundaryless career even more than graduates who work in other sectors.

The boundaries of tourism as a sector are unclear, and thus there is not a little disagreement among the proponents of different degree programs to prepare for work in this field. In general, tourism degree programs prepare for destination management, events management, studies of costs and revenues, etc., while for the sub-sector of hospitality, there are degree programs that address hotel management, transport, food and gastronomy. Most research on the career development of students in the tourism sector has focused on the sub-sector of hospitality (Maxwell et al., 2010; Ayres, 2006; Ladkin, 2000), and fewer studies have addressed students in the broader definition of tourism, excluding the sub-sectors of accommodations and food. Obviously, tourism and hospitality overlap, and thus it is particularly difficult to ascertain whether career development in tourism-related fields should have specific characteristics in addition to the general ones. However, two interesting studies can be cited. Bustreo and al. (2018) explored the gap between the expectations of employers and students' perceptions, and found that Italian tourism students invested heavily in acquisition of hard skills, and underrated the soft skills that, instead, are highly valued by employers. This result supports the idea that students have little awareness of the reality of the labour market. Robinson et al (2008) studied a strategy put in place by the University of Queensland's School of Tourism to partner with industry to further the readiness of its graduates for work in tourism and events management and help them with job placement. The strategy included a "professional development" class for final-year students. The authors noted that students seemed to be dissatisfied about their career prospects, and suggested that they had unrealistic expectations. They indicated the importance of providing information about career opportunities at secondary school as well as at university.

2. Methodology

2.1 Context

Data was collected from students and graduates from the International

Tourism and Destination Management degree program at the University of Macerata. This two-year postgraduate degree, equivalent to an M.A./M.Sc, prepares managers and professionals able to tackle the global challenges of present tourism, as key players of sustainable development and promoters of cultural heritage (iTourDeM website, 2019). The programme, taught in English, also offers the opportunity to obtain a double degree with the University of Oviedo, and attracts students of different nationalities.

2.2 Methods and techniques

Student questionnaires and interviews

The author asked students in their second year of the iTourDeM Master's degree program to fill out a questionnaire on self-perceived employability at the beginning and at the end of a course on "Place branding and rural development" in October and December 2018, respectively. Of these, twelve valid questionnaires were returned and analysed.

The questionnaire, which contained set questions with lists and open-response questions, was based on the Qenani et al. (2014) questionnaire on career development and self-perceived employability. It also asked respondents to consider the UNIMC'S services, activities and initiatives, and rate whether they were helpful for developing employability and job hunting skills, drawn from Smykal (2016), Try (2005), and TheMuse website, section "Job Search".

The students were given the results of the analysis of their questionnaire during the exam in January 2019. Those who so desired could request an appointment to speak with the author more in depth about the results: five students requested a meeting, three of whom were Italian, or permanently living in Italy, one a European student on the Erasmus study abroad program, and one from outside Europe. These interview appointments aimed at deepening the student's understanding of different aspects of employability.

Graduate interviews

The group of graduates, different from the group of students, comprised 9 who had earned the Master's and 1 who held the Bachelor's degree in Tourism. They did not fill out a questionnaire, but were interviewed using the life story interview technique (Bertaux, 1991; Atkinson, 2002), a storytelling-based method for drawing out biographic information, between June and October 2019. All their interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed.

Analysis of the graduate interviews followed a process of initial coding, trying to identify common pathways in the personal stories of the transition from education to work. Next, data were clustered according to frequency of

topics, and this focused coding provided identification of thematic categories under each dimension, which were then summarised.

3. Findings

3.1 Students in Tourism

3.1.1 Sample profiling

Of the 12 students, 8 (66.67%) were female, and 4 (33.33%) male; 5 of the 12 were Italian. The average age was 24.83. All respondents were full-time students and had previous work experience. Almost half of them (5 students, 41.7%) lived in their parents' home.

3.1.2 Perceptions about one's potential for employment

Confidence in finding a job just after graduation was quite good among respondents, with an average self-rating of 3.66/5. Fully 9 out of 12 respondents rated their prospects between 3 and 4.

The answers were distributed as follows:

1. Low Self-Perceived Employability: 1 (8.33%)
2. Medium Self-Perceived Employability: 4 (33.33%)
3. High Self-Perceived Employability: 7 (58.33%)

Some differences in confidence about finding a job could be seen between the Italian and non-Italian students, with the Italians rating themselves at 3.2 on average, and the non-Italians 4.0.

As regards the state of the economy, all students but one believed that the situation was better than in 2008.

3.1.3 Preparation provided by the university, and effort invested by the student

3.1.3.1 Preparation provided by the university:

In responding to the questionnaire, students indicated confidence that the university was providing them with the skills listed in the questionnaire, as follows:

Table 3 - Preparation provided by the university for developing key skills

Skill	Average	St.D.
Cooperation	3.83	0.94
Critical thinking	4.33	0.65
Communication	4.67	0.65
Field-specific skills	**3.75**	0.75

In their answers to the open questions of the questionnaire, almost all respondents believed that the university was supporting them in acquiring competences for the labour market, for the following reasons (explicitly mentioned at least one time in the answer):

Table 4 - Answers to open question

Reason	No.	%
Critical thinking and open-minded attitude	5	41.67
Transversal and soft skills	4	33.33
Hard skills, sector specific skills	2	16.67
Social links (useful for job seeking)	2	16.67
Internships	2	16.67
[remarks] A bit too theoretical/ the labour market seeks abilities	2	16.67

3.1.3.2 Effort invested by the student

Students rated their own investment in career development activities with an average of 3.5. The higher distribution was between 3 and 4 again (10 respondents). To avoid cells with low frequency, also in this case the answers were aggregated on 3 levels (category 1: rating 1-2, low career development effort; category 2: rating 3, average career development effort; category 3: rating 4-5, high career development effort):

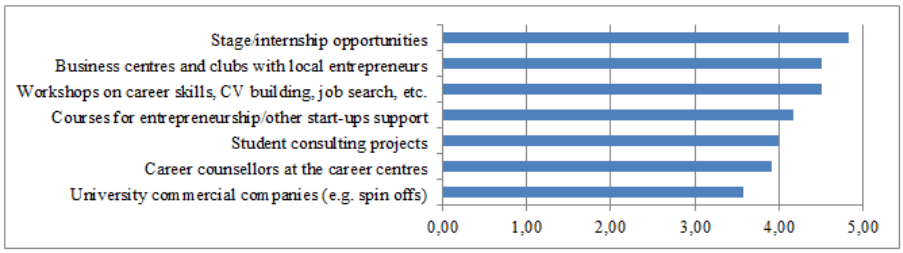
1. Low career development effort: 1 (8.33%)
2. Average career development effort: 5 (47.67%)
3. High career development effort: 6 (50.00%)

There was a small difference in the ratings given by Italian and non-Italian students (3.20 versus 3.71 in average rating).

3.1.4 Getting a job

As regards the most effective tools and support services to access the labour market, respondents rated internships as the most important for increasing job opportunities.

Figure 1 - Most important tools and services to access the labour market



During the interviews, the most discussed topic was internships. The five interviewees obviously did not have a clear concept of career development, but considered access to the labour market to be important. They failed to see a link between the curricular activities they were doing at the university and the labour market. The "Place branding and rural development" course they had completed was based on strong interaction with the territory, with several joint projects with enterprises and participation with stakeholders in workshops and activities. In spite of this, when pressed to reflect about the value of professional network building and related aspects, they failed to recognise the link with the labour market They saw these curricular activities as 'interesting', 'engaging', and 'relevant to learn the topic', but did not think of them as ways to establish links with prospective employers.

Furthermore, even though these students rated their own personal investment in career development as high or medium-high, all but one of them seemed to lack a strategy for getting a job. The one exception was an Erasmus student, who seemed to have a plan and to be making choices according to that plan, which included self-reflection on competences the student needed to acquire in order to obtain the desired future job. For example, the student chose the internship in sight of these goals, while in three other cases, the students based their decision more on 'interest' about the topic/organisation, regardless of the value of the internship for future employment.

3.2 Graduates in Tourism

3.2.1 Sample

The sample of 10 included 9 respondents with a Master's degree in Tourism, and 1 with a Bachelor's.

All respondents but one were females, with an average age of 28.9. Five of them lived in the Marche Region, four in other regions of Italy, and one abroad. At the moment of the interview, 7 of them were employed, 2 were in training (industrial PhD studies), and 1 was unemployed. Among the 7 employed interviewees, 1 was in a permanent position (the one living abroad), 3 in fixed term positions, and 2 were self-employed.

3.2.2 The unknown world of career development

Most interviewees admitted that they had invested little or no effort in career development while studying, mostly because they felt that their duty was to study and pass exams:

> When I was student, I only thought about studying… believing that afterwards, after a month or two, I would have found a job. Then it didn't work out that way. [MA, Female, 31 years old, fixed-term employment – in the sector]

> At that time I only thought about finishing university, passing my exams. [BA, Female, 25 years old, fixed-term employment – in the sector]

3.2.3 The perceived gap between theory and practice

The majority of interviewees stated directly or indirectly that the university was too "theoretical" and that they felt unfit for the labour market in terms of practical skills:

> I didn't feel prepared, because I lacked practical knowledge of the real world. [MA, Female, 28 years old, self-employed – in the sector]

> [*speaking about events organisation*] The university didn't contribute to this type of preparation. Perhaps it contributed by providing me contacts, but not in terms of competences and skills. [MA, Female, 27 years old, PhD student – in the field]

> You leave university being able to do practically nothing. [MA, Female, 31 years old, unemployed]

> It was not the content, it was the approach. You can do the course of [….], but applied in a situation that I can encounter in the field of tourism. [MA, Female, 27 years old, industrial PhD – in the field]

Others, however, pointed out the need to work on one's own to understand how to do things, and said individuals should be responsible for developing usable skills:

> The university cannot teach you everything. It can give you the basis, but then you are the one who should find the suitable place for yourself. [MA, Female, 32 years old, permanent position – in the sector]

> The university offers you many opportunities, but then you are the one who should take them. You need to search, you need to act. [MA, Female, 28 years old, self-employed – in the sector]

3.2.4 The added value of curricular internships

In Italy, curricular internships are rather short for both the Bachelor's and the Master's degrees (between 150-200 hours). A Master's graduate usually has had two internship periods, one completed during studies for the Bachelor's, another done during the Master's programme. At the University of Macerata, internships are a compulsory part of the curriculum. Most Master's students did the internship in external organisations, private or government. Some of them found the internship through the university network, while others preferred to find it themselves.

Internships can be very significant for developing career skills, but only if interns are self-aware and manage the experience wisely. All interviewees recognised the added value of the experience, chosen always on the basis of interest, or to explore the sector.

> I did my internship in a hospitality company on the Adriatic coast. It was great. I understood during the internship that my field of work would be hospitality. [BA, Female, 25 years old, fixed-term employment – in the sector]

> I chose the internships carefully [*according to my interest*]. It was useful for my daily work in the company now. [MA, Male, 29 years old, entrepreneur – in the sector]

> I did my MA internship in a hotel, and I liked the experience. […] During the BA I had done the internship in a travel agency, but I didn't like it. It was not my place. [MA, Female, 27 years old, Industrial PhD – in the field]

3.2.5 The career services

Only one of the interviewees took advantage of career services at the university:

> I followed workshops to learn how to write a CV [MA, Female, 28 years old, self-employed – in the sector]

> Well, no, I didn't follow any workshop… Actually, I discovered the very existence of the career centre during the last semester of my study programme [MA, Female, 28 year old, industrial PhD – in the field]

Others relied on the internet and friends to write their first CV, then refined it according to feedback gained during job interviews / from prospective employers.

3.2.6 Competence assessment

Some respondents indicated that during their university studies they did little reflection on what competences they possessed, which is not surprising, given how little attention they paid to preparing for a career, as noted above:

> No, honestly no, I did not reflect about my competences. Now I know that for example for some of the exams I should have studied more, with more awareness. When you are student, you want to study, and that's all [MA, Male, 29 years old, entrepreneur – in the sector]

> Actually no, I did it after graduation. […] I also have to say that I have discovered many of my skills by working [MA, Female, 25, self-employed – in the field]

Others instead were more focused on understanding what could have been useful afterward:

> I assessed particularly the competences that I wanted to have to work in hospitality, so I focused mostly on marketing and foreign languages [MA, Female, 31 years old, fixed-term employment – in the sector]

> I was aware about what I was able to do, and particularly what was easier for me. [MA, Female, 32, permanent position – in the sector]

4. Discussion

In general, analysis of the questionnaires and interviews shows how little these students have invested in career development during their university years. Similarly, it is particularly significant that all graduates retrospectively recognised they had not invested enough in career development before entering the labour market. In answering the questionnaires or interview questions, students, who have little or no work experience, had a degree of uncertainty in their self-assessment, especially in defining their own investment in career development activities. Instead, graduates brought more awareness to the assessment of their preparation at the end of the study pathway, as they had

actually conducted job searches and their preparation had been evaluated by prospective employers.

Self-reflection among the students seemed to be weak or very weak in terms of possessed competences in relation to labour market expectations. Graduates reported that an understanding of which competences are useful for the market, and working to achieve them, provides a competitive advantage.

The link with the labour market seemed to be lost upon the students: this can be related to their very limited knowledge of the labour market and how recruitment works. The graduates confirmed that they experienced a 'reality check' only after graduation, as they had not expected that finding work would be such a challenge.

The lack of preparation for the challenge of finding a job, particularly in weak labour markets, means that many Italian students waste precious years in misdirected effort or passive drifting from one limited contract to another, and never achieve a solid position in the career for which they studied. Three major factors are involved. First, many students fail to do research on the occupational outlook for the job they desire, for example, where the jobs are, what process is usually followed for obtaining them, and what the long-term prospects are. They do not think of conducting information interviews with employers to build their network and gain insight into the concrete needs of businesses. They do not think through and define a strategy for obtaining a job, based on the reality of the market. Second, the Italian culture, and particularly the Marche Region ethos, strongly values staying in one's hometown near one's family, and features a deep attachment to one's geographic area, a 'love of the land.' Thus many students hope to find their desired work close to home, and drift from one small contract to another as they become available, rather than launching out to areas where prospects are better. Third, Italian law establishes a variety of contracts aimed at promoting the entry of young people into work, such as training apprenticeships, occupation-oriented apprenticeships or traineeship contracts (*tirocini*) or targeted programmes (*Giovani eccellenze*). These contracts are usually available for young people up to the age of 29, and offer favorable conditions for employers. Thus graduates often move from one such contract to another, and then find at the age of 30 that these offers no longer apply to them, and that firms strongly prefer younger applicants because of the economic advantages of this contract category. Given these factors, as well as the fact that in Italy it takes much longer to find a first job than in other European countries, students need to begin the transition from studies to work as early as possible, and build a carefully considered career strategy grounded in a good understanding of market realities, well in advance of graduation.

The cultural attitude toward preparation for employment while studying is particularly significant. This element appears rather evident from the qualitative

data in this study: the students believed that 'first you study, then you work', and the graduates also reported that "when you are student, you think about studying". However, this sequential process is no longer applicable. While this change is clear in policies and among researchers, it seemed not to figure in the students' cultural conception of transition. Students lacked motivation to engage in career development because they did not see the need for it. Their objective was to pass exams and obtain the degree. Similarly, they did not know about, or failed to see the value of the supplementary learning provided by career services.

Criticism of the university for having an approach that is 'too theoretical' could be interpreted by taking into account the students' focus on studying, and their lack of knowledge about the world of work. In fact, the idea that university provides you with knowledge but not skills, expressed by two students in the questionnaire open answer section, and by some graduates in the interviews, depends to some extent on their own individual failure to link theory and practice. In fact, some graduates acknowledged that individuals should work on skills development of their own initiative, commenting that "the university cannot teach you everything".

However, neither the university nor the individual bears the entire responsibility. Teachers cannot replace individual reflection and reasoning, and the students cannot (or, on the basis of analysed data, do not) automatically reflect on and reason about theories and models as applied to work, or better, to life. Thus, rather than focusing exclusively on curriculum (what is taught), it would be worthwhile to focus on pedagogies (how it is taught), but with an important caveat. In fact, students and graduates spoke positively about internships, experiential learning and other forms of active pedagogies in their degree programme, noting how they drew pleasure from learning in these ways, how these methods made the subject engaging and interesting, and how important they were for their personal development. However, students tended not to see the connection with professional development.

Most probably, then, the process of meaning-making should be more carefully supported. Regular teaching should contain specific references to career preparation and the importance of self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision making skills and learning about the transition from university to work, in order to support the professional development of students. Life design abilities, in addition to skills, need to be incorporated into regular learning: students need to be able to identify goals, define strategies, and plan activities related to learning or to work choices, in order to reach objectives. Also, as Palmer (1998) argued: "what we teach will never take unless it connects with the inward, living core of our students' lives" (p. 31). Supporting connections with the world of work does not mean focusing on the

product (job), but focusing on the process (life). Higher levels of education are expected to provide students with a vision of the world based on human development and human values, and this will be one of the most important contributions these young people will bring to life, above and beyond marketable knowledge and skills. However, they will be asked to express themselves in a difficult and unpredictable labour market. For this reason, their career development should receive as much support as their cognitive and personal development.

5. Conclusions and implications for further work

This study aimed to contribute to an increased understanding of how career development is pursued during the university years in a sample of students enrolled in the Master's degree programme in Tourism at the University of Macerata. Further, the research sought to determine the outcomes on the labour market of graduates from this degree programme, and explored the role of career development in their transition from education to work.

While there are a number of limitations to the empirical components of this paper, which rely on data from only one degree programme and only one university, some interesting results could be useful for further exploration of the subject.

Analysis of the data suggests that students devote little attention to career development. In part, they recognise its importance, but still lack a clear assessment of their preparation. The graduates, however, who are already in the world of work, fully recognised its importance. Students are focused on preparing for and passing exams, and fail to take the extra step of making sense of what they are learning for their own life design purposes. They lack knowledge about the labour market, and do not take advantage of such university career services as career counsellors, CV writing support and workshops on how to conduct a job search. The idea that 'work comes later' and first you have to study probably has a strong cultural component, and will not be easily changed, even in times when the change of career paths is evident across the country and internationally. In this context, it seems that students and then graduates consider university education 'too theoretical' to provide skills: however, when exposed to active pedagogies such as experiential learning, or project based learning with companies, students do not seem to perceive the added value in terms of career development.

Further work is therefore needed to explore methods for supporting meaning-making and to evaluate their efficacy. The cognitive and personal

development of students is central to a university education, but support of their aware and thoughtful preparation for the world of work is also a vital service.

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