QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION CAREER GUIDANCE: PROCEDURES AND PROCESSES FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY[1]

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on procedures and processes which ensure effectiveness of career guidance in higher education within the framework of quality assurance processes. In 2014 Eurydice report *Modernization of Higher Education* states that the main challenges for European higher education institutions were access, retention and employability of a wider range of students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). The tools that the authors of the report identified in order to face these challenges were the implementation of flexible learning paths and the improvement of guidance services. Addressing this issue imposes to understand career services design and provision as part of the process of higher education improvement. The added value of this paper consists in the essay to present a local experience as an example of ensuring quality in higher education through the evaluation of guidance processes impact on students' employability.

Key words: Quality, Employability, Career Guidance, Monitoring, Evaluation.

Introduction

This paper deals with an experience in higher education career guidance developed by the University of Florence. It links this experience to the important

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role that quality assurance processes have assumed in the context of higher education improvement. The approach followed in this paper focuses on the different meanings of employability and on the concept of transition. Reconstructing graduates' transition from education to labour market, this paper presents the potential role of university career services as a tool to enhance employability for specific clusters of individuals.

The relevance of the paths through which individuals enter in the labour market and the importance of specific requirements of certain sectors highlight the need to constantly monitor and evaluate how university career services work, what is their impact on different populations and what are the activities which better answer to the labour market needs. The experience of on-going evaluation carried out within the *Cantieri di Intraprendenza e Lavoro project*[2] (*Cantieri project*) seems to foreshadow the possibility that the involvement of external evaluators, not only improves the quality of services' provision, but also helps the institution to accomplish their missions.

Argumentation will follow this plan: first of all, it will try to clarify the role of employability related interventions in the promotion of individuals' transition to the labour market. Secondly, it will focus on the issue of university career services' quality. Thirdly, it will present an on-going evaluation experience from the University of Florence in order to highlight how a constant relationship between educational institutions and employers, as external evaluators, can lead to a general improvement of the quality.

Defining employability of graduates

In the current era of continuous change, the notion of employability has gained a very important role because of the growing need of individuals to develop a greater ownership of their life-path and to secure employment. Moreover, the highly competitive and volatile labour market highlights the need to anticipating the acquisition of employability skills before the entrance into the labour market in order to maximise the potential for a successful career. Indeed, employers expect graduates to demonstrate their "work-ability" through something more than a formal certificate of education based on good grades.

Employability is a multifaceted concept that has been interpreted in various ways in the last twenty years. Many researchers have defined employability as the propensity to secure a job, a progress in career, or as the "capacity to move self-sufficiently into and within the labour market, to fulfil potential through sustainable employment" (Allison et al., 2002, p. 3). Others as Yorke and Knight define employability as "a set of achievements, understanding and personal at-

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2   The *Cantieri di Intraprendenza e Lavoro project* (Intrapreneurship and Work Yards Project, the English translation) has been developed, within the Guidance and Placement Office, under the scientific responsibility of prof. Paola Lucarelli who has been the University of Florence Delegate of career guidance activities for the last five years.

tributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (Yorke, 2004, p. 21). A third group claims, "employability is not just about getting a job" but it is linked in its core sense with "the acquisition of attributes (knowledge, skills and abilities) that make graduates more likely to be successful in their chosen occupations (whether paid employment or not)" (Harvey, 2004, p. 3) nor it is something "automatic" (Harvey, 2003, p. 3, about Joan Newton). In general "employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on 'employ' and more on 'ability'. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. Employment is a by-product of this enabling process" (Harvey, 2003, p. 3). As a consequence, it is not a product in itself but a pedagogical process that has much to do with reflection and transformative learning. This process enhances development in terms of competences, understanding and personal attributes (Figure n. 1): and here the notions of learning and development are something that transcend the capability-based approach to employability.

Figure 1 – The process of employability
(Harvey, 2003, p. 4 adapted from Harvey et al., 2002)

As suggested by Harvey, Locke and Morey in 2002 (p. 17), "employability is about how individuals engage with opportunities, and reflect and articulate their skills and experience" or as a starting point for the development path that brings to transition into the first "decent job" (ILO, 1999, p. 1).

In the background there is a reflection on how the employability process can be influenced by external factors. Indeed, individuals are not ontologically independent of one another, nor their role is external to the changing context of society but tightly linked with it in a bi-univocal relation. As a matter of fact, human beings are proficient in transforming and developing themselves and their skills, knowledge and learning in a consequential way. Moreover, they learn according to their previous experiences or, as defined by Beach (1999, p. 114), using a portability approach they transform their skills, knowledge and learning. The transfer concept of Beach suggests that when someone has overcome successfully a prior learning-based experience, he/she will be able to apply the learning to a new task, being highly influences by the former. This means that individuals that can count on an *accompany* or *support construct* can live a much more positive experience of transition that changes the individuals and makes them become something new.

Following that, many experts have developed the idea that institutions should help transition of the young graduates from the educational to the work context through specific learning and teaching strategies or educational actions, such as guidance provision at a micro, meso and macro level.

This support system, involving teaching and learning activities as well as services, could become part of the employability curricula (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004), both directly and indirectly, i.e. by letting students know or not the employability aims of the course or program. As a consequence, higher education providers should audit their curricula to evaluate their effectiveness and how employability can be achieved in reason of the fact that care for education and for the educational process is the essential key for reading the transitions to work. From this perspective, some researchers begin to think about transitions as "pathways of care for the subjects' formation process" (Boffo, 2015, p. 158) that, at a micro-level or from the students' perspective, corresponds to the care for the self, and, at a macro-level or from a higher education institutions perspective, can be identified with the care for the human being and their wellbeing and their role into the civil society.

This understanding enforces the agreement on the idea that the moment of the acquisition of employability skills is prior to the entrance into the labour market and corresponds to the presence in higher education institutions of services that are increasingly expected to contribute to the labour market entrance by equipping students and graduates with skills for employment. Indeed, a key goal of the Bologna Process is to enhance employability and mobility of citizens creating a European space for higher education.

This means creating the basis for the development of higher education as link between education and employment. International stakeholders and policy makers recognize the impact of higher education in enhancing young graduates' employability and a direct correlation between skills, productivity and employ-

ment (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006, p. 3). Yet there is a strong debate on how to achieve this goal, due to the absence of a recognized model to do it at best, or a best practice that every higher education institution can adopt.

In this sense higher education institutions have initially used a *skill approach* based on the development of specific skills through specific models or extracurricular activities. After that, they have adopted a more holistic approach feeling the urgency of adapting their activities to the changing nature of the workplace and the requirements of the employers (needs) in order to be responsive to these changes and be responsible for the equipment of their students. The present approach seeks "to develop employability attributes as an explicit and embedded part of academic learning" (Harvey, 2003, p. 16), or as a curriculum with embedded employability. This is particularly evident and clear when the study course is developed in consultation with labour market and stakeholders with the aim of helping students make easier transitions into the workplace.

In Italy the reform of the study courses in 2010 included this concepts in the Law no. 240/2010 where it was stated that "finding work and finding work that is coherent with the study path followed is not just what graduates want, but it is also one of the standards by which the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research assesses the degree course that the student has come from, and, as a consequence, the capacity of the universities to be productive in terms of both research and teaching. It is not possible to consider the topic of the transition into work of Italian graduates without taking into due consideration the close link with the quality systems, third mission, teaching and training offered by the study courses" (Boffo, 2015, p. 156). In this sense the "third mission" is the long-term reflection of the Ministry on the importance of connecting University and labour market through linked actions, relationships,... that can benefit students and not-traditional students to gain "meaningful employment" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, p. 62) and a decent work in condition of freedom (ILO, 1999, p. 1).

Career Guidance services and Quality

As seen in the previous section, the concept of employability can be interpreted in different ways. Certainly it plays a central role in the European commission's higher education reform strategy as well as in European strategies such as *Europe 2020* and *Education and Training 2020*. Relevance given to graduate's labour markets transition, has contributed over the past decades to several different phenomena in higher education. In this perspective the most relevant is the fact that it has brought an "output and outcome awareness" (Teichler, 2011, p. 29) that has progressively involved curriculum development, teaching and learning processes as well as the assessment of university services.

In 2009, Helmut Zelloth claimed that "among international organisations, it was the OECD which addressed career guidance issues for the first time as part of an examination of policy issues related to initial transitions from school to work" (European Training Foundation 2009, p.10). Referring to that institution it is possible to include in career guidance "services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training, and occupational choices and to manage their careers" (OECD, 2004, p.10).

In the same period in which policies and strategies for career guidance have become a political priority in many European higher education institutions, several authors noticed that "the improvement of quality of higher education has become a common focus of the western world government" (Do Céu, De Nazaré, 2014, p.94). Among these authors there are researchers who link the spread of quality assurance processes to the need of compete in a globalized knowledge society and others who insist on their link with recent economic crisis. In both cases the attention to returns on investments in higher education seems to be an undoubtable trend which results in the spread of "several definitions and models of assessment and management of quality in higher education" (Do Céu, De Nazaré, 2014, p.94). Although the differences among them, in literature it is possible to find an integrative conceptual approach. Following this approach "the aims of a quality-assurance system and mechanisms are to improve efficiency in service provision, to increase institutional financial accountability and to create transparency from the perspective of the citizen" (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network 2012, p.50).

From this point of view, there is a strong relationship between quality and evidence. "One of the ways in which quality and evidence are inter-related is through the collection of data as part of service provision and improvement" (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, 2014, p.12). The main activities which can provide service provision and improvement through data collection are monitoring and evaluation. Two are the elements that allow to draw a distinction between them. The first one concerns the goal of the activities. Monitoring is the routine collection, analysis and use of information about an on-going intervention which ensure that a programme stay on tracks while evaluation is usually concerned with more with strategic questions such as effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact and sustainability. The second one concerns the involvement of external stakeholders. As Hooley claims in fact "monitoring... is usually carried out by individuals and organisations directly involved in the development intervention" while "evaluation... is usually carried out in co-operation with external evaluators or entirely outsourced" (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, 2014, p.12).

Since employability is increasingly seen as a key performance indicator by higher education institutes, career guidance services start to be involved in more than one assessment in order to ensure a result "as systematic and objective as possible" (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network 2014, p.12). In the large

majority of countries, higher education institutions are obliged to submit employability related information to quality assurance authorities in order to accredit institutions and programmes. "Besides formal quality assurance procedures, several countries have established other processes of evaluation based on employability criteria" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, p.73). The basis of such evaluation is often student and graduate surveys. Another source of information can be employers or HR specialists as well as higher education itself through their plans and prospects.

Employability-related quality standards can focus on a variety of issues. Quality assurance agencies can simply verify the presence of services that can provide support for the labour market transition of graduates or they can be required to show that their programmes and activities answer an existing demand. In other cases, they have also to be able to prove that they involve employers and specialized staff in designing and implementation processes. The main goal of quality assurance processes is to make relevant information about the impact of career services in higher education public, however, several countries, Italy included, "have also developed (or are in process of developing) systems of performance-based or purpose-specific funding" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, p.74). This means that data of career guidance impact are not only transparent, but also able to influence higher education funding.

On the basis of this complex framework, Italian universities tried to promote the transition of their graduates facing a severe occupational crisis and the shift of higher education public provision from an input oriented model to an output oriented one.

From this point of view, the University of Florence *Cantieri project,* started in May 2015, can highlight what could be the role of quality assurance processes in the achievement of continuous improvement of processes and procedures.

The project was conceived within the activities of the Guidance and Placement Office. It uses a provision of the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research that allocated some funds on the basis of a selective procedure. These funds intend to improve, in three years, the effectiveness of the university career guidance activities and to built an integrated system able to promote the transition of graduates to labour market.

From a structural perspective the project aims to:

1) Coordinate the systems that are devoted to identify the needs of students and employers.
2) Support the design and research experiences gained about employability, transitions and career guidance inside the university,
3) Build up a university committee which can monitor and evaluate all the processes,
4) Training a selected staff in order to allow it to manage the career guidance activities showed in Figure n. 2.

Research activities			
Information activities	**Training activities**	**Psychology oriented activities**	**Placement activities**
Front office activities Class interventions Job placement at Prato Campus	*To develop soft skills* Assessment Centre Career guidance seminar Workshops for job active research Curriculum check Video Curriculum development *To develop entrepreneurial skills* Entrepreneurial training Green business development *To develop innovation's transfer skills* Job in lab Idea generation workshop	Career counselling Intrapreneurial Self capital Training	Business Café Company presentations Career Lab Career Day

Figure 2 – The activities carried out by the *Cantieri project*

Considering these activities, the project not only spread good practices already carried out by academic schools and departments, but also design new services thanks to the implementation of monitoring and evaluation strategies able to account their results to internal and external stakeholders such as Ministry, students and labour market's organizations.

Even if the accountability is a condition to be funded by the Ministry for the entire length of the project, the University of Florence devotes a lot of energy to involve internal and external stakeholders in the evaluation process in order to:

1) evaluate the impact that career guidance services can have in term of production of employable human capital,

2) ensure a quality offer for students and graduates,

3) collect evidence that can be used to improve university system as a whole.

Reasons and evidences from an on-going evaluation activity by the University of Florence

As presented above, the *Cantieri project* invests in career guidance in order to measure the impact of the services on employment rates of recent graduates. Two are the main questions that lead the first 5 months activities. The first one is: what is the relevance of these actions for the transition of graduates into the labour market? The second one is: what are the impact and the transformation of graduates' conditions?

In this direction, the role of monitoring and evaluation as two important steps to get aware of quality of actions planned is confirmed (European Commission, 2015, p. 6–7). As a matter of fact, a project, that aims to induce a change by targeted action, needs an evaluation during the implementation phase and an

impact evaluation to deduce quality of effects produced. Due to their educational dimension, this consideration is particularly important in higher education and career services which have continuously to match learning outcomes and trends of the world of work in order support students developing their future life, and work-life as well. That's why the evaluation of project's development and the collection of «good-quality data» (Federighi, 2013, p. 77) have become very important for the *Cantieri project*. This evaluation in fact «enables us […] to *learn internally*: involved stakeholders are able to learn and improve their programme, and […] to *present externally*: the results of the programme can be presented to a broader public» (INTERACT, 2012, p. 11). Therefore, it could be significant and useful to elaborate strategic decisions (INTERACT, 2012) and also to activate a reflective process on scope, aims and strategies eventually leading to a review of planned actions.

For these reasons, it has been activated a process of on-going evaluation as «a process taking the form of a series of evaluation exercises» (European Commission, 2007, p. 6). The process presented in next paragraph is the first part of a broader process of on-going evaluation. It aims to verify the matching between the offer of career guidance services into the *Cantieri project* and the employers' demand during the recruitment phase. Since the final results could be evidence which allow to transform some guidance activities for better ensuring employability development, the on-going evaluation is not just monitoring the project progress, but it produces knowledge and policy learning which inform University level as well (Federighi P., Abreu C., Nuissl von Rein E., 2007; Federighi P., Torlone F., 2007). Moreover, it also produces evidence to create innovative educational strategies to support graduates' transition.

In this framework the first stage of the on-going evaluation of the *Cantieri project* has been unrolled during the University of Florence Career Day[3]. In this context the research group of Adult Education of the Department of Educational Sciences and Psychology[4] has conducted a survey on recruitment phases and processes of the companies who participated at the Career Day. The survey had the goal to understand the different recruitment phases depending on company dimension and to point out the matching/mismatching between the services offer and the demand of labour market, in order to plan educational activities that could help graduates facing the transition into labour market.

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3   The inquiry presented here has been unrolled to HR Recruiters during the 2015 edition of the University of Florence Career Day, which took place in 6th, 7h, 8th October 2015 in Florence and counted 119 companies and more than 400 students. They were 21 multinational corporations, 11 big companies, 27 medium companies and 18 small companies.

4   The research group of Adult Education is composed by Prof. Paolo Federighi, Prof. Vanna Boffo, Dr. Francesca Torlone, Dr. Gaia Gioli, Nicoletta Tomei, Carlo Terzaroli.

The purpose of survey[5], in details, was to analyse four main topics of the recruitment process: used methods, phases of selection process, importance of soft skills, use of social network for selection. Looking at results, we can notice that *Curriculum Vitae* (CV) screening (90% of companies) and individual interview (76,7% of companies) are the most used methods for selection among all companies. Connecting to methods, data analysis provides also an interesting overview on phases of recruitment into the interviewed enterprises. In fact, looking at the first stage of selection process (Table 1), it emerges that CV Screening is the most used method in big, medium and small companies as a way to know first characteristics of candidate; it's interesting, on the contrary, that multinational corporations prefer to have a phone interview, also to know how people usually relate in a phone call.
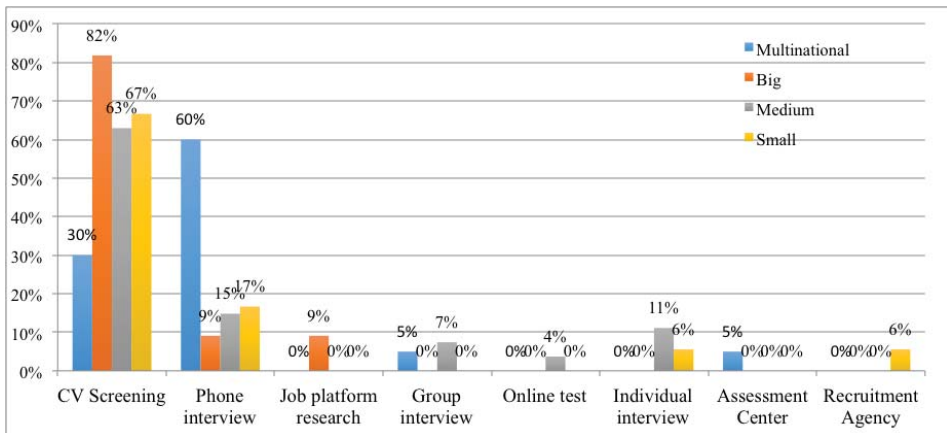

Table 1 – Recruitment process, first phase

These data provide a first relevant suggestion to guidance services planning: the personal and professional preparation to the recruitment stage can't be the same for all field of study. As a matter of fact each economical sector in each territory presents different dimensions companies, which use different methods in turn: that's why it is so important a continuous relation with the local labour market. And that's why an effective guidance service has to plan educational actions tailored on sector field needs. Other data (Table 2), that show multinational corporations use of Assessment Centre, lead our analysis in the same direction: it asks indeed for specific preparation especially for student which would like to apply for jobs into multinational organizations. The data also shows an intense use of Skype call in selection process of medium companies (23%), small companies (12%) and multinational corporations and suggest a different pathway to enter into this type of organizations.

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5   The survey has been delivered by a semi-structured interview, composed by five questions with multiple answers or with blank spaces to fill in.
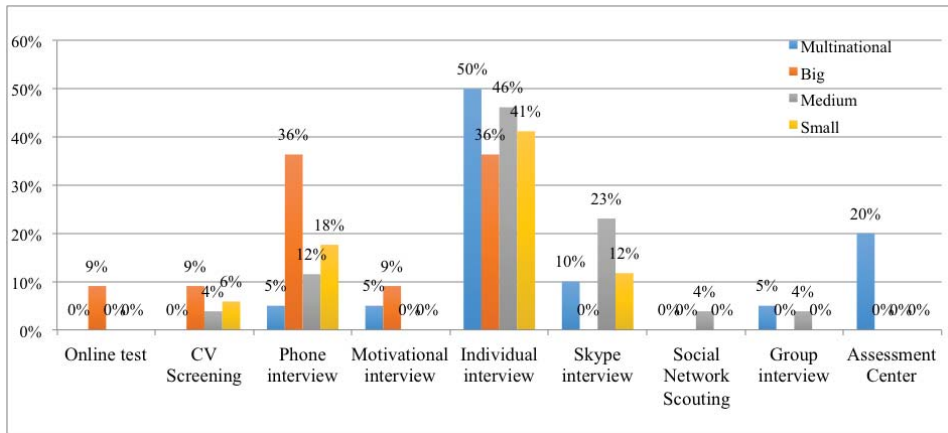
Table 2 – Recruitment process, second phase

Conclusion

On the basis of these elements it is possible to conclude that company size influences recruitment methods and phases as well. This conclusion leads to claim that career services carried out by the University of Florence now partly fulfil the needs of their main stakeholders. However on the perspective of processes' improvement two considerations are due.

Firstly, it seems clear that Career services should start to tailor their activities according to what different kind of companies require to students who want to apply there (*sectorization of guidance services*). Secondly, as personalization is highly difficult to provide, it seems appropriate to invest in research that lead to the identification of different graduates' transition paths in order to focus what are the needs of different clusters of students (*clusterization of guidance services).*

Interpreting these considerations through the lens of quality assurance processes allows to claim that pursuing this goals means not only foster the impact of career guidance activities effectively helping graduates transition to the labour market. It also contributes to the improvement of higher education as a whole by the accomplishment of its third mission.

From a procedural point of view, as these conclusions are built on evidence produced by an on-going evaluation which involved skilled professionals, such as researchers, and external stakeholders such as recruiters, quality assurance seems to be closely linked to good-quality data collection and interpretation.

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