

“It’s a very different world”: Work transition and employability of Higher Education graduates

Purpose

This study addresses the specific topic of transition between Higher Education and the world of work, taking differences naturally inherent to the individual and to the surrounding micro and macro contexts. With an holistic approach, this paper aimed to provide a deeper understanding about the university-to-work transition process in a period of turbulence and continuous changes in the labour market

Design/methodology/approach

The three research questions that guide this qualitative study are: (i) What are the factors that facilitate the transition to the labour market? (ii) What are the factors that constrain the transition to the labour market? (iii) What are graduates’ perceptions of their employability? To answer these questions, eleven graduates were interviewed about facilitators and barriers of the transition process and perceptions of employability. Data collected from the interviews was then related to categories previously defined from the literature review. Version 12.0 of the NVivo software was used to support the process of data analysis.

Findings

Overall, participants’ discourse refer to a multidimensional and dynamic perspective of factors related with work transition and employability. The obtained results indicate that the lack of career agency during graduation and professional experiences, together with late career exploration processes, represent possible barriers of transition, especially in study fields with targeted job offers. Likewise, experiences promoting the development of competencies through supportive practice from teachers, mentors and colleagues are referred as facilitators of transition.

Practical implications

One of the most consistent outcomes of the interviews conducted concerns the importance of a stronger focus on developing practical experiences during Higher Education studies. This empirical study demonstrated how this type of experience can mitigate the impact of the transition from university to the labour market.

Originality/value

This empirical study demonstrated how work being integrated into learning in curricula can mitigate the impact of the transition from university to the labour market. It offers important insights about possible strategies that could be adopted to promote graduates’ employability from a perspective of shared responsibility.

Introduction

Recent decades have been marked by a significant increase in the population's access to higher education (HE). Portugal is no exception to this trend, with 34% of the population between 25-34 years-old attaining tertiary education, while in 2007 the educational attainment at this level of education was about 21% (OECD, 2018). Concerning unemployment rates, about 8% of HE graduates were unemployed in 2017, a lower rate compared to lower education levels (OECD, 2018). These better employment prospects represent one of the main motivations of the vast majority of students entering HE (Dias, 2013). Nevertheless, the international socioeconomic reality has also been changing in recent decades, largely because of the globalization of markets and rapid technological development, and aggravated by the economic crisis triggered in Europe in 2008. As a result, permanent work contracts, where individuals tended to work in the same organization for their entire lives, were replaced by temporary and precarious contracts, requiring individuals to be able to adapt rapidly to new contexts and new demands (Coutinho et al., 2008; Tomlinson, 2007). This conjunction has led to increasing difficulties for new graduates to enter the labour market, compared to two decades ago, with a decrease of 2.5% in employment rates among tertiary education graduates in the Euro area and almost 14% in Portugal (Alves et al., 2018).

Employability as an integrative product of knowledge, skills and attitudes

Although there is some controversy and debate about the extent to which universities should serve labour market demands (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Harvey, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012), the vision of higher education as a promotor of employability might be considered to produce relatively strong consensus among scholars. In this respect, it is relevant to clarify the distinction regarding the concept of employment, as an objective outcome which can easily be measured, and employability, a broader concept referring to a wide set of competencies (kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes) that is supposed to foster continuous learning development in a dynamic way (Pegg et al., 2012). Therefore, higher education institutions can be considered promoters of employability to the extent they foster the development of this range of attributes that meets the socioeconomic demands of the 21st century. According to Yorke and Knight (2004), curricula designed for employability should help students to construct understanding of subject matter and promote continuous interest in self-development. These authors operationalize this relation between knowledge and competencies through their USEM account of employability. The acronym USEM refers to: *Understanding*, which represents knowledge, one of the key outcomes of higher education; *Skills*, refer to the ability to apply knowledge to practice, with awareness and responsiveness to the context; *Efficacy beliefs*, refers to malleable attitudes allowing to face up tasks as opportunities for development and belief in ability to succeed in facing new challenges; *Metacognition*, refers to reflection and self-regulation in relation to practice and ability to continuously 'learn how to learn'. Similarly, the CareerEDGE model proposed by Pool and Sewell (2007), outlines the *degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills, generic skills, emotional intelligence, experience, career development learning* as fundamental components of employability. Pool and Sewell (2007) argue that employability is strongly related with the perception of competencies developed during course degree, reason why *self-efficacy, self-confidence* and *self-esteem* are fundamental for the understanding of the relation between skills and employability. The model also emphasizes the importance of making available opportunities for continuous *reflection* and *evaluation* of previous experiences.

Within this framework, employability is enabled by the construction of students' understandings from personal experience, combined with pedagogical approaches that promote active learning and positive engagement. Employable graduates will be those who are able to integrate scientific subject knowledge with transversal and career competencies.

Transition to work: Sociocognitive Career Theory

Sociocognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is a framework that has been proposed to understand the processes inherent in the transition to work (Lent et al., 1999, 2002). It builds on constructivist assumptions about the capacity of human beings to influence their own development and surroundings and establishes a relation between agentic variables (such

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3 as self-efficacy, outcome expectations and goals) and interaction with individual and environmental variables (such
4 as gender, social support and barriers). A key construct of SCCT is self-efficacy beliefs, which refer the individual's
5 expectations about his or her performance capabilities. According to SCCT, self-efficacy arises mainly from
6 successful performance, which increases the likelihood of future effective performance. In contrast, failure
7 experiences tend to reduce self-efficacy. According to Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli (2001), the higher
8 the individual's perceived efficacy to fulfil educational requirements and occupational roles, the better he or she will
9 prepare through education for a career, and the greater will be his or her persistence in following this career. This
10 construct has been applied to a variety of career and vocational related behaviours such as job search intentions, career
11 choice, task performance and persistence, interview readiness and performance and employment outcomes (Strauser
12 and Keim, 2002).

13 SCCT also includes outcome expectations and beliefs about outcomes being contingent on performance. For example,
14 a perception of positive outcomes related to labour market transition can influence the efforts related to job search.
15 Also, predictions about outcomes might differ depending on the balance between self-efficacy and individual
16 competencies. If self-efficacy beliefs exceed competence levels only slightly this can be motivation for further skills
17 development; however, significant overestimation or underestimation of self-efficacy can have negative results
18 (Bandura, 1986). The SCCT framework is useful for achieving a deeper understanding of the relation between
19 students' perceptions of their competencies, and preparation for the labour market Given the reported association
20 between self-efficacy and career behaviours and outcomes, understanding students' perceptions of their preparedness
21 for the job market is a relevant issue (Edwards, 2014; Ochsmann et al., 2011).

22 23 **University-to-work transition: Barriers and facilitators**

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27 The transition between higher education and the world of work represents a unique journey, characterized by
28 differences naturally inherent to the individual and to the surrounding micro and macro contexts (Allen and van der
29 Velden, 2007; Raffe, 2014). In a socioeconomic scenario characterized by job uncertainty, it might be expected that
30 typical constraints related to labour market transition will be amplified, to the extent there is no longer a clear and
31 predictable career path for younger professionals (Maggiori et al., 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). Johnston (2016)
32 suggests that activation of career resources may depend on perceived control to situations, which implies that contexts
33 of uncertainty might act as threatening and, consequently, reduce the ability to activate and mobilize career
34 adaptability resources. In turn, Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig and Platt (2010) describe work transition process as
35 especially challenging and unpredictable, such that a well-functioning adolescence is not a guarantee of an unhindered
36 work transition. This can be particularly exacerbated in fields of study with lower employment rates, namely the
37 Humanities and Social Sciences (Allen and van der Velden, 2007), where job finding might require a more intensive
38 and proactive engagement.

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41 In this scenario, social support has been presented as a protective factor in work transition, particularly during
42 emerging adulthood (Murphy et al., 2010). The importance of family and friends is described as a mediating factor in
43 the maintenance of the individual well-being to overcome the difficulties of the transition work process. In addition,
44 the authors suggest that the process could be also related to the management of expectations in relation to first jobs.
45 Indeed, realistic and reliable expectations regarding transition are related to more adaptive and resilient attitudes
46 (Bennett, 2019; Murphy et al., 2010).

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49 Practical experiences have been proposed in the literature as important opportunities for students to carry out the
50 integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Blasko, Brennan, Little and Shah (2002) reported that work experience
51 increase the chances of achieving a job appropriate to education level, higher income and job satisfaction. Other
52 authors, have referred to the relation of practical experience to the development of relevant attributes, such as the
53 ability to mobilize personal resources or others' human resources (Allen and van der Velden, 2011; Kapareliotis et
54 al., 2019), "job setting skills", such as CV preparation and job interview techniques (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), career
55 management skills (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), self-knowledge, self-efficacy (Billett and Ovens, 2007; Dacre Pool
56 and Sewell, 2007; Van Dinther et al., 2011; Edwards, 2014) and understanding of the world of work (Beavis et al.,
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2005; Kapareliotis et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the impact of work experiences seems to vary according to several aspects, namely, as to whether the activity is related to the study area or not, or the ability to learn and apply these learning experiences (Allen and van der Velden, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Although a consensus was not achieved regarding which competencies are more relevant, there is relative unanimity regarding the importance of a set of skills that goes beyond specific knowledge to deal with the complex and rapidly changing demands of a globalized world (Allen and van der Velden, 2012; Pereira et al., 2019). This set of resources is commonly designated as transversal competencies. Empirical research has established a relationship between perceived competency and more positive perceptions of employability and preparation to work (García-Aracil et al., 2018; Qenani et al., 2014; Shah et al., 2004; Wittekind et al., 2010), not only because of the relevance of such competencies to professional activities (Martin et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2004), but also because of the effect it has on increasing self-confidence (Alvarez et al., 2017).

Empirical studies presented have also provided some evidence of the role of career management skills, such as career adaptability and decision-making, and the ability to communicate about competencies, skills development and perceived employability (Alvarez et al., *competencies* 2017; Dumulescu, Balazsi, & Opre, 2015; Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Monteiro, Ferreira, & Almeida, 2018; Qenani et al., 2014; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015). This set of competencies is critical to individuals to profit from their technical and transversal skills and to develop and adjust continuously the necessary attributes to contextual demands (Bridgstock, 2009; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas, 2013; Yorke & Knight, 2004).

The present study

This study represents an attempt to fill some lacks identified in the literature. Firstly, theoretical frameworks have enhanced the relevance of self-beliefs for employability. Although, empirical research demonstrating such relationship, focusing on graduates' perspective about their work transition processes, is still scarce. Secondly, the revised literature suggests that individual and contextual factors tend to be interdependently related in the work transition process (Feldmann, 2016; Tams and Arthur, 2010). Current literature suggests that career adaptability, which is expected to impact the adaptation to career tasks and transitions, is highly context-dependent (Johnston, 2016; Savickas, 2005). However, little research has been able to demonstrate such a relationship (Johnston, 2016). Likewise, in a synthesis of relevant empirical research, Feldmann (2016) observes that current research in the field is mainly characterized by search for "best practices", finding a deficit of empirical work in the area. This scenario implies that exploration of transition processes should adopt a holistic and integrative approach in order to capture the predictable singularities and communalities of graduates' pathways. Considering a multi-dimensional approach, this study adopts a qualitative design to provide a deeper understanding of the university-to-work transition process in a period of turbulence and continuous changes in the labour market in Portugal, as in many other OECD countries. Three research questions guide this study with higher education graduates from different study fields are: (i) What are graduates' perceptions of their employability? (ii) What are the factors that facilitate the transition to the labour market? (iii) What are the factors that constrain the transition to the labour market?

Method

Interview guide and data analysis

The interview guide was developed according to the three research questions. After that, it was validated by two senior researchers. The interviews were semi-structured, with following the structure:

- (i) Transition between university and labour market (e.g.: What were the main demands, barriers and difficulties experienced during the transition to the labour market?);
- (ii) Preparation for the labour market (e.g.: How do you generally assess your preparation for the transition to labour market before your transition?);
- (iii) Higher education perceptions (e.g.: How do you perceive the overall contribution of your higher education in terms of general capacity building?);
- (iv) Perceived employability: individual and contextual factors (e.g.: How do you describe the labour market in your area of training?);
- (v) Job satisfaction (e.g.: How do you assess your satisfaction with your job?);
- (vi) Other experiences or observations (e.g.: Have you had any type of formal or informal educational or other type of experience that you consider relevant to professional integration?).

Data collected from the interviews was then related to categories previously defined from the literature review. The broader categories were divided into three dimensions: (i) higher education institution; (ii) graduate; (iii) employer organization. Version 12.0 of the NVivo software was used to support the process of data analysis, which consisted of a decomposition of data into units of analysis. Afterward, a systematic comparison between the information previously coded and new information was developed (Schilling, 2006).

Participants and Procedure

Eleven graduates, selected according to the criterion of balancing gender, field of study and employment situation, were invited to voluntarily participate in the interviews. The sample sizes meets the criteria of 10 participants for sampling among homogeneous population (Sandelowski, 1995). Invitation for participation in the study occurred 18 months after graduation. Table 1 presents the list of participants, gender, age, study field and employment situation at the time of the interview. Although the employment situation varied among participants, only one of them was unemployed, which is in proportion with current general unemployment rates among HE graduates in Portugal (about 8%, according to 2018 OECD statistics). The interviews were then conducted individually, either face-to-face or by phone, with a duration ranging between 30 and 60 minutes. The first author, experienced in the field of employability and in qualitative research, conducted the interviews. All the interviews were audio recorded and then fully transcribed, using fictitious names to preserve the anonymity of participants.

[Please insert table 1 here]

Results

The main results obtained from the data analysis are presented below by describing relevant information, organized into three dimensions: individual factors, academic factors and labour market factors. Data are illustrated with short excerpts of the interviews selected with the criteria of the representativeness of the information.

Individual factors

In the vast majority of the cases, the process of career exploration is triggered after work transition and after being confronted with the imminent need to find a job. Self-exploration, mainly manifested around the capacity of knowledge of personal interests, emerges more explicitly at the time of the first work experience, through the opportunity that professional practice offers in terms of experimentation with new and/or unknown tasks:

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5 (...) *This experience in the labour market also brought another aspect, which was to know*
6 *exactly what I wanted and what I didn't want. Therefore, it was only after entering to the job*
7 *market that I understood there were areas that I actually undervalued, or that I didn't even*
8 *like. For example, group intervention, [after work experience] I discovered that I did like it,*
9 *whereas the area of management of leisure activities, I initially thought I would like to work in*
10 *that, but then I realized that I didn't, that after all it was not what I wanted (Sofia)*
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13 Similar to what happens with self-exploration, the exploration of the labour context does not appear to be a process
14 consolidated by the majority of the participants and, when it is, it does not seem to begin before the period of transition
15 to the labour market. This develops into unawareness about what exists in the labour market and what might effectively
16 represent an opportunity. In this way, recent graduates who were interviewed, in general, demonstrate low levels of
17 agency toward a career during their HE studies:
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21 *When I left university, and because my field of study is a bit flexible in terms of areas in which I*
22 *can work, I was not very sure about which areas I could go into, or in which areas I would be*
23 *most interested. So, there were some doubts here, but there was this desire to enter to the job*
24 *market and to exercise the profession and to develop myself in that sense. But there was a little ...*
25 *let's say, a lot of ignorance of what the job market was. (Manuel)*
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28 The moment when graduates realize some of the difficulties related to their integration into the labour market seem to
29 be destabilising, confronting graduates with the lack of resources to deal with adversities inherent to the transition. At
30 the same time, it seems that this moment can trigger changes:
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34 *If I reach a balance in relation to a year or two years ago, I currently have other tools, I have*
35 *another mentality. I have other strategies that I did not have before. So, I also have other*
36 *resources that allow me to be a better professional (Sofia)*
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39 In this context, students who have previous work experience show greater knowledge of the labour market,
40 demonstrating a perception of greater preparation at the time of university-to-work transition and more awareness and
41 reflection in their career choices:
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45 *Before I started working, I had already worked for five years. Then, I stopped to go back to*
46 *university and I can say that I was prepared and I already knew how the job market is, I already*
47 *knew how it works, even if it not specifically in the area that I ended up working in (Diana)*
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50 Apparently, graduates are aware of the relevance of work experience, since they manifest the importance of a
51 university-business approach, and the development of professional experiences throughout the course. However,
52 graduates seem to delegate this role to HE institutions and employing organizations, showing little autonomy in this
53 process of exploration and drawing close to the market before the conclusion of their studies with the specific intention
54 of deepening their knowledge about themselves and about the world:
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[About strategies to promote employability] *more connection between university and companies, more understanding of what companies want when they want to hire. Maybe even promote certain exchanges during the program courses a little more, certain experiences of being in a company* (Margarida)

The general lack of knowledge of the labour market leaves new graduates in situations of greater vulnerability, depending mostly on the opportunities that arise from external circumstances. When graduates have the opportunity to develop deeper self-knowledge and understanding of the work world, they describe themselves as better prepared for the transition. The following example illustrates one exception where the participant explored the labour market in his area during his Master's dissertation and reported confidence at the time of transition:

I had enough knowledge of what I could offer and add to the labour market. My [Master's] dissertation was in management and development of human resources in the organization, so what could I do with it? Besides knowing how management was carried out in both private and public organizations in [name of the region], it was also a way to show these same activities (...) I realized that here in [name of the region] there are no graduates in human resources management. These vacancies are occupied by graduates with other degrees, such as psychologists or managers (...) I felt... I felt ready! I felt a fear just to know where I was going and what was waiting for me, but in relation to learning and with all that I have been learning (...) I felt capable! (Paulo)

Therefore, the majority of the participants demonstrated reactive strategies oriented toward professional insertion and after, in relation to career progression. Various types of strategies were identified, such as the search for specific training in order to develop competencies perceived to be relevant to the field, the search for work experiences through unpaid internships when difficulties finding paid internships arose, the capacity to identify opportunities and to adequately react to circumstances:

I am in the tax area. I feel the need in my daily work to have knowledge of the legal subjects of taxes. To search [for training] according to career needs, trying to specialize in these areas until I achieve the goal (...) That's how I decided to take the training courses, always responding to career needs (Margarida)

The moment of the interview seemed, in several cases, a first exercise of confrontation with issues related to future career planning. Descriptions of future career plans were, in most of the cases, vague, with ill-defined objectives, around the ideas of "to do something I like" or "earn a good salary":

To have a stable life in economic terms, in order to be able to project myself into the future, both personally and professionally with that same career. It [stability] would also bring motivation for that work, for that career, this would be fundamental. Also, obviously, being rewarded at the end of the day, not always thinking at the end of the day "It looks like another workday" (...), to feel good about the work that we are doing (Manuel)

Two exceptions were identified, with graduates describing specific and strategic plans regarding their future paths. These same two participants also stood out for their discourse based on the idea of autonomy, proactivity and career agency, as illustrated below:

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I see the degree (...) as a license to learn i.e., we learn to learn during the course and, at the end, it's what we find in the job market ... We'll never work with the same thing; we're always discovering new things and how to learn that subject, how to study (Joel)

I can tell you that I'm currently in the company where I did my internship, but it's not the company that I want to stay with for my lifetime. I have a project planned, I think it's a good school, a great school, but I want to experience other realities, I want to meet other people, I want to know other working methods and you only can learn if you change. If in the past, a curriculum was unappreciated for having several professional experiences, I think that nowadays this is very enriching (...) I imagine being in another organization and in an occupation with more responsibility than I have today (Cristiana)

The interviews suggest that graduates generally associate HE with training for a profession. Graduates from non-vocational courses, where there is no direct correspondence to a specific and defined profession, express some questioning about their career decisions, especially in cases in which professional integration did not correspond to their expectations as idealized before the transition:

(...) Since I wouldn't be able to graduate in computer science or medicine, I probably wouldn't have even gone to university (...) I invested a lot of money, I invested many years, and there was no return. Maybe [if it were now] I would integrated the labour market, I would have other types of experiences and started to gather money to create some future here (...) on a personal level, it was gratifying, but on a professional level, I don't feel that it was gratifying or beneficial to have studied at university (Manuel)

In spite of the lack of proactive behaviours from interviewed regarding the preparation for work transition, participants' perceptions of employability are mainly focused on the individual's perspective, enhancing factors such as the importance of developing transversal skills, work experiences, volunteering and networking. In some cases, the interviewed individuals demonstrated a perception of employability focused on the ability to explore and adjust to contextual demands:

What I try to do where I am working now is to be better every day and try to be better and help. I think that's the most important thing to keep my job, it's to be an asset to my company and not just one employee more working there... (Filipe)

Academic factors

Graduates positively emphasized the scientific basis and theoretical component of their course program, but they claim the need for a higher focus on practical and transversal competencies.

In terms of knowledge, I think it was well-rated [the program course], I had knowledge necessary for a good job... Theoretical knowledge. Practical, no. But theoretical, yes. At the university where I took the program course and in the specialization I took, (...), I think I came out well-qualified and with the necessary knowledge (Filipe)

From this perspective, graduates highly value the rapprochement between university and labour market, pointing out this articulation as a need to overcome the lack of perceived practical and transversal competencies and the weak correspondence between the academic world and the professional world.

I think that some skills, mainly in the last year [of graduation], should be... For example, in one of the seminars, to prepare students for work transition. Because it's a very different world. I felt this difficulty because I was a little bit, let's say, formatted with the university thought, and the job market is different, there isn't the question of things being programmed, of things being formatted, so I think that in the last year, workshops or seminars should be used, something that would help young people specifically in this transition (Sofia)

In regard to this last aspect, some of the participants reported the distinction between "academic problems" (typically structured, with a predictable logical solution) and "real problems" (commonly disorganised, and without a predictable and unique logical solution).

Weak point... let's say, it's the bright side of the university. When we are doing work, focused on electronic engineering, we had to develop a specific work and product. At university, it didn't have actually to work in order to get a good grade, or to pass, we just needed to prove that it was correct in theory. When you come to a company, they don't want to know if the theory is correct, they want the product to work and in good conditions. And that was the great difficulty I felt from one place to another, in the university, in the academic world, we just have to prove the concept, while in the business world we have to really and objectively prove that it works and make it work (...) In terms of university, it is important not to think that it is enough to prove the concept for a student to be approved or even have a good grade, but rather a requirement closer to the professional level, that it is a product for a client. The teacher should be our client, we would have to deliver something in good condition, as you deliver it to a client (Luis)

In technological fields, content becomes outdated very quickly. This can lead to an increased difficulty at the time of professional integration, when graduates are confronted with unknown industrial procedures:

The weak points are perhaps some subjects that are no longer so... They are very old and there is no introduction to newer content. Then, we arrive into the labour market and it is completely different, we studied many old things that are important, but then we go to the labour market and it is completely different, automated processes and so on. The training we had was mainly based on the mechanical part and not so much on the automatic part (Carla)

Graduates refer to the teachers' role when reflecting on the quality of HE, highlighting positive aspects, such as the willingness to help, the promotion of relevant tools for the labour market. As aspects to be improved, they mention the need for greater support in traineeships:

Strong points, I think that along the various subjects, we had several teachers who told us that we need to be very versatile. Because the ideas and paradigms are always changing, and we have to know how to adapt. Teachers gave us some tips, that we have to be creative, that's how we show we are different (Joana).

Teachers can play a relevant role in the preparation of students for the world of work, either through informal conversation, or through formal pedagogical tools, in order to stimulate the ability to adapt to different contexts. This

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3 was particularly emphasized by one of the participants who referred to the importance of promoting students'
4 autonomy:

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8 *Let's say that the strong points in my training are, certainly, the bases. The bases to get where I got. It was*
9 *the ability to manage and do things by myself; that is, in most of my training, teachers taught me the theory*
10 *but when I needed the practice, I had to manage and to do the things alone, autonomously. Obviously, they*
11 *gave me the proper support, but I had to do the work, to manage information they taught me, the bases.*
12 *And that gave me the ability to do my research when I arrived to the world of work. When I don't know*
13 *something, I'm gonna investigate so that I can then get the fruits. In other words, the great contribution of*
14 *the university was not the theory that professors gave me, nor the practices, it was the capacity that*
15 *professors gave me to research and to find my own way (Luís).*

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17 As possible contributions from HE institution to the promotion of employability, participants reinforce the importance
18 of collaboration and interaction with labour market (projects in companies, job shows, summer internships, platforms
19 and job exchanges), training in job search strategies and teaching methodologies, such as problem-based learning. This
20 transcription refers to practical experiences as opportunities for graduates to develop a singular profile, favoring some
21 differentiation that gives them advantages at the time of entry into a profession:

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25 *(...) something that could give us this vision of companies, or give us the possibility to integrate a*
26 *company during a semester, or for some period, as part of a curricular program, and not only a*
27 *curricular internship. This would allow us to have some contact or to do some work in areas where*
28 *the university has knowledge. This would give us the opportunity to develop initial contact with*
29 *companies. University is still very closed within itself and there is very little interconnection*
30 *between what the job market really is and what it has to offer and to demand of ourselves and the*
31 *university. At university, we all look the same. If we experience something more specific here, we*
32 *can have another kind of development (Manuel).*

33 34 35 *Labour market factors*

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38 Labour market aspects were also invoked by participants as important factors for the understanding of their
39 employability, referring to the opportunities available and to the difficulties experienced in the work transition process.
40 Regarding the process of professional insertion, interviewees attributed significant importance to internships –
41 professional or curricular – for the process of work transition. These are described as an opportunity for an initial
42 exploration and rapprochement to the labour market, which, in several cases, ended up giving rise to proposals for
43 integration within employing organisations.

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47 *I think the internships are really the most important point of all. It's very important before entering*
48 *the labour market that we've had the experience of having a curricular internship. A curricular*
49 *internship or volunteering, something like that, that can also cultivate our integration into the*
50 *labour market (...) because what we talk about in classes does not always correspond exactly to*
51 *what happens, right? (Paulo)*

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54 The relevance of such experiences also refers, once more, to the differences between academic and professional worlds.
55 Therefore, the opportunity to connect with real professional contexts before the labour market transition can act as an

opportunity for an early confrontation with real difficulties associated with the transfer of knowledge between academia and the professional world, and thus enhance the development of protective resources for the moment of transition.

Social support networks emerge as a facilitator of the transition, namely family and friends, but also key elements in the university and employing organisations, such as teachers, colleagues and mentors, seem to play a relevant role in this transition:

I was lucky to have a good person as a mentor within the company, to have some connection here. Also, the teacher who was supervising me was also a good connecting link. So, [it is important] to have someone to give us this initial help for doubts or for alternative ideas, because there is some difference here, (...) between what we study at university and what we find in the labor market (Manuel).

Participants described the transition process as a time of confrontation with a new reality that generates anxiety related to the lack of knowledge about the world of work, the adaptation process to routines, tasks, schedules and organizational environment, the pressure felt to demonstrate value, and the lack of professional experience, all of which are aspects mentioned. All of these factors seem to affect the perceptions of self-efficacy during the initial period of professional integration:

In terms of skills and interests, I was always confident and I knew what I was capable of, but, arriving in the world of work in the first weeks, it all gets a little doubtful... With so many new things, so many different things, we question what we were doing all these years, if it really was useful for something. But it's the initial impact because then, little by little, we realise that after all, the bases are all there and everything is connected (Luís).

As barriers to transition, participants referred to contextual factors, such as the lack of job offers in some fields of study. Participants also refer to the business reality in Portugal, mostly composed of small and medium-sized enterprises, as an increased difficulty in absorbing graduates, particularly in some study fields.

It is very complicated [the labour market reality in Portugal] (...) because there are very few organizations. First, because our reality at the business level in Portugal is labour marketost all micro, small and medium enterprises, and (...) for these, it having someone working specifically in Human Resources is not justified. In other words, it is an obstacle for Human Resources specialists. If we have a reality in which most of our businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, it ends up making it difficult in terms of employability, right? (Paulo).

These data suggest that in some small contexts, where there is no tradition of a specific job position, it might require an increased effort from new graduates to create and maintain their job. One of the participants reported an example of this situation, where she had to stand out for her autonomy and ability to do something new, identifying a specific need of the company:

I did a thorough review with all the steps I gave inside, with all the projects I developed, where I made some intervention that maybe was not so visible (...). I also presented a new project; that is, besides having shown what I have done up to that time, I also made a proposal for a new project to justify "ok, if we move forward in this format, I will still have this work" (...). And it was enough to then make a full-time contract. After three months, I was already on a permanent contract (Cristiana).

As strategies to promote employability from employing organizations, participants mentioned the relevance of partnerships with universities and the promotion of opportunities for skills and career development.

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3 *The [name of the university] developed a program in which 15 scholarships were awarded to 15*
4 *young people who have entered university in that year and a company paid these scholarships. If*
5 *they [students] completed the course in five years, they could do an internship in the company and*
6 *probably get an employment contract. This is really a very good action (...) the more forums and*
7 *things like that university does with companies from various regions of Portugal, the better it will*
8 *be, because the company will know the students better and how well-qualified we are (Filipe)*
9

10
11 Also, partnerships between universities and employing organizations, such the development of Masters' thesis in
12 companies, can also give rise to opportunities of interaction with work contexts, without the pressure related to the
13 responsibility of an employee:
14

15 *Projects in companies (...) I mean, I think it's important for me because I went for a company (...)*
16 *I think it's important because it's already preparation for the world of work, that is, we're doing*
17 *the thesis in a company but we're not responsible as an employee of the company, that is, if we fail,*
18 *we learn to fail and we don't commit much to the work of the company. I think that's a good way to*
19 *prepare the student (...) From the part of the company, to have the initiative to finance projects for*
20 *the university (Joel).*
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22 As a way of synthesizing the results obtained, Table 2 aggregates the information collected concerning the three
23 research questions guiding this study.
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27 *[Please insert Table 2 here]*
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30 **Discussion**

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32 This study sought to provide a deeper understanding of the university-to-work transition process in a socioeconomic
33 context characterized by high instability and low predictability of career pathways, and to bridge some gaps and
34 questions that still exists in the theoretical literature. One of the open issues refers to the influence of contexts of job
35 insecurity in periods of transition (Johnston, 2016; Maggiori et al., 2013). Overall, the collected data confirms the
36 activation of career resources during transition, as expected in the literature (Johnston, 2016; Savickas, 2005).
37 However, the process was not so linear for all the participants. Precarious employment situations seem to make room
38 for some disappointment and a more external locus of causality, as presented in the results section. This can represent
39 an initial contribution to the understanding of the effect of situations perceived as threatening, such as job uncertainty,
40 for the mobilization of career adaptability resources, in contexts such as Portugal and several other OECD countries.
41

42 Addressing the barriers of the transition, participants demonstrated low levels of career agency during graduation.
43 According with the interviews, self-exploration and exploration of the labour context essentially begins after the
44 conclusion of the study program, at the point of confrontation with the need to get a job. If we consider that job search
45 success depends on the ability to show employers how a candidate can be a benefit for the organization, taking his/her
46 interests, resources and skills, and that later job searching is related to a longer time needed to find a job (Allen &
47 van der Velden (2007), this tendency to belatedly initiate the process of self-exploration can represent one initial
48 barrier to market transition. This constraint is particularly relevant for students coming from non-vocational courses
49 of study, where career paths might be nonlinear and less predictable. Bearing in mind that access to higher education
50 is typically for the motivation to seek better job opportunities (Dias, 2013), success in work transition might also has
51 some relation to students' expectations about the usefulness of their higher education program. From this perspective,
52 a first step to prepare university-to-work transition concerns the management of realistic expectations regarding study
53 programs and career opportunities, especially among inexperienced students. Actually, the lack of professional
54 experience is an aspect recognised by the participants as a limitation to the university-to-work transition. Other
55 barriers identified are related to the lack of job vacancies in some areas, such as fields of social sciences and
56 humanities In such context, graduates might need to play the role of what Bennett (2019) called the "enforced
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entrepreneurs”, because of the need to create and justify their job position in relation to the interests of the organization. In such cases, typical difficulties related to the integration into a new organization, and the pressure perceived to demonstrate value to employers, will certainly increase.

Concerning facilitators of work transition, beyond the perception of a good scientific training during study programs, participants enhance the value of internships and pedagogical experiences fostering autonomy and problem-solving. These experiences are particularly important because of the opportunity for early contact with the labour market before the transition. The interaction with professional contexts throughout the education process facilitates the exploration of individual interests and competencies and promotes an early understanding of how the work world is organized. This contact is important for individuals in adjusting proactive strategies in order to be successful in professional integration. Participants refer to the difference between the “academic world”, usually with higher focus on theoretical concepts and the “real world”, where problems are commonly complex, unstructured, and with several possible solutions, and where it is imperative that “things have to work”. To have the opportunity to rehearse problem-solving in professional contexts, with support and feedback from teachers, supervisors or colleagues and without the pressure of workplace liability, might represent a facilitator of further transition to the labour market. The literature has evidenced the relationship between practical experience, the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills and to develop self-efficacy (Van Dinther et al., 2011; Edwards, 2014; Lent et al., 1999, 2002; Monteiro et al., 2016; Muldoon, 2009; Turner, 2014). As presented in the theoretical framework proposed for this study (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Lent et al., 1999, 2002; Yorke and Knight, 2004), previous successful professional experiences reinforce positive self-perceptions, which contributes to higher perceptions of preparation and persistence through possible difficulties related to the transition and performance and can be an important stimulus to graduates' sense of career agency. Therefore, early confrontation with the unknown, in a protected environment, might represent a strategy for the prevention of anxiety that participants relate to the transition process. The novelty here will not be so much in the importance of practical experiences during higher education studies, which has already been stated in previous studies, but rather in the identification of particular aspects in which such practice is relevant in the transition processes, from graduates' perceptions. Such perspective is particularly relevant in the framework of employability and sociocognitive career theory (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Lent et al., 1999, 2002; Yorke and Knight, 2004), which presupposes that not only competencies and skills matter, but also subjective perceptions of competencies, barriers and facilitators of transition. Such interaction between self-beliefs and perception of preparation for transition was another aspect corroborated with this study, through graduates who have had professional experiences before completing their studies, but also through participants' description of processes of adaptation to the professional world of graduates without prior work experience.

Practical implications

This study acknowledges individual, academic and labour market factors as relevant to fostering employability. Besides the reported lack of training in instrumental strategies, such as job search techniques, participants enhanced the need to develop skills and experiences that allow better adjustment to contextual demands. The ability to develop resources in order to respond to emergent needs might be fostered through learning processes that stimulate autonomy and where students are encouraged to search for possible solutions to complex problems (see, for example, Ornellas et al. 2019). In a world characterized by very rapid advances in technology and knowledge, this is particularly relevant for graduates to be successful in their labour market approach. New graduates need to be aware of the need for continuing training throughout their career paths, from the moment they leave university. This ability to adapt is essential because of the need to find solutions for new problems and to foster innovation, namely in technological fields. Also, in areas where employment opportunities are scarce, newcomers to the labour market will need to be able to identify and create opportunities that might combine individual and organizational interests. Such aspects indicate that higher education institutions should go beyond one-off interventions focused on job search strategies, and adopt deeper and holistic approaches to preparing graduates for a new labour market, from the outset of higher education. Pedagogies that stimulates autonomy and the ability to solve problems, adopting, whenever possible, real situations of professional and contexts are examples of practical experiences that promote self-knowledge, knowledge of the labour context and positive self-beliefs. Alongside practical experiences, the construction of portfolios, represents an

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3 example of an activity that develop students' awareness of their own skills and competencies, in continuous
4 development, and labour market requirements in each professional context, geographic location and period of time.
5 Less defined areas of professional activity might require practical experiences more oriented for the training of
6 flexibility, capacity to identify opportunities and ability to transfer knowledge. Such exercise could foster proactive
7 strategies regarding career planning and promote self-efficacy in transition processes.
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10 11 **Limitations and further research**

12 This study naturally has some limitations that should be acknowledged. As usual in qualitative studies, it is not
13 intended to be representative of the processes of transitions, which may somewhat limit the potential for
14 internationalization of this paper. Rather, the purpose of the study was to provide a holistic understanding of the
15 processes of transition in a turbulent socioeconomic context, which may guides light for future studies, since this
16 context may be similar to other countries. It could be worthwhile to conduct data analysis within specific fields of
17 study, where it would be expected to obtain higher contextual homogeneity, either at the level of training programmes
18 or at the level of the labour market reality. Also, considering the multidimensional perspective of this study, it would
19 be interesting to triangulate perceptions of academic staff and employers, as a way to explore the engagement and
20 alignment of the different key parts of the university-to-work transition.
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23 24 **Conclusion**

25 Overall, the collected data suggest that participants' discourse refers to a multidimensional and dynamic perspective
26 of factors related to university-to-work transition and employability. This study gives support to the assumption of
27 labour market transition as a period of destabilization, fostering career adaptability strategies from graduates, as
28 proposed in theoretical literature (Johnston, 2016; Savickas, 2005). Moreover, the activation of career adaptability
29 resources apparently is also influenced by labour conjuncture. Higher perceived difficulties might affect perceived
30 control and affect on low levels of agency, as hypothesized by Johnston (2016).
31

32 One of the most consistent outcomes of the interviews conducted concerns the importance of a stronger focus on
33 developing practical experiences during higher education studies. Although the benefits of work experience might not
34 represent a complete novelty in the literature, this empirical study demonstrated how this type of experience can
35 mitigate the impact of the transition from university to the labour market: by increasing knowledge about the labour
36 market, self-knowledge (including interests and competencies) and also self-efficacy.
37

38 Lastly, this study also offers some important insights about possible strategies that could be adopted to promote
39 graduates' employability from a perspective of shared responsibility. This requires a closer interaction between
40 university and societal organizations and industry, not necessarily with the simplistic view of responding to
41 socioeconomic needs, but mainly with the purpose of creating opportunities for students to exercise the transfer and
42 application of competencies, to develop career exploration and self-confidence.
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