

Academic trajectories and labour market transitions of mature graduates_a case study from the University of Algarve

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ABSTRACT

The Bologna Process, recently implemented in Portugal, has brought many changes to higher education institutions (HEI). One of these changes refers to a law that enables mature students (23 years and older) to gain special access to higher education, taking into account their professional experience. The numbers of mature students are therefore increasing in our country, making our academic population more diverse. Our team has in the past investigated these students' situation in higher education (HE), in order to provide university management our recommendations to improve students' success. To continue our research we (two HEI in Portugal) designed a new research project¹, which partially aims to understand mature students' trajectories through HE and their transitions to the labour market. Again we hope to provide recommendations for that university management to do more for our students' employability. In this paper we identify and characterise various dimensions of individual and collective profile of mature students in the University of Algarve (Portugal) and their paths towards labour market integration. Our results show that positive experiences within university context, regarding their learning and

¹ Project PTDC/IVC-PEC/4886/2012 "Non-traditional students in higher education: research to steer institutional change", funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. This projects includes the University of Algarve and the University of Aveiro.

competences acquisition. Also it becomes clear that while studying in university mature students developed personal qualities that proved to be determinant to their professions or to the ability of creating their own businesses.

Keywords

Higher Education, mature students, transition, employability

1. INTRODUCTION

From the Industrial revolution on, work and theories associated with social relations have been changing and gaining new meanings, at the same time there appeared economic and social inequalities (Barreto, 2002). The meaning of work changed across time to produce new perspectives on the working social relationships. The definition of education as a form of investment and a way to secure people's future goes back to classical theories period (Teixeira, 2009). The Taylorist /Fordist model, centred on standardised mass production and productivity, considered the modernisation basis, failed to look at the links between worker and work and hence was disregard after the 60s. Socioeconomic and cultural changes contributed to create new demands to more flexible markets that could not ignore other dimensions (Pires, 2005): education assumed a new role to create new competences essential to the labour market; and organisations begun to observe, analyse and recruit workers also because of their academic certifications. Flexible production is but a new label to meet competitiveness challenges. Workers are expected to keep up the rhythm of changes coming both from information and technology. Knowledge seems an instrument for workers to avoid falling into the info-excluded group, which includes older workers, long-term unemployed workers, single parents, people with disabilities, among others (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In this paper we focus the mature graduates' transition to the labour market. Our research questions were the following: what are the typical trajectories of mature graduates in our university? In these trajectories, which elements are fundamental to their personal and professional fulfilment? What are the most important barriers they found in their transition to the labour market?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Higher education and the labour market

The implementation of the Bologna process in Portugal (2006 on) was supposed to promote the transition from a traditional "transmission model" to a "competence building" pedagogical model. This would help new graduates to have a new "profile", which would include the ability to apply knowledge in diverse scientific areas, to solve problems or justify an argumentation (Cabral-Cardoso, Estêvão & Silva, 2006). There are skills and competences that are of outmost importance, as to be able to work in teams, or to be able to assume an instrumental leadership, crucial to the mediation in crisis environments or to "manage" emotions in collective situations (Canário et al, 2005).

There are a number of studies on the graduate transitions to the labour market either in Portugal (Marques, 2006; Alves, 2007; Gonçalves, 2007; Alves, M., 2009; Chaves, 2007; Vieira, 2008, Saúde, 2008) either international (Teichler, 2007; Purcell, Wilton & Elias, 2007). These studies are very diverse in nature, scope and aims. However, in Portugal this seems a field in expansions, especially because only recently the access to higher education was made easier to mature students (Marques, 2010). On the other hand, these students are often discriminated in the access to the labour market, mainly due to their age (Sergeant, 2001). Their life experience, increased responsibility and maturity (Zosky et al, 2004; Kasworm, 2003) should function as an advantage; but the actual scenario is far more complex. Mature students must be more persistent and proactive convincing employers (Purcell et al, 2007) they deserve an opportunity.

It is widely accepted that personal attributes are qualities and skills that should be desirably built during the time students spend in a higher education institution. More, these shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen (Bridgstock, 2009). Also Prokou (2008) remember us other criteria are crucial when graduate seek for a new job or try to change careers, such as the level of academic qualifications or the key-competences valued by employers. To these we could add traditional factors like previous experience, social class or gender, age and ethnicity, among others. But all these factors that seem to influence deeply “employability” would seem just an empty discourse, if we do not try to define, first, the *meaning* of employability.

2.2. *Employability*

This is a concept which has been instrumentalised and used according to the perspectives and interests of various social actors. To Hillage and Pollard (1998) it is based in the ability that each individual has to obtain a job; to perform various functions within this job; or to get a new job. Their concept goes further than just the vague idea of a worker to “keep her/himself as employable”. It includes vulnerable groups such as unemployed, or workers who search for job’s alternatives or promotions in their careers. Harvey (2001) states that employability is associated to the graduates “propensity” to obtain a job and therefore includes the analysis of additional factors in this equation: security and progression in work; time as necessary to build qualifications; the way how recruitment is made; continuous learning (new graduates are expected to continuously learn and acquire new competences); abilities and personal characteristics demanded by employers. So employability also depends on the *employers*, on the type of enterprises and on the specific area of economic activity (that do entail accordingly needs for specific competences of graduates).

Employability is determined by factors of personal nature (motivation, confidence, and ability to adapt), personal circumstances (mobility issues; caring responsibilities; financial support or family support networks) and, of course, external factors, like recruitment factors, salary, working conditions or progression opportunities (McQuade & Lindsay, 2005). To these factors we have to add the knowledge and competences acquired during the graduation; the experience gained through internships or extra-curricular

activities in HE. But it seems pretty obvious that most views of employability stress individual characteristics and readiness for work, that is, graduate's ability to get a job, to move between jobs or to create their own business.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a preliminary and partial outcome of the research project "Non-Traditional students in higher education", that focus four different groups of non-traditional students². Regarding mature graduates, we wanted to know more on their typical trajectories and, also, to get a first understanding on the obstacles they find to the labour market transitions. As 2006-07 was the first academic year when the access for mature students was made easier, we decided to focus in the cohorts of the mature students who entered the University of Algarve 2006/07 and 2007/08. Our study is centred on students' perspectives. Until this moment we have conducted 15 in-depth interviews to mature graduates (Arksey & Knight, 1999) students that participated in diverse degrees. The script we used included questions on the learning processes within higher education; on the transition processes to the labour market; and on the plan that graduates have for the future. In a second phase we will conduct life stories (Atkinson, 1998) to selected cases. In this paper we present and discuss the first, preliminary results from in-depth interviews to graduates. We cannot present full answers to our research questions at this stage, but only preliminary views and clues for future analysis.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. The context of higher education

Regarding higher education our emergent categories refer to: motives for entering HE; perceptions on learning and pedagogical processes; social life in the academia and extra-curricular activities; obstacles and potentialities in HE; training and the importance of internships; changes that HE printed in mature graduates.

All our interviewees stated that previous professional experiences determined the decision to enrol HE and the degree they have chosen. They seek in HE an increased professional recognition and, also, all had the awareness that they should build in HE additional knowledge and consolidate competences. These mature graduates claim therefore to be able to make more well-informed, experienced-based decisions, when compared to traditional students. Traditional students, they say, do not know the labour market and ignore the functional content of professions at large. This reduced maturity carries diminished levels of motivations and investment in HE; so that in the opinion of mature graduates, younger colleagues have

² Mature graduates; students with special needs; African students; and students participating in short learning programmes of technological specialization.

“greater difficulties in understanding the practical component of the contents”.

Mature graduates have divergent opinions on pedagogical trajectories and processes in HE. For some, their degree matched their expectations and increased their professional skills. But others point-out critiques towards their teachers, the density of curricular plans and the course's contents. Some claim there is a distance / separation between the academic and the enterprise's worlds. Let us first details some positive analysis. Some degrees and some courses are said to have a high degree of coherence and learning coherence towards professional reality (“It is a great school that prepare us to face the world”). Mature students, who are already integrated into the labour market, assess HE in terms of the adequacy of a set of knowledge and professional competences needed to act in a certain professional field. Also pedagogical processes are mentioned as to have contributed to the improvement of graduates ability to organise, to acquire working methods, study techniques and, especially, to build or improve working-in-teams competences. In some cases, the fact that teachers organise evaluation methods around project's methodology is stressed: it allows students to integrate theoretical issues into a problem (a project) that students seek to solve.

Among negative perceptions graduates point flaws in teachers, both in their technical/ scientific skills or in the way they establish social relations with students. Younger lecturers are viewed as more insecure and more limited in the incorporation of experience of diverse nature in teaching. It is also interesting to note that regarding critical thinking there are no unanimous perceptions. Whilst some graduates consider that participation in HE has stimulated an evolution in their posture and ways of thinking, others did not. However some in this group admitted not to have engaged enough. They have focussed in successfully performing tasks in a minimum period of time; their main and well-defined goal was to conclude their degree. Mature students have a limited time to dedicate to the academia.

Social relationships between peers were a very satisfying dimension of students' life at HE. Although mature students do not have the time to participate in some of the common social events, they managed to establish good relationships with their peers. Extracurricular activities were seen by mature graduates as good excellent opportunities to complete their knowledge; but they point-out that as mature students they had family responsibilities and hence limited time to spare for those activities.

The barriers mature graduates indicate mostly refer to the difficulties in managing time, especially to conciliate personal, professional and academic life. They also claim to have had difficulties in their academic background and, finally, some point to have had problems with teachers. They claim a part of the teachers' body not to accept that some students can have a different trajectory and hence they act as if mature students do not have the right to be or belong to the academic community. These teachers are anything but flexible concerning, for example, evaluation methods or dates to deliver essays. There are even cases of teachers that are said to be hostile or treat mature students as intruders.

When questioned on the components of their degree's curricular plan, our interviewees unanimously stress the importance of internships. Mature graduates consider internships allow to link theoretical and practical dimensions; to close the gap between formation and work; and to facilitate a more competent performance. Mature graduates say that internships should exist in every year of their degrees with an increasing responsibility (this is already a fact in some degrees, but not in the majority). Graduates also think that these internships are important for institutions as they can contribute to improve the existing working practices. Finally, their perception is that there is a separation between the university and the enterprises, which does not help to mutual recognition and a better adjustment between these two realities.

Regarding the changes brought to their lives after the completion of HE degrees, graduates claim not to have improved their incomes – either they changed careers and stand in the same type of job. However this seemed not to carry any type of frustration. Mature graduates blame the serious crisis our country is living and still think their HE degree to possess a huge personal and social significance or value. They explicitly say it pulls away a stigma they felt and gave them social recognition. On the other hand participation in HE seemed to have widen their knowledge and “open other doors” which, in time, will mean an opportunity for a better life. Finally mature graduates say they felt more confident; with an increased ability to understand both concepts and general events; and that HE has provided a better personal development. Hence they feel more ready to accept professional functions that involve higher responsibilities.

4.2. Integration in the labour market

This material includes emergent categories on the following themes: HEI support to employability; perceptions on today's labour market; integration into the labour market; strategies to get a job; positive and negative aspects of the profession; professional competences; and training after the HE degree was concluded.

Our interviewees ignored if their university had any services to promote employability – but also acknowledged they never looked for that type of information. All they remember is that that programme's directors made the contacts with the institutions they have made internships at; and that from time to time received information (usually via email) on available jobs. They conclude that there was not an organised structure or services to promote employability.

When we asked mature graduates what services should be integrated in career services, ideas were scarce and fuzzy. There was the general idea that universities should keep a continuous and coherent dialogue with employers. One person suggested to use the degree on digital marketing to promote “employability services”. Synthesising, although they think that universities should not seek jobs in the name of graduates, there is a consensus in that universities should be proactive in building a relation with the employers' community to promote the professional integration of graduates.

Mature graduates think today's labour market is stagnated: there is a general constraint in hiring, difficulties to find a job, and reduced salaries both in public and private sectors. They also think the way that graduates look for a job has changed and point-out social networks as the most effective and common way to do it. They do not have the traditional view that a job is for a lifetime. They claim graduates should be proactive in looking for a job and also in creating their own business, arguing that HE has prepared them for doing that: "it is expectable that, after our degree is concluded, we would know how to use our capacity of developing our reasoning and our intelligence, and use it to benefit us". In short, to look for a job is today to "leave our comfort area".

It seems that their diagnosis of the labour market does not apply to themselves. In fact, all interviewees (from a very small group however) are working and in the specific areas of the degree they have chosen. Some just continued to work in the same job they had previously to go to HE; others founded a job easily. They think the motive for this is their knowledge (or previous knowledge) of the labour market that somehow determined they were chosen and not others. In the recruitment processes they think that the interview component was determinant – and an opportunity for them to show their confidence that stemmed from their previous professional experiences.

Our mature graduates think their salaries are low and think that, taking into consideration the responsibility and the level of their qualifications, they should have a higher wage. As positive aspects of their professions they stress the fact they work in areas they like, and the learning they are taking from their colleagues'. Their working place is a learning space both at professional and personal levels. It also is dominant (although not unanimous) the idea that to have a profession is a constant challenge and a stimulus to innovation and creativity. In some cases (like Marketing or Infancy Education) graduates claim that their professional activity fulfils them beyond "the job", as it reflects in other contexts and dimensions. For example, the infancy educator realises that apart from her basic work with the kids, helps parents and gives them confidence so that they improve their skills as such. So in a way, graduates do have a broad sense of their professionalism.

It is interesting to note that the same reasoning applies to the competences graduates say to have or think to be necessary for someone working in their profession. Our interviewees focused much more on transversal competences than on specific, technical-oriented competences. Mature graduates consider these to be important: the ability to establish good relationships with colleagues; to communicate; be flexible; to create and innovate; to have a commitment towards the institution you work in; and, finally, to be able to continuously complete your training. There in, in fact, a unanimous position among graduates, who state that a first degree is not enough anymore. To continue to learn seems almost an imperative and an indispensable condition to guarantee employability.

It is important to note that graduates refer to the need for further training not only in their specific areas of knowledge, but also to include new areas they would like to invest. This "investment" in further knowledge seems to have

two distinct intentions: first as a way to continuously improve yourself as a professional or seeking a specialization in the field; second, as a way to embrace new challenges that eventually carry the possibility for changing jobs or careers. In both cases, it is a matter of employability.

4.3. Plans to the future

The plans our interviewees have for the future are cautious and pragmatically anticipated. Most of all they fear do any action that would endanger their professional stability, which comes at the top of priorities (maybe a consequence of the crisis we live?). Mature graduates do not intend to explore new areas of knowledge, nor even similar to those where they are integration currently; they do not intend to leave the country, although some have had offers to do so with far much better salaries (the salaries they complaint from); and they prefer not to create their own job. There is, therefore, a big contradiction between discourse and practice, which can have a number of explanations (family responsibilities; the subjective feeling they come from the crisis, etc.). However it seems a fact that what graduates say it is to be done is not, definitely, what themselves intend to do. From the interviews analysed to this paper, only one person has bold plans to the future. This is a person that narrates his trajectories in a different way and clearly has lived diverse professional and personal experiences. We are not stating there is a connections between these factors; but this kind of experience is much more influenced by the individuals experience and biography of subjects than a product of HE learning.

5. CONCLUSION

The first point we want to stress in this conclusion refers to the concept of employability. Employability seems most of all a very attractive concept to compose a discourse, regardless its correspondence with social practices. In mature graduates interviews it is clear the emphasis on a notion of employability centred almost exclusively in the students or in the graduates themselves. In certain themes, there is a share that is given, also, to higher education institutions. But there is never a reference towards employers. This discourse of employability seems to be perfectly learnt, then, for responsibility is placed over individuals. This issue of responsibility is not innocent and it seems, potentially, to have a significant set of consequences that surely includes policy. We need therefore to look much more in detail to the theoretical building of employability and to refine our research instruments, with the aim to understand what the concept of employability our graduates built is.

It seems coherent, however, that our graduates consider individual competences fundamental for their employability. In this issue there are two points that seem important to us. The first is that our graduates consider transversal competences fundamental, not only for them to be hired or to be able to look for a job; but also crucial for one to be considered as a competent professional. So further attention has to be given to the importance of transversal competences and the strategies that HEI find to

promote its acquisition by graduates. The second interesting point to stress concerns some competences that mature graduates seem to consider determinant within employability, namely to be assertive and resilient, or to take good decisions. These competences are personal and seem to depend much more from contextual or structural factors; not so much, maybe, from university? This is still a preliminary fragile inference that has to be confirmed with further interviews.

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