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Employability Processes and Transition Strategies in Higher Education: an Evidence-Based Research Study at the University of Florence
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Abstract

Introduction: the research context

The main question of the presented survey is based on the problem of understanding the transition process for young graduates from their degree course to seeking and entering employment. How do the graduates look for work, how do they prepare for the transition phase, and, above all, how do they build their employability during their years of university studies? This segment of the research work will be accompanied by a survey on the wide space of the social economy which, to date, is proving to be the natural field of employment for teacher training graduates in Adult Education, Continuing Training and Pedagogical Sciences (LM-57&LM-85 study courses – University of Florence), namely the students who are the subject and object of the research. We are dealing with two well-defined and complementary subjects and lines of investigation: on one hand the graduates, and on the other, the companies in the area of Tuscany.

The single global view of the investigation is to discover where the supply and demand meet. Providing the backdrop are some lines of theory that pedagogical literature has touched on marginally, or not at all, such as the topic of competences, reread through the concept of capability, and the topic of employability, reviewed according to a definition of the concept which still has a remarkably rich variety of nuances. Indeed, while upon a first analysis we could say that the research context moves within the macro-topic of career guidance and work placement, upon closer observation, it is possible to see how career guidance is a wide and variegated field of investigation comprising themes such as transitions, employability, competences, soft skills and policy learning.

The research question and goals

In a European labour market where the estimated percentages of entry to work after a year varies so greatly, from 75% in regions such as the Netherlands, to 38% in states such as Greece (Eurostat, *Youth Employment Rate, age group 20-29*, 2015), understanding the subjective dynamics, also of large groups, is a specific and significant direction to take in order to plan youth employment policies. Indeed, the research offers wide margins for reflection and future prospects for the development

of policy learning. There are other reasons alongside this first main goal:

- 1) To understand the tendencies of young people towards work;
- 2) To understand the cultural flows of labour markets;
- 3) To interpret life prospects;
- 4) To map implicit strategies for transitions;
- 5) To observe the choices open to young people.

While studying transitions we must be able to understand their deepest implications. This is so the choice of measures to adopt in the youth training centres and university curricula can be pointed in the best direction, both at the level of learning and learning methods. This has a central influence not just on placement policies, but also on training policies, which directly impact the selection of quality indicators for schools, professional courses, university courses and higher education curricula.

Methodology

Therefore, the initial question relates to understanding which dynamics underlie the young adults' (aged 23-29) initial transition to work after leaving higher education. As already indicated, the epistemological context is of an ecological-naturalist type, (Bateson, 1972), in which the ontological-relational dimension supports the type of survey to be developed. The direction of the interpretative approach is dictated by the need to analyse education and training and must be backed by a critical-phenomenological attitude on the part of the researcher (Stein, 1989; Arendt, 1958). The survey adopts a qualitative method. It particularly aims to grasp the phenomenon to be studied according to a map that is not set out beforehand but is under constant adjustment, as is the case when the work perspective is inserted in a context of pedagogical-educational research, but which also has socio-anthropological characteristics. The grounded theory provides the most appropriate context for a suitable research style adapted inductively and not deductively (Glaser, 1978). The research adopts a case study strategy, hence providing precise indications on the procedures to follow in order to conduct the investigation process (Mortari, 2007). The case study will be carried out along the two branches of investigation, taking forward the analysis of two samples of young adults: teacher training graduates and workers in the social economy. The investigation technique, that is, the data collection device, is the focus group first of all, followed by in-depth interviews. Both the focus groups and the interviews are longitudinal. The samples chosen for each of the two branches are followed for the duration of the research. The focus group grid lays down some fixed fields in order to find out information on the research subjects. The semi-structured interviews are conducted according to a second grid. The protocol is developed strictly at each step. The researchers must strictly adhere to the research protocol and respect its minimum details each time.

The research methodology therefore comprises some phases which, if rigorously pursued, will be able to give a clear and systematic research design. This will be within an evidence-based ecological-naturalistic framework, in which methods, strategies and investigation techniques fit together and are developed coherently. In this context, the quantitative and qualitative indicators adopted, and the sociological and pedagogical, as well as the psychological and economic bent of the work, can certainly be used to form a methodology that works with a useful cross-section of methods. Hence, with a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary, or multi-inter-transdisciplinary slant, the investigation will be multifaceted, and set out with the aim of a political use, in the sense that all the perspectives of the investigation are based on an approach to man.

The Results and the Interpretation

The expected results concern four fields of reflection that can lead to considerations on the employability process contained in the university curricula under investigation: 1) Desires; 2) Competences; 3) Channels; 4) Expectations.

The investigation was carried out on around 32 graduates and 15 managers of companies in the social economy sector. The data collected, from June 2014 to July 2015, relates to around 5 focus groups, 32 in-depth interviews with graduates from the Adult Education, Continuing Training and Pedagogical Sciences university courses, and 15 interviews with the same number of small and medium-sized company managers in the social economy sector in the area of Tuscany.

With relation to the fields of reflection, “desires” considers the graduate’s desire to go into a particular career and it surveys the possibility that the students have built skills inherent to reading the context of reference and career guidance in their area. “Competences” goes to investigate potential self-perception with regard to the acquisition of communication, self-guidance and transversal capabilities and skills. “Channels” will regard questions on the ways, services and tools used to look for work. “Expectations” concerns the vision that every candidate will have for their future lives. These results can be used to understand self-perception as a future professional, but they will also enable an understanding of which competences/skills will have been used to build this perception of the reflective professional self.

Another aspect of the research work is aimed at understanding what the labour market in the social economy sector requires from teacher training graduates. This part is already known, in part, from previous lines of investigation (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone, 2015). It can provide a useful reading approach extended to the labour market in order to gain an even deeper understanding of the transition from one state to another in young person’s lives.

The research can be read and interpreted in countless ways, but what the research is

interested in most of all is the possibility to read to the ways, desire and capacities of young people to become serious professionals, who are also qualified as responsible citizens of the future.

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Curriculum Vitae Vanna Boffo

Vanna Boffo (Ph.D) is Associate Professor in General Pedagogy and Adult Education at the Department of Education and Psychology of the University of Florence (since November 2014). She reached Scientific Abilitation for Full Professor in General and Social Pedagogy on the 6th February 2015 (Italian Law n. 210 on 30th December 2010).

- She is School leavers' career guidance delegate for entry to the Florence University and Graduate career guidance and job placement delegate for the Florence University Department of Education and Psychology (since October 2008). She is the Coordinator of the joint higher order degree course in Sciences of Adult Education, Continuing Training in the same Department (since September 2012). She is teaching at the University of Florence, from 2003, "Methodology of the Research in Adult Learning and Education" and "General Pedagogy" Courses and in the European Universities as Masaryk University and Wuerzburg University for Winter and Summer Schools.

- She is Co-Director (with Prof. Paolo Federighi) of the Book series “Studies on Adult Learning and Education”, for Firenze University Press and Member of the Scientific Committees of some Scientific International Journals.
- She is the Research Unit Head Scientist of the Scientific Research Programmes of Great National Interest (Prin 2012). She participated in many European Projects and in many Italian Research Projects (since 2001).
- Her Current research activities are concentrated in three ambits, 1) the first relating to particular topic in the adult education sectors, training for and in the workplace, 2) the second one relating to the study of training courses for career guidance and entry to the world of work, 3) the third oriented towards the study of pedagogical care, in particular on the comparative investigation into professional educational roles. She has written more than 120 products of research.

Relevant Publications , (up 5 years)

- V. Boffo, S. Falconi (2013). *Relations, Communication and Services. The Case of Disabled Workers in a Public Organisation* . EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICES, vol. 1, 2013, p. 101-116, ISSN: 2240-7758;
- V. Boffo (ed.) (2012). *A Glance at Work. Educational Perspectives*. p. 1-180, Florence: Firenze University Press, ISBN: 9788866551874;
- L. Malita, V. Boffo (eds) (2010). *Digital Storytelling for Employability*. p. 1-128, Florence:Firenze University Press, ISBN: 9788864531786;
- L. Malita, V. Boffo (eds) (2010). *Finding the First Job through Digital Storytelling. A Guide to Getting into the Employment World*. p. 1-111, Timisoara:Editure Mirton, ISBN: 9789735209711
- P. Federighi, V. Boffo, I. Darjan (eds) (2009). *Content Embedded Literacy in the Workplace*, p. I-145, Firenze:Firenze University Press, ISBN: 9788864530901.

Relevant Projects (up 5 years)

- 1) SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PROGRAMMES OF GREAT NATIONAL INTEREST (PRIN) – 2012 tender – Italian ministerial decree no. 957/Ric dated 28 December 2012 – THREE-YEAR RESEARCH PROJECT prot. 2012LATR9N – EMP&Co. entitled: “*Planning innovative curricula for personalised learning pathways, building skills for employability, boosting talents to create new professional figures. Positive higher training strategies to support young adults in the employment emergency, as a response to the current social, economic and citizenship crisis*” (2014-2017) ; Role: Unit Research Head Scientist;
- 2) EU-funded international research project ESRALÉ, “*European Studies and Research in Adult Learning and Education*”, Project No. 540117-LLP-1-2013-1-DE-ERASMUS-EQMC with the coordination of Ekkehard Nuissl von Rein from the Technische Universitaet Kaiserslautern [TUKL], three-

- year duration (2013-2016). Role performed: Coordinator of the University of Florence Unit Research;
- 3) EU-funded international research project SALM (*Skills and Labour Market to Raise Youth Employment*) (2012-2014), 527690-LLP-1-2012-1-PT-LEONARDO-LMP, coordinated by Prof. Carneiro Roberto from the Universidade Catolica Portuguesa. Role performed: member of the Florence University research team. Role performed: Member of the University of Florence Unit Research;
 - 4) EU-funded international research project Flexi-Path, *Flexible professionalisation pathways for adult educator between the 6th and 7th level of EQF* (2008-2010), coordinated by Prof. Ekkehard Nussl von Rein (German Institute for Adult Education – Duisburg-Essen University, Germany). Role performed: Member of the University of Florence Unit Research;
 - 5) Research project funded by the European Commission (Tender - EAC/27/2008), *Inventory of outreach strategies to enable people to go one step up*, developed for the year 2009, scientific research director Prof. Paolo Federighi (Department of Educational Sciences and Cultural and Training Processes – Florence University, Italy). Role performed: member of the scientific committee for the project.