

# The Link between Universities and the Labour Market: Perceiving the Building of Employability Processes in Higher Education

Vanna Boffo, Dino Mancarella

## Abstract:

The topic that we will deal with in this essay is central for the development of higher education in Italy, Europe and the world. Universities as academic and educational institutions have changed radically over the last 50 years. At present, their task is to educate and train new brackets of the population for a future in which competencies and learning will be the points of reference for an ever more rapidly and intensely evolving and developing world. To this end, it becomes important to reflect on the topic of building university curricula in the educational sector and on the competencies achieved by the graduates from master's courses designed to train the professional figure of pedagogist. The aim of the article is to concentrate on the internal aspects of university programmes whose goal is to train true professionals in the world of education and training, who are able to take on the responsibilities required of them and to display the necessary competencies. Here, it will be offered the last results of a qualitative research on the perceptions of the learning outcomes of two groups of master degree students in Adult Education and Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Florence. The principal points will consist into the reaching of the employability competences and into the acquiring of the knowledges about the labour market.

**Keywords:** Employability; Higher Education; Qualitative Method; Quality of Studies Courses; Skills

## 1. The Link Between Universities and the Labour Market: Building Bridges, Following Transitions

The topic that we will deal with in this essay is central for the development of higher education in Italy, Europe and the world. Universities as academic and educational institutions have changed radically over the last 50 years. At present, their task is to educate and train new brackets of the population for a future in which competencies and learning will be the points of reference for an ever more rapidly and intensely evolving and developing world.

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To this end, it becomes important to reflect on the topic of building university curricula in the educational sector and on the competencies achieved by the graduates from master's courses designed to train the professional figure of pedagogist. The classes in question are, of course, the LM 50 master's degree in 'Educational Service Planning and Management', the LM 57 master's degree in 'Adult Education and Continuing Training' and the LM 85 master's degree in 'Pedagogical Sciences', all of which concern the areas of pedagogy, education and training. We are interested in understanding if and how the training programmes offered to the students on these courses effectively define and cut out the non-teaching professional figures that they aim to educate and train. The research question (Fabbri and Torlone 2018) can be set out as follows: in a constantly changing and accelerating panorama, what training programmes can we offer graduates to best enter the professional labour market?

Our aim is to concentrate on the internal aspects of university programmes whose goal is to train true professionals in the world of education and training, who are able to take on the responsibilities required of them and to display the necessary competencies. Two things are increasingly clear: the impossibility to trace training programmes on paper and the connection between education and work. The road to claiming a clear framework is still long. The problem of professions and building solid professionalism is connected to the degree course structure and to what is stated in the syllabi drawn up for each separate course in the overall learning programme. However, in order to answer the research question, more urgent issues have to be dealt with: who are the professionals we are interested in, what job do they do, how do they come to do this job? All of this is needed to understand which contexts and workplaces we are preparing our students for.

The figures who we are interested in are level-two professionals (as per law no. 205 of 29 December 2017) who coordinate and manage education and training processes, organise services for citizens, head teams of educators or trainers and work in the field of human resource management. On one hand, they are professionals who will work in the social economy, in consortia or social cooperatives that organise, manage and develop services for citizens and, on the other, in firms and companies which employ education graduates in human resources, as training department heads and in human resources management. Concerning both areas, studies dealing with the relationship between education and work and offering reflection on the knowledge, competencies and capabilities provided by degree courses are few and far between. Instead, we deem it urgent to understand how universities can also be the place where professionals are given the competencies necessary for the professions of the future. Competencies and skills are central to the European Skills Agenda (Pact for Skills, European Skills Agenda 2030), hence they must provide the blueprint for the launch, development and growth of educational and training professions and for the preparation and accompaniment of the education-to-work transition.

The discourse proceeds in three directions: the first concerns the need to design learning programmes in line with the future of work; the second concerns

the urgency to further investigate the category of *competency*; and the third concerns new professional educational care and training roles in the social and corporate sectors. While the first direction takes in university degree courses and their relationship with the labour market, the second takes into consideration the legislation and political moves that should absorb the European directives into Italian educational policies. The third instead refers to the social economy and the cooperative labour market, namely the type of enterprise that has taken on the task of developing services for citizens.

The data from the last AlmaLaurea employment survey concerning graduate profiles and their employment status show a situation of growth, albeit minimal compared to the situation circa ten years ago, namely prior to the economic crisis (AlmaLaurea 2022). While on one hand the state of Italian universities seems to be improving in relation to the number of students graduating within the set time frame, which has increased since the university reform, on the other hand, the country is last in Europe for the number of graduates, as well as suffering from low starter pay levels in the first five years after graduating, and above all, despite the worth of a degree over a school diploma, a lack of job opportunities (AlmaLaurea 2022).

Both the AlmaLaurea and the OECD (2021) reports speak of the relationship between curricula and the work-to-education transition, between knowledge acquired during the degree courses and acquired professionalism. The topic of the connection between a graduate's job, job seeking and education, and the disciplines studied, methods and know-how acquired during the time at university is increasingly becoming the background for current reflection (CRUI 2018). However, we cannot rest on our laurels since, in Italy, little attention has been given to universities in terms of studies on their learning programmes, and above all, little research has dealt with the relationship between the training programmes and the labour market.

The term *employability* is not only the stuff of economists, it is beginning to enter the reflection on university training too. Pedagogy has started to deal with university teaching and as a consequence with its results in terms of jobs and quality of employment. Talking about these aspects also changes the way of looking at reflections on teaching, teaching methods and types of learning in higher education contexts (Yorke and Knight 2004).

The hypothesis behind this short essay refers to the centrality of the world of life, professions and work placement in understanding the sense of higher education teaching, the direction of teaching methods and the presence of 'different' techniques and tools to improve, boost and cement broad, transversal, innovative, transdisciplinary and technologically advanced learning.

The education and training programme cannot be separated from what the graduates will do 'afterwards'. It must be connected to transversal skills that they can put into practice in their future professional, working and personal life. As Dewey already stated over one hundred years ago, there has to be transparency between the worlds of the school, university and life (Dewey 1966 [1916], 1969 [1938]). This alone is enough to make us think how far university culture still

has to go, with its excessive focus on the disciplines and the content to be taught, and lack of attention as to how and why they are learnt.

## 2. Work-Related Education

In order to innovate degree courses, it is necessary to start from the everyday, that is, from the close link between the students and their learning (Kolb 1984). To do so, it is even more necessary to build a teacher-pupil relationship that is meaningful, dense, generative and exciting. Alongside the teacher-pupil relationship, it is crucial to adopt a method that can support the relationship and keep it moving with the times, having an innovative edge and making use of new technologies. University teaching can and must support transformations in know-how, also through methods and techniques that are able to speak to all students, young or older. One of the pillars of the relationship between the construction of competencies for the future, the centrality of developing future professionalism and the acquisition of basic, characteristic and, at the same time, visionary knowledge, is the capability to look at the labour market and to act using experience.

Therefore, from another point of view, if we want to reflect and think about creating competencies for the labour market, we also have to reflect on educational practices. Some good practices that are followed in university courses are: 1. use of the universities' MOODLE platform in order to create a community with the students on the various courses; 2. interaction between different courses, tackling topics and projects with a kaleidoscopic vision; 3. students' involvement in research activities on topics concerning building professionalism; 4. shared planning through MOODLE; 5. constant reference to the ground and the labour market as a 'bridge' between academic and experiential know-how; 6. inclusion of career services in the teaching programme; 7. presence of foreign researchers and using young entrepreneurs to show the transformations on the labour market first hand. The list of positive aspects could go on and on.

First of all, the use of the MOODLE platform on some courses not only introduces a technical innovation in its use of a new tool, but also new planning methods and ways of relating with the students. On one hand, designing a course using a platform that supports, accompanies and steers the teaching activities enables the extension of the class beyond the teaching hours, and an increase in the space and time available. On the other hand, the platform models relationships that develop in a certain way in person and can change, sometimes unexpectedly, online.

Creating a community where knowledge is shared, that acts as a constant point of reference, and where teachers and students can dialogue on forums; is a central step in making teaching a place where the action of educating really does get across. Planning a course *on* and *with* the MOODLE platform makes the class a community, reaches out to students who are unable to attend lessons, strengthens relationships, and implements and stimulates logical and deductive thought. During the course duration, the platform can be used as a tool to constantly build relationships and dialogue. It can be associated with record-

ings of the lessons so that the courses can also be followed by people in work or who, for personal reasons, cannot attend them in person. Recordings of lessons are a significant teaching asset and devoting time to putting them together is a new job for teachers. Digital tools are also used for in-course testing. The sense of fostering use of the platform lies in giving students the capability to get used to the digital interface, and honing their skills in using connected tools, mobile phones to do research in the classroom and computers after lesson time.

By using MOODLE alongside other teaching methods, a ‘kaleidoscopically’ interrelated vision can be created. If all teachers implement the same teaching strategies, it will be easier for students to understand their use. Similar behaviour has a strong impact and the tool can become an ‘integral part’ of the learning plan. This approach was widely tested during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. We can say that this innovation in teaching, taken up both rapidly and intensely, really did take new work-related teaching practices a step forward, much further than could ever have been hoped for. These days, the introduction of digital platforms as day-to-day work tools in university teaching has become inescapable for two more reasons: the first concerning the type of learning, the second technological progress.

We know that one of the most important transversal skills is the capability to learn to learn. In a world that is getting faster and faster, where technological innovation is behind the development of industrial, institutional and administrative systems and processes, learning is a pivotal human potential. Knowing how to learn, as Niklas Luhmann stated in the 1980s and Gardner over ten years ago reconfirmed as one of the five keys for the future, is the attitude we have to assume to gain knowledge in the present day. What we are teaching our students on university courses is, in contrast, already obsolete at the end of the semester so fast is the pace at which knowledge is advancing. As just remarked, Gardner underlined this in the volume *Five Keys for the Future* (2007), which gives us some precious tips on how to get along in tomorrow’s world.

Technological progress enforces new types of learning, know-how and knowledge. This new know-how is inseparable from the digital. *E-competencies* will be the new literacy and numeracy. In other words, we inhabitants of the planet earth will not be able to do without them. It is actually a matter of justice, of obtaining social equality, of the right to humanity. Providing the possibility of digital learning, digital literacy and its implementation, must be the stuff of higher education. If the students who enrol on master’s courses are required to have obtained credits in ‘IT culture’, we also have to provide the tools, learning possibilities and conditions to implement this *digital* culture. It does not mean adding techniques but using tools that are vital for being in the world, for work and for life in general. We could go back in our minds and make a comparison: for today’s human beings, the Internet is what Gutenberg’s discovery was for the civilisation of Humanism. As we underline the importance of connected and interdisciplinary learning, we know that there is still a long way to go to give graduates the skills to navigate and anticipate the digital tendencies and tools of the future.

A second reason for underlining the central importance of trying out new digital teaching concerns the education for the professions of the future. Big data will be a part of all new jobs, even relational and care work. As such, it is the task of universities to prepare young people for the world that awaits them through innovation. There is much evidence in this sense, starting from the fact that «1. A country's economic and industrial development is largely based on the capability to introduce new digital technologies and to promote a digital culture; 2. At European level, the importance of digital skills as a key competency for permanent learning is repeated strongly and with conviction; 3. Digital skills are, to different extents and specifics, present in all work contexts» (CRUI 2018, 8). The study by Fondazione CRUI on transversal skills (CRUI 2018, 73-87) underlines precisely the necessity to form digital skills, as well as a digital culture, by planning appropriate and transversal university training programmes, for everyone, not only for IT graduates. Talking of the digital economy and society, some digital skills should become an integral part of all university curricula, for example, 1. The digital as a factor of innovation; 2. planning for digital innovation; 3. knowledge of applications; 4. knowledge of the world of data and how to live in it; 5. IT security awareness (CRUI 2018, 77). Each of these factors must become a common asset of every graduate. Without a doubt, without these tools, it will be harder to look for a job. In addition, teachers and universities who fail to innovate their teaching in this sense will be less competitive.

Innovation in degree courses involves planning in relation to the labour market on one hand, and the acquisition of transversal skills and digital skills on the other. Teaching is the means to achieve these ends and as such it has a central role because there is no way that university training programmes can avoid transformation. Even the caring professions – educators, teachers, pedagogists and trainers – can and must make use of innovation processes for the future. In order to prepare graduates in these sectors, new educational models and new degree course organisation models need to be put into place, and competencies gained for teaching in higher education.

Italian universities are undergoing a passage of transformation and change; indeed, we could say that this is the case for most sectors. In particular, an agreement needs to be found as to the purpose of education. Should the aim of universities be for culture or for work? It goes without saying that without serious reflection on the role of universities in transforming Italian, European and global society, we will not be able to create the real conditions for innovation in teaching. Transformation commands great force at the legislative level, from the AVA 2.0 quality assurance system, to VQR research quality evaluation and the new university governance modalities set out by Law no. 240/2010.

As the incipit to his most famous book, Willard V. Quine quotes Otto Neurath's words on the role of science at the start of the twentieth century, a moment of great change: «We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom» (1970, 2).

The same could be thought about universities and their formative role in the society of the future.

### 3. The Perception of Employability Among Participants of the University of Florence LM 50 and LM 57/85 Master's Degree Courses: A Methodological Introduction

In order to provide for a smoother entry to the labour market, over the last 20 years, university reforms (Legislative Decree no. 509/1999; Legislative Decree no. 270/2004; Law no. 240/2010) have concentrated on bringing the courses on offer closer to the professional world. Hence, education departments have also begun to offer courses enabling those who will work in education and training to develop useful competencies for their employability, by which meaning a complex construct (Knight and Yorke 2002, 2003, 2004) linked to the capability to enter and navigate the world of work, develop one's potentials and go after one's desires (Harvey 1999, 2001; Yorke 2006; Yorke and Knight 2006).

The research presented here came about with the intention to investigate the topic of the relationship between *expected results* in terms of learning outcomes and the students' perception of their learning. Perception is very important because it then creates the awareness that will lead students to ask questions about circumstances and the environment, and builds the sensation of knowing where to go. Moreover, it allows them to better listen to and observe the labour market. If they really live out their perception of employability, then the students first and graduates later will have an awareness enabling them to find their way and grasp the opportunities that come up. All in all, employability is a state of the human person, a formative condition in which the subject is able to find their way, look around and know where to go. The employable subject can move from one workplace to another because they can recognise which competencies are needed and above all know that they possess them.

The interviews with the new graduates from two master's courses in the area of education and training, the University of Florence LM 50, *School Leadership and Clinical Pedagogy*, and LM 57/85, *Adult Education, Continuing Training and Pedagogical Sciences* courses cast light on the perception of employability gained thanks to the academic pathway leading to the master's degree. The results of this study could give a contribution at the social level (Smith 2005), by introducing proposals for the innovation of degree courses for non-teaching roles. This could lead to two results for the future master's graduates:

- acquiring the necessary competencies and knowledge to help guarantee the best university success and the best education-to-work transition;
- acquiring understanding, skills and values that can grow throughout their lifespan, allowing them to transfer the assets acquired during their university studies to an array of subsequent work contexts.

In educational research, the intention is to investigate the person by placing the educational act that they are involved in at the centre as well as their education and the acquisition of competencies and knowledge. A qualitative method was chosen for this research for two reasons. On one hand, it was chosen because the context within which the phenomenon is embedded is complex and from research it has emerged that this method is suited to adapting to complexity (González 2019). On the other hand, it was chosen because, to study the per-

ception of employability of recent graduates of master's courses, is to research a social phenomenon that is complex in its own right: «Research needs embodied conceptualising, not just continuous citing of numbers of deaths, stranded polar bears, wealth gaps, and hungry children» (Marshall et al. 2022, 15). This study cannot be performed in solitude, only producing numbers, although this is not to say that this aspect does not have to be taken into consideration. Qualitative measurements need to be taken as they can further the knowledge about a certain phenomenon by gathering more specific data than the data collected using quantitative methods. Grounded theory (GT) is a methodology or approach that is used in various fields, including education (Strauss and Corbin 1998). GT adapts well to the objective of this study as it enables a theory to be generated from the data that are collected (Punch 1998), without any preconceived hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss 2006). It explores the experience in order to obtain a holistic vision while at once dealing with complex phenomena (Goulding 1998; Charmaz 2014). The research strategy used in this thesis is the case study, where case means a unit or phenomenon outlined at a precise moment or in a specific period of time (Gerring 2007). Hence, a case might be an individual, a class, a work group, a study group, a school, an educational services centre, a city, a country. Case studies are used in various situations in order to develop knowledge of individuals, groups and social organisations and for an in-depth understanding and analysis (Gerring 2007) of complex phenomena. The research uses the qualitative focus group (FG) technique (Morgan 1988) to spark an exploration of a certain matter and then come to some significant discoveries that are useful for the research underway. The FG is one of the few forms of research that can lead to an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation without experts on the subject (Morgan 1998; Krueger and Casey 2015) and without really knowing at the beginning all of the questions that the interviewees will be asked (Byers and Wilcox 1991). Therefore, this non-directive way of interviewing the group involved in the research will generate a rich understanding of the participants' experiences and beliefs concerning the phenomenon. The goal will be to explore and discover the chosen object of study. In this way, the attention will shift from the interviewer to the interviewee (Krueger and Casey 2015). The participants in the FG will be invited to discover what they have in common and what their differences are. Given this premise, it is clear how FGs spark a knowledge process characterised by sharing and comparison among the participants.

#### 4. Reading the Data from the FG with Students on the University of Florence LM 50 and LM 57/85 Courses

This essay sets out a preliminary reflection on data on the perception of employability among students on the LM 57/85 and LM 50 courses. The data were collected in four focus groups with final-year students from the two courses about ten days before presenting their thesis. They were considered qualified participants (Delli Zotti 2021), or experts (Bogner et al. 2009), thanks to their direct

experience of the master's degree courses. The first two focus groups were considered the pilot trial for this research. They were made up of final-year students from the LM 57/85 course finishing in February 2022. The two following focus groups instead involved final-year students from courses finishing in April, more precisely five students from the LM 50 course and six from the LM 57/85 course. The research will continue until April 2023, involving students from both courses who will graduate in November 2022, February 2023 and April 2023.

The data that have been collected thus far and that will be collected later will be used for multiple ends: for an in-depth study of the two degree courses; for a comparison between them; for the implementation of any necessary changes or integrations to the academic programmes. This is why the data analysis has been and will be carried out by grouping together the interviews by course, in order to explore the parallels and differences between the two cases later on (Azarian 2011), collect cues to improve the courses and use the positive aspects emerging from the study with greater awareness.

The focus groups took place (initially due to the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2022) and will continue to take place (seeing as the method proved to be a satisfactory) online (Kite and Phongsavan 2017), using the Webex platform. The interviews were recorded, following authorization from the participants. Four areas were investigated: desires, competencies, job search channels and expectations. The participants were asked the following stimulus questions: Area 1 – Desires: What made you want to carry on/resume your education? Area 2 – Competencies: Which knowledge and skills have you developed during your university studies that you think can be useful for the labour market? Area 3 – Channels: Which channels will you use to look for/change jobs? Area 4 – Expectations: How do you think this degree course has helped you to better understand the job prospects, professional figures and employment contexts coming out of the course you are attending? At the end of the FG, all of the participants were asked a final question linked to their general perception of the academic course that was coming to an end: Final reflection: since you enrolled on the degree course, do you feel that something has changed thanks to the course? If so, what?

As far as the LM 57/85 course is concerned, analysis of the interviews collected revealed that, concerning the first area, there were two main reasons that made them continue their studies and take a master's course: the need to further their education and reasons linked to the labour market. The first core category took in various facets: the need to further the programme followed in the bachelor's degree; the need to further develop competencies such as reflective and meta-reflective skills; an interest in investigating specific subjects (pedagogy, working with disabled children). The second core category mainly concerned the need to expand job prospects, for example, to work with adults; or the necessity to respond to labour market requirements, demanding a more complete education in order to work in a team and on projects.

«I also did the bachelor's degree in education so it was an easy choice for me, because I wanted to carry on and go into the subjects that were touched on a bit superficially in the bachelor's degree and I chose adult pedagogy because the two options I had before me were either this or school leadership and... let's say, I wasn't interested in leading a school so I chose this because of the job prospects it gives at the end of the course because they're... I'd say there's a much wider range than with a lot of other courses at the university» (Interview 17).

The second area relates to competencies. The qualified participants underlined that the master's course mainly enabled them to expand certain theoretical knowledge, namely: the different pedagogical and andragogical theories and theories on children's cognitive development. Emerging among the competencies developed, also thanks to the work groups on the various courses, were social skills (such as effective communication, listening, developing friendships, the ability to cooperate); personal skills (such as reflection and meta-reflection, critical thinking, flexibility, dealing with unexpected events, greater self-criticism, greater awareness of one's own capabilities); organisational and planning skills (for example, the capability to set goals and priorities, team building, teamwork); lastly, another category related to skills more directly usable in the labour market and more precisely for finding work (such as knowing how to write a cover letter, knowing how a company is structured).

«[...] so, let's say that definitely having an overview of the main andragogical theories, at least as far as I'm concerned... [...] means I can make a critical interpretation of what's going on [...] Another thing... for example... one course I found very useful was on corporate organization and human resource development because it made me more aware of how company organizations are structured [...] so that course was fundamental for me to understand how they work and how then, let's say, various branches also of education and training slot together and work together [...] another type of knowledge that I found very useful is also... ahhh let's say a taster, because obviously it can't deal with everything, but also the main computer, technological tools a bit for... Also to stimulate ... let's say to make the training context more interactive. I found this very useful because they're things used by companies and getting a first taste of these things is always useful, yes. In terms of competencies, let's say more structured ones... that I put into practice, I'd definitely say, well reflective capabilities, because I think that the course... that is, we're constantly urged to... to... to reflect about what ... about what we learn. And also organizational and planning capabilities, let's say I feel I'm pretty good from this point of view. Uhhhhhh.... Yes, let's say these are the main ones [...] Then there are definitely others too... capabilities also interpersonal type of skills because all the courses are set up like projects, so you have to... deal with other people and the other people in the group and... in this case too there are competencies that are somehow tested and developed» (Interview 1).

As regards the third area under investigation, the thoughts shared by the students highlighted the different channels used to look for work. The most widely used means is the Internet. Various sites were mentioned: Indeed, InfoJobs, Monster, Tuttojob, Bakeca; several FG participants highlighted the importance of sites for spontaneous teaching assistant candidacies (MAD); competitive state examinations (at regional and national level); the Official Gazette; online competitions; and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). Some students highlighted the importance of online research for positions in line with their interests before sending emails directly to the companies or cooperatives that were looking for those figures. Another aspect that emerged in looking for work was word of mouth and networks of friends and work colleagues. Community service and work placements in companies or cooperatives enabled them to make themselves known in the workplace and to then receive job offers. Lastly, the career day promoted by the University of Florence was also mentioned.

«Well, it's a nice question in that... it was the job that found me... in this case. Well, a channel that I definitely used a bit to get an idea of what job prospects there could be was LinkedIn. LinkedIn and Indeed are the main channels I used, because they're a bit more complete and above all they also have offers, let's say, in education and training, while on others maybe... the other portals there aren'tuhm... yes, this helped me loads, but in reality what helped me a lot more was networking, uuhhh... because it was... let's say thanks to a... to a colleague that I well got the job that I'm doing now... and the work on my thesis also helped me expand my contacts like this... and perhaps it was a bit the topic... in this case too I was contacted by a company so it wasn't me who looked, but the company that found me eh... but in that case too it was because of... let's say... a third person somehow might have acted as a go-between eh. The topic of my thesis helped in this case too...» (Interview 1).

As for the last area, which investigates how the master's course helped the student to better understand the job prospects, professional figures and employment contexts coming out of the course they had attended, the students emphasised the importance of the correlated activities, such as the Winter School organised by the University of Würzburg (Germany) in which one of the partners is the University of Florence (since 2022, the Winter School has changed its name to the Adult Education Academy), the 'I professionisti si presentano' (Meet the Professionals) activity, career guidance, work placement activities and the UNESCO chair. Another core category that was pointed out concerned the single courses: Work Pedagogy, Andragogy, the 'Formarsi al lavoro' (Training for Work) placement and the Corporate Organization and Human Resources Development course. Last, but no less important, was the role covered by their peers, above all those who were coming to the end of their course or who had already finished.

«Yes, I remember the first year [...] the Work Pedagogy course where we had to organize ourselves in groups [...] it was the spur for building our various theses, about... about what roles we could then, that we could... the job prospects that would be open to us. [...] corporate organization prepared me from a certain point of view [...]» (Interview 2).

In this first analysis, the elements that the students shared in the last stimulus question, but also in the rich and generous answers to the previous questions, were put together in the following categories: professional aspirations; positive aspects and the proposed initiatives encountered on the degree courses; weak points of the degree courses; students' reflections.

As far as professional aspirations are concerned, the professions indicated were teaching in upper secondary schools, human resources manager or corporate training, pedagogist, pedagogical coordinator and researcher. The positive aspects included some courses that the students deemed particularly useful, such as Work Pedagogy, Psychology of Disability, Pedagogical Epistemology, Corporate Organization and Human Resource Development as well as the Training for Work and online work placements. The projects and work groups put together during the courses were also appreciated because they enabled the students to develop various useful skills for the labour market, and the work on the thesis proved useful too. The training programme also received a positive judgement: the students recognised the desire to modernise the course and the intention to link the course with the labour market. Lastly, various correlated activities were very much appreciated: interviews with tutors, conferences and seminars, work placement activities, light assessment, activities with the UNESCO chair and the activities relating to the Adult Education Academy, Impresa Campus entrepreneurship development programme and the Enterprise Training Centre.

The students pointed out various weak points, for example, the relationship between the course and the labour market. Despite the efforts pointed out in the previous categories to link up the degree course with the labour market, there still appears to be a yawning gap between the two. On one hand, there need to be more practical lessons and workshops and on the other hand, more 'practical' and up-to-date authors. The explanation of job prospects should also be more practical and less theoretical. Again, with regard to the labour market, more development of competencies is needed, especially those skills useful to enter the employment context. Other weak points that were raised pointed in three directions: the communication of the University of Florence, the teaching and syllabus, and career guidance. As far as communication is concerned, some of the students interviewed complained that the university failed to communicate the initiatives in a satisfactory way. As far as the second point is concerned, they requested a more recent and wide-ranging reading list. Furthermore, they did not consider the teaching to be in line with the methods studied since on many occasions it is very one-way and does not involve the students. They deemed the online work placement less useful than work placement in person. Lastly, they considered the career guidance is unsatisfactory and that the two master's courses fail to outline a clear and precise professional figure.

The final reflections category was also very rich. On one hand, the students were extremely insecure and afraid of leaving the university environment. Indeed, university gives students a certain feeling of security. The lack of security is also linked to the fact that the course failed to outline a clear, strong professional profile. Other students underlined that they had achieved a certain awareness of the competencies they had acquired. The students' observations were linked to the fact that the work placement is underrated because it only counts for 3 credits. The students made some proposals: the need for the university to plan more opportunities to learn to create a network with fellow students; longer work placement; more tools to become a trainer and planner; more practice in drawing up individualised educational plans (PEI). The focus group participants also highlighted the importance of the role that students have to cover within the university, that is: a) they must be aware that it is up to them to find opportunities offered by the course to grow professionally; b) they must find ways to put what they have learned into practice in order to fill the gap between university and the labour market. As far as the reflections on the relationship between the course and the labour market are concerned, once again the need emerged for the course to be more practical; for the work placements to be longer; and for the students to have more possibilities to go into companies and to put what they have learned into practice. As far as the university communication is concerned, it should be made clearer and more transparent. Finally, there were four more reflections. One concerned the job prospects which appeared unclear and confused because too many were indicated. Universities appeared to be a protected place where various professional experiences could be gained. The personal perception of the courses was nevertheless positive among several students. The perception of the education given on one hand underlined the necessity to put what had been learnt into practice and on the other hand that university can be important in stimulating working activities.

This preliminary analysis now takes into consideration the elements emerging from the two FGs involving the final-year students on the LM 50 course.

As far as the first area is concerned, namely what made the students want to enrol on the master's course, two categories emerged: education and the desire to further and expand knowledge that the students already possessed; the labour market and the need to diversify their employment activity (for example, wanting to become a upper secondary school teacher).

«[...] at the moment I'm an teaching assistant [...] I obviously chose at the same time as... as my profession I chose this master's course because I wanted to gain knowledge, also from a legal point of view, and we've done a law course. It was very interesting. We did this, well, we didn't do it at all in the primary school education degree... the legal, well management side of things. And also... I'd like in the future, not now because I like what I'm doing, maybe to coordinate and so to become a pedagogical coordinator or, why not, maybe try out the competition to become a school leader.» (Interview 8).

In the answers concerning the second area, namely, the competencies developed during the course, reference was made to the theoretical knowledge learnt; the social skills; personal skills (critical thinking; greater humanity) and the competencies linked to the labour market, to put into practice in the working context.

«But, actually, getting there then, no, in the end I see that in itself, much more, that is, it didn't give much... For me, in reality that's fine, ah, that is, I, I'm happy let's say that I carried on and did this course too» (Interview 11).

As for the area of job search channels, the students on the LM 50 course used the channels offered by the university: Almalaurea and the career day. There were students who wrote emails directly to the companies and cooperatives after doing research on the Internet. Then they used social media, in particular LinkedIn. Then, networking proved important, thanks to word of mouth. Websites also proved to be important in looking for a job, for example institutional websites where competitions are published and spontaneous teaching assistant applications (MAD) can be filled in. And some delivered their CV in person.

In the fourth area, the students referred to meeting the course chair, as well as university websites and fellow students. Among the other areas that emerged were the professions that they would like to do. Some wanted to be a pedagogical coordinator or school leader; some wanted to work in hospitals and others in companies (in human resources). In the area relating to the positive aspects of the degree courses and the initiatives proposed, they mentioned the following courses and workshops: Neuropsychiatry; Law; Rehabilitation and Disability Management Techniques; Gender Pedagogy; Clinical Pedagogy; Family Pedagogy, School Leadership; and the training for work placement. Then reference was made to the activities proposed in the single courses: teamwork and planning. The criticisms that emerged can be grouped into the following core categories: the relationship with the labour market; the syllabus; the career guidance; the professional figure at the course end and the teaching. As far as the first core category is concerned, the lack of practical exercises in the subjects taught was underlined. In the second core category, a certain degree of repetition and superficiality in the contents of the various courses emerged as well as a repetition of the subjects studied during the bachelor's degree course. In addition, online work placement proved less useful than in-person work placement and the lack of an obligatory course on teaching was also underlined. With regard to career guidance, the lack of space devoted to explaining the outgoing professional profile was underlined. Another core category was linked specifically to the figure of clinical pedagogist. The students complained that the description of this figure was confused as, in order to become a clinical pedagogist it is not sufficient to finish the master's course which is what might be understood by reading the degree course description on the website. Lastly, a final criticism was levelled against the teaching as in most of the single courses it was very much one-way and not of the type to involve or make the students participate actively during the lessons.

The opinions and experiences were different in the area relating to the students' reflections. Some students underlined that the lack of relationships with other students owing to the lessons held online due to the pandemic had deeply affected them. Some found it very interesting to work with different people thanks to the group work. There were different visions of the education given by the course. There were some students who expressed a certain regret and disappointment because the course did not provide additional knowledge to the bachelor's degree course and they did not feel that they were leaving the master's course having developed the skills relating to the professional figure that was the reason for enrolling on the course. Instead, other students claimed that they had been culturally enriched and developed more awareness about the profession that they wanted to do. The focus group participants finally hoped that they would manage to use their master's qualification in the employment context. The proposals put forward were as follows: to explain the end-of-course job prospects earlier on because this would have enabled them to make a more informed or different choice as to the master's course; to do in-person work placement with professional figures presenting their profession.

For a more in-depth analysis of the data that emerged and a more systematic comparison between the two courses, it is possible to highlight some aspects in common emerging from the FGs. The most salient aspects divided by area were as follows: for the first area, the motivation for the students to enrol on the master's course was linked to the need to diversify their employment activity and further their education. As for the second area, there was agreement about the development of theoretical knowledge and social skills and competencies useful in looking for a job. As for the third area, the Internet was the favoured channel, with use of: institutional sites to look for and apply to competitions; job search websites (such as Indeed, InfoJobs,...) and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook). Word of mouth and networks of friends, and in particular fellow students, were mentioned, as were work placement or community service experiences, and the university Almalaurea and career day activities. The fourth area highlighted the importance of some courses and meetings such as the meeting with the chair of the master's course and exchanging opinions with students about to finish or who had already finished the course. The positive aspects in common that emerged highlighted the importance of the initiatives proposed by the University of Florence and the master's course, such as the 'Training for Work' placement. The group activities carried out during the single courses were also particularly appreciated because of the organisational and social skills they helped to develop. Furthermore, in both master's degree courses, the students made three requests: to present the outgoing professional profiles right from the start and on several occasions, also by involving professionals who already work in the field; to increase the practical part of the academic programme; to provide teaching that enabled the students to be an active part of the learning process and not just a listener.

Two further considerations need to be made concerning the use of FGs to carry out this research. The first is based on the feedback forms that were given to each participant at the end of every meeting. The second stems from the notes taken by the researcher. As far as the students' feedback is concerned, it is important to underline how taking part in the focus group allowed them to reflect on the education they had gained from a career guidance point of view (Loiodice 2004), by focusing their attention on the programme that they had followed and gaining a clear idea of the professional figure that they would like to be and the competencies and skills they had developed. The FG participants really did appreciate the fact that they were given a voice and could share their thoughts and therefore be listened to (Gemma and Grion 2015), something that they would have liked to have happened right from the beginning of the master's course, in similar moments planned from the first year on. Finally, the researcher underlined some positive aspects linked to the FG meetings: on one hand, there was an exchange of opinions and experiences but also advice and suggestions among the participants (e.g., how to look for work); for those who had not met previously, taking part in the focus group a few days before presenting their thesis allowed them to meet at their graduation having already shared something together, enabling them to experience the moment in a relaxed way.

##### 5. Degree Courses and Education and Training Professions: Final Reflections

Professional know-how. It can be thought that the degree courses previously mentioned in this article allow for reflection on professional know-how and that part of this critical and reflective activity can become the epistemological dimension which needs to be looked at for the education of the professions of the future. On the topic of the connection between epistemology and education, a lot has been said by some outstanding adult education scholars, from Mezirow (1991) through Rogers (1951, 1980) to Schön (1983, 1987, 2006), who have investigated, outlined and interpreted some central aspects of the education professions. From the transformative dimensions (Mezirow 1978), through active listening (Rogers 1980), to reflective practice in the workplace (Schön 1983), these authors can be credited with bringing the importance of training as professionals to the centre of attention. The skill set can provide a good baseline for understanding how to reflect on a professional epistemology.

If we look at the definition of *occupation* given by the Italian institute of statistics (ISTAT), we can reveal that:

The object of the classification, occupation, is defined as a set of working activities concretely performed by an individual, which involve their own knowledge, skills, identity and fields. The logic used to cluster different occupations within the same group unit is based on the concept of competency, in terms of both the *skill level and specialization* required to exercise the occupation. The *skill level* is defined as a function of the complexity and breadth of the tasks performed, the level of responsibility and decision-making autonomy of the occupation; the

*skill specialization* instead refers to the differences in the sectoral domains, the disciplinary fields of the applied knowledge, the equipment used, the materials processed, the type of good produced or service provided in the sphere of the occupation (ISTAT 2013).

Thus, it is very important to connect the topic of professions and what a profession is with and through the topic of competencies. There is an inseparable link between profession and competencies. This relationship became even stronger with the update of the classification of occupations promoted by ISTAT in particular in recent decades:

The new official classification of occupations (CP2011) officially came into force on 1 January 2011. It is based upon the same logic used by the two previous classifications (CP1991 and CP2001) and hence continues to fully comply with the format chosen at the international level. The basic criterion, as has been said, is the skill level and specialization required to appropriately perform the tasks associated with the occupation (ISTAT 2013, 15).

The topic of professions came bounding into the education and training sectors following the transformation that the Bologna process imposed not just on Italian universities, but also on European universities by decreeing the European area of higher education (MIUR 1999). We believe that it was within this context that the link between education and the labour market started to gain a stronger foothold. Then, finding their rightful place within this relationship, the education and training professions became the subject of studies at the start of the 2000s.

In Italy it is well known that a great deal of intense legislative work has been done in this direction. In particular, paragraphs 594-601 of Law no. 205/2017 introduced two hitherto undefined educational figures whose occupation had previously been unclear:

Socio-pedagogical educators and pedagogists work in the sector of education, training and pedagogy, in relation to any activity carried out in a formal, non-formal and informal way, in the various phases of life, in a perspective of personal and social growth, according to the definitions contained in article 2 of Legislative Decree no. 13 of 16 January 2013, in pursuit of the goals of the European strategy resolved by the Lisbon European Council on 23 and 24 March 2000. The professional figures indicated in the first sentence work in socio-educational and socio-welfare services and facilities, for people of all ages, in particular in the following fields: education and training; school; socio-educational dimensions of the social and welfare sector; parenthood and family; culture; law; environment; sports and physical education; and international integration and cooperation. Pursuant to law no. 4 of 14 January 2013, the professions of socio-pedagogical educator and pedagogist are included within the unregulated professions (Law no. 205/2017, paragraph 594).

Alongside these legal outlines, we can also find others, such as article 14 of legislative decree no. 65/2017, which has brought substantial innovative changes in the direction of building an integrated system for children's education by clearly defining the qualifications to gain access to the profession of teacher in early childhood education services. The decree creates a direct route from the L-19 bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and Training to labour market entry. Paragraph 517 of Law no. 145/2018 opens the social and health sector to educators and pedagogists without registration on specific professional orders. Finally, legislative decree no. 96/2019 introduces the figure of pedagogist to multidisciplinary assessment teams for students with disabilities.

We have made this reference to the research and regulations in order to highlight the present extreme interest in the topic of the professional figures coming out of the master's degrees. This centrality helps us grasp the crucial importance of understanding the evolution of educational processes in light of transformations in the labour market. Above all, however, owing to the lack of structural frameworks in the professional world, it is important for university training programmes to seize upon competencies and skills as central objects to study and to put into practice. What do we mean by this? We want to underline the importance of shifting the idea of *professional epistemology* to take into consideration the know-how and competencies that have to be achieved by graduates in order to build the best transition and entry to the labour market as professionals with a solid, flexible and renewable, namely, sustainable set of transversal skills and techniques.

It is a duty of higher education to build the professions of the future and to accompany our young graduates towards the best education-to-work transition. Hence, the first step to take must be to seek every means to prevent the gap between education and work. We could say that the commitment, not just of higher education but of the whole country of Italy, must be to build employability. While referring to other research for reflection on the construct (Harvey 2001, 2003; Yorke and Knight 2003, 2006; Yorke 2006; Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Sumanasiri et al. 2015), we wish to conclude by urging that the speed at which the competencies requested by the labour market is changing and should be always taken into consideration when setting out degree course teaching and learning plans. Indeed, despite their importance in defining the level-two education and training professions, the crux does not lie in the professional families, but in which skills or competency drivers will be setting the pace for the future of employment in education and training.

If degree courses are able to read and interpret these changes, then universities really will be the place to build that 'social elevator' which has been broken down in Italy for too many years. While there is no doubt that knowledge, ongoing learning and know-how are central in making a people grow, it is equally as necessary to be able to build knowledge and capabilities and to be able to apply them in contexts undergoing rapid and immediate evolution. Employability means knowing how to develop the competencies to make personal, structural and systemic transformations in order continue to exist in an evolving world. One of the last steps taken to bring the education system closer to the labour market was Legislative Decree

no. 13/2021, published in the Official Gazette of 18 January 2021, on the adoption of guidelines to implement the *National Competency Certification System*. In the case of higher education, to acknowledge this link is to take systematic care of the bridge between universities and the labour market, wherein competencies and learning outcomes are central to pinpointing new needs and new professions.

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