

# Per il futuro dei Career Service: dal servizio alla costruzione delle competenze per il lavoro. Un modello per la prospettiva EUniWell

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## The future of Career Services: from services to the construction of competencies for the world of work. A proposal for an EUniWell model

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*Una prospettiva pedagogica dell'employability concepisce il Career Service come un insieme di costrutti, strategie e servizi per coltivare le connessioni tra l'alta formazione e il mondo del lavoro a tutti i livelli. L'obiettivo è quello di promuovere lo sviluppo di competenze e capacità di cui gli studenti hanno bisogno per la transizione post laurea. All'interno di questo quadro, lo scopo della presente ricerca qualitativa è stato quello di testare una descrizione teorica di un modello pedagogico per i Career Service universitari che sia in grado di sostenere gli studenti nella transizione verso il mondo del lavoro. I risultati confermano la teoria esistente e hanno delle implicazioni per l'implementazione del work-related learning e l'innovazione dei corsi di studio universitari.*

### Parole chiave

employability; competenze trasversali; transizioni; professionalizzazione; alta formazione

*A pedagogical understanding of employability defines modern-day Career Services as a set of constructs, strategies and services to cultivate connections between higher education and the world of work at all levels. The goal is to foster the development of skills and capabilities that students need to actively manage their professional path. Within this framework, the aim of this qualitative research was to test a theoretical description of a pedagogical model for university Career Services which is capable of supporting students' successful transition to the labor market. The results confirm the existing theory and have implications for the implementation of work-related learning and the innovation of university courses of study.*

### Keywords

employability; soft skills; graduate transitions; professionalization; higher education

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## 1. Employability and Career Services in Higher Education

The aim of this introduction is to situate the discussion of employability within the contemporary landscape of European HE and Career Services. Its purpose is to reflect on how to best support the transition of graduates from academia into a world of work characterized by continuous change and uncertainty. The graduate transition concerns two human dimensions, employability and wellbeing, which from a pedagogical perspective could be translated as professional development, skills and self-care. On one hand, the ability to build skills for work, the perspective of work, and commitment to work consolidate the spaces of human entrepreneurship and development. On the other hand, taking care of one's personal and professional self are central aspects of being able to build the best conditions for both work and life.

The research presented in this contribution is part of a broader line of inquiry connected to the European research project “*Transwell - Wellbeing in Transition from Academia to the Labor Market*” (2022-2023) which is funded by EUniWell<sup>1</sup> and involves three partner universities of the consortium. Indeed, the *Transwell Project* allowed the researchers to reflect on and harmonize the categories considered above through educational-pedagogical language that refers to employability and wellbeing as the ability to explore, stay and continuously redesign one's professional condition fully in tune with one's human, social, cultural, and environmental wellbeing, i.e., the ability to take care of oneself.

As stated in the Yerevan Communiqué, «fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives in rapidly changing labor markets... is a major goal for the EHEA»<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, as suggested by the European Pillar of Social Rights, employability should be one of the main outcomes of the educational process and should not be left to chance, but instead be supported by active measures:

«Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labor market»<sup>3</sup>.

Such statements reflect the changing role of HEIs in society: employability is not solely an individual effort to prepare for the world of work but a responsibility of universities who are called upon to implement strategies to support the development of students' employability pathways<sup>4</sup>. This responsibility also echoes the motivations which drive today's students to undertake a university education, namely to boost their preparation and gain access to quality job prospects<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, from a pedagogical point of view, it is important to keep in mind that HE's responsibility to develop employability also refers to their responsibility to foster students' personal development, which also includes the acquisition of skills needed to construct a personal and professional life path<sup>6</sup>.

Managing successful transitions is significant for HE graduates because contemporary career and life paths are characterized by frequent transitions and higher degrees of uncertainty compared to the past. Indeed, today's

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\*1 The present contribution is a product of collaborative work. Vanna Boffo contributed to the conceptualization and methodology. Chiara Clemente, Ali Khatibi and collaborators at the Institute of Technology at the University of Nantes conducted the interviews. Vanna Boffo and Chiara Clemente performed the data analysis and contributed to manuscript revision and finalization. Ali Khatibi contributed to the article's connection with the Transwell Project.

<sup>1</sup> The European University for Wellbeing (EUniWell) is a European University Alliance funded by the European Commission as part of the 2020 Erasmus+ program. It currently has eleven university members, three of which are part of the *Transwell EUniWell Seed Fund Project*: the University of Birmingham, the University of Florence and the University of Nantes. The main objectives of this transnational university alliance is to develop joint research and teaching on well-being while also promoting strong civic engagement and the transformation of its member institutions towards HE cultures, contexts and ecosystems that promote well-being. More information about EUniWell is available at <https://www.euniwell.eu/> (last consulted 20 June 2023).

<sup>2</sup> European Higher Education Area, *Yerevan Communiqué*, Ministerial Conference Yerevan, 2015, p. 2. Institutional documents and strategic priorities for HE published by the European Higher Education Area and the European Union (see notes 3 and 8) speak to the importance that these European bodies attribute to employability as an outcome of HE for social cohesion, sustainable economic development, innovation and democratic citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, *European Pillar of Social Rights*, «Publications Office of the European Union», 2018, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the role of HE in society from a pedagogical perspective, see V. Boffo, *Confini educativi: per una cura delle transizioni in alta formazione*, in P. Federighi (Ed.), *Educazione in età adulta. Ricerche, politiche, luoghi e professioni*, FUP, Firenze 2018, pp. 43-46. For a discussion on the changing role of HE based on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (students, HEI institutions, government and employers), see M. Cheng - O. Adekola, J. Albia - S. Cai, *Employability in higher education: a review of key stakeholders' perspectives*, «Higher Education Evaluation and Development», (XVI), 1 (2022), Bingley, West Yorkshire pp. 16-31.

<sup>5</sup> M. Cheng - O, et. al., *Employability in higher education*, cit., pp. 21-22 discuss students' perspectives on HE and employability based authors' findings from a literature review and document analysis of student union documents from the UK and EU published after 2010.

<sup>6</sup> V. Boffo, *Confini educativi: per una cura delle transizioni in alta formazione*, cit., p. 43.

youth will, on average, occupy a greater number of jobs over the span of their professional life than in the past<sup>7</sup>. Megatrends, such as technological, demographic, and climate change, are driving the rapid evolution of skills needed for full participation in the labor market and civic life<sup>8</sup>. From a pedagogical perspective, it is imperative that students receive training, support and care for developing employability throughout their university experience. This is especially crucial because the majority of today's graduates will not experience a linear professional path<sup>9</sup> and may even find themselves occupying professions that do not yet exist<sup>10</sup>.

Within this panorama of societal change, transformation and uncertainty, a focus on employability and competencies can be interpreted as a response to the educational and training needs (*domanda di formazione*) of the 21st century. In this sense, Federighi refers to the education and training needs of a population in a specific historical context and society's intention to utilize educational tools and methods to respond to problems and challenges<sup>11</sup>.

To understand how HEIs can respond to the training and learning needs of students in the 21st century, it is important to turn to the pedagogical definitions of employability as a process connected to an «educational path»<sup>12</sup> rather than an output (i.e. job placement as a product of a job search or employment statistics). As will be discussed below, the term employability has Anglo-Saxon origins and its first pedagogical definition refers to educational, social and labor market participation dimensions. Its connotations have since been expanded to include a pedagogical dimension related to lifelong learning<sup>13</sup> and full participation in the labor market as well as in active citizenship through the lens of life competencies<sup>14</sup>.

The first working definition of employability with pedagogical connotations can be attributed to Hillage and Pollard in 1988<sup>15</sup>. The authors' definition of employability contains references to the skills, capacities and attitudes needed to look for, find and maintain work (ideally quality work in line with one's skill level and desired working conditions). Their definition is representative of the first of many Anglo Saxon contributions towards a pedagogical understanding of employability which go beyond strictly economic or psychological dimensions. In a report commissioned by the UK government, Hillage and Pollard defined employability as follows:

«In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work»<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> World Bank, *Social Protection for Recovery: Europe and Central Asia Economic Update (Fall)*, 2022, pp. 92-93. The World Bank's finding based on an analysis of labor market data from 1995 to 2020 is that the average job tenure for younger workers has declined nearly uniformly in all subsamples and is significantly lower than that of older workers. Moreover, nonstandard work (part-time, self-employment and/or interrupted work patterns) has also increased from 1995 to 2020 with younger people being more affected.

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on a European strategy empowering higher education institutions for the future of Europe*, (2022/C 167/03), «Official Journal of the European Union», [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC\\_2022\\_167\\_R\\_0003](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2022_167_R_0003) (accessed June 2023).

<sup>9</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, in Ead. (Ed.), *Giovani adulti tra transizione e alta formazione: Strategie per l'employability. Dal Placement al Career Service*, Pacini, Pisa 2018, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Institute for the Future - Dell Technologies. *Emerging Technologies' Impact on Society & Work in 2030: The next era of human/machine partnerships*, 2017. Given that the 21st century world of work and society is characterized by rapid and frequent change, it is important for HEIs and those in charge of designing and planning courses of study to be aware of emerging professions and skill needs in order to ensure high quality preparation of graduates for an uncertain future.

<sup>11</sup> See P. Federighi, *Liberare la domanda di formazione. Politiche pubbliche di economia della formazione*, EDUP, Roma 2006. Federighi argues that in order to increase quality outcomes of all types of education, including HE, it is necessary to match the educational and training offer with the demand expressed by the population (and indirectly expressed by employers and social sector organizations). The educational demand includes knowledge and skill needs, but also the need for flexibility, personalization, guidance etc. Quality Career Services (p. 173) have a role in guaranteeing that subjects are in fact gaining benefits from putting their education and training into practice. If educational pathways are not aligned with the training needs of 21st century learners, then the ability of education to guarantee quality outcomes, such as wellbeing, active participation in society, and applying what is learned in the context of work, will be compromised.

<sup>12</sup> V. Boffo, *Employability and Transitions: Fostering the Future of Young Adult Graduates*, in Ead. & M. Fedeli (Eds.), *Employability & Competences: Innovative Curricula for New Professions*, FUP, Firenze 2018, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> In the words of Yorke, «Employability is not merely an attribute of the new graduate. It needs to be continuously refreshed throughout a person's working life». See: M. Yorke, *Employability in Higher Education: What it is – What it is not*, «ESECT and The Higher Education Academy», 2006, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> V. Boffo, *Transizioni per il lavoro in Higher Education: il ruolo del Dottorato di Ricerca in Italia*, in Ead. & F. Togni (Eds.), *Esercizi di ricerca Dottorato e politiche della formazione*, FUP, Firenze 2022, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> J. Hillage - E. Pollard, *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis* [research brief], «Great Britain. Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)», 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Ibi, p. 3.

Indeed, in the Anglo-Saxon context, the UK government had become increasingly interested in the connections between HE and the labor market in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the midst of a period of economic uncertainty and an unemployment crisis<sup>17</sup>. The work of scholars Harvey, Yorke and Knight are representative of the sustained attention dedicated to this topic in these decades. Collectively, they understood employability as a complex process that is activated and cultivated through educational processes within HE as well as through lifelong learning<sup>18</sup>.

Yorke and Knight's 2006 definition of employability, one of the most widely cited in the sector literature, has a particularly strong pedagogical orientation because it focuses on outcomes of the educational process: skills, knowledge and personal attributes<sup>19</sup>.

Yorke and Knight define employability as:

«a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy»<sup>20</sup>

Yorke and Knight's USEM model of employability (U: Understanding; S: Skills; E: Efficacy Belief; M: Metacognition) takes four interrelated factors into account: the understanding of one or more subjects or disciplines; skills, or "skillful practice" which takes into account awareness of context and appropriate action; self-efficacy which underlines psychological factors related to motivation and performance; and metacognition, which acknowledges the importance of reflection on learning and practice<sup>21</sup>.

While Yorke and Knight's definition of employability emphasizes the importance of developing skills and attributes, other contributions within the literature emphasize the importance of developing and using these skills and attributes in context of the world of work as part of the learning processes<sup>22</sup>. To cite an example, Billet and Choy refer to employability in terms of:

«processes that initially develop and later maintain [...] capacities to respond to the emerging challenges of work (i.e. work tasks), work requirements (i.e. codes and standards) and ways of working (i.e. systems and processes)»<sup>23</sup>

In the words of Boffo et al., «studying employability from a pedagogical point of view allows... shifting attention from the object (work or employability) to the subject (students, graduates) with a focus on the learning process and on the congruent educational and curricular dimension»<sup>24</sup>, which includes links between learning, teaching and the world of work. Thus, pedagogical definitions of employability invite questioning and reflection about the definition of learning outcomes within HE curricula and what educational strategies and processes can be activated in order to develop the skills and attributes that students need for professional and personal success<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Anglo-Saxon context in which the first fundamental pedagogical reflections on the concept of employability emerged, see V. Boffo, *Employability for the Social Economy: The Role of Higher Education*, in V. Boffo, Ead., P. Federighi - F. Torlone (Eds.), *Educational Jobs: Youth and Employability in the Social Economy. Investigations in Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom*, FUP, Firenze 2015, pp. 152-154 and V. Boffo, *Transizioni per il lavoro in Higher Education: il ruolo del Dottorato di Ricerca in Italia*, cit., pp. 27-30.

<sup>18</sup> See L. Harvey, *New Realities: The Relationship between Higher Education and Employment*, «Tertiary Education and Management», (VI), 2000, pp. 3-17; L. Harvey, *Defining and Measuring Employability*, «Quality in Higher Education», (VII), 2 (2001), pp. 97-109; M. Yorke - P.T. Knight, *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum: Learning & Employability Series 3*, Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), 2004; M. Yorke - P.T. Knight, *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum: Learning & Employability Series 1*, The Higher Education Academy, Yorke 2006. These are a sample of key works, however, it is important to acknowledge the large body of publications produced particularly in the 2000s by the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT), coordinated by Mantze Yorke, and the Higher Education Academy research group composed of: Peter Knight (Open University), Lee Harvey (Sheffield Hallam University), Stephen McNair (Surrey University), Brenda Little (CHERI), Kate Purcell (University of the West of England), Mike Hill (Graduate Prospects), Val Butcher (Higher Education Academy).

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth pedagogical discussion of Harvey, Yorke and Knight, as well as of Yorke and Knight's USEM employability model, refer to V. Boffo, *Employability and Higher Education: A Category for the Future.*, in V. Boffo - M. Fedeli - C. Melacarne (Eds.), *Fostering employability in adult and higher education: An international perspective*, Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ 2019, pp. 11-23.

<sup>20</sup> M. Yorke - P.T. Knight, *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum Series 1*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibi, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> M. Cheng et. al, cit., p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> S. Billet - S. Choy, *Learning through work: Emerging perspectives and new challenges*, «Journal of Workplace Learning», 2013, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> V. Boffo et. al., *Employability Processes and Transition Strategies in Higher Education: an Evidence-Based Research Study*, in Ead., M. Fedeli et. al, (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning for Employability. New Strategies in Higher Education*, Pearson, Milan-Turin 2017, pp. 168-169.

<sup>25</sup> See: V. Boffo, *Confini educativi: per una cura delle transizioni in alta formazione*, pp. 43-60.

Yorke and Knight suggest many different (and not mutually exclusive) approaches that utilize curricula design and teaching practice to develop and enhance employability, such as employability embedded within the whole curriculum, core curriculum and work-related learning<sup>26</sup>. The latter is particularly significant given the importance of engaging in real-life work activities and contexts for learning knowledge and skills that are relevant and transferable<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, contributions from the fields of psychology, anthropology and cognitive sciences in favor of establishing that engaging in authentic practice is essential to the learning process, have prompted pedagogists to further reflect on how to assist students in achieving learning outcomes (i.e. knowledge, skills and attributes) that will be useful and relevant for the transition from school to work<sup>28</sup>. Overall, the reflections on these contributions are in favor of the effectiveness of work-related learning compared to traditional classroom learning<sup>29</sup>.

With this in mind, understanding employability as a pedagogical construct should ideally produce knowledge on how curricula and strategies implemented by HEIs can support the development of competencies which are useful for the graduate transition. A pedagogical reflection posits employability at the center of an educational process and relationship of care: care for the student, care for their transition and care in the sense of profound reflection on behalf of HEIs on how their courses of study develop the professional and life pathways of graduates<sup>30</sup>. This is particularly relevant when one takes into account that the transitions of graduates are particularly affected by the economic crises of recent decades and by the phenomena of mismatch and overeducation, which represent a misalignment between courses of study and requirements of a labor market in continuous transformation<sup>31</sup>. One of the main takeaways of this reflection on employability is that HEIs need to focus on where and how graduates will apply what they have learned in university. In addition, HEIs should strengthen relationships and synergies with employers, the labor market and the social sector.

Within this context, this paper adopts the view of Career Services as a set of constructs, strategies and services that help cultivate connections<sup>32</sup> and serve as a bridge between the university's social mission, courses of study and the world of work<sup>33</sup>. Career Services, traditionally understood as services offered by HEIs to help students transition to a successful professional life after completing their studies, has undergone several transformations in line with changing economic, labor market and societal demands since vocational guidance centers first emerged on United States college campuses in the 1900's<sup>34</sup>. Today, the paradigm of Career Services has shifted from a transactional model of services based on job placement towards a new model that promotes care for students by facilitating transformative learning and building relationships<sup>35</sup>. Career Services is a facilitator of learning and connections, and an institutional presence - not simply a physical office - which guides curricular and extracurricular educational strategies, services and activities to cultivate employability<sup>36</sup>. In addition, a review of the literature also revealed the following:

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<sup>26</sup> M. Yorke - P.T. Knight, *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum Series 1*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> S. Billet - S. Choy, *Learning through work*, cit., pp. 1-13. The authors emphasize the benefits of learning in the context of work as a component of educational programs. The benefits for both learning and practice include: active engagement in work tasks and challenges; engagement in authentic social experiences and relations; and the subsequent ability to better recall and exercise what was learned (transferability) in future real work contexts.

<sup>28</sup> Ibi, pp. 4-8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibi, p. 5; p. 7. An example of Billet & Choy's reflections on the contributions of anthropology and cognitive science: «... much of what anthropologists propose as being non-propositional bases for learning and doing is quite inconsistent with the premises upon which educational programs are enacted. In particular, their emphasis on declarative knowledge (i.e. storable facts, propositions and concepts) may suit institutional practices and purposes, but perhaps not performance in contexts beyond them»; «... contributions to human cognition through both sensory means and ways of knowing can assist understanding learning through work and maybe explain why adaptability or transfer of knowledge [from schools, colleges, universities] might be so limited».

<sup>30</sup> For an in-depth discussion, refer to V. Boffo, *Confini educativi: per una cura delle transizioni in alta formazione*, cit., pp. 43-60 and V. Boffo, *Employability and Transitions*, cit., pp. 117-127.

<sup>31</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> F. Dey - C.Y. Cruzvergara, *Evolution of Career Services in Higher Education*, «New Directions For Student Services», 2014, pp. 5-18. Dey and Cruzvergara published their highly influential article in a journal geared towards Career Service practitioners making the case for a change of paradigm from a transactional service model to a *Connected Communities* model based on “meaningful connections to internship and employment opportunities as well as mentoring and experiential learning” (p. 8). Their work is the product of academic scholarship and decades of direct experience in Career Service leadership roles in the context of U.S. universities. For example, Dey transformed the organizational structure and institutional vision of Career Services at Johns Hopkins University, where he is currently the Vice Provost for Integrative Learning and Life Design, as well as at Stanford University during his previous tenure as Dean and Associate Vice Provost of Career and Experiential Education.

<sup>33</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., p. 16; M. Montefalcone, *Linee guida per lo sviluppo e il rafforzamento dei Career Service*, Italia Lavoro S.p.A., 2017, pp. 37-42.

<sup>34</sup> F. Dey - C.Y. Cruzvergara, *Evolution of Career Services*, cit., pp. 5-7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibi, pp. 5-18.

<sup>36</sup> Ibi, pp. 16-17.

- Career Services includes a dynamic ecosystem of relationships which fosters co-responsibility for developing students' employability among the various stakeholders<sup>37</sup> (academic departments, companies and employers, professors, students, alumni, the local community, etc.);
- Career Services includes a research culture and practice which promotes continual investigation of students' training needs and the needs of the labor market and civil society in order to encourage innovation at the university level to best meet these evolving needs<sup>38</sup>.

Thus, the theoretical framework for the research presented in this paper is the pedagogical category of employability and an understanding of Career Services as described above. The main objective of the research was to obtain a theoretical description of a student-centered, pedagogical model for university Career Services that can be shared with the EUniWell consortium to promote student wellbeing during the transition from education to the world of work. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that this inquiry is connected to the broader scope of the Transwell Project: investigating how to foster students' wellbeing in work-related learning, with specific reference to services that are provided by European universities in relation to "learning through work" (apprenticeship, internship, etc.) and "learning for work" (career services).

## 2. Research Methods

The literature on modern-day Career Services and the construct of employability have emphasized the importance of an educational and training dimension which facilitates work-related learning<sup>39</sup>, the development of transversal competencies, the development of a professional self and access to quality information about the labor market<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, strong relationships with stakeholders<sup>41</sup> and a research dimension<sup>42</sup> can also be considered as hallmarks of a pedagogical model for Career Services.

Given this framework, the present study aimed to investigate Career Services and work-related learning at universities within the EUniWell consortium in order to gain theoretical insights into a pedagogical model for Career Services. The research strategy selected was a theory-testing single-case study<sup>43</sup>. Within the realm of empirical inquiry, case study research is observational in nature and allows for the in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context<sup>44</sup>. Testing theory with cases allows researchers to understand whether, or the degree to which, empirical data supports the theories in question<sup>45</sup>. In this context, the case helps build incremental understanding rather than being a central strategy for developing theory<sup>46</sup>.

Løkke and Sørensen help further clarify the object of research in theory-testing case studies:

«theories as an object of interest can be developed, modified, and tested using case studies and thus serve as both input and output to the study (Campbell 1975, Eckstein 1975, Yin 2014). Theories-as-object is the special focus when case studies are used for theory testing, which distinguishes them from other types of case studies<sup>47</sup>».

<sup>37</sup> Ibi, pp. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>39</sup> S. Billet - S. Choy, *Learning through work*, cit., pp. 1-13; M. Yorke - P.T. Knight, *Embedding Employability into the Curriculum Series 1*, cit., pp 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., pp. 13-23.

<sup>41</sup> F. Dey - C.Y. Cruzvergara, *Evolution of Career Services in Higher Education*, cit., pp. 8; 10-11; 13-17; M. Montefalcone, *Linee guida per lo sviluppo e il rafforzamento dei Career Service*, cit., pp. 60-72.

<sup>42</sup> V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> L. Mortari, *Cultura della ricerca pedagogica. Prospettive epistemologiche*, Carocci, Roma 2007, p. 205. Drawing inspiration from a reflection of Dewey's expressed in his 1974 book, *Democracy and Education*, Mortari advocates for the equal importance of theoretical and empirical investigation in pedagogical research, declaring that: «Any theory, however well meditated, has a hypothetical value that needs to be put to the test before acquiring validity and attainability as an instrument for orienting practice» (p. 12-13). According to Mortari, empirical research in pedagogical sciences has been developed utilizing research strategies and techniques which have been adapted from other social sciences (p. 12). The case study is one such strategy (p. 60).

<sup>44</sup> R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA 2014, pp. 14-17.

<sup>45</sup> A. Løkke - P.D. Sørensen, *Theory Testing Using Case Studies*, «The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods», (XII), 1 2014, pp. 66-68.

<sup>46</sup> Ibi, pp. 68-69.

<sup>47</sup> Ibi, p. 68.

The study adopted an ecological research paradigm according to which knowledge cannot be separated from knowing subjects<sup>48</sup>. In line with this paradigm, qualitative methods are preferred for investigating lived and social phenomena without compromising their complexity<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, qualitative methods were adopted by the researchers in order to obtain thick data rich in meaning and depth based on the detailed testimonies and lived experiences of human subjects<sup>50</sup>.

The first step of the research design was to review the scientific literature on employability and Career Services in order to identify and clarify what data to collect and select the appropriate instrument for data collection. The instrument used was the semi-structured interview with a «purposeful sample»<sup>51</sup> of key informants, which aimed to obtain privileged and detailed information about the object under investigation. A flexible interview guide was developed with questions on the following topics: constructs and criteria used to inform practice; services and activities offered, with specific attention to students; the main actors with which relationships are developed (in addition to students); and how knowledge of the labor market is obtained. While the object of the case study was a theoretical pedagogical model for university Career Services, the key informants for data collection were professors from academic departments or faculties, as well as from dedicated offices with depth and breadth of experience with Career Services. This group comprised the key informants for this research because of their expert knowledge and breadth of experience with Career Services and work-related learning.

The third step consisted of data analysis supported by ATLAS.ti, a computer-aided software for qualitative data analysis. The approach to data analysis was thematic and abductive, as it included top-down and bottom-up reflexive processes<sup>52</sup>. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the documents were inputted into ATLAS.ti. Codes were grouped into themes before the coding process began, which corresponded to the questions of the semi-structured interview. This served as a first form of data classification although the classification was revisited and revised before arriving at the final analysis. The coding was done in three rounds. Throughout this process, the code manager, coding and open coding functions were utilized to tag the data whereas the comments and memos functions were used to annotate the data with observations. In most cases, codes were strongly informed by the theoretical framework and scientific literature (top-down approach). In some cases, however, codes emerged from the interviews (bottom-up approach).

### 3. Research Results

Eleven key informants from three universities of the EUniWell consortium who are partners of the Transwell Project were interviewed between September 2022 and January 2023. The interviewees were identified locally on the basis of their expert status and in-depth involvement in Career Services and work-related learning. The sample consisted of five key informants from the University of Florence, four from the Institute of Technology at Nantes University and two from the University of Birmingham. Of these 11 key informants, six are professors and teaching staff, and five occupy leadership and/or experienced staff roles in Career Service offices.

The analysis generated 20 codes corresponding to five code groups and 258 quotations. The first four code groups correspond to the themes present in the semi-structured interview guide, whereas the fifth group, “Prospects for Future Development”, emerged from the data (Figure 1). Code frequencies within several of the researchers adopted to code the data and examples from the data itself<sup>53</sup>. At a macro level, the code

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<sup>48</sup> For a brief overview of the ecological paradigm see L. Mortari, *Cultura della ricerca pedagogica*, cit., pp. 31-32; Mortari dedicates the second part of the first chapter to an in-depth explanation.

<sup>49</sup> Ibi, p. 63. The choice of qualitative methods is also connected to the hermeneutical-phenomenological epistemological orientation outlined by Mortari that places lived experience and human relationships lived experience at the center of meaning and knowledge generation. To adopt this orientation in educational research is also to draw attention to the pedagogical value of lived experience and relations (see D. Fuster, *Qualitative Research: Hermeneutical Phenomenological Method*, «Propósitos y Representaciones», (VII), 1 2019, p. 222).

<sup>50</sup> S.B. Merriam, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, in Id. and associates (Eds.), *Qualitative research in practice: examples for discussion and analysis*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA 2002, p. 5-6. Merriam underlines on page 3 that the basis for «understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world», which is in line with the ecological research paradigm and epistemological orientation presented by L. Mortari (see notes 48 and 49).

<sup>51</sup> S.B. Merriam, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> J. Thompson, *A Guide to Abductive Thematic Analysis*, «The Qualitative Report», (XXVII), 5 (2022), pp. 1410-1421.

<sup>53</sup> J. Thompson, *A Guide to Abductive Thematic Analysis*, cit., pp. 1413-1414. The European University for Wellbeing (EUniWell) is a European University Alliance funded by the European Commission as part of the 2020 Erasmus+ program. It currently has eleven university members, three of which are

groups reflect the components of a pedagogical design for Career Services and the social mission of universities to generate value for society by providing quality education in line with the needs of 21st-century work and society<sup>54</sup>. At a micro level, the code groups represent a pedagogical vision of what it might take for HEIs to educate the leaders and professionals of tomorrow.

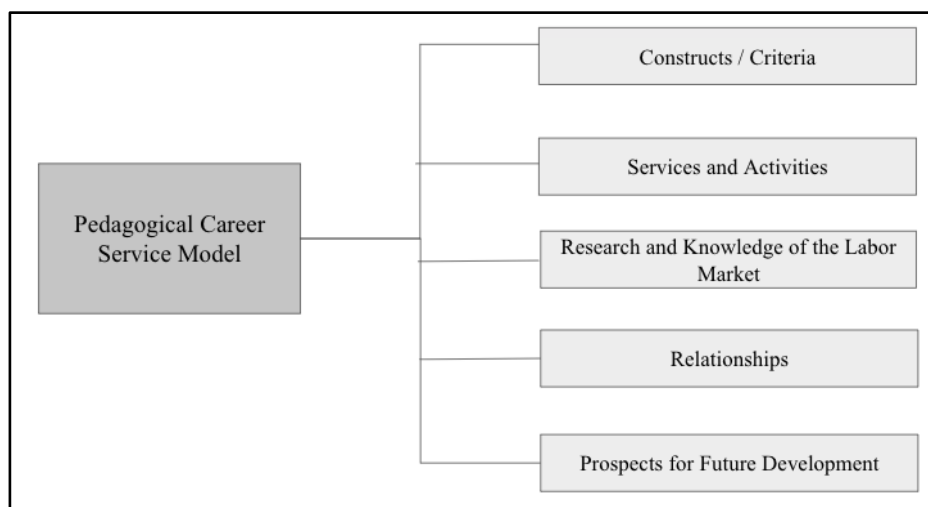


Figura 1 - Code groups

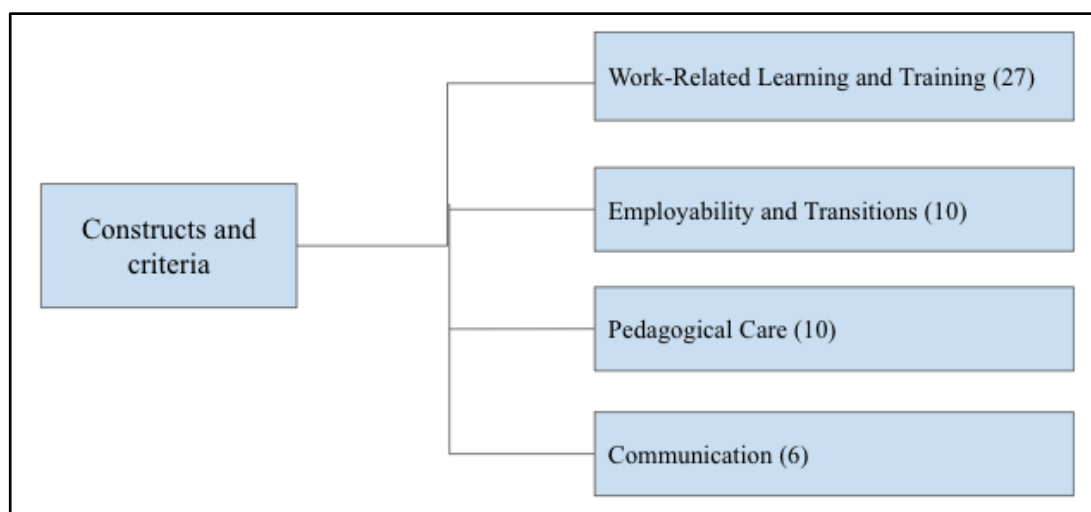


Figura 2 - Constructs and Criteria Code Group

The construct and criteria for a pedagogical Career Services model detected most frequently in the data was training and work-related learning, which refers to an intentional educational strategy, which creates and promotes connections between university and the world of work in order to achieve subject-specific and transversal learning outcomes, including the development of competencies that are essential for employability<sup>55</sup>. While the activities which fall into this category are varied, they have in common their use of «the context of work

part of the Transwell EUniWell Seed Fund Project: the University of Birmingham, the University of Florence and the University of Nantes. The main objectives of this transnational university alliance is to develop joint research and teaching on well-being while also promoting strong civic engagement and the transformation of its member institutions towards HE cultures, contexts and ecosystems that promote well-being. More information about EUniWell is available at <https://www.euniwell.eu/> (last consulted 20 June 2023).

<sup>54</sup> Also see M. Montefalcone, *Linee guida per lo sviluppo e il rafforzamento dei Career service*, cit., pp. 37-42.

<sup>55</sup> See M.A. Hamilton - S.F. Hamilton, *Learning well at work: Choices for quality*, National School-to-Work Opportunities Office, Washington, DC. - Cornell University Dept of Human Development and Family Studies, Ithaca, NY 1997, pp. 9-32; S. Billet, *Developing Domains of Occupational Competence: Workplaces and Learner Agency*, in M. Mulder (Ed.), *Competence-based Vocational and Professional Education: Bridging the Worlds of Work and Education*, Springer, Cham 2017, pp. 47-66.

to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work»<sup>56</sup>.

Examples within the data include:

«The focal point of our model is training. In what sense? The focal point is training beginning with each area of study, and including offerings of work-related learning, of traineeships, of training for entering the job market.»

[...]

«There is an existing and strong culture of professional integration in our Institute and all our courses are designed to be professionally oriented (project-oriented classes, practical classes, strong connection with companies and the presence of temporary staff belonging to the corporate world, the development of apprenticeship, internships, and so on)»

Closely connected with the dimension of training and work-related learning was an emphasis on developing students' competencies:

«Another pillar of our model is competencies. I wouldn't call them professional competencies or technical skills or competencies for a specific job. I could call them life competencies, competencies for the multiple organizational dimensions of life: transitions, social life, private life, civic life, etc. So, we could call these competencies life skills that include technical and transversal skills.»

In addition, other constructs and criteria identified in the data were employability and transitions, and pedagogical care. Employability and transitions have been discussed in the previous section; however, in relation to a pedagogical model for Career Services, employability is also interpreted as a category that stimulates reflection on the educational goals, actions, and interventions to be implemented within HEIs in order to create educational pathways towards the world of work<sup>57</sup>. An example of one such reflection related to employability from the data is:

«... an effective response to the needs of students to be aware of their challenge of transitioning from study to work. So, the main objective but also the value of university Career Services is and should be to respond to a need of awareness. Awareness of who we are, not necessarily as students but as people, awareness of our needs, our attitudes, our interests, in order to shift our focus from university books to the territory, to what it offers, to reality, to the professional world. And with this awareness, with curiosity and initiative and all of the skills that students need, go and seek out the best conditions for one's professional path.»

Pedagogical care (also referred to in the literature as educational care), on the other hand, understands care as a «a relational practice, in which an adult, who is responsible for the relationship, facilitates a young person's care for life»<sup>58</sup>. The educator establishes and actively maintains a relationship of care by adopting relational postures and behaviors such as profound listening, empathy, attentiveness, reflexivity, etc. such that they are able to support students' wellbeing and implement actions which respond to students' needs<sup>59</sup>.

Care also translates into commitments and actions, which can be interpreted within the four phases of Tronto's model of care:

- "recognition of need" or "caring about" as paying close and deliberate attention to the needs and problems of students with a sense of recognition that these needs deserve to be met;
- "willingness to respond" or "taking care of" as assuming responsibility for responding to the identified needs and problems of students;
- "direct action" or "care giving" as meeting these needs and ensuring that the individuals and organizational infrastructure involved in the caregiving possess an accurate understanding of the

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<sup>56</sup> Great Britain. Department for Children, Schools and Families. *The Work Related Learning Guide (2nd Ed.)*, 2009, p. 6. As mentioned in the introduction, Anglo-Saxon scholarship has a long history of important contributions to the category of employability and work-related learning is no different. In line with the decision to cite Anglo-Saxon definitions for employability, we are also citing an Anglo-Saxon definition for work-related learning.

<sup>57</sup> V. Boffo, *Employability and Transitions*, cit., pp. 124-5.

<sup>58</sup> L. Mortari, *For a Pedagogy of Care*, «Philosophy Study», (VI), 8 (2016), p. 457.

<sup>59</sup> Ibi, pp. 456-460.

problem, the appropriate competencies in order to respond and the capacity to deliver an effective response;

- “reaction to the care process” or “receiving care” as the receiver of care actively participating in the process and responding to the care they have received<sup>60</sup>.

Within the context of HE and Career Services, care was interpreted as universities recognizing the needs of students, assuming the responsibility for implementing actions to address these needs, and doing so by employing knowledge and competencies. Examples in the data include:

«The University recruits a huge number of students, an increasing number of students from widening participation backgrounds. And that's a key part of our [Career Services] strategy because we know that they often don't succeed as well as students from more privileged backgrounds. And so, for instance, there is specialist support around that.»

«There was scientific investigation into the educational aspects of our services, how they could be developed, put in place and delivered. The other aspect of this was a continual and constant interface with the world of work to ensure that there was an alignment between what was thought out and developed and later delivered [by our office], and what could be actually necessary for those who receive our graduates into their workforce.»

Lastly, communication emerged within the data as an important construct and criterion for a pedagogical Career Services model. Specifically, this refers to dynamic and bi-directional communication that fosters engagement and active participation of stakeholders in the university's educational mission<sup>61</sup>. For example, one key informant described how adopting a standardized skill framework was an important step to help engage students in the larger campus discussion about skills as well as to help students reflect on the transferability of their learning:

«One of the purposes of the Graduate Attributes Framework is to have a standardized kind of set of language so we're all using the same thing. Because obviously, when we're working in such a large university with lots of different people, people will phrase things very differently. So I think that's part of the drive to bring in this attributes framework, so that we're all kind of using similar language, and therefore students can actually understand that language [...] If they're analyzing data [in a science course], they don't realize that actually what they're doing is developing data analysis skills that could be transferable into another arena if they decided to do so. So, I think it's making sure that, yes, they are understanding that they're learning subject-specific skills, but that these are transferable skills as well.»

<sup>60</sup> J.C. Tronto, *Confini morali. Un argomento politico per l'etica della cura* (1993), tr. it. N. Riva, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2006; G. Maio, *Fundamentals of an Ethics of Care*, in F. Krause & J. Boldt (Eds.), *Care in Healthcare: Reflections on Theory and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2018, p. 52. The four phases of care are from Tronto whereas, to aid in comprehensibility, the original names of these phases have been integrated with those of Table 1 from Maio's contribution on care ethics for medical practitioners. The researcher's share the view expressed by Maio on page 52 in terms of the added value of Tronto's model of care because of its operational and action-oriented nature: «the political scientist Joan Tronto understands care not primarily as virtue, but rather as practice (Tronto 1993); she makes it clear that care cannot be achieved through good intentions alone, but can only be considered to have been carried out when these good intentions have actually resulted in some kind of effect on the other person». Indeed, this statement mirrors the affirmation in V. Boffo, *Per una cura delle transizioni in alta formazione*, cit., p. 51: «The interesting point of [Tronto's] vision of care is that of commitment, for Tronto care implicates action...».

<sup>61</sup> L. Toschi, *La comunicazione generativa per i servizi alla carriera e per la Terza Missione dell'Università e degli Enti di ricerca*, in V. Boffo (Ed.), *Giovani adulti tra transizioni e alta formazione: strategie per l'employability. Dal Placement al Career Service*. Pacini Editore, Pisa 2018, pp. 187-214.

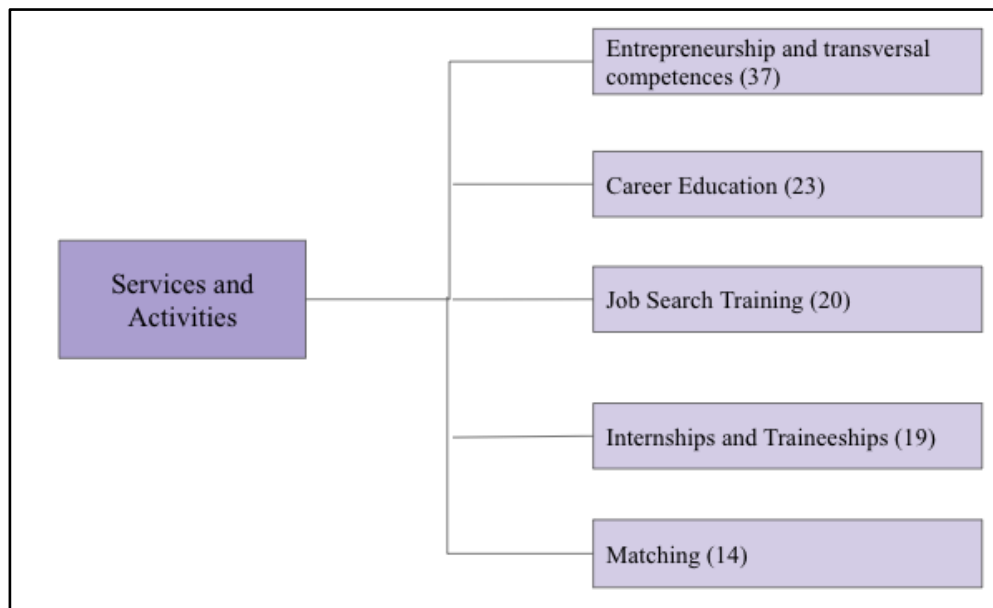


Figura 3 - Services and Activities Code Group

According to the data (Figure 3), Career Service insiders indicated a strong emphasis on developing and offering services and activities centered around transversal competencies, including entrepreneurial-related competencies such as creativity, flexibility, initiative and problem-solving<sup>62</sup>.

The type of activities and services detected in the data include:

- Initiatives and actions to integrate transversal competencies into the formal curriculum (syllabi and assessment);
- Skills training that is complementary to the formal curriculum (for example, the Personal Skills Award, a flexible employability program to help undergraduate students develop, recognize and articulate their skills through participation in university initiatives, extracurricular experiences, work experience and dedicated online modules);
- Entrepreneurship initiatives such as challenges, hackathons, innovation hubs and incubator labs, a formal university status for student entrepreneurs, and an 'entrepreneurial gym' which has an intentional multidisciplinary character by bringing together different academic disciplines to work on real-life problems.

Within the variety of different activities and services for developing competencies discussed by the key informants, two observations are particularly interesting to point out:

«Embedded within the [skills] program is a fundamental part that the [Career Services] team will then take them through various modules and help them understand, and teach them how to understand and articulate those experiences to employers. Because it's all very well having the experience, but sometimes what some students struggle with is actually articulating them.»

«The student entrepreneur can attend training classes and dedicate his second-year internship to develop his entrepreneurial activity. We particularly promote this opportunity inside the PPP [Personal and Professional Project course] so that they can take the full advantage of this student entrepreneur status.»

Other prominent services and activities within a pedagogical career services model include: career education (focus on developing one's professional self, including dimensions of awareness and understanding of one's

<sup>62</sup> See M. Bacigalupo et. al., *EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*, «Publication Office of the European Union», Luxembourg 2016. The researchers adopt the view of the European Commission that entrepreneurship is a life competence which includes a sense of initiative aimed at generating value for society. According to this broad definition, entrepreneurship does not narrowly refer to starting a business but rather to a transversal competency which can be applied «to all spheres of life from nurturing personal development, to actively participating in society, to (re)entering the job market as an employee or as a self-employed person, and also to starting up ventures (cultural, social or commercial)» p. 6.

personal interests and capabilities and of professions and labor market possibilities); job search training (focus on tools and techniques for entering the job market conscientiously, including job search strategies, cover letter and resume development, mock interviews, assessment, etc.); internships and traineeships, particularly within students' course of study; and matching or placement focused on facilitating fruitful encounters between students and employers (organizing career fairs, providing support for recruitment initiatives, etc.). In relation to the services and activities focused on career education, insiders emphasized the focus on developing students' awareness to help foster an informed and autonomous management of their professional and personal paths:

«Career Services, in my opinion, should not make [professional] choices for students but it can do a lot to prepare and lay the groundwork for developing the awareness that is necessary in order to make choices.»

«[The activities] try to help students understand their potential and their capabilities that many times are there but they are not known to the student.»

«For the events in which it's relevant to bring in a testimony or an organization, it's important - this is an aspect that must be managed - that that testimony or organization helps clarify in the eyes of the student the particularities of that job. [...] It's fundamental to not amplify ambiguities but to help clarify them.»

As suggested by the above quotation, an effective pedagogical model of Career Services also entails engaging in collaborative relationships with a variety of different organizations in order to expose and share privileged testimony about the world of work and professions with students.

With respect to the multitude of stakeholders with whom to develop relationships and collective responsibility for students' employability<sup>63</sup>, the data indicated a strong prevalence of relationship building with companies and employers. This aspect was mentioned universally by key informants in all of the interviews. A wide range of initiatives and activities were detected in the data ranging from promoting and organizing internships and traineeships, research on and synergy with the world of work (i.e. labor market observatory, advisory boards, round tables), organizing meetings and presentations involving students and employers for the purposes of career education and matching, and more. Another affirmation that was transversal in the interviews was that strong connections between HEIs, the world of work and the social sector are fundamental for Career Services and the social mission of universities in general (i.e. educating graduates that are able to participate fully in society).

The data also revealed efforts and initiatives to develop relationships with and between courses of study and faculty, with professionals and professional associations and, to a lesser extent, with alumni. These relationships have resulted in and are fostered by active participation of stakeholders in campus and/or department events and course-related activities connected to work-related learning. An example of this is inviting professionals to speak in class and to participate as members of a panel when students present group projects or presentations. Nevertheless, with some notable exceptions, the overall emphasis was on companies and employers as the group of actors who received the most mentions and discussion in the interviews.

The results from the fourth top-down code group (Figure 4) concerned the type of research actions aimed at obtaining knowledge of the labor market (i.e. trends, skill and training needs, graduate career prospects, etc.).

<sup>63</sup> T. Cumbo, *I Career Service nell'Università italiana*, in V. Boffo (Ed.), *Giovani adulti tra transizioni e alta formazione: strategie per l'employability. Dal Placement al Career Service*, Pacini, Pisa 2018, pp. 34-35. According to Cumbo, the main actors that are part of a university ecosystem that favors the development of employability are: companies and employers, academic departments, professors and teaching staff, labor and social organizations, professional organizations and alumni. The relations and connections between these actors help promote a shared responsibility for developing students' employability. In addition, they help develop and sustain a variety of services (internship and traineeship, mentoring and guidance, career education, networking, etc.) that help students discover, negotiate and manage their professional and personal paths.

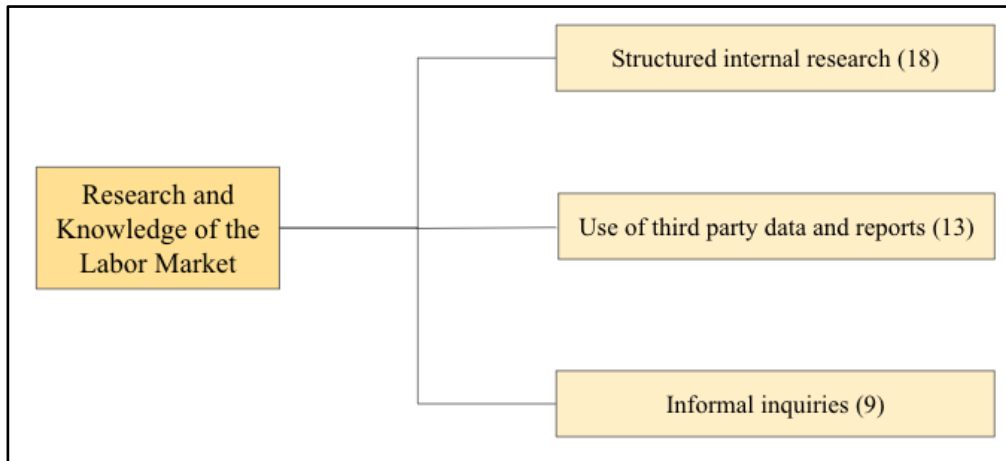


Figura 4 - Research Actions and Sources of Labor Market Knowledge

These actions were classified in three main groups according to the type of activity carried out<sup>64</sup>:

- Structured internal research conducted by academic departments of the university and/or by research collaborations directly connected with the university;
- Use of research, data, statistics, etc. carried out by third parties, such as national or European agencies, research institutes, etc. for monitoring and interpreting labor market information;
- Informal and ongoing inquiries through direct contact and networking with employers and other key partners.

It is important to point out that engaging with research emerged as a strong point of a pedagogical Career Services model. Despite concerns voiced in the interviews about resource constraints (time and funding), insiders emphasized the importance of systematic inquiries and data collection for assessing the quality, relevance and effects of services and activities. The type of structured internal research detected in the interviews include qualitative and quantitative data collection as part of a quality framework (i.e. customer satisfaction surveys, professional integration surveys), surveys of labor market stakeholders and theoretical research. According to the insiders, the results are used to inform internal decision making in line with a scientific approach. In addition, there were also multiple instances in the data of publications through collaborations with publishing houses and research organizations.

The objects of structured internal research were services, activities, and in some instances, theory. The use of third-party data was referenced predominantly in relation to labor market trends and needs. Graduate placements as an object of research was mixed, with insiders from one institution relying on internal surveys as well as external data, and insiders from the other two institutions discussing relying mainly on third party data for information on placements. With respect to the latter point, insiders acknowledged that although the third party research is robust, it is based on national data whereas the possibility to carry out surveys on an university level which could then be compared to national data would produce a more nuanced understanding of graduate transitions and institutional performance.

Finally, the last code group emerged from the data (bottom-up) and highlighted prospects and areas of future development according to the key informants' rich depth and breadth of experience. The areas detected in the data are:

- Research on and innovation of professions, especially emerging professions;

<sup>64</sup> The researchers adopt the declinations of Montefalcone for the type of actions that universities may undertake to produce knowledge about the labor market. See M. Montefalcone, *Linee guida per lo sviluppo e il rafforzamento dei Career Service*, cit., p. 74. Within these declinations is the assumption that knowledge must be generated about three main facets of the labor market: the general context of the world of work, including local, regional, national, European and international contexts; the demands of these labor markets and the knowledge and skill needs of companies and employers. Within the context of HE, producing knowledge about the labor market is connected to lines of inquiry developed by professors and researchers and an evidence-based approach to revising and informing the design of courses of study based on the trends, training and skill needs identified.

- Faculty and staff training in order to promote work-related learning and embed these educational strategies and actions within courses of study, as well as to promote shared responsibility for developing students' employability;
- Increasing personalization of services, experiences and support, which also includes capacity building in the area of Career Services to bridge training and resource gaps (i.e. limited budget and human resources).

#### 4. Discussion and Implications

The results of the present research confirm a theoretical description of a pedagogical model for Career Services that is in line with current theory. In addition, the results affirm the presence and importance of a research dimension within a Career Services model and suggest important prospects for future development such as intensifying research on emerging professions, increasing personalization of services and focusing on faculty and staff development to improve HEIs' capacity to develop students' employability. As the literature suggests, a pedagogical model is based on education and training, work-related learning, an understanding of employability and graduate transitions, the exercise of care and communication, which fosters and generates shared vision and engagement. The educational actions and services that follow are based on the development of transversal competencies, including entrepreneurship, career education, and internships and apprenticeships. Although Career Services has evolved from a model based exclusively on placement, matching activities do still have a place in today's Career Service model. However, the main objective involves facilitating educational processes based on life competencies<sup>65</sup> via strategies, services and activities continuously informed by research. The results also confirm the strong relational character of Career Services, which involves cultivating relationships with internal and external stakeholders in order to implement fruitful collaborations and a sense of shared responsibility and action for developing students' employability.

Career Service is not merely a physical space (office) that provides services. Above all, it is an institutional presence<sup>66</sup> and an ecosystem of relationships<sup>67</sup> that promote strategies and actions aimed at supporting students' transformative learning and developing their employability<sup>68</sup>. With this in mind, the research findings also allow us to make pedagogical interpretations on a micro, meso and macro level. At the micro level, the results provide insight into the construction of human subjectivity in the context of students' transition from HE to the world of work. Preparing students for life after university requires stakeholders to recognize their needs and respond to them within an ecosystem of strong relationships and shared responsibility.

At the meso and macro level, the theoretical bases of a pedagogical Career Service model provide an initial roadmap on how university courses of study and HE itself can help address the needs of students, society and the labor market. From the point of view of pedagogical care, it is necessary to ensure that the connections between courses of study and the professional world are adequately developed to keep up with the rapid changes and transformations that characterize the 21st century. Despite a wide acceptance in the literature about the importance of competencies, it is well known that universities have not fully embraced or integrated them in the courses of study<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, universities are facing great challenges in terms of keeping up with the pace of change of the world of work which, overall, is evolving much more rapidly than university offerings towards an emphasis on competencies.

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<sup>65</sup> Most notably in the European sphere, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union published a European framework for key competences for lifelong learning in 2006. Most recently, in the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning*, the Council described these key competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes which all have equal importance. With respect to the 2006 Framework, the Council added in 2018 (in italics) that these are competencies: «which all individuals need for personal fulfillment *and development*, employability, social inclusion, *sustainable lifestyle, successful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious life management* and active citizenship» (p. 7). The European framework declines eight key life competencies which, using the revisited language of the 2018 Council Recommendation, are: Literary competence; Multicultural competence; Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; Digital competence; Personal, social and learning to learn competence; Citizenship competence; Entrepreneurship competence; and Cultural awareness and expression competence.

<sup>66</sup> F. Dey - C.Y. Cruzvergara, *Evolution of Career Services in Higher Education* cit., p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> M. Montefalcone, *Linee guida per lo sviluppo e il rafforzamento dei Career Service*, cit., pp. 60-72.

<sup>68</sup> See V. Boffo, *Introduzione. Dal Job Placement ai Career Service*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> V. Boffo, *Transizioni per il lavoro in Higher Education*, cit., p. 18.

For example, to cite one recent report from this year, in the *Future of Jobs Report 2023*, the World Economic Forum affirms the importance of skills-based<sup>70</sup> and on-the-job training as strategies to implement in order to help the entire adult population adapt to and navigate the rapid changes of the labor market. The same report also indicates that employers are increasingly turning to skills assessments to identify talent, with current data indicating that these have already begun to assume a more important role in selection than degree type and subject<sup>71</sup>.

The results of this research from a theoretical and empirical perspective point to the importance of cultivating employability and constructing competencies<sup>72</sup>. Within a meso and macro perspective, the facilitation of these learning outcomes requires an «embedded employability process»<sup>73</sup> which needs to be supported by a redesign of university curricula and a newfound sense of purpose of HE with implications for increasing the quality and quantity of work-related learning within courses of study accompanied by quality guidance. In this sense, the challenge ahead is to integrate a student-centered pedagogical model of Career Services into university courses of study themselves<sup>74</sup>. The pedagogical model of Career Services confirmed by this research can offer guidance on the guiding constructs, activities and services, relationships and research activities to promote and integrate within the architecture of university courses of study.

With respect to the limitations of this study, it is important to note that the sample includes a relatively small number of key informants and that this number could be increased for future research. Nevertheless, this criticality is partially mitigated by the type of research strategy used which aims to build incremental understanding of theoretical concepts that have already been firmly consolidated by decades of research. Moreover, the results are strengthened by the quality of the testimony of the key informants who represent privileged insiders with depth and breadth of knowledge and experience regarding Career Services and work-related learning. Lastly, regarding future research developments, it is important to connect this qualitative investigation with the broader research project currently underway which aims to collect quantitative data at a European level on how to foster students' wellbeing in transition from academia to the labor market, with a focus on work-related learning in relation to career services, internships, apprenticeships, and more. In addition, the results of bottom-up code group, *Prospects for Future Development*, allow us to interpret research trajectories on emerging and future professions as a response to the need of work-related learning and Career Services practitioners who require evidence on this topic in order to keep making informed decisions about strategies, activities and services. Thus, the dissemination efforts of researchers studying these topics should also target Career Services offices and university representatives of relevant courses of study.

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<sup>70</sup> For example, according to the World Economic Forum, analytical thinking and creative thinking are considered the most important skills for the global labor market in 2023. Other skills include self-efficacy (resilience, flexibility, agility), motivation and self-awareness, lifelong learning, attention to detail, technological literacy, and interpersonal skills and attitudes such as empathy, active listening, leadership and social influence. See WEF, *Future of Jobs Report 2023*, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023> (last consulted 20 June 2023), p.6; pp. 42-44. It is important to note that these skills are also reflected in the *European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (see note 65). To cite the Council of the European Union's 2018 Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, «skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, team work, communication and negotiation skills, analytical skills, creativity, and intercultural skills are embedded throughout the key competences» (p. 7).

<sup>71</sup> Ibi, pp. 54-55. See Figure 5.5 on page 54 for the ways companies report assessing skills when hiring, which include reviewing previous work experience, assessments, HE degree completion, psychometric testing, completion of short courses and apprenticeship. The report also makes clear, however, that university degrees still continue to play a top role in selection especially in certain geographic areas.

<sup>72</sup> Competences as learning outcomes have been discussed in the previous sections of this paper in relation to employability, work-related learning and graduate transitions. However, this is also true from the perspective of pedagogical care, according to which the fundamental purpose of education is to accompany students «through the process of building the cognitive skills and emotional attitudes they will need to be self-sufficient and enthusiastic on the path of their existence». L. Mortari, *For a Pedagogy of Care*, cit., p. 457.

<sup>73</sup> V. Boffo et al., *Employability Processes and Transition Strategies in Higher Education*, cit., p. 162. This interpretation of employability in the context of HE curricula and courses of study was adopted in the context of an empirical study about graduate transitions conducted by the Florence Research Unit of the *Emp&Co* (Employability and Competencies) Project of Relevant National Interest funded by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research. The research aimed to investigate «the role that pedagogy can play in supporting transitions from the university to the professional world, due to its ability to design, plan and manage educational activities that accompany the search for a 'decent job' (ILO, 2012)» (p. 175).

<sup>74</sup> P. Federighi, *Higher Education of Education and Training Professionals*, in V. Boffo - P. Federighi - F. Torlone, *Educational Jobs: Youth and Employability in the Social Economy*, FUP, Firenze 2015, p. 131. From the point of view of ensuring quality outcomes of HE courses of study, it is important to emphasize that skills are not the same as credentials. The former refers to *skillful practice* (in the words of Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 5) and the latter to what qualifications (formal titles) one possesses. For skills and credentials to correspond to one another, a focus on innovation and quality in HE (including assessing the effectiveness of courses of study to achieve desired and desirable life and professional outcomes) is paramount.

## 5. Conclusion

The qualitative data obtained as part of research was part of a theory-testing case study that gave voice to key informants with a depth and breadth of experience with Career Services and work-related learning in three European universities. Their testimonies allowed the object of inquiry, pedagogical theory on Career Services, to be examined and confirmed based on empirical data. The research results also highlight the potential of a pedagogical approach to Career Services to assume an educational and transformational character not just for students, but for all the actors involved. The following reflections from two key informants demonstrate how this aspect is connected with the relationship and research dimension of Career Services:

«[...] an investigation among employers [in our database] to understand what they need and especially what the new professions are, i.e. the emerging professions that are talked so much about but here we are, meaning companies look for engineers, we propose engineers. But staying in this pattern means we're not able to intercept nor promote the possibility of other professionals, other forms of professionalism being adopted in the companies.»

«The labor market observatory was not just a place to receive information, but to give information. There was a process of educating and providing guidance to companies.»

These reflections invite the possibility of further research and consideration of the types of resources, including networks and skills, and best practices that are needed to sustain a multi-level culture of research and innovation within courses of study and synergy at the university level. In the words of another key informant:

«Career Services is a think tank of ideas to be continuously renewed and that is characterized by vast possibilities of innovation in its offer, vision and objectives. Career Services mutates, it needs to mutate based on cultural, social and economic changes lived by the people that it works with: students, graduates, the world of work. So it is not and it cannot be static but it must evolve continuously through a critical and analytical perspective. This is the reason why a group of researchers of these themes is needed, researchers and experts of all the areas involved so that this think tank can produce beneficial effects as well as innovation.»

The theoretical constructs and bases of a pedagogical Career Services model examined in this qualitative research are a point of departure for universities in the EUniWell consortium and beyond to examine their current models and experiment with innovations, not just for their Career Service offices but especially within courses of study and at the university-wide level. Working on the construction of competencies implies a deep caring for on behalf of universities that are called on to listen, accompany, imagine, innovate, teach and design pathways to the world of work and fruitful participation in 21st century society that promote the success and wellbeing of graduates. The goal of HE is to produce resilient graduates, capable of satisfying personal objectives, meeting societal challenges and navigating the constantly evolving demands of the labor market with a sense of agency. Thus, a focus on competencies, rather than disciplinary content in and of itself, represents an appropriate educational response and much needed evolution in HE degree tracks. Although we can affirm that Career Services as a centralized office is capable of promoting and providing useful activities and services for developing students' employability, the pace of change outside of universities is such that it is unsustainable for Career Services to remain solely as a parallel curriculum or extracurricular offering. Innovation is urgently needed in order to activate teaching and learning within formal curricula that adequately prepares students for the professional world and life beyond university. A student-centered, pedagogical Career Services model can play a key supporting role to help orient the direction of this innovation so that embedded employability is achieved.

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