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## LifeLong Learning and Higher Education: to Build Professions for the Future

### *LifeLong Learning e Alta Formazione: costruire professioni per il futuro*

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abstract

*The article focuses on the topic of the professions in the education and training field as output of the master degree of the pedagogical area starting from the results of an empirical research conducted among the master's degree graduates in the study courses in Adult Education, Continuous Training and Pedagogical Sciences. The transformation imposed by the labor market on educational professions in recent decades shifted the center of gravity of the formation from the certainty of the workplace to insecurity and uncertainty. There is the necessity to find new models of formation for innovative curricula in higher education. The category of employability is located right at the center of the curricular innovation. To interpret employability in the best way means to allow the creation of professionals who know how to learn from the change and operate in the educational and training areas of the future.*

**Keywords:** *employability, adult education, higher education*

L'articolo pone all'attenzione il tema delle professioni educative e formative in uscita dalle lauree magistrali di area pedagogica a partire dai risultati di una ricerca empirica svolta fra i laureati magistrali di corsi di studio di Scienze dell'educazione degli adulti, della formazione continua e Scienze pedagogiche. La trasformazione che il mercato del lavoro ha imposto alle professioni educative negli ultimi decenni ha spostato il baricentro della formazione dalla certezza del luogo di lavoro alla precarietà e all'incertezza. Si rendono necessari nuovi modelli di formazione per curricula innovativi per l'alta formazione. La categoria di employability si situa proprio al centro dell'innovazione curriculare. Interpretarla al meglio permetterà di costruire professionisti che sapranno apprendere dal cambiamento e operare nei settori educativi e formativi del futuro.

**Parole chiave:** occupabilità, educazione degli adulti, istruzione superiore

# LifeLong Learning and Higher Education: to Build Professions for the Future

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## **1. To introduce: the context of master degree's professions in the formation area**

The themes of work and professions as outputs of the routes of higher education are relatively new, if viewed according to the pedagogical perspective. In Italy also Adult Education was interested a little in the topic of professionalisation, on the contrary, in the Anglo-Saxon countries the theme has been much debated, so much so as to become a true wide field of research (Harvey, 1999, 2001, 2003; Pegg *et alii*, 2012; Yorke, Knight, 2003, 2006). More accurate studies on education and training professions can be found at Italian level, starting from the beginning of the year 2000 (Alberici, Orefice, 2006), thanks to research contributions considered very important for the legislation and the regulatory definition of these professions.

The contribution that the current research provides to the development of the reflection on the professionalisation in contexts of lifelong learning training and in those of formal, non-formal and informal education can be placed in continuity with the research on university curricula and the skills that higher education delivers to graduates. In this sense, the theme of professionalisation interfaces with that of the lifelong learning starting from the solidity of the competences and capabilities that the curricular paths are able to activate (Nussbaum, 2011). Already a decade ago the Italian research of Alberici (2006), Orefice (2006), Calaprice (2007), Federighi (2015), Loiodice (2015) put this in evidence, *a fortiori* today, emerges with particular attention the link between the three mentioned axes, for the construction of new professional figures.

The framework of the context is certainly changed, both from when the international research has detected a direct connection between university study paths, construction of skills for the employability and ability to orientate oneself in the world of work in continuous evolution, and from when, in 2008, the worldwide financial crisis hit the Western States discovering the problem of youth unemployment as one of the greatest for

the growth policies of the industrialised countries. Currently, the dimensions of youth unemployment remained far-reaching in Italy, Spain, Greece, they restricted instead in other European countries, leaving space to the problem of *skills mismatch* (OECD, 2016; 2017). The university paths in Italy are not exempt from the latter problem and in addition have to fight graduates' unemployment (AlmaLaurea, 2017).

We can say, however, that only recently the problem of graduates' employability has imposed and that the research question on the potential for employability in the transition to work, especially from the first to the second real job, was not so frequently investigated.

In this sense, it is possible to think that talking about professionalisation for the contexts of formation is an integral part of a reflection on the Adult and Learning Education, as today is called the field of study that deals with education and adult learning in a wide-ranging way. Study and research on the professionalisation in higher education have become important also for the didactical development of university curricula. If we consider the AVA 2.0 system, introduced by MIUR in December 2016 (MIUR, 2016), we can evaluate how, according to the new rules for the establishment and management of university study courses, the centrality attributed to the student is addressed to the construction of skills for the professional as well as personal future. We can say that the construction of a professional dimension is an integral part of the construction of the study curricula, didactical methodologies and the purposes for which the contemporary University exists and is a central institution for the future of the country.

The professionalisation is linked to the research, education and the Third Mission in an unequivocal way (ANVUR, 2015). To consider higher education from this point of observation, allows us to have a vision on the future strategies to be adopted to stay inside the university contexts with a sense of responsibility for the future of the generations that we are training and the world that research and other university missions contribute to change (European Commission, 2012, 2014).

We are doubly interested in the development of the professionalization both for the main interest to connect with the world of work – that as Dewey wrote, is also the world of life (Dewey, 1899, 1938) – and for the contribution that pedagogy could give to the reflection on these themes, and also for the commitment that we must assume in the definition of professional profiles that go out of the master degree's study courses that are of relevance for researchers and teachers who take care of the pedagogical, educational and formative areas inside the Italian university contexts.

To develop a reflection on the connection among curriculum, skills and

work is the main educational task of the University as institution and, therein, even of those involved in adult education and work pedagogy. Starting from these reflections we have set an empirical research that sustain the change inside the master degree in adult education and pedagogical sciences so as to form the practitioners to be able to live, work, transform and adapt to the tasks assigned by an ever-evolving world that is growing exponentially.

Let us add that we could speak, at the theoretical level, about a new way of studying the human formation, that represented the center of the pedagogical studies from the end of the Eighties of the twentieth century until at least the beginning of the Year Two Thousand (Cambi, 2000). We could say that this was a new way of dealing with the category of formation and care of the formation (Mortari, 2007). A formation that goes from the personal and micro level, to a professional and meso-macro level whereas the size of the professionalisation is not only a new research field, but a mandatory declination through which we look to the theme of human education and, therefore, of formation. Starting precisely from these considerations, we could say that it is necessary to investigate which are the professional fields, jobs, and above all, skills required to graduates in the teaching/education/formation context. To take care of these aspects, means to assign these fields the dignity and centrality that too many times, in the world of work, have been expropriated.

## **2. The category of employability**

Framing the study of professionalisation starting from the category of employability can be a good starting point especially referring to the illuminating studies of Harvey, Yorke and Knight who at the end of the Nineties of the twentieth century opened innovative research paths at the Anglo-Saxons Universities, precisely to answer to the question, then diffused, on which was the bug in the preparation of the English graduates since the world of work, already then, could not recognize anymore the capacity of young people as suitable for the professional challenges of the future (Harvey, 2003; Yorke, Knight, 2006).

It gave origin to a new pedagogical thinking and opened new slopes of reflection that brought to the problematisation of the concept of employability that, since then, has been fundamental for the construction of development strategies for Higher Education, as today affirm Europe 2020 documents (European Commission, 2009). The macro analysis restores to us, however, also a possible vision for the meso and micro contexts, in-

deed, the definition of employability affect the labor policies, the construction of skills for the workplace, and the individual development, at a personal and professional level.

The concept used in the documents of the European Commission refers to a employment-centred definition: “a combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or enter employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their career” (European Commission, 2014, p. 62), i.e. refers to employability as a combination of factors that make the subject able to stay and progress in career and it is seen as the ability to obtain a significant work, to keep it and, therefore, stay in the world of work, while instead for the two British scholars, Yorke and Knight, employability is a life condition, that can be acquired through a formation centered on the ability to stay in the world of life. Yorke wrote in 2006 that employability is: “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

From the studies by the research group guided by Yorke and Knight origins the USEM model that took account of four important and linked components:

1. *Understanding* (Appropriate subject knowledge, apprehension and applicability);
2. *Skills*. (Subject-specific and generic abilities. The term is used here because of its significance in political and employment circles, but there is a real danger of its being given a simplistic and unhelpful interpretation. A term such as ‘skillful practice’ is probably more appropriate.);
3. *Efficacy beliefs*, (Awareness and understanding of one’s self and one’s abilities) (The ability to reflect on and regulate one’s own learning and behaviour) students’ self-theories and personal qualities. Of critical importance is the extent to which students feel that they might ‘be able to make a difference’ – not every time, but in a probabilistic way;
4. *Metacognition*, encompassing self-awareness regarding the student’s learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for action (Yorke, 2006, p. 5).

The model focuses the attention on personal qualities and individual capacities, suggesting that the acquisition of employability is a task of the subject, student, graduate, doctoral student or Phd. We should recognize to the USEM model the extensive study on work-related didactics as well as the elaboration of a pedagogy for employability (2012).

Another model for understanding the construction of career paths is the DOTS model drawn up by Anthony Watts (2006) and founded on

four pillars: 1. Decision Learning (to be able to plan and guide the acquired knowledge), 2. Opportunity awareness (to be able to take as well as to create opportunities), 3. Transition Learning (to be capable of transferring and orienting opportunities) 4. Self-Awareness (to be able to articulate and recognize motivations, skills, responsibility that can support the career path).

Even more clearly, we can see in the Harvey's definition from 1999 a reminder to the centrality of the relationship between formation and employability "Employability of a *graduate* is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit *attributes* that employers anticipate will be *necessary* for the *future* effective functioning of their organisation" (Harvey, 1999, p. 4). If Yorke emphasizes the need to equip graduates with abilities, skills, knowledge, understandings and transversal skills, personal attributes, Harvey puts the accent, already twenty years ago, on the need to ensure that the graduate is aware of him/herself, has the propensity to exhibit attributes, to develop the capacity to anticipate and stay in the future, has the critical and reflective thinking necessary to look at his/her own life and the context in which he/she acts. These insights anticipate unequivocally what we are currently seeing: it is important for graduates to acquire a 4.0 training in order to be able to enter a world of work, that is, already today, a world of the future:

Employability raises fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of higher education. Employability is not about training or providing add-on skills to gain employment. On the contrary, *employability is about how higher education develops critical, reflective, empowered learners*. Despite appearances to the contrary, the real challenge is not how to accommodate employability but how to shift the traditional balance of power from the education provider to those participating in the learning experience (Harvey, 1999, p. 13).

We are referring here to an idea of learning as human experience that higher education must be able to consider and understand through the construction of curricula that can deliver the appropriate skills to stay, to be, to become men and professionals of the future. Following this original idea of employability, research has evolved until reaching a wide definition.

The new model proposed by Dacre Pool and Sewell in 2007 is known with the acronym CareerEDGE and complete what was missing from previous models, summarizes the claims, integrates, deepens and develops them. The elements on which it is based are five and we can say that the

novelty introduced regards emotional intelligence as the ability to stay in balance and connect to others in professional relationships. These elements are: 1. Career development learning (summarizes all the points of the DOTS model); 2. Experience (emphasizes the importance of the experiences developed both in workplaces that in informal contexts of daily life); 3. Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills (as in the USEM Model, knowledge and skills are essential as landmark); 4. Generic skills (emphasizes the need to possess soft skills that, here, are defined as generic); 5. Emotional intelligence (introduces a main element for motivation, self-awareness and of others, individual development and group work). The five elements, subject to reflection and evaluation, can support the reinforcement of self-effectiveness, self-esteem, self-confidence.

As Dacre Pool and Sewell explain in their article, the first diagram of the model provides the necessary elements and the connections to reach the development of employability. The following development of the model takes the form of a metaphorical “key” that can open the door, we could say, of the world of work, having any capability that can accompany consciously the students toward the professions, but also toward their own continuing education (Dacre Pool, Sewell, 2007, p. 281). The model looks, indeed, to the subject individuality and proposes an effective reading of the capacity/skills/knowledge that are necessary for an appropriate transition. It stresses in a less evident way the role of social dimensions and environment. In the same way, it influences the personal development. It seems clear, in any case, that is confirmed and supported the thesis that employability is a process strongly correlated with the learning places and with everything that has to do with the formation of the subject. Thus, it becomes a central element, from which we should begin to reflect on the new forms of didactics, teaching and guidance.

CareerEDGE model seems to be a good reference model even if it focuses a little on the important aspect of learning. For this reason, other models have been proposed as the one called *Learning and Employability Framework* by Sumanasiri, Yajid, Khatibi. The model combines simplicity and clarity, opening the way to a considerable number of empirical researches that will validate its usability and application (Sumanasiri, Yajid, Khatibi, 2015, p. 55) and it is explained in four steps. The *Learning and Employability Framework* takes into consideration as the first set of elements, considering them as a *unicum*, the CareerEDGE model in which it finds its origins, noting critically that only a few empirical studies evaluated it while evidence demonstrates that it was very widespread. Other studies, in fact, have justified the Dacre Pool and Sewell model (Sumanasiri, Yajid, Khatibi, 2015, p. 56). Secondly:



Studies on learning reveals that above five employability skill categories proposed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) in CareerEDGE framework are similar in focus to learning environment and process according to LEPO model of learning (Philips *et al.*, 2010). LEPO model summarizes learning to three broad concepts Learning environment, learning process and learning outcomes and clearly stands out as from other models of learning as generalized and integrated conceptual framework on learning [...]. Further, many national and international higher education quality frameworks have identified learning outcomes as one of the main deliverables of university education [...] with VSA (Voluntary System of Accountability) doing a leading role in US higher education system through evaluation of core learning outcomes of universities by evaluating common, multi-disciplinary and university wide skills. Therefore, it's clear that the five lower-tier employability skills constructs career development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge and understanding, generic skills and emotional intelligence have direct relationship with learning outcomes of university degree programs (Sumanasiri, Yajid, Khatibi, 2015, p. 57).

Thirdly, the researchers from the University of Malaysia affirm that employability is clearly linked to the results of the university learning as well as to programs of the degree courses (Finch *et al.*, 2013) whose activities should be based precisely on the fact that soft-skills that are vital in their turn for the development and implementation of employability. The authors continue:

The framework combines the simplicity and clarity with strong theoretical support to produce a practical framework that is of interest to stakeholders such as students, graduates, faculty, employers and various other groups. "Learning and employability framework" is still theoretical in nature and is ready for quantitative testing methods since all constructs are directly measurable through quantitative methods unlike many of its predecessors including CareerEDGE (Dacre Pool, Sewell, 2007), USEM (Knight, Yorke, 2003), and Employability skills model (Cotton, 1993) [...] The model can be used as a guide for curriculum designing, pedagogic approach improvements, and also to understand the skill gap between industry demand and university supply (Sumanasiri, Yajid, Khatibi, 2015, pp. 57-61).

This is our same consideration. Can a higher education system not being adequate to the requests that come from the world of professions,

from the world of work, that is in the end the world of life itself? The centrality of the category, in comparison with other quality indicators that can be used to review the potential of a system to provide students with every capacity and expertise appropriate to the work and life, it concerns the fact that there have been many empirical studies, experimental scientific, which led researchers to assume the validity of the consideration of the same category. The studies of Yorke and Knight spread the culture of didactic measurability of employability, the reports that the Educational Centers and the Career Service of many Anglo-Saxons, Canadian, Australian Universities have produced, revealed precisely the validity and verifiability of didactic and educational practices now spread worldwide.

Considering the evolution of this construct, which is the perception of graduates regarding their study curriculum? Are the skills that make up the construct of employability really possessed by the graduates in the study courses of the educational sciences area?

### **3. The results of a longitudinal research and the skills needed for the professions of lifelong learning**

In June 2014 started a longitudinal research, ended in December 2016, with the aim of investigating the transition to employment of young master degree's graduates in Adult Education, Continuous Training and Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Florence. The purpose of the qualitative research carried out was to verify if: "The curriculum and the core competences taught within the master degree in Adult Education, Continuous Training and Pedagogical Sciences (LM-57 & LM-85) are appropriate for the employability of the graduates". The case study analyzed had the purpose: 1. to see in depth which were the trajectories of the job search of graduates, 2. to analyze the hard and soft skills that graduates possessed when going out of the study course; 3. to understand the knowledge of the world of work possessed by graduates; 4. to understand volitions and desires of graduates<sup>1</sup>.

1 The research funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research PRIN2012 LATR9N, *Employability & Competences* "Designing innovative curricula for personalized learning paths, building skills for employability, valuing talents to create new professionalism. Positive strategies of higher education to assist young unemployed adults to answer the social crisis". University of Padua – Research Unit I (Monica Fedeli), University of Padua – Research Unit II (Michelangelo Vianello), University of Florence

With regards to the context of the research, some general data may give an idea of the work condition of graduates in the educational sector: “At the end of the study course, 55% of Bachelor graduates want to continue studying. Three years after graduation, 66% has found a job. The level rises to 72% for Master graduates. The acquisition of professional skills linked to career development is the most important element in the work search. The consistency between outgoing profile and employment is in 46.9% of graduates” (Alma Laurea, 2016).

With regards to the context the research question is articulated on three levels, micro, meso and macro:

<b>MICRO LEVEL</b>	<b>The graduate perspective</b>
How do young adults approach the work transition?	
<b>MESO LEVEL</b>	<b>The perspective of the Curriculum of Studies</b>
Are the curriculum and the core skills developed within the master degree in Adult Education, Continuous Training and Pedagogical Sciences adequate for the development of the employability of graduates?	
<b>MACRO LEVEL</b>	<b>The institutional perspective</b>
Which is the role of University in the development of employability?	

The research carried out allowed to get in touch with different cohorts of graduates who have been followed longitudinally for two years. The sample was composed by all the students enrolled in the master degree LM-57&85 at the University of Florence who discussed the thesis between July 2014 and November 2016. The graduates were guided longitudinally for two years after the dissertation through a communicative-relational approach<sup>2</sup>. The total data were:

- Research Unit (Vanna Boffo), University of Naples Parthenope Research Unit (Francesco Lo Presti), University of Siena Research Unit (Claudio Melacarne).
- 2 Some reference on the methodological nature on the Prin research: following the grid defined by Mortari (Mortari, 2007, p. 53) the author indicates briefly the methodological and instrumental aspects, and gives account of the protocol that was followed. With regard to the methodology, the researchers followed the qualitative method and adopted the epistemological context of the grounded theory, focused on the person and on the interpretation of the educational and formative path. The strategy of the research was the case study and the research tools used were the focus group and the in-depth interview. With regards to the research tools, focus groups and interviews followed a strict protocol and concentrated on: description of the phenomenon of transition, identification of the interpretative keys, creation of a metadata grid that could

- 10 samples of graduates (10 sessions of thesis);
- 52 students (30 from the University of Florence + 2 from the University of Padua + 9 from Würzburg University);
- 110 interviews and 10 focus groups;
- comparison at a national level (Padova);
- comparison at an international level (Würzburg).

With regards to the analysis of the research carried out through the transcription of all the interviews and through the creation of a metadata grid was highlighted that:

- The transition from university to work is connected to the way of being, its transformation, the inner self, to the vision of the world;
- No transition begins with the graduation even if it is in that moment that it is prepared;
- Skills are the result of an educational path (even if graduates are not always aware of it) linked with practice and traineeship;
- Employment is always verified (although often as part-time job or other types of job);
- The postgraduate transition lasts about 10 months, or more;
- The transition aims at reaching a goal that is in line with the study undergone;
- There is a distance between the undergraduate and postgraduate volitions;
- Graduates are aware of the possessed competences and those required by the labor market;
- The formal and informal networks are important for the job search;
- Workplaces have a high formative and guiding potential.

The results may be summarized in these terms: 1. Employability is an umbrella category; 2. Job Placement is the result of an educational process; 3. The relationship between study courses and labor market must be strengthened; 4. Professional and business culture, knowledge of the labor market must be included in the study curriculum together with the development of a set of skills required by the labor market for the professional profiles of the education/training field and the social economy; 5.

allow researchers to understand the characteristics of the transition. Elements under investigation were desires, competencies, the channels of the job search and expectations for the future of interviewed graduates.

The development of core skills can be defined within the academic study programs, 6. There are no actual cases of unemployment but all interviewed students proved to be active workers.

The work done in the field has focused on the aspects of the social economy that are in constant evolution and that strongly require a different modeling of the curricula of the study courses in the area of education. We could say that the research revealed the urgent necessity to have a direct and synergistic contact with the world of work because of the creation of new professions that require different skills in comparison with those offered, even when considering those indicated by the study courses regulations and arising from the jurisdictions whose guidelines are laid down by MIUR. We have also noted the significant phenomenon (to which we attach a strong symbolic value) that extends for one year the period needed to enter the world of work. This year after graduation has a crucial role for professional development. During this year, young adults: 1. Redefine their professional identity (starting from their false expectations); 2. Seek alternatives to formation, especially when this is the field work; 3. Build and use relationships and dynamic learning networks.

#### **4. Conclusions: open questions for the future**

The research carried out and the knowledge of a labor market in constant change pose the problem of competence supply. As Paolo Federighi said at the International Conference *Employability and Competences: Innovative Curricula for new professions*, at Florence, in march 2017:

In the past, the issue of competence supply has been resolved through the formation of good heads. This was also thanks to the correspondence between business models and business schools which took charge of the growth of people. Today, most companies require increasingly leaner training models and intellectual mobility. This requires staff with high levels of seniority, capable of working on projects in the medium term. This has a direct consequence on the function of the educational systems and the University, creating problems of mismatch (Federighi, 2017, p. 6).

We are facing a very high risk to prepare graduates who are not also good professionals. Indeed, what do business managers that constitute the natural target for the master degree' graduates in the area of education say?

Executives answer that our graduates have high communication-relation skills in line with the demands of the labor market, in the same way

they are very proficient with regards to the principles of lifelong learning; on the contrary they must strengthen their organizational and managerial skills and their economic and legal knowledge (Boffo, Federighi, Torlone, 2015). Some indications come from interviews carried out among some managers of Tuscan enterprises and are particularly revealing on the professional profiles required (Boffo, 2015, p. 160):

The *project designer*: graduates that are proposed to this kind of job should strengthen the writing skills and the knowledge of the devices required (Interprofessional Funds, l. 53/2003, ESF...) and economic knowledge. They should know what it means to manage a contract and a grant.

The *service coordinator*: is responsible for a single service (educational training, ...). The graduates that are proposed to position of this type usually develop their careers and grow within the service itself (e.g. from educator, to responsible, to coordinator). What emerges from this is that once someone becomes a coordinator, some skills, such as technical-managerial, organizational, budgeting and planning skills, are missing.

The *coordinator of multiple services* is responsible for more services and has particularly developed the relational and management skills and the knowledge of the regional policies in the triennial programming. Also has a strong social innovation spirit.

In the same way, new professions for market 4.0 can be highlighted: manager of no-profit organizations; coordinator of facilities and educational services; service designer; entrepreneur for new cooperatives; fundraiser; manager and designer for innovative models of the social economy; learning platforms manager; social entrepreneur (Boffo, 2015, p. 165).

To conclude, we can refresh the question that was the starting point of the research and remember the answer, i.e. "Are the current paths suitable for the preparation of the future professional?". To reread the actions that higher education can develop through the category of employability may represent a concrete change in the perspective on the role that the Universities in the future will have for Italy, formation and the progress of the research.

Three possible strategic actions on the development of employability within the master degree study paths in the educational/pedagogical/formation area that emerged from the research carried out, give an impulse and support the work transition of our graduates: 1. Be able to integrate the work culture within the study courses without limiting it to the traineeships or some events/services so that it is possible to build a consistent professional identity, also for the changing world of work. 2. Support

the University career services that can prepare students to the entrance into the world of work and ensure the acquisition of those skills necessary to appear ever more prepared and able to support the request for flexibility, team work, listening, sharing, proactivity. 3. The most positive cases of work transition are linked to a close relationship between teaching and applied research. To undertake traineeships for a few credits is not enough to encourage this practice within the mass-university, yet there is an urgent need to reformulate the study-and-work program, the practice of writing thesis within and in accordance with the businesses, the construction of joint activities with the world of work.

Higher education has radically changed its role since the development, also in Italy, of a mass university accessible to the entire student population. Lifelong learning and the pedagogical and transformative function of learning must be applied to the structural conditions that need to look at the innovation and change processes. At the same time, new professions in the area of training require specialist paths connected to a world of work radically modeled by global economies. Research on these themes is challenging and necessary for our graduates and for social services for whom we are preparing the professionals of the future.

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