

# ENHANCING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

*Carlo Terzaroli, Nicoletta Tomei*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper deals with some experiences put together at the University of Florence to enhance experiential learning in higher education. It reconstructs the conceptualization of David Kolb's theory while presenting its relationship with Dewey's 'theory of the experience'. It links the career service model implemented at the University of Florence with the category of employability. The results of this linkage speak of an educational process which fits into the Kolbian model and seems to address the learning challenges which can affect increasingly heterogeneous cohorts of students and increasingly complex learning institutions such as universities. The interpretation of this process as an example of how to embed employability in higher education allows us to attribute it the status of a case study that shows career services to be a relevant and specific learning space. The key contribution of the paper consists of the fact that it opens an interesting perspective on how experiential learning could be a fruitful model for the modernization of higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** experiential learning, higher education, career services, employment.

## *1. Conceptualizing experiential learning*

One of the most widespread definitions of human learning in the field of adult education claims learning to be:

the combination of processes whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person's individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experienced) person (Jarvis 2006: 13).

This broad definition points out the relationship between learners and social environment. It refers to the concept of experience in order to explain the cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes that occur in the whole person when he or she learns something.

<sup>1</sup> The paper is the result of joint work in the common parts of *Abstract*, *Conclusions* and *Bibliography*. However, paragraph *Conceptualizing Experiential Learning* can be attributed to Nicoletta Tomei, paragraphs *Enhancing experiential learning in higher education* and *Career services as a source of experiential learning in higher education: the case of the University of Florence* to Carlo Terzaroli.

In the context of higher education, this concept has often been used to accompany the process to modernize tertiary education institutions. Indeed, in recent decades the expansion of this sector has been notable, resulting in what Schuetze and Slowey have identified as general trends which consist of 1. the greater access of non-traditional students to higher education courses; 2. the diversification of courses on offer and institution types and 3. the introduction of new modes of delivering a differentiated learning programme (Schuetze, Slowey 2002). As a consequence of these trends, the assessment of prior learning practices, competence-based curricula and credits systems have been more widely implemented, transforming practices and the conceptualization of higher education itself and putting the ability to use learner experience to enhance learning processes at the basis of students' success.

In this perspective, Kolb and Kolb remind that even if «recent efforts to improve higher education have focused on improving learning processes in education through the application of research» (2005: 193), current researches which are focused on the concept of experiential learning are often misunderstood. The reason of this misunderstanding lies on fact that experiential learning is sometimes considered «as a set of tools and techniques to provide learners with experiences from which they can learn» (2005: 193), instead of a philosophy of education rooted in deweyan «theory of experience» (Dewey 1997: 24). This theory argues that new approaches to education need a sound reflection on the concept of experience in order to replace traditional education whose practices are determined by tradition.

The concept of experience began to emerge as significant in education at the beginning of the past century, during which the new schools' movement developed an educational approach based on these three assumptions:

1. personal involvement in learning experience is the best strategies to ensures learning,
2. knowledge can affect individuals' behaviour and to be meaningful to someone, only if it is actively discovered,
3. freedom to set its own learning objectives and to actively pursue them within a given framework is the only way to secure people's commitment to learning (Smith 1980: 16).

Upon this basis, Dewey's theory focuses on two principles, known as the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction. The continuity principle says that each experience will influence the next one. The interaction principle says that one's present experience depend also from the interaction between past experiences and the present situation. In other words, from the interplay of these principles, experiences arise as a dynamic process resulting from a transaction. «An experience is always

what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment» (Dewey 1997: 43).

According to this transactional perspective, the connection with the environment is not unilateral. The person having the experience is modified by his or her environment while the environment is modified by the person having the experience, in a constant reciprocal situational influence. Dewey further elaborates this situational influence of one's experience by suggesting that it involves 'trying' and 'undergoing' activities. Trying activity refers to the expression of someone willing in concrete actions while undergoing refers to the consequences of the experience on the individual.

When we experience something we act upon it, we do something; then we suffer or undergo the consequences. We do something to things and then it does something in return: such is the particular combination. The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness of experience. Mere activity does not constitute experience (Dewey 2007: 104).

In this sense, the experience identified by Dewey is not stored in the past, nor does it belong to the immediacy of the experienced present. It is not mere acceptance of the environment's impact, but it is a dynamic continuum from past through present to future. In Dewey's perspective, in fact, his experience theory leads to the understanding not only that, for better or worse, every past experience affects the quality of further experiences by setting our attitudes, but also that, as «we always live the time we live in and not some other time», it is only «by extracting the full meaning of each present experience» that we prepare ourselves to make it easier or harder to act for one or another end (Dewey 1997: 33).

With the idea of «preparation», an organic connection is established between education and experience because, even if on some regards all the experiences do something to prepare a person for later ones, experiences that strive to be educative should be devoted to ascertain «how acquaintance with the past may be translated into a potent instrumentality for dealing effectively with the future» (Dewey 1997: 10).

The belief that a genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are miseducative. Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience (Dewey 1997: 25).

Consequently, education maybe defined as the emancipation and enlargement of experience, carried on through an active and reflective

process which strives for the «reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience» (Dewey 2007: 59).

The formulation of such a philosophy of education provided the theoretical grounding for several learning theories that enjoyed both credibility and longevity in trying to answer the following question: how is it possible to lead the meaning embedded in present experience towards a wider horizon of future «experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality»? (Dewey 1997: 28).

Many authors, who share Dewey's perspective, according to which «the heart of all learning lies in the way we process experience» (Fisher Turesky 2005: 58), concentrate on two main aspects, namely active participation and critical reflection. Among the authors who best portray speculation on active participation as a viable route to process experience, we can find Lave and Wenger who developed the situated learning theory at the beginning of the 1990s. This interesting learning theory claims that learning is not something that happens in the individual's brain but something which lies in the process of co-participation in the concrete activities of a community (Lave, Wenger 1991: 10). According to this theory, the co-participation process identifies a structure which allows people's experiences to be interpreted as a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave, Wenger 1991: 19). Legitimate peripheral participation is an analytic perspective which enables researchers to reconstruct and reorganize learning experiences on the basis of situational influences and activities carried out by the learner.

Beside this kind of speculation, a large amount of contributions can be found which foster the possibility of understanding the enlargement of experience through the lens of reflection. The most important author in this regard is, without any doubt, Donald Schön. While studying the learning process of professionals, he draws up the reflective learning theory which claims that experiences lead to the development of two kinds of knowledge: knowledge based on 'reflection on action' and knowledge based on «reflection in action». The first identifies an explicit wealth of knowledge elaborated after experiencing a situation. The second identifies a sort of implicit knowledge which is elaborated while people are still experiencing a situation (Schön 1983: 77). By helping us to explain how experience can be transformed into knowledge, these two modes of reflection seem to contribute to explaining why present experience influences the manner in which the learner deals with future situations.

Even though both of these theories grasp important elements of Dewey's theorization of experiential learning, several considerations support the idea that neither of them can completely describe the transactional aspect of experience. Indeed, on one hand, the first theory clearly recognizes the importance of the environment's influence, while fail-

ing to explain how previous experiences can influence future ones; on the other hand, by emphasizing reflective moments of the experiential learning process, the second theory seems to fail to reproduce the specific sequence proposed by Dewey in order to explain the transactional aspect of experience.

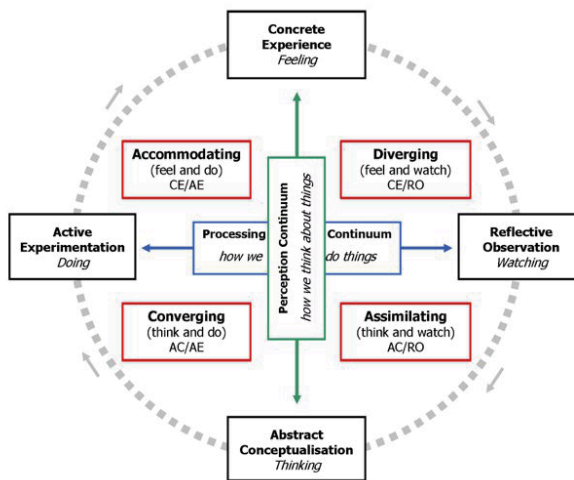
Upon examination, each instance reveals, more or less clearly, five logically distinct steps: 1-a felt difficulty; 2-its location and definition; 3.-suggesting a possible solution; 4-development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; 5-further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief (Dewey 1991: 72).

Since Dewey's instrumentalism would have some perplexities about a separation of thought/reflection and action/participation, which are considered unified by experience and utilized simultaneously, the experiential learning theory by David Kolb seems «to develop a holistic model of the human learning process and a multilinear model of adult development» (Kolb, Kolb 2005: 194) which fits better with Dewey's theorization. In Kolb's theory in fact, learning is understood as «the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience» (Kolb 1984: 41).

As Atkinson and Murrell made clear, «at the heart of Kolb's model is a description of how experience is translated into concepts that can be used to guide the choice of new experiences» (1988: 375). Since, Kolbian learning process is often described as «a four-step cycle based on the orthogonal relationship of two continuums of cognitive growth and learning: the concrete-abstract continuum and the reflective-active continuum» (1988: 375), these authors identified the first continuum, with the representation of how individuals gather information from the environment. Moreover, they clearly underline that this gathering process, following different paths which range from «involvement in particular and palpable events to preference for detached analysis», can also be identified as the perception continuum (1988: 375). On the contrary, the reflective-active continuum presented by Kolb, represents the processing continuum in reason of the fact that it seems to refer to how individuals process the information they gather and how active they are in this process as learners. As everybody can «take a more observational role» or «prefer active participation» as well as use more or less concrete strategies to think about things, «individuals must continually choose, along the respective continuums, how they will gather and process information to resolve the problems and conflicts presented by any learning situation» (1988: 375).

Put into words, Figure 1 illustrates that Kolb's experiential learning theory «is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension between four learning modes: concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation and active experimentation» (Kolb, Kolb 2005:194). Concrete experience represents the process through which learners become involved in situations grasping information through the immediate and unbiased events. Reflective observation represents the process through which learners realize an understanding carefully observing and considering reality. Abstract conceptualization relies on the learner's ability to analyse ideas and concepts logically in order to view things from different perspective, generate hypotheses, and make plans. Active experimentation represents the process through which learners engage themselves in actively influencing people and events, «triggering a recursive process that is responsive both to the learning situation and to what is learned» (Kolb 1984: 30). Actively testing a hypothesis serves, in fact, as a guide in creating new experiences.

Figure 1 – Kolb's learning cycle. [Chapman at [www.businessall.com](http://www.businessall.com) based on Kolb 1984]



According to Kolb's experiential learning model, individuals seem to develop themselves in four primary ways. The different learning modes in fact, contributing to the process of constructing knowledge, develop simultaneously affective, perceptual, symbolic and behavioural attitudes. Through concrete experiences, learners can develop affectively. From opportunities to observe reflectively, they can develop increasingly complex and sophisticated perceptual skills. Thinking abstractly, learners can develop their symbolic skills. Through active experimentation, they can develop behaviourally.

On this basis, it is possible to say that the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) implies that an effective learner needs different abilities or that the learners must be able to get fully, openly and unbiasedly involved in new experiences; to reflect on and interpret these experiences from different perspectives; to create concepts that integrate these observations in logically sound theories; and to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems leading to new experiences' (Sims 1983: 503).

Since these generic abilities encompass specific skills which can be more or less developed by each individual, ELT seems to describe individual differences in learning on the basis of particular preferences for the use of one learning mode rather than others<sup>2</sup>.

In order to be able to boost comprehension of the way in which experience results in learning, Kolb's theory of experiential learning has been used in different fields and training contexts as a model. The theory has proved to be «particularly applicable in instances in which attention to the process is at least as important as attention to the product» (Atkinson, Murrell 1988: 375). In this perspective, higher education career services can be considered an excellent example of such an instance, due to their understanding of employability.

## *2. Enhancing experiential learning in higher education*

The category of employability appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in the wake of the employable/unemployable dichotomy (Gazier 1998), paying specific attention to individual needs for help: this approach, in some ways, was based on considering the relationship between abilities and willingness, so it aimed to support people on the edges of society. Afterwards, the category was assumed in the economic field «to achieve full employment through government measures designed to facilitate access to the labour market» (Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, Rossier 2016: 71); however, the approach maintains a strong accent on political and economical aims, which could sometimes leave aside the value of the person as a rights holder. This is why in recent decades the work of Gazier introduced the notion of «interactive employability» which «maintains the focus on individual adaptation, but introduces a collective/interactive priority» (Gazier 1998: 300).

<sup>2</sup> As Kolb and Kolb remind the original four learning styles- assimilating, converging, accommodating and diverging- has been expanded to include nine distinct styles by recent theoretical and empirical works. In 1985, Abby, Hunt and Weiser identified four additional learning styles 'emphasizing the impact of the style's weakest learning mode on the learner's learning process', while a 'balancing' learning style was identified by Mainemelis, Boyatzis and Kolb in 2002 (2005: 197).

The reason for this shift concerns institutions taking it upon themselves to develop employability: not only individuals but also public actors are directly concerned in the implementation of opportunities for effective transitions to the labour market. European institutions have also adopted this trend within various policy programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2014: 61): as a matter of fact, many strategies, such as *Europe 2020* and *Education and Training 2020*, stress the central role of employability in European Commission actions. The aims of these actions concern the enhancement of graduates' employability and support for their transition to the labour market (Boffo 2015). The focus on expected outcomes and graduates' success in employment, social cohesion and citizenship leads to an 'output and outcome awareness' within higher education institutions (Teichler 2011: 29) at international policy level.

Parallel to this, at the pedagogical and educational level, in the higher education context, the concept of employability has been developed in the work of Mantz Yorke and Peter Knight, within the The Higher Education Academy research programmes<sup>3</sup>. Yorke defines employability as «a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy» (Yorke, 2006: 21).

Yorke's work starts from the analysis of the interrelation between higher education and recent economic developments to come up with a concept that could support students' transition from university to work (Yorke 2006: 3). Moreover, fostering employability could represent a way to support social inclusion and citizenship: many studies, in fact, reveal the direct link between the transition to work and the effective development of autonomy and self-realization in adulthood (Furlong 2009; Eurofound 2014). In this sense, the approach focuses on the person's development and it is not merely related to an economic and occupational point of view. As Lee Harvey states,

employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning and the emphasis

<sup>3</sup> «The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is the national body which champions teaching quality. We provide value to the HE sector by focusing on the contribution of teaching as part of the wider student learning experience. [...] The HEA's areas of current focus are informed by our consultation with the sector, by funding council priorities, government policy, sector data, intelligence and reports amongst others. These are: Employability; Retention and Attainment; Assessment and Feedback», <<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/about-us>> (06/2016).



is less on 'employ' and more on 'ability'. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner (Harvey 2003).

According to the category of employability, universities and study courses have implemented different ways of embedding (Yorke, Knight 2006) the process in higher education pathways. Analysis of the framework and measures carried out reveals two concepts: the development of employability in the curriculum, through teaching and learning methods focusing on work experience (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, Lawton 2012); and the enhancement of employability skills through extra-curricular activities such as career services (Watts 1997). In this paper, we concentrate on the second typology of actions, since it represents a direct connection between experience and learning, following Kolb's experiential learning model (Kolb 1984).

Attention to career services in higher education as a tool for the education of adults and young adults came into being at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States to help immigrants find a job and in the 1940s and 1960s to support war veterans through job placement centres (Dey, Cruzvergara 2014). Only in the 1970s and 1980s did development of the self through career counselling emerge as a primary tool for work transitions. Then, in the 1990s and 2000s ICT society and the spread of social media produced a revolution that directly impacted career services: they «transformed career centers into dynamic networking hubs that engaged hiring organizations in campus recruiting and facilitated networking between students and recruiters» (Dey, Cruzvergara 2014: 5). As shown in Figure 2, the evolution of career service models in higher education strictly follows economy and society trends and tendencies.

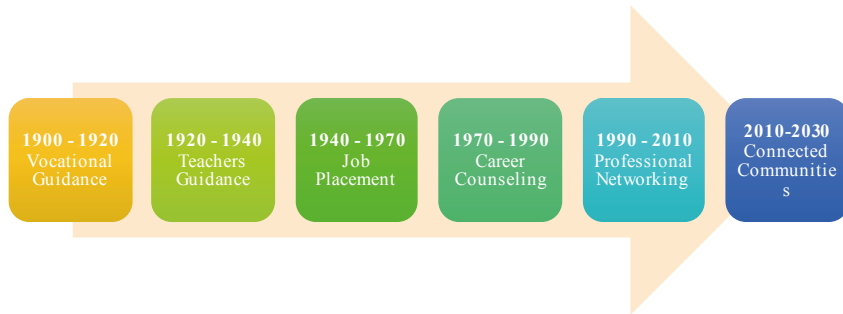
According to the work of Farouk Dey<sup>4</sup> and Christine Y. Cruzvergara<sup>5</sup>, the new model of career services arising in higher education reflects the needs emerging from the economic downturn of 2008. In this perspective, many universities at international level started moving

from the traditional transactional model of career services toward a customized connection model that promises specialized career development support to students and meaningful connections to internship and employment opportunities as well as mentoring and experiential learning (Dey, Cruzvergara 2014: 8).

<sup>4</sup> Farouk Dey is the associate vice provost of Student Affairs and dean of Career Education at Stanford University, United States.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Y. Cruzvergara is the director of University Career Services at George Mason University, United States.

Figure 2 – Evolution of career services in higher education. [Cruzvergara, Dey 2014]



As a result of the relations between universities and the labour market, the development of employability is becoming a significant part of the student experience during the whole process of higher education rather than an isolated aspect considered as students approach graduation. That is why the role of career services, also at European level (Genz 2014), is increasingly becoming a continuing part of the formative process in and alongside the curriculum: in this direction, different activities have been implemented to foster the enhancement of employability skills in higher education pathways (Rota 2014) through tailored activities that fit specific needs.

The learning model, which constitutes the employability development process, and the connection between university and work can be linked to the abovementioned experiential learning model by David Kolb. The cycle, presented in Figure 1, shows the phases of Kolb's learning process. In detail, a cyclical process is formed that could fit in well with the experience structured into the most common career service models. As a matter of fact, the four steps in the model constitute a process that produces the transformation in personal attitudes and skills of the subject involved. Specifically, experiential learning theory proceeds from the assumption that «ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience» (Kolb 1984: 26) and the relationship with the environment (Kolb 1984: 133). Looking at the elements of the cycle, we can highlight some specific aspects. First of all, learning is a process continuously grounded in experience (Kolb 1984: 28) which allows us to avail of or modify ideas depending on the situation: in this sense, «it implies that all learning is *relearning*» (Kolb 1984: 28). Secondly, it is not about a «molecular educational concept» (Kolb 1984: 31), but it concerns «the central process of human adaptation to the social and physical environment» (Kolb 1984: 31): it consists of a way of creating a relationship with the social environment and being part of it.

To conclude, a direct link can be evidenced between career service work experience, employability development and Kolb's model. Indeed,

the learning process or the concrete experiences gained in the career service represents a way to foster employability skills, through the four phases, in view of supporting young adults facing the transition from higher education to the labour market. In this sense, the next paragraph shows the relationship between activities and learning theory, while describing some specific educational activities implemented within the University of Florence Career Service. As a matter of fact, the specific part on *Educational and Formative Activities for Employability* reflects the implicit and explicit experiential learning gained through the extra-curricular activities carried out by that service.

### *3. Career services as a source of experiential learning in higher education: the case of the University of Florence*

Over the last two decades, the role of career services in the Italian higher education system has grown as a priority. The emergence of the university's third mission has fostered the activation of internal structures aimed at supporting students facing the transition to the labour market. Indeed, the third mission is intended as a way to make the most of research through knowledge transfer into productive contexts: in this sense, the transformation could concern both research products (as new inventions or innovations) and people with knowledge gained at university level. The aim of this evolution is to create a better link between research and society, and to support social and economic growth and development (European Commission 2011).

In this connection, many Italian universities have started developing job placement offices to invest in the third mission, with a specific focus on guidance and employability. The evolution of the national system reflects, in some ways, the trend identified by Cruzvergara and Dey (Cruzvergara, Dey 2014) for career services at international level. In the Italian context, the specific situation reflects a skills development approach to the increase of employability: as a matter of fact, many institutions have set up services and activities to support skills and capabilities for the transition to the labour market and to find their way around it in different circumstances. This is also the case of the University of Florence, which that came up with a new career service model in 2016<sup>6</sup>. The structure of the career service intends to sustain students, graduates, doctoral stu-

<sup>6</sup> The University of Florence career service model was planned and implemented by Prof. Vanna Boffo, Rector's Delegate for Job Placement, in cooperation with the career service coordinators for the specific areas.

dents and doctoral graduates so that they can cultivate the capability to live their lives and careers better.

In this perspective, the model shown in Figure 3 concentrates on four different sectors: career counselling, educational and formative activities for employability, meetings with employers, and intrapreneurship development. The area of career counselling aims to set value by individual resources in order to point the students' desires and values for their personal and professional pathways, in collaboration with professional psychologists. Moreover, the sector of educational and formative activities for employability offers a set of activities to foster the development of capabilities and skills that support the transition to work and, more in general, transitions throughout career pathway. The area of meetings with employers provides opportunities to match supply and demand and to help give students an insight into the labour market and recruitment activities, through the direct perspective of employers. Finally, the area of intrapreneurship development aims to foster intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship through workshops, networking and innovative projects. The whole model is always supported by important research activities that integrate different disciplinary fields; this research involves engineering, adult education, economic management, psychological studies, law, communication, monitoring and evaluation, and it could really be the most innovative element in career services in higher education in Italy and at the international level.

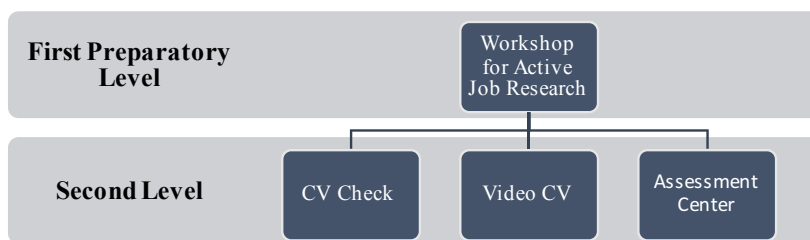
Figure 3 – The University of Florence Career Service Model. [Boffo 2016]



In this section we make an in-depth analysis of one of the four areas, to highlight the direct link of the approach with Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb 1984). In fact, the «Educational and Formative Activities for Employability» area refers directly to the quoted theory through a set of workshops that aim to support student employability (Yorke, Knight 2006). It presents four different types of activities to help students develop skills and understand tools to ease transition from university to work. Specifically, the services offered are organized into two steps: the first preparatory level that provides an overview of effective tools for the transition and the recruitment process; a second step that aims to improve the possession of specific tools and support the development of soft skills (Yorke, Knight 2006). In order to participate in the second-level services, it is mandatory to participate in the first.

The first level is represented by the Workshop for Active Job Research<sup>7</sup>: it consists of a workgroup, based on two-day sessions, to help students draw up job applications, CV and cover letters and to deal better with job interviews. The learning process includes simulations, concrete experiences and reflective role-playing to understand personal and professional experiences in a career perspective. This triggers an individual learning process that reinforces the skills and capabilities needed during the recruitment phase. Indeed, after participation in the Workshop for Active Job Research, most people go on to experiment with job applications and job interviews to test their achievements and improve their way of approaching employers.

Figure 4 – Overview of the University of Florence Career Service' Educational and Formative Activities for Employability' area. [own source, from Boffo 2016]



After this first preparatory level, the University of Florence Career Service offers three more services for improving students' employability: the CV Check, which consists of an individual review of students' *curriculum vitae* with a mentor, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses; the Video CV, which is a workshop to make a video presentation to up-

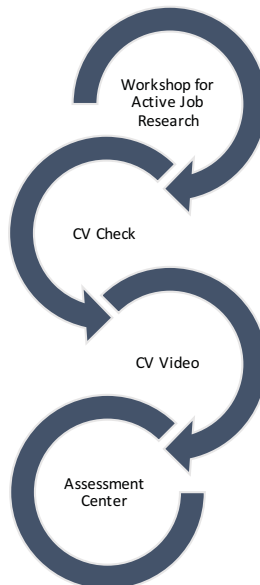
<sup>7</sup> The Workshop for *Active Job Research* is organized in cooperation with a professional psychologist who has a great deal of experience in the field of recruitment.

load on social networks or websites; and the Assessment Centre, which is a simulation of the recruitment tool in order to gain familiarity with it so they can face the recruitment process better.

An overview of the services and activities implemented in the ‘Educational and Formative Activities for Employability’ area of the Career Service shows a link with Kolb’s model of experiential learning (Kolb 1984). As a matter of fact, it is seen that the participants are involved in a cyclical learning process both in the single services and the whole set of activities: that is why we can talk about a recursive process that gives the learning area a helix structure.

Figure 5 schematically illustrates how the cycles intersect and aims to point out the strict link between this area of the Career Service and the experiential learning approach. All the activities are based on integrating concrete experience, often linked with the recruitment process, with reflection and conceptualization of the experience in line with professional careers and personal pathways. What is important from the participants’ point of view is to actively experiment job application tools and approaches to job interviews: in fact, it often happens that students come back to the Career Service after attending a recruitment process in order to improve their skills and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses so that they can perform better in successive interviews, as part of a continuous learning process.

Figure 5 – Intersection between career service activities conceived as single learning cycles. [own source, from Boffo 2016]



#### 4. *Conclusions*

The relevance of young adults' transitions to work has increasingly become a matter for higher education institutions' attention. Owing to the evolution of life pathways in a direction of more fragmentation universities have to prepare students and graduates for the different challenges they will face during their lives. Consequentially, universities have started implementing learning processes in order to foster young adults' employability for their whole career path. Career service activities have been changing from simply providing counselling and guidance to developing employability skills for personal and professional lives: as a result, the direct link between higher education pathways and individual growth demands new learning approaches aimed at supporting skills and capabilities. Especially for adult learning and education studies, supporting people facing the transition from higher education to labour market represents a strong challenge for the future. The development of universities' services raises many questions for our research field. The presence of an international debate on the topic of employability in Career Service (Rota 2014; Genz 2014) stimulates a broad new perspective for the pedagogical research. In fact, what is the role of learning and its link with personal and work experience in respect to the transition towards the labour market? How could didactics and curriculum foster the development of employability through pathways tailored on young adults' needs? These questions could really represent unexplored paths for new research in and on adult learning and education in relation with international trends and transformation of higher education (Sihil, Pramanik 2011).

From this point of view, career services could provide an effective way of integrating Kolb's experiential learning theory in the university context. The combination of formative activities, direct experiences of recruitment processes and reflective observation of situations and behaviours in different levels of activities results in a new learning model: it aims to accompany students during their transition to work through experience and reflection on skills, personal tools and recruitment methods; moreover, the multilevel organization of the educational and formative services displays a cyclical method to boost employability in a lifelong perspective. That is why we can highlight a direct link between career services and experiential learning theory, which is implicitly embedded into the model described in this paper. As a matter of fact, experience represents the core of the whole learning and educational process for the effective transition of young adults into work: the recursive learning cycle, in this sense, is an opportunity to accompany, at different times and through multiple steps, the transition process from university to work through career service activities based on an experiential learning approach.

From a more general point of view, promoting higher education learning activities which fit into the Kolbian model seems to address the learning challenges which can affect increasingly heterogeneous cohorts of students and increasingly complex learning institutions such as universities. Providing targeted and organized processes to assist information gathering and skill development processes and addressing individual differences- especially those related to the way in which students prefer to learn- and suggesting methods to explore experiences that can be replicated in the future with particular reference to career development challenges - are in fact the first steps towards the implementation of a holistic programme of institutional development that includes curriculum development, faculty development, and student, administrative, staff and resource development in view of modernizing higher education.

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