This chapter sets out to introduce some theoretical reflections on the employability construct in adult and higher education. At the same time, it illustrates some perspectives for educational action through the presentation of career service activities aimed at the development of transversal skills.

Employability and Higher Education: A category for the future

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A category for the future

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical aspects of the category of employability, observed as a key point for higher education strategies, and at the same time considered a dimension of adult education. This category is central to the development of teaching and learning models in higher education and, if suitably studied, it can point the graduate training processes in such a direction as to transform, model and update the objectives of higher education (Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2012; Humburg, van der Velden, & Verhagen, 2013; European Commission, 2016; Eurofound, 2018). In close connection with the theoretical part, the paper will present further reflection on the training actions that universities can implement to construct employability processes.

On one hand, the chapter will show the evolution of the concept through the main models found in the world of educational, sociological, and economic research (Yorke & Knight, 2006; Harvey, 2003; Pool & Sewell 2007; Sumanasiri, Yajid, & Khatibi, 2015). As such, it will be interesting to underline the importance of the bond between educational processes in higher education and the tools/techniques to build the education-to-work transition for young graduates.

From another point of observation, the chapter will highlight the educational and organizational implications deriving from use of the category of employability as a concept of reference in teaching practices, educational strategies, and student services.
Career services are a context demonstrating the connection between employability, transversal skill-building, and transition towards the world of work. From this perspective, employability can be deemed to fit a wider classification: indispensable support can be provided not only by teaching, but also by services, to understand how to enter the world of work. It could be said that the key to achieving a different vision of university lies in this ability to “go beyond employability”.

For a definition

So, what is meant by employability?

There have been different definitions depending on the periods when they were developed, and it is interesting to see the path that the category/construct/concept has followed over the last thirty years, from the 1990s to date. Above all, it is interesting to see how it first received attention in economic and socio-economic studies and how the meaning of the category has since slowly veered towards a pedagogical horizon. It is equally as interesting to observe the passage of employability from a “micro” to a “macro” dimension, from analysis on the part of single graduates/students/researchers, then the education system, and lastly the labor market system. In short, the category has been modelled depending on the use of it made by research, also in the political field. For example, for the European Commission, the category of employability was a key factor suggested/highlighted by the Lisbon strategy in the 2000-2010 period, and by Europa 2020 in the 2010-2020 period (Eurofound, 2018). A lot could be said from this last point of observation, first and foremost, that the same political strategies, economic and financial crises, or, in other words, the reality of our globalized and interconnected world has made it necessary to ask the question of what employability really is and why it is important to grasp its value for higher education.

One of the first definitions of employability stems from the work of Hillage and Pollard, who tackled the subject through some case studies in 1998 (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). At that time, the concept was already widely used in the literature and the two researchers provided a definition that is centered on personal capabilities and work:

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 labour market to realise 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 (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 3).

This first definition referred to the ability to know how to look for, find and keep a job or a position, and underlined the centrality of skills in career organization.

Then as now, the formative slant in Anglo-Saxon universities helped to reflect the growing importance of the connection between the teaching program and entry to the world of work, namely the ability to find a job. Later, an interesting investigation was carried out by Harvey (Harvey, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001; Harvey & Knight, 1996) and at the same time by Yorke and Knight (Yorke & Knight, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007). The perspectives of both Harvey and of Yorke and Knight connect the concept of employability with education and pose the problem of the use and presence of “life” skills so as to tackle the world of work in a solid manner, while dealing with change and transformation. In 1999 Harvey already underlined:

At root, employability is about the relationship between higher education and employment. As such, 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, 1999a, p. 13).

In a social context that requires a greater number of graduates to have ever more and increasingly targeted skills for better production growth, it becomes crucial to perform in-depth reflection on the category of employability, with the aim of understanding which way to direct efforts to improve university teaching, create work experience and forms of apprenticeship, and construct specific ties with companies,
associations, and public and private production sectors.

The definitions of Harvey, on one hand, and of Yorke and Knight, on the other, introduce didactic-pedagogical elements and expand the concept to the point of becoming the basis for an innovative way of considering higher education. Harvey provided this definition in 1999, once again in a very critical manner: “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, 1999a, p. 4). Indeed, the apparent problem could be the attributes/skills that a graduate should possess, which should be the very ones that companies are looking for. Instead, the fundamental problem underlined by Harvey is the consideration that employability is a process and that this ultimately causes a real problem to arise concerning the ends of higher education.

However, the most widespread and widely quoted definition is that of Yorke and Knight: “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” (Yorke, 2006, p. 3). It is in this definition that we find the most intensely pedagogical traces of the reflection on employability. It is not only capabilities and skills, but also knowledge, and to go further, values meant as personal attributes which the university education program/process has to help to bring out in the students. As is evident from these definitions, centered on subjects in education, and referring to teaching practices that use curricular and extra-curricular work experience and underline personal and transversal skills, a privileged point of view is being adopted. And that viewpoint is not primarily of the world of work, but of the educational process, the curriculum, the tool and means of teaching practice.

**Employability models**

The studies of Yorke and Knight’s research group came up with the USEM model which takes four broad and interrelated components into consideration:

- Understanding [...] (as a term, preferred to ‘knowledge’ because of its implication of
depth) is, of course, a key outcome of higher education and needs no further justification; [...].

• Skills. (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 ‘skilful practice’ is probably more appropriate).

• Efficacy beliefs, 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.

• Metacognition, encompassing self-awareness regarding the student’s learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in and for actions (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 5).

The model focuses on personal qualities and individual capabilities, suggesting that it is a task of the subject, student, graduate, PhD student, or post-doc to acquire employability. We have to thank the USEM model for the extensive studies on “work-related” didactics as well as for drawing up a pedagogy for employability (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012). In this model, employability is a condition possessed by a subject which sums up his or her competencies as well as transversal skills capacity. This is then combined with a personal theory of self-efficacy, which in turn is associated with the desire to be able to look at these attributes with “metacognition”, and read the work situations with meta-reflexivity and a “gaze from above”. Yorke and Knight’s model refers to the centrality of the subject in choosing his or her own path, with his or her own tools, without the fear of being chosen by others or perhaps not having the skills/capabilities to know how to go it alone (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 4).

Another model which enables us to understand how career paths are built is the DOTS model drawn up by Anthony Watts (2006). It is based on four assumptions: 1. decision learning (being capable of planning and directing acquired knowledge), 2. opportunity awareness (being capable of grasping as well as building opportunities), 3. transition learning (being capable of transferring and directing opportunities), and 4. self-awareness (being capable of expressing and recognizing motivations, abilities, and responsibilities that can provide support in a career path).

Still in the second half of the 2000s, a new employability model became established which somehow incorporated elements from the USEM and DOTS models.
The new model, proposed by Pool and Sewell in 2007, filled in the gaps in both the previous models. It is based on five elements, introducing the new aspect of *emotional intelligence* as the capability to retain a balance and connect with others in professional relationships (Pool & Sewell, 2007, p. 280).

The model, known by the acronym CareerEDGE, sums up the previous ones, but also adds to, expands and develops them. It is based on the following elements: 1. career development learning (this point sums up all the points in the DOTS model); 2. experience (this point underlines the importance of the experiences gained both in the workplace and in the informal contexts of everyday life); 3. degree subject knowledge, understanding, and skills (like in the USEM model, knowledge and abilities are the essential basis of reference); 4. generic skills (this point underlines the necessity to possess transversal or soft skills, which are defined here as generic); 5. emotional intelligence (this point introduces a crucial element for motivation and awareness of oneself and others, personal development, and teamwork).

When put to reflection and assessment, the five elements can support and strengthen the positive upshot of good levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence. As Pool and Sewell explain in their article, the first model outline presents the elements necessary for and connected to accomplishing greater employability. The successive development of the model takes on the metaphorical form of a “key” to open the door, one would say, to the world of work, with all the capabilities that can consciously accompany the student towards work/a profession, but also towards his or her own continuing self-formation. By carrying out a course of reflection, the various important points in the model – experience, knowledge, generic skills, continuing learning, and emotional intelligence – permit the subject/student/graduate to acquire the central aspects of employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007, p. 281). Indeed, what the model does is look at the subject’s individuality and propose an effective reading of the capabilities/skills/knowledge necessary for a suitable transition. At the same time, it less evidently underlines the role of social and environmental dimensions, which also influence personal development. In any case, it seems to clearly confirm the thesis that employability is a process that is strongly correlated with places of learning as well as everything to do with the formation of the subject. Indeed, it becomes a central component and starting point for reflection on the new forms of didactics, teaching, and
career guidance.

The CareerEDGE model seems to be a good model of reference, having received support in studies by numerous authors (Finch, Hamilton, Riley, & Zehner, 2013; Smith, Ferns, & Russell, 2014) even though, as can be observed, it does not dwell on the important aspects of learning. As a result, other models have been proposed, such as the Learning and Employability Framework by Sumanasiri, Yajid, and Khatibi (2015, p. 55).

The researchers from the Malaysian university affirm that employability is clearly linked to university learning results as well as to degree course programs (Finch et al., 2013). Course activities should be based on soft skills, which are in turn vital for the development and implementation of employability. Therefore, their model ascertains a clear, convincing, and unmistakable relationship between learning and employability to the point of hypothesizing a pedagogy for employability as well as employability-based teaching. The main question they answer is: “Can a higher education system not be suitable for the requests from the world of professions, the world of work, and all in all the world of life itself?” (Sumanasiri, Yajid, & Khatibi, 2015, p. 57).

The studies of Yorke and Knight have spread the culture of teaching based on the category of employability, and many teaching centers and career services in many Anglo-Saxon, Canadian, and Australian universities have continued to study, validate, and verify teaching and educational practices based on this close link between life, studies, and the transition to work (Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2002; Bennett, 2016).

**From employability to educational actions**

Considering the reflection made on the employability construct by theoretical research on one hand and empirical work on the other can give us a clear vision of the topic and enable us to know where to stand in upholding the necessity for a central relationship between universities and the world of work. In some European countries, higher education strategies still do not support this close bond between educational courses and work development which would do well to exist, all the more so today with artificial intelligence, new media, and Industry 5.0 dominating production and indeed directing the global race towards the future. Harvey maintained:
The two key reasons for the expansion of higher education in Europe are to improve the skills stock and provide people with the attributes needed to be critical lifelong learners. Lifelong learning goes beyond a single focus on an educated work force […] As such, it is a view compatible with a philosophy of transformative learning. In effect, then, achieving a job within six months of graduation is merely a symptom, and a misleading one, of a much more important development: the enhancement and empowering of the learner […]. Thus employability is not about getting graduates into jobs. It is not even about delivering ‘employability skills’ in some generic sense. Rather it is about developing critical lifelong learners — and employability is subsumed as a subset within that. So the focus needs to be on empowering students to become critical learners (Harvey, 1999a).

Harvey’s words echo sharply after ten years of worldwide crisis, in an era such as the present which is more deeply uncertain and lost than ever (Bollas, 2018).

Asking the questions of “how to be guided by the principle of employability in planning study courses” or “how to build a university course based on work-related didactics” must not just be a theoretical exercise. Some indications for educational action in higher education contexts could be: 1) to change curricula in order to include life skills; 2) to model study courses by introducing a close relationship between teaching and skills for the labor market; 3) to connect different knowledge in a creative way and build open spaces of real interdisciplinarity; 4) to prepare students, graduates, and their families for a new vision of university; 5) to change university culture by opening education to the transversal skills of problem-solving, creativeness, flexibility, and spirit of enterprise, for the purpose of self-knowledge, communication, relationships, and citizenship (European Commission, 2016).

To ask these questions is to place technical and transversal skills at the center of the educational pathway and curriculum, to connect scientific knowledge with the life world, just as Simmel or Dewey were exhorting us to do over a century ago.

From an educational point of view, the relationship between universities and the world of work can be activated through a range of actions that go from work-related didactics (Fedeli, 2018) to the implementation of curricular and extra-curricular work experience, underlining how far transversal skills can model the path of a young
graduate. Indeed, it can be assumed that employability is not a characteristic of people or systems or institutions, but a process, and as such it must be constructed together, in an organized and responsible manner. In a continually changing world, the acquisition of skills allows graduates to enter the world of work, but the ability to remain in the world of work is boosted if a person is capable of transforming him or herself, and acquiring reflexivity and critical skills (Nauta, van Vianen, van der Heijden, van Dam, & Willemse, 2009). Harvey, along with Yorke and Knight, assert just this: employability is the capability to acquire reflexivity and critical skills, to know how to stand up in a continually transforming world. The process to educate a student during his or her time at university can be modelled in light of global changes, following how much technical, digital, and social transformations are changing people’s lives and the environment surrounding each one of us.

In addition to teaching practice, and in addition to work experience, which is always indicated as determining in reducing the time needed to enter the labor market, I believe that university career guidance services can provide further support for the relationship with the world of work and can form a place for educating and constructing students’ employability. Career services are the place which offers the first tools for the education-to-work transition, and where it is possible to try out educational experiences that are directly connected to the world of work. Career services are often observed as a separate tool from the university curriculum; they are a service for the comprehension and understanding of the sense and meaning of professionalism (Rayman, 1993; Stewart, 1993; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014).

Career services can be considered the place where employability is created and developing these services can be thought of as a conscious route towards creating a connection between universities and the world of work. Some activities that they provide are more widely known, such as drawing up curriculum vitae, or learning how to go into a first job interview, learning how to respond to a first job offer by Skype, or knowing how to speak about oneself and one’s skills. They are aspects that are neglected in university courses, as at times they are deemed to be of little importance. Instead they are crucial educational and formative areas which all students can begin to work on so they can take care of their professional selves. Attention to the dimension of self, as well as learning, is a central aspect for the work-to-education transition; it
implies knowing one’s “self” as well as knowing which direction to turn. As a service alongside but interconnected with the study courses it can offer students and graduates a space where they can find themselves and outline their professional skills (Enkhtur & Yamamoto, 2017).

Meeting an entrepreneur or understanding which skills a company recruiter is looking for can be a highly formative experience. In the same way, the presentation of a large company with various personnel needs can be pedagogically intense. These situations can make graduates aware of the different facets of the market, the new professions, and what actually happens inside a company.

Coming into contact with work widens the students’ gaze on the reality surrounding them and opens their eyes to diversity and others, it enables them to see things from another perspective and listen with different ears to what was always within their sight and earshot. It opens young adults to learning. Further studies and investigation are needed on the educational and formative potentials of career services.

The University of Florence Career Service indeed seeks to focus on educational and formative lines in order to accompany, support, and walk alongside the students as they choose their life projects. Employability is central in building these projects and the range of educational actions implemented are aimed precisely at achieving this ambitious goal.

**Career services as an exemplum**

I will now make a rapid reference to the career service experience at the University of Florence in order to understand how the construct of employability contributes to organizational innovation in contexts of higher education. For Italy, it represents an interesting experimentation of the application of services to introduce and build work culture in a large, generalist university.

The activities that the University of Florence has built up since 2010 to foster the work-to-education transition of its graduates and PhD students have become a point of reference for all the students at the university. During this intense period, the number of services offered by the Career Service has gradually increased, as has the number of students and graduates that have made use of it. The commitment to reach out to the
The largest number of students is the target of the Career Service in its everyday work with the professors, but above all with companies, professionals, institutions, and trade associations, so as to create the best entry to and the closest bond with the world of work. The main commitment of the University of Florence Career Service is to create a work culture. As such it uses its services in connection with the degree courses, placing prime importance on programs that support work training, meetings with companies, entrepreneurship education, and the creation of entrepreneurial spirit.

In order to help create the conditions to improve the entry to work results, the Florentine university offers a range of activities, paths, and meetings, with four branches of services for students on one hand and companies on the other: *career education, work education, meetings with companies, and enterprise development*. Every formative area consists of a series of services which go from activities on transversal skills, through drawing up a curriculum vitae, video CVs, and meetings with companies, to enterprise training center programs. While on one hand the service tries to develop brief formative interventions to support reflexivity on the students’ professional future, on the other it tries to offer eye-witness accounts of the range of professions that can be embarked upon after completing courses at the university, which cover the whole range of subjects available in Italy. Among all the services, at least three are particularly connected to the formation of transversal skills: the *assessment center, career day, and enterprise training center*.

The *assessment center* enables the students to approach a method of company assessment rarely offered during university courses. In small group sessions, for an entire day, students and graduates undergo assessment in the transversal skills of “teamworking”, “proactivity”, “problem solving”, and “effective communication”, allowing them to get a taste of company selection processes.

The *career day* saw 162 companies, the highest number to date, take part in 2018. One hundred forty-three companies took part in the event in 2017, and 117 in 2016. All the companies present undertook to offer work experience positions or actual employment. Therefore, the intention behind the initiative was to offer a real occasion for contact, but above all for entry to the world of work. The event tried to account for the general requests from the local, national, and international area and to satisfy the demand coming from all areas of the university.
The enterprise training center is a two-day training program which challenges participants to develop an innovative product or process. During the training activity, conducted using the design thinking method, the students can try to work in teams (team-building and teamworking) and understand what it means to use creativity to achieve a challenging goal.

The Career Service provides many other activities, but what I am interested in showing is the central significance of university career services in creating the best connection between teaching, research, and the world of work.

Lesson learned: towards labor in the real world

The competences are key points for employability […] Without competences the University will not [achieve] its mission, not only the third mission. In conclusion, initiatives that help improve employability of students are to be encouraged, especially where they include significant work-related elements or are embedded in the curriculum. […] (Harvey, 1999a, pp. 7-8).

These are the words used by Harvey to end one of his many essays on the topic of employability. Only twenty years have gone by, but it is as if the world had progressed by decades. Without mentioning the digital revolution which has changed our human lives forever, we could say that little is being done to maintain, repair, and direct our world towards the future. Work is part of this future, we need to think of it in and for higher education so that people can develop in a better direction.

Some affirmations can be drawn from what has been discussed.

First of all, a connection needs to be made between theory and practice, know-how/knowledge and its application in production and work processes. This may have little meaning for technical and scientific courses, but it could be very desirable for degree courses in the humanities and social spheres, where it is more difficult to single out a professional career connected to the study area. The aim of making this connection between theory and practice must be to overcome the phenomenon of the mismatch between qualifications and professions/positions undertaken (OECD, 2017).

Second, the category discussed can pave the way for an expanded vision of work as bringing cognitive wealth. Being familiar with career paths, work processes, and
workplaces before finishing university can support seeking a job that is in line with what was implemented in the educational process. This would imply that overeducation can become a thing of the past (OECD, 2017). Graduates must be capable of understanding their personal and professional roles.

Third, employability may be considered something that can be learnt throughout life. There is a strong connection between the category under investigation and the concept of lifelong learning, and immediately connected to this point is the close relationship with transformative learning (Dirkx, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Fourth, the employability category fosters reflection “on the workplace”: building innovative teaching tools, such as design thinking, stimulates the creation of new didactic models that are more open, inclusive, and communicative, and contemplate students’ cognitive, emotional as well as ethical-moral parts.

Fifth and lastly: new higher education models are made possible by intense dialogue with the world of production, the professions, and the work done by career services. The universities of the future will be made of connections and contaminations, students but also families, companies as well as start-ups. It is this part that most needs to be extended to dialogue, coexistence, listening, and empathy (Stein, 1989).

Is empathy not perhaps the highest level of human relations, of all personal, professional, school, and working relations?

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