This chapter summarizes the articles contained in this special issue, highlighting core themes and future implications for research and practice for adult education.

**Employability in higher education**

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The topic of employability observed through the lens of higher education could apparently seem a false problem. Indeed, we know that in every country/state/nation, higher levels of education correspond to the possibility of finding employment in line with the level of instruction (OECD, 2019). In general, there is a virtuous relationship between achieving a university degree, masters, or PhD and the placement of university alumni in employment. Learning and education are suitable gateways to social mobility, economic well-being, and the construction of life projects that look toward the future of the subject and person with a sense of security and stability. We could state that learning is the force that can mold the life path and point it in the direction of well-being (OECD, 2018).

Work is a fundamental learning environment for adults. To deal with employability is to place “work” as a means and the end of human realization at the center of educational attention (York & Knight, 2004). In those countries, like Italy, where the virtuous relationship between learning and finding employment is broken off, we encounter anomalies of intellectual unemployment or professional mismatches (AlmaLaurea, 2019). But these contradictions are an expression of the complex social, cultural, and economic balance in the states where these problems are seen.

It can be said that many higher education systems have undergone a structural change that has irreversibly transformed their nature, goals, and scientific, educational, and organizational practices. In Europe, new employment situations and demands for knowledge have highlighted the criticalities and contradictions of both
the university curricula and governance strategies. Some of the greatest attention is paid to the relevance of the educational programs on offer for the resulting professional figures. In many cases they are criticized of being self-referential. For these reasons, many of the essays collected here, whether taking a micro, meso or macro perspective, seek to deal with the challenge of producing knowledge that is important and relevant for the social, organizational, and employment contexts. This is and will become a vital factor for universities and add educational value to higher education training programs.

A significant gulf and misalignment still exist between the world of work and university, as well as between university and the students’ need for personal and professional development. Some aspects of new university education could be summed up in at least three dichotomies: user-client, particular-general, vertical-transversal.

*User-client:* adults are no longer just subjects asking for a service, but the holders of wider and more complex interests than in the past. Parents’ expectations, adults’ professional ambitions, personal aptitudes, critical factors, and students’ fragility help to generate new expectations on the part of adult university students. More than in the past, today universities have to respond to demands for knowledge but also for support, specialization, and integration. If we look at the current university students’ profiles, we discover that in part they have changed their status. They have become student-clients, with greater awareness of what the organization has to guarantee in terms of learning and services. They have different learning demands, have tools to collect information that can evaluate services through national and international university league tables, and make a more attentive and
balanced costs—benefits assessment (fees vs employment, distance from home vs services offered, cultural scene vs safety).

*Particular-general:* those who work in university environments know that it is not easy to change teachers’ attachment to the general and universal nature of knowledge and know-how. Many academic communities share single systems of meaning, which incorporate the vision of teaching as the work of handing over knowledge. This is often accompanied by portraits in which the student’s learning is mainly seen as an individual process that is independent from any type of social involvement. The challenge is to go from a vision of knowledge as a skill that has to be exercised and therefore evaluated in a decontextualized way, to the idea that knowledge is localized and therefore anchored to tangible and intangible contexts, practices, and limits.

*Transversal-vertical:* both the economic world and the European Union (EU) have supported various initiatives to help the development of transversal skills that are useful for adults to foster active citizenship and to increase social inclusion and employment. In this direction, universities are urged to set up programs that can support the acquisition not only of strictly specialized or technical-professional skills but also “soft” or “transversal” skills.

**Employability and building subjectivity**

So, taking care of a process/path/category such as employability means taking care of the learner both while on the educational path and after its conclusion (Illeris, 2009). That is not all. It also means dealing with the delicate and central passage from the condition of *learner-in-formation* to a *learner-in-transition*. And we know that, in our rapidly evolved world, jobs change, professions alter, places of work and production are modelled swiftly, even more so than we can imagine. So, in this issue
it has been our primary interest to tackle how to read a topic only apparently linked to economic changes from an educational, formative, social, and cultural, namely, human point of view. Employability and transformation, one might say. Because it is definitely a process of transformation, a transformative process that accompanies the learner-in-formation to acquire suitable technical and transversal skills to become, or to be, a learner-in-transition (Mezirow, 1991).

The articles have highlighted the transformative strength of employability if we adopt its competence-centered definition or rather if we consider employability as a category that accompanies learning with, and interprets it as, giving oneself a shape. What shape? That of future women and men, of subjects changing their skills and abilities by listening to the pace of time, trying to look ahead with the tools given to us today, extending our being/existence more than our deeds. Indeed, doing could prevail over new technologies, new inventions that could dominate humankind to the point of making us disappear. Instead, doing and being are the two poles of educational action and learning. We do because we are. We are because we act. By placing skills in the center, we can be prepared for tomorrow, for what looks as if it is in the future, but is instead already knocking on our door.

So, to have some points of reflection that can guide us in future research, first of all we can state that to look at university studies through the lens of employability is to place on one hand work at the center of the discourse on learning in higher education, and on the other skills, for life and for work. Encouraging employability has to mean having a clear idea of the paths needed to develop that attitude toward life which allows the subject/learner to tackle a whole host of conditions with flexibility, proactivity, creativity, critical capacity, and reflexivity. These skills are connected to paths of teaching & learning, but also to knowledge and the awareness that the
relationship between study and work has to be built during the educational pathways and that these programs must be directed toward the organization of learning to live in the future adult and professional world. Flexible work, nomadic work, the work of the new and brand-new professions must be understood and investigated. That is why we are talking about employability. The society of the future could open up unprecedented scenarios, perhaps even tomorrow. How can we manage to educate in higher education without a change, transformation, and complexity-oriented outlook (Gardner, 2006)?

Schön had warned us about the passage from the devaluation of professional knowledge and working practices to the crisis in trust concerning the knowledge learnt in universities. “If professions are blamed for ineffectiveness and impropriety, their schools are blamed for failing to teach the rudiments of effective and ethical practice” (Schön, 1987, p. 8).

Today, like in the years when The Reflective Practitioner (Schön, 1983) was written, university is suffering from a legitimacy crisis as to its own formative capacity and above all as to the practical usability of a knowledge that does not take into consideration the contexts where this knowledge is used. The criticalities point above all to the excessive centrality of technical knowledge and training strictly specialized professionals, who do not, however, possess such planning skills or expertise as to deal with the problems encountered in the varied landscape of professional practice.

Not only all levels of school, not only workplaces, but also the third level of education, that is, higher education, needs to and must reflect on the continuing improvement of the connections with the world of life (Simmel, 1917). So, in a certain sense, we are asking what research and adult education can do to direct
university toward better adult education. This is an innovative perspective, an alternative vision through which to look at the future of higher education.

**Three reflections on employability**

The first juncture of reflection concerns knowledge of the relationship between learning and the world of work. Dewey (1899) had already theorized this relationship and had done so with such deep awareness of what (twentieth-century) schools had to do that his words still leave us open-mouthed today. There is no need to recall Dewey’s prescriptions, but his considerations on the relationship between theory and practice, on culture as the profession of knowledge, against the professional and technical education of an engineer or doctor, are shrewd reflections that concern precisely the topic of employability at school, in adult learning, and in educating to build a life project. As well as presenting reflections on the relationship between employability and professions, the essays of Boffo, Bierema, Dellaville, and Terzaroli underline precisely the importance of a bridge, a connection, a *common pathway* that places adult subjects in the world of work. From theoretical considerations on the category of employability (Boffò), it emerges that transversal and technical skills (Bierema) are the hinge around which to enact learning not for that specific type of job (Dellaville), but for what the future may require (Terzaroli). As such, entrepreneurial spirit can be considered the skill that can look toward creating something new from what does not yet exist.

The second point of reflection on the whole corpus of articles concerns the competences that university teaching processes can produce, make grow, and bring out for the improvement of teaching/learning practices. To date, *academic teaching* has been *teaching by disciplines*. If we want to strive to teach employability, we must equip ourselves to develop teaching by skills. This issue of the journal clearly
highlights the centrality of skills for the learner’s formation, but even more for the transformation of the teaching and learning processes, and the very purpose of universities. Here we touch on the topic of the goals of learning. Learning is always for the future of life, humankind, society. Learning is a democratic exercise and an exercise of democracy. However, the purpose of learning has to see a connection between theory and practice.

Employability and its centrality for university teaching impose a reflection on transforming the goals of learning, for the whole lifespan, but above all for a constant and continual transformational dialogue. University teaching is a central topic of research for higher education, new perspectives still await to be opened. The articles by Fedeli, & Vardanega and Frison & Tino specifically report on innovative university teaching experiences, on one hand investigating teaching in the field of scientific disciplines (Fedeli, Vardanega), and on the other highlighting how work-related teaching can innovate higher education.

Third point of reflection: skills. How can skills for the future be introduced and built into our university programs, how can we help the education and learning of adults who re-enter education alongside young people? The topics are connected and concern a new attitude to teaching and learning. Here, the themes of innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit are very topical and are virtuously connected to the dimension of employability. The articles by Melacarne & Nicolaides, Fabbri & Romano, and Hoggans & Robbins indeed center our attention on “skills”.

What is the concept of skills and why is it central for innovating teaching and training? As is underlined in all the quoted chapters, transversal, vertical, and technical skills form the crux of a way of modelling teaching related to use and deed, but also to the centrality of the single person. Action entails an education of the mind.
This affirmation implies that action models the mind, bends it, directs it, shapes it, gives it shape. All the chapters examined offer interesting cues for applying, in that same direction, a transformation that goes from learnt knowledge toward action in the classroom, in the workplace, with young adults or adults already present in the workplace.

We can assert that all the chapters in the volume revolve around the topic of skills and action. Taking up what we established right at the start, the learner has transformed into a subject who already acts and works at the moment of his or her education. And so methods and techniques have to become the active ingredients of an educational process that makes the learner able to think starting from the educational action.

We have left a last reflection for the chapters that deal with the relationship between employability and PhD programs. On one hand, the article by De Vecchi demonstrates how the relationship between research competences and the possibility of entering professional contexts needs to be built, that it is not a natural dimension of a PhD course. This leads to a transformation of PhD course goals and supports those who have to draw them up in outlining job-oriented curricula, in the sense of educating PhD students to use their research skills in the workplace too. In the same way, the last chapter by Devis, Fedeli, & Coryell compares two PhD programs carried out in Italy and the United States respectively, underlining the potential for exchanges on the very terrain of employability.

**Looking to the future**

As we underlined at the start, reflection on the topic of employability and higher education can lead us to think of the future in an innovative manner, by considering how we prepare our adult students for a world that may no longer be the
one to which we are applying our knowledge. We have our ear to the ground, listening for cultural, teaching, social, and cultural innovation. If we want to build a citizenship for the future, we must pay utmost attention to the social and cultural transformations around us (Mezirow, 1997, Habermas, 1990). We have to reflect critically in the face of what is apparently unexpected. To ignore a relationship with the world of work is to fail to act the stages of transformative and reflective learning.

A final word goes to the professionals who deal with adult education and work in the field of the transformation of students, workers, and managers. Knowing how to be attentive, listen, dialogue, and use language and words, while anticipating the future, is the knowledge needed to connect. Without practice, namely, action, or communicative skills, no conversation will be possible. The art of holding a conversation with the other is at the basis of the possibility of critically and reflectively transforming our minds and behaviors. In order to even introduce employability as a category guiding our teaching practices, we should continue to exercise our communication skills, which provide transformative learning with its strength for change.

References


