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‘Regional Universities’ and Pedagogy

Graduate Employability in Rural Labour Markets

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Abbreviations

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CF	Cohesion Fund
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
EURES	European Employment Services
EUROSTAT	Statistical Office of the European Communities
HE	Higher Education
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISCO	International Standard Classification of Occupations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	Public Employment Services
RIS3	Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
UBC	University-Business Cooperation
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WEF	World Economic Forum
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

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Introduction

Much has been written about graduate employability, and the term is common today in government policies, the media, and educational research. Narratives of neoliberal policies advance the idea that graduates should be responsible for readying themselves for work, supported by the education system. As the "societal role" of the university has come to the fore, these institutions have been vested with new functions, and their intrinsic and instrumental values have been discussed widely. Dramatic changes in the world of work have meant that businesses now insist on greater flexibility in hiring, firing, and benefits, demanding workers who can adapt quickly to new job descriptions and responsibilities; this dynamism has left a sizeable sector of the working population at the mercy of uncertain financial and business flows. At the same time, in the interests of economic growth, governments have re-formulated welfare provisions to "rationalise costs", shifting upon citizens the responsibility for almost every aspect of their life, including education and personal development.

During these developments, there has also been a new awareness of the urgent need for sustainability that has motivated countries to commit to achieving the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals for society, the economy, and the environment.

These different needs necessarily intertwine: working towards decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) may demand changes in the economic paradigm; making human settlements inclusive, resilient, and sustainable (SGD 11) entails reviewing the concepts of urban and rural, including employment, health, and mobility.

While we work towards a more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable planet, we sometimes fail to address some sectors in need of attention, among them, graduate employability in peripheral areas. About half of the territory of the European Union is rural, home to about 20% of the European population. These often-fragile territories are characterised by low innovation and less development, with poor employment prospects. Rural regions of Europe often see an exodus of young people to cities, only partially compensated as older residents return to the countryside. Many EU and national government policies aim to support regional growth through research and innovation ecosystems based on local and specialised resources and capacities. Universities are expected to be crucial players in regional innovation, contributing through research, education, and formation of human capital, but how this role should be played out in urban and rural regions remains unclear. More specifically, how can a university located in rural or peri-urban setting support graduate employability to the same extent and with the same outcomes as a university based in a major city? Overall, it is unclear how human settlement can be "inclusive, resilient and sustainable" in rural areas where their most educated young members find it impossible to contribute to the local economy and feel forced to seek better prospects in urban centres.

This study seeks to contribute to understanding how narratives of employability should be re-framed to support sustainability. It focuses on a topic in part neglected by research: how can graduate employability be fostered in European rural economies? Are there teaching and learning practices that support the employability of graduates in rural labour markets?

The title of this book sets "Regional Universities" in quotation marks because this work includes, but does not focus on, the model of regional universities as formulated in the literature. Instead, it addresses higher-education institutions that deal with rural or peri-urban territories in their regional action. Since different countries vary on their definitions of "urban" or "regional" or "rural" universities, the book title uses the word "regional" to point out the limits and opportunities of the reference territories of universities.

This work is largely explorative and seeks not so much to propose easy solutions as to open a dialogue among different disciplines on the very complex topic of the employability of graduates in rural areas.

The book is organised as follows. Chapter 1 provides general background and describes employability in the context of social and economic changes of recent years. Chapter 2 outlines the macro-level of policies in education, regional development, and sustainability issues, and Chap. 3 describes the concept of "rural" and delineates the characteristics of rural economies and employment. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the meso-level of graduate employability, namely higher education and business, while Chap. 6 describes the micro-level of individual students and graduates. Chapter 7 explores pedagogies that support the increase of employability potential for rural economies. Finally, the Conclusions highlight the need for further dialogue among components of society to reach system-level thinking to tackle global issues, both at the vertical level of policies and at the horizontal level of stakeholders.

CHAPTER 1

Graduate Employability

Abstract The concept of employability ranges from the individual to the global dimensions, and encompasses several domains. This chapter outlines the key socio-economic transformations that have modified transition pathways between education and work, and describes the changing nature of jobs and careers. Following major changes in the nature of employment, the concept of employability has been accordingly re-formulated: in this context, the nature of jobs for university graduates has changed towards new professional roles and positions that are not yet fixed. The chapter introduces the main shift from employment to employability as a consequence of new policies implemented, in particular in Western countries, then analyses the concept of employability that has resulted from socio-economic changes, including the entrepreneurial components, and concludes with the analysis of "university graduate jobs" as conceived today.

Keywords Employability • Labour market • Entrepreneurship • Graduate jobs

1.1 From Employment to Employability

Transitions from education to work[1] were relatively stable for most of the past century, as a consequence of established education and training programs, welfare, labour market systems, and family structures across

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Europe. Even if the patterns of transitions were different across countries (e.g. a *parallel* model in Germany or a *sequential* model in France), similar patterns of transition from education to work were identified in cohorts of young people as "cumulative" experiences (Muller and Gangl 2003).

The change in cultural, social, and economic systems due to globalisation, technological change, and neoliberal policies in Western countries has deeply affected the social life and its values, in a process that has been defined as "detraditionalisation" (Heelas et al. 1996), "individualisation" (Beck and Ritter 1992), and "disembedding" (Giddens 1991). The focus on the "self" has been translated into individual experiences of transitions, depending on either "choice biographies" (Du Bois Reymond 1995) or new patterns of vulnerability and perceptions of uncertainty (Furlong et al. 2003; Wyn and White 1997; Furlong et al. 2006). As Cieslik and Pollock (2002, p. 3) argue: "In place of these collective guides and traditional institutions are much more individualised identities and biographies where individuals have a greater scope beyond traditional markers of class, race, and gender to create complex subjective lifestyles".

If no new "single model of transition" can be identified, some elements, common among countries, can be identified as follows (Raffe 2011):

- The transition process takes much longer (typically from around age 15 to age 25, OECD 2000).
- In all countries the position of young entrants to the labour market differs from that of adults, and in many respects is less favourable.
- Education plays particular roles in preparing young people for the labour market.
- In all countries, transitions are differentiated and unequal, and different categories of young people have different experiences.

To understand the change in transitions from university to the world of work, the dramatic change of the labour market should be considered first. Since the 1970s, the automatisation of work and other factors have led to a downsizing of the labour market, particularly in manufacturing and construction. Manufacturing in particular was a strong field for Western labour markets, and job loss cumulated during the years of recession (2008–2009). Structural changes affected the market, which has shifted from an industrial society to a knowledge-based economy, driven by technological innovation. This shift involved a radical change in the conception of human resources: mass production and consumption,

which required a large number of employees, are no longer central to economic growth, and "knowledge-intensive" companies, based on technological innovation and a highly skilled workforce, have taken the fore (Stewart 2001). According to Drucker (1993), in the "post-capitalist" society "the basic economic resource […] is and will be knowledge" (1993, p. 7), intended as knowledge "for doing", or knowledge "in action", after centuries of "knowledge for being".[2] The rise of the 'knowledge worker' has dominated the discourse on human capital in recent years. Although a shared definition of this term has not yet been agreed upon, it can generally be said that knowledge workers have as main capital their knowledge, and possess hard and soft skills that allow them to apply knowledge to a task or job. They are able to find, process, handle, and use information within a lifelong process of learning. The impact of the knowledge economy on the labour market, as in other spheres of the individual, has of course been disruptive. As the worker owns the capital, hierarchies and powers are modified (managers vs leaders), centralised organisations become decentralised organisations, sectors become permeable, and companies are not always able to define to which sector they belong (Phillips et al. 2017). The knowledge-based economy offers a great promise that anyone "skilled enough" or smart enough or committed enough can achieve the higher positions in professional settings, with incomes more and more polarised between the "winners" (those who achieve the higher positions) and the "losers" (those who do not) (Brown and Hesketh 2004). The process and its implications became more visible during the years of economic crisis, but the effects on the labour market had already started in the final decades of the twentieth century, when finding or keeping a job was a challenge for many individuals (Rothwell and Rothwell 2017). Also, the nature of jobs has changed from permanent to temporary positions. The ILO report 2019 (World Employment and Social Outlook Trends 2019) highlights how in Northern, Southern, and Western Europe, although with differences from country to country, there is a general shift towards temporary or part-time contracts, with uncertain welfare conditions and social protection and with a certain degree of risk of poverty (2017, p. 51). In 2016, a study for the European Parliament stated that "all employment relationships are at some risk of precariousness" (European Parliament 2016, p. 11), however assigning a higher level of risk to temporary agency and posted work and informal/undeclared work (e.g. zero hours contracts), and a low risk to permanent positions. According to European data, permanent contracts accounted in 2018 for