

Institutional Learning in Higher Education and Graduate Transitions

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Abstract:

The 'learning exclusion equilibrium' strategy in Italy also governs young adults' possibilities of accessing higher education institutions (HEIs) and entering and being successful on the labour market. The upshot of this strategy has been to weaken the social role of universities and open the field to new players promoting new solutions based on stronger teaching and research partnerships. After graduation, young university leavers face a period in which they follow non-linear paths as they try to fit their skills to the labour market demand. For many professions, there has been an immense change in this demand. Now, unlike the past, life skills are considered basic competences for technical professions too. If those lacking these skills enter the labour market later, the problem arises of how to create these competences both during the period of university education and in the following years. Universities have to practise institutional learning and study with those who need knowledge in order to come up with a new strategy so that their graduates can directly manage their relations with the labour market. Knowledge of the situation and development of graduates' professional lives is needed in order to give academic programmes a new direction and allow students to make an informed choice of which university to enrol in. The European Graduate Tracking Initiative can lead the way towards this goal.

Keywords: Cooperation and Ecosystem; Graduate Tracking; Higher Education; Institutional Learning; Life Skills

1. A Dual Higher Education Strategy Driven by the Learning Exclusion Equilibrium

Italy provides a particularly interesting case to seek to understand the processes that influence youth and adults' access to higher education (HE) owing to the existence of two apparently contrasting phenomena in a situation of nevertheless low HE participation:

- a. The general strategy behind public policy in Italy is to strengthen areas of ongoing delays in the formation of human capital, productivity and infrastructures, by supporting them with appropriate macroeconomic stimuli. This is accompanied by a discriminating dual adult learning strategy. On the one hand, vulnerable groups' achievement of learning objectives is postponed until the resumption of economic growth (the negative effects that

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ensue are mitigated by boosting social policies). On the other hand, the state sponsors the development of competences in potential high-skilled workers both through tax incentives and public interventions to support learning, research and innovation.

- b. Despite the priority given to high-skilled professionals, this opportunity is reserved for a small number of young people and adults. Some of those who access HE are also affected by the discriminating dual adult learning strategy. In 2020 the gap in university education levels between Italy and the rest of the European Union (EU) continued to grow, with only 20.1% of the population (aged 25 to 64) having a degree against 32.8% in the EU. The number of adults accessing public universities has been falling constantly for over 20 years. The relative stagnation of the rate of «participation in education» that emerges from the reports can be explained by the hypothesis that it is a variable that depends on the «learning exclusion equilibrium» existing in Italy, namely the situation in which a (largely manufacturing) economy becomes trapped in a vicious circle of low value added, low skills and low wages. Italy is in a condition where businesses' scarce demand for skills is accompanied by scarce attention to this problem by public policies. This means that both businesses and the state contribute to the poor supply of skills among citizens and the low propensity of young people and adults to invest in education and training.

The «big quit» of young people and adults from learning opportunities may be due to the «great resignation» felt owing to the perceived impossibility of finding learning opportunities that are relevant to them. This is also likely to be affected by the quality of the learning offer and in particular by the problem highlighted by the hips by the CSRs (European Commission 2020) in underlining the important challenge to Italy posed by the shortage of teachers. This element has a negative impact on the quality of the offer – in particular in the technical and professional training field – and the participants' learning outcomes.

The tensions deriving from these strategic options are probably the accelerators behind the growing obsolescence of classic university models, their weakened relationship with society and the scarce function of their academic programmes. Going from what Ryan Craig wrote about the USA in 2018, the problem does not only seem to concern Italy:

College students may well be getting soft skills and digital skills – and most do in their extracurricular activities – but there's little guarantee it's happening in their program of study. And there's no reason why not besides the absurd durability of programs that fall short. Planned obsolescence in designing academic programs – or at least a systematic review of whether programs are doing an adequate job of producing all the skills graduates require – would be helpful in this regard (Craig 2018).

The obsolescence of academic programmes does not only call into question the universities' teaching offer (Fitzpatrick 2011). The phenomenon also concerns the functions of HE in society, in that it can undermine the value of HE qualifications and graduates. The functions of the single universities change regardless of the knowledge and intentions of the strategies adopted at the different levels in the university system (ministries, universities, departments, researchers). A method to help tackle the risks of universities and their staff becoming superfluous to requirements can be to plan actions to predict and deal with the inevitable obsolescence of old models and make the progressive transition to new ones.

2. Obsolescence Risks: Alternative HE Models

The creation of alternative HE opportunities to the classic, centuries-old university model tells of the existence of a demand that is not met, which other actors propose to interpret, displaying its risk of obsolescence.

The phenomenon of online universities in Italy is well known and it is no exaggeration to state that they fit into a logic of pure 'credentialism'. Apart from the first experiences from the start of this century, these online projects have evolved in a very different direction to the Open University in the United Kingdom or the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. However, it must be recognised that online universities respond to demand from 'unconventional' students to obtain one or more degrees in relatively short time spans. It is the only place to offer an answer to this demand.

Corporate academies and corporate universities (about 40 of which were identified in Italy in 2015) represent a more significant phenomenon because they bring about an effective change of paradigm with necessarily more attention to learning outcomes than issuing diplomas (Assoknowledge and Università La Sapienza 2015).

The function of corporate academies is substantially limited to sharing and circulating competences already present in a company and helping them to take root. They mainly operate by setting value by their own employees' competences while making use of external figures through cooperation with other companies, research institutes and universities. These HEIs stand out in that they are essentially aimed at company employees, suppliers or customers.

On the other hand, corporate universities are HEIs that are open to the general public. In some cases, they are set up as consortia, with the direct involvement of companies from the same cluster and universities. In other cases, they are institutions created by companies from a particular production sector operating within a business district which come together in a consortium. Looking at the Italian context, an example of the first type can be MUNER, the Motorvehicle University of Emilia-Romagna where several automotive companies have put their know-how and the most innovative technologies at the service of students and trainers who want to become the new professionals in the automotive field, designing road and racing vehicles, more sustainable propulsion systems and subsystems for intelligent Industry 4.0 functions and production facilities. An

example of the second type is the Politecnico Calzaturiero del Brenta. This HEI is the training, technology transfer and services facility for the Riviera del Brenta shoe district, where luxury shoes are produced. There are over 500 companies in the district and more than 10,000 employees. The polytechnic works closely with the companies in the district, experts and teachers from leading companies worldwide and the international network of schools and research centres. The polytechnic has trained 95% of the workers in the district.

Both of these examples bear witness to the presence in Italy of a similar model of non-traditional HEI to the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg, DHBW)¹ in Germany.

The corporate university phenomenon highlights a strategy that can be credited with reducing or eliminating the risks of misalignment between training programmes and work transition and shortening the time taken by students to transition to the labour market. The academic programmes in this university model are designed on a 'planned obsolescence' basis, thanks to a constant dialogue with the skills demand and students' job prospects.

3. The Mismatch between the Skills Supply and Labour Market Demand

The mismatch between the skills supply and demand is a marker of HEIs' risk of obsolescence and delegitimation. Academic qualifications are losing their 'signalling' function, while the importance of real acquired skills is growing. As is known, signalling theory asserts that HE enables employers to pinpoint potentially productive graduate employees. However, the mismatch between skills supply and demand makes qualifications less relevant while highlighting HE's function of «increas[ing] students' propensity to learn in employment and signal[ing] to employers that graduates are people with a high propensity to learn in employment» (Rospigliosi et al. 2014, 420). The focus shifts from the piece of paper to the propensity to learn in employment².

Research on transitions from HE to employment has been documenting the problem of the mismatch between formal education programmes and students' and labour market expectations for years.

The high number of university dropouts, the number of students behind with their exams and the average number of years that a student takes to graduate reveal the existence of far-reaching and stubbornly resistant shortcomings in the HE system.

In terms of the labour market demand mismatch, it is at least since the beginning of the 1970s that research has been devoting energy to what in 1986

¹ The DHBW is a HE institution with several campuses throughout the state of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. It offers cooperative education bachelor's degree programmes in partnership with industry and non-profit institutions in the areas of business administration, engineering and social services.

² In this connection, see the career service proposed in Boffo 2020.

was defined as the «contemporary phenomenon of overeducation and under-employment among college graduates» (Smith 1986, 85).

Fifty years on, the problem has definitely not diminished. Graduates' employment rates have not fully recovered since the 2008 crisis and skills mismatches between the available educational offer and fast-changing labour market demand are requiring increasing attention (Cascioli 2021). A recent study by Salas-Velasco (2021), based on the analysis of data «from the first nationally representative survey of labor insertion of recent university graduates in Spain» provides useful food for thought. By estimating a multinomial logistic regression, the study uses self-assessment to identify match status four years after graduation and helps to investigate four aspects of the mismatch phenomenon.

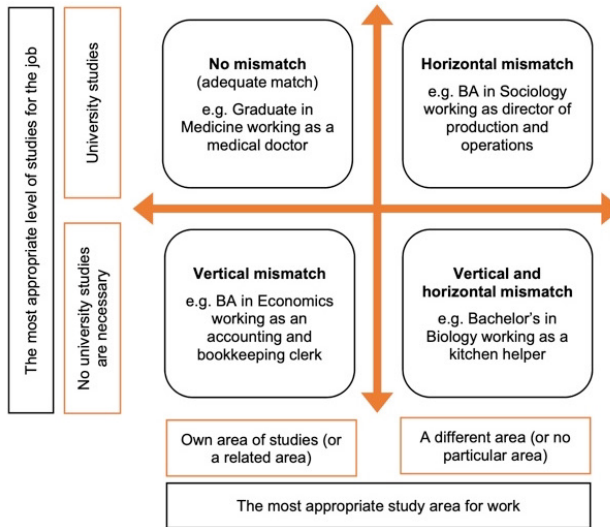


Figure 1 – HE graduates' degrees and their jobs: the education-job mismatch. Source: Salas-Velasco 2021.

The study distinguishes between HE degrees:

- having an adequate match with the graduates' working positions;
- suffering from a horizontal mismatch, which occurs when university graduates who are trained in a particular field work in another field to their formal qualification level;
- suffering from a vertical mismatch (over-education), which occurs when graduates work in non-graduate positions and study in areas unrelated to their studies;
- suffering from a vertical and horizontal mismatch, which occurs when graduates are over-educated for the position occupied and the correspondent working area is not appropriate for their area of study.

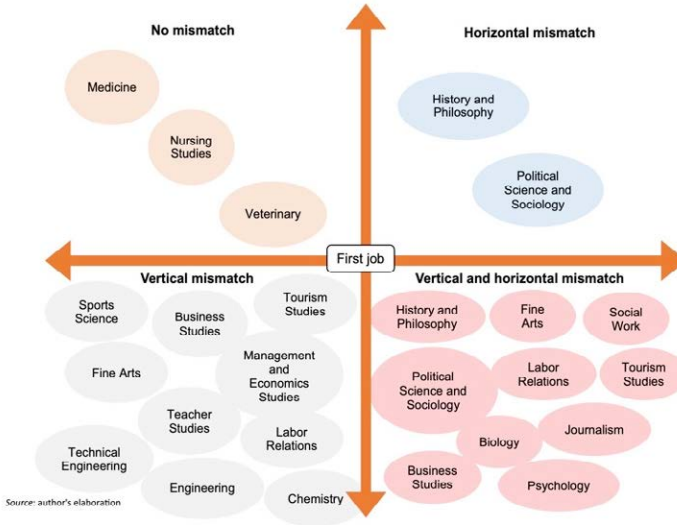


Figure 2 – Mapping the university degree mismatch of HE graduates in Spain. Source: Salas-Velasco 2021.

The results of the study show how, after four years, only medical graduates have a high probability of doing a job corresponding to their study course. Further investigation of what leads to this match is needed, taking into account the medical professions’ professionalization processes and the protective organisation of their profession. The panorama shown by the results gives a glimpse of the extent of the phenomenon, confirming the fact that the skills mismatch is triggered by the ‘learning exclusion equilibrium’ which then generates an increase in inequalities between graduates. The graduates who fall into the vertical mismatch category are condemned to the prospect of income verging on or under the poverty threshold³.

³ Anelli 2018. *University To Work Transition. Policy Brief 08, Employment Skills and Productivity in Italy*. A research project coordinated by IGIER-Bocconi, in partnership with the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. This policy brief is part of the Bocconi University ‘New Skills at Work’ project, financed by the JPM Foundation. A special thanks to INPS and to the staff of the visit INPS scholar programme for making the data available and their exceptional technical support.

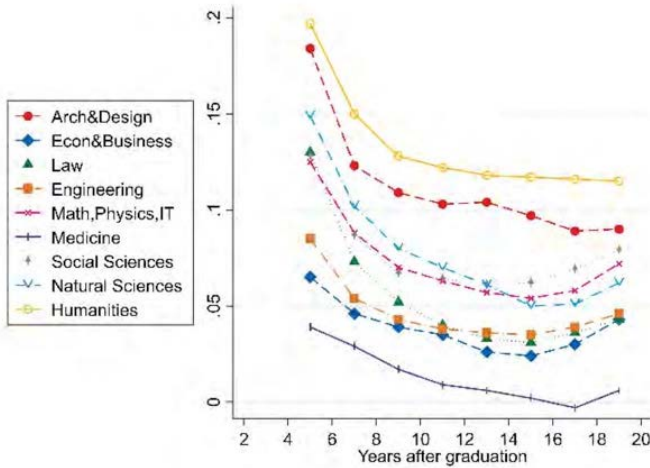


Figure 3 – Probability of income below the poverty line – Trajectories. Source: Anelli 2018 and INPS.

The main reply of governments to this phenomenon has been employment policies and measures such as: training/apprenticeship programmes; active labour market programmes; policies concerning temporary or fixed-term contracts and measures to lower labour costs (Pastore 2017). While the measures have been useful, they have not gone far enough to have a great effect on graduate employment rates or skills mismatches between available educational offers and labour market demands. While they have acted on the effects of the mismatch to a certain degree, they have not tackled the causes stemming from the university system cultural model.

One of the possible causes of the mismatch can be identified as students' not fully informed choice of course upon enrolment. Therefore, the question arises as to why information on job prospects which can help in making these choices is not regularly made available to the young people and their families. In the much more complex US HE context, since the beginning of the century, the Federal Department of Education has released yearly updates of the College Scorecard which is useful for students and families when weighing up college options. The tool also includes updated information that may be beneficial to school counsellors, college access providers, researchers and other critical stakeholders. The department has made improvements to the College Scorecard interactive web tool in addition to restoring several metrics that help students gauge how their prospective institution compares to other colleges in terms of costs, graduation rates, post-college earnings and other metrics. The changes reflect the depart-

ment's priority aim to support and encourage inclusive, affordable postsecondary programmes that provide strong career outcomes for students⁴.

4. The Non-linear Paths of Young People's Transition to the Labour Market

Horizontal and vertical mismatches appear in all but a few professional families and some HE models (which are not easy to transfer).

Universities are limited in their ability to offer programmes that match the skills demand owing to the difficulty to predict the trends leading to changes in the skills demand expressed by the labour market. In addition to macroeconomic factors, this demand depends on product, market and organisational innovation processes affecting the economic actors. The dearth of studies that look beyond the duration of the academic programmes and make longer-term predictions prevents us from even imagining a device enabling this type of alignment for all professional families.

The world of professions changes as a result of job destruction and job creation processes taking place in a context of technological, economic and social transformation. These dynamics are driven by innovation in production processes, transformation in production structures and social transformation (Nübler 2016). The current university model is not sufficiently flexible to adapt to and align with these job destruction and creation trends.

Young graduates' lives follow non-linear paths stemming from the misalignment and extended duration of their transition into work. A model countering these effects is the Early Careers Talent Pipeline Conceptual Framework (Donald 2021). However, it only works in the case of organisations competing in a war for talent, when students are drawn towards a professional position in the penultimate year of their education, before rapidly passing to selection and then micro-placement (with assessment of the 'organisation-person' fit, offering and acceptance of the graduate employment opportunity in a very short time frame). The micro-placement phase is followed by a retention plan and then the graduates are actually hired.

For most young people, graduation marks the start of a non-linear path which only concludes after several years when they enter a job position that somehow fits their aspirations, educational pathway and expected wage premium.

During this period, those young people who do not get discouraged fill the wait with activities in view of developing their professionalism and learning. The Emp&Co research project (Boffo and Fedeli 2018) – a two-year longitudinal research project on graduates in Adult Education at Florence University – observed the following four types of learning activities in the graduates' professional growth paths:

⁴ <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/search/?search=University&page=0&sort=threshold_earnings:desc&toggle=institutions> (2023-03-15).

- **Formal education**

Both during studies and after graduation, the tendency to return to further professional training. This may be in order to strengthen skill areas not covered by the university learning offer or to acquire knowledge of new professions.

- **Networking relationships and dynamic learning networks**

Built in all professional growth paths, with a positive outcome. The access to and strengthening of networking seems to be related to graduates' family backgrounds and a capacity for autonomous initiative in the creation of new social and professional networks (in associations and business). As well as being a hub of opportunity, networking is a context permitting mutual learning and the exchange of knowledge.

- **Access and use of educational and cultural infrastructure and services**

Appearing to be a further component present in the growth paths of numerous graduates, it is a factor that has been investigated only marginally. In the cases found (e.g., Youth Guarantee Programmes), access to the services and programmes provided by youth policies proved to be useful. What remains to be investigated further is the recurrence and importance of the use of digital as well as generic cultural infrastructures (from libraries, to museums, music, etc.), because they give direct access to information on the labour market, and mediate skills development and the creation of networking opportunities.

- Lastly, **work** proves to be part of the opportunities that work culture had already generated before university studies ended. Work is at once the expected result and the means through which graduates develop their ability to learn and produce new knowledge. The opportunity to move from one job to another better one could be interpreted as the fruit of prior learning accumulated through different past learning activities and workplace learning from previous occupations.

The conclusion of university studies is just one stage in young people's formation. Their general education process continues in an intense (albeit not structured) way for several years after graduation, following non-linear paths. It is supposed that the learning quality of non-linear paths (quality of workplace learning from frequent job changes, alternating with continuous training, unemployment or reskilling processes) is the origin of any lasting mismatch.

This statement has two significant implications:

- a. the new research question should no longer focus only on 'what skills companies need today and tomorrow', but rather on 'what young people will learn after leaving initial training', and how the different occupations in the life of young adults contribute to forming the skills required for the jobs of the future.
- b. the general education process continues after graduation, until a young person finds a place within a possibly fitting occupation and a 'decent' job. The general education offer does not end with the last qualification obtained –

whether it is a diploma or a degree – but with the possession of skills that enable the young person to do a decent and fitting job. This does not happen by extending schooling or through particular services or helpdesks.

5. The Competences that Create Alignment

The itinerary in which graduates build their professionalism can be described as a non-linear path. During this period, they go through a series of micro-transitions to reach a professional position that is hopefully in line with their aspirations and know-how. The quality of the work experience in this period does not only seem to depend on the graduates' technical and professional skills. 'Skills for the labour market' are no longer necessarily associated with this type of competence. Now others seem fundamental for the labour market and the graduates' professional success, namely skills for life or life skills.

In the Italian political and technical debate, there is widespread use of terms like 'soft skills', 'managerial skills' and 'transversal skills', respectively used within different communicative and linguistic contexts (the first and the second term are used in training within public and private organisations, the third term is in use in educational and training institutions and public policies). The act on lower and upper secondary schools dated January 2022 and approved by the Chamber of Deputies refers to «non-cognitive skills», that is, skills such as «flexibility, creativity, aptitude for problem solving, the ability to judge, the ability to argue and the ability to interact» (art. 2)⁵.

Typically, these types of skill are considered complementary to the disciplinary or technical vocational skills that are connected to specific professions. Their function is to ensure that the individual is able to put the acquired knowledge into practice.

In the field of public policies concerning labour market skills education and training, the prevailing approach is to define the skills – including transversal skills – according to the goals of the academy programme or the specific tasks assigned to the future worker⁶.

However, this is not the only approach. A recent study on the skills needed to ensure employability in the current decade overturns this culture (EY, Pearson and ManpowerGroup 2021). «Skills for life» are referred to as «core competences», while technical and vocational skills are considered «additional skills». Skills for life form the foundation of private and professional life, while the additional skills have a contingent function, connected to the workplaces where individuals spend their professional time and the job done at a given moment in individuals' lives. This terminological premise serves to highlight how,

⁵ Draft bill: Lupi et al. "Disposizioni per la prevenzione della dispersione scolastica mediante l'introduzione sperimentale delle competenze non cognitive nel metodo didattico" (2372). <<https://www.camera.it/leg18/126?leg=18&idDocumento=2372>> (2023-03-15).

⁶ Regione Lombardia. 2020. *Quadro regionale degli standard professionali. Sezione competenze trasversali*. <<https://qrsp.servizirl.it/qrsp/#/home>> (2023-03-15).

in Italy, the problem of the role of «skills for life» is conditioned by the slow and uncertain process of removing a disciplinary learning culture dominated by the idea that the skills required by the labour market and distinct to the current individual professions are fundamental. This belief is particularly rooted in the formal education of young people and adults.

The approach that is taking shape in the most advanced business world is different. Over the last few years, in the Italian business world particular attention has been paid to the skills that are necessary for the future and the ‘life skills’ needed to improve the current performance of Italian companies. The discussion focuses on the new skills that will be required for future jobs in the coming years, as well as the efficient management of human resources. Large Italian financial groups (such as Mediobanca) annually promote studies monitoring the positive correlation between operational profitability and the weight assigned to ‘life skills’ with respect to technical skills. This information from companies urges investment in human resources, not only *vis-à-vis* specialised technical skills, but also advanced life skills (critical thinking, adaptive flexibility, ideation skills, originality, adaptability, understanding others and the ability to assess situations and work autonomously), considered a critical success factor.

This new skills demand expressed by the labour market makes the contrast between professional skills and life skills obsolete. These life skills are the most functional components to build the solid professionalism requested by the world of work. Corporate culture has also adopted this type of skill and it has become a fundamental part in the development of its ‘human capital’.

Given that the teachability of skills for life is strongly connected to the informal education processes at work in daily life and work, their possession appears directly connected to an individual’s set of study, life and work experiences.

This means that universities take part in developing life skills but that they do so – in a positive or negative way – together with the other social actors present in the life of young adults.

Given that HE is and should be closely connected to research, that is, to the real processes of building new knowledge (not only the transmission of already acquired knowledge), this means that universities can carry out their role in forming young adults’ basic skills (that is, life skills) on condition that they also work alongside other social actors in research and the dissemination not of a magical, but tendentially scientific approach to all problems concerning life and work (obviously, I am not referring to the discourse on “STEM” subjects).

6. Universities as the Privileged Partners for the Dissemination of a Scientific Approach: Learning with Those in Need of Knowledge

Improving the institutional education, research and relationship management processes with the Italian and European labour market is an area in which the European Strategy (European Commission 2022) has given an important contribution. Everywhere, the national agencies that work to up the quality of the university system have played a propelling role in this field and since the end of

the last century, the European Commission has made many tools and fields of action available: mobility, joint qualifications, European University Alliances, European universities, international research programmes, micro-credentials, etc.

Thus far, none of this has had a great impact on some fundamental indicators, such as: the number of graduates, average duration of degree courses and access of adults to universities. The reason can be found in the same 'European Strategy for Universities' which considers these types of action and measure in connection with their concrete, direct and non-mediated role concerning «the societal context of democratic decline, inequality and diversity, as well as the green and digital transitions and geopolitical changes». It adds

Excellent education, research and innovation environments are an enabler for developing high-level skills, creating breakthrough knowledge and translating it into practical applications. Cooperation among universities and with the industrial ecosystems is mutually beneficial in this respect, with the higher education sector supporting skills development for industry and the business sector, in addition to personal development purposes. Learners should have more opportunities to benefit from traineeships, be exposed to start-ups, and be engaged as actors of change in their community to positively impact the society around them (European Commission 2022, 8).

The European Strategy seeks a university capable of practising institutional learning (Torlone 2018) and dealing with the demand to develop competences and skills in all brackets of the population and all fields. It works to develop new knowledge not only in traditional students, but all those requiring knowledge (and not necessarily qualifications: entrepreneurs, professionals, politicians, associations, social movements, etc.). It is normal that a university operating in this way makes a greater contribution to the development of basic skills for all – researchers included. When a university operates this way, it sees:

- The immediate social utility of its activities as it can respond to the short-, medium- and long-term educational demand for knowledge of all brackets of the population;
- A more general demand for teaching a scientific approach and method, in connection to research rather than its dissemination. Only universities, some education and research centres and some workplaces can guarantee citizens such an opportunity (again I am not only referring to the STEM issues);
- The phenomenon of cultural reproduction that restricts access to its resources to limited brackets of the population. Cultural reproduction, the exclusion of whole swathes of young people owing to their families of origin, hinders the extension of the role of universities and limits the tendency to enrol. Hence, everyone potentially needs to be addressed, including those who will never enrol, owing the mediated benefits generated with respect to the role of university research and teaching.

7. Job Placement, Alumni, Actors of Change in their Community. Knowing what Happens to University Leavers after Graduation

In addition to career guidance services, a certain number of universities have started to provide structured job placement services to all their graduates. A still extremely small number have come up with an 'alumni' strategy through which they not only try to find out the real impact of their learning programmes on their students' educational investment and professional well-being but at the same time reinforce their bonds with the economic and social system employing their graduates.

These initiatives strengthen universities' institutional role and ability to collect and use information for the purpose of their organisational improvement. However, they do not give an answer to a problem highlighted by the research: the existence of a period in young people's lives when they are alone or can only rely on measures such as special projects, helpdesks and on-demand services. This archipelago of opportunities, mainly provided by the for-profit sector, enables the most fortunate young people to look for the support and accompaniment needed to manage the paths to build their professionalism. There is no 'after-sales' service provided by either the institutions that guaranteed the achievement of certain learning outcomes, or other social actors. There is a missing piece between the end of university education and the moment when graduates are able to access workplace learning and continuous learning measures as professionals. It is not necessary to imagine comparable measures to those existing to defend the consumers of different products to academic programmes. It would be simpler to imagine a highly individualised device, based on the Individual Learning Account model, which gives young people a supervisor and mentors who accompany them in their workplace learning experiences, use of cultural resources and construction of social networks. But this is just an example in order to identify a field of research that could provide graduates with support in their non-linear paths (Slowey 2016). For students and graduates to become actors of change in their community and positively impact the society around them, universities, along with other actors, must assume new responsibilities towards their former graduates, for the broadest possible period of their professional lives. It is hard to say if the university system is ready and capable of performing this role for all the professional families that it fosters.

In the meantime, it must be noted that there is little research on the future of graduates. As yet there are no systematic studies or Regulation on European Statistics that gives directions as to how to collect and compare this type of information. There is a dearth of data and the few that there are, are put to little use in the evaluation of academic programmes.

Nevertheless, in addition to working to imagine systemic, stable and sustainable answers, there will probably be the opportunity to gain better knowledge of the non-linear paths at European level and to compare the experiences of graduates in the different countries of the EU. Educational research can also help to build and better the capacity of EU and European Economic Area (EEA) coun-

tries to track HE graduates, and support the European Commission in its effort to go from the European Graduate Tracking Initiative (EGTI) to a Regulation on European Statistics which can involve member states in surveying the individual paths of graduates even when they become expatriates either due to the brain drain or brain mobility. This would provide a picture comparing the actual learning outcomes of each academic programme and their impact on graduates' personal and professional well-being. The Council of Ministers' recommendation for a graduate tracking initiative dates from 2017, prompting the European Commission to launch a pilot European graduate tracking survey and provide member states with capacity-building support for the harmonisation of country-level ability to collect comparable and relevant data (Council of the European Union 2017). During the 2020s, Europe-wide graduate tracking will guarantee the production of comparable evidence on how HEIs prepare students for their professional lives and European citizenship. This systematic and timely collection of data about European graduates is expected to improve the understanding of the relevance of HE systems, and inform policymaking in addressing skills mismatches and graduate employment issues. Gathering information and analysing graduates' personal development, career paths and behaviour as citizens will have a positive impact at three main levels:

- individual – by helping individuals to make more informed decisions on the educational path they want to follow and ensuring support from HEIs and policymakers in developing the hard and soft skills required by the evolving labour market;
- employer – by empowering HEIs and policymakers to reduce skills mismatches and gaps and improving the balance between labour market supply and demand;
- education policies and education research – by using these data to gain more knowledge of young people's lives and employment pathways and adding a new piece to the adult education system that supports learning processes during the transition to the labour market.

But it will only be possible to achieve these results if all the academic programmes are involved in a systematic investigation – not just a survey – and the results produced are used by universities and future students at a large scale.

The results of this investigation could enrich the dataset of statistics services and at the same time give rise to a useful service for families and companies. Collecting information and disseminating it on the web in a self-directed career guidance service is merely a political option that could only be hindered by some stakeholders. Creating a university balanced scorecard based on graduates' professional careers would create greater transparency with respect to the ranking services currently available. It is well-known that where university balanced scorecards already exist, more efficient devices have been created that provide comparisons on the basis of criteria defined by the students themselves. Nevertheless, the simple decision to collect information on graduates and make it

accessible to universities and future students would definitely foster the improvement of the teaching programmes on offer and informed choices by new students.

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