

Self-perceived employability and implications for learning design: An exploratory case study

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Abstract

This work explores the concepts of work readiness and self-perceived employability, addressing contextually the perceptions from third-year bachelor students enrolled in the degree of Cultural Heritage and Tourism at the University of Macerata in academic year 2018-2019. The research aim was to identify perceptions of undergraduates in terms of skills and employability potential to design effective teaching interventions. Following literature review, the paper describes collected data and discusses around key research questions, related to (a) perception the world of work; (b) assessment of possessed skills; (c) estimation of employment possibilities; (d) perception of preparation to the labour market. Results show a gap between perceptions of the labour market and possessed skills, a medium-low self-perceived employability, and a low engagement in career development activities, where, to the other hand, perceived preparation provided by the university is declared as medium-high. Conclusions highlight the need of further work to better understand the implications of results for effective learning design.

Key words: Self-perceived employability; Labour market; Self-reflection.

Introduction

Major changes in the labour market took place in past decades, in particular in Western countries, following technological advancements and changes in economic policies toward less regulated labour markets. Transitions from education to work, which had been relatively stable for the most of the previous centuries, have consequently changed: instead of cohorts experiences, as before, now transitions happen in a very fragmented and largely unpredictable way, as individual biographies dealing with constantly changing scenarios. Employability as term shifted from the objective of securing a paid job to the capability of the individual to find and retain a job.

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Alongside with a cultural and social focus on “self”, both in terms of self-fulfilment and self-responsibility, the individual has been asked to take over the duty of ‘being employable’. Employability, as concept, has not yet found an agreed definition. The most used draws from Yorke (2001): “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”. As well, the set of ‘employability skills’ which should be acquired by the ‘employable individual’, are not agreed among the educational community, and include different definitions as soft skills, interpersonal skills, career skills etc., having as a main characteristic the not-technical element (hard skills), which are anyway considered as necessary for job performance. A significant body of literature addresses the ‘skills issue’: on those considered the most relevant for employers (Purcell et al., 2002; Slade, 2014; El Mansour and Dean, 2016; Wesley et al, 2017); on the difficulty of teaching and assessing them (Knight and Yorke, 2003; Huber et al, 2007); and on the “vagueness” of their definition (Mason et al, 2009). This ongoing debate has led to a great fragmentation of concepts and interpretations. The same terms are unclear, often overlapping between skills, where ‘generic skills’ is used interchangeably with ‘core skills’, ‘basic skills’, ‘transferable skills’, and ‘employability skills’ (Caballero et al., 2011).

Against this changing background, education system has been entitled to support the journey of ‘employable graduates’, particularly in the case of higher education, that was in past decades asked to increase dialogue with business in order to provide human capital foreseen as needed in future workforce. Higher education institutions have been then challenged to provide employability provisions to support smooth transitions from education to work, by increasing their links with the world of work and by being active players in regional development, and at the same time use new knowledge acquired through this process to feed curricula, and equip graduates with (although undefined) employability skills.

Theoretical framework

To understand how to foster acquisition of employability skills, the relation of the labour market, and the ways of assessing skills needed to be fit-for-work should be investigated. As for employability concept, ‘graduate work readiness’ is a relatively new concept and it is not clearly defined yet. Definitions include:

- “the extent to which graduates are perceived to possess the attitudes and attributes that make them prepared or ready for success in the work environment” (Caballero and Walker, 2010);
- “A ‘work ready’ individual possesses the foundational skills needed to be minimally qualified for a specific occupation as determined through a job analysis or occupational profile” (Clark et al., 2013);
- “a complex of generic attributes that allow graduates to apply their technical knowledge to problem-identification and problem-solving once they join the workforce” (Jollands et al., 2012);
- “enhanced capacity to ensure employment” (Glover et al., 2002);
- “component of the ‘graduate-ness’ (the effect on knowledge, skills and attitudes of having undertaken an undergraduate degree) of a student who has a sense of ‘self-directedness,’ or an ability to recognise one’s ‘personal agency’ in obtaining and keeping employment” (Coetzee, 2012).

It might be noted that defined as such it is overlapping, and replacing to some extent, the concept of employability: as well, there is no consensus about the components of work readiness, or the way to measure it (Priksat et al., 2019).

Although by now part of higher education in the overall frame of an increased link between education and the labour market (Daniel and Broker, 2014; Tynjälä, Välimaa, and Sarja, 2003), work readiness is based on business perspective: it emerged as a selection criterion for predicting graduate potential (Caballero et al., 2011). In fact, where traditionally selection for job recruitment has been based on academic (or technical) achievement, today more importance is being placed on graduates possessing a range of generic skills and attributes required across all jobs (Caballero et al., 2011). The measurement on how much, or to which extent, graduates are work-ready is usually carried out in business settings: several studies investigated employers to achieve a definition of components of work readiness in terms of skills, and how graduates preparation is valued by employers (Casner-Lotto et al., 2006; Gardner & Liu, 1997; Hart, 2008; Stewart and Knowles, 2000; Atlay and Harris, 2000; and others).

In educational settings, focusing on students, the concept of work readiness is usually mentioned as “self-perceived employability”. The two concepts share the same objective – it means to define the extent on which the graduate/the labour market perceives, or try to measure, the readiness of an individual for work. The concept of self-perceived employability has been also been explored only in recent times. In general, it can be defined as the perceptions and beliefs about possibilities to succeed in obtaining full time employment. Self-perception should be considered as different from self-efficacy, which is

concerned with people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1994).

In past few years, research on self-employability as perceived by students, has increased (Jollands et al., 2014; Daniel and Broker, 2014; Smith et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2007; Taylor, 2005) as a consequence of the overall pressure on universities to bring graduates closer to work.

Sociological research has also advanced understanding on how the labour market, as construct of individuals, has a subjective value and plays a significant role in perceptions. In fact, if paid work can be seen as an institutional fact (Searle, 1995), it is also something that is constructed in context, and depending on individual experiences. The labour market construct by individuals plays a significant role in perceptions, either of own employability and the labour market itself. Researchers have explored the orientation to the labour market and the value of the work organisations to shape the values related to career, and career development (du Gay, 1996; Sosteric, 1996; Whittle, 2005). These works provided evidence that individuals "engage with the world of work in different ways which relate to their subjective frames of reference" (Tomlinson, 2007). Subjectivity, even if with difference of use and meaning between different disciplinary fields, can be defined as "the conscious and non-conscious conceptions, dispositions and procedures that constitute individuals cognitive experience" (Billet, 2010, referring to Valsiner and Van de veer, 2000). Subjectivity entails the interrelation and interdependence between the individual as agent and the social world, and the sense-making of the individual in relation to lived experience. The construct of how work is conceived, depends therefore on the relation with the social world: it is therefore a psychological instance that incorporates subjectivities (influences and cultural practices over time), immediate social experiences (situations), and post-mediate experiences (how experiences are constitute) (Billett, 1998).

Students can have or not previous job experiences, but have experienced work as part of the social world, and possess their own perception of work – and of themselves within the picture. Much research have explored the role of self-perceived employability in work settings, e.g. employees, in particular in psychological field (Forrier et al., 2009; van Dam, 2005; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Berntson and Marklund, 2007; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; De Vos et al., 2011). Also, some research has investigated the match between students and business perceptions: Wye and Lim (2009), who investigated the differential perception of 30 employers and 600 undergraduates on the topic, concluded that there is a mismatch on work readiness between the two targets.

Berntson et al (2006) proposed a research to identify predictors of employability developed around three areas of investigation – human capital (as education, competence development and job tenure in relation to employability); dual labour market¹ (as belonging to the ‘first segment’ of the labour market is positively perceived in relation to employability); and economic situation (during economic prosperity employability is perceived more positively than during economic recession). Perceived employability was measured through one item “How easy would it be for you to acquire new and comparable employment without moving?” rated on Likert scale 1-5, other dimensions were retrieved through educational level and contract agreements. The analysis work was carried out on a subsample of statistical data from two Swedish national surveys: the Labour Force Surveys and Work Environment Survey. Results highlighted that more education and competence development were positively associated with perceived employability, but not so much with tenure, and that employment status was not relevant as expected for perception.

Vanhercke et al. (2013), adapting from Berntson and Marklund (2007), define instead self-employability as “the individual’s perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment” (2013: 594). The authors point out that five aspects are important to the definition, namely: 1) perceived employability is a subjective evaluation; 2) concerns ‘possibilities’ of employment and accounts for contextual factors; 3) is relevant for different groups on the labour market and throughout the career; 4) refers to ‘employment’ possibilities, either in the organisation of the employee, or outside it; 5) the term employment concerns both quantitative and qualitative elements (2013:595-596). Graduate students represent a specific target in which some of the aspects listed by Vanhercke et al., as their transition are not within the labour market, or re-access (e.g. after maternity leave), but to the labour market: the same authors specify that however self-perceived employability can be used to “raise awareness about the need to invest in employability beyond academic achievement”.

Other research focuses specifically on graduate students: Rothwell and Arnold (2007) developed a 11-items scale that could support understanding of individual employability within and outside the person’s current organisation, and for career development purposes. Further, Rothwell et al. (2008) developed a scale for university students: the scale is developed around four quadrants, namely

¹ The concept of ‘dual labour market’ was introduced by Doeringer and Piore in 1971: it suggests that labour market is divided in two segments, in which the first is characterized by ‘high wages, good working conditions, employment stability, chances of advancement, equity and due process in the administration of work rules’ (p. 165), and the second by low job security, poor working conditions and low wages.

- self-belief: graduates' engagement with their studies and academic performance (internal employability);
- my university: students perception of the strengths of the university in terms of reputation (external employability);
- my field of studies: status of credibility of graduates' field of study (external employability);
- external labour market: perception of the state of external labour market (external employability).

The scale includes 16 items, and five subscales (Self-perceived employability; Employability/ambition; External employability; Internal employability/ambition; University commitment): tested on 315 university students, has shown external employability being the most robust measure (41% of variance explained), while internal employability the weaker (8,1% of variance explained). The scale was further tested by other researchers, directly as measurement (Vargas et al., 2018; Maiolo et al., 2013) or to add further elements (as career adaptability, Monteiro et al., 2018).

Qenani et al. (2014), on the basis of the work of Berntson et al (2006) and Rothwell and Arnold (2007), and by including additional variables, designed a self-employability survey, administered in two Californian colleges. 978 usable questionnaire were collected. Questions of the survey included human capital variables, satisfaction with college preparation on job attributes, personality questions, perceptions on the states of the economy, and confidence about employability. The questionnaire is explained in detail in the next paragraph, since used as a basis for field research at the University of Macerata. Results of the Qenani et al.'s study (2014) can be summarised as follows: gender plays a role (50% more confident in their employability skillset compared to female students); significant relationship was found between employment prospects and self-managing behaviour; internship and projects with enterprises can increase perceived employability; college reputation is important to students.

Further studies have analysed the awareness of graduate students in relation to employability. Qualitative methodologies have been applied to investigate this issue: Tomlinson (2007) argued that students view their employability as "crucial issue which as to be negotiated and worked at", with lower expectations about the value of the degree to access the labour market (Tomlinson, 2008), according to the results of 55 interviews to undergraduates at their final year. Cavanagh et al. (2015), through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, have concluded that there is a " gap in knowledge about what will be critical in the workforce", with little capacity to link the academic study with work activities. This has also been to some extent echoed by the work of Tymon (2013), who collected data through focus groups on a sample of over 400 students, from the first to the final year of study career: among most

relevant findings, it has been confirmed some uncertainties on how undergraduate value the development of transversal skills, recognised as requirement but employers, through academic courses, while a great emphasis has been put on placements as main support from higher education institutions. An additional mismatch between students perception and requirement from the world of work is related to the concept of employability itself, which seems to be considered by undergraduates as instrumental to get a job, whilst literature see it as a lifelong process, that includes the overall professional career lifecycle.

Sample and method

Sample

Field research has been carried out at the University of Macerata during the Academic Year 2018-2019. The scope of research was to understand the extent to which Bachelor students enrolled at the course of Cultural Heritage and Tourism perceive the skills required by the labour market, the skills possessed by them, their view of the labour market, and the role of the university contribution to employability. Collection of data was included in the design of the course in “Agri-food marketing and economics”, in which a project based approach was applied: students were asked to work in group during the semester to propose a plan for improving the marketing potential of local small enterprises and associations in the field of agri-food. The course included presentations of local companies and associations (testimonials) in the classroom, participation to a problem-based workshop (organised in the frame of a the Erasmus+ Project FOODBIZ), and presentation of results to entrepreneurs and stakeholders concerned.

It is however acknowledged that the extent of the impact of the course’s activities is limited on pre-post data collected: a semester is composed by several courses, and each individual is exposed to personal, professional and academic experiences that might have contributed to results.

Method

Research design has been based to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. How students perceive the world of work in terms of competence needed for access and maintain a job?

- RQ2. How do they assess their possessed competences in relation to the labour market requirement?
- RQ3. How they do estimate their possibility to get a job?
- RQ4. How they perceive the preparation provided by the university?

Sample and participants' profiling

Research has been carried out in the frame of the Bachelor degree “Cultural Heritage and Tourism” (national classification L1-L15), course “Agri-food economics and marketing”, third/final year.

The actual data on employability of graduates for this degree (Almalaurea, 2018, referring to datasets 2017) show the following outcomes – please note that the inter-disciplinary Bachelor degree course includes two profiles, L-15 (Tourism) and L-1 (Cultural Heritage).

As regards national classification L-15 (Tourism), data are based on 32 interviews (graduates for year 2017: 44). The 31,3% of the sample was enrolled as MA student. Employment rate at +1 year from graduation was 46,7%, with part-time contracts representing the 45,5% of the sample, and the 18,1% in stable positions (permanent contracts). The 90,2% of the sample was employed in private companies. Average salary was 1.376 EUR for males, 665 EUR for females, with a remarkable gender gap. The 18,2% of the sample defined as necessary the degree to carry out the job (graduate jobs); the 72,6% stated that the degree was not necessary, but useful; the 9,2% considered the degree not necessary and not useful for the job in which they were employed. Geographical distribution recorded the 63,6% of the sample working in Central Italy; 18,2% in Southern Italy; 18,2% abroad. Time from graduation to first employment: 4,8 months.

As regards national classification L-1 (Cultural Heritage), data are based on 13 interviews (graduates for year 2017: 15). The 61,5% of the sample was enrolled as MA student. Employment rate at +1 year from graduation was 30,8%, with part-time contracts representing the 75% of the sample, and the 25% in stable positions (permanent contracts). The 100% of the sample was employed in private companies. Average salary was 2.188 EUR for males, 1.001 EUR for females, again with a remarkable gender gap. The 25% of the sample defined as necessary the degree to carry out the job (graduate jobs); the 50% stated that the degree was not necessary, but useful; the 25% considered the degree not necessary and not useful for the job in which they were employed. Geographical distribution recorded the 50% of the sample working in Central Italy; 25% in Southern Italy; 25% abroad. Average time from graduation to first employment: 2,3 months.

The sample of students at the University of Macerata was composed by 30 students, of which 25 (83,33%) were female, and 5 (16,67%) male. Average age

was 21,53 years. Of them, 19 (63,3%) were enrolled as Cultural Heritage students, 11 (37,7%) as Tourism students. All respondents had Italian nationality.

Parents work included professional profiles (with reference to ISCO-8 and ISCO-88) higher for level 2 and 3 for both parents (68,97%-13,79% for fathers, and 44,83%-17,24% for mothers); the 27,59% had one parent (mother) doing the housewife. Parents as entrepreneurs were 17,24% (father) and 10,34% (mother). Level of education of parents were at tertiary level only for 4 parents in total (2 male; 2 female). All respondents are full-time students; the 70% (21) had a previous work experience. The 66,6% (20) lived in the parents' house.

Collection tools

The collection of data included the questionnaires, administered at the beginning and the end of the semester, one group discussion carried out in the frame of a workshop, and individual semi-structured interviews, aimed at exploring more in depth results of the questionnaires.

1. Questionnaire

Following the profiling section, the questionnaire was organised in the sections below described:

(RQ1/RQ2) Competences, the labour market and self-assessment

To collect data for RQ1 and RQ2, the list of skills from the World Economic Forum – The skills needed in the 21st century (WEF, 2015) has been used. It comprises 16 items divided into: a) Foundational Literacies - How students apply core skills to everyday tasks (6 items); b) Competencies - How students approach complex challenges (4 items); c) Character Qualities - How students approach their changing environment (6 items).

The respondent was asked to assess on a Likert scale 1-5 (1 = not at all relevant; 5 = very relevant) the same list of skills according to the following questions:

- Which are in your opinion the most important competences and skills to access the labour market?
- Which are in your opinion the most valued skills by the employers?
- Reflect about you, and rate the level of skills that you possess today

The first two sections were aimed at collecting perception of skills needed to access the labour market and to retain a job; the third at assessing individual's preparation for work.

(RQ3) Potential of employment perception

As regards potential of employment perception (RQ3) the questionnaire section has been formulated on the basis of Qenani et al. (2014), and adapted to the needs of a smaller group addressed, and the purpose of the research. The questions of these sections included one question aimed at assessing student's confidence in being employed right after graduation and a second question on the perception of the state of the economy (worse/better as in 2008).

As variables, also personal traits have been considered, by asking to rate on a 1-5 scale (1 = a little; 5 = very much) own perception of the following aspects ("I am..."):

- More curious than cautious
- More organized than easy-going
- More outgoing than reserved
- More trusting than suspicious
- More sensitive than secure

(RQ4) Preparation provided by the university

This section was composed by three questions, the first two from Qenani et al. aimed at collecting the perceived extent on the support provided by the University in acquiring skills for work, completed with an open question aimed at collecting more details on the topic, and an additional question on self-managing behaviour (e.g. career development skills).

2. *Group discussion*

A group discussion has been carried out in the frame of the workshop "Very Marche – problem-based workshop" (co-funded by the Erasmus+ FOODBIZ project) in November 29th, 2018, and included in the activities with students after the presentation of three entrepreneurs (two wine makers and one e-commerce provider). Initially designed as focus group, it has been then implemented as group discussion given the participants' number. The topic addressed was: skills for the market. The workshop was participated by 41 students, 38 of them enrolled in the bachelor course "Agri-food marketing and Economics" (3 were MA students of International Destination Management).

3. *Interviews*

Two semi-structured interviews were carried out in January 2019: the aim of the interviews was to explore more in-depth the questionnaires' results, and followed the structure of the same questionnaires.

Data collection

Data were collected between October 2018 and January 2019: the group discussion took place at the end of November 2018; interviews at the end of January 2019; questionnaires were administered at the beginning (October 2018) and the end (December 2018) of the course. Valid questionnaires were considered those having the same respondent from pre- and post-course questionnaire, in order to allow comparison of data over time. In total, data included therefore 30 valid students' profiles, corresponding to 60 questionnaires.

Findings

1. Questionnaires

Competences, the labour market and self-assessment

The first collection of data showed a good correspondence between the sections related to the labour market (access and retention/employers), while self-assessment shows lower levels of perceived preparation in all items but one (Curiosity):

Table 1 - Questionnaire results on skills

	ACCESS		EMPLOYERS		SELF-ASSESSMENT	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Literacy	4,83	0,53	4,70	0,60	4,43	0,82
Numeracy	4,03	0,93	4,00	0,95	2,87	0,97
Scientific literacy	3,53	0,68	3,50	0,90	2,83	0,59
ICT literacy	4,50	0,63	4,53	0,73	3,37	0,85
Financial literacy	3,77	0,77	3,83	0,95	2,43	0,77
Cultural and civic literacy	4,20	0,92	3,90	0,84	3,70	0,75
Critical thinking/problem solving	4,67	0,55	4,83	0,38	3,50	0,68
Creativity	4,53	0,68	4,63	0,56	3,53	0,90
Communication	4,73	0,45	4,83	0,46	3,30	0,99
Collaboration	4,53	0,68	4,70	0,53	3,80	1,10
Curiosity	4,43	0,82	4,17	1,05	4,43	0,57
Initiative	4,33	0,92	4,60	0,62	3,33	1,03
Persistence/grit	4,53	0,63	4,43	0,68	3,77	1,04
Adaptability	4,47	0,63	4,40	0,77	3,83	1,15
Leadership	4,03	0,61	4,53	0,68	3,00	1,05
Social and cultural awareness	4,53	0,68	4,03	1,03	3,97	0,89

By taking the mean of the sections access and employers, which can be broadly intended as the labour market perception in terms of access and retention, the following table highlights the gaps between the perceived requirements and the actual perceived level of skills. The following table highlights relations between the perceived requests from the labour market in terms of skills, and the pre-post self-assessment (the second self-assessment exercise has been administered at the end of the teaching semester):

Table 2 - Comparison between self-assessment at the beginning and the end of the teaching semester in comparison with the labour market needs, as perceived

	Labour market	Beginning of semester self-assessment	End of semester self-assessment	Perceived improvement (+)
Literacy	4,77	-0,33	-0,13	0,20
Numeracy	4,02	-1,15	-0,75	0,40
Scientific literacy	3,52	-0,68	-0,15	0,53
ICT literacy	4,52	-1,15	-0,65	0,50
Financial literacy	3,80	-1,37	-0,77	0,60
Cultural and civic literacy	4,05	-0,35	0,18	0,53
Critical thinking/problem solving	4,75	-1,25	-0,82	0,43
Creativity	4,58	-1,05	-0,48	0,57
Communication	4,78	-1,48	-0,82	0,66
Collaboration	4,62	-0,82	-0,25	0,57
Curiosity	4,30	0,13	0,27	0,14
Initiative	4,47	-1,13	-0,50	0,63
Persistence/grit	4,48	-0,72	-0,28	0,44
Adaptability	4,43	-0,60	-0,13	0,47
Leadership	4,28	-1,28	-0,55	0,73
Social and cultural awareness	4,28	-0,32	0,12	0,44

Further, respondents were asked to define their perceived improvement in possessed skills at the end of the teaching semester, by rating the items on three levels: less prepared (-); same (=); more prepared (+), with the following results:

Table 3 - Respondents declaring perceived improvement in acquired skills

	No. of respondents declaring improvement in possessed skills (+)	% of respondents declaring improvement in possessed skills
Literacy	8	26,67
Numeracy	2	6,67
Scientific literacy	8	26,67
ICT literacy	19	63,33
Financial literacy	14	46,67
Cultural and civic literacy	19	63,33
Critical thinking/problem solving	23	76,67
Creativity	25	83,33
Communication	22	73,33
Collaboration	25	83,33
Curiosity	22	73,33
Initiative	17	56,67
Persistence/grit	15	50,00
Adaptability	16	53,33
Leadership	8	26,67
Social and cultural awareness	17	56,67

By relating data, even considering perceived improvement, it is clear that students do not feel prepared for the labour market, as perceived by them, in terms of skills. Skills in which at the end of semester, and therefore one semester to graduation, students declared to be enough prepared were:

- Cultural and civic literacy;
- Curiosity (the only skill which was already assessed as sufficient for the labour market at the first questionnaire);
- Social and cultural awareness.

Potential employment perception

Confidence in finding a job just after graduation is quite low among respondents, with an average rating of 2,60/5, with a higher distribution on rate 3 (16 respondents) and 2 (7 respondents). 4 respondents rated 1, as “not sure at all to be employed right after graduation”, and only 3 showed a good confidence, but rating 4. None answered 5 (very confident).

To avoid cells with low frequency, as in Qenani et al. (2014:205), categories 1 and 2 were combined into one Category (1) *Low Self-Perceived Employability*, Categories 4 and 5 were combined into the Category (3) *High Perceived Self-Employability*, while Category (2) *Medium Self-Perceived Employability* remained unchanged.

Results show the following distribution

1. Low Self-Perceived Employability: 11 (37%);
2. Medium Self-Perceived Employability: 16 (53%);
3. High Self-Perceived Employability: 3 (10%).

Correlation between employability perceptions and personal traits is not significant (0,12-0,26). Given the small representation of male respondents, a clear comparison across genders is not possible – however no remarkable differences have been found in the two groups.

Little differences appear also considering previous work experience: those who had work experience show a mean of 2,67 and 3,05 respectively, while those without work experience show an mean of 2,44 and 3,00. Correlation is absent (0,07).

As regards the state of the economy, the 63,33% believe that the situation is better as in 2008.

Preparation provided by the university

As regards preparation provided by university, students seems to be confident that the university is providing them with the skills under investigation, as follows:

Table 4 - Preparation provided by the university, as perceived

Skill	Mean	Standard Deviation
Cooperation	4,40	0,77
Critical thinking	4,23	0,82
Communication	4,20	0,66
Field-specific skills	4,17	0,79

As regards career development, with an average of 3,03, 13 respondents rated 3 (enough); 9 rated 2; the rest of respondents declared a good extent (6 rating 4, and 2 rating 5). To avoid cells with low frequency, also in this case the answers were aggregated on 3 levels (category 1: rating 1-2, low career development effort; category 2 = 3, average; category 3 = 4-5, high career development effort):

1. Low career development effort: 9 (30%);

2. Average career development effort: 13 (43%);
3. High career development effort: 8 (27%).

Correlation between self-perceived employability and perception of investment in career development is not significant (0,55).

22 out of 30 answered yes to the question “Do you think that the university is supporting you in acquiring the right competences to access the labour market?”, 5 no, and 3 I don’t know.

Table 5 - Answers to open question

Reason	No.	%
Hard skills, sector specific skills	5	16,67
Critical thinking	1	3,33
Cooperation and collaboration	1	3,33
Territorial knowledge/world knowledge (labour market)	8	26,67
Self-awareness	4	13,33
Basic knowledge (to be specialised afterward)	1	3,33
Interdisciplinarity	1	3,33
I don't know	4	13,33
Negative: too theoretical	5	16,67
Negative: not organised, little information	1	3,33

More than the 25% of the sample indicates that the university provides competences related to the world knowledge, seen as very important to access the labour market.

2. Group discussion and interviews

Qualitative collection methods have been regrouped given their limited number of data. The most interesting element is exactly the lack of data. Students received individual reports on questionnaires, and the invitation to have a meeting for explanation and clarifications, as well as support for planning their career. The missed opportunity of having interviews to discuss individual results, should be considered itself a result: out of 30 bachelor students, who have received the individual profile of perceived self-employability, only 2 required an interview. Further possibilities to discuss about their career prospects proposed afterwards during the following semester were not considered. Among the hypothesis for the lack of interest there is a low awareness about the importance of career development skills during the study years, which has been confirmed informally during the delivery of the individual reports, when a student plainly admitted that he was not interested,

because he was 'interested to finish the exams'. The two interviewees had different specific profiles: the first had a clear strategy and goal (become entrepreneur in the field of territorial development through touristic valorisation of inner lands); the second was keen to continue to study, and unsure about his own future path.

As regards the group discussion, the topics were linked to the companies' presentations of their marketing strategy, and the skills needed to perform the job – in marketing and overall in small companies. Students were challenged with direct and indirect questions related to their perceptions about skills needed for work, through questions like: "what do you think you need to be able to do for this task?"; "which is the most relevant skill you need to possess to achieve a similar result?". Discussion was among a small group of students within the overall group (about 7 active participants). Data collected highlighted:

- a) a clear positioning of the value of transversal and soft skills for work, but
- b) an uncertain understanding of what it is meant in practice with 'soft skills' (cited by participants in English), or for example, at more detailed level, 'communication': challenged with specific questions, participants were not completely able to explain how 'communication' is played out in context, although formally recognising the value of it internally and externally to the company;
- c) the fact that a few of the group actively participated discussion, it is itself an answer, although unclear: among potential explanations, there is a potential lack of self-reflection; lack of awareness about their own preparation to the market; and lack of interest for being prepared to the market before finishing the university.

Discussion

With reference to the research questions, the following considerations can be made.

[RQ1] How students perceive the world of work in terms of competence needed for access and maintain a job? [RQ2] How do they assess their possessed competences in relation to the labour market requirement?

Students seem to have a clear idea on competences required by the labour market, both to access the position and to retain a job: average rating of all items is consistent between the most important skills for accessing and those most important for employers. It is interesting to stress instead that "Financial literacy" is not considered very relevant (3,83), as well as "Scientific literacy" (3,50). Financial literacy, which is relevant generally as career management

skills for employees, has been also confirmed as useful skills for employability purposes (Coben et al., 2005), as included mostly in “business skills”, and very important for entrepreneurs (Wise, 2013; Xu and Zia, 2002). Scientific literacy is recognised being important as skills for life in a knowledge society (Aikenhead et al., 2011), and to some extent for the world of work in general, particularly in association with technology and mathematics (Holbrook and Rannikmae, 2009).

During group discussion and interviews also the concept of transversal skills, including soft skills, appeared to be somewhat blurred, as above said. To some extent, the detected impression was that students loudly repeated a ‘not understood lesson’: they declared that soft-skills are important, they acknowledged also that other transversal skills (e.g. digital skills) are relevant to the labour market, also for the fact that this is stressed by professors during courses, but awareness on how the acquisition of these skills affect their own readiness to work - and consequent employability - seemed to be low. The very understanding of how practically these skills are used and useful in context was also uncertain, as missed link between theory and practice.

[RQ3] How do they estimate their possibility to get a job?

Students seems not to have invested very much in career development activities (higher concentration in average category, 43%, with quite high percentage in low category, 30%). The interpretation of this element is anyway doubtful: interviews and group discussion highlighted instead some uncertainties on the actual meaning of ‘career development’. A few respondents have provided evidence of a clear life design, and a consequent action toward objectives (in particular, one interviewee wishing to found a company and become entrepreneur, who had a clear strategy for building his own professional network). Most of consulted students, referred to the lack of time (“I am busy with studies”), which can also be interpreted as a low understanding of the concept itself, as career development skills should be embedded into the learning experience and not carried out as separate topic. It could be argued that respondents have still in mind the traditional sequential model of transitions from Education to work (‘first you study, then you work’), which is anyway not applicable in our times.

Data collected during group discussion and interviews highlight also low expectations: at the question “are you worried about finding a job?”, in two cases out of seven, the answer was “I am not, but if you want, you find a job”, referring however to low skilled jobs, or the so-called students’ jobs (e.g. waiter during the weekends). It is true that in the knowledge-based economy, learning is only a pre-requisite of access and retain a job position (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2013; Sin and Neave, 2016); higher education, which was both necessary and sufficient to achieve a stable position in the labour market (Sin

and Neave, 2016), particularly when the public sector was stronger, is now necessary, but if often insufficient (Sin and Neave, 2016: 2; Brown and Hesketh, 2004: 30). However, even acknowledging the fact that credentials are less effective in supporting access to the labour market, this does not mean that graduates' expectations should be limited to the constraints of low skilled jobs. This element could be linked with the subjective construct of the labour market, which depends on the interrelation and interdependence between the individual as agent and the social world, as well as the sense-making of the individual in relation to lived experience (Billet, 2010), therefore to the reference local market features. In fact, the labour demand of Marche Region companies is characterised by the search for levels of human capital that are lower than the country's average (Banca d'Italia, 2018).

[RQ4] How they perceive the preparation provided by the university?

Qualitative answers to open questions highlight an average self-awareness in relation to job, with little references to the labour market (e.g. 'territorial knowledge, world knowledge', which indirectly refers to the labour market). Instead, more references are related to personal development, e.g. "the university supported me to understand what I want to be" or to development of soft and transversal skills "group work to apply in practice what I have learnt in theory".

It is particularly interesting to stress that to one hand students rate very high the preparation provided by the university, while to the other hand, they rate their own preparation on the same skills as low, or anyway not sufficient to access the labour market. It can be argued that the link between the learning experience is weakly related with the acquisition of employability skills.

Conclusion and implications for further work

This work has explored the self-perceived employability of bachelor students enrolled at the third year of the degree of Cultural Heritage and Tourism at the University of Macerata in academic year 2018-2019, in order to design effective teaching interventions to enhance employability potential. Following analysis of findings, two broad areas are identified for further investigation and action.

The first relates to the low possession of career development skills. Respondents seemed to be not aware about the need of planning their own leaving from the university, and to prepare themselves from their professional future. Although many of them probably will continue studies with the Master studies, literature agree that career development skills should be concern of students from the first year of the studies (Jackson and Wilton, 2017; Brown et

al., 2008; Watts, 2006), and the sample was composed by students of last year of Bachelor.

The second refers to a perceived gap between the university experience and the professional future, which seem to be conceived as almost separate phases of life, in which the first prepares formally to the second, but with little understanding on how the first actually provides relevant skills for the second.

Both areas are connected with a low awareness on how their own learning is meaningful to prepare them to act in the world of work. It could be argued that supporting the process of linking theory to practice would require a revised approach of teaching practice, in order to better enact forms of 'knowledge in action'. More than on methods suggested by literature, it is particularly important that pedagogies support the development of reflective practices: in his work on reflection in higher education, Rogers (2001) argued that authors who have theorised reflection share some key components in the definition of the concept, referring to a cognitive and affective process that: "(1) requires active engagement on the part of the individual; (2) is triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience; (3) involves examining one's responses, beliefs, and premises in light of the situation at hand; and (4) results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience" (2001:41-42). The mediation process between the individual and the world, defined by Schön 'reflection-in-action' (1993), and in Eraut's discourse 'metacognition' (1994), contributes to the development of high cognitive skills, that lead to "skilful behaviour", then on the ability to interpret the situation and perform accordingly (Hinchliffe, 2006: 96).

Further work is needed however to better understand the labour market construct of the students, which plays a significant role in employability perceptions and can be linked both to global influences as well as to very place-based inputs. As the market construct depends on subjective instances, the mediation process enacted by university teaching, to be effective, should consider thus how the world of work is conceived and conceptualised by learners.

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