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Education and social inclusion;
Education, globalization and democracy;
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Perceptions and experiences of a sample of non-traditional students in transition from Higher Education to the Labour Market in Western Sicily

Enza Sidoti, Silvia Palma*

Abstract

In recent years, a long economic crisis has affected the occupational opportunities of young people. In Italy, unemployment among 20-34 year olds has reached percentage values as high as 40%. The purpose of this work has been to investigate perceptions and expectations of a group of non-traditional students about to graduate in Western Sicily. A group of 200 non-traditional students (112F/88M) attending final year classes in four randomly selected university courses were interviewed using a 25 item questionnaire. The students selected were concerned about the post-graduation period, and all complained about the scarcity of employment opportunities in the south of Italy. Indeed, a distance remains between education, market dynamics and employers. Education to produce skilled graduates therefore becomes crucial and requires a new pathway derived from a better insight into the youth labour market.

Keywords: *Financial crisis; graduate unemployment; complexity.*

1. Introduction

In recent years a long economic crisis has hit Europe, and with it, the labour market and occupational opportunities of young people.

WE Outlook 2012 reported:

> Unemployment in the OECD area remained at 8.5% level and will remain high for the next future. About 48 M people are without work, 14,5 M more, compared to 2007, the beginning of the financial crisis. Nine OECD Countries – Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Spain –registered very high unemployment figures, and a part, at least, of the low skilled unemployment may become structural in the Countries where the rising of unemployment and social exclusion were worst. (WE Outlook, 2012)

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WE Outlook 2013 considered emergence from the crisis as still a distant prospect:

> More than five years passed from the beginning of the financial and global crisis and unemployment figures remained high in many OECD Countries. To trigger a growth would be needed a rapid recovery of public and private investments, difficult to realize as we are in the middle of credit crunch. (WE Outlook, 2013)

In Italy, the financial crisis has had particularly negative social effects and unemployment has reached values over 12%. Besides low productivity and the low GDP (few investments in research and innovation), the high tax rate, high fiscal evasion and the rising trend of the public debt do not leave enough space to face necessary economic policies toward a possible economic recovery. Unemployment in the last ten years has increased more than twice in comparison with the EU average, and, among the large amount of negative data registered, it has reached percentage values as high as 40% among individuals aged between 20 and 34. In the south of Italy, a region traditionally offering few opportunities in the labour market, unemployment figures have been above 50% among individuals aged between 20 and 34. Thus, it has represented the EU region with the highest figures for this age group.

In 2010 an OECD report "Off to a Good Start? Jobs for Youth" summarized the results, obtained in 16 countries, of an analysis of work for young people (see OCSE, 2010). The report called for a necessary balance to be found between study and work, it claimed that education should provide the right skills requested by the labour market and wondered, among other things, whether it was always certain that the skills acquired in courses of study, even at the University, were truly expendable in the labour market. The report highlighted how the problem was very topical, especially in the South of Europe, in which many graduates, despite having acquired considerable skills, have no prospect of work, because these skills do not correspond at all with the demands of the labour market or they have no active labour market at all. It was therefore again stressed how the problem was further aggravated if there were insufficient skills and/or less favoured socio-economic origins. In all OECD countries, it has been recognized as a political priority to invest in young people to give them the right opportunities and develop strategies to improve the correspondence between the skills they acquire at school and those required by the labour market, in order to facilitate the transition between school and work.

In 2010 the Institute for the Development of Professional Training for Workers (Isfol), launched a survey called "Longitudinal Survey on school-work transitions" to follow the career pathway of graduates in the labour market in the subsequent three-year period. Among the innovative aspects of the survey that deserve particular attention was the fact that it was linked to the OECD-PISA survey (Program for International Student As-

sessment) on the cognitive abilities of 16-year-olds who are about to leave high school, in Italy led by Invalsi (ISFOL, 2012).

The problem appears dichotomous. On the one hand, in Italy, compared to other major European economies, the economic crisis has further aggravated those structural difficulties that have characterized the youth labour market and access to employment for young people, especially in the South, where it has become even more difficult. Moreover, in Italy, where participation in higher education is very limited, the percentage of young people aged between 25 and 34 with a degree, is over 12 percentage points below the European average (20.7%). In the age group between 18 and 24, a tertiary education degree before 24 years is only obtained by 4.3%, in contrast to the 10.7% of European students. The OECD-PISA three-year survey also found that over 30% of students in the South did not reach sufficient levels of basic skills. The impact of public spending on education and training on GDP in Italy is 4.8% (the EU average being 5.6%). The share of spending dedicated to financial aid for students is 4.6% (the EU average being 6.4%). In 2010 Italy held the penultimate place in Europe for the working age population (between 15 and 64 years old, 62.2%,) and the third-to-last for employment, 56.1%, (the EU averages being 71% and 64.1%). Entry into the labour market within a year is achieved by only 15.8% of young people in the South, compared with 34.9% in the Centre and 38.7% in the North. The seriousness of circumstances in Italy and the weakness of the employment situation are also a result of the number of young people who are no longer in the training circuit, do not have a job or even offer themselves directly in the labour market (young Neet, i.e. not in employment, education or training, 30.9% in the South, 15.1% in the North).

There are varying definitions of a non-traditional student. The term was defined in a general way to refer to post-secondary students who do not enrol immediately after high school, do not have a background of Higher Education (HE) in the family, do not have a father, mother or other relative with significant status, such as a full professional MD, an engineer or lawyer. In this context, the term was also referred to economically, socially or educationally disadvantaged students encountering barriers that prevent them from achieving their potential (Kim, 2002; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

2. Methodology and aim of the work

The purpose of this work has been to investigate perceptions and expectations of a group of non-traditional students who were about to graduate in Western Sicily (WS), when many would be poised to enter the labour market.

A group of 200 students (112F/88M) attending final year classes in four randomly selected three-year university degree courses (Economics of Cul-

tural Heritage, Science of Education, Biotechnology, Environmental Sciences) were interviewed. A cross-sectional study adopting a simple random sampling procedure was carried out. After identification of all the different courses within the Faculty of Science of Education, the whole population was divided according to gender (male and female). This sample was recruited drawing at random from the list available in the administration office, using the matriculation number and granting a percentage of about 10.0% with respect to the whole population. All recruited individuals were informed about the aims of the survey in order to obtain their full collaboration. A written agreement was required from everyone. Privacy norms and ethical aspects were considered and fulfilled assuring the interviewee of the absolute anonymity of the results and that the data would be presented only in aggregate form without having the possibility of tracing the owner of the information offered. All subjects were told that participation in the investigation was voluntary and that the data collected would be used only for this study. The total sample in the survey consisted of 200 individuals out of a total of 2,040 students (10.1%), 88 males and 112 females, aged 24-30, enrolled in the four different courses. Their characteristics were: being the first graduate in the family; being from an inland area of Sicily; belonging to a family engaged in agricultural activity and having deep roots in the area they live in; having been on the course for more than 5 years. The data were obtained through a self-administered, anonymous, 25 item questionnaire with open answers. The questionnaire included items related to the perceptions, expectations and factors influencing entry into the labour market. The answers to the questionnaires were numerically codified. Intervals of confidence were computed at a 95% level. $\chi 2$ tests were performed to highlight statistical association. A $p<0.05$ was considered significant.

The small number of interviewees obviously presents limitations and calls for wider studies: the numbers could certainly not represent the universe of non-traditional Sicilian university students. However, the survey may give some impressions on the direction of thought of our non-traditional students. Ethical permission for the study was obtained before collecting the data and after perusal of the results by the University Ethics Committee.

The survey was conducted in March 2016.

3. Results

The composition and type of study course of the sample interviewed is shown in table 1. The gender, absolute number, percentage, study course and requested item are reported in table 2. Differences were not evidenced in the answers of the students interviewed, either by gender or type of studies, (χ^2ns), revealing a sense of frustration and lack of confidence in the future in all the individuals selected. Almost all the students selected

admitted that Sicily was a nice place to live and have a social life. They also affirmed that in Sicily it is possible to find a favourable environment for studying and pursuing HE, rating their HE experience positively and being substantially satisfied with the courses chosen.

Most of them, however, stated that Sicily is not a good place to look for work and job opportunities. The majority of them (>75%) were concerned with the post-graduation period and also complained about the scarcity of employment opportunities in general in the southern regions of Italy. Most of the sample (~86%), affirmed that they will certainly move North, either within Italy or, if possible, to Europe to continue their education and job search. The main reasons, among others, were better work opportunities and possibly a better income. Difficulty was experienced in finding graduate-level work in Sicily and particularly in finding the work they were aiming at.

The students (~76%) were aware they have little experience of and limited access to information on the full range of job opportunities available, but they also complained (84%) that institutions offer limited information on conditions, wages as well as policies and facilities regarding labour market requirements. University was considered as self-contained and self-referential and it was commonly held that there is a lack of communication between University, Institutions and Employers. Communication may increase opportunities in the labour market as it may result in courses that better fit the demand of Employers (as many employers stated they cannot find enough workers with the skills they need). Efficient investment in human resources by Employers and Institutions should be requested. A large majority of students complained that Institutions and Employers in WS do not pay enough attention to human capital to increase skills and opportunities to adapt to the labour market and the demand for new jobs.

Work experience was regarded as particularly valuable in the labour market. The students were convinced that the value of a degree alone is not enough and most of the complaints (>87%) referred to the need to have work experience. Having work experience and work-related skills was strongly emphasized by the interviewees. University courses do not offer many experiences limiting the opportunities for many jobs.

Other obstacles students predicted in the search for employment were: a reduction in what the labour market offers; a too rigid labour market; a lack of practical skills; and employer requirements that do not fit with their skills. Last but not least, they found that there were additional obstacles: being female; missing the support of the family; coming from the south and having a southern accent.

4. Considerations

Some considerations seem to emerge from the survey: the liberal society and the global market did not secure a better quality of life, equality in

accessing the labour market and employment opportunities. New ideas in the world travel faster than the speed at which new ideas are accepted and become individual opportunities. In this respect, relevant education to produce skilled graduates becomes crucial.

The relationship between Higher Education (HE) and the labour market has been considered as a linear relationship. However, in modern society, complexity predominates. Different factors intervene and relations cannot be simplified (Morin *et al.*, 2003). Education, therefore, needs a new pathway to approach complex systems and a new way to produce skills among young people. The rate at which technology is developing, the continuous innovation and the more unstable world economy are largely without precedent and become increasingly challenging as new work requires a higher degree of cognitive abilities. To use a now common expression it requires a "capability approach" (Alessandrini, 2014). However, it seems that this expression is scarcely recognized in the South.

Educational systems have not progressed at the same speed as the changing nature of work. It seems, at least in WS, that graduates were not adequately prepared for the world of work. There is low investment in education, research and development. Italy's public and private funding of HE is less than 1% (0.88-0.9%), very low compared to the other OECD countries.

Moreover, in WS it seems that the social context is particularly impermeable and the Institutions do not seem to be affected by the acceleration that the market and global feeling stimulate in the rest of the world. In WS there are students who do not receive appropriate Education and some, those who may deserve it, are not considered. Work is often given as a favour and not provided. There is no freedom and no opportunities for self-fulfillment and work is often seen and always considered as a gift for which you remain indebted for life. Civil society is often not bound to Education, an individual's political vote is often suggested and women still have areas to overcome.

The employment problems we face did not start today. They are rooted in the cultural setting of our social and educational system which, from 1968 onwards, spread an egalitarian myth in the country that has made us forget how important it is to nurture the talents of the new generation, to stimulate and recognize merit, to allow our young people to grow and promote the development of a country that has a strong need for innovation and creativity. Some of the negative consequences of the uncontrolled expansion of education are evident: the deterioration of the quality of training, the inflation of qualifications, the waste of resources, and unemployment linked to a mismatching between qualifications offered and demanded, both by level and by specialization (Minello, 2013).

Data reported from the University of Bologna (AlmaLaurea, 2017) showed that Italy does not pay enough attention to its human capital: that is, an economic system based and sustained by an increasingly qualified population of workers, as affirmed since the early 1960s by Nobel Prize

winner Becker and even earlier by Mincer, Schultz and other economists. There is a lack of communication between University, Institutions and Employers. There remains a distance between Education, market dynamics and Employers' demand for work. Employers must set the bar at defined levels and request trained and skilled graduates for the appropriate levels. Institutions must communicate with Employers and Universities and become acquainted with student needs.

It is highly surprising that a region like Sicily with such an enormous quantity of resources (archaeology, cultural history, almost 200 km of coastline, no solid waste plants, and tourist attractions) is unable to create job opportunities. It should be possible to ask why there are only jobs for a salary and not a salary for jobs that may result in effectiveness and efficiency.

A forecast of employment growth, albeit limited, estimated that over the next decade about eight million new positions will be offered in Italy, positions that will focus on technical, specialist and intellectual professions and services requiring skilled labour, skills in all senses of the term: their acquisition represents a fundamental must for the future of our country.

The majority of students today need academic and institutional support to increase knowledge and skills, and financial support to face the increasing cost of studying. The complexities in students' lives necessitate policies that support innovation and opportunities and promote equity in affordability, persistence and completion. There is a great need for programs and systems that help students to achieve their educational and career goals.

University courses should be addressed to teach people how to learn, as learning to learn enables workers to adapt to economic downturns and may rapidly move human capital to other sectors. HE then must be considered as transdisciplinary-literacy, in a continuous *poiesis* and not only *tekhné*. Studies (the Institute for Future Work, 2011) have highlighted the importance of adapting current skills for future employment. A number of forecasts suggest good opportunities for future job creation in the information technology, industrial (e.g. robot engineers and technicians) and green sectors.

It is now widely accepted that Education, Economics and Society are closely interdependent. Moreover, the economy has been emphasized too much at the expense of feelings and the individual. We need to overturn the classic economic approach to ensure a central role for individuals in the search of resources useful for achieving their ambitions. The new task of educational Institutions is therefore to create an environment that facilitates the acquisition and development of skills by new generations. It is necessary "to go beyond the notion of human capital by assuming the prospect of a welfare of capacities", that is, the individual and collective possibility of carrying out the right to learn (see Sen, 2009; Binanti, 2013).

However, which knowledge, skills and capabilities are to be favoured through education/training? According to the *Global Report 2016*, skills for innovation (capabilities) can be grouped into three general categories:

1) skills based on the subject; 2) high-level skills and creativity; and 3) behavioural and social skills. Ignazio Visco (2015), Governor of the Bank of Italy, recently drew attention to where there should be investment to generate the growth of human capital: 1) the link between education and innovation; 2) educational-training investment to promote a culture of innovation; and 3) the capability approach (in the thought of Nussbaum and Sen) for the development of human capital, that is, capabilities and innovation.

The *Global Report* claims that the thrust behind every innovation process is the human factor. However, among the brakes on the Italian system it mentions the low quality of human capital skills, the weakness and financial situations of the big Companies and their management, the fragility of the south, and the weight of an indolent and self-referential state apparatus (Bianchi, 2013: 358).

Alessandrini (2013) sees in the approach to capabilities a possible redefinition of the processes of human capital development that allows the definition of the right to learn as a right to the development of skills and a re-reading of the strategic opportunities of education. Indeed, Nussbaum (2002) developed the concept of overcoming economic individualism centred on instrumental rationality and proposed processes based on the recognition of the dignity of the individual.

The "capability approach" considers each person as an end, by placing emphasis on the theme of development and growth as self-fulfillment. The thesis that motivates the approach to human development is that economic growth does not in itself automatically improve quality of life. Pedagogy can and must deal with the theme of combating inequality and the fragility of human capital (Alessandrini, 2014).

The central question is how to value capabilities that, in turn, can support just and effective welfare. Capacity would therefore mean opportunities for choice. To promote capabilities would mean to promote spheres of freedom, i.e. substantial freedoms (Sen, 2009).

In the wake of these considerations, Negrelli talks about "the unitary process that prevents the dispersion of the various areas of knowledge and acquisitions in rivulets and maintains the person in his/her global, transcendental and historical identity at the centre" (Negrelli, 2013: 45-47). The need is therefore highlighted for a cultural education and preparation far superior to that of the past, as well as a training able to help acquire learning and meta-learning skills (i.e. knowing how to learn to learn), so that the worker is ready to adapt to technological changes and procedures in environments subject to constant variability (Costa, 2013a, 2013b). In the light of these considerations, it is a question of harmonizing know-how with know-doing and, thus, technological-professional skills and essentially human skills. The moment is particularly favourable to advantageously exploit the paradigm shift of education and training systems; education should not follow changes in the economy, but has a higher task that is not reducible to the needs of the economy (Woods, 2011).

Training, however, becomes a lever capable of fostering a welfare system based on learnfare in which everyone can combine her/his skills with external capacitating factors to develop continuous and authentic individual change, concrete and effective in "eradicating those inequalities that generate existential peripheries," and give life to a project of humanistic redefinition of the very paradigm of development and economy. An active model of welfare based on inclusion policies that allows everyone to fulfil her/himself according to freedom (Costa, 2013a, 2013b). HE, therefore, is at the centre of an active welfare state, and capable of acquiring the awareness of capabilities to convert available resources into choices for the achievement of one's own objectives (Sen, 2009). This generative work features an individual who continually challenges her/his knowledge and experiences to generate all possible horizons for a sense of empowerment (Costa, 2011). Referring to human capital is equivalent to promoting, in workers, the conquest of precise skills, adaptation to change, and mastery of and tension towards innovation (Rothschild & Whitt, 2009). Fortunately, the current crisis has therefore produced a renewed interest in values that favour the need for new, potential educational and training systems.

The document Europe 2020 is the EU's growth strategy for the coming decade: 75% of the population aged between 20 and 64 will have to be employed. According to this document, quality education and training as well as inclusive economic growth depend on actions throughout to develop key skills in line with labour market needs. Europe 2020 refers to the centrality of innovation, to a new re-personalization of work, as an expression of human freedom, capable of producing innovation and development. "This opens a pedagogical perspective that captures the generative power of exploration of the new" (Costa, 2013a: 106). Companies are called to cultural and organizational change according to an open innovation model (Chesborough, 2003). Work becomes an educational experience in the formation of an identity capable of qualifying the action of sense-making.

In conclusion, it has to be seen that education is essential for life, and education and training are important for the development of capital. The future of our society and culture needs Education. However, a new way of thinking, Pedagogy (Education), is also needed. The pedagogic relationship is an essential part of the human community and covers all the aspects that concern the Education and training of the human being. It must rethink education, rediscovering the meaning of being and of being in a continuous "learning to learn". Human behaviour cannot always be true to the rationality of the purpose but it can obey the rationality of values (Simmel, 1917). The South (all the Souths) must wake up and, instead of complaining, pressurize Governors and Institutions with the rationality of Education. And this not with an eye to a global economic market but to a labour market that can weave together technology and humanities, can change the inertia of doing to a new act that gives young people an identity based on

values and real answers aimed at increasing knowledge for life and work that provides a sense of fulfillment.

HE should be aimed at having a better insight into the youth labour market, forcing Institutions to understand why so many young people, in many regions, are forced to go away to find better employment opportunities. It is also incredible that at the beginning of the 3rd millennium you may be discriminated against because you are female, and even more because you have a southern accent!

In any country, "successful development depends mainly on the ability of a nation to make good use of human resources" (see Becker, Nobel Prize in Economics, 1992).

5. Tables

Tab 1. Composition of the sample

	Male		Female		Total	
EDUC	21	*24%*	29	*26%*	**50**	*25%*
ECON	22	*25%*	26	*23%*	**48**	*24%*
BIO	21	*24%*	29	*26%*	**50**	*25%*
ENVIR	24	*27%*	28	*25%*	**52**	*26%*
	88		**112**		**200**	
Age μ	**25**		**24**		**SD 2,4**	

Tab 2. AQ (gender, absolute number, percentage, type of study, χ2)

ABOUT	♂ %	♀ %	Hum %	Tech %	*χ2*
living in Sicily	*88/100*	*105/93*	*91/93*	*102/100*	**0,05ns**
social life and facilities in WS	*88/100*	*105/93*	*91/93*	*102/100*	
the courses chosen	*78/89*	*100/89*	*89/91*	*100/98*	
low opportunity to work in WS	*74/84*	*72/81*	*70/71*	*76/77*	
concern for post-graduation period	*70/79*	*86/76*	*76/77*	*78/76*	
the quality of graduates	*70/79*	*95/84*	*70/71*	*89/87*	
transfer North	*76/86*	*75/85*	*90/91*	*80/78*	
many reasons to go	*80/90*	*90/80*	*90/91*	*88/86*	

ABOUT	♂ %	♀ %	Hum %	Tech %	*χ2*
difficult to obtain graduate-level work	*80/90*	*100/89*	*70/71*	*89/87*	
be aware of the full range of job opportunities available.	*67/76*	*80/78*	*80/81*	*79/70*	
limited info in conditions, wages, policies and facilities	*74/84*	*81/72*	*78/79*	*69/78*	**0,05ns**
to stay at certain conditions	*72/81*	*79/70*	*70/71*	*72/70*	
low value of degree alone	*80/70*	*85/76*	*69/70*	*74/72*	
taking relatively low quality jobs to stay	*58/54*	*59/52*	*49/50*	*40/39*	
demand for graduates	*70/79*	*78/69*	*76/77*	*71/69*	
to break into the works they were aiming	*72/81*	*76/68*	*69/70*	*66/65*	
Sicily have a treasure of resources	*70/79*	*86/76*	*76/77*	*78/76*	
increased opportunity for employment	*79/89*	*94/83*	*69/70*	*89/87*	
more communication inter-institutions	*79/89*	*94/83*	*69/70*	*89/87*	**0,05ns**
university preparing for labour market	*78/89*	*100/89*	*89/91*	*100/98*	
employers demand should fit with courses	*88/100*	*105/93*	*91/93*	*102/100*	
being a woman	*- ----*	*89/79*	*78/79*	*60/59*	
taking care of human capital	*80/70*	*85/76*	*69/70*	*74/72*	
coming from the South and the southern accent do not facilitate	*42/48*	*52/46*	*30/31*	*22/21*	
missing the support of the family	*39/44*	*69/62*	*51/52*	*48/47*	

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