

Citius, Altius, Fortius in a deregulated labour market: narratives of precarious graduates

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ABSTRACT

Labour markets foster qualification models and professionalisation strategies characterised by insecurity and deregulation. This article analyses narratives of precarious graduates through a subject-oriented approach, taking into account the increasing vulnerability, insecurity and fragmentation that characterise the professional experiences of graduates in the current global economic and financial crisis. Drawing upon information-rich evidence from 21 focus group interviews carried out in a research project in Portugal, this article aims to highlight how young graduates are experiencing, interpreting and managing dilemmas in their transitions from higher education into the labour market. It concludes that ambivalent and unpredictable paths have become the 'main route' for accessing a profession in a context of precariousness.

Introduction

Citius, Altius, Fortius (Faster, Higher, Stronger) are the three Latin words that are used in the Olympic motto and which also seem to express dominant discourses on graduate employability. When developing this idea, we borrow Tomlinson's (2012:408) statement that 'graduates are perceived as potential key players in the drive towards enhancing value-added products and services in an economy which demands stronger skill-sets and advanced technical knowledge'. However, the decline of the established graduate career trajectory has somewhat disrupted the traditional link between higher education, graduate credentials and occupational rewards (Collins, 2000; Becker, 1993). More recently, concerns have been raised regarding flexible economies and labour market uncertainty. These developments draw attention to the importance of examining current contradictions raised by the new global division of the labour market and its

impacts, due to the pressure put on young graduates to set ever-higher goals and achieve more, in spite of the fact that they are integrated into deregulated and vulnerable socio-professional contexts. Moreover, labour markets foster qualification models and professionalisation strategies characterised by insecurity, deregulation and surveillance in the context of a neoliberal ideology that could obscure alternative futures, especially for young graduates.

Both international and national research studies have revealed deep transformations of the processes of professional transition in the advanced economies. While the main empirical focus of this article is Portugal, we note the wider relevance of common main trends in higher education and the labour market (Vieira & Marques, 2014; Humburg, Van der Velden, & Verhagen, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013, 2012; Teichler, 2009, 2007; Allen & Van der Velden, 2009, 2007; Archer & Davidson, 2008; Muller & Gangl, 2003; Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen, & Smithson, 2002). In fact, in recent decades, studies have repeatedly drawn attention to a number of recurrent trends. These include uncertainty in the timing of obtaining a first job and of professional itineraries; forced experiences of underemployment and unemployment; a danger of 'over-qualification' and growing mismatches in the correspondence between the diploma and the profession; hierarchy and devaluation of some job titles which increase competitiveness (and attempts to monopolise the professional field); difficulties in developing a career and projecting the professional future; and biographical trajectories based on ruptures and/or educational and identity reconversions. Other studies have focused on the trend towards privatisation (outsourcing and deregulation of the economic sectors, both public and private); the slow dismantling of old systems of regulation, redistribution and social protection, and a generalised movement of 'de-socialisation' (Touraine, 1997), 'individualisation' (Giddens, 1990), 'flexibility' (Boyer, 1988), and 'disarticulation' (Bauman, 2003) of social relations.

As a result of these general trends and, in particular, of the current global economic-financial crisis, particularly faced by Portugal (with the intervention of the Troika between 2011-2013), many young people are obliged to take low-paid jobs with poor working conditions leading to discouragement, failure and distrust in the future. In addition, Portugal has witnessed significant outflows of professionals who seek alternative employment in other countries in an attempt to overcome the lack of opportunity and barriers to the achievement of their socio-professional aspirations. At home, young adults with higher qualifications, until now relatively invisible in traditional narratives of Portuguese emigration, are also being affected by the specific context of the financial and economic crisis. This is an increasingly marked tendency, but the contours of which are yet to be clarified in the specific context of Portugal (Amaral & Marques, 2014).

Our study undertakes a multidimensional view of the labour market based on socio-professional inequalities resulting from status, regulations and distinct career projections among graduates. In terms of the perceptions of graduates regarding the conditions of professional transition, a rhetoric of legitimisation of the current state of precariousness and individualisation in the labour market is quite evident. In other words, legitimating arguments tend to be analysed in order to highlight the state of precariousness embedded in processes of subjectification vs. insecurity, autonomy vs.

hierarchical subordination, self-accomplishment vs. management control, among others. These ambivalences have stressed the double face of contemporary capitalism (cf. Murgia, 2014; Maestripieri, 2014; Murgia & Selmi, 2012; Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012; Sennett, 1998, 2006; Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Gorz, 1988).

Despite the existence of some formal academic studies focusing on precarious work (Barbier, Brygoo & Viguier, 2002), empirical analysis of subjective conditions, namely, perceptions and attitudes towards employability, skills, work and career, remains underdeveloped. Research evidence obtained from a project entitled *Preparados para trabalhar? Um estudo com diplomados do ensino superior e empregadores (Prepared to work? A study of higher education graduates and employers)*¹ allows us to confirm the main narratives of precarious graduates, by taking into consideration current transformations in professional transition and employability profiles. Methodologically, the study was designed in a two-step project constituted by an extensive first phase during which data from national online surveys was collected and analysed, and a second one based on qualitative research. For the purpose of this article, we have mainly used research findings gathered from 21 focus groups with graduates and employers, in order to highlight how young graduates are experiencing, interpreting, and managing dilemmas in their transition from higher education into the labour market.

Using a critical perspective, we have started to identify the social and structural constraints which emerge from the deregulation and segmentation of the current trends in which the professional transitions of the Portuguese young graduates are shaped. Their enrolment in unpredictable itineraries of professional integration, simultaneously and differently, (re)configures patterns of employability and professionalisation trajectories that require analysis. Finally, by analysing narratives of precarious graduates we intend to illustrate the growing fragmentation and subjectivity of labour relations (e.g. normative, symbolic and socio-cognitive aspects). Our study aims to contribute towards an improved understanding and evaluation of the labour market as one of the main facets of social and socio-economic insecurity and risk in contemporary European societies.

Graduate employability and labour market: nonlinear patterns

The employability of graduates remains a critical issue for higher education (HE) policymakers² and assumes a renewed focus in the current climate of wider labour market uncertainty. As Teichler (2009) argues, the increasing alignment between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the labour market reflects, in part, current pressures regarding innovation and knowledge applied to economics, whether through the research agenda or through the performance of the graduates. However, a persistent paradox emerges as a result of two conflicting ideas: on one hand, this development is seen as resulting from the idea of the contribution of higher education toward economic and

1 This project was developed within the scope of the Consortium 'Maior Empregabilidade' ('Greater Employability') established in 2013 and formed by 13 HEIs in Portugal. Currently, this Consortium is made up of 22 institutions.

2 At the same time, the universities have undergone some significant changes, including an increased emphasis on vocational courses, the roll-out of the Bologna Framework and new policies to combat student dropouts and assist labour market entry.

social success, both individually and collectively, either due to economic growth or to the development of adequate systems of remuneration and meritocratic prestige; on the other hand, it is presented as a result of a decreasing correspondence between education and employability, flexibility, discontinuity and segmentation of the itineraries of transition towards active life (Vieira & Marques, 2014; Tomlinson, 2013; Teichler, 2009).

The globalisation of economies, changing paradigms of competitiveness, as well as changes in production systems have contributed to the transformation of graduates' professional transition processes. The effectiveness and efficiency of governance models associated with bureaucratic-rationalising tendencies have led to new models of organisation and management. In the private sector, a 'slimming' of organisational structures is promoted (referred to as 'lean production', 'neo-Taylorism', 'core competence' and 'corporate anorexia'). In essence, these amount to new strategies for drastic reduction of the workforce. In the public sector, the principles adopted in the private sector have been diffused using the concept of 'New Public Management', leading to the privatisation and externalisation and/or outsourcing of some public services, and to the dissemination of organisational configurations and managerial logics that are more flexible, specialised and geared toward goals set by cost-benefit principles. Because many of these restructuring processes were accompanied by reductions, or cuts in public spending, both the private sector and the state itself have contributed to the growing precariousness of work relations, by offering individual and flexible contracts and failing to stem the worsening of structural unemployment (Marques, 2010). Thus, we have witnessed a fragmentation of collective labour agreements, working time patterns and statutes, and the emergence of groups of 'stabilised', 'precarious', 'associates' and 'unemployed' workers, among others. In fact, we can observe a contradictory tension. On one hand, the workforce is considered as being 'annihilated', leading to a central debate across several disciplinary fields about the 'end of work' while, on the other hand, it is claimed that new participatory management models are emerging. These are based on values that are novel in the field of work and employment (such as responsibility, motivation, autonomy and personal and professional development). However, this appeal to commitment is carried out within a framework of uncertainty and precariousness, on the impossibility of obtaining a secure job (Auer & Gazier, 2006), and on the erosion of the worker's character (Sennett, 1998).

Traditionally, the regulation of the labour market was constituted by permanent forms of employment, the characteristic form by which a dependent workforce was engaged and corresponding to a social norm inherited from the Fordist years (Navarro, 2005; Freyssinet, 1991). The International Labour Organization (ILO) underlines the contractual notion of 'permanent' or 'standard' to refer to:

the relationship between a person called an employee ... and an employer, for whom the employee performs work under certain conditions in return for remuneration. It is through the employment relationship ... that reciprocal rights and obligations are created between the employee and the employer. It has been, and still is, the main vehicle through which workers gain access to the rights and benefits associated with employment in the areas of labour law and social security. (ILO, 2006)

This legal and standard form of employment defines the terms of exchange of time and/or services for money between an employer and an employee. This is deeply embedded in national policies and strongly influenced by what may be named 'normative systems', that is, the combination of formal regulations, labour laws, customary practices and forms of legitimisation (Navarro, 2005). Until the end of the nineties, higher education helped to regulate the flow of skilled, professional and managerial workers. The significant correspondence between demand and supply defined a relatively stable flow of highly qualified young people into well-paid and rewarding employment.

However, the changing nature of work and employment as results of organisational and economic restructuring, as we have already pointed out, highlights other aspects of a broader socio-economic process that employers and employees are engaged in, in the post-crisis era. In this context, it is important to highlight the diffusion of so-called 'atypical' forms of employment (European Commission, 2013; Tremmel, 2010; Kovács, 2005; Célestin, 2000; Atkinson & Meager, 1986), including such developments as the time-limited nature of many employment contracts the growth of independent workers, and shifting organisational forms, such as multi-employer sites and triangular employment arrangements in temporary agency works (Standing, 2011; Böheim & Muehlberger, 2006). Self-employment, entrepreneurship and the creation of new businesses are often presented as a panacea for the crisis in Western economies, particularly in the Portuguese case, in light of the soaring youth unemployment rates observed in recent years. Nonetheless, for many young graduates this dimension of employability, based on contractual autonomy and independence, may contain relevant evidence of opacity, subordination and dependence on particular social and professional statuses (Marques, 2015). Indeed, the increase in subcontracting and outsourcing of services has led to many of these workers being simultaneously economic and hierarchically dependent on the company with whom they establish that contractual relationship. Expressions like 'dependence of self-employment' (Böheim & Muehlberger, 2006) and 'quasi self-employed', 'bogus self-employed', 'independent employee' or even 'independent hybrid worker' (Kautonen et al., 2009:113), all demand analytical caution before assuming a generalised trend based on an 'entrepreneurial economy', as an alternative to the Fordist paradigm. In the absence of further research,³ what seems plausible to sustain at the moment is that these non-standard forms of employment require a rethinking of our understanding of the employment relationship, in order to incorporate a range of social, institutional and psychological issues.

In fact, a number of studies have examined the growing segment of the labour market constituted by non-permanent employment, the extent to which these types of non-permanent employment can be described as precarious, and who is involved in these employment relationships experiencing various degrees of precariousness (European Commission, 2013; Auer, 2005, Esping-Anderson & Regini, 2000; Auer & Cazes, 2000; Burchell, Deakin & Honey, 1999). For the time being, it is sufficient to define precariousness based on pay, types of contracts and career prospects

3 Undertaken with a range of different methodological approaches in order to explore different dimensions, deepen knowledge and provoke distinct kinds of insights.

(Barbier, Brygoo & Viguier, 2002).⁴ Many employees are poorly paid, with reduced social rights and labour protection. Moreover, in many professional contexts, workers go to great lengths to develop their knowledge and career prospects, while many also face the (risk) of unemployment (Kretsos, 2010; Vosco, 2010). This is not just the case for lower-skilled workers, but is generalised to all social groups including ‘knowledge workers’ with skills that suggest high levels of employability. These workers tend to hold higher levels of qualification and possess the core skills requested by employers in advanced technology sectors and knowledge-intensive services (Clarke, 2008).

A broader perspective on atypical forms of employment allows for an analysis of the consequences of insecurity and uncertainty for those in less regulated and non-permanent employment relationships, who are involved in temporary jobs, doing short-time labour or linked to employment agencies by unorthodox means, mostly with no assurance of state benefits. It is in this context that the ‘precariat’ class (Standing, 2011) has emerged as new concept for defining a set of workers, including highly qualified ones who are facing lives of insecurity, moving in and out of jobs that give little meaning to their lives. There is a clear need to deepen our understanding of these graduate trajectories.

Methodology

The study *Preparados para trabalhar? Um estudo com diplomados do ensino superior e empregadores* (*Prepared to work? A study of higher education graduates and employers*) was developed within the scope of the Consortium Maior Empregabilidade (‘Greater Employability’) established in 2013, and formed by Fórum Estudante together with 13 HEIs in Portugal. The main research objective was to analyse and assess the role of transversal skills in the transition process into the labour market. In this context, transversal skills are seen as a set of personal and interpersonal skills – generally called ‘soft skills’ – but also as technical skills that can be used and are important in many professions, regardless of the specific area of knowledge. In the literature review that was carried out, employability was defined as ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – making graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’ (Yorke, 2006, 8).

This was a two-phase project aimed at analysing transversal skills from the perspective both of graduates and of employers. It sought to elicit information that was both exploratory and interpretative in nature, thus meeting the criteria for a mixed-methods design (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Using multiple data sources and having multiple researchers involved in the analysis of the data contributed to the rigour of the study. Phase I comprised an examination of the key features of 6,444 graduates who concluded their bachelor’s or master’s degrees between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013, in one of the 13 HEI participating in this study (ranging from Northern to Southern Portugal),

4 According to these authors, it is possible to define four dimensions related to precariousness, namely (i) the living conditions of lower class households and families, (ii) the social and legal statuses of individuals, as related to employment, (iii) employment precariousness in terms of pay, types of contracts and career prospects and, finally (iv) precariousness of society as a whole (Barbier, Brygoo & Viguier, 2002:30).

and 781 employers. Phase II of the study was based on 21 focus groups with a total of 155 participants, including 11 focus groups with graduates and 10 with employers from the HEIs comprising the *Maior Empregabilidade* Consortium. The analysis of the qualitative data concentrated on the focus groups, but was supported by data from the survey.⁵

National online surveys

Two online surveys were designed, both with similar structures: one focused on graduates and the other on employers. The graduate online survey had three aims: first, to characterise the socio-graphic profiles and transitions; second, to identify the skills that are more frequently used in their professional activity; and third, to evaluate the most important skills for the future (next five years). Similarly, the employer online survey enabled us to: first, identify the main economic sectors which have been recruiting graduates; second, assess the skills mostly used by graduates in their professional activity; and third, evaluate the most important skills likely to be demanded in the future (the next five years).⁶

The graduate sample presented the following traits: among 6,444 graduates, 62% were female, with an average age of 29 (standard deviation of ± 7 years), who had completed their bachelor's degree (67%) or master's degree (33%) between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013 in one of the 13 HEIs participating in this study (ranging from Northern to Southern Portugal). A range of scientific areas of study were represented among the respondents: education, arts and humanities, social sciences and law, engineering, natural sciences and information technology, as well as health and social protection. Graduates evaluated the contribution provided by their HEI towards their preparation in transversal and professional skills positively. In this context, the skills that were highlighted were teamwork, lifelong learning, ethics and social responsibility, as well as written communication. All transversal and professional skills evaluated in this study were used moderately or intensively.

The employer sample was composed of 781 employers (54% female), mostly aged 31 to 45 years (58%), the vast majority (93%) of whom had completed tertiary education. They had all worked directly with several recent graduates, with 35% involved in recruitment and selection activities with this target group. Most of these employers were based in private sector companies, particularly in profit entities (79%), followed by non-profit entities (10%). Their activities were spread across several domains, including scientific consulting activities, scientific and technical activities (19.2%), activities in the area of manufacturing (16.9%), followed by activities in the health sector and social protection (12.6%). The employers evaluated the graduates' preparedness in all transversal and professional skills positively. The five top skills most positively evaluated by employers were 'information and communications technologies',

5 Detailed quantitative data is reported elsewhere (Vieira & Marques, 2014).

6 The quantitative data allowed us to confirm some critical features of objective career trajectories regarding graduates from HE and structural changes that have taken place lately in Portugal, namely, the increase in unemployment rates, expansion of 'peripheral employment' situations, waiting time to get the first job and an deteriorating correspondence between the academic scientific area of study and the content of work, among others.

'teamwork', 'adaptation and flexibility', 'lifelong learning' and 'ethics and social responsibility'. Graduates and employers' opinions regarding the four skills deemed to be the most important for their professional activity in the following five years were 'analysis and problem-solving', 'creativity and innovation', 'adaptation and flexibility' and 'planning and organisation'. The fifth skill chosen by employers as the most important one for the labour market in the future was 'striving for excellence', whereas graduates chose 'proficiency in foreign languages'.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were regarded as an appropriate method of data collection for the second phase, because these allow for multiple points of view on a topic by means of a process of discussion and interaction. The participants of 11 focus groups of graduates were recruited taking into account the conditions under which they had concluded their (post)graduate studies between 2008 and 2012, together with their gender, field of study and diversity of statuses (e.g. working students and Erasmus mobility experience). Of the 83 graduate focus group participants (50 of whom were male), 64 had concluded their bachelor's degree in one of the 13 HEIs participating in this study. When analysed by scientific area, the social sciences were the most prevalent, followed by law, engineering, and arts and humanities. A largely positive assessment of their academic path was evident, although many participants mentioned, as we will discuss later in this article, the long time it took to find their first job, as well as the multiplicity of jobs in the period of time considered in this study. The participants in the ten employer focus groups consisted mainly of private, public and tertiary sector entities, and were selected from a range of business areas and sectors. Of the 72 focus group participants, 49 were male. They represented the main economic sectors that have recruited graduates from all 13 HEIs in recent years.

The research team was involved in the focus group interviews. One person was responsible for the facilitation, and the other person held a supporting role for each HEI where the focus group interviews took place. Two interview guides were compiled based on international projects which had already been carried out, such as Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO); Careers after Higher Education: a European Research Study (CHEERS); Research into Employment and professional FLEXibility (REFLEX). The transcripts from all group interviews were analysed utilising MAXQda software, which is extremely useful for handling large data sets. A general inductive thematic analysis allowed the identification of the main categories in order to compare certain characteristics that enabled the research team to establish similarities and differences in perceptions and attitudes, as well as the issued assessments (positive or negative), and also its intensity in the target groups. Even though this article draws on a relatively large sub-set of qualitative data (21 focus groups), it is important to note some limitations: on one hand, due to the masculine bias among the participants (presented as biased regarding previous online surveys, which revealed a female majority) and, on the other hand, to the non-generalisability of the main findings of this study. Nevertheless, as will be highlighted in the discussion of the findings below, the analysis of the qualitative data is strongly aligned with the national and international literature related to this subject.

(Un)certain career paths

'Main route' of access to the labour market: dependency and unpredictable paths

The transition from academia into the world of work has ceased to be an instant biographical event and has become a complex and nonlinear process. The research outcomes from our analysis of national surveys cast light on the difficulties that graduates experience in their transition from higher education into the labour market: about 73% are working, whereas the rest are divided more or less equally between those who are searching for a new job (i.e. currently unemployed persons who have worked in the past), and those who are searching for their first job. The majority of graduates also stated that it took them up to one year to obtain their first job. Despite these difficulties, over 80% of graduates said that their work fitted in well with their field of studies and about 90% were satisfied with their current job.

The following statements obtained from graduate focus groups emphasise the social and structural constraints that limit the current professional itineraries of the young graduates, in line with the main changes mentioned above concerning higher education and the labour markets.

Oh, but it's very difficult. Really, really hard. I only got a job about a year and a half ago in Lisbon, because here I couldn't find anything at all. And so, I got this one in Lisbon. It's in a senior home, because hospitals ... and other institutions of the kind are really difficult to find.

You become a graduate, and there is no job waiting for you as you had expected, so I thought I had to define a time span, I thought I could wait until something different came up. Six months have gone by, which is not a lot ... six months is not a lot ... sending CV – and not really expecting somebody would call me. Sending them by email, or handing them personally ... but I soon realised that six months had elapsed, and that I could be waiting even longer – So, I had to be a bit more proactive, adopt a more proactive attitude. I then decided to further the qualifications I had acquired, with professional qualifications for graduates. (Focus group of graduates)

The contractual ties of the graduates can define levels of dependency or independence in the natures of their relation with labour. Without wishing to prolong the debates about the de-professionalisation/proletarianisation of professional groups⁷ that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, we nevertheless think it important to highlight that both the earning levels and experiences of unemployment change the real conditions of exercising a profession. In that sense, Evetts (2012; 2010) and Kuhlmann (2012) are

⁷ We use the term 'professional groups' in the sense defined by Lucas and Dubar (1994) and Dubar and Tripier (1998), since we consider it to be the most appropriate expression for the analysis of the profound ongoing transformations in the occupational structure. We acknowledge the heterogeneity and constitutive differentiation of professional groups under the socio-historical conditions of emergency, consolidation and recognition of their knowledge and power, as well as the unequal impacts and constraints which they are subjected to.

unanimous in their diagnosis of changes in autonomy and independence as foundations of legitimacy of certified knowledge, relations of trust, and the professional ethos that the various professional groups face in the contemporary world.

In this perspective, the development of unpredictable and unequal itineraries, into and through the labour market, has been increasingly integrated with generalised practices of non-standard employment relationships (Vosco, 2010; Esping-Anderson & Regini, 2000; Beck, 2000, 1992; Paugam, 2000). The results of our quantitative analysis in Phase I showed that the most common statuses fall within the spectrum of short-term contracts (fixed-term or of indefinite duration) including temporary, traineeship and part-time contracts. These forms of precarious employment are clearly dominant among graduates (70.1%); in permanent situations of employment, only 11.6% of the graduates have stated they are in a stabilised condition (not at risk of any 'contractual fragility'). In the focus group discussion, it became apparent that graduates' statuses in the labour market are closely linked to precariousness and the expansion of 'peripheral employment' situations.

(...) I was unemployed for about a year, and later an opportunity came up at the Instituto de Emprego, at the Instituto de Conservação da Natureza e Biodiversidade ... I was there for three years, first doing a professional internship and later, working on 'green receipts' for the rest of the time ... all the work was more or less connected to my professional area.

They took me away from the company and then 'invited' me back, but offering other conditions, even more precarious than the previous ones ... salary and fixed-term contract, for example (...). (Focus group of graduates)

As previously noted, in the selection criteria for the focus group sessions, we looked for participants from a wide range of professional activities and sectors. Thus, we included professionals from private companies engaged in diverse fields of activity, including educators, teachers and researchers in HEI (e.g. with research grants/scholarships), staff of public institutions (e.g. hospitals) and local communities, and professionals from local, social and educational development associations, including non-governmental organisations (NGO).

I have never been unemployed, in the proper sense of the word, so I've had other activities. I was also a young entrepreneur, and as everybody knows, when you set up a company, it is not something that will be profitable in the first or second year ... so I started doing other activities, what we call freelancer ... yes, so I did other things, had other collaborations, I sometimes participated in academic projects, as well as a doctorate. So, I was always lucky enough to be connected ... directly and indirectly to my training area, which is history. Well ... this has been basically my career path.

In the meantime, when I finished my degree, I immediately obtained the CAP (Certificate of Professional Aptitude) and the CCP (Certificate of Professional Competence) and it is precisely where I am right now. I am currently providing professional training in diverse areas ... such as marketing, logistics, and other related areas (...). I am also providing support services and consultancy services to

companies, small businesses from several business sectors, from agriculture to book publishers, magazines and so, all these areas are related to the skills I achieved during my degree. (Focus group of graduates)

In terms of status, 18.2% of participants were self-employed, close to the average in Portugal (PORDATA, 2014) which is 19.2%. The focus group discussions made it possible to look in greater depth at the professional experiences of the participants who reported that they were self-employed. They were mainly working as freelancers or in their own offices (e.g. accountancy and law), but there were also some who had created their own companies, both in the new technology sector, in agriculture and in the arts and humanities area.

Currently, I work on my own, freelancing in conservation and restoration. (...) the contingent of independent/ freelancers is soaring. That means for a large number of these workers there are only two ways out: either he/she works as a freelancer, and therefore endures the painful path of trying to finish a degree, then kick-starts without any safety net at all, already facing some obstacles; another way out is self-employment, which is slightly different from being a freelancer. He/she reacts slightly to whatever pops up, making a life that is completely unstable, having to face the harsh reality of making some money one month, and being penniless the following month.

*I opened the Agency [***] with the teacher, and it was from then on that I started in the job market. We started some projects ... and that was when I had the opportunity to meet my current boss, for whom I'm currently working.*

*I had a research scholarship of about one year at the Marine and Environmental Centre, here at the University of [***], and I had a two-month scholarship in an international biotechnology laboratory, at [***] (...) We decided to create a start-up, as I mentioned previously [***], in other words, instead of working as a dependent worker, I am self-employed. It's a phenomenal experience. In my field of work it has become a recurrent practice because we have been able to achieve great success. (Focus group of graduates)*

These testimonies require some caution in interpretation regarding the 'real meaning' of contractual independence that could express tensions between autonomy and hierarchical subordination, as we have mentioned above. In fact, under the same category, three distinct unequal situations can be identified. These include, first, 'bogus self-employed workers' who carry out an activity with clear working hours and a workplace, similar to typical workers; second, isolated workers or entrepreneurs, albeit having workers under their supervision; and third, workers involved in an informal/ non-declared working relation which may express a rejection strategy of an uncertain/ negative identity.

In any case, in the current context of changes in the labour world, there are many risks associated with professional paths based on autonomous projects or entrepreneurial careers. These imply individualisation and externalisation of the production costs and all the consequences of contractual instability that stem from this,

as well as ruptures and blurring of the borders of professional activity, and dismantling of the axes of financial, family and affective emancipation (Marques, 2013).

Nevertheless, these diversified contractual arrangements mostly correspond to practices imposed by the employers and are not chosen by young graduates, due to the fact that they are almost always accompanied by inferior salary conditions, intensification of working patterns, reduced capacity for trade union negotiation and less protection of social rights. Among those working full time, 31.2% reported gross monthly earnings of €501 to €750,⁸ and 23.8% €751 to €1000. Only 25.5% reported earnings of more than €1,251, which is relatively low if we take into account the year of completion of their academic degree in this study (2008–2013 cohort).

The heterogeneity of the professional itineraries of the participants is also visible in the ways they describe their job titles. Some refer to the work they do in more or less functional terms, for example, referring to the post in relation to their academic qualification, for example 'Social Educator' or 'Graphic Designer' or their hierarchical position, for example 'Technician', 'Technical Assistant', 'Production Technician' 'Insurance Intermediary' or 'Programmer'.

Other interviewees, however, used categories to describe their work that suggested some degree of change in the content of their work that referred to the immateriality and non-prescriptive character of the context in which it was carried out (e.g. 'digital consultant', 'search coordinator/talent-scout', 'quality manager', 'network manager', 'agricultural administrator'). Many of these expressions can be seen as starting from the re-contextualisation of the 'organisational action' (Maggi, 2003), and linking this with a professional profile with multiple functions, or a mix of competences.

I am currently working at Portugal Telecom (PT), I am a telecommunications consultant and I provide technical support to all the commercial channels of the company ... we work toward the development of solutions for the Small and Medium company market and, in fact, I am the one who carries out the projects at an initial stage, related to anything that requires more complex solutions, the internet, television for telecommunications, surveillance telephones and solutions for smart clouds.

(...) when I joined the company, I initially performed functions as a programmer, a normal programmer. In the meantime, I managed to get to business intelligence, and right now I am working in the decision support systems (...).

I also provide support systems and consultancy to companies, small businesses linked to several areas, which range from agriculture to publishers, magazines.

Presently I am more involved with quality management ... in the food sector; the company provides consultancy services in that area, and in other areas I was involved with food technology, micro-biology. (Focus group of graduates)

⁸ In Portugal, the minimum wage was established at €505 in 2014. Still, according to the data of the official office of the European Union statistics referring to January 2015, among the 22 of the 28 EU countries that pay the minimum wage, the values range between €184 per month in Bulgaria and €1,923 in Luxembourg, with Portugal ranked half way up the table.

Equally important are changes in the hybrid modalities of work organisation that are sometimes combined with an ambiguous rhetoric about the importance of teamwork, even when work is, in practice, carried out alone. The following examples illustrate the metamorphosis in the meaning of 'team' that starts to represent 'individual':

It involves the whole team. We do not exactly have defined roles within the team, but we work together a lot. Even because it requires more practical work, both field and laboratory work ... In my personal case, it is a custom work. I have had the chance to talk about it many times and in many groups the need to talk about and teach the sense of teamwork is mentioned, and very rarely, do we discuss what you will do if you have to work on your own. How will you make it and what will you do in order to cope everything you have to do?

(...) There is a great deal of individual work, as well as teamwork. It depends on the issues, on the cases and on the people too (...).

(...) I succeeded in getting the responsibility to have a project under my supervision, thus I work in a team in business intelligence, a great team. And then, I have my own project, I am responsible for it and I work on my own – a team of precisely one individual. (Focus group of graduates)

As mentioned before, if we consider the relevant expansion of 'peripheral employment', this 'precariousness' is linked with risks and uncertainties regarding job maintenance, career and professional future but also regarding the development of their learning process and autonomy in workspaces. It will be easier to illustrate these dynamics of vulnerability and contractual individualisation as enhancers of (new) risks by considering some of the main outcomes from focus groups of graduates and employers. This point will be addressed in the next section.

Some narratives of precariousness: individualisation and uncertainty

In addition to these objective practices of labour and social precariousness, it is also important to take into account the dimensions of subjectivity associated with the experiences undergone by these graduates and how they are represented. These must be balanced with the employers' expectations and the propensity to recruit specific 'types' of graduates.

If in the past holding an academic degree was invested with a rare value and, thus, provided a solid guarantee of access to the first job or profession and to the launching of a professional career and identity, today that value is unpredictable and diminished. Degrees are now relatively abundant and are not capable of serving as a protection against unemployment and precarious contractual relations (Marques, 2006; Bourdieu, 1979), although having a diploma is perceived as a pre-requisite for entering the labour market.

I believe a degree, or even a Master's degree, are business cards that one can use to introduce oneself to a company. I have graduated in X and Y and have a Master's degree in something or other. Nowadays it is absolutely worthless!

What matters is what you are still willing to do and not the nice hand-printed diploma that you received upon completion of the degree. Not even the great final classification because that's not what gives one the status, so that people can feel their feet firmly on the ground. When these people join an organisation or go to a research group or a company, whatever that may be, they are common people, like anybody else and they have to show how efficient they are. That task is up to each one, individually.

As far as I'm concerned, my degree in IT design was undoubtedly a way in. I devoted myself much more toward the digital part (...) it gave me the necessary tools to stop being the person who has shown a knack for design and started being seen as someone who possesses a language of his own, someone who knows how he works ...' (Focus group of graduates)

As far as the employers are concerned, and with the backing of public policies designed to promote the employment of youngsters (in particular by means of professional internships), we observed that, much more than the diploma, an internship is almost mandatory: graduates are expected to follow a trial path based on the accumulation of periods and diverse types of internships, as part of the process of demonstrating that they can be candidates for the jobs available. Once more, the employers are allowed to reinforce their 'controlling' arguments that will adjust to their labour demands and needs, the arguments that will 'mould' the candidates' behaviours and 'test' competences in reality, among other features.

I think that my graduation, or even the master's, only allow the student to present his/her visiting card in a company. He/she can say: 'I have a degree in this or I'm a master in ...'. Nowadays, that is absolutely worthless.

Recruitment itself will only happen normally at the very end of the internship. During the summer internship a new opportunity will come up for a potential professional internship. If all goes well, and if both parts are willing, this internship will provide integration in to society.

(...) Our staff is constituted by 12 individuals who did the internship path, and all showed their skills, their competences and their abilities and were prepared for whatever they wanted to do. All of them had very worthy occupations within our organisation, all of them were part of the company's permanent staff without holding a contract. (Focus group of employers)

In considering the narrative of graduates regarding their transition from higher education into the labour market, taken-for-granted assumptions about a 'job for life' appear to have given way to genuine concerns over the anticipated need to be employable. In fact, the issue of being employable was seen as crucial both for integrating into positions in the labour market and for sustaining them (Tomlinson, 2012). The quotes below demonstrate both the high risks and the uncertainties produced by the labour market, and how graduates are managing their expectations accordingly.

Both for that complicated life of the freelancer, and for those who work as self-dependent workers, or in a life of entrepreneurship, school still hasn't done much to provide solutions for these two professional career paths; the efforts of the school and of the students are still very much geared towards the idea that the student will be seeking a job placement after graduation. And that idea of getting a market position, that idea of a job post is finished or is about to end!

I believe, and have realised that what the companies are increasingly looking for nowadays is networking, the ability to be able to reach a certain place and be able to talk, get to know people ... getting to a place and being able to meet people, establish new contacts and connections and anything which is directly related with that. That is exactly how you run a business and a partnership and that is how you create work contacts with employers. Above all, I believe that is the attitude to have!!

In my opinion, students' focus nowadays should be mainly on the perception that I am gradually reaching - that the labour market has also changed a lot since we were students ourselves, and that we acquired skills and competences which are tested in a professional internship and in various professions. But that is only the beginning of the career path.

(...) if we don't take care of ourselves, the market will not give us the opportunity to do it and, above all, we should be prepared to grab that opportunity with motivation, with an optimistic perspective. In spite of all the obstacles and incidents that come our way, we have to adopt that posture, and that posture in life was also strengthened by the curricular activities that we were taught. (Focus group of graduates)

These concerns have been well reported in many studies, some of which have been mentioned in this article (e.g. Tomlinson, 2012, 2009). We must conclude that the transition from HE into the world of work is perceived as a potentially hazardous one that needs to be negotiated with more astute planning, preparation and foresight, though still in a context of precariousness. On a similar note, graduates assume the responsibility for their future employability, which makes them acutely aware of the need for continued professional training and development beyond graduation. This propensity towards discourses of self-responsibilisation by graduates and their assessment of professional and transverse skills in making the transitions to work is largely corroborated by employers participating in our study.

In fact, a sustained 'individual management' prevails in the recruitment process, which has three components. The first of these is the academic assessment of the candidate and of his or her behaviour (evidenced, for example, by the CV and interview). The second one is the valorisation of extracurricular experiences and the third is based on an assessment of the candidate's previous experience. This assessment takes two forms: the employers' assessment of the candidate's 'unprogrammed mindset', or potential for adaptation to fit the job in question; and the candidate's maturity (evidenced, for example, by having had a curricular or professional internship). The

following quotations from the employers' focus group highlight both the subjectivity in the recruitment process and the risks that result from their discretionary behaviours.

There is a clear generational gap here. One of the characteristics I mostly look for in whatever area, is that they show drive, stamina, yes, I think the proper word is stamina, the will to succeed ... in my particular case, when I'm selecting candidates, I have to feel them, to feel that they are almost enraged, that they feel the need to show me, to prove that they are exactly what they display in their portfolios (...).

The Agency holds the view that the EQ (emotional quotient) comes first and the Intelligence Quotient follows suit. Recruitment is done via an interview, people send their CV, qualifications certificate that have to be handed in personally, and then recruitment is carried out based on the interview and on the empathy which needs to be a relevant factor (...).

Because when we select candidates, it isn't only crucial to consider the technical aspects, but the behavioural component as well; we have a set of values established by the company and people are assessed right at the stage of the group task when we observe competences such as team work and, obviously, entrepreneurship, initiative and responsibility.

*Last year the company recruited 20 to 30 graduates. The assessment is positive, and what we are looking for are resourceful candidates who are eager to learn.
(Focus group of employers)*

Against this background, it is not surprising to observe the presence of expressions such as 'stamina', 'desire', 'will', 'drive', 'empathy', 'EQ – Emotional Quotient', taking us to behavioural issues or questions of attitude and, above all, habits or intrinsic qualities of the individual which the latter must equally possess and make available, not just in the private sphere, but in the professional and public spheres as well. In this sense, this hurtling rush towards competition that is fuelled by the market, clearly constitutes a sign of new times which, according to Sennett, 'corrupts the character' (1998) of the worker and serves to legitimise the emergence of a kind of natural selection of the most competitive among the graduates, who must satisfy the employers by showing them that they are almost 'raging' or 'angry'. This feeling is also evidenced in the discourse of some graduates, concerning the justification of the selection criteria of job applicants.

Conclusion

Since the nineties, graduates have faced major changes in their transition into working life. Indeed, the employability of young graduates has been flagged up as a social problem that has become progressively more visible than the high rates of youth unemployment, the long waiting to obtain their first job and the increasing mismatch between academic qualifications and the functions actually required in the workplace.

The subjectification required under contemporary capitalism is characterised by ambivalences and contradictions that demand more thorough exploration and analysis in future research. It is now a requirement that graduates are permanently employable,

even as their employment opportunities and working conditions become increasingly precarious. These ongoing transformations can create both new opportunities and new risks for graduates because they do not constitute a homogeneous group. Any structural analysis must take into account the socio-economic differentiation among graduates, which varies, for example, according to the activity sectors in which they are placed, the greater 'return on investment' from credentials in some specific scientific areas (e.g. there are clear advantages for those with qualifications relating to the Information Technology and Communications sectors, new materials and engineering). There are also differences related to gender identity and social background, and variations in the ability to mobilise resources.

The combination of the qualitative and quantitative results of this study provides evidence to support the idea that the academic degree is one of the essential pre-requisites for obtaining a successful position in society. However, a certificate is not sufficient to protect the graduate from unemployment, nor does the certified knowledge and expertise end with obtaining the degree. The graduate must take responsibility for furthering these qualifications and acquiring additional skills in order to gain professional success. Furthermore, as both graduates and employers point out, there is also a need for transversal skills that focus on a behavioural dimension, highlighting particular 'qualities', 'predispositions' and 'personality traits'. It must also be accepted that there is no longer any such thing as 'a job for life'.

In employability narratives, the topic of the 'lack of maturity' in today's generation strengthens the importance of continuing to invest in the preparation for the labour market and, perhaps, the consensus that harmonises discussions about the effects of labour market change is that individuals have to adapt flexibly to a job market that places increasing expectations and demands on them. In short, graduates need to maintain their employability continually. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the underlying factors that underpin the conditions and modalities which young people are subjected to if they want to gain access to employment opportunities – and seek to stay on the job market – but which also render them so vulnerable. These include high unemployment rates, precarious contractual and working time arrangements, restricted access to civil rights protection, individuation in the recruitment processes and the non-existence of career and planning support for professional futures. In this context, it is relevant to ask several questions: how can recruitment and management practices based on the substandard conditions of the contractual links, the individuation of social training and protection costs and the reduction of democratic mechanisms in the workplace (such as the ability to negotiate or defend their labour rights) be reconciled with the companies' demands for loyalty, trust and availability? How can young graduates be prepared for professional careers anchored in principles of autonomy, creativity and freedom if they are confronted with an inferior range of options, security and prospects for obtaining a job?

If we place our research in a broader context, we may conclude that there has been a progressive loss of the regulation and binding power of citizens related to the normative fragility of performance of the Nation State. This can be explained to a great extent by the weakness of individual states in relation to their inclusion in dependency networks at a worldwide level, in a context in which an elite controls power on a global

scale, and economic and financially orientated approaches are applied indiscriminately to all areas of life. If we are to achieve a more cooperative, fair and decent life, based on citizenship values such as autonomy and equal opportunities for future development, there is a need to place more emphasis on the capacity for establishing links between young people and the labour market.

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