

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE LABOUR MARKET

Ana Paula Marques, Rita Moreira

Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences, University of Minho (PORTUGAL)

Abstract

This paper focuses upon a case study in entrepreneurial learning, involving students from different scientific fields from the University of Minho located at North of Portugal. The specific purpose of this paper is to analyse the experiences and perceptions regarding entrepreneurship viewed as an alternative means of accessing a profession or a career as well as to explore the main initiatives/programmes, forms of support and infrastructure deployed in academic preparation and training for the labour market. We will make specific use of the key deliverables from two projects, namely 'The Potential of Entrepreneurship at the University of Minho' (2010-2012) and the on-going PhD project 'Qualified Entrepreneurship: Higher Education Policy and (Re)configuration of the Career Paths of Graduates' (2010-2013). The present study is based on the results from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with young people from different socio-demographic and educational profiles, all of whom were in a professional transition phase. Specifically, we point out: i) the main stakeholders, their missions and strategies for fostering entrepreneurial learning, ii) the entrepreneurial experiences undertaken by young people and the meanings and representations of - entrepreneurship and its effects on identity re-composition. The conclusion presents a summary of the main results, highlighting the privileged relationship between non-formal/ informal entrepreneurial learning.

Keywords: Portugal, higher education, entrepreneurial learning, labour market, perceptions.

1 INTRODUCTION

Regarded as a solution for economic growth and employment problems, entrepreneurship reached the political agenda and also been imbedded into education systems. Various universities offer nowadays courses on entrepreneurship; and there is an EU-wide policy on entrepreneurial learning in higher education.

In higher education institutions (HEI), entrepreneurial learning takes specific contours. In fact, the difficulties of graduates' transition to the labour market, which are visible in rising unemployment rates, underemployment and various forms of precarious employment (e.g., temporary contract, low wages, subcontracting) have mobilized the attention of political authorities as part of employment and training public measures. To promote the employability of graduates, namely transversal skills relevant to the labour market ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]) has been one of the main policy priorities for higher education.

In spite of the diversified range of activities developed in this area, there is no systematized information to assess its impact on the acquisition of relevant entrepreneurial skills in the transition to the labour market of young people in terms of employability, professional careers, , life projects, social and citizen participation, nor the involvement of the different stakeholders in the expansion of entrepreneurial learning opportunities ([1]).

In recent decades it has been recognized that Portugal has undergone a profound educational transition, especially in the younger generations. It is indisputable that the most visible changes in the educational landscape are related to higher education. The increase of higher education graduates until the end of the nineties and throughout the first decade of the century. XXI is one of the fundamental trends that characterize Portuguese society. Considering the target set in the Europe 2020 Strategy ([7]) of reaching 40% of the population aged 30 to 34 with a higher education qualification, it can be stated that Portugal has been showing a significant effort at that level. Although it is below the target and far from the European average, which holds 34.6%, the way forward shows that, in that age group, 26.1% of the Portuguese population already have higher qualifications.

However, the greatest challenge for Portugal and other EU Member States is to create more and better jobs for young people with high qualifications. Indeed, in Europe there are more than 5 million unemployed young people under the age of 25, with the youth unemployment rate being the highest (20.4%), or more than double the relative rate of the working age population as a whole (9.6%). In

turn, it is estimated that by 2020, 35% of jobs will require higher level qualifications (ISCED level 5 and 6) and constant adaptation and innovation skills within the current internationalization of the economy and society ([8]). In turn, the endemic signs of less correspondence between education and employment are manifest, as a result of the progressive openness, ambiguity and flexibility of the educational and economic systems. This trend of less correspondence between the diploma and the profession / employment, including the centrality of transversal skills ([9], [10], [11]; [12]) reinforces the central idea that young people face specific vulnerabilities and needs of this transition period from education to active life and that their exclusion from the labor market through the experience of unemployment represents a huge waste of potential resources and talents vital for the rejuvenation of the labor force, ([13], [14], [15], [16]).

In this scope, we are interested in examining entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning in relatively broad terms: as perceptions, attitudes and behaviours associated with future work and entrepreneurship. This can be regarded as entrepreneurial learning in its social and cultural manifestation, rather than identifying business opportunities or business creation ([17], [18]). The main focus is explore the contribution of entrepreneurial learning (formal, non-formal and informal) in the preparation of graduates for work and entrepreneurship, and secondly to identify the main stakeholders and their role in stimulating initiatives and experiences in the academic context that contribute to the training at the level of transversal skills in general, and entrepreneurial in particular, crucial in the process of transition to the labour market. This study was based on semi-structured interviews with sixteen graduates carried out from two projects, namely 'The Potential of Entrepreneurship at the University of Minho' (2010-2012) and the on-going PhD project 'Qualified Entrepreneurship: Higher Education Policy and (Re)configuration of the Career Paths of Graduates' (2010-2013), both conducted at the University of Minho in northern Portugal..

2 METODOLOGY

It draws upon qualitative methodology, in this paper we explores a case study, with a view to illustrating some of the most relevant aspects of entrepreneurial learning. Is based on the results from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with graduates from different socio-demographic and educational profiles, all of whom were in a phase of professional transition and currently searching for a job. In respect to methodological approach, the selection of graduates for interview was made from two surveys designed to assess the entrepreneurial potential of graduates and have been developed in two research projects mentioned, with fieldwork conducted in 2010 and 2011.

Table 1. Socio-demographic, educational and professional backgrounds of respondents

Interview N°	Gender	Age	Scientific area/course	cycle of study	Employment situation
1	M	28	Computer Engineering	2°cycle	Businessman
2	F	36	Marketing and Strategic Management	2°cycle	Self-Employed
3	F	27	Psychology	3°cycle	PhD Student
4	F	22	Public Administration	1°cycle	Unemployed
5	M	26	Biophysics	2°cycle	Researcher
6	F	23	Social Economy	2°cycle	Unemployed
7	F	23	Civil Engineer	2°cycle	Internship
8	M	27	Economics	2°cycle	Self-Employed
9	M	30	Sociology	1°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker
10	M	29	Geography and Planning	1°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker
11	F	29	Sociology	1°cycle	Unemployed
12	M	36	International Relations	1°cycle	Self-Employed
13	M	30	Environmental Engineer	2°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker
14	F	30	Education	2°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker
15	M	35	Public Administration	2°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker
16	M	29	Biology and Geology Teaching	1°cycle	Fixed-Term Contract Worker

Source: Project Potential of Entrepreneurship at the University of Minho' (2010-2012) and the PhD project 'Qualified Entrepreneurship: Higher Education Policy and (Re)configuration of the Career Paths of Graduates' (2010-2013)

Looking at the labour market profile, the interviewees themselves were nearing completion of their courses, unemployed and seeking employment or, in most cases, had already found a job. To ensure theoretical and empirical relevance, we purposely selected individuals from a diverse range of higher education contexts in relation to scientific fields and cycles of study (undergraduate, masters and doctoral levels), thus representing a heterogeneous range of entrepreneurial learning pathways. In addition, we included cases with different socio-demographic profiles in terms of gender, socio-economic or employment status (Table 1).

3 ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING AND TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET: RESULTS OF A PORTUGUESE CASE STUDY

Following this presentation regarding our sample of graduates and methodology, we will present empirical evidence from the interviews to illustrating some of the most important aspects of entrepreneurial learning. Specifically, we have sought to place greater emphasis on the attitudes, positions and perspectives of the respondents from three analytical vectors: i) identify the main stakeholders, their missions and strategies for fostering entrepreneurial learning in University of Minho; ii) characterise entrepreneurial experiences as undertaken by students/graduates, particularly in terms of the skills mobilised, obstacles and success factors; iii) survey the meanings and representations of entrepreneurship and reflect on its impact. Each of these dimension target a different level in our analysis, taking into account the discourses, meanings and representations produced around the theme of entrepreneurship. This also illustrates the various dimensions of subjective experience and social experience in entrepreneurial learning in higher education.

3.1 Stakeholders, entrepreneurship education, support activities

Institutions of higher education can provide entrepreneurial learning opportunities for students incorporating the involvement of various stakeholders, including students, academics, researchers, technical staff and other staff. The idea of entrepreneurship education is relatively new in Portugal, and only started to be widespread in 2006. In respect to higher education, the strategy for fostering entrepreneurship is strongly related to innovation, technology transfer and business creation.

In the particular case of the University of Minho (UM), the promotion of entrepreneurship is embodied in new structures and an academic interface, in close cooperation with other public and private organisations, e.g. the businesses sector, local small firms and entrepreneurs and their associations, local communities and associated non-government organisations, which support entrepreneurship education via their own agendas. In practice, this has meant increased extracurricular activities and support that, through a non-formal approach, seeks to engage students via a series of outreach initiatives, e.g. events and ideas competitions, and training courses and programmes in the area of entrepreneurship, as well as support for the creation of businesses (mentoring, counselling, etc.). This diverse range of activities has made visible the growing importance of various stakeholders in the expansion of entrepreneurial learning opportunities within academia, especially the role of the Office of LIFTOFF-Entrepreneur, TecMinho and Spinpark/AvePark.

LIFTOFF-Office of the Entrepreneur is a project carried out by students via the UM Students' Union, focused on training and awareness in entrepreneurship. This includes training courses and workshops on entrepreneurship, business creation and employment. LIFTOFF also promotes awareness sessions with entrepreneurs, seminars and conferences, and is responsible for the organisation's annual Entrepreneurship Week. TecMinho, while an interface of UM, is also responsible for implementing activities to promote entrepreneurial culture in academia, establish relationships with the exterior and support custom-made technological and knowledge-intensive entrepreneurial projects. This includes awareness-raising and training courses in entrepreneurship, services and infrastructure to support business projects; to date it has supported the creation of academic spin-offs. UM also helps academic business projects through other entities such as Spinpark, a technology incubator that supports companies throughout their evolutionary development, and AvePark, Park of Science and Technology, that helps more mature companies in terms of access to networks of contacts, training and support for internationalisation.

3.2 Entrepreneurial experiences in Higher education

The study first examined the entrepreneurial experiences undertaken by higher education graduates before entering in labour market. A number of common activities emerged in their accounts, namely

work experience or internships, student mobility programmes, volunteering and associative activity. This analysis revealed what these graduates had learnt in practice; the skills and competencies relevant to their personal and professional development. In most cases, the acquisition of these skills was closely connected to stronger links to the labour market and, in essence, the opportunity to 'learn to work', 'make contacts' or 'to build a CV'. The following testimonies illustrate some of these learning experiences:

"(...) I had several vacation jobs and did part-time jobs and an internship ... these experiences were important because it was through them that I got other opportunities, on a recommendation, directly or indirectly ... I was able to find people who taught me how things were done in practice". (Maria, 36, Marketing, Self-Employed).

"(...) [Erasmus] was the best experience of my life ... I had to deal with a totally different culture. Undoubtedly, I grew-up a lot during this period. I had to make decisions and I became much more responsible ... I looked at this exchange as a very good opportunity, as Rio de Janeiro is in need of engineers" (Sara, 23, Civil Engineering, Intern).

"(...) [the volunteer work I did] helped me to overcome the problem of relationships with adults and also allowed me to get a part-time job at a clinic and find clients" (Paulo, 27, Economics, Self-employed).

This emphasis on non-formal and extracurricular activities, as well as experiences that lead to professional development via the acquisition of soft skills is something that is consistent with the findings of previous studies ([12], [19], [20]). Also, it is possible to observe the complexity of the process of learning and development in terms of knowledge and skills, indicating a transformation of dispositions and attitudes among these young people, for life and for transition to labour market in particular.

3.2.1 Obstacles and success factors in educational provision

Whilst, as has been shown, higher education provide opportunities to fostering graduate entrepreneurship, the evidence also clearly suggests that the respondents undertake various forms of entrepreneurial learning. In respect of entrepreneurial formal education, university departments and schools have their own educational provision, who in some cases had a positive impact on their students/graduates learning, as the testimony of João shows:

"(...) we had contact with companies, there were organised sessions with entrepreneurs ... an excellent opportunity to create contacts. We were in a fertile environment for entrepreneurship because in addition, students have many ideas and can be proactive, and many of our teachers also have businesses" (João, 28, Computer Engineering, Businessman).

Otherwise, it is clear that some respondents criticised their courses as being too theoretical and lacking a focus on entrepreneurship, recognising that this theme is localised within a restricted core of courses. To this extent, a graduate's record confirm this situation:

"It is something completely unknown in a course at my level ... there are many things organised by the university, but more for courses like economics and management ... To speak of entrepreneurship is for economics and management" (Miguel, 27, Biophysics, Research Fellow).

Moreover, it should be noted that the activities undertaken by University of Minho, namely by TecMinho, have introduced a new approach into the entrepreneurial learning process. For some graduates, the performance of these entity was viewed as being very active and useful.

The university has some very good programmes ... I applied for a project in entrepreneurship, a business idea in TecMinho. It was very useful and important because we had information sessions and they taught us how to do a SWOT analysis. I am civil engineering and knew nothing about that (Sara, 23, Civil Engineering, Intern).

"[The university] plays an active role, through having created the office of entrepreneurship (...) students have felt more supported" (Joana, 22, Public Administration, Unemployed).

3.3 Perceptions and attitudes towards entrepreneurship

In this section, we examine the perceptions, attitudes and motivations of higher education graduates to their future work, career and entrepreneurship. These discourses and meanings allow us to capture

various ways of being an entrepreneur and underlying meanings, as well as examine the way as graduates, making the transition into the labour market, understand and negotiate the demands of entrepreneurship.

3.3.1 Perceptions of entrepreneurship

The ambiguity in relation to the concept of entrepreneurship means that a large number of the respondents have difficulty in assigning meaning to the concept. To this extent, it would appear that graduates are internalising different meanings of entrepreneurship:

"(...) is not for everyone ... Not all courses relate to the development of products. For example, a Law School will not develop a product, will it?" (John, 28, Computer Engineering, Businessman).

"(...)I relate it a lot with being pro-active and that everyone has to have it. ... I believe that an entrepreneur has to have ideas and be creative" (Paulo, 27, Economics, Self-employed).

This results shows somewhat the plurality of meaning of entrepreneurship among graduates. It was evident that there is a need for conceptual clarification between entrepreneurial skills and business start-up and, likewise, between entrepreneurial education (learning) and entrepreneurship education.

3.3.2 Entrepreneurial projects

Through analysing the testimonies of our respondents about their professional projects, there emerges a more flexible attitude towards work. Expressions such as 'opportunity', 'challenge', 'freedom', 'personal fulfilment', 'live day-to-day', 'new experiences' and 'continuous learning' frequently arise in explaining professional motivations. It was clear that the graduates in the study were further using expressions that could be signalling a natural incorporation of language and meanings promoted by educational and employment policies.

"(...) I want to work in various areas, and want to be free to work on something that I have done. I'm not much of a planning person. I prefer the going-out stage, and I enjoyed that because I always had an intention to work two or three years out" (Joana, 23, Civil Engineering, Internship trainee).

"(...) I do not want to finish my course and then have to confine myself to the options that course gives me; I have other options. Please ... I have something in mind, where the money I'm getting is mine and I am not counting on others" (Joana, 22, Public Administration, Unemployed).

"(...) I do not want to be accommodated, I always want to have new challenges, new experiences, to learn a lot ... learn more, or know that it is necessary to take risks" (Paulo, 30 years, Sociology, Fixed-term contract worker).

Regardless of employment status, these narratives show that the attitudes and dispositions of these graduates are moving towards greater autonomy in work, where flexibility of knowledge and skills are seen as strategies to achieve and maintain an employability profile that is innovative and appropriate to the demands of the current labour market. Graduate's perceptions of the acquisition and development of entrepreneurial skills outlined therefore their positive impact on employability and future work, acquired through participation in a range of activities at formal, non-formal and extracurricular levels.

4 CONCLUSION

This evidence shows that the transition from higher education to the labour market involves an active process, showing examples of how entrepreneurial learning is perceived by graduates in Portugal. Despite the relative novelty of entrepreneurial learning in academic context, we have seen how the graduates interviewed illustrate of what can be acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning processes, as well as illustrating some shortcomings, such as limited scope in terms of fields of study. Taken together, this Portuguese case study also shows the importance of interface institutions that use a university as a platform of support, particularly in the promotion of non-formal and informal learning initiatives through extra-curricular activities. It would be wrong to infer that these case studies are intended to be representative but rather illustrative of the present state of play in this area, we can at least confirm that various forms of learning matter in respect to entrepreneurship. This has some

important political implication. As we have demonstrated, in many cases, these apparent ‘successes’ need to be tempered by realisation that the deteriorating economic situation in Portugal brings with it the risk that much of this work will be undermined by a lack of opportunities and declining working conditions. However, the incipient success of entrepreneurial learning can be a fundamental pillar for concrete structural actions (programmes, incentives, training, etc.) that may help realise the objectives of encouraging entrepreneurship through measures that help highly qualified population besides those with precarious access to the labour market.

REFERENCES

- [1] Vieira, D., Marques A. P., *Preparados para trabalhar? Um Estudo com Diplomados do Ensino Superior e Empregadores*, Lisboa: Maior Empregabilidade/POAT FSE, 2014.
- [2] Tomlison, M. *Education, Work and Identity. Themes and Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- [3] Tomlison, M., “Graduate employability: A Review of Conceptual and Empirical Themes”, In *Higher Education Policy*, 25, pp.407-431, 2012.
- [4] Tomlison, M., *Higher Education and Graduate Employability*, VDM Publishing, 2009.
- [5] Teichler, U. *Higher Education and the World of Work: Conceptual Frameworks, Comparative Perspectives, Empirical Findings*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, Disponível em: <https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/469-higher-education-and-the-world-of-work.pdf>, 2009.
- [6] Teichler, U. *Careers of University Graduates. Views and Experiences in Comparative Perspectives*, Col. *Higher Education Dynamics*, nº 17. London: Springer, 2007.
- [7] EC (European Commission), *EUROPA 2020 - Estratégia para um crescimento inteligente, sustentável e inclusivo*, [COM(2010) 2020 final], 2010.
- [8] EC (European Commission) *Juventude em Movimento. Uma iniciativa para explorar o potencial dos jovens e garantir um crescimento inteligente, sustentável e inclusivo na União Europeia*, [COM(2010) 477 final], 2010.
- [9] Alves, M.G., Alves, N., Chaves, M., “Inserção profissional e razões de ingresso e reingresso no ensino superior: um ponto de partida para uma temática em aberto. *Sociologia*”, *Problemas e Práticas*, nº 60, pp. 99-118, 2012.
- [10] Gonçalves, C.M. (Coord.) *Licenciados, Precariedade e Família, Estratégias Criativas*, 2009.
- [11] Marques, A. P., Alves, M. G. *Inserção profissional de graduados em Portugal. (Re)configurações teóricas e empíricas*, V. N. Famalicão: Edições Húmus, 2010.
- [12] Marques, A. P., *MeIntegra — Mercados e estratégias de inserção profissional. Licenciados versus empresas da Região Norte. Relatório final. Universidade do Minho: Coleção DS/CICS*. <http://hdl.handle.net/1822/8633>, 2007.
- [13] Marques, A. P., “Empregabilidade e (novos) riscos profissionais”, In A. M. Brandão e A.P. Marques (Org), *Jovens, Trabalho e Cidadania: Que Sentidos?*, Ebook; CICS/ Universidade do Minho, pp. 20-34 ISBN 978-989-96335-1-3 [http://www.lasics.uminho.pt/ojs/index.php/cics_ebooks/issue/view/123] [<http://hdl.handle.net/1822/26455>], 2013.
- [14] Marques, A. P. “‘Sacralização’ do mercado de trabalho: Jovens diplomados sob o signo da precariedade”, In *Configurações*, 7, pp. 65-89, 2010.
- [15] Marques, A. P. “Recrutamento e gestão da transição de graduados: o olhar dos empregadores da Região Norte”, In A. P. Marques & M. G. Alves (orgs.). *Inserção Profissional de Graduados em Portugal: (Re)configurações teóricas e empíricas*, V.N. Famalicão: Húmus, pp. 259-286, 2010.
- [16] Marques, A. P. “Novas legitimidades de segmentação do mercado de trabalho de jovens diplomados”, In *Revista Portuguesa de Educação* [online], vol.22, n.2, pp. 85-115. ISSN 0871-9187, 2009.
- [17] EC (European Commission), *Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan - Reigniting the entrepreneurial spirit in Europe*, COM(2012)795, 2012.

- [18] EC (European Commission), Fostering Entrepreneurial Mindsets through Education and Learning', COM(2006)33 final, 2006.
- [19] Marques, A. P., Moreira, R. 'Empreendedorismo na Universidade do Minho. O potencial empreendedor dos diplomados do ensino superior numa perspectiva educativa', paper presented in II Encontro de Sociologia da Educação – Educação, Territórios e (Des)igualdades. Porto: January, 2011. <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/15247>.
- [20] Marques, A. P., Moreira, R. 'Transição para o mercado de trabalho: empreendedorismo numa perspectiva de género', paper presented in Actas do XIV Encontro Nacional de Sociologia Industrial, das Organizações e do Trabalho. Lisboa: <http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/handle/1822/17766>, 2011.