The value of work: emerging opportunities and challenges for universities

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The educational system, particularly universities, has been challenged in past years to expand its role in society from its first and second missions of teaching and research to a third mission of "social, enterprising, innovation activities" for the benefit of society, through relations with business. In this context, "employability," the capacity of individuals to find, retain, and re-find a job, has become a central theme debated within and outside universities. This study seeks to contribute to an increased understanding of the reasons that university efforts to guarantee the employability of students should extend beyond skills development. It explores from a pedagogical point of view the theme of transition pathways from education to work, and reports results from interviews of a sample of graduates on their opinions about the value of work and of a university education.

KEYWORDS: *WORK, GRADUATES EMPLOYABILITY, EDUCATION, CAPABILITY APPROACH, UNIVERSITIES*

Introduction

Universities in past years have been asked to expand their contribution to the development and wellbeing of society. In this context, employability, the capacity of the individuals to find, retain and re-find a job, is a key asset that educational institutions are asked to provide their students. Universities have responded through changes in organisation, curricula and pedagogy. Some scholars have resisted the 'new role' of universities, while others have embraced it fully.

Some nations, such as the United Kingdom, have sought to further the employability of their students through specific and explicit policies, and others, such as Italy, with more general and implicit ones. On the whole, however, at least since the Bologna Declaration (1999), employability has been in the policy agendas of all European countries. Universities are expected to be reactive and proactive to society's needs, particularly economic ones, by creating flexible and tailored curricula, contributing to overcoming skills mismatches, guiding students to choose STEM disciplines, and preparing them to face an unpredictable labour market. In addition, they are expected to be held accountable for all this. For their part, while these institutions may advance narratives

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about transitions from education to work that hail their ability to face the challenge, the reality beyond the narrative is more complex.
In fact, studies in the literature and other evidence confirm that employability depends on many variables beyond the control of educational institutions, most importantly, the realities of the economy and the labour market. The idea that having the right skills will automatically lead to a successful career is naïve, to say the least. In the process of transition from education to work, personal traits and networking resources are just as important as skills, and external factors such as economic conditions and cultural expectations also have a tremendous bearing on a graduate's success in finding and keeping work.

Granted this, it is nonethelss the case that educational institutions, and particularly universities, play a significant role not only in communicating knowledge and training students in practical skills, but also in helping them acquire transversal soft skills. Even so, it can be argued that even these goals are short-sighted, and that the overarching mission of universities is to educate individuals, not just train them.
This article seeks to contribute to an increased understanding of the reasons that university efforts to guarantee the employability of students should extend beyond skills development, and suggests that a pedagogical point of view should be brought to bear in discussions of transition pathways from education to work. It also reports on the opinions of graduates about the value of work and of their university experience for their own identity and self-esteem. Part 1 outlines the theoretical reference framework, while Part 2 describes the methodology applied to collect qualitative data from a sample of graduates to explore perceived relations between the university experience and work. Part 3 reports and discusses the findings, and Part 4 summarises and offers suggestions for further research work.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 The value of work

The notion of work has changed over centuries, as has its centrality and value for the self and society. In the modern understanding, work is "an activity through which human beings transform the world in which they live, remaking in it their image and finding in this process one of the most important ways of participating in social life" (Méda and Vendramin, 2017). Research on pre-capitalist society has concluded that the meaning of work was less defined, and viewed differently in different cultures

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(Chamoux, 1994). The concept of work was given the present definition with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, as Western society began to be constructed around economic production. Méda and Vendramin (2017, pp. 16-22) identify three phases in the meaning of work, namely: (1) work as the factor of production (18th century); (2) work as the essence of the human (early 19th century); and (3) work as the system for the distribution of income, rights and welfare (late 19th century). This three-layer definition shaped the idea of work in and for society and was 'inherited' by the 20th century. The first part of this century was dominated by the conviction that work was a fundamental constituent of social cohesion: it served not only for the production of goods, but enabled individuals to contribute to society and find their own place in it. Work then was considered as a mean for fostering cooperation and solidarity, and ensuring the 'ordinary functioning' of society. In second part of this century, work shifted from a duty in the service of society to a tool in the service of individual self-fulfilment. Work became the expression of self as deployment of abilities, capacities and creativity (Méda and Vendramin, 2017, p. 29).

1.2 Work and the self: employment and employability

This emphasis on the 'self' is seen in all spheres of society, and has affected the concept of work as an important expression of individual contribution to society. Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) stressed the difficulty of striking a balance between the individual and the social identities of work (the 'Me' among the "We"), arguing that it is difficult to separate ourselves from what we do. At the same time, society currently views unemployment as a weakness of the individual rather than a responsibility of the collectivity (Serrano Pascual, 2001), and puts the onus of "being employable" on the individual (Keep and Mayhew, 2010), who must engage in a never-ending process of life design and re-design.
What does it mean to be "employable"? The term is taken for granted, but has yet to be defined with precision. Its components are not clear, and its meaning changes according to the needs of the context or the speaker. Since the early 1900s it has indicated the potential of the individual to find a job (Grazier, 1999). Today, the best known definition is from Yorke (2004), who defines employability as:

> a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

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However, those 'skills, understandings and personal attributes' are not defined, and many studies have explored and debated 'employability skills' (Hager and Holland, 2006; Yorke and Knight, 2006; Harvey, 2000; see Suleman, 2016 for a complete analysis). Governments have developed reference frameworks to guide education and training systems in their action for preparing employable individuals, for example, the "Skills for the Future Australia" or the "US Employability Framework". In contrast, some have criticised the very concept of employability as a 'floating' (Sin and Naeve, 2016) or an 'empty' signifier (Cremin, 2009). Others, accepting the concept of employability but rejecting the exclusive focus on skills, have proposed a system-level examination of the theme (Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017) by considering

- The macro level of policies;
- The meso level of education and business, the two systems directly involved in employability and employment;
- The micro level of individuals, considering their ambitions, interests, and identity traits.

They look at skills, but in the broader context of how they relate to a country or area's economic performance, the features of the business system (fields and sectors), investments in education and other factors. At the meso level of education and business, it is obvious that missions and approaches differ between the two systems. Education institutions focus on 'employability skills' and pre-professionalism development (Jackson, 2016), considering job seeking skills among those that can be acquired through career development and job placement support services, while businesses want graduates to be 'work ready' and 'profitable' from the first day on the job. A significant factor to be considered at the meso level is the dramatic change in the nature of employment over past decades from the predominance of stable job positions or careers (Feintuch, 1955; Magnum, 1976) to a strong trend for temporary and often precarious job positions (ILO, 2019). In this context, many more years are required for the transition from education to a stable job position.

The micro level is equally important in the picture. Some assert that an individual's skills do not fully explain employability, and that other approaches are more suitable, for example, the graduate capital model (Tomlinson, 2017), which looks at an individual's employability potential from the broader perspective of five key capitals:

- Human capital, hard skills and technological knowledge acquired by graduates during their studies;
- Social capital, related to social relations and contacts (networks or social ties that support graduates in getting closer to targeted employment);

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- Cultural capital, a person's cultural knowledge about appropriate behaviour, awareness of the business environment and the work culture;
- Identity capital, which refers to the investment of graduates in their future career, and how their personal identity is connected with their targeted employment;
- Psychological capital, especially adaptability and resilience in a challenging labour market.

This perspective views the employability of individuals as a result of the interrelation among different capitals, and offers a more holistic approach than the skills-focused one.

In this context, also the capability approach can be considered: Sen defines such freedom, or capability, as a set of functionings, 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (1999, p. 75) which 'can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on' (1992, p. 39). A capability is 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (Sen, 1993, p. 30) and is 'thus a kind of freedom… the freedom to achieve various lifestyles' (Sen, 1999, p. 75). For Sen, the individual is the 'agent' who acts for change according to his or her values and goals (Sen, 2001), and freedom is central to this:

> The capability set represents a person's freedom to achieve various functioning combinations. If freedom is intrinsically important, then the alternative combinations available for choice are all relevant for judging a person's advantage, even though he or she will eventually choose only an alternative. In this view choice itself is a valuable feature of a person's life. (Sen, 2003a, p. 8)

The concept of functioning was developed in philosophical terms by Nussbaum (2000), who focused on the concept of 'human dignity,' and a tentative (and debated) list of core capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's environment. In past decades the capability framework has been used within a range of policies and tools, including evaluation and cost-effectiveness provisions for social change (Robeyns, 2005). Education has also been inspired by it, since, as well summarised by Walker (2008):

> The capability approach is strong on educational purposes that inflect towards democratic freedom and the role of education in forming reflexive human beings able to choose and to have full and complete lives (p. 149).

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The capability approach has also been applied to employability, with freedom of choice as the central point of debate. As Sen asserted, 'the quality of life a person enjoys is not merely a matter of what he or she achieves, but also of what options the person has had the opportunity to choose from' (1985, 45). In this regard, authors have stressed the extent to which the relative dimensions of employability, which are the result of macro, meso and micro factors, broaden or restrict employment opportunities (Robeyns, 2005; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Bussi, 201; Bergström, 2012; Hinchliffe, 2013; Ilieva-Trichkova, 2014).

1.3 The 'new' role of universities

Employability. Employability has been one of the goals of higher education in the European Union for over twenty years. In the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration, France, Germany, the UK and Italy agreed upon a common framework for higher education that promoted mobility for students, graduates and teachers and defined employability as one of the key objectives of their European Higher Education Area. The next year, the first official European Union document to use the word 'employability' was issued when 29 European nations signed the Bologna declaration to confirm the Sorbonne agreement and harmonise university programs, credits and degree recognition among signing states.

The Third Mission of Universities. These declarations were preceded by intense debate about the 'societal role' or Third Mission (or Third Stream, particularly in British context, see Molas-Gallart et al., 2002) of universities (Goddard, 2009; Zomer and Benneworth, 2011), which is widely acknowledged to refer to "social, enterprising, innovation activities that universities carry out alongside their teaching and research activities whereby additional benefits are created for society" (Montesinos et al., 2008). The third mission therefore includes relations with business.

Regional development and the Third Mission. In 2009, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development further emphasized the role of the universities in the development of their own geographic regions. The European Commission also promoted this in its 2011 "Agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education system," which invited Member States to "target regional support towards higher education-business cooperation particularly for the creation of regional hubs of excellence and specialisation." In 2013, the EU articulated a Smart Specialisation Strategy for regional development through innovation, to promote the match between a region's research and innovation and its business needs.

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A reference concept in this effort has been the "triple helix" approach advanced by Etzkowitz (2008) and further developed by Ranga and Etzkowitz (2013): the university is asked to become a player of innovation in regional systems by linking with industry and government; a subsequent 'quadruple helix' approach incorporated civil society, and a 'quintuple helix' also embraced the environment (Carayannis et al, 2012). Several models for this 'regional' university have been proposed, as well described by Kempton (2019, following Trippl et al, 2015). The European Commission also contributed to promoting the 'entrepreneurial university' by creating in 2017 the HEINNOVATE scheme for higher education institutions (universities, university colleges, polytechnics, etc) to help them assess "the entrepreneurial and innovative nature of their higher education environment" (HEINNOVATE website).

1.3.1 Rethinking the purpose of universities: a critique of the overemphasis on the instrumental value

Discussion of the third mission and regional role of universities has been met with a broader questioning of the very purpose of the university and education. As Collini (2012) wrote, the real question is: "What are universities for?". They are seen to have two basic values, an intrinsic one of knowledge production, and an instrumental one of benefits for society (Dunne, 2006; Collini, 2012, McCowan, 2015). Until the 19th century, the function of the university was creation of knowledge per se (as in Newman, 1852, cited by McCowan, 2015, p.10), but subsequently the instrumental role of this same knowledge has been advanced to the fore.

Some argue, instead, that these values are not distinct and separate. In fact, knowledge produced by the university is driven by enquiries 'to extend human understanding', thus it always has instrumental value, at least in part (Collini, 2012). Similarly, academic research and education 'is invariably conducted in and responsive to a larger community' (Williams-Jones, 2005, p. 249), and 'the story of the university is inextricably intertwined with the story of its responsiveness to society and economy' (Nadeva, 2008).

Instead, critiques concern the proper balance of these values. Regarding employability, one such instrumental value, Morris (2010) warned of the risks inherent in its overemphasis, for example, using it as a performance indicator in higher education, and criticised a shift from 'knowing what' to 'knowing how' (p. 135) aimed more at producing workers than at educating citizens. Similarly, Leonard (2000, p.182), argued that "Education has been redefined as primarily a means of skilling more and more young workers, and of providing professional and in-service courses in life-long (re)learning, rather than about expanding the minds and developing the capacities of citizens." In

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contrast, Jackson (2016) stressed that "HE's drive to enhance employability encompasses, and is not separate to, the broader aim of developing global citizens who are socially responsible, empowered and engaged with the needs of the community" (p. 19).
In this context, some have questioned even the instrumental effectiveness of universities in preparing students for work. While businesses call for flexible and already trained graduates who will enable their employers to be competitive in the global market, Mason et al dismissed as wishful thinking the idea that job skills can be fully learnt within formal education: many skills are job specific or can only be acquired on the job. Universities can contribute to developing them, but cannot bring students to a professional level. Similarly, Jackson (2016) noted that pre-professional status can be achieved through university activities such as work integrated learning, internships and placements, but recognised that fully professional skill levels are not realistic aims for universities.
Also, some criticised university research conducted with private funds, or its contribution to innovative or technological clusters, because "the results serve the 'private' rather than 'public' good" (Nadeva, 2008).

1.4 Graduates and the labour market

As economic and social conditions have evolved since the end of the last century, a more skilled and educated workforce was required, and universities were challenged to provide tertiary education to higher numbers of students, from more diverse backgrounds. Before the 'massification' of higher education (Scott, 1995), the labour market for graduates was marked by long-term stability: credentials were the key passport to higher job levels and social positions. Now it is generally acknowledged that university degrees are devaluated in the present labour market; paradoxically, while they are a pre-requisite to get a job, they add little competitive advantage (Garsten and Jacobsson. 2003; Sin and Neave, 2016).
In fact, in most countries, there is a growing phenomenon of over-education or under-employment. For example, in Italy in 2018, 42.1% of employed graduates were over-educated for their jobs. And as the years go by, the mismatch between high education qualifications and low job levels continues for graduates: in Italy, +6 years from graduation, 40% of graduates are still working in positions below their qualification level (ISTAT, 2019).
At the same time, globalisation and increased competition have led companies to seek more 'flexibility' in employment options. First, they want functional flexibility in their

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employees, seeking staff who can be re-deployed quickly in different tasks and functions. Secondly, they need numerical flexibility, with quick hiring and firing options. Thirdly, they desire financial flexibility, which embraces two aspects. One is related to the ability to adapt employment costs to the external market. Another is tied to the first two types of flexibility, which means that the pay system should allow new forms of pay calculations, for example, based on assessment rather than mere seniority (see Atkinson, 1984). In addition, technology has brought forth new job functions (Degryse, 2016), creating jobs that did not exist a few years ago (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), and prompting the development new types of contractual arrangements that may be advantageous for employers, but offer workers little stability or certainty (Eurofund, 2018).

Thus young generations suffer a twofold disadvantage in the labour market: they are more educated, but probably they will reach lower job positions than their older counterparts, and access the labour market in a moment when secure jobs are few, and job precariousness is increasing. Studies on Millennials (also known as Generation Y), those reaching young adulthood in the 21st century and who have entered the workforce, and Generation Z, many of whom are now in higher eduction, have indicated that young generations, particularly Generation Z, desire stable work in a protected market, but are not optimistic about their chances. For example, one survey reported that 71% of Millennials interviewed felt some optimism about achieving a higher standard of living than their parents, while only 56% of the Generation Z sample did. A European survey on Generation Z attitudes to career development conducted by employer branding group Universum in 2015 reported that youths valued the opportunity to make an impact, to express creativity, and to be autonomous. It also found that 40% (50% in Eastern and Central Europe) cited ‘a good work-life balance’ and ‘being secure and stable in my job’ as the most important features of a job. Other authors have pointed out that Generation Z members were children during the global economic crisis, and the importance that many attribute to a secure job in a protected market may be the result of having seen their parents struggle with unemployment (Seemiller and Grace, 2016).

Thus there emerges a sharp contrast between the needs and trends of the labour market and the desires of young generations of workers for stability and a good quality of life.

2. Research question and methodology

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Field research was carried out to explore the views of graduates on their university experience in relation to work and the value of work, in order to better understand the outcome of academic studies for the individual.

2.1 Context

Data was collected from graduates from the degree courses of Cultural Heritage and Tourism at the University of Macerata. UniMC focuses on Humanities and Social Sciences, with faculties in Economics and Law; Jurisprudence; Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism; Political Science, Communications and Internal Relations; and Humanities (Languages, Language Liaison, Hisory, Arts, and Philosophy), and enrols about 11,000 students yearly. The main buildings of the university are located in the Marche Region, central Italy.

In the Marche Region, the composition of the business fabric by economic activity shows a greater incidence of the primary sector than in the rest of Italy. The Marche Region is strong in manufacturing, with one of the highest numbers of craft businesses in the nation. In 2018, 17.4% of people aged 18-29 were unemployed. The same year, the general unemployment rate nationally for all residents was 8.1% (ISTAT database 2019). According to the Italian inter-university consortium Almalaurea (2019, referring to 2018 data), 1 year after graduation, 54.6% of UNIMC's second-level graduates are employed; after 2 years, 73.5% are, and after 3 years, 79.0% are.

The two sectors of Cultural Heritage and Tourism are characterised by some weaknesses. Most Cultural Heritage jobs typically are offered by the Italian government, as most of the Italian heritage sites or properties are government owned. The number of positions thus depends on the extent to which the nation invests in this sector, which may not correspond to local perceived or real needs to offer a cultural service. There are two main problems for professionals in this field. The first is that particular professional skills are not valued. Officially, there is no law indicating what professional figures should work at these sites, and unofficially, there is a general feeling that 'anyone can do it'. The second problem concerns outsourcing, as tenders for management are time-limited, usually have low budgets that should cover many services, and include no specifications of minimum requirements for staff competences or credentials, which means the jobs are fixed-time and badly paid, and yet competition for them is intense, because the specific degree in Cultural Heritage is not considered an added value.

Tourism also has a difficult labour market, but in a different way: the main problems in tourism are low skilled positions and highly seasonal activity. Graduates in tourism should additionally consider that high level positions in hospitality usually require moving across the country or abroad. Also, in relation mostly to destination

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management, sustainable tourism or touristic route design, they must have strong local networks, and the position will probably require self-employment or other entrepreneurship profiles. Positions as employees in the tourism sector are scarce in the nation, and even scarcer in the Marche Region.

2.2 Methods and techniques

Qualitative data was collected using the life story interview technique (Bertaux, 1991; Atkinson, 2002), a storytelling-based method for drawing out biographic information. As suggested by Thomson et al (2002), this interviewing technique can capture key issues in the otherwise fragmented transitions that characterise the lives of today's young adults. It applies to all critical moments (as defined by Thomson et al.), including the transition from education to work. While life story interviews are largely unstructured, some key topics to orient storytelling were provided to interviewees. These covered Tomlinson's Graduate Capital Model, as defined above. The data analysed in this paper refer to opinions about the value of work and perceptions of the university experience in relation to professional achievement and personal growth.

2.3 Sample

The sample included 21 Cultural Heritage graduates and 10 Tourism graduates. Of these, three had completed only a Bachelor's degree, and the rest had earned at least a Master's. The majority of respondents were females (71.0% of the overall group; 62.0% in the Cultural Heritage group; 90% in the Tourism group). The average age was 30.9 years; the Cultural Heritage group average age was slightly higher (31.9) than that of the Tourism group (28.9). Almost a third (10 out of 31) came to the Marche for their university studies, and only one of them decided to stay in the Region after graduation (others returned to their hometown or moved to another Italian region or abroad). More than half (21 respondents) lived in the Marche at the moment of the interview, 7 in another Italian region, and 3 abroad. At the moment of the interview, 5 were in a permanent position, 10 in a fixed term position, 4 in self-employment and 6 were either in paid traineeship or PhD, and 6 were unemployed.

2.4 Data collection

The interviews, which took place between June and October 2019, were recorded with permission and transcribed. Analysis followed a process of initial coding to identify common pathways in the personal stories of the transition from education to work. Next, data were clustered according to frequency of topics, and this focused coding

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provided identification of thematic categories under each dimension, which afterwards were theoretically conceptualised.

3. Findings and discussion

Clustering was performed on the basis of the two main topics of the research question, by exploring the personal value attributed to work and the perception of the university experience beyond the employment outcome.

To better understand the context, it should be recalled that the graduation rate in Italy is below the European average, and that the Marche Region in particular offers a lower percentage of jobs suitable for graduates than does Italy as a whole. The over-education phenomenon is quite common in the Region and in the country. Finally, as noted above, the number of jobs in Tourism and Cultural Heritage is limited and the positions are poorly paid and offer little stability.

Therefore, it is not surprising that most graduates do not work in the sector, or if they do so, only hold temporary positions.

The following section reports and discusses the findings.

3.1 The value of work

Even if the interviews were mostly unstructured, the closing question was always the same: what is work for you? Usually respondents said something after a while, then articulated the concept. None answered immediately: some laughed, others said, 'that's a tough question', some sighed. All participants stressed something like 'at this point of my life', probably aware that their definition has changed since they were younger, and will continue to change over time. Results of this analysis are summarised in table 1 (the first reaction was assigned the most weight):

Table 1. Definitions of work

First definition used	Perceived aim of work	No.
Self-fulfilment	Intrinsic	12
Passion/pleasure		8
A way to make a living	Instrumental/Individual	4
Autonomy/independence		3
Dignity		2
Something good for society	Instrumental/Societal	2

About half of the sample (17 respondents) provided a unique definition of work, while 14 of them described secondary meanings of work, in addition to the first statement. Frequencies are summarised in Table 2.

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Table 2. Primary and secondary aims of work

Perceived primary aim	Perceived secondary aim	No.
Intrinsic	Instrumental/Individual	8
Intrinsic	Instrumental/Societal	1
Instrumental/Individual	Intrinsic	3
Instrumental/Individual	Instrumental/Societal	1
Instrumental/Societal	Intrinsic	1

Some respondents also clearly stated that the instrumental role is secondary, or not signifiant in their perception. This seems in line with literature findings, and also fits with the characteristics of their generation.
For example:

Work is not only having an income. It means fulfilling your life. [MA Cultural Heritage, Male, 34 years old, unemployed]

I don't want to be rich. I'm not interested in that, but in having a decent life. [MA Tourism, Female, 25 years old, self-employed]

Further, work deeply shapes identity and is important to one's self-esteem.

It is what defines you, it is an identity, your identity is a lot in work, then also in other things. I recognise at least 60% of my identity in what I do, then there are other things. [MA Cultural Heritage, Male, 34 years old, unemployed]

… It is not nice to say, perhaps, …but it is everything! Apart from the income, this work for many years has been my objective in life. [BA Cultural Heritage, Female, 33 years old, part-time permanent employee – in the sector]

For the same reason, the influence of work, or the lack thereof, on one's identity is intensified by societal pressures:

For the individual who works, who has a position the society, it is dignity. I have been jobless two years. I couldn't answer people asking: 'And you? What do you do?'. Nothing, I do nothing in life. It's not decent. Then work is respect, it allows you to live in a dignified way. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 years old, fixed-term employment – not in the study sector]

When you meet people, particularly in small places… 'What do you do? Are you at home'? […]… You feel the pressure. You are compared to those your age who work, who already have a family… who

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have a place in society, and you are still wandering in the labyrinth of your future… Yes, in these moments you feel totally discouraged. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 years old, fixed-term employment – not in the study sector]

Finding a job, any job, sometimes becomes more important than any other goal. Some respondents who experienced unemployment stressed the relation between work and self-esteem, beyond financial implications:

[searching for a job] Psychologically, it's draining. Sending curricula and waiting for the telephone to ring, and none answering or calling. It's like this. […] That's the moment in which your friends 'get lost'. They find a job in a photography shop or in a supermarket. That's the moment. [MA Cultural Heritage, Male, 32 years old, fixed-term employment –in the study sector]

You feel useless, without an objective, 'No one calls me, so it means that I haven't done enough, I'm not qualified enough for the professional profiles needed'. You feel enormous dejection. Perhaps not in the first two months after graduation, as you are in the phase of "discharge". You have freed yourself from a stressful period, … but from the third month on… [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 years old, fixed-term employment – not in the study sector]

For this reason, graduates spoke about a feeling of urgency, then of relief at having found even a low skilled job:

At the beginning I was really energetic, both because I was coming from a period in which I couldn't find a paid job, and also because this was the first concrete job opportunity that I found. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 years old, fixed-term employment – not in the study sector]

You know, you wake up every morning with this anxiety… Then at the end of July they called me in this supermarket, it was a generic interview in which they asked about my expectations. I said something like 'my dream in life is to work in a supermarket.' [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 years old, fixed-term employment – not in the study sector]

The value of work has therefore several nuances: clearly, its definition depends on personal experiences, and on the age of the respondents. More mature respondents (2) also said that they tried to work for example, in the Cultural Heritage field, but then decided to change sector in their 30s because they needed a secure income. Still, the income is considered a secondary meaning of work, after the primary meaning of self-fulfilment and finding a place in society.

3.2 The main value of the university experience

In such a complex and difficult labour market, where graduates do not find jobs that require their skill sets, it does not seem that those with the most skills garner the best jobs, as instead would be expected. If the university is only a 'skill provider', it could be

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said to have failed in its mission. However, the interviews revealed a completely different perception. In fact, regardless of professional outcomes, only one graduate out of the 31 said she should have studied something else, in order to find a job, but quickly added that she loved very much what she had studied. These interviewees felt the university experience gave added value to their lives. In different ways, they said the university experience caused them to grow as persons:

It opened my eyes. I mean, the university education allowed me to see things in a different way, to appreciate them in a better way. [MA Cultural Heritage, Male, 32 yrs. old, unemployed]

The university gave me a lot. It opened my mind. [MA Tourism, Female, 33 yrs. old, fixed term employment - in the study sector]

It supports your growth. You have the chance to meet people, to deal with people who otherwise you wouldn't have met. [MA Tourism, Female, 31 yrs. old, fixed term employment – in the study sector]

I grew so much as a person, that … even if you don't reach the position you wished for in the field, you always have to try. Even if you don't succeed in the market as a graduate, it's a process worth undertaking. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 yrs. old, fixed term employment – not in the study sector]

If you are a graduate in the Humanities, you can also work at the General Register Office and perhaps better than others. Liberal arts degrees open your mind, broaden your horizons. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 36 years old, permanent employment – not in the study sector]

They also valued the importance of a university eduction in helping them acquire high cognitive abilities:

If you do the university properly [not like a high school student], and you do it by yourself, it gives you autonomy, critical thinking, you are able at least to read and understand a text… which is not so trivial as we think. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 36 yrs. old, permanent employment – not in the study sector]

I use the acquired competences in my job [even if I don't work in the field of studies], particularly soft skills, but especially as *forma mentis*. If I compare myself to colleagues having my same position, I am one step ahead. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 30 yrs. old, permanent employment – not in the study sector]

Finally, they recognized the transferrable skills they gained as an added value of their university studies:

I'm happy with the preparation and with the choice I made. I have fundamentals of languages, economics… I thought that the courses in economics would never be useful, but now I know that

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they were very useful. I can talk with the accountant and understand what he is saying! [MA Tourism, Female, 25 years old, self-employed in the tourism sector]

My degree did not provide me only with very academic subjects, like art history. We also had foundations of Economics, and Law, which have been useful to me also in preparing for government job competitions, because they give you tools to move across other domains. I mean, to know the mechanisms, key terms, they help you in life. [MA Cultural Heritage, Female, 28 yrs. old, fixed term employment – not in the study sector]

While the graduates interviewed almost unanimously said that the university did not prepare them specifically for the world of work, they nonetheless believe that the degree has been significant in their lives, also for work purposes. The inconsistency of the two assertions is only apparent: according to the narratives of employability, particularly from the media, graduates expect the university to prepare them for a job, while the mission of the university is to prepare them for life, which also includes work, but does not necessarily guarantee them a job.

4. Conclusions and implications for further work

This research work aimed to contribute to re-framing the concept of the university's role in employability in a wider pedagogical context, not limited to skills provision. It discussed the capabilities approach as a reference framework for university education, and explored the negative implications of viewing employability as a central instrumental value of universities. Further, the survey of graduates has provided empirical qualitative data about their perceptions of the value of work, how it influenced their identity and self-worth, and their views on how the university experience provided added value to their lives.

The results confirm the data in the literature, by contributing to increase understanding of how graduates perceive both work and the university experience, albeit limited to two degree programs in the Social Sciences and Humanities, and to the Marche Region of Italy. The interviewee definitions and perceptions of the value of work are in line with the current set of values in modern society. An interesting outcome was the view that earning a university degree need not necessarily lead in a linear way to landing a job or achieving job security in the desired field. Instead, the interviewees valued their university experience and degree regardless of their employment outcomes. They recognised the added value of the study path for their personal growth and for the broader horizon and mindset it helped them acquire.

In times when the education system is challenged by numerous pressures from government policies and business demands, should universities be concerned with the

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issue of employability? According to data collected in this study, the answer seems to be 'yes'. However, the issue should be addressed differently, not merely in terms of the supply and demand mechanism that seems to dominate media discourse, not judged exclusively by how the skills of graduates fail to match those required by businesses, and not simply condemning education's inadequate answer to the needs of the economy. Achievement of 'employability skills' (however they may be defined) is one small goal of the pedagogical action of the university, which is to educate people. Yes, work plays a remarkable role in a person's identity and contribution to social wellbeing. Graduates are the most educated members of the workforce, and the most educated citizens. Through work as expression of their self in society, they bring to bear higher cognitive abilities, the capacity to understand and interpret reality, and the capability to plan and act for change. Education should have the overarching goal of forming citizens in such values as democratic self-government, social justice, and sustainability. Employability skills are instrumental to the university mission of serving society but definitely are not an end unto themselves: they are needed to allow educated people to take action toward major goals for human development.

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