

LEARNING CAREERS, HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORK- PLACES IN TIMES OF COMPLEXITY

Employability, transitions and professional trajectories.



Jérôme Eneau,
António Fragoso,
Andrea Galimberti,
Elzbieta Sanojca,
Rachel Metzger,
Vanessa Pleven,
(eds.)



Jérôme ENEAU, Antonio FRAGOSO,
Andrea GALIMBERTI, Elzbieta SANOJCA,
Rachel METZGER, Vanessa PLEVEN (eds.)

**LEARNING CAREERS,
HIGHER EDUCATION AND
WORK-PLACES IN TIMES OF
COMPLEXITY**

**Employability, transitions and
professional trajectories**

Jérôme ENEAU, Antonio FRAGOSO, Andrea GALIMBERTI, Elzbieta SANOJCA,
Rachel METZGER, Vanessa PLEVEN (eds)

*Learning careers, higher education and work-places in times of complexity:
Employability, transitions and professional trajectories*

University Rennes 2 / ESREA

ISBN: 978-2-9564498-1-2

Rennes, Mai 2026

Cover page photograph : Sebastien BOYER - Rennes 2 Univeristy

Design and layout: Vanessa PLEVEN and Rachel METZGER

Table of contents

Jérôme Eneau, Elzbieta Sanojca

Preface 3

Introduction

Michael Tomlinson

Transitions from education to employment: bringing in meaning 13

Education, employability and socio-economic policies

Buratin Khampirat, Ieva Rudzinska, Paing Soe Oo

Career development 5.0: A bibliometric and thematic review 25

Vito Balzano

Interplay between HE policies, welfare mechanisms, and work market structures in today's time: the Italian case 41

Hongxia Shan, Elena Ignatovich, Siyi Cheng, Michelle Stack, Agnes d'Entremont, Thomas Tannert

Reciprocal impacts of migrant engineering students and postgraduate education: A qualitative study in Canada 53

Jorie Soltic

Rethinking lifelong learning through a philosophical lens on identity: From individual professional growth to interrelational existential formation 67

Changes in professions and institutions of education

Federico Zamengo, Paola Zonca, Nicolò Valenzano, Daniel Mastro Simone

Educators: where are you? The difficult transition for educators in Italy 83

Alessandro Monchietto, Charlotte Kohlloffel

From human capital to sustainability 95

Ghada Challah

Imagining a shift in supervision paradigm to help PhD candidates access employability beyond academia 105

Helena A. Jędrzejczak, Karolina Messyasz, Magdalena Smak

State higher vocational schools as regional centres for promotion of lifelong learning 123

Integration and career transitions: lifelong learning pathways

Maria Livia Alga, Chiara Sità

A nomadic and lifewide learning. Embodying transitions between university and educational work during internship 141

Vanessa Pleven, Hugues Pentecouteau, Jérôme Eneau

Interrupted trajectory of professional transition. A case study of identity tensions experienced by a nursing assistant enrolled in nurse training 153

Céline Hoffert, Maria Pagoni, Emmanuel Triby

Learning space, developmental space. How do beneficiaries of employment-oriented programs navigate for their professional transitions? 165

Mehran Jamshidi

Supporting skilled immigrants as non-traditional learners in professional integration. The role of post-migration support mechanisms for skilled immigrants' employability and professional integration 179

Process of creative and emancipatory learning..... 193

Elzbieta Sanojca, Jérôme Eneau

Analytical model for studying the emancipatory effects of open cooperation..... 195

Samantha Broadhead, Sharon Hooper, Henry Gonnet

Disrupting the pipeline. Employability skills and adult learning in the creative art 207

Marhabo Kholmurodova, Andrea Mattia Marcelli

Being a tertiary education student with disabilities in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan..... 223

Patricia A. Gouthro, Susan M. Holloway

Multiliteracies and learning careers: Fostering critical and creative educational pathways for adult learners..... 237

Preface

This e-book arose from the 2025 conference of ESREA (European Society for Research in the Education of Adults), uniting two ESREA networks: “Access, Learning Careers and Identity” (ALCI) and “Working Life and Learning” (WLL). The conference, held in Rennes (France) in March 2025, was entitled “Learning careers, higher education and workplaces: supporting transitions in times of complexity”; it provided an opportunity to present papers by contributors mainly from Europe (England, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal), but also from Australia, Canada, India, Kyrgyzstan and Nigeria.

Learning careers, higher education and workplaces

The aim of the conference was to explore, at the intersection of higher education and workplaces, how research can inform the question of supporting transitions in times of complexity. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have transformed across Europe and beyond as a result of economic, social and political factors resulting in the increasing expansion, globalisation and marketisation of universities. One effect of this has been the opportunity to widen participation and access to groups who would not have previously entered HE such as adult students (Scott, 2001; Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan 2017). Another change initiated by the Bologna process (EC2010) has been a policy push to enhance links between universities and employers with the emphasis to prepare students for the labour market by making them employable. The onus is on students to develop their employability skills and portfolio if they want to succeed in a competitive, individualistic world. As Tomlinson points out: “It now appears no longer enough just to be a graduate, but instead an employable graduate” (2012, p. 25).

Adult students in universities experience a number of transitions on entering university and during their studies which impact on their learning careers and identity: for many it is a transformative experience but as Reay (2003) points out it can also involve the risk of making previous balances and relationships more unstable. In a similar way, transitioning into the graduate labour market can also bring with it benefits but also bring risks. Adult students, particularly working-class students, do not experience a level playing field when it comes to transitioning into the labour market (Thompson, 2012; Merrill et al., 2020) as competing in the labour market with young graduates can highlight issues of inequality such as age, class, gender and race (Burke, 2014). Non-traditional adult students are taking a longer transition period than ‘traditional’ students to gain employment and when they do it is often at a lower and less meaningful level than graduate level. Such students, therefore, experience a mismatch between higher education qualifications and the demand of the labour market.

The transformations in higher education put an emphasis on the concept of transition in two different directions: on one side the experience of entering HE institutions was highlighted in order to better support the chances of a growing population (e.g. non-traditional students), on the other side a focus on future professional contexts took a rising relevance in connection with the need of preventing over-skilling, skill mismatch and unemployment. These two processes (ingoing and outgoing) are deeply entangled as the movements from HE to workplaces and vice-versa are not linear and may reoccur at different times in a person's life. Career transitions are, in fact, a lifelong endeavour. Many studies highlight their frequency and multiple configurations: "both minor discontinuities and major interruptions in an individual career" (Chudzikowski, 2012, p. 298) – for example a shift to a different work role, change a work setting (Greer and Kirk, 2022), experience retirement (Beehr, 2014) or a job loss (Gowan, 2014).

In a contemporary scenario characterised by "protean" careers (Hall, 2004) and "life design" (Savickas, 2021) but also by dramatic professional interruptions (e.g. the recent great resignation), the need of constantly re-imagining a multiverse of professional futures, alternative working contexts and multiple learning itineraries is on the fore. Unexpected effects, crises as well as a potential in terms of transformation (Akkermans and Kubash, 2017) are dimensions often connected to transitional experiences. Adult students entering university are an example of how a plurality of impacts shape their learning careers and identities: for many it is a transformative experience - able to make one's own cultural and social capital more differentiated. This case shows how the interconnection of identity issues, professional itineraries, training aspects and socio-economic dimensions depicts – potentially – a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. On the other hand, the overarching predominance of assumptions still based on human capital theory (Becker, 1964) continuously generates the risk of adopting linear and reductionist perspectives. For example, transferable competences are often represented as commodities to be delivered on the market or as instruments equipping the subjects to navigate the uncertainty (Han, 2009). Holmes (2023), drawing on Macpherson's political-economy theory, denotes a widespread use of a possessive approach in which the individual is conceived as "essentially the owner of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them" (Macpherson, 1962, p. 3). A scenario where self-contained individualism (Sampson, 1988) pushes subjects to 'invest' in themselves, by engaging in lifelong learning to develop their skills and attributes (Field, 2006). These common representations radically underestimate the systemic factors that are intertwined with individuals, higher education institutions, employers, policy makers etc. Researchers such as Tomlinson (2008), Kalffe and Taksa (2015), to contrast this mainstream perspective, have adopted a social positioning model which focuses on a relational and historical perspective. Other research has drawn on Bourdieu (1986) and his work on capitals (social, cultural and economic) in order to consider structural factors on graduate labour market outcomes, which continue to be differentiated particularly by class, ethnicity and gender (Merrill et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions, specifically, are dealing with all these issues as they are more and more asked to support transitions towards workplaces through dedicated modules, tutoring activities and guidance services. Along this articulated net of interventions, they are inevitably conveying a certain transition culture and triggering certain kinds of subjectification processes.

E-book structure

The conference was dedicated to the exploration of processual, contextual, theoretical and methodological perspectives on these phenomena in order to better understand how transitions from higher education (HE) to the labour market take shape and how career development and identities unfold across working life. A constellation of constructs and meanings are often connected to transitions when we start interrogating their configurations and the possibility to partially plan or foresee their effects. In this sense, the concept of flexibility, the notion of employability and the complex domain composed by those competences that should allow smooth passages from one professional context to another (for example, transferable or cross sector competences) were part of our investigation.

This e-book is organised in 4 main sections with 24 contributions, which address these different questions in a complementary way.

The **general introduction** by Michael Tomlinson presents a specific contribution, drawing on his keynote speech at the opening of the conference in Rennes.

The first section then focuses on issues relating to **education, employability and socio-economic policies**. The contributions examine the changing nature of employability in an era of socio-technical transformation, as well as the tensions between higher education, social policies and the labour market. They focus on analysing the impact of higher education on career trajectories, whilst also taking a more critical look at the prevailing discourse on lifelong learning.

The second part examines **changes in professions and educational institutions**. It presents a variety of contributions, including: the transformation of the professional role of educators, the evolution of supervision practices and models, and the role of vocational higher education institutions as regional actors, all while offering a critical reflection on teacher training, balancing human capital and sustainability.

The third part addresses issues of **integration and career transitions**, in relation to **lifelong learning pathways**. The contributions present examples of nomadic lifelong learning, diverse career transitions - including interrupted pathways in nursing training - and the informal learning of skilled adult immigrants.

The fourth and final part addresses the **process of creative and emancipatory learning**. The contributions return to more theoretical or critical questions, covering adult education as a process of emancipation, the role of creativity, and the need for specific strategies to achieve emancipatory purposes.

Acknowledgements

This e-book, as well as the March 2025 conference in Rennes, would not have been possible without the numerous and precious contributions and supports of: the convenors of the two ESREA networks (ALCI and WLL) and the reviewers of the contributions (conference proposals, articles), in particular Trevor Gerhardt and Barbara Merrill; the members of CREAD (Centre for Research on Education and Learning, in Rennes); the institutions that supported the conference and the publication (Rennes 2 University, Rennes Métropole, Region Bretagne); the staff of the research department at Rennes 2 University; and the PhD students who organised the conference on site. Special thanks to Vanessa Pleven and Rachel Metzger, who organised the editing and layout of the chapters in this book.

A presentation of the two organiser networks

Access, Learning Careers and Identities - Aims and history of the network

The network focus is on access into learning and experiences of learning in a range of educational settings such community education, vocational education, further and higher education. It also explores the impact of biography and lifelong learning in shaping learning careers and how this process and experiences may lead to changing self and identities. This raises issues of structure and agency and their interaction by taking into account the socio-economic positions in which adult learners are located and the actions that they take to develop their learning identity and career within a particular educational institution. In doing so the network examines the different conceptual approaches to understanding learning careers and learning identities.

The network provides a forum for adult educators from a range of disciplines to discuss and debate the issues in relation to theory, policy and practice.

This network was established in 1996 and a first network conference was held at the University of Leeds in the UK. At that time the network was called the Access research network reflecting the focus of adult education research at that time. The conference book publication entitled *Participation and Organisational Change* (Hill and Merrill, 1997) illuminates the narrow theme of the network as it only addressed access and participation in higher education. The network convenors were Chris Duke, Etienne Bourgeois and Barbara Merrill. This focus of the network continued to dominate the following two network conferences in Barcelona and Edinburgh. Subsequent network conferences (held every two years) were located at University of Barcelona (2000) for a second time, Louvain University, Belgium (2006), University

of Seville, Spain (2008), University of Aveiro, Portugal (2011), Linköping, Sweden (2013) and again at the University of Seville (2015). Ten years later responding to the changing nature of European adult education research and literature which was moving beyond research just on access and participation to other wider concerns and concepts the network name was changed to Access, Learning Careers and Identity.

The network is now convened by three coordinators: Barbara Merrill University of Warwick, UK), Andrea Galimberti (University Milano Bicocca, Italy) and Antonio Fragoso (Algarve University). The network aims to meet every two years.

Working Life and Learning - Aims and history of the network

The field of working life and learning is interdisciplinary, evolving and complex, and it opens up for a plurality of topics, as well as theoretical and methodological approaches. The network, thus, aims to gather researchers from different perspectives, paradigms and traditions to enhance as well as critical research as applied research about the working life and learning. Social and ecological responsibility and the ethics of research are important foundations beyond solely rational choice or human capital approaches, which are not the main orientations of this network.

The research network started in 1993. Originally, working for many years under the headline “Adult Education and the Labour Market”, the network was politically engaged and interested in practical perspectives related to learning and education within the wider society and the labour market. During this time, a growing interest in theoretical and methodological perspectives began to emerge. A new focus with a relaunch of the network in 2011 initiated a focus on workplace learning, and the VET and HRD sector. The importance of the practical, theoretical and methodological perspectives remained. During this time, the network ran conferences about every two years and produced five research publications. Their research endeavours covered “Adult Education Policy and the European Union: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives” (2014), “Learning Across Generations in Europe: Contemporary Issues in Older Adult Education” (2014), “Private World’s: Gender and Informal Learning of Adults” (2015), “Working and Learning in Times of Uncertainty” (2015) and “Researching and Transforming Adult Learning and Communities” (2016). The relaunch of the network in 2019 with a conference planned for 2020 aims to continue the original legacy, building on prior research by colleagues and friends of the ESREA family but also considering how global, regional and local changes impact upon Europe.

The network is now convened by five co-ordinators: Andrea Galimberti (University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy) Trevor Gerhardt, free-lance academic with the University of Essex Online (Kaplan), Birkbeck University of London, University of West London and QAHE, University of Ulster and Roehampton University, Pierre Faller (Columbia University, USA) Irina Lokhtina (University of Central Lancashire, Cyprus), Elzbieta Sanojca (Rennes 2 University, France)

The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA)

ESREA is a European scientific society. It was established in 1991 to provide a European-wide forum for all researchers engaged in research on adult education and learning and to promote and disseminate theoretical and empirical research in the field. Since 1991 the landscape of adult education and learning has changed to include more diverse learning contexts at formal and informal levels. At the same time there has been a policy push by the European Union, OECD, UNESCO and national governments to promote a policy of lifelong learning. ESREA provides an important space for these changes and (re)definition of adult education and learning in relation to research, theory, policy and practice to be reflected upon and discussed. This takes place at the triennial conference, network conferences and through the publication of books and a journal.

ESREA Research Networks

The major priority of ESREA is the encouragement of cooperation between active researchers in the form of thematic research networks which encourage interdisciplinary research drawing on a broad range of the social sciences. These research networks hold annual/biennial seminars and conferences for the exchange of research results and to encourage publications.

The current active ESREA networks are:

- Access, Learning Careers and Identities
- Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning
- Adult Educators, Trainers and their Professional Development
- Between Global and Local: Adult Learning and Communities
- Education and Learning of Older Adults
- Gender and Adult Learning
- History of Adult Education and Training in Europe
- Transformative and Emancipatory Adult Education.
- Life History and Biography
- Migration, Transnationalism and Racismsand
- Policy Studies in Adult Education
- Working Life and Learning

ESREA Triennial European Research Conference

In order to encourage the widest possible forum for the exchange of ongoing research activities ESREA holds a triennial European Research Conference. The conferences have been held in Strobl (1995), Bruxelles (1998), Lisbon (2001), Wroclaw (2004), Seville (2007), Linköping (2010), Berlin (2013), Maynooth (2016), Belgrade (2019), Milano (2022) and Praha (2025).

ESREA Journal

ESREA publishes a scientific open access journal entitled The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA). All issues of the journal can be read at www.rela.ep.liu.se. You can also find more information about call for papers and submission procedures on this website.

References

-
- Akkermans, J. and Kubash, S. (2017). Trending topics in careers: A review and future research agenda. *Career Development International*, 22 (2), 586–627.
- Becker, G. (1964). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. New York: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Beehr, T. A. (2014). To retire or not to retire: That is not the question. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(8), 1093-1108.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). “The forms of capital”. In R. J. (Ed.). *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp.241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Chudzikowski, K. (2012). Career transitions and career success in the ‘new’ career era. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 81, 298–306.
- Field, J. (2006). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. London: Trentham Books.
- Gowan, M. (2014). Moving from job loss to career management: The past, present, and future of involuntary job loss research. *Human Resource Management Review*, 24(3), 258–270.
- Greer, T. W. and Kirk, A. F. (2022). Overcoming barriers to women's career transitions: A systematic review of social support types and providers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 77-110.
- Hall, D.T. (2004). The protean career: A quarter-century journey. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65 (1), 1-13.
- Han, S. (2009). Competence: Commodification of Human Ability. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Competence Development* (pp. 56-68) London: Routledge.
- Holmes, L. (2023). Graduate employability and its basis in possessive individualism. In Siivonen, P., Isopahkala-Bouret U., Tomlinson M., Korhonen M. and Haltia N. (Eds), *Rethinking graduate employability in context. Discourse, policy and practice* (pp. 29-50). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kalfa, S. and Taksa, L. (2015). Cultural capital in business higher education: reconsidering the graduate attributes movement and the focus on employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40 (4), 580-596.

Macpherson, C. (1962). *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merrill, B., Finnegan, F., O' Neill, J. and Revers, S. (2020). "When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them": Class and capitals in, and after, higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 45 (1), 163-175.

Sampson, E. (1988). The debate on individualism. *American Psychologist*, 43, 15-22.

Savickas, M. L. (2012). *Career adaptability*. Boston: 48HRbooks.

Tomlinson, M. (2008). The degree is not enough': students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1), 49-61.

Tomlinson, M. (2012), Graduate Employability: A Review of Conceptual and Theoretical Themes, *Higher Education Policy*, 25, 412-431.

Introduction

Transitions from education to employment: bringing in meaning

Michael Tomlinson

Southampton Education School
University of Southampton, UK
University Road
Building 32
SO17 1BJ
M.B.Tomlinson@soton.ac.uk

This collection brings together timely scholarship and thinking on a pertinent, and in many ways, perennial topic: transitions from education to the labour market at a time of marked social, policy and technological change. An underlying theme within this collection is how to engage students in their future career development and the multitude of factors that shape their experiences and outcomes on leaving formal education. The ways in which learning careers and future labour market careers interact is of enduring sociological and policy interest. As a research and policy agenda, it goes to the core of how we might conceive the successful design and implementation of appropriate educational provisions both at the level of education (the supply-side) and the within workplaces (the demand-side), in ways which serve multiple parties' ends. Very often these two institutional contexts are seen to be antagonistic rather than in a productive synergy. Accordingly, there are continued 'translation' issues concerning how the practices of one institutional context can inform, or influence, the other.

The ideas within this collection challenge many of the prevailing orthodoxies about the role of education and its relationship with the labour market, at a both a personal and collective level. The dominant orthodoxy within much educational policy has been informed by Human Capital Theory which understands the educational system as being a catalyst of economic growth through supplying the labour force with the necessary forms of skills that provide productive advantages to workplaces and economies at large (Becker, 1993). Thus, educational policies at a global level have become pre-occupied with ensuring direct alignment between what learners acquire through education and the demands of the labour market.

Scholarship pertaining to education-to-work transitions often brings into play the concept of employability, a concept which is much-contested and subject to multiple and competing interpretations within both policy and academic scholarship (Siivonen et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017a). Common-sense understanding has tended to present employability as an individual's ability to gain employment in both the

short-term and over the course of their working life. Consequently, this is something they have responsibility to develop to ensure they can successfully integrate into the labour market and optimise their prospects for sustainable work futures. The policy emphasis has been on educational institutions providing more vocationally facing modes of learning, curricula and assessment that are attuned to the needs of employers and their changing skills demands. There have been persistent charges from policy makers, echoed by employers, that educational institutions are not sufficiently meeting this task and failing to generate returns on the investment individuals and governments make towards education and training.

However, the dominant policy framework provides a hollowed-out conception of employability that understands employment outcomes, and individuals' relationship to the labour market, as the acquisition of skills that can be traded in for better economic returns. Any understanding of how individuals move between educational institutions to the labour market needs to have broader understanding of the many social, cultural and contextual factors that shape individuals' relationship to the labour market, the processes by which they engage with their careers and the outcomes they experience over their working lives. One of the foremost considerations must be to move away from reductive and economistic understandings of employability as constitutive of the simple accumulation and utilisation of human capital (Brown et al., 2020). Such an approach is at variance with the realities of institutional life, of students and their ongoing challenges, concerns and conceptions of what is valuable, as well as educators and the competing demands they face in balancing different facets of their work. It also presents a largely utilitarian notion of the role of educational institutions, whilst diminishing broader and more humanistic understandings of their role in enriching human capability and agency.

The context and challenges to transition from education to work

While it may be a truism to argue that finding suitable and sustainable future employment is an important goal when individuals make educational choices, this can sideline other values in relation to working life and what individuals seek from this. It appears that the labour market for school, tertiary and higher education leavers has been affected by a multitude of social and economic forces, impacting their prospects for secure and sustainable employment (Eurofound, 2024). These are situated at macro, meso and micro levels, each of which providing a reference point to some of the key challenges for these entering the labour market.

The first has been the precarious labour market conditions facing many school and college leavers for some time, once reflected in the decline of the "youth labour market" but now also impacting the more established "graduate labour market" (Lauder and Mayhew, 2020). The traditional notion of labour market segments that interact with education systems in relatively clear ways has been markedly eroded since the latter part of the last century. Qualifications pathways traditionally reflected an institutional pact between different educational institutions and occupational

structures. Young people are, however, in many ways the victims of “post-industrialism” and its hour-glass labour market structure, reflecting a disequilibrium between those in high-skilled, secure and rewarding employment and those at the opposite spectrum. Rather than finding themselves with sound opportunity structures and prospects for skilled employment, many young workers form part of the labour precariat, in low-skilled, contingent and poorly protected areas of the service and retail sector (McDonald et al., 2023).

The related issue is that non-graduates are more likely to find themselves in competition with university graduates as jobs in the higher end of the skills distribution decline and many graduates are forced to trade-down their aspirations for the short-term. This means that the linkage between people’s qualifications and their labour market outcomes within a less demarcated structural job queue becomes blurred. For university graduates, the situation has been challenging since the 2008 recession and compounded by events such as Covid-19 as many have experienced delayed entry and being able to graduate-level jobs for lengthy periods (FutureTrack, 2021).

Turbulence in the macro-economic environment has always impacted first-time job entrants such as school and college leavers, but new emergent forces related to Artificial Intelligence also appears to be intensifying their challenges. Whilst the scale of this impact is contested, it is the case that older recruitment patterns and early career structures are impacted by AI largely because employers need to make strategic decisions about labour capital investment, hiring and training. The older pyramidal organisation structures that saw individuals move incrementally through careers structures was formerly ruptured by the pace of organisational restructuring but has more recently been impacted by the onset of Artificial Intelligence (AI). First-time entrants and so-called “starting positions” are becoming eroded and the skills required in those positions increasingly being executed by AI (World Economic Forum, 2025). More experienced employees are likely to be retained and draw upon residual skills, whilst adapting to increasingly hybrid working platforms, potentially offloading prosaic work tasks to AI.

In all cases, the transition from education to employment is challenging and represents a period of significant rupture and discontinuity between past and future identities. Whilst pathways into employment were never pre-arranged, as a crucial rite of passage transitions into the labour market increasingly necessitate planning, absorption of shock and some tolerance of complexity.

What we know about the transition from education to employment

Given the structural challenges facing many school and college leavers entering the labour market, it is important to consider how they conceptualise their future and how they make linkages between their participation in education and their immediate and longer-term employment outcomes. The ways in which individuals

come to perceive their employability in many ways is not just about how they understand their own abilities to find and sustain employment, but also how they anticipate opportunity structures and realistic pathways based on pre-given economic contexts before they enter. The act of sense-making and meaning-making is important as recent graduates will develop an interpretative schema based on their knowledge of social and educational contexts and how they might negotiate the task of developing sustainable employability.

The author's own research across a range of inter-connected research projects (Tomlinson, 2008; 2017; 2024) over nearly two decades has led them to be make the below observations concerning sets of overarching themes that recure across these studies over time:

First, that graduating students and recent graduates are highly reflexive about their place in the world and certainly when addressing challenging matters about how they should manage their employability. The reflexivity students develop concerns their place in the education system and within the institutions they are studying, or studied, how they get their and where they might be heading towards in the future. Students typically look to actively sense-make about their ongoing educational experiences and what value it has for them as individual and future workers. Reflexivity orientated towards future work and life invariably centres on fundamental questions on the shaping of their future lives, how much it fits with their overall life purpose and direction and what control they may have over it. In this process students confront perhaps the most pressing existential questions of all – who am I and what does my future hold?

Second, that they understand employability through a contextual lens, that is, they are sensitive to the external context and refer to what is going in the labour market, the perceived opportunities within and what they are “up against”. This ordinarily entails concerns about and reference to the challenges in the labour market (be that weakened labour markets, digital disruption, recruitment challenges, and growing precarity), as well as reference to the changing education context (including mass HE, growing personal costs of HE). Connectedly, they have internalised the notion of ‘relative’ employability, that is, how their employability stands against that of others’. As such, students are sensitive to the external environment and who they are competing against, how their credentials compare and the implications this may have for their prospects. The external context provides a key meaning filter by which they come to understand their potential value.

Third, and closely connected to the above, that many graduating students are aware of the need to add value to their educational profile so that they can signal their value beyond the mass of other graduates leaving tertiary education. Concerns around the external job market and challenges in recruitment connect to other concerns about mass education and credential inflation – so many more people leaving college with qualifications. Nearly always, the perennial concern of ‘too many graduates, not enough jobs’ prevails in their accounts. Consequently, they are aware of the

limitations of formal qualifications and the need to go beyond and enhance their profiles. Many students appear to have internalised the changing rules of competition, employers' shifting recruitment behaviours and how they need to reflect their own brand identity. Furthermore, there appears to be some variation amongst students based on the socio-cultural profile (Bathmaker, 2021), with for example first-generation students not always been attuned to the "game rules" as their more advantaged cohorts.

Fourth, that students often adopt different approaches to managing their future employability, based in part on their aspirations, their stages of development, sense of career readiness and emerging identities. There is no uniformed way in which they construct their working futures, and it derives from how much their future employment matters at given points in time. It is often the case that some will have started to develop a strong sense of their place in the labour market, where others are less certain and wish to strike a correct balance between employment planning and study, or when they enter the labour market, between work and life outside. Employability is often largely subjective and depends on what individuals understand to be meaningful and valuable future life courses and how much they invest in this as a source of identity. As an example, graduates who are strongly career motivated and see their work as an expression of self will likely approach the market with proactivity and purpose, although such attitudes are not always widespread. Many, however, continue to report being under-prepared and in some need to steerage.

Fifth, that students attribute value to their educational experience in ways that go beyond the crude instrumentality of "homo economicus". As an overall rule, students often want to secure a sound economic return for what is a significant personal financial contribution and enjoy future financial stability. However, the value they ascribe to both being in higher education, as well as their future employment, is often framed through a lens of substantive value rationality rather than pure economic rationality. Thus, when reflecting on what they have gained from being in higher education, many reflect on its value for intellectual and academic growth (knowing more and being more intellectual agile), its value for personal confidence and cultural awareness (develop a graduate-ness or wider cultural frame) and its value for professional growth and accumulation (acquiring capabilities that are valuable in workplaces). At a time when much of the discourse has been on "value for money" and how much higher education's value can be equated to economic returns, it is worth understanding its value in terms of non-economic benefits and how it adds to their human development remains highly pertinent. These do not just work at the level of individuals, but also wider society, communities and the public sphere.

Sixth, students are often purpose-oriented and embark on meaning-making, the two being largely conjoined. If purpose is an organising principle that helps frame an individual's life goals and design, meaning often constitutes the rationale behind such endeavours - that is, why it is worth pursuing and why it matters. Typically, students want their experiences to "add up" and have value, including the richness of formal and informal learning experiences, as through this they can make sense of where these

experience fit in their overall lives. The experience of meaningful education and work-related experiences further helps them craft a narrative of what they are about and how they may convey this to others (linked to point three). The pursuit of meaning also significantly carries through to how they think about their working lives and what they want to achieve and be in the labour market. Ultimately, they want their future work to be meaningful.

Bringing in meaning

Considering the above issues, there is a need to understand more closely the concept of “meaningful work” and why this is pertinent for any consideration of how individuals make transitions from education to the labour market and the decisions that inform this movement. As a concept, meaningful work has been given scholarly attention in recent years (Blustein et al., 2023), and a salient feature is the extent to which work matters, is worth pursuing and provides some kind of motivational value for them to want to work rather than solely pursuing extended leisure (Bailey et al., 2024). Importantly, meaningful work is itself highly reflective, episodic, and relational that feeds through into narratives concerning both the immediate, situated nature of the work and its relevance to society and others. Whilst the affective and motivational dimensions of working life are clearly important, there are also moral and social dimensions about the meaning of being part of a given profession and the connection that has to wider social relations and functionings.

The author found that during Covid-19 many recent graduates were confronted by crucial questions of meaning and to pursue this during existentially challenging period when early goals had been hampered by a weakened labour market and related opportunity structures (Tomlinson, 2024). The interviews undertaken as part of this project were rich and variegated, ranging from graduates’ perceptions of how the pandemic had impacted their prospects, their strategies for negotiating its challenges and the resources they felt they could, or otherwise, draw upon. Underpinning many of the responses were latent issues concerning what they valued about their current or aspired future employment. The theme of meaningful work was often a feature and manifested in a range of concerns about what mattered.

The substantive issues concerning how graduates conceive meaningful work have been documented elsewhere (Tomlinson and Souto-Otero, 2025), but to summarise the core framework upon which the data was based, these conceptions centre around three main dimensions: meaning in work, meaning at work and meaning from work. The first of these centres around the personal and affective connection with work, how it provides a platform for self-expression, identity and potential human flourishing. This is a significant anchor for motivation and orientation to specific job areas and potentially staying the course. The second concerns the inter-social and interaction component and helps sustain a social narrative and identity within workplace contexts and the sets of social relations they engender. The third is the wider context of the work and the perceived benefit in the wider public sphere. It

was clear that social impact was more than a virtue signal: does the work have some kind of longevity or future travel that carries beyond the here-and-now. Finding meaning through the public value of one's engagement offers a substantial lens through which individuals define their own value and purpose, even if sometimes at the expense of material gains.

There appear to be many forces at play that can compromise the pursuit and realisation of meaningful work, both within workplaces and the wider economic context. The ongoing advancement of AI attracts debate about its various affordances and challenges and how future employees and employers mediate its potential impacts (European Commission, 2022). Questions often centre about its potential challenges in terms of job obsolescence, deskilling and threatening the core functions of established areas – risks that cut across many sectors of the labour market. Related questions are also of a technical variety, for instance how well job applicants and employers can strategically align their skills and job profiles and how can analogic practices be directed to complement new digital modalities in ways which add value to both people's own experience of working lives and the overall labour process (Souto-Otero and Brown, 2024). Optimistic human-centric approaches often depict the human actors as key mediators who are a main controller of work practices; but as they do not always control the means of their labour, there are inevitably riskier questions about the sustainability of their employment and stability of surrounding labour markets.

This is why it has become more important than ever to consider the problem of meaning and how individuals' relationship to the labour market is being mediated by new digital modalities that shift the boundaries between the material, technological and affective dimensions of working life.

Meaningful learning for meaningful work

The research within this collection often troubles the notion that learning trajectories are linear and follow neat pathways from one institutional context to another. Learning trajectories also do not operate in a social vacuum and are shaped by the social context of individuals' wider experiences, as well as contingent features of their identity, including their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, nationality – to name a few. One of the main benefits of the movement towards post-compulsory education since the latter part of last century in many countries has been the diversity of the student body across tertiary settings. The link between social origins and life chances has become less pre-determined for many because of massification and the broadening of educational opportunities. Yet it has led to many paradoxes, a prominent one being how life chances can be distributed when the "room at the top" continues to be restricted and confined to many from privileged social backgrounds (SMCPM, 2022).

Despite these challenges, which often reside in wider social and labour market structures, tertiary and higher education continues to provide substantial personal benefits and its role as a public good provider clear needs to be defended. Related are questions about how institutions can work to support graduates in their future lives, irrespective of whether this is their core goal. The problem of employability endures as a public policy mission and has become in many senses an intractable “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) that are subject to continued policy intervention. The framing of wicked problems however reveals the disconnects between policy influencers conceptions of educational processes and outcomes and those of other key actors, namely educators and students.

One of the dominant tenors to critical literature on employability is that it tends to represent a narrow intellectual orientation that emphasises short-term measurement goals ahead of less intangible educational processes that might be beneficial longer-term. Like so many policy framings that lay onus on supply-side solutions, the linkage between educational goods and labour market demands is far from precise and measurable. Overall, a distinction might therefore be drawn between “thin’ and thick” approaches to the relationship between educational learning experiences and labour market outcomes (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2020; Souto-Otero et al., 2023). The former framing is essentially instrumental and performative: how easily and effectively can a student find a job and what can the institution do to enhance this and pre-empt the kind of skills purportedly demand from employers. Policy makers can then find incentives for institutions to fulfil this goal, which in market-driven educational environments can lead to enhanced ranking on evaluative league tables.

Re-orientating the education-work nexus towards thicker approaches brings more significantly into focus how individuals develop identities and values in different educational and labour market context. Thicker approaches invariably require some kind of engagement with students’ future professional and work identities, including how they may build career resources and find alignment between their values and what might be desirable future pursuits. The role of a meaningful educational experience helps with their acculturation into practices and ways of thinking that they may come to value.

One fundamental part of this goal, and in keeping with our concerns about meaningful work, is the reclaiming of a more values-centred that has meaningful education experience and learning in centre ground. Nearly a hundred year ago, Dewey (1938) wrote about the interplay between individuals’ social experience, their learning environment and the continuous development of capabilities in ways that promote curiosity, propensities for ongoing learning and a sense of purpose. Approaching educational value in a richer and thicker way can also productively disrupt existing patterns of thought and behaviour in ways which trouble time-honoured assumptions and beliefs (Jarvis, 1992), and this may include what the labour market represents for individuals, and how best to approach and use it as a platform towards a future life that may be worth pursuing. The role of HE then becomes one of enabling empowering forms of personal transformation that, instead of competing

with goals of sustainable employment, is integral to how they negotiate their life trajectories.

This is clearly a time when meaning-making and working through what matters and how to navigate a complex social and economic environment is a paramount goal for those involved in tertiary adult and higher education. Essential questions concerning the value of tertiary and adult learning, what it can provide for learners and help them navigate meaningful future lives need to come to the fore and be centrally located in debates about the future of education, work and their interaction.

References

-
- Bailey, C., Madden, A. and Lips-Wiersma, M. (2024). Experiencing meaningful work through worthwhile contributions: A critical discourse analysis. *Human Relations*, 78(5), 550–578.
- Bathmaker, A.M. (2021). Constructing a graduate career future: Working with Bourdieu to understand transitions from university to employment for students from working-class backgrounds in England. *European Journal of Education*, 56(1), 78-92.
- Becker, G.S. (1993). *Human capital: Theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blustein, D., Lysova, E. and Duffy, R. (2023). Understanding decent and meaningful work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10, 289-310.
- Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Cheung, S. (2020). *The death of human capital: its failed promise and how to renew it in an age of disruption*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Education and experience*. New York: Macmillan.
- Eurofound (2024). *Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world*. Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- European Commission (2022). *Rethinking education and skills in the digital age*. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- FutureTrack (2021). *Ten years on – The future track graduates*. Warwick: University of Warwick.
- Jackson, M. and Tomlinson, M. (2020). Investigating the relationship between career planning, proactivity and employability perceptions amongst higher education students in uncertain labour market conditions. *Higher Education*, 80(3), 435-455.
- Jarvis, P. (1992). *Adult learning and lifelong learning* (3rd edition). London: Routledge.
- Lauder, H. and Mayhew, K. (2020). Higher education and the labour market: an introduction. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(1), 1-9.
- MacDonald, R., King, H., Murphy, E. and Gill, W. (2023). The covid pandemic and youth in recent. Historic Perspective: More pressure, more precarity. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-18.
- Rittel, H. and Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, 155-169.
- Siivonen, P. Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret, U., Tomlinson, M., Korhonen, M. and Haltia, N. (Eds) (2023). *Rethinking graduate employability in context: discourse, policy and practice*. Basingstoke Palgrave.

Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2022). *State of a Nation: a fresh approach to social mobility*. London: SMCPC.

Souto-Otero, M., García-Álvarez, J. And Santos Rego, M. A. (2023). Subject choice motivation and students' conceptions of employability: Thin and thick. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44(4), 606–630.

Souto-Otero, M. and Brown, P. (2024). The rise of the digital labour market: Characteristics and implications for the study of education, opportunity and work. *Journal of Education and Work*, 37(1-4), 1-16.

Tomlinson, M. (2008). “The degree is not enough”: students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29, 1, 49-61.

Tomlinson, M. (2017a). Graduate employability: introducing a complex, contested and multi-faceted and policy and research field, in M. Tomlinson and L. Holmes, *Graduate Employability in Context: theory, research and debate*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Tomlinson, M. (2017). Student perceptions of themselves as “consumers” of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38, 4, 450-467.

Tomlinson, M. (2024). Conceptualising the transition from higher education to employment: navigating liminal spaces. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(8), 1079-1096.

Tomlinson, M. and Souto-Otero, M. (2025). Graduates' conceptions of meaningful work. *British Educational Research Journal*, 2700-2718.

**Education, employability
and socio-economic policies**

Career development 5.0: A bibliometric and thematic review

Buratin Khampirat*, Ieva Rudzinska, Paing Soe Oo***

** Institute of Social Technology
Suranaree University of Technology
111, Maha Witthayalai Rd, Suranari, Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima District,
30000 – Nakhon Ratchasima
Thailand
Buratin Khampirat: buratink@sut.ac.th
Paing Soe Oo: paingsoeoo91@gmail.com*

*** RSU LSPA
RSU Latvian Academy of Sport Education
333 Brīvības gatve
LV – 1006 – Rīga
Latvia
ieva.rudzinska@rsu.lv*

ABSTRACT

This study proposes Career Development 5.0, an integrated framework combining smart technologies, sustainability, and inclusion to advance job readiness. A mixed bibliometric and thematic review of 175 Scopus-indexed publications (2015–2025) was conducted. VOSviewer and Bibliometrix(R) analyses show rising interest in digital competence, sustainability, and inclusive education. Thematic analysis identifies three core dimensions: (1) smart education and digital literacy, (2) sustainability and green skills, and (3) inclusive career support. Findings also reveal geographic disparities, with stronger implementation in Europe and parts of Asia. The study recommends embedding Career Development 5.0 into institutional policies and curricula to support Industry 5.0 and Society 5.0.

KEYWORDS

Career Development, Employability, Higher Education, Inclusive Education, Bibliometric Analysis

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude propose Career Development 5.0, un cadre intégré combinant technologies intelligentes, durabilité et inclusion pour améliorer l'employabilité. Une analyse bibliométrique et thématique mixte de 175 publications indexées dans Scopus (2015-2025) a été réalisée. Les analyses VOSviewer et Bibliometrix(R) montrent un intérêt croissant pour les compétences numériques, la durabilité et l'éducation inclusive. L'analyse thématique identifie trois dimensions fondamentales : (1) l'éducation intelligente et la culture numérique, (2) la durabilité et les compétences vertes, et (3) le soutien à l'emploi inclusif. Les résultats révèlent également des disparités géographiques, avec une mise en œuvre plus forte en Europe et dans certaines régions d'Asie. L'étude recommande d'intégrer le développement de carrière 5.0 dans les politiques et les programmes d'enseignement des établissements afin de soutenir l'industrie 5.0 et la société 5.0.

MOTS-CLÉS

Développement de carrière, Employabilité, Enseignement supérieur, Éducation inclusive, Analyse bibliométrique.

Introduction

The increasing transformation to a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy has profoundly altered the relationship between education, employment, and society (OECD, 2024). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to align their missions with the multidimensional demands of the 21st-century workforce, driven by the growing use of digital technologies, rising environmental concerns, and heightened awareness of social equity (UNESCO, 2022, Tusquellas et al., 2025). Traditional methods of career development, which focus on acquiring technical skills and preparing graduates for the job market, are no longer sufficient to equip them for complex, changing, and multidisciplinary situations (Römgens et al., 2020).

In light of this changing environment, the concept of Career Development 5.0 has emerged, influenced by overarching frameworks such as Industry 5.0 and Society 5.0 (Shahidi Hamedani et al., 2024). These paradigms promote a transition from automation-focused systems to human-centred, sustainable, and inclusive frameworks of innovation and growth. In this context, employability is no longer limited to economic utility or job placement; rather, it is viewed as a dynamic, lifelong process that includes digital fluency, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023). Therefore, HEIs are being reimagined as strategic stakeholders who contribute to the advancement of sustainable development, social transformation, and economic competitiveness, which necessitates the integration of new competencies, such as environmental skills, emotional intelligence, and intercultural awareness, into the formal curriculum and practical learning opportunities (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2024). Work-integrated learning (WIL), cooperative education, vocational education, and digital co-learning platforms are becoming more and more accepted as good ways to support Career Development 5.0 (Khampirat, 2024, Pherali et al., 2025).

In despite these significant advancements, the current literature identifies numerous critical research gaps. First, the concept of employability is still not fully developed, and it often overlooks broader social and environmental issues (Alam et al., 2024). Second, much of the existing research tends to focus on smart education, sustainability, or inclusion studies independently rather than integrating them into a comprehensive career development framework (Supriya et al., 2024). Third, a limited number of studies have employed a longitudinal or comparative approach to investigate how HEIs modify their career plans across different areas over time. Lastly, even as systematic reviews are gaining popularity, bibliometric methodologies are still underutilized in demonstrating how the field's ideas and themes have evolved. Systematic reviews are becoming increasingly popular, but bibliometric methodologies are still underutilized in demonstrating how the ideas and themes in this field have evolved (Hassan and Duarte, 2024).

In light of these shortages, this study performs a bibliometric and thematic literature analysis of academic publications from 2015 to 2024. This review seeks to (1) deliver an in-depth analysis of how higher education is responding to the transforming employability agenda through the framework of Career Development 5.0 and (2) provide research-based insights for policy, practice, and future investigation. Finally, this study expands employability not only as workforce preparation but also as an inclusive, sustainable, and transforming component of higher education.

Objectives

- To map the bibliometric landscape of research on employability, smart education, sustainability, and inclusivity in higher education from 2015 to 2025, using Scopus-indexed publications.
- To identify influential institutions, journals, and thematic clusters contributing to the evolution of Career Development 5.0.
- To synthesize key themes and trends emerging from the literature, highlighting how HEIs are integrating smart, sustainable, and inclusive practices into their career development strategies.
- To uncover research gaps and propose future directions for academic inquiry, policy innovation, and institutional practice in support of sustainable and inclusive employability.

Literature review: Framing career development 5.0

Higher education and the transition to career development 5.0

Academic growth, discipline specialization, and knowledge sharing have long been the primary objectives of higher education. However, the rapid evolution of the global labour market and increased employer expectations have forced HEIs to reconsider their roles. HEIs are under increasing pressure to help students become more marketable upon graduation by teaching them to think critically and creatively about their work (Pop and Khampirat, 2019). This change is demonstrated by the increasing use of experiential learning techniques such as project-based curricula, career services, work-integrated learning, cooperative education, and cross-sectoral collaborations with business (Khampirat, 2021). Researchers have highlighted the increasing importance of comprehensive pedagogies that support the development of professional identities in addition to technical proficiency (Sa-Nguanmanasak and Khampirat, 2019, Khampirat, 2021)

At the same time, the emergence of Industry 5.0, characterized by its harmonious integration of advanced technology and human-centred innovation, has drastically altered conventional notions of employability (Barata and Kayser, 2023).

The demand for a new framework, Career Development 5.0, which incorporates advanced technology, sustainability awareness, social inclusion, and ethical involvement into career preparation initiatives, has increased as a result of these changes. This model extends the human-centred principles of Society 5.0, which aims for innovation that prioritizes collective well-being alongside economic advancement (Atay et al., 2025). Career Development 5.0 represents a more thorough integration of social, environmental, and technological concerns, whereas previous frameworks tended to regard graduate employability as a function of technical skills and labour market alignment (Shahidi Hamedani et al., 2024). Thus, HEIs are reframed as crucial organizations that develop responsible, future-ready citizens in addition to being knowledge-generating institutions. This expanded role signifies a fundamental change from viewing education solely as a means of workforce supply to embracing a more comprehensive perspective on human development and global citizenship. UNESCO's Futures of Education framework (UNESCO, 2021) posits that higher education should serve as a transformative force, enhancing learners' abilities in collaboration, empathy, and sustainable action. Japan's Society 5.0 model (Narvaez Rojas et al., 2021) advocates for a human-centred, knowledge-intensive society that focuses on innovation aimed at addressing social challenges and enhancing overall well-being.

In this regard, HEIs are under growing pressure to serve as moral guardians of future societies by incorporating digital responsibility, sustainability, and inclusivity into their outreach, governance, and curriculum. This shift corresponds with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), which promotes critical reflection and meaning-making for personal and societal change. Career Development 5.0 serves as a values-based framework aimed at promoting agency, adaptability, and civic-mindedness in graduates, rather than merely focusing on a technical agenda for improving employability. As the intersections of education, innovation, and societal well-being become increasingly interconnected, HEIs function not merely as centres for skill development but also as drivers of inclusive and sustainable futures.

Sustainability and inclusive career support

Research has highlighted the need to incorporate sustainability into employability education, suggesting that environmental literacy, ethical decision-making, and green skills ought to be fundamental graduation outcomes (Margherita and Bua, 2021). This requirement is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN, which advocate for a more comprehensive approach to sustainability. In particular, SDG 4.7 (UN, 2025) asks educational systems to provide all students with the information and abilities they need to support sustainable development. Graduates who can contribute to ecological innovation and sustainability-driven change are predicted to become increasingly in demand as industries across sectors embrace environmentally conscious practices. Thus HEIs must go beyond "green" marketing and integrate sustainability into courses, evaluation, and career support.

Increasingly, inclusive practices that address structural inequalities and ensure that all learners, regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or disability, receive equitable support in transitioning to the workforce are needed (Mosley et al., 2025). The concept of “inclusive career guidance” originated in response to the continuous underrepresentation of excluded groups in high-quality employment and leadership positions (Hulukati et al., 2025). To achieve this, HEIs must develop proactive, equity-focused strategies, such as mentorship programs, culturally responsive counselling, and user-friendly digital tools that break down systemic barriers and help individuals feel a sense of belonging. Students engage in career development more when they feel noticed, supported, and empowered (Ball and Ribchester, 2025). Table 1 compares the key concepts, strategic aims, implementation techniques, and theoretical foundations of sustainability and inclusivity in career support, highlighting their unique yet interrelated functions. This comparison demonstrates that both qualities are essential for producing graduates who can thrive in diverse and socially complex contexts, as well as in green economies.’

Dimension	Sustainability in Career Support	Inclusivity in Career Support
Core Focus	Environmental responsibility and long-term ecological thinking	Equity, access, and social justice for all learners
Strategic Goal	Equip graduates with green skills, systems thinking, and ethical decision-making	Ensure equitable opportunities in career readiness regardless of background
Theoretical Basis	Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), SDGs (e.g., 4.7, 12, 13), Circular Economy Principles	Inclusive Education frameworks, Social Inclusion Theory, Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
Implementation in HEIs	Embedding sustainability into all curricula; industry partnerships for green careers; eco-focused service learning	Targeted support for marginalized groups; mentorship for first-generation students; inclusive career workshops
Key Competencies	Green literacy, circular economy mindset, environmental ethics, systems thinking	Cultural awareness, accessibility, anti-discrimination, empathy, identity-safe communication
Career Support Themes	Climate-resilient career pathways, sustainability-linked job fairs, green entrepreneurship	Career services for students with disabilities, multilingual career resources, inclusive leadership pathways
Policy Examples	Green campus initiatives; sustainability-linked career programs	Universal Design for Learning (UDL); affirmative advising and mentoring

Table 1 Comparative Overview of Sustainability and Inclusivity in Career Support. Source: Author’s own work

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods bibliometric and thematic review to investigate the academic landscape regarding Career Development 5.0 in higher education. A bibliometric quantitative survey was used to identify trends, contributors, and keyword networks, while a qualitative thematic analysis provided a deeper understanding of emerging concepts and frameworks.

Data source and search strategy

The Scopus database was used to retrieve the data since it covers a wide range of reputable, peer-reviewed academic papers from various disciplines. To in line with the multifaceted nature of the research, the search strategy utilized a combination of key terms that encapsulate the ongoing dialogue surrounding employability in higher education. The query used was: (“*career development*” OR “*employability*”) AND (“*higher education*”) AND (“*smart*” OR “*sustainable*” OR “*inclusive*”). This formula was created to identify publications that combine ideas of digital transformation, sustainability, and social inclusion with the new paradigm of Career Development 5.0.

Several filters were employed to refine the dataset and ensure its relevance. Only articles and review papers published in English from 2015 to 2025 were included, including a key era during which employability discourse evolved in response to Industry 5.0, post-pandemic educational reform, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The final dataset consisted of 175 documents, exported in both CSV and BibTeX formats to enable bibliometric and network studies using programs such as VOSviewer and Bibliometrics (R Studio). These documents served as the empirical basis for analysing key figures in the area, establishing research trends, and locating theme clusters.

Bibliometric analysis

A bibliometric analysis was conducted using two complementary tools to comprehensively investigate the structure and development of research related to Career Development 5.0. VOSviewer was used to make visual network maps that show patterns of co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and citation linkages between papers. These maps show how the intellectual and collaborative structure of the field is set up. In parallel, the Bibliometrix R-package was employed to conduct advanced statistical mapping, which included productivity analysis by author, institution, and country, as well as thematic evolution over time. These methodologies, together, made it possible to thoroughly examine publication trends, essential contributors, and the ideas behind employability-related research in higher education.

Thematic analysis

To gain more in-depth conceptual insights from the literature for quantitative mapping, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted. The top 50 most-cited articles in the dataset were chosen for manual coding and inductive analysis using a grounded theory method. Using repeated reading and open coding, we found patterns that kept coming up and put them into three main thematic dimensions: (1) Smart education and digital competencies, including topics like AI, online learning, and digital literacy; (2) Sustainability and green career orientation, which includes environmental ethics, green skills, and curricula that align with the SDGs; and (3) Inclusive and equity-driven career support practices, which focus on how HEIs can help with diversity, access, and fairness in career preparation. These themes provide the analytical framework for understanding the implementation of Career Development 5.0 across various institutional and disciplinary settings.

Results

Keyword co-occurrence and thematic clustering

Table 1 presents the 20 most important keywords in Career Development 5.0 research from 2015 to 2025. The terms “*employability*,” “*career development*,” and “*higher education*” are the most frequently used, indicating a strong emphasis on preparing graduates for the job market. Keywords such as “*skills*,” “*digital competencies*,” and “*soft skills*” highlight the significance of both technical and interpersonal abilities, while “*smart learning*” and “*Industry 4.0*” reflect the digital transformation in education.

Additionally, the inclusion of “*sustainability*,” “*inclusive education*,” and “*SDGs*” shows a growing focus on equity and environmental responsibility. Terms like “*lifelong learning*,” “*career readiness*,” and “*work-integrated learning*” signify a shift towards continuous and practical education. Furthermore, “*global citizenship*” and “*transformative learning*” suggest a values-based approach, presenting professional development as both ethically and economically viable for future readiness.

Ank	Keyword	Frequency
1	Employability	41
2	Career Development	29
3	Higher Education	27
4	Skills	22

5	Digital Competencies	19
6	Sustainability	17
7	Inclusive Education	15
8	Industry 4.0	13
9	Smart Learning	12
10	Soft Skills	11
11	SDGs	10
12	Innovation	9
13	Future of Work	8
14	Lifelong Learning	8
15	Work-Integrated Learning	7
16	Career Readiness	7
17	AI in education	6
18	Competency-Based Learning	6
19	Global Citizenship	5
20	Transformative Learning	5

Table 1 Top 20 Keywords in Career Development 5.0 Research (2015–2025). Source: Author's own work

Thematic cluster analysis

Co-occurrence analysis utilizes a co-occurrence matrix to examine the frequency with which items co-occur in a collection. In the field of bibliometrics, it is instrumental in identifying the relationships between authors or terms within a single document. This study created a keyword network using VOSviewer based on Scopus-indexed papers from 2015 to 2025. The analysis revealed five major thematic clusters, illustrating changing objectives in Career Development 5.0 research, as depicted in Figure 2.

- Red Cluster (Programmatic Core): Includes *development, career development, program, learning, system, and inclusion*, emphasizing foundational structures of learning systems and curriculum design.
- Green Cluster (Competency and Sustainability): Includes *model, competency, process, strategy, and sustainable tourism*, highlighting the integration of core skills and sustainability frameworks.
- Blue Cluster (Technology and Institutional Response): Includes *technology, implementation, interface, and educational institution*, focusing on institutional adaptation and digital transformation.

- Yellow Cluster (Performance and Quality): Includes *performance*, *overall performance*, *quality*, and *teaching*, related to evaluation metrics and academic effectiveness.
- Purple Cluster (Impact and Perspective): Includes *impact*, *perspective*, *role*, and *leadership*, exploring policy relevance and broader governance implications.

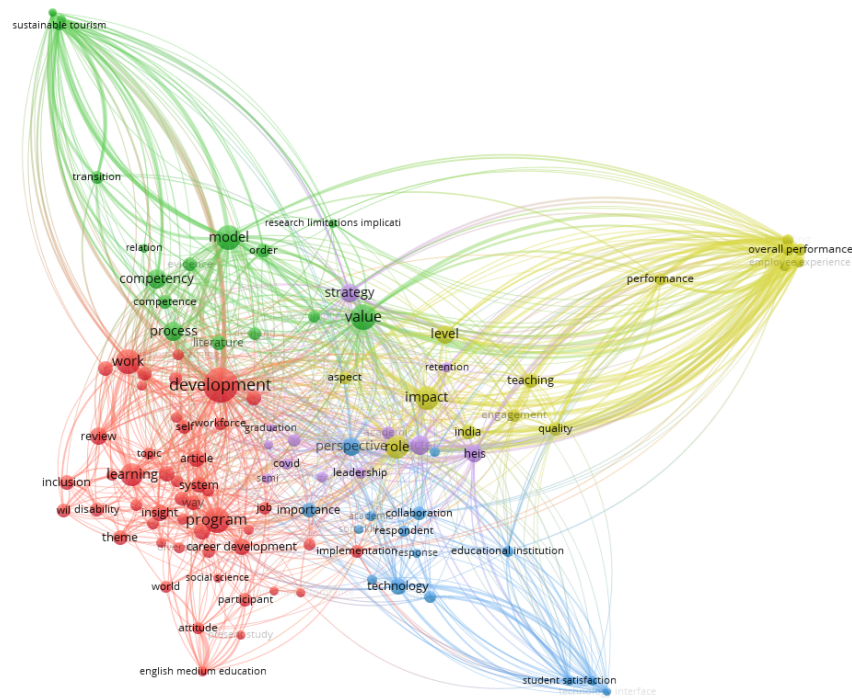


Figure 2: Keyword co-occurrence network map. Source: Author’s own work

Note: Generated using VOSviewer from Scopus-indexed articles on Career Development 5.0 (2015–2025). Each node represents a keyword, with the size indicating its frequency of occurrence. The links represent co-occurrences, and the colours indicate thematic clusters derived from bibliometric mapping.

To further illustrate the intensity of conceptual focus, a keyword density map was produced (Figure 3). These visualizations emphasize the high-frequency terms in the dataset, with red zones indicating dense conceptual intersections. In particular, the centre is marked by words such as learning, programming, and development, indicating their importance in academic discussions of career development 5.0. Outer boundary phrases, such as “technology,” “sustainable tourism,” and “student satisfaction” suggest both emerging fields and specialized areas that require further research.

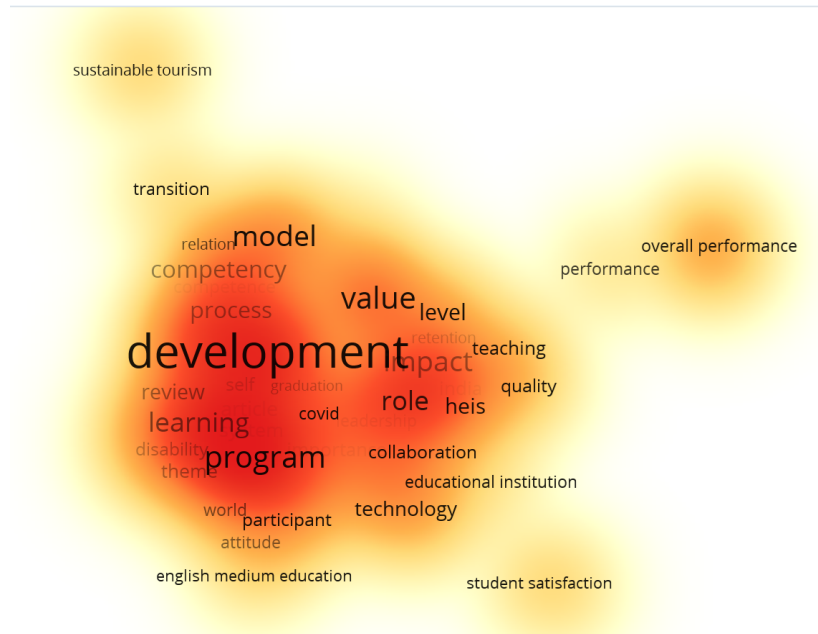


Figure 3 Keyword Density Visualization Map. Source: Author's own work

Note: Generated using VOSviewer based on Scopus-indexed articles (2015–2025). Warmer colours indicate higher frequency and co-occurrence density of keywords. The red areas highlight central concepts such as “development,” “program,” and “learning,” while outer boundary keywords indicate emerging or specialized themes in Career Development 5.0 literature.

Discussion

This bibliometric and thematic review demonstrates the intellectual evolution of employability and career development discourse in higher education, specifically within the framework of Career Development 5.0. The current research suggests a shift from short-term training focused on rapid job market entry (Tomlinson, 2017) to a more comprehensive and future-oriented perspective. Career Development 5.0 views employability as a lifelong process that includes digital adaptation, environmental responsibility, and inclusive engagement (Shahidi Hamedani et al., 2024). Systemic approaches that synchronize educational transformation with societal and industrial changes are increasingly essential.

The co-occurrence network is illustrated in terms such as “*digital competencies*”, “*inclusive education*”, and “*sustainability*”, demonstrating the growing integration of higher learning with Industry 5.0, which emphasizes human-machine collaboration and personalization (Xu et al., 2021), and Society 5.0, which highlights inclusive innovation and human well-being. This transition reflects a comprehensive view of graduate employability that encompasses the development of soft skills, including ethical reasoning, digital citizenship, intercultural literacy, and

resilience, alongside technical or discipline-specific expertise (Ul Hassan et al., 2025). Thematic clusters, such as “*Competency and Sustainability*” and “*Impact and Perspective*”, illustrate the growing interconnection of pedagogy, institutional responsiveness, and social values. These clusters signify an expansion of HEIs as transformative institutions that promote economic development, social unity, and environmental responsibility (Umar et al., 2025).

This review emphasizes the necessity for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework, in contrast to previous literature that has treated employability, sustainability, and digital transformation as separate entities (Tomlinson, 2017). Split or isolated initiatives have failed to understand the complex nature of modern career pathways. This review uses bibliometric mapping to link diverse literature sources. The conceptual framework supports both theoretical development and practical application, validating previous critiques (Eimer and Bohndick, 2023) and providing a productive direction for the future. The distribution of significant authors and institutions, primarily in Europe and certain parts of Asia, suggests that intellectual and policy activity is concentrated in specific locations. This illustrates how sophisticated digital infrastructure and existing career development approaches are in different ways.

Although digital literacy, sustainability, and inclusion are now widely presented as essential elements of Career Development 5.0, these priorities should not be seen as completely neutral or unquestionable. Their strong emphasis in the literature may partly reflect global policy agendas promoted by international organizations and economically advanced regions, rather than needs that are equally shared across all educational contexts. From a critical viewpoint, there is a risk that Career Development 5.0 becomes a normative or “politically correct” discourse, which may unintentionally disadvantage institutions or regions with limited resources or digital infrastructure.

In addition, power relations influence how employability skills are defined and promoted. Ideas about what counts as “*future-ready*” skills are often shaped by actors with greater economic and technological power, raising important questions about whose interests these frameworks primarily serve. Acknowledging these tensions does not reject the importance of digital, sustainable, and inclusive approaches. Instead, it highlights the need for more reflective and context-sensitive implementation, rather than applying uniform models across diverse global settings.

Policy and practice implications

The importance of topics such as inclusive education and digital competency emphasizes the necessity of rethinking career services as a fundamental component of curriculum design rather than as an add-on. Innovative career guidance systems, AI-driven learning analytics, and interdisciplinary programs that promote ethical reasoning, sustainability, and lifelong learning should be prioritized by institutions

(Kaldybaeva, 2025). Policymakers are encouraged to integrate Career Development 5.0 into national educational systems, aligning quality indicators with the SDGs, Industry 5.0, and Society 5.0. Furthermore, regional gaps in educational outcomes necessitate the enhancement of research and innovation ecosystems in developing countries supported by mobility programs and open cooperation platforms.

Limitations

Although the study has benefits, it is not without limitations. First, the bibliometric data were obtained only from the Scopus database, which may not include relevant materials indexed in other databases, such as Web of Science or ERIC. Second, by focusing just on the top 50 most referenced papers, the thematic analysis may have missed new but under-cited contributions, particularly from non-English-speaking regions. Additionally, the authors' keyword choices, which could not accurately capture conceptual details, are an intrinsic limitation of VOSviewer's keyword-based clustering approach. Lastly, whereas bibliometric techniques highlight structural trends, they lack cultural or contextual interpretations that are deeply embedded in the manuscripts.

Future research directions

Future studies may employ mixed-methods approaches, such as bibliometric mapping, expert interviews, policy analysis, or institutional best practice case studies. Moreover, longitudinal tracking of how specific interventions (e.g., AI-based career counselling, sustainability educational programs, or inclusive pedagogy) affect graduate outcomes would support conceptual implications. Ultimately, integrating student voice and employer feedback into career development research will be crucial for bridging the gap between academic innovation and labour market realities.

Conclusion

This bibliometric and thematic review explores shifts in higher education employability research through the lens of Career Development 5.0. Analysis of 175 Scopus-indexed papers (2015–2025) reveals a move from traditional job preparation to integrated models emphasizing digital literacy, sustainability, and inclusion. While Europe and parts of Asia lead the discourse, highlighting the need for more inclusive, context-sensitive reforms. By synthesizing diverse research strands, this study advances theoretical understanding and outlines strategies for transforming higher education.

References

- Alam, M. J., Ali, R. S. M., Keiichi, O. and Ahsan, A. H. M. (2024). Sustainable employment for vocational education and training graduates: The case of future skills matching in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Training Research*, 22(3), 266-288.
- Atay, S., Müftüoğlu, C. T., Gülmez, N. and Şahin, M. (2025). Society 5.0 and human-centred technology: Redefining talent management in the digital age. *Sustainable Futures*, 9, 100733.
- Ball, C. and Ribchester, C. (2025). ‘It feels like you’ve joined the university club’: the transformative potential of Fellowship recognition for professional services staff. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, pp. 1-22.
- Barata, J. and Kayser, I. (2023). Industry 5.0 – Past, present, and near future. *Procedia Computer Science*, 219, 778-788.
- Eimer, A. and Bohndick, C. (2023). Employability models for higher education: A systematic literature review and analysis. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 8(1), 100588.
- Hassan, W. and Duarte, A. E. (2024). Bibliometric analysis: A few suggestions. *Current Problems in Cardiology*, 49(1), p. 102640.
- Hulukati, W., Rahim, M. and Lakadjo, M. A. (2025). Development career guidance module based on adaptability to enhance high school students' career readiness. *Journal of Education*, 11, 1-13.
- Kaldybaeva, U. (2025). Using AI in career guidance for students. *Eurasian Science Review*, 2, 2211–2222.
- Khampirat, B. (2021). The impact of work-integrated learning and learning strategies on engineering students’ learning outcomes in Thailand: A multiple mediation model of learning experiences and psychological factors. *IEEE Access*, 9, 111390-111406.
- Khampirat, B. (2024). Psychometric characteristics of the career adapt-abilities scale in Thai undergraduate students: A multiple indicators multiple causes model. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1338401.
- Margherita, E. G. and Bua, I. (2021). The role of human resource practices for the development of Operator 4.0 in Industry 4.0 organisations: A literature review and a research agenda. *Businesses*, 1(1), 18-33.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74), 5-12.
- Mohamed Hashim, M. A., Tlemsani, I., Mason-Jones, R., Matthews, R. and Ndrecaj, V. (2024). Higher education via the lens of industry 5.0: Strategy and perspective. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 9(1), 100828.
- Mosley, T. J., Zajdel, R. A., Alderete, E., Clayton, J. A., Heidari, S., Pérez-Stable, E. J., Salt, K. and Bernard, M. A. (2025). Intersectionality and diversity, equity, and inclusion in the healthcare and scientific workforces. *The Lancet Regional Health – Americas*, 41, 100973.
- Narvaez Rojas, C., Alomia Peñafiel, G. A., Loaiza Buitrago, D. F. and Tavera Romero, C. A. (2021). Society 5.0: A Japanese concept for a superintelligent society. *Sustainability*, 13(12), 6567.
- OECD (2024). OECD Employment outlook 2024: *The Net-Zero transition and the labour market*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Pherali, T., Chan, M. L., Charoensukaran, W., Chase, E., Kennedy, E., Tyrosvoutis, G., Witthaus, G. and Laurillard, D. (2025). Pedagogical approaches to teacher professional

- development in contexts of mass displacement: An agenda for research and practice. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 1, 1-15.
- Pop, C. and Khampirat, B. (2019). Self-assessment instrument to measure the competencies of Namibian graduates: Testing of validity and reliability. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 60, 130-139.
- Römgens, I., Rémi, S. and Beusaert, S. (2020). Unravelling the concept of employability, bringing together research on employability in higher education and the workplace. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(12), 2588-2603.
- Sa-Nguanmanasak, T. and Khampirat, B. (2019). Comparing employability skills of technical and vocational education students of Thailand and Malaysia: A case study of international industrial work-integrated learning. *Journal of Technical Education and Training*, 11(3), 94-109.
- Shahidi Hamedani, S., Aslam, S., Mundher Oraibi, B. A., Wah, Y. B. and Shahidi Hamedani, S. (2024). Transitioning towards tomorrow's workforce: Education 5.0 in the landscape of Society 5.0: A systematic literature review. *Education Sciences*, 14(10), 1041.
- Supriya, Y., Bhulakshmi, D., Bhattacharya, S., Gadekallu, T. R., Vyas, P., Kaluri, R., Sumathy, S., Koppu, S., Brown, D. J. and Mahmud, M. (2024). Industry 5.0 in smart education: Concepts, applications, challenges, opportunities, and future directions. *IEEE Access*, 12, 81938-81967.
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Forms of graduate capital and their relationship to graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 59(4), 338-352.
- Tusquellas, N., Santiago, R. and Palau, R. (2025). Professional development analytics: A smart model for Industry 5.0. *Applied Sciences*, 15(5), 2057.
- Ul Hassan, M., Murtaza, A. and Rashid, K. (2025). Redefining higher education institutions (HEIs) in the era of globalisation and global crises: A proposal for future sustainability. *European Journal of Education*, 60(1), e12822.
- Umar, S. B., Ahmad, J., Mohd Bukhori, M. A. B., Ali, K. A. M. and Hussain, W. M. H. W. (2025). Transforming higher-education-institutes: Impact of change management on sustainable performance through transformational leadership and knowledge management. *Sustainability*, 17(6), 2445.
- UN (2025). *Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. [Online] New York: United Nations. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.
- UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2022). *Knowledge-driven actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Xu, X., Lu, Y., Vogel-Heuser, B. and Wang, L. (2021). Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0 - Inception, conception and perception. *Journal of Manufacturing Systems*, 61, 530-535.

Interplay between HE policies, welfare mechanisms, and work market structures in today's time: the Italian case

Vito Balzano

*Department of Educational Sciences, Psychology, Communication
University of Bari Aldo Moro
Via Crisanzio, 42
71022 – Bari
Italy
vito.balzano@uniba.it*

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the tensions between higher education (HE) policies, welfare mechanisms, and labour market structures in contemporary Italy. Drawing on a critical pedagogical framework, it questions dominant employability discourses rooted in human capital theory, arguing that such models neglect the structural barriers affecting non-traditional students. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, the study highlights how HEIs are caught between market-driven demands and social justice imperatives. The Italian context, marked by regional disparities and precarious employment, exemplifies the inadequacy of fragmented policy approaches. The paper calls for an integrated and participatory rethinking of HE as a civic institution committed to epistemic justice, inclusive governance, and transformative learning. Ultimately, it advocates for repositioning HE as a public good capable of fostering equity, democratic participation, and sustainable development.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, employability, social justice, non-traditional students, Italy.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les tensions entre les politiques d'enseignement supérieur (ES), les mécanismes de protection sociale et les structures du marché du travail dans l'Italie contemporaine. S'appuyant sur un cadre de pédagogie critique, il remet en question les discours dominants sur l'employabilité ancrés dans la théorie du capital humain, en soutenant que de tels modèles occultent les barrières structurelles auxquelles sont confrontés les étudiants dits « non traditionnels ». À travers une analyse interdisciplinaire, l'étude souligne comment les établissements d'enseignement supérieur se trouvent tiraillés entre les exigences du marché et les impératifs de justice sociale. Le contexte italien, marqué par des disparités régionales et une précarité de l'emploi, illustre l'insuffisance des approches politiques fragmentées. L'article appelle à une refonte intégrée et participative de l'enseignement supérieur en tant qu'institution civique engagée en faveur de la justice épistémique, d'une gouvernance inclusive et d'un apprentissage transformateur. En dernier ressort, il préconise de repositionner l'enseignement supérieur comme un bien public capable de favoriser l'équité, la participation démocratique et le développement durable.

MOTS-CLÉS

Enseignement supérieur, employabilité, justice sociale, étudiants non traditionnels, Italie.

Theoretical framework: employability, human capital, and social justice

Contemporary debates surrounding higher education (HE) are increasingly structured by the competing logics of employability and social justice. Within the dominant neoliberal paradigm, employability is often conceptualised as the acquisition of transferable skills and competences aimed at enhancing individual adaptability in volatile labour markets (Tomlinson, 2012). This conceptualisation, rooted in human capital theory (Becker, 1964), positions education as an economic investment, wherein students accumulate skills to maximise their future earnings. The individual becomes the entrepreneur of the self, responsible for converting educational credentials into labour market value (Foucault, 2008).

This framing, however, has drawn substantial critique within the fields of critical pedagogy and sociology of education. Human capital theory reduces the educational process to a transactional exchange, marginalising its transformative and emancipatory dimensions. Scholars such as Bourdieu (1986) and Burke (2014) highlight how educational trajectories are shaped by pre-existing social structures, including class, gender, and ethnicity. Consequently, students' differential access to capital-economic, cultural, and social-mediate both their educational experiences and their post-graduation opportunities. The reliance on individual responsibility for employability obfuscates the broader systemic conditions that generate unequal outcomes. Rather than levelling the playing field, the emphasis on employability often reinforces pre-existing hierarchies and reifies meritocratic ideals that overlook structural disadvantage.

Pedagogical approaches oriented toward social justice seek to challenge these reductive paradigms by foregrounding the relational, identity-forming, and ethical dimensions of learning. From this perspective, HE is not merely a site for acquiring marketable skills but a formative space where learners negotiate their subjectivities, aspirations, and place in the world (Holmes, 2023). Education becomes a vehicle for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), enabling learners to interrogate the socio-political conditions that shape their lives and communities. The emphasis shifts from the production of economically viable subjects to the formation of socially engaged citizens capable of contributing to the collective good. In this light, the process of learning is inherently dialogic and contextual, embedded within historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks.

Adult and non-traditional students often engage in HE as part of broader biographical projects aimed at social mobility, reorientation, or empowerment (Merrill et al., 2020). Yet these aspirations are frequently undermined by institutional and structural constraints, including exclusionary practices, limited recognition of prior experience, and insufficient institutional support. The normative assumptions embedded in HE practices - such as the ideal of the full-time, uninterrupted academic trajectory - tend to marginalise those whose educational journeys diverge from traditional patterns. This marginalisation is compounded by the increasing

marketisation of HE, which prioritises efficiency, standardisation, and performance metrics over holistic and inclusive educational experiences.

The tension between employability and social justice also plays out in policy discourses and institutional practices. On one hand, HE institutions are incentivised to align curricula with labour market needs, often measured through graduate employment statistics. On the other hand, they are also charged with widening participation and fostering inclusive learning environments. These dual imperatives create contradictions that are particularly pronounced in countries like Italy, where systemic inequalities in both education and employment persist. Moreover, the rhetoric of lifelong learning, while ostensibly inclusive, often places the burden of upskilling on individuals without adequately addressing the socio-economic conditions that limit access to meaningful opportunities.

Thus, a critical pedagogical lens is essential to interrogate how HE can both reproduce and contest social inequities. It calls for a reimagining of education as a site of ethical and political engagement, rather than mere economic utility. In this light, the theoretical framework adopted in this paper combines insights from human capital theory, critical pedagogy, and social justice education. It aims to unpack the ideological underpinnings of employability discourses while advocating for a more holistic and inclusive vision of HE—one that recognises learners as situated, agentic subjects navigating complex socio-economic terrains. By reclaiming the transformative potential of education, such a framework aspires to reposition HE as a public good capable of fostering democratic participation, equity, and collective well-being.

Higher education and non-traditional students: Transformations and contradictions

Higher education (HE) is increasingly recognised as a transformative context, particularly for non-traditional students—those who enter university later in life, return after a break, combine study with employment or care responsibilities, or come from historically underrepresented backgrounds. These learners often engage in HE as a strategic move to improve their socio-economic standing, reshape their identities, or re-enter the labour market. Yet, while HE promises inclusion and upward mobility, the experiences of non-traditional students are often marked by ambivalence, disruption, and systemic constraint (O’Shea, 2014).

The transition into and through HE for non-traditional learners entails complex biographical and social negotiations. Educational participation intersects with personal histories, familial responsibilities, and work commitments, often demanding significant resilience and adaptability. These students frequently encounter institutional cultures and pedagogical practices that are implicitly oriented toward younger, full-time, and middle-class learners (Read, Archer, and Leathwood, 2003).

As a result, they may experience a sense of non-belonging or misrecognition, even within ostensibly inclusive institutions. Their aspirations, while often grounded in a desire for stability or self-realisation, are too often met with structural limitations—rigid timetables, inadequate support services, and curricula that fail to acknowledge diverse learning trajectories.

The affective dimension of HE engagement is also critical. Feelings of shame, doubt, or inadequacy are not uncommon among adult learners, particularly in environments that valorise speed, competence, and competition. This emotional labour is compounded by precarious material conditions—financial insecurity, time poverty, and limited access to networks of academic or professional capital. In this context, the notion of “*student success*” becomes deeply contested. For non-traditional students, success may not align with conventional metrics such as rapid graduation or immediate employment but instead involve gradual personal transformation, expanded critical awareness, or renewed civic participation.

Despite these challenges, non-traditional students contribute richly to HE communities, bringing diverse perspectives, life experiences, and forms of knowledge that can enhance pedagogical practices and academic discourse. Their presence challenges traditional epistemologies and compels institutions to rethink what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is recognised as a legitimate knower. However, this potential remains underutilised unless accompanied by intentional efforts to restructure educational practices and policies in ways that accommodate and celebrate diversity rather than demand assimilation.

In Italy, the participation of non-traditional students remains relatively limited compared to other European countries, reflecting broader issues of access and equity in the national HE system (CNVSU, 2020). Initiatives aimed at lifelong learning and adult education exist but are often fragmented and inadequately resourced. The absence of integrated support structures—such as academic advising, recognition of prior learning, or flexible learning pathways—renders the system less responsive to the needs of diverse learners. Furthermore, the persistence of regional disparities, particularly between northern and southern Italy, compounds the difficulties faced by non-traditional students, reinforcing existing socio-economic stratifications (Balzano, 2017).

Another important dimension concerns the misalignment between the goals of HE institutions and the lived realities of non-traditional students. Many adult learners seek education not simply as a stepping stone to employment, but to reclaim agency, explore intellectual interests, or contribute more meaningfully to their communities. Yet the increasing marketisation of HE often reduces educational experiences to short-term economic outcomes, eroding the intrinsic value of learning. This instrumentalization limits the ability of universities to foster the kind of reflective, dialogical, and critical spaces that non-traditional students particularly value.

Moreover, there exists a symbolic hierarchy of knowledge within HE that tends to privilege abstract, decontextualised forms of academic discourse over experiential, situated, and practical knowledges. Non-traditional students, who often bring rich life experience into the classroom, may find their contributions devalued or excluded from formal recognition. This epistemic injustice intersects with socio-economic inequalities to constrain their full participation and development. In this regard, fostering inclusive pedagogical practices also requires a decolonising approach to curriculum and assessment, one that legitimises plural forms of knowledge and nurtures epistemic agency.

Furthermore, the social position of non-traditional learners often intersects with other axes of inequality - such as gender, ethnicity, disability, and migration background - creating layered and intersecting challenges. For example, women with caregiving responsibilities, migrant learners navigating linguistic and cultural barriers, or students with disabilities confronting inaccessible infrastructures, all face compounded exclusions that demand specific institutional responses. Addressing such complexities requires the development of equity-oriented policies informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and grounded in participatory engagement.

In addition, the temporalities of learning for non-traditional students frequently diverge from normative academic schedules. Life events, employment shifts, and familial obligations often require intermittent study, delays, or non-linear trajectories. Institutions must respond to these realities by developing modular, part-time, and asynchronous learning pathways that provide continuity without penalising flexibility. Academic advising and career counselling services tailored to adult learners should be mainstreamed rather than offered as exceptions.

The presence of non-traditional students also raises questions about institutional identity and the purpose of higher education itself. If universities are to be truly democratic spaces, they must not only open their doors but also transform their internal cultures to value the plurality of student identities. Faculty development, inclusive pedagogy training, and co-design of learning environments are necessary steps toward embedding diversity and equity into the institutional DNA.

Ultimately, a meaningful commitment to equity in HE must involve institutional reflexivity and structural transformation. This includes reforming admissions policies, diversifying faculty and leadership, implementing flexible and accessible learning modalities, and cultivating supportive peer and mentoring networks. Non-traditional students' voices must be central in these processes - not only as recipients of services but as co-designers of educational policy and practice. Only by embracing this participatory ethos can HE institutions begin to close the gap between rhetoric and reality and deliver on the promise of education as a right, not a privilege.

To address these contradictions, a reconfiguration of HE is needed - one that moves beyond performative inclusion toward substantive engagement with

difference. This entails not only adapting institutional practices but also reimagining the pedagogical contract itself. Non-traditional students must be positioned not as exceptions to be accommodated, but as co-constructors of the academic community. This shift requires a pedagogical ethos grounded in care, dialogue, and recognition, aligning with broader commitments to social justice and democratic education.

The Italian labour market and welfare: Fragmentation, policy tensions, and the role of HEIs

The Italian labour market presents a unique and complex terrain within which the objectives of higher education institutions (HEIs) are negotiated and often contested. Characterised by high levels of segmentation, precarious employment, and significant regional disparities, Italy's work market poses substantial challenges to graduates, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009). While HEIs are increasingly tasked with fostering employability, the structural features of the Italian economy often undermine the very pathways HE seeks to cultivate. This disjuncture reflects a broader policy tension between educational aspirations and socio-economic realities.

One of the most salient characteristics of the Italian labour market is its dual structure, which divides secure, long-term employment - often confined to older generations or those with access to public sector positions - from insecure, flexible, and low-paid work, predominantly occupied by young people and new entrants (Mandrone, 2020). In this context, even highly educated graduates may find themselves in underemployment or engaged in work that does not correspond to their level of qualification. The resulting skill mismatch not only frustrates individual aspirations but also raises questions about the alignment between educational systems and labour market demands.

Compounding this issue is the regional divide, which continues to define socio-economic opportunities across the country. Graduates from southern Italy face higher unemployment rates and fewer professional opportunities compared to their northern counterparts. These disparities contribute to the phenomenon of internal brain drain; whereby skilled individuals migrate to the North or abroad in search of more favourable labour market conditions. As such, the promise of HE as a vehicle for mobility and inclusion becomes deeply uneven and contingent upon geographical location (Cappellari and Lucifora, 2009).

To mitigate socio-economic exclusion and promote employment, the Italian state has implemented various welfare interventions, including the controversial "*Reddito di Cittadinanza*" (Citizens' Income). While intended to provide income support and facilitate re-entry into the labour market, evaluations of the programme suggest limited effectiveness in fostering long-term career development or skills enhancement (Sacchi, 2018). Moreover, the program's activation policies are not

always well-integrated with educational or vocational training pathways, thereby limiting its capacity to function as a bridge between welfare dependency and sustainable employability. In some cases, beneficiaries of the scheme report feeling stigmatised or inadequately supported, reinforcing cycles of exclusion rather than promoting integration.

HEIs are thus situated at the intersection of conflicting imperatives: on one hand, they are expected to produce economically valuable graduates; on the other, they operate within a socio-economic system that frequently devalues or underutilises such qualifications. This contradiction is further exacerbated by austerity-driven policies and the underfunding of public education, which constrain institutional capacity to innovate, support students, or engage meaningfully with local labour markets (Boffo and Federighi, 2016). At the same time, universities are increasingly pressured to demonstrate impact through employment statistics and performance metrics, often privileging short-term gains over long-term educational or social objectives. This quantitative accountability logic frequently overlooks contextual factors, such as regional economic ecosystems or the diversity of student populations and instead reinforces a homogenised view of success.

Another crucial tension lies in the disconnection between HE curricula and the evolving needs of contemporary work. Rapid technological change, the rise of the gig economy, and the growing emphasis on soft skills and transversal competences require continuous adaptation. Yet many degree programmes in Italy remain rigid and theoretical, with limited opportunities for experiential learning or interdisciplinary integration. This inertia inhibits the development of agile, work-ready graduates, while also restricting the capacity of HEIs to act as catalysts for innovation and civic regeneration.

Moreover, the Italian HE system has historically struggled to establish robust linkages between universities, local industries, and civil society. While some technical universities and regional hubs (e.g., in Emilia-Romagna or Lombardy) have developed collaborative ecosystems, these remain exceptions. In many cases, institutional silos and bureaucratic inertia hinder the creation of meaningful partnerships, thereby reducing the relevance and accessibility of academic outputs to wider publics. The result is a disconnect between the knowledge produced within HEIs and the social and economic challenges faced by communities.

Yet, there is also evidence of innovative practices and collaborative initiatives that seek to reconfigure the role of HEIs in more socially responsive ways. University–community partnerships, service learning, and participatory research projects offer alternative models of engagement that connect academic knowledge with local needs and foster inclusive development. However, these remain peripheral within the dominant evaluative frameworks of academic performance and funding allocation. To scale such initiatives, a cultural and institutional shift is necessary - one that values co-production of knowledge, community impact, and democratic governance alongside more conventional academic outputs.

Ultimately, the Italian case illustrates how employability discourses, when detached from broader labour and welfare reforms, risk entrenching rather than alleviating structural inequalities. A more integrated approach is required - one that recognises the interdependence of education, social protection, and economic policy. In this context, HEIs can play a critical role not only in preparing individuals for work but also in advocating for systemic change that enhances the quality, accessibility, and dignity of employment itself. This entails reimagining HEIs not only as service providers but as public institutions embedded within a socio-political fabric, capable of shaping equitable futures through interdisciplinary knowledge, civic engagement, and transformative pedagogy.

Towards an integrated approach: Educational transitions, structural constraints, and pedagogical responsibility

Considering the multifaceted tensions explored in the previous sections, a paradigm shift is urgently needed to reposition higher education (HE) as a site not only of knowledge transmission but also of social transformation. An integrated approach to education, welfare, and employment policy must transcend siloed interventions and embrace a holistic, long-term vision of human development. Such an approach recognises that educational transitions are not merely technical or administrative processes but are deeply embedded in personal histories, structural constraints, and collective aspirations.

Central to this reconfiguration is the recognition of HEIs as social institutions with ethical and political responsibilities. Beyond the production of human capital, universities must cultivate critical agency, democratic participation, and epistemic justice. This requires a deliberate commitment to pedagogical practices that are inclusive, dialogical, and reflexive. Curricula must be reimagined to reflect the lived realities of diverse learners and to interrogate the socio-economic structures that shape their opportunities and constraints. Teaching and learning should prioritise co-construction of knowledge, foster interdisciplinary inquiry, and integrate experiential, community-based forms of learning.

This pedagogical repositioning calls for an understanding of HE as a practice deeply linked to social imagination. Education must be envisioned not solely as a means of adapting to existing labour market demands, but as a creative process that enables learners to conceive and build alternative futures. A transformative pedagogy cultivates critical consciousness, empowering students to engage with their contexts, challenge injustices, and participate in the co-creation of more equitable societies. Such approaches draw upon traditions of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011), decolonial thought (Mignolo, 2007), and feminist epistemologies that value relationality, care, and reflexivity as educational principles.

To advance this vision, HEIs must engage in active collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, including students, employers, policymakers, trade unions, civil society organisations, and local communities. These partnerships should not be instrumentalised to meet narrow employability targets, but rather serve as platforms for shared problem-solving, mutual learning, and social innovation. By building bridges between academic knowledge and real-world challenges, universities can enhance their social relevance and contribute meaningfully to the regeneration of local and regional contexts. Moreover, institutional engagement should move beyond consultation to co-governance, where communities actively participate in shaping educational priorities, structures, and outcomes.

A reoriented HE system must also address internal governance and accountability structures. This involves shifting from metric-driven evaluations to more qualitative, participatory, and context-sensitive forms of assessment. Institutional success should be measured not solely by graduate earnings or research rankings, but by the capacity to reduce inequalities, support student flourishing, and impact communities positively. Embedding equity and inclusion in institutional cultures - from admissions policies to staffing, leadership, and strategic planning - is a prerequisite for such transformation. Practices of shared governance, transparency, and democratic deliberation should be institutionalised as mechanisms for fostering trust and legitimacy.

This transformation also requires a profound shift in how knowledge itself is conceptualised and validated. HE must confront its complicity in reproducing hegemonic epistemologies that marginalise non-Western, experiential, or community-based ways of knowing. Epistemic justice entails creating space for plural knowledges, challenging hierarchical assumptions, and fostering pedagogies that are dialogic and decentred. In practice, this means diversifying curricula, rethinking assessment criteria, and encouraging pedagogical experimentation that honours the voices and contributions of all learners.

In the Italian context, this means moving beyond reactive policies and towards systemic investment in education as a public good. It requires reinforcing the social dimension of HE, expanding access and support for non-traditional students, and integrating HE with regional development strategies. National and local governments must coordinate efforts to create enabling conditions for lifelong learning, decent work, and welfare protections that are aligned with contemporary challenges. Policies should support flexible learning pathways, recognise informal and prior learning, and strengthen adult education infrastructure. It also involves addressing the digital divide, linguistic barriers, and socio-cultural stigmas that continue to restrict access and participation among marginalised groups.

Furthermore, the pedagogical responsibility of HEIs extends to challenging dominant narratives that equate individual worth with market productivity. By opening space for critical reflection, ethical reasoning, and collective imagination, universities can nurture the capabilities needed to build more just, inclusive, and

sustainable societies. This pedagogical orientation echoes the vision of education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970), where learning becomes a transformative act that empowers individuals to act upon the world rather than merely adapt to it. Such a vision demands courage, creativity, and institutional will to resist the commodification of learning and reclaim the university as a common good.

This contribution has explored the intricate interplay between higher education (HE), welfare policies, and labour market structures in the Italian context, highlighting the persistent contradictions and tensions that shape the trajectories of students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds. While employability discourses increasingly dominate the rhetoric of HE reform, they often obscure the socio-economic inequalities and structural barriers that constrain learners' opportunities. The analysis reveals that policy approaches rooted in human capital theory are insufficient to capture the complexity of educational transitions, which are always situated within broader cultural, institutional, and political frameworks.

By adopting a critical pedagogical perspective, this paper has argued for a reimagining of HE as a space of ethical responsibility, democratic engagement, and transformative learning. Such a vision challenges the commodification of education and calls for the reintegration of social justice at the core of institutional missions. In doing so, it affirms the potential of HEIs to function not only as engines of economic development but as civic actors committed to equity, inclusion, and epistemic diversity.

The Italian case, with its segmented labour market, fragmented welfare system, and regional disparities, underscores the urgency of coordinated and systemic reforms. Enhancing the role of HE in this scenario entails a shift from individualised responsibility to collective and structural engagement. It demands educational policies that are embedded in social contexts, responsive to learners' lived realities, and aimed at fostering both personal and societal transformation.

Looking forward, the challenges presented here also point toward opportunities for innovation. HEIs that embrace their civic and pedagogical responsibilities can serve as laboratories for new models of knowledge, cooperation, and democratic participation. Strengthening the connections between education, work, and welfare requires more than programmatic alignment; it involves a commitment to reconfiguring the very purposes and practices of HE in the service of a more just and inclusive society.

In sum, building equitable futures in HE requires a sustained and courageous effort to interrogate dominant narratives, dismantle structural barriers, and co-create inclusive educational ecosystems. Only through such integrative and justice-oriented approaches can higher education realise its full potential as a public good and a transformative force in the twenty-first century.

References

-
- Balzano, V. (2017). *Educazione, persona e welfare. Il contributo della pedagogia nello sviluppo delle politiche sociali*. Bari: Progedit.
- Balzano, V. (2025). *Pedagogia sociale. Teorie, contesti e pratiche educative*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.
- Barbieri, G. and Scherer, S. (2009). Labour market flexibilization and its consequences in Italy. *European Sociological Review*, 25 (6), 677–692.
- Becker, G. (1964). *Human capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. New York: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In: Richardson, J. G. (ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, pp. 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Burke, P. J. (2014). Widening participation in higher education: racialized inequalities and misrecognitions. *Higher Education*, 67 (5), 535–550.
- Cappellari, L. and Lucifora, C. (2009). The “Bologna Process” and college enrolment decisions. *Labour Economics*, 16 (6), 638–647.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Holmes, L. (2023). Graduate employability and the limits of human capital theory. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48 (2), 291–306.
- Mandrone, E. (2020). *Il lavoro che cambia: nuovi strumenti per nuove politiche attive*. Roma: INAPP.
- Merrill, B., Finnegan, F., O’Neill, J. and Revers, S. (2020). “When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don’t think I’m it for a lot of them”: class and capitals in, and after, higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45 (1), 163–175.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Delinking: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2–3), 449–514.
- Sacchi, S. (2018). The Italian welfare state (still) in transition: the progressive recalibration of social policies in a residual welfare state. *Italian Political Science Review*, 48 (1), 1–23.
- Tomlinson, M. (2012). Graduate employability: a review of conceptual and theoretical themes. *Higher Education Policy*, 25 (4), 407–431.

Reciprocal impacts of migrant engineering students and postgraduate education

A qualitative study in Canada

Hongxia Shan*, **Elena Ignatovich****, **Siyi Cheng*****, **Michelle Stack******, **Agnes d'Entremont*******, **Thomas Tannert*******

** Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia
Ponderosa Commons North (Oak House) 6445 University Boulevard
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2
Email: Hongxia.shan@ubc.ca*

*** School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia
2206 East Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T1Z3
Email: lena.ignatovich@ubc.ca*

**** Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia
Ponderosa Commons North (Oak House), 6445 University Boulevard
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2
Email: siyicx@student.ubc.ca*

***** Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia
Ponderosa Commons North (Oak House), 6445 University Boulevard
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2
Email: michelle.stack@ubc.ca*

****** Faculty of Applied Science, University of British Columbia
2054 - 6250 Applied Science Lane
Vancouver BC, Canada V6T 1Z4 Canada
Email: adentremont@mech.ubc.ca*

****** University of Northern British Columbia
3333 University Way, Prince George, BC. Canada V2N 4Z9
Email: thomas.tannert@unbc.ca*

ABSTRACT

Research suggests a positive correlation between attending higher education institutions and improved labour market outcomes for migrants. However, it remains unclear how higher education contributes to the professional advancement of migrants. Additionally, there is limited knowledge about how the increasing number of migrant students might impact higher education and professions. This paper aims to address these gaps by exploring the experiences of migrant engineers who pursued postgraduate studies in Canada. It provides insights into the unique roles that postgraduate programs play in the respondents' professional lives and the effects they have had on higher education and the engineering profession as a whole. Theoretically, this study is informed by a notion of migrant advantage grounded in a practice-based ontology.

KEYWORDS

Postgraduate programs; internationally trained engineers; migrant advantage; life history study; situational analysis

RESUME

La recherche propose une corrélation positive entre la fréquentation des établissements d'enseignement supérieur et l'amélioration des résultats sur le marché du travail pour les migrants. Toutefois, le rôle précis que joue l'enseignement supérieur pour l'avancement professionnel de ces personnes demeure incertain. En outre, les connaissances sont limitées concernant les effets potentiels de la croissance du taux d'étudiants migrants sur l'enseignement supérieur et les professions. Cet article vise à combler ces lacunes en examinant les expériences d'ingénieurs migrants ayant entrepris des études supérieures au Canada. On offre des aperçus du rôle spécifique que jouent ces programmes dans leurs trajectoires professionnelles, ainsi que les effets sur l'enseignement supérieur et la profession d'ingénieur en entier. En théorie, cette étude s'appuie sur la notion d'un avantage migratoire ancrée dans une ontologie pratique.

MOTS-CLÉS

Programmes d'études supérieures, ingénieur(e)s formé(e)s à l'étranger, avantage migratoire, analyse de récit de vie, analyse situationnelle

Introduction

Higher education institutions in Canada have seen a significant increase in the enrolment of mature students with migratory backgrounds, including adult international students and adult migrants. According to Adamuti-Trache's (2011) analysis of a longitudinal survey of migrants to Canada, 46 percent of migrants enrolled in post-secondary education within four years of arrival, and 17 percent pursued university education. Meanwhile, the number of international students has also been rising, particularly due to the availability of migration pathways. According to IRCC (2020), by the end of 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 642,480 international students in Canada, most of whom were mature students enrolled in post-secondary institutions.

Research has identified a positive correlation between attending Canadian higher education institutions and improved labour market outcomes for migrants (e.g., Adamuti-Trache 2011). International students' employment rates are lower than those of their Canadian peers, but they are significantly higher than those of migrants without Canadian education (e.g., Picot and Hou 2019). However, it remains unclear how higher education institutions have contributed to the professional advancement of migrants. Additionally, there has been little focus on how the growing number of students with migratory backgrounds may be influencing higher education and their respective professional fields in Canada in terms of knowledge and practices. This paper aims to explore these issues from a practice-based perspective on migrant advantage. The paper begins with an introduction to the context of the study, highlighting a predominantly deficit discourse surrounding migrant others, particularly those from non-Western contexts, in countries such as Canada. It then proposes a practice-based notion of migrant advantage as a conceptual lens to portray the sociocultural and sociomaterial conditions that enable migrant integration. The paper proceeds to present the research respondents, methods, and findings, and concludes with a summary of key findings and suggestions for future research.

Context of the study

Human mobility has long been associated with social and economic benefits for organizations, industries, and local economies, particularly in the context of return migration or expatriate studies (e.g., Newland and Plaza 2013). In contrast to the limelight shed on return migrants and expatriates, migrants, especially those from non-Western countries, face tremendous challenges in getting themselves recognized and received as equals to their native counterparts in OECD countries. Migrants to Canada, for instance, find it an uphill battle to access their professions of training or obtain employment at a level that is comparable to their prior qualifications (e.g., Raihan, Chowdhury and Turin 2023).

Much research has been conducted to grapple with the reasons why migrants face challenges in integrating into the host labour markets (e.g., Coulombe, Grennier, and Nadeau 2014; Majerski 2019). A dominant trend is for research to focus on migrants' perceived deficits, such as limited English or French proficiency, lack of Canadian work experience, unfamiliarity with Canadian cultural norms, different educational backgrounds, and limited social networks. While these are real challenges many migrants face, the problem with this body of literature is that it produces and reinforces a deficit construct of migrants (see also Guo 2009), thereby placing the onus of change on individual migrants.

Migrant advantage: a practice-based conception

To challenge the deficit image of migrants, this paper adopts a practice-based notion of migrant advantage. By no means does the proposal of migrant advantage imply that migrants are superior to non-migrants. Instead, it posits that, given the social, cultural, and geographic distances that migrants traverse, they are likely to develop distinct ways of knowing, doing, relating, and being, which constitute a positional advantage to the extent that they are activated in practice. Notions similar to migrant advantage exist. Yosso's "*community cultural wealth*" (2005) highlights the forms of knowledge, skills, abilities and networks that marginalized communities develop as valuable capital they may mobilize. Williams (2007) positions migrants as "*distinctive knowledge bearers*", suggesting that they embody and contribute unique forms of knowledge derived from their experiences of movement, displacement, and adaptation. Similarly, Erel's (2010) concept of *migration-specific capital* and Sadjed et al.'s (2015) notion of *migration-related competency* emphasize that migrants not only acquire skills, knowledge, and competencies given their migratory journeys, but also actively develop and mobilize social capital and networks. These social resources enable them to create alternative pathways through which their cultural capital is recognized, validated, and converted.

In all the theoretical perspectives outlined above, social capital, to which migrants do not have ready access, is of critical significance to migrants' integration processes. There are different types of social capital. Field (2016) makes a distinction among three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking capital. From the perspective of migrant integration, bonding networks that are ethnically homogeneous may narrow opportunities for migrants. In contrast, bridging and linking capitals may facilitate migrant integration in the host labour market. The former refers to establishing distant ties between people of diverse backgrounds who may share common goals. The latter is about establishing relationships "up and down the social and economic scale, allowing people to leverage resources from outside their own socio-cultural milieu (p. 45)." Field further identifies higher education as a pivotal site for individuals to access linking social capital, a vertical dimension of connectivity across structures.

The concept of migrant advantage builds on the theoretical perspectives outlined above and approaches migrants' skills, knowledge, and capitals as dynamic, relational, and contextually produced. Crucially, it foregrounds the social practices through which these abilities and resources are actualized as a positional advantage for migrants. Grounded in the practice-based ontology, this perspective disrupts conventional analytical frameworks that rely on binary distinctions in social analysis, such as individual versus structure, subject versus object, or the social versus the material (Schatzki 2001). Rather, it directs attention to the processes through which individual migrants are enrolled in social practices, including socially mediated routines and norms, collective activities, and communities (Shan 2024). From this vantage point, migrant advantage is an emergent effect of participation in practice, shaped by access, positioning, and legitimacy within specific institutional and social contexts. Research attention centres on how migrants come to participate in, reproduce, and sometimes reshape these practices, with particular attention to the organizing features of practices that enable them to mobilize their distinctive experiences and resources in agentic and transformative ways.

The research

This paper draws on a study that is designed to uncover migrant advantage in practice. This is a qualitative research project funded by an SSHRC Insight Grant (2019-2023). The study examines how migrants from non-Western contexts build their career pathways and contribute to knowledge transfer and practice innovation in healthcare and engineering, two professional fields with a significant representation of migrant workers, in Canada. This paper is based solely on the interviews with migrant engineers. As part of the study, 32 migrants were interviewed; they were identified through a media search, or self-nominated as individuals who had brought about innovative changes to the engineering profession. The respondents came to Canada between 1998 and 2018 from non-Western countries. Ten respondents were women and 22 men. All had obtained at least a bachelor's degree before coming to Canada and were working in engineering in British Columbia at the time of the interview. Of the 32 respondents, 17 attended postgraduate programs in Canada – 12 as international students and five as landed migrants. Out of the 17, 10 obtained master's degrees, six obtained PhD degrees, and one was still completing a master's program in Canada at the time of the interview. Additionally, five other respondents also took courses at higher education institutions. This paper focuses on the experiences of the 17 respondents who attended postgraduate programs in Canada.

For the field research, life history style interviews (Cole and Knowles 2001) were conducted with respondents. Respondents were invited to narrate their educational, professional, and migration histories, with particular attention to the key transitional moments they experienced. They were also invited to elaborate on significant contributions and impacts they had made in the engineering profession in Canada. All interviews were transcribed verbatim except for two in which the respondents declined to be recorded. All transcripts were sent back to the respondents

for member checking. Life history (Cole and Knowles 2001) and thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012) were used to understand their professional trajectories and types of contributions within their professions. A situational map (Clarke 2003) was constructed to articulate the structural and emergent conditions constituting the events for each of the contribution respondents reported. This process involved asking questions such as who and what – human and nonhuman, community and network, policy and practice, action and interactions – were involved? Who and what made a difference in this situation and how? And how all the actors came together in practice.

This paper presents findings related to the following questions: 1) how have the respondents benefited from postgraduate programs in Canada, 2) what kinds of changes have they brought to higher education and engineering, and 3) what features of postgraduate programs have enabled the respondents to expand both their professional lives and engineering practices in Canada.

Research findings

This section presents the research findings on how migrant students benefited from their postgraduate programs, the impacts they had on higher education and the engineering profession, and the organization of postgraduate programs and higher education institutions that contributes to the outcomes reported by the respondents.

Individual outcomes through postgraduate studies

The respondents pursued graduate studies primarily to achieve their educational aspirations, develop skills and expertise in specific fields, and ultimately advance their professional careers. For some, enrolling in a graduate program in Canada was also a strategic first step toward immigration. One respondent also noted that completing an engineering program in Canada would facilitate obtaining professional licensure. In every case, returning to graduate school was a deliberate and pragmatic decision, shaped by a combination of personal ideals, particularly the desire for education in a Western country, and practical professional and employment needs.

By attending postgraduate programs, some respondents reported that they advanced their professional knowledge and research skills in their original areas of interest, while others explored new areas of knowledge and practice. Most respondents expressed gratitude toward individual faculty members for helping them explore and connect with their fields of interest in Canada. They also noted that the programs they attended provided opportunities to develop valuable hands-on practical skills. A number of respondents pointed to the universality of engineering knowledge and commented that engineering is the same in Canada as elsewhere. According to some, the main difference lies in the codes and industry standards they needed to

adopt. For other respondents, however, the theoretical courses they took were a repetition of what they already studied back in their home countries.

Eight respondents were employed upon graduation. Three of them were already involved with the companies through research or co-op projects during their postgraduate programs. Six secured employments after a job search lasting up to four months. Two respondents encountered obstacles in their job search. Hassan (Pakistan) could not find a job after graduating with a master's degree in 2003 for nearly nine months. As a result, he moved to the Gulf region and worked there for two years until he obtained a job in Canada. Similarly, Mateo (Mexico) graduated in 2002 with a master's in engineering in Canada. He could not find a job and returned to his home country. Nonetheless, he decided to return to Canada in 2008 to pursue a PhD program. This time, he found a job in the industry soon after graduating in 2012. While pursuing their postgraduate programs, *three respondents also launched entrepreneurial ventures*. Amin (Iran) co-founded a successful start-up with a friend in his home country. Darius (India), who completed his MBA, co-founded a company with another migrant from his home country; this venture quickly grew to employ seventy-five people and secured multi-million-dollar contracts. The idea for this business originated while he was still a student. After earning his MBA, Aman (Iran) became a co-founder of a company that expanded from two to twenty-two employees. In the cases of Darius and Amin, both completed MBA programs in Canada. Their businesses integrated their engineering expertise with management training, a combination that likely played a key role in their successful business development.

Impacts of respondents on higher education and the engineering profession

It must be stressed that while the respondents developed their knowledge, skills and opportunities through postgraduate programs in Canada, they also helped expand the repertoire of knowledge and practices in higher education and engineering. Some contributed to the production of research papers, engineering codes and models, and patents. Some also contributed directly to educational practices in higher education institutions.

Respondents contributed to the development of patents, research papers, and models, and in some cases updated industrial standards and codes. Taken together, they played a crucial role in translating research knowledge into industrial use and, at times, informed policy and organizational planning. For example, Aaban (Bangladesh) was involved in the creation of five patents, two of which are based on his PhD dissertation and are used worldwide today. Six respondents published research-based papers in journals and conference proceedings. In one case, a respondent published fourteen journal papers and seventeen conference papers. What is important is not the number of outputs, but the quality and utility of the work. Ana (Mexico) published a publicly accessible report based on her capstone project, which attracted the interest of several organizations, manufacturers and the City of Vancouver. They reached out to her to learn about her research, particularly the

equipment she tested. These connections led to her first employment in Canada. In the case of Kang (Taiwan), he published two papers based on his thesis research, which suggested a new solution for constructing wooden buildings and potentially provided data for the development of new standards in this area of practice. He said:

For solid wood design, we definitely need to improve Canadian standards. So, my research could provide good data for those guys who are going to develop the standard for wood design. - Kang (Taiwan)

Some respondents also *directly contributed to teaching and education practices in higher education*. Kang, for instance, shared that he was able to bring his knowledge of seismic design to his classroom.

So, because of my background in Taiwan... a strongly seismic area, ...[my] seismic knowledge is super strong. I'm pretty confident that most of the ...people from Taiwan have more background in earthquake designing, especially about the engineering part than most of the Canadian engineers.... So, I remember ...when the professor [was] talking about the seismic things, I kind of assist[ed] him a lot. Also, I shared some of my lectures from Taiwan with my classmates, so they have a better understanding about how lateral system ... is developed and why we need to apply these factors to the building, to the designing process. - Kang (Taiwan)

Two respondents also became affiliated professors in higher education. They believed they brought unique knowledge of the educational systems from outside of Canada. Among them, Karim (Iran) suggested that the engineering education in his home country was of high quality:

...even if you just go from the quantity, the number of courses that I had in my university specialized in power engineering was probably ten times what is being offered in any other university in Canada to the undergraduate and graduate students.” - Karim (Iran)

Additionally, he pointed out that at his home university, he benefited from the involvement of expert practitioners working as associate part-time professors and from ready access to the well-equipped laboratories with industrial machines and “*not just mock-ups*”. He brought these experiences and knowledge to Canada when he took on a part-time adjunct professor position, teaching a capstone course at a university that connects students to the industry through small-group industrial projects. He was committed to teaching the course because he fully believed in its value.

So, the students work on projects that are defined by the industry – a start-up [or] a bigger company. It's a way to prepare them to work in the industry

framework as a team. [They] learn some other skills like teamwork skill, and people skill, and presentation skill. - Karim (Iran)

Enabling practices of postgraduate programs

If the mutual impacts between migrant engineering students and postgraduate programs are largely positive, it becomes essential to examine how the organization of these programs contribute to such outcomes. A thematic analysis of the students' journeys through postgraduate education, alongside a situational analysis of their professional achievements, reveals that most of the respondents benefited significantly from being able to engage in problem-based and object-driven learning, and accrue experiences, skills and knowledge at the boundaries between the academic world, and the industry and the local communities.

For respondents pursuing research-based programs, conducting industry-relevant research was critical for their learning. To give an example, Chun (China) shared the following.

I was involved in a few industrial projects ..., which was really, really good for me. ...If you are working on research, you have two options: just going through theoretical procedures or doing some experiments. ...I had both of them, I had the chance to read the articles, to connect with people who know about that research. And also, I was able to do experiments. When my professor was working with industrial companies, I was able to get actual experience, because when I was talking with two engineers who were in cooperation with our university, I was able to get actual experiences from them and it really helped me....If you're talking with industrial [people], they have their...views, because they were working for a long time in the industry. And they know what kind of issues you will face or, what kind of solutions you need to solve the issues. But I don't want to say it's enough because you need to take some academic courses to know about the principles, fundamentals too." – Chun (P.R. China)

All respondents engaged in research programs highlighted supervisors and professors as key contributors to their academic and professional growth. They mentioned that supervisors not only introduced them to their research fields and the academic communities but also connected them with industries, often through their own collaborations and working relationships with the industries. They reported that their professors played a crucial role in turning industrial problems into research questions for different types of student projects. Rahul (India), for instance, shared:

For example, if my professor [has] five different projectsSome...may be his idea, [suggestion] to the industry... Some of them come from the [industry]. Like,[there] may [be] five or ten different questions, and the professor may

look at [them], hey... this can become like a research question. ... a PhD level [research] question or it's just like a semester project question - Rahul (India)

For his doctoral dissertation research, he shared:

I always felt that I [was] doing something relevant...applied. We had ... very good support from my professor. He was a very experienced guide. And very good peer group. So, I loved... we would do assignments at [the university] library. If we had assignments, group assignments, you would spend the day in [university] Library trying to figure [things] out. That was also fun experience. ...we also used to go to [the company's] offices for our research work, because... we were using their systems and of course [technologies]. So that allowed us to interact with many senior engineers who had master's and PhD [degrees] themselves --- Rahul (India)

What needs to be noted is that some respondents also sought funding for their postgraduate programs. The funds they were able to access included faculty research funding, teaching assistance, fellowships and scholarships provided through industry sponsorship, and the Canadian Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. Seven respondents' study and research projects were sponsored by industrial funding or industrial partner scholarships through the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC). In a few cases, it was the funding opportunity that determined the respondents' specific choice of program and university.

Not everyone's program was research-based. Respondents whose degrees were course-based shared that they benefited from and appreciated developing hands-on experiences and knowledge through attending co-op programs and internships, and conducting capstone projects, which provided them opportunities to get involved in research driven by the needs of industries and communities. All these provisions helped respondents connect not only with the industry and communities, but sometimes also directly with employers and job opportunities.

Professors are not the only key players in respondents' journeys through their postgraduate programs. A number of them reported that they also learned with others, both people from the industry and peer students. Some of them explicitly shared that it was a privilege to work and learn from a diverse group of people. Kang (Taiwan) shared that when he was working on a diverse research team.

There were people from ... Alberta, ... people from Iran... we are gathering our knowledge together to develop the research...there's some device in ... [searching for device on video] ... this one, is only [available] in New Zealand so people introduce this to me. I think this is a really good communication because people sharing all the information over the world and then that's how we develop our professional knowledge and also all the techniques and designing idea. --- Kang (Taiwan).

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the university environment and infrastructure are also important for respondents to maximize their professional opportunities. Universities provide resources for learning, such as labs, workshop training, and information sessions. Some of the workshops and information sessions were reported to be helpful to the respondents in developing knowledge of local communities and institutions, and sometimes in growing social networks. For instance, respondents who started entrepreneurial businesses mentioned that they attended workshops on entrepreneurship, built their social networks, and learned about and applied for seed funds as they went about setting up their businesses. They also suggested that partner programs at universities, such as in collaboration with Mitacs, were helpful in helping them develop soft skills and entrepreneurship.

Discussion

Higher education plays a unique role at the nexus of immigration, internationalization, and, to a great extent, integration. As an increasing number of international and mature migrant students seek higher education to enhance their professional and life opportunities, it is important to understand not only the benefits migrant students derive from higher education but also how programs benefit from their presence. More importantly, we need to understand how higher education supports the advancement of migrants' professional lives.

This paper approaches these questions from a practice-based perspective of migrant advantage, which helps identify how the organization of postgraduate programs contributes to the professional successes of migrant engineers. Through the examination of the experiences reported by 17 migrants, it becomes clear that postgraduate programs for the engineering profession play a critical role in inducting migrants into both the academic and industrial worlds. Respondents became motivated and proactive in learning and innovating when they participated in research projects, capstone courses, and other collective activities that bridge between academic and professional practices. Such opportunities are typically driven by industrial problems, sponsored by supervisors or enabled directly by programs. Through participation in these activities, migrant respondents expanded both *bridging* and *linking* social capital (Field 2016). They benefited from collaboration with peers from diverse backgrounds and, at times, with people operating in different fields of practice.

Through various engagements built into their postgraduate programs and in the universities more broadly, respondents developed not only local knowledge but also local networks and social connections. While participation in higher education supported the localization and extension of their skill, knowledge, and cultural capital, the development of diverse and more distant social ties also facilitated their recognition and positioning within professional fields. At the same time, as migrant students entered these networks of activity, they reciprocally contributed to them through distinctive ways of doing, saying, sensing, and being. Drawing on their prior

learning and training, they brought forms of difference that not only marked their distinctiveness but also contributed to the expansion and reconfiguration of knowledge and practice within higher education and the engineering profession.

Conclusion

Drawing on the experiences of 17 migrant engineering students, this paper explores the mutual impacts of migrant engineering students and postgraduate programs. It must be noted that the 17 respondents were self-nominated or nominated for the study because of the significant contributions that they have made within the engineering profession. It is likely that they constitute an elite group of professionals. The fact that more than half of them were involved in research at universities might be an indicator of this bias. Despite this bias, their perspectives about higher education offer insights into practices in postgraduate programs conducive to students' professional growth, particularly the professional integration of migrant students. Among others, the study suggests opportunities for students to engage in industry and community-relevant research and work can help harness migrant advantage in host countries such as Canada.

References

-
- Adamuti-Trache, M. (2011). First 4 years in Canada: post-secondary education pathways of highly educated immigrants, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 12(1), 61–83.
- Clarke, A.E. (2003). Situational analyses: grounded theory mapping after the postmodern turn, *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(4), 553–576.
- Cole, A.L. and Knowles, J.G. (2001). *Lives in context: the art of life history research*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Coulombe, S., Grenier, G. and Nadeau, S. (2014). Human capital quality and the immigrant wage gap, *IZA Journal of Migration*, 3(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-9039-3-14>.
- Erel, U. (2010) Migrating cultural capital: Bourdieu in migration studies, *Sociology*, 44(4), pp. 642–660. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510369363>.
- Field, J. (2016). *Social Capital*. 3e éd. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203794623>.
- Guest, G., MacQueen, K.M. and Namey, E.E. (2012). *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384436>.
- Guo, S. (2009). Difference, deficiency, and devaluation: tracing the roots of non-recognition of foreign credentials for immigrant professionals in Canada, *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 22(1), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v22i1.1002>.
- Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada (IRCC) (2020). *Temporary residents: study permit holders – monthly IRCC updates*. <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/90115b00-f9b8-49e8-afa3-b4cff8faceae>

- Majerski, M.M. (2019). The earnings of immigrant and native-born men in Canada: the role of social networks and social capital, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 60(2), 314–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2018.1526054>.
- Newland, K. and Plaza, S. (2013). *What we know about diasporas and economic development*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute (Policy Brief No. 5). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Diasporas-EconomicDevelopment.pdf>
- Picot, G. and Hou, F. (2019). Skill utilization and earnings of STEM-educated immigrants in Canada: differences by degree level and field of study. *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, no. 435. Ottawa: Statistique Canada. <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.881943/publication.html>
- Raihan, M.M.H., Chowdhury, N. and Turin, T.C. (2023). Low job market integration of skilled immigrants in Canada: the implication for social integration and mental well-being, *Societies*, 13(3), article 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13030075>.
- Sadjed, A., Sprung, A. and Kukovetz, B. (2015). The use of migration-related competencies in continuing education: individual strategies, social and institutional conditions, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37(3), 286–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2015.1066768>.
- Schatzki, T.R. (2001). Introduction: practice theory. In: Knorr Cetina, K., Schatzki, T.R. and von Savigny, E. (dir.) *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, pp. 10–23. New York: Routledge.
- Shan, H. (2024). Professional learning and knowledge “transfer” in practice: immigrant engineers reticulating the epistemic culture of the profession, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2024.2395339>.
- Williams, A.M. (2007). Listen to me, learn with me: international migration and knowledge transfer, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 45(2), 361–382.
- Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>.

Rethinking lifelong learning through a philosophical lens on identity

From individual professional growth to interrelational existential formation

Jorie Soltic

*PUC - KU Leuven Continue
KU Leuven
Etienne Sabbelaan 53
8500 – Kortrijk
Belgium
Jorie.soltic@kuleuven.be*

ABSTRACT

The discourse on lifelong learning (LLL) increasingly prioritizes reskilling and upskilling for economic purposes, reducing identity to a professional and (hyper)-individualistic construct. This paper critically examines this tendency through Paul Verhaeghe's psychoanalytic approach and the phenomenological tradition, particularly Husserl's work. It addresses key questions: How does the philosophical tradition conceptualize identity formation? What do current LLL policies and practices reveal about identity in this context? By synthesizing these perspectives, the paper argues for a more holistic view of identity in LLL. Rather than an isolated, market-driven construct, identity should be seen as a relational and dynamic process. This approach makes space for existential dimensions of identity and fosters a stronger sense of community.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning, identity formation, neoliberalism, employability, phenomenology

RÉSUMÉ

Le discours sur l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie (ATLV) accorde une priorité croissante au perfectionnement et à la reconversion des compétences (reskilling et upskilling) à des fins économiques, réduisant ainsi l'identité à une construction professionnelle et (hyper)individualiste. Cet article examine de manière critique cette tendance à travers l'approche psychanalytique de Paul Verhaeghe et la tradition phénoménologique, en particulier les travaux de Husserl. Il aborde des questions fondamentales : comment la tradition philosophique conceptualise-t-elle la formation de l'identité ? Que révèlent les politiques et pratiques actuelles de l'ATLV sur l'identité dans ce contexte ? En synthétisant ces perspectives, l'article plaide pour une vision plus holistique de l'identité au sein de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Loin d'être une construction isolée dictée par le marché, l'identité doit être perçue comme un processus relationnel et dynamique. Cette approche permet de réintégrer les dimensions existentielles de l'identité et favorise un sentiment d'appartenance communautaire plus profond.

MOTS-CLÉS

Apprentissage tout au long de la vie, formation de l'identité, néolibéralisme, employabilité, phénoménologie.

Introduction

Lifelong learning (LLL) is gaining increasing prominence on national and international policy agendas. At the same time, the search for identity remains one of the most enduring and fundamental concerns in philosophy. This paper brings these two domains into dialogue. More specifically, it explores how philosophical insights can help us critically examine the conception of the human subject embedded in contemporary LLL discourse. The central question is: *What insights does philosophy offer on meaningful identity formation, and how can these contribute to a critical reflection on the human image promoted within LLL discourse?*

The paper consists of four main sections. First, I discuss Paul Verhaeghe's book "*Identity*", which examines identity from a historical and socio-critical perspective, grounded in his psychoanalytic practice (Section 2). The second section draws parallels with phenomenology, focusing on Husserl as the movement's founding figure (Section 3). The third section applies these insights to contemporary LLL trends, such as microcredentials and personalized learning. I analyse how these trends shape a particular human image, comparing them to Verhaeghe's and phenomenology's perspectives while identifying tensions and gaps (Section 4). The final section presents a personal argument for a more holistic and meaningful approach to identity formation within LLL (Section 5).

"Identity" (2012) by Paul Verhaeghe

Paul Verhaeghe's 'Identity' (2012) serves as the central work in this paper, as it provides both a critical and accessible analysis of contemporary identity formation. It combines a historical perspective with a socio-critical interpretation of neoliberalism's impact on self-perception.

We are aware that Verhaeghe (2012) is already some time ago and his analysis may not capture the significant societal shifts that have occurred since then, in particular the Covid-19 pandemic and the acceleration of digitalisation (including AI and social media), which have introduced new dynamics into how individuals negotiate identity and meaning in work and learning. However, these developments do not invalidate the theoretical framework, as will be revisited in the conclusion (cf. infra-5).

The self-care corporation: alienation in contemporary society

Verhaeghe opens his analysis with a striking portrayal of modern society. Despite unprecedented prosperity and material progress, psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and burn-out have reached epidemic proportions. In his own

words: “*Never has the Western individual been so well off, yet never has he felt so miserable*” (Verhaeghe 2012: 112).

From his clinical practice, Verhaeghe observes that modern individuals struggle with a deeply ingrained conviction: success - primarily in one’s career - reflects a purely *individual* achievement and is therefore entirely self-determined (Verhaeghe 2012: 78 ff.). Conversely, failure is seen as a *personal* shortcoming. The obsession with self-actualization and authenticity - often accompanied by a commercialized “*CEO of your own life*” ideology - paradoxically leads to a loss of self-awareness and connection. Rather than fulfilment, it fosters alienation. As a result, an increasing number of individuals feel like failures despite their efforts, forced to construct their identities within this isolating framework (Verhaeghe 2012: 163).

Identity formation as an interrelational process

Contrary to this neoliberal ideal of identity as an individual project, Verhaeghe argues that identity is fundamentally relational. It emerges through continuous processes of identification and separation. There is no “essential” identity; rather, it is shaped by the norms and values of the society one inhabits. A child raised in a middle-class family in London will develop a different identity than the same child growing up in a Texan household - despite identical biological predispositions. This perspective underscores the fluid and ever-evolving nature of identity.

A historical perspective: from ζῶον πολιτικόν to hyperindividualist

Identity formation is not only a social process but also historically contingent. Verhaeghe traces the transformation of self-conception over time:

- Ancient philosophy: in classical antiquity, identity was inseparable from ethics (Verhaeghe 2012: 41). Aristotle viewed self-knowledge as a path to moral virtue, where individuals were inherently good and oriented toward the community.
- Christianity: under Christian influence, ethics shifted from an internal process to an external, divinely dictated framework. Morality was no longer a product of self-reflection but rather imposed by a higher power, with humans inherently sinful.
- Modernity: with the Enlightenment, science, and later scientism, ethics remained externally imposed, but authority shifted from God to measurable standards such as natural and economic laws. As Verhaeghe puts it: “*God is dead, but everyone bows to numbers*” (Verhaeghe 2012: 224). Community ethics gave way to regulations, contracts, and formal procedures. Identity became an individual project, culminating in today’s ideal of the self-made person.

This historical shift reveals a dual transformation: first, from ethics as an internal principle to an externally dictated system, and second, from a collective to a hyper-individualistic understanding of identity. The dominance of separation over identification in today's self-perception stands in stark contrast to Aristotle's belief that self-knowledge inherently contributes to the common good.

Neoliberalism as an overarching narrative

Verhaeghe moves beyond historical analysis to critique the dominant ideological framework of the present. According to him, contemporary identity is a direct reflection of the neoliberal worldview (Verhaeghe 2012: 149). He argues that neoliberalism is no longer merely a political doctrine but has evolved into an all-encompassing ideology (Verhaeghe 2012: 117).

The marketization of society

Verhaeghe contends that the balance between society's key pillars - politics, religion, economy, and the arts - has been drastically disrupted over the past 30 to 40 years, with economic logic taking precedence. In neoliberal ideology, productivity growth is the ultimate goal, and market forces are idealized. As a result, values such as profit maximization have eclipsed concerns for quality and well-being.

The neoliberal conception of the human: the competitive consumer

The economic reduction of human relationships has profoundly shaped how we view ourselves and society. Social interactions are framed as transactions, and success is measured exclusively in terms of profit and efficiency. Solidarity and altruism recede into the background. Verhaeghe argues that this system has intensified the focus on the individual self while pushing the collective further into obscurity. The human being is redefined as a hyper-competitive consumer, driven by self-interest and personal gain.

Moreover, individualization is not merely normalized but *naturalised* within this ideology, making it appear as the only possible way of understanding human existence. This neoliberal conception of the self has consequences beyond personal identity formation - it also impacts democracy and social cohesion. The prevalence of psychological distress (as noted earlier) is only one manifestation of a deeper societal malaise.

Phenomenological excursus

From psychoanalysis to phenomenology

A rich tradition

With his contemporary theory of identity, Verhaeghe situates himself within a long-standing philosophical tradition. One of these traditions is phenomenology, which has made significant contributions to the debate on identity formation and experience, as the contemporary phenomenologist Zahavi (2018: 6) also notes: “*Twentieth-century phenomenologists have made major contributions to the investigation of the self which can be fruitful for reformulating questions of personal identity*”.

Phenomenology vs. psychoanalysis

However, Verhaeghe is not a phenomenologist but a psychoanalyst, and psychoanalysis and phenomenology have fundamentally different focal points. Psychoanalysis primarily explores the unconscious, whereas phenomenology, as we will see, is primarily concerned with consciousness. Yet, despite these differences, both disciplines reach strikingly similar conclusions: human experience and identity cannot be fully understood through purely objective or rational means (Csordas 2012).

Beyond abstract metaphysics: "Back to the things themselves!"

The dominance of the natural sciences

To understand phenomenology, we must first consider its historical context. This movement emerged in an era (late 19th–early 20th century) when rationalist and even naturalist approaches dominated intellectual thought. At the time, it was widely believed that (natural) scientific and mathematical methods were sufficient to fully explain human experience - only objective, verifiable, and generalizable knowledge was deemed reliable, while sensory experience was considered secondary.

Husserl's concept of intentionality

Husserl, regarded as the founder of phenomenology, observed that materialist science left no room for consciousness. In his view, a strictly “*hard*” scientific approach to the world was insufficient for truly understanding human experience. His famous call to return “*back to the things themselves*” was a plea to understand the world as it is actually experienced. A central concept in this approach is “*intentionality*”: consciousness is always directed toward something outside itself - whether an object, another person, or an experience.

The external world as an irrelevant question

Phenomenology does not question the existence of the external world - this, in Husserl's view, is an irrelevant issue. Instead, its fundamental concern is what and how we experience. In other words, the phenomenologist is not interested in a world *an sich*, existing independently beyond perception. Phenomenology focuses on how reality appears to us in everyday experience, as we perceive it as ordinary human beings. It is concerned with questions of "*meaning*", emphasizing that meaning arises through the individual's direct interaction with the world. This contrasts with more "*intellectualist*" abstract metaphysical inquiries, such as the Platonic search for Ideas.

"The how" rather than "the what"

As a result, phenomenology is more of an applied methodology than a doctrinal system; it emphasizes the way in which something is experienced, examined, and understood. Phenomenology thus connects various thinkers through its shared method. Husserl, for instance, inspired numerous major philosophers, including Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Ricoeur, and Taylor, who expanded on phenomenological thought while introducing their own distinctive nuances (Čapek and Loidolt 2021).

*The experience of the self in everyday reality**First-person perspective*

Phenomenology offers a refreshing framework for studying the 'self' and questions of identity, as it is "*the study of the structures of consciousness as experienced from a first-person perspective*". This approach places the lived reality of the self at the centre, in contrast to a purely objective or abstract analysis.

Social identity

Within phenomenology, identity is understood as shaped by our experiences and interactions in the world around us - the concept of 'being-in-the-world.' This idea is aptly captured by contemporary phenomenologist David Carr (2021: 14): "*Our personal identity is not something that exists independently of our social interactions and commitments. Our social world gives us our identity, or it is that world from which we choose our identity. Personal identity is social identity*".

The historical roots of this (phenomenological) relational "*I*" can already be found in German idealists such as Hegel and Fichte, who argue that: "*Das Ich wird, indem es sich als das Andere setzt*".

Shared conclusion

The idea that the "*self*" is constituted in relation to the "*Other*" brings us back to Verhaeghe, who highlights this dynamic in his critique of contemporary neoliberal

identity. Both Verhaeghe and the phenomenological tradition share the conviction that the limitations - and in Verhaeghe's case, even the threats ("*the neoliberal peril*") - of a purely scientific and rational discourse in the context of identity formation fail to adequately capture human experience. This shared perspective on identity, found both in phenomenology and in Verhaeghe's work, provides a valuable lens for analysing the current discourse on lifelong learning.

Application to LLL: A reductionist-fragmented view of the human being

To examine the implicit view of the human being within the LLL discourse (4.2), I begin by exploring trends in LLL practice (4.0), before connecting these insights to developments at the policy level (4.1).

From practice

Own experiences

The following analysis is partly based on my own experience as program coordinator for lifelong learning at PUC – KU Leuven Continue, an interfaculty service at KU Leuven. PUC – KU Leuven Continue is dedicated to the development and organisation of university-level LLL programmes. The centre offers courses across a broad range of disciplines. While most programmes are aimed at professional development, some also cater to those pursuing learning out of personal interest. A defining feature of our model is its open, cohort-based structure: participants from diverse sectors, organisations, and backgrounds follow the same learning trajectory as a group, starting and finishing the programme together.

"One-size-fits-all does not fit anymore"

Especially since COVID we have seen an increasing demand for more *flexible* learning pathways. This demand extends beyond the learning process itself, including aspects such as duration, intensity, and pace, and also encompasses learning content. This presents new challenges for existing (predominantly cohort-based) LLL models, such as that of PUC – KU Leuven Continue, as also recognized by UNESCO (2022: 2) in the context of LLL in higher education:

"In order for HEIs (higher education institutions) to transform into LLL institutions, they must undergo a fundamental shift, from soliciting the participation of young students coming from secondary schools to welcoming a diversity of learners who are (re)entering higher education at different ages and stages of their personal and professional lives (...) Offering more flexible provision is key to accommodating non-traditional students' diverse backgrounds, professional and personal commitments, and individual learning styles and life experiences."

The rise of EdTech

A key driver of this flexibilization is educational technology, or “*EdTech*”. Technology has enabled learning pathways to become more flexible and even personalised in ways previously unimaginable. EdTech tools, for instance, can respond to learners’ preferences in real time and adjust the learning pace through learning analytics and algorithms. Hybrid learning environments, which combine in-person and online learning, allow participants to tailor their learning processes to their own circumstances, such as work or family commitments (McKinsey and Company 2021).

Microcredentials as another expression of the flexibilisation trend

Another prominent manifestation of the trend that ‘one-size-fits-all does not fit anymore’ is the rise of microcredentials - shorter qualifications than full degree programs (as also advocated in the United Nations’ Education 2030 Agenda). Participants can select course credentials from various programs and providers and, if desired, work towards assembling their own ‘macrocredential’ (Cowie and Sakui 2022: 21). Like EdTech, microcredentials facilitate the creation of unique and personalized learning paths, tailored to individual needs and learning pace.

Microcredentials are particularly promoted in the context of professional development, as they offer “*standalone chunks of learning*” that can efficiently and promptly provide up-to-date knowledge and relevant skills (Golding and Rossade 2022).

Towards policy

In recent years, lifelong learning (LLL) has become a prominent feature of policy agendas at the Flemish, federal, and European levels. Policymakers increasingly view LLL as a means to generate *economic* value. The emphasis is (understandably) on labour market-oriented aspects, positioning LLL primarily in service of *professional* growth.

The new Flemish coalition agreement (2024-2029), for instance, restricts the Flemish Training Leave (VOV) to programs leading to occupations experiencing labour shortages - likely in response to the current tight labour market. Moreover, most LLL measures end at the age of 65, coinciding with the official retirement age.

At the European level, this economic focus is equally evident. The European Skills Agenda frames LLL as a tool for developing “*human capital*” and enhancing labour market adaptability (“*employability*”), particularly through “*reskilling*” and “*upskilling*” (Crespy and Kenn 2024).

This policy-driven emphasis on the *economic* dimension of LLL aligns with a broader shift towards a more individualistic approach. A case in point is the recently introduced federal Belgian “*Labour Deal*” (2022), which positions the right to LLL as an *individual* career entitlement. As a result, LLL is increasingly perceived as a

personal responsibility - almost an obligation. This brings us naturally to a critical analysis of the implicit view of identity within the current LLL discourse.

Towards identity

Protean, yet merely professional

To begin with, the current LLL discourse reflects a vision of identity that is dynamic and unfixed - aligned with both the phenomenological tradition and the insights of Verhaeghe. LLL emphasizes an identity that remains in constant flux, requiring the learner to continuously adapt to a (rapidly) changing societal reality. As previously discussed, the rise of microcredentials, for example, facilitates this ongoing adaptation by offering quickly acquired, professionally relevant “chunks” of knowledge.

At the same time, we must add a critical note. As previously noted, policy primarily focuses on labour market relevance, meaning that “*lifelong*” in practice often translates to “*career-long*”. Individuals are primarily encouraged to develop dynamically in terms of their *economic* value and role: their (professional) identity - what we might call their “employable identity” - must be continuously shaped according to labour market demands. In this context, we may reference the modern ideal of the so-called “*Protean career*”, in which the individual, much like the ancient Greek sea god Proteus, who constantly altered his form to adapt to turbulent waters, is expected to self-direct and continuously steer their career.

The unique, authentic self

The focus on professional identity goes hand in hand with an ideal of a unique, authentic self. This aligns with the current trend of personalised learning pathways - particularly within edtech. Typically, this trend is legitimized by educational motives, such as the ability to differentiate and thereby contribute to “*empowerment*” (Bagnall and Hodge 2022; Papadopoulos 2023). Additionally, personalised learning is often framed as a means of expanding access to and democratizing LLL.

However, beyond these educational justifications, this trend is also closely tied to more capitalist motives - namely, the maximization of efficiency, effectiveness, and “*employability*” (Selwyn 2017; Komljenovic et al. 2023). This results in a perspective in which responsibility for identity formation is placed entirely on the individual: it is, in a sense, our civic duty to ensure that our own - unique - LLL trajectory remains (economically) valuable.

As a consequence, LLL policy appears to promote a highly individualised vision of identity, one that largely disconnects identity formation from broader social or collective frameworks.

A reductionist, fragmented, and even paradoxical view of the self

In summary, the current LLL discourse embraces a somewhat fragmented notion of identity - certainly reductionist when compared to Verhaeghe and the

phenomenological tradition - on two key points. On the one hand, while identity formation is indeed regarded as a dynamic process, it is framed exclusively in terms of professional identity. A fuller, *existential* identity fades into the background. On the other hand, the LLL discourse disregards the *relational* dimension of identity formation by emphasizing individualistic, unique learning pathways. Identity is thereby reduced to a collection of skills that must be continuously adapted on an individual (or even isolated) basis to meet market demands.

Moreover, this conceptualization of identity within the current LLL discourse contains a striking paradox. On the one hand, LLL encourages individuals to constantly adapt to external trends and conditions, such as the evolving labour market and technological innovations. On the other hand, LLL simultaneously promotes an individualised, self-directed developmental process, in which authentic, personal choices are central. This combination of adaptability and individual responsibility creates a tension: while individuals are encouraged to autonomously shape their unique learning path, they are also continuously urged to adjust it in response to external expectations. This raises the question of whether individuals are truly free to choose an authentic path - or whether this path ultimately remains subordinate to market-driven demands.

This brings us back to Verhaeghe's social critique of neoliberalism, which fosters alienation from the self and undermines the development of a (meaningful) existential identity. Emerging research (Avci et al. 2025; Zhong et al. 2025) both confirms and extends Verhaeghe's insights. In particular, studies conducted since Covid suggest that identity formation and lifelong learning now unfold within an increasingly fragmented and accelerated environment.

Taken together, these recent findings confirm and extend Verhaeghe's observations, demonstrating that the pressures and opportunities of current LLL practices continue to shape individual identity in profound ways. In the concluding section, I will therefore argue for a more holistic vision of identity formation within LLL - one that incorporates broader, alternative perspectives from the philosophical tradition as a valuable counterbalance.

Concluding thoughts

Towards greater balance: the human in totality

A more balanced approach to identity formation within lifelong learning (LLL) must extend beyond individual and instrumental goals, such as increasing labour productivity. A holistic perspective would recognize that genuine identity formation is inherently intertwined with the social and interpersonal, allowing space to perceive the human being in their intrinsic value and "*totality*" - both as an individual and in relation to their environment.

More truncus communis instead of cherry-picking?

While personalised learning paths, along with innovations like microcredentials and edtech, offer valuable educational opportunities, cohort-based LLL programs - defined by a shared curriculum and collective learning journey - remain relevant. Such formats foster collective engagement, dialogical exchange, and a shared horizon of meaning, thereby contributing to identity formation in a more integrated and socially anchored manner. Rather than dismissing these traditional formats as “*old school*”, they may serve as counterweights to the prevailing logic of customisation in the field of LLL.

In today’s society, LLL may require precisely this solid foundation - a common trunk - rather than an ever-narrowing focus on individualized selection and cherry-picking. After all, without a solid trunk, cherries cannot grow, let alone flourish. Perhaps within this lies a key to a more meaningful, relational process of identity formation - a quest that has long occupied humanity’s collective consciousness.

References

-
- Aspin, D. N. and Chapman, J. D. (2001). Lifelong learning: concepts and conceptions. In: *International handbook of lifelong learning*, pp. 9-34. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6193-6_1.
- Avci, H., Baams, L. and Kretschmer, T. (2025). A systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development, *Adolescent Research Review*, 10(2), 219–236. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-024-00251-1>.
- Bagnall, R. G. and Hodge, S. (2022). The power of personalization rhetoric. In: *Adult education and lifelong learning in modernity*, pp. 27-60. Cham: Springer.
- Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: ethics, politics, democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Carr, D. (2021). Personal identity is social identity, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 20(3), 341-351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09702-1>.
- Čapek, J. and Loidolt, S. (2021). Phenomenological approaches to personal identity, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 20(3), 371-383. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09716-9>.
- Crespy, A. and Kenn, B. (2024). The EU’s “People, Skills, Preparedness” agenda: A risky shift in social policy, *Social Europe*, 11 October. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-eus-people-skills-preparedness-agenda-a-risky-shift-in-social-policy>.
- Csordas, T. J. (2012). Psychoanalysis and phenomenology, *Ethos*, 40(1), 54-74.
- Golding, C. and Rossade, C. (2022). Making microcredentials count. In: *Innovating Higher Education Conference 2022*, 19-21 Octobre, Athènes. https://ihe2022.exordo.com/files/papers/184/final_draft/Making_Microcredentials_Count_Full_Paper_IHE2022.pdf.

- Han, B.-C. (2014). *De vermoeide samenleving*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Joldersma, C. W. (2019). The pull of the ethical that shifts narrative identity: Paul Ricoeur's summons to responsibility and sympathy for the other, *Philosophy of Education*, 75, 147-152.
- Komljenovic, J., Williamson, B., Eynon, R. and Davies, H. C. (2023). When public policy "fails" and venture capital "saves" education: Edtech investors as economic and political actors, *Journal of Education Policy*, 38(6), 745-766. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2023.2223155>.
- Kušić, S., Sofija, V. and Zovko, A. (2022). Micro-credentials – improvement or fragmentation in higher education?, *Conference Proceedings*, pp. 152-156. <https://doi.org/10.36315/2022v2end033>.
- McKinsey and Company (2021). *How technology is shaping learning in higher education*. <https://www.mckinsey.com>.
- Papadopoulos, D. (2023). Individualising processes in adult education research: a literature review, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 42(1), 8–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2135141>.
- Ralston, S. J. (2021). Higher education's microcredentialing craze: a postdigital-Deweyan critique, *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3, 83-101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00121-8>.
- Sakui, K. and Cowie, N. (2022). Micro-credentials: surveying the landscape, *JALTCALL Publications*. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.CALL.PCP2021-02>.
- Selwyn, N. (2017). The rise of educational technology as a sociocultural and ideological phenomenon, *Educause Review*. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/4/the-rise-of-educational-technology-as-a-sociocultural-and-ideological-phenomenon>
- Social Europe (2022). *The EU's people-skills-preparedness agenda: a risky shift in social policy*. <https://www.socialeurope.eu>.
- UNESCO (2022). *More flexible HE provision*. <https://www.unesco.org>.
- United Nations (2022). *Education 2030 agenda*. <https://www.un.org>.
- Verhaeghe, P. (2012). *Identiteit*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Zahavi, D. (2018). *Phenomenology: the basics*. London: Routledge.
- Zhong, B., Song, Y., Feng, G. C., Shi, J., Zhu, Y., Xie, L., Zhou, W. A., Yu, S., Lu, Y., Qin, Y. and Xiong, Z. (2025). AI imaginaries shape technological identity and digital futures, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 169, 108682. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108682>.

Changes in professions and institutions of education

Educators: where are you?

The difficult transition for educators in Italy

Federico Zamengo*, **Paola Zonca****, **Nicolò Valenzano*****, **Daniel Mastro Simone******

** University of Turin
Italy
federico.zamengo@unito.it*

*** University of Turin
Italy
paola.zonca@unito.it.*

**** University of Turin
Italy
nicolo.valenzano@unito.it*

***** University of Turin
Italy
daniel.mastro Simone@unito.it*

ABSTRACT

The professional role of educators is currently undergoing a critical phase in the Italian context, as the transition into this profession has become more complex than in the past. This contribution aims to present the results of a qualitative study involving a group of 20 educators on this topic.

KEYWORDS

Educators, job transition, great resignation, social worker, Future Lab.

RÉSUMÉ

Le rôle professionnel des éducateurs traverse actuellement une phase critique dans le contexte italien, la transition vers cette profession étant devenue plus complexe que par le passé. Cette contribution vise à présenter les résultats d'une étude qualitative menée auprès de 20 éducateurs sur ce sujet.

MOTS-CLÉS

Éducateurs, transition professionnelle, grande démission, travailleur social, Future Lab.

Introduction

With the aim of promoting social innovation processes, a permanent working group has been established in recent years between the University of Turin and the Province of Cuneo, focusing on the education and training of educators (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Goddard, 2016). The group initiated a renewal of educational services, during which it emerged the need to collectively reflect on the role of the educator (Field, 2006). Currently, educators in Italy are increasingly difficult to find (Salerno, 2024).

In Italy, the educator is a professional who works mainly in non-formal educational settings: within the third sector, in public services – often in partnership with public institutions – and in the private sector. Educators may be employed in socio-educational services or within the healthcare system, supporting children, young people, families, and adults in situations of vulnerability. They are also committed to fostering community well-being through projects involving citizens and aimed at promoting individual and collective empowerment.

Although this is a longstanding profession, it has been formally regulated by law only in the past thirty years, and the legislative process is still ongoing (Zago, 2023). Regarding education and training, young people who wish to become educators are required to obtain a three-year university degree, which could follow two distinct pathways: either oriented primarily towards the social field, or with a stronger healthcare focus, designed for those intending to work in medical and psychiatric contexts. Paradoxically, at a time when demand for this profession is increasing – particularly in response to growing social inequalities and educational poverty – a genuine professional crisis is unfolding. Many educational services are currently struggling because they are unable to recruit professionals willing to work as educators. Hence the question in the title: Educators, where are you?

After briefly outlining the profile of the educator in the Italian context, the article presents the initial results of an exploratory study involving twenty educators, focusing on the issue of the professional crisis. This represents a first step in investigating a complex phenomenon that has not yet been extensively explored in Italy, but which can be more broadly situated within our research addressing young people's withdrawal from workplaces, as documented by numerous international reports (Deloitte, 2023; Gallup, 2023; McKinsey and Company, 2022; PwC, 2023).

A multidimensional crisis

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation of educational work in Italy has become particularly complex, especially concerning young educators. For these graduates, the transition into professional life appears much more difficult than in the past. Despite strong labour market demand for educators, relatively few graduates choose to pursue this profession on a permanent, long-term basis. As a result, some educational services face the risk of being eradicated or are forced to reconsider the structure of their activities.

From a theoretical perspective, the reasons behind this phenomenon are manifold. On one hand, reference can be made to changes generated by the neoliberal paradigm, which, for example, has led to the erosion of welfare systems and a general weakening of social bonds (Magatti, 2017); on the other hand, internal changes within the profession itself are evident, particularly regarding educators' perceptions of their own role (Falcinelli, 2021).

Regarding this second aspect, the few studies specifically addressing this topic interpret the structural shortage of educators in Italy using multidimensional models. Among the most significant factors are the low social and economic recognition of this professional category and the existence of overly fragmented training pathways. In Italy, educators are among the lowest-paid graduates, and the presence of distinct educational pathways does not appear to align with labour market demands (Salerno, 2024; Premoli, 2022; Galimberti, 2022). In short, outside the school system, educational work is poorly recognised, weakly structured, and organised through numerous short-term projects, which prevent both educational services from achieving long-term continuity and professionals from planning their personal and professional futures with economic and employment security (Pandolfi, 2022).

Consequently, many young people prefer to continue their studies in order to pursue a teaching career, which is more secure and better remunerated (Premoli, 2024). However, in quantitative terms, enrolment in study programmes for future educators and the number of graduates in this field have not declined significantly over the past ten years (Almalaura, 2024). This, together with the growing labour market demand for educators, suggests that the profession still holds some appeal, at least as a first choice. Yet, the encounter with professional reality appears challenging and often leads to a shift in career trajectories. The turning point seems to lie in the transition from higher education to the labour market. When this is combined with the well-documented phenomenon of the “Great Resignation” – in Italy, 70% of those leaving employment are aged between 26 and 35 (Coin, 2023; d’Aniello, 2022; Cohen, 2021)—the profession of educator risks being perceived as a temporary occupation for young people who, after a brief work experience in this field, decide to pursue a different career. In this way, the profession becomes trapped in a vicious cycle, unable to support the natural process of generational renewal.

The research: context and research question

To explore this topic, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted between February and July 2024, involving 20 professional educators from the Province of Cuneo in northwestern Italy.

The group of educators was evenly divided: half were experienced professionals with more than ten years in the field and an average age slightly over forty, while the other half comprised younger educators, some of them were recent graduates, others had only two to three years of experience, with an average age under thirty.

The research context proved particularly significant not only for understanding the phenomenon of job dissatisfaction but also for fostering dialogue between different generations of educators. The research experience thus provided an opportunity to share impressions and meanings both within the profession and among individuals with varying levels of experience and professional perspectives. The chosen methodology aimed to create a space in which educators from different generations could engage in an in-depth discussion about their profession.

In light of the theoretical framework presented, the study was guided by three key research questions:

- Can the current disenchantment with the profession be seen as a generational problem, a reflection of the general situation of today's youth, or should it be interpreted as a symptom of a structural crisis?
- Does the hypothesis that the turning point for young educators is the transition into the labour market match the views of the participants?
- What possible solutions can be identified – at least by the participants in this study – to counteract the dwindling presence of educators?

Research methodology

Before examining the results in detail, it is worth highlighting some key features of the methodology employed: the Future Lab.

This participatory action research method enables participants to explore and share possible future scenarios through collaborative dialogue, encouraging the formulation of meaningful questions and shared action perspectives. In other words, it is an approach that promotes the collective creation of imaginaries, focusing on constructing and redefining meanings related to a specific theme and developing concrete decisions (Pellegrino, 2019). Originally developed by Jungk and Müllert in the 1980s, this methodology consists of three distinct phases (Jungk and Müllert, 1987), each involving both individual and collective reflection:

1. Dystopian phase: participants are asked to reflect on possible negative consequences that could arise if current challenges are not addressed – hence the term “dystopia,” as they are invited to stress the current situation in increasingly negative directions.

2. Utopian phase: participants are asked to imagine ideal conditions for the topic under consideration, without constraints of realism or current limitations.
3. Transitional phase: focuses on identifying elements in the present that could contribute to realising utopian visions, outlining achievable action plans for the coming years to bring these positive visions closer to reality (Pellegrino, 2019; 2020; Jungk and Müllert, 1987).

More specifically, each phase involved a three-hour workshop in which participants were asked to reflect and share their ideas while envisioning the professional role and conditions of educators in the future.

Participation in the study was voluntary, indicating a clear interest and sensitivity towards the project topic. Following the methodological guidelines, each of the three sessions was dedicated respectively to dystopia, utopia, and transition, using a similar format. Each session began with a stimulus text, followed by a guiding question posed by the moderator. Participants first reflected individually and then in small groups. Finally, a collective debriefing was conducted using posters to highlight the key features of the group reflections – this was a crucial moment for identifying the main elements of each scenario and building a shared imaginary.

The sessions were facilitated by two researchers and two observers who transcribed the group discussions. These transcripts were then subjected to *in vivo* categorisation of emerging themes (Kuckartz and Radiker, 2023; Jugessur, 2022). The material was analysed using a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives (Baldacci, 2001).

The research materials included not only the observations and transcriptions by the researchers but also photographs of the artefacts produced by participants during the sessions, such as post-its, posters, and individual notes. The dystopian and utopian phases projected the professional future of educators into 2040, while the transitional phase aimed to identify achievable objectives and actions over a shorter period, namely the next three years.

Main Results

In presenting the main findings of the study, we offer a general overview of the three scenarios, using participants' own words from the group discussions (Saldana, 2021). Broader considerations will be addressed in the final section. It is important to note that the three scenarios should not be seen as separate, static images, but as part of a single dynamic process resulting from shared thinking (Lipman, 2004): dystopia leads to the imagination of utopia, through which the transition can emerge. The testimonies collected serve as symbolic indicators of the professional tensions already present in current reality; the resulting narrative is therefore not necessarily linear, rather it unfolds as a complex interaction between loss of meaning and transformative reactivation within the participant group (Poli, 2022). As emphasized by the theorists of the model, the transitional phase is the most delicate, as it involves attempting to make specific actions concrete based on more abstract analysis (about dystopia and

utopia), yet it represents a crucial element for the participatory and active dimension proposed by the model (Pellegrino, 2020).

4.1 Dystopia: the erosion of educational work

In the dystopian vision of the year 2040, as described by the research participants, the educator is seen as an almost obsolete figure, absorbed into a generic “operator” role, stripped of specific competences, whose concerns regard tasks of execution and control. One participant explicitly stated: “the educator will only be a trainer.” This signals the end of the pedagogical mission and, symbolically, the extinction of a professional identity: that of the educator as a reflective agent capable of integrating knowledge, relationships, and change. The reflections in this session reveal clear signs of professional depersonalisation: “the end of the profession” emerges as a recurring theme in the group’s dystopian discussion. Educational work is described as precarious, fragmented, bureaucratised, and subordinated to a productivity-driven logic that suppresses genuine reflection and planning. The loss of autonomy and the dominance of managerial logic are seen as trends already present today; according to one educator, professionals “already work according to overly rigid protocols.”

The imagined organisational climate in 2040, echoing terms repeatedly used by participants, would be “oppressive,” marked by “continuous on-call schedules,” “professional isolation,” and a “growing sense of uselessness.” In the dystopian scenario outlined by the group, even future digital technologies do not alleviate suffering; instead, they reinforce the sense of distance and dehumanisation: the educator becomes a “screen figure,” with few opportunities to face-to-face relational engagement. Under these conditions, “tomorrow’s educator will systematically experience burnout,” and the organisations where they work will not implement any supportive initiatives.

Yet, in this bleak scenario, some participants choose the path of personal resistance: “I will continue,” an educator with over ten years of experience claims, “to work as an educator, but in a different way, outside the institutions.” This statement suggests that, in this case, professional motivation remains, but the structures of the services in which the profession is practiced are in crisis: “It may be,” another educator comments in response, “that the public system has collapsed and work is only carried out in the private sector... But is this still educational work?” Younger educators, however, seem less motivated: “I really do not think I will still be an educator in 2040,” or “Of course the meaning given to the idea of education will remain a personal matter, but I do not think I will bring it into my job in the future.”

Utopia: educators “everywhere”

While, as expected, the dystopian scenario projects dramatic features for future educators, the utopian scenario explored in the following session radically overturns the dystopia and depicts a profession that is finally recognized, one that is fully

integrated into everyday contexts, and endowed with high economic and social value. The educator of the future “is not an isolated figure, but a networked actor, embedded in multidisciplinary teams,” actively building social ties and promoting wellbeing. A key term which emerged in the discussion is “everywhere”: “educators are present everywhere – in physical and virtual spaces, in nature, in services, and across different territories”; “each organisation will have a team of educators working for the wellbeing of all collective contexts”; and again: “educators are alongside all people, not only those affected by vulnerable situations.” Networking is no longer a conceptual goal but a daily and well-established organisational practice: “We will constantly work in and with groups.”

In this future, educators finally have “more time.” Bureaucratic simplification allows them to focus on the core of pedagogical action, namely relationships: “We no longer spend a lot of time filling out forms that nobody looks at; instead, we will finally be truly alongside people.” Work is organised around networks and follows a co-constructive logic rather than one based on individual performance. Continuous training, supervision, and dialogue with universities become stable tools to ensure both the quality of work and professional wellbeing. In this scenario, educators receive adequate remuneration, social recognition, and contractual stability – elements recognised as “a basic requirement acknowledged by policymakers because everyone knows that our work is important.”

Whereas these reflections contain elements of professional advocacy and valorisation, it is also true that the described utopia cannot be considered naïve or merely a professional claim. There is awareness that in 2040 “work will remain complex and not simple,” especially considering the social changes envisioned for the future: “Who knows,” one professional asks, “what it will mean to be an educator in a world full of answers provided by AI?” A colleague replies, “We will be the professionals of questions in a world that provides only answers.” Yet, despite the changes and uncertainties of 2040, the utopia outlines a context in which the educator is recognized as having a solid professional profile, valued by both political authorities and social contexts.

Transition: modest proposals for a possible future

As stated, the final phase, that of transition, is undoubtedly the most delicate and complex. In this phase, educators collectively evaluate which measures could be implemented over the next three years to prevent the dissolution of the profession (dystopia). The imagined utopia is thus revisited retrospectively to trace a path towards the desired horizon. In other words, the guiding question that stimulates participants’ reflection in this phase is: “What can we do now to improve the situation, drawing inspiration from the utopia?” (Pellegrino, 2019).

The thematic areas on which participants focused during the transition phase are essentially two: professional isolation, considered the most critical aspect of the present, and the value of educational work, both from an internal professional perspective and in terms of external recognition. Participants put forward some simple proposals especially regarding these aspects. A primary area on which to focus when elaborating interventions is the loneliness experienced by professionals: “We never have time to discuss things,” “We cannot meet and address situations together; we are overwhelmed by what needs to be done”; and, as a young educator added, “We are literally thrown into work without really having experience.” This is a widespread feeling in contemporary times, and not only in the field of education (Hertz, 2021), as such it is the dimension that most strongly motivates participants to take action. Therefore they proposed establishing among educators in the area “study days, residential seminars, regular and periodic meetings” because, according to one participant, “we need to build stable bridges and networks connecting ourselves.” In other words, the priority is to create opportunities for the bottom-up development of professional learning communities, collaborative spaces oriented towards shared reflective practice, which are largely absent or only weakly institutionalised within educational services (Wenger, 1998). These can foster the generation of collaborative networks (utopia) to counter the “end of educators” (dystopia). These spaces are conceived as genuine opportunities to sustain professional growth, directed at both younger and experienced educators, because, as one participant emphasizes, “even with a lot of experience, you can feel alone in your work.” The second priority identified is the valorisation of educational work. This involves personal motivation on the professionals’ end, but it also translates into efforts to achieve public recognition of educational work. One participant observes: “It is necessary to go beyond data, numbers, and reports. In the past, it was not like this, and perhaps it was even wrong, but today everyone asks us for numbers and data based on short-term projects, yet educational processes can be assessed in the long term, not in the short term as funding requires.” This is not an opposition to accountability itself, but rather a call for greater integration between “data” and the “meanings,” of educational processes, which are often hidden and less visible. In short, the focus is on the need to re-signify educational work: the activation of shared reflective practices proposed to address isolation could serve both protective and generative functions, enabling educators to reconnect with the meaning of their work and collectively negotiate tensions between educational values and organisational constraints.

Assigning value to educational work is also expressed through initiatives that can enhance the recognition of the profession externally. A young educator underlines: “If I tell my friends what I do, they do not understand... It is not easy, in fact, they really have no idea what an educator does outside school and without working with children.” On the basis of this observation, the group committed to implementing public initiatives to raise citizens’ awareness about the importance of the educational role, with a clear stance: the local activation of a coordinated effort to draft a shared summary document bringing together the interventions identified during the research process, so that proposals become known to policymakers, funding agencies, and leadership of public and private services. A senior educator ironically remarked: “We could organise a big strike... We would halt many daily activities, and then everyone would understand how much we quietly do.”

Conclusion

Aware that the scope of this investigation is limited in both sample size and geographic area, and that further research at national and international levels would be necessary to compare initial findings, the Future Labs conducted provide an interesting insight into the dynamics of educational work as experienced by the participants in this study. Despite these limitations, it is still possible to offer some initial responses to the research questions. As far as disenchantment with the profession is concerned, the exploratory study challenges the generational hypothesis. Professional isolation is perceived by all participants, regardless of their years of service. Nevertheless, in the dystopian phase, most young educators do not see themselves as educators in 2040, this perception calls for a more nuanced analysis. If isolation appears to be a structural element in the contemporary representation of the profession, more experienced educators seem to possess greater coping strategies: “I will continue to work as an educator, but in a different way, outside the institutions,” a senior educator stated, as we previously mentioned. It is plausible that young educators, already facing the challenging transition from university to professional life, experience this condition more acutely, which currently appears to be structural in educational work. As observed in similar studies, the professional crisis of educators in the Italian context must be addressed multidimensionally (Salerno, 2024; Premoli, 2022; Galimberti, 2022): this study also suggests that young professionals’ disengagement from the profession cannot be attributed solely to their youth. A young educator noted: “The commitment is extremely high, but the salary is decidedly the opposite.” In short, the transition from education to work does not necessarily lead to an immediate abandonment of the profession, rather it opens up a phase of critical negotiation of one’s role, which can result in either disillusionment or the pursuit of new forms of educational engagement that may receive better economic recognition. It is important to remember that, for younger educators, professional challenges are intertwined with their actual possibilities of becoming independent adults (Arnett, 2000; Arnett *et al.*, 2014).

While the transition between education and work represents a critical phase, the proposals imagined by the participants in this study may offer important opportunities to support and foster a sense of collective belonging. The creation of shared reflective spaces – informal in character, yet recognised as important by the professional community – could constitute a first, though not sufficient, step towards sustaining the value of the profession. From this perspective, strengthening the connection between universities and professional realities could represent an important action to promote a greater sense of belonging among educators. Only through such bottom-up organisation it is possible to envision broader collective actions capable of modifying the structures of a profession that nonetheless remains fragile and insufficiently recognised. The proposals put forward by the Future Lab participants, though modest, appear feasible and realistic, mindful that, as H. Arendt reminds us, “even the smallest act in the most limited circumstances carries within it the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (Arendt, 1958, p. 190).

References

-
- Almalaurea, <https://www.almalaurea.it/lavoro>
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.
- Arnett, J. J., Žukauskienė, R. and Sugimura, K. (2014). The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18–29 years: Implications for mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1(7), 569–576.
- Baldacci, M. (2001). *Metodologie della ricerca pedagogica*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Cohen, A. (2021). *How to quit your job in the great post-pandemic resignation boom*. Manhattan: Bloomberg Businessweek.
- Coin, F. (2023). *Le grandi dimissioni. Il nuovo rifiuto del lavoro e il tempo di riprenderci la vita*. Torino: Einaudi.
- d’Aniello, F. (2022). Behind and beyond the Great Resignation: A pedagogical viewpoint, *Education and Society*, 1, 329-346.
- Etzkowitz, H., Webster, A., Gebhardt, C. and Terra, B. R. C. (2000). The future of university and the university of the future: Evolution of the ivory tower to entrepreneurial paradigm. *Research Policy*, 29, 313–331.
- Falcinelli, F. (2021). *L'educatore professionale oggi. Formazione, competenze, esperienze*. Roma: Carocci Editore.
- Field, J. (2006). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. London: Trentham Books.
- Goddard, J., Hanzelkorn, E., Kempton, L. and Vallance, P. (2016). *The civic university: The policy and leadership challenges*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Hertz, N. (2021). *The lonely century: A call to reconnect*. Londra: Hodder and Stoughton.

- Jugessur Y. (2022). In Vivo coding qualitative data analysis methodology adapted, contextualized into 7 stages and applied to data from Interview, Focus Group and Case Study in School enterprises, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 11 (5), 30-36.
- Jungk, R. and Müller, N. (1987). *Future Workshops: How to create desirable futures*. London: Institute of Social Inventions.
- Kuckartz, U., Radiker, S. (2023). *Qualitative content analysis. Methods, Practice and Software*, SAGE, London
- Magatti, M. (2017). *Cambio di paradigma: Uscire dalla crisi pensando il futuro*. Milano: Feltrinelli Editore.
- Pandolfi, L. (2023). Promuovere le capacità di self-care in nuclei familiari vulnerabili: Un'indagine sul ruolo e sulle metodologie d'intervento dell'educatore domiciliare e scolastico. *Journal of Health Care Education in Practice*, 5(1), 175–185.
- Pellegrino, V. (2019). *Futuri possibili. Il domani per le scienze sociali di oggi*. Verona: Ombre corte.
- Pellegrino, V. (2020). *Futuri testardi. La ricerca sociale per l'elaborazione del "dopo-sviluppo"*. Verona: Ombre corte.
- Pellegrino, V. (2020). Il futuro come processo di re-framing collettivo: La "ricerca processuale" per l'elaborazione del "dopo-sviluppo." *FUTURI*, 13, 5-193.
- Poli, R. (2022). *Working with the future: Ideas and tools to govern uncertainty*. Milano : EGEA.
- Premoli, S. (2022). Educatori cercasi: la crisi del mercato del lavoro educativo. *Vita No Profit*, in <https://www.vita.it/educatori-cercasi-la-criasi-del-mercato-del-lavoro-educativo/>
- Premoli, S. (2024). La crisi delle professionalità educative e il ruolo della pedagogia accademica tra responsabilità e prospettive, *Civitas Educationis*, 13 (2), 163-183.
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Salerno, V. (2024). *Schock. Dall'educatore vulnerabile e ignorato alla formazione di un'équipe educativa dialogica e resiliente*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zago, G. (2023). *L'educatore. Profilo storico con appendice antologica*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.

From human capital to sustainability

Alessandro Monchietto*, **Charlotte Kohlloffel****

** Department of Philosophy and Education
University of Turin
Via Verdi, 8
10124 - Turin
Italy
alessandro.monchietto@unito.it*

*** Department of Philosophy and Education
University of Turin
Via Verdi, 8
10124 - Turin
Italy
charlotte.kohlloffel@unito.it*

ABSTRACT

Teacher education stands at the intersection of conflicting imperatives: the drive to optimise employability within market-oriented frameworks and a transformative vision of education as a vehicle for sustainability and social justice. Using Allan's (2003; 2008) notion of aporia, this paper examines two persistent tensions in contemporary policy. The first concerns the strain between inclusive practice and standardised accountability, which asks teachers to meet uniform targets while supporting diverse learners. The second highlights the friction between competitiveness and sustainability, where short-term efficiency conflicts with broader ethical and ecological commitments. The paper argues that these contradictions, rather than being resolved, can work as catalysts for critical reflection, allowing teacher education to support teachers in genuinely inhabiting their role as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2018).

KEYWORDS

Teacher Training, Transformative Professional Learning, Educational Policy, Market-Driven vs Sustainability-Oriented Education, Aporias in Teacher Policy.

RÉSUMÉ

La formation des enseignants est traversée par des tensions difficilement conciliables : optimiser l'employabilité dans un marché du travail concurrentiel tout en promouvant une éducation orientée vers la durabilité et la justice sociale. En s'appuyant sur la notion d'aporie telle qu'elle est élaborée par Allan (2003, 2008), cette contribution théorique examine deux contradictions centrales des politiques éducatives actuelles. La première oppose l'inclusion à une accountability standardisée, plaçant les enseignants face à un choix entre accompagnement différencié et performance standardisée. La seconde révèle le conflit entre compétitivité et durabilité, où l'efficacité à court terme se heurte aux exigences de transformation écologique. Plutôt que de chercher à résoudre ces contradictions, la contribution propose d'en faire des ressources pour des réflexions critiques, préparant ainsi le corps enseignant à assumer pleinement un rôle d'intellectuels transformateurs au sens de Giroux (2018).

MOTS-CLÉS

Formation des enseignants, apprentissage professionnel transformateur, politique éducative, éducation axée sur le marché et éducation axée sur la durabilité, apories dans les politiques en relation aux enseignants.

Introduction

The development of Higher Education (HE) policy was shaped by competing demands: on the one hand, by the economic desire to align education with the needs of the labour market, and on the other, by the increasing recognition of education as a means of social transformation. This tension is particularly evident in teacher education, where institutions are expected to simultaneously promote employability and maximize student achievement while training educators capable of tackling global challenges such as climate change, inequality and the dismantling of democracy. Drawing on Allan's concept of *aporia* (2003; 2008), this paper explores the contradictions in contemporary education policy and argues that teacher education must manage rather than resolve these tensions.

Theoretical background

Aporias in education policy

Allan, in her extensive work on inclusive education, argues that education policy is often structured around irreconcilable demands - what she calls "*aporias*" - which place teachers, schools, and policymakers in a paradoxical situation. One of the most persistent of these *aporias* is the expectation that teachers must simultaneously maximize student achievement while ensuring full inclusivity.

At first glance, these goals might seem complementary - after all, inclusive education is often framed as an effort to ensure that all students can succeed. However, as Allan points out, the very mechanisms used to measure student achievement, such as standardized assessments, performance metrics, and competitive rankings, often conflict with the principles of inclusive education. Inclusion requires flexible assessments, individualised programs, and accommodations that challenge the rigid structures imposed by academic performance benchmarks.

Education policymakers attempt to mediate this tension through frameworks that claim to integrate both objectives, but these solutions function more as temporary fixes rather than genuine resolutions. Schools and teachers are held accountable for raising standardized test scores and improving performance metrics, yet they are also expected to accommodate students with diverse learning needs, many of whom do not conform to the rigid expectations of assessment models. As a result, inclusion often becomes a rhetorical commitment rather than a substantive educational practice.

Teachers are left navigating a system where they must constantly compromise between achievement and inclusion, making decisions that, by necessity, prioritize one over the other, in a climate of *learnification* (Biesta, 2021). When faced with limited resources and time constraints, they may focus on students who are more

likely to contribute to improved performance statistics for the school, marginalising those who require additional support, eventually for obtaining more fundings for the school or to adapt to a broader system. This dilemma is not merely a pedagogical challenge, but a structural contradiction embedded in contemporary education policy and practice (Norwich, 2013).

This raises critical questions about whether the current policy framework can ever truly reconcile these contending demands. If inclusion is to be meaningful, it cannot simply exist alongside performance-driven models of education – it must challenge and redefine what is meant by success in the first place.

Market-oriented education policies vs inclusion-based education policies

The contradiction between maximizing performance and inclusion is not an isolated phenomenon, but a recurring structural tension in education policy. As Allan shows, when two goals are seen as equally important but potentially incompatible, one will inevitably dominate or constrain the other, leading to policy compromises that do not fully resolve the contradiction.

A similar aporia can be observed in the global discourse on market-oriented education policy and Inclusion and social justice-oriented education policy. On the one hand, international organizations advocate for education systems that focus on efficiency, economic competitiveness and the adaptability of the workforce: a framework that views education as an investment in human capital (European Commission, 2016). On the other hand, there are policies that support a model of education that focuses on sustainability, social responsibility and ecological awareness (UNESCO, 2021) and challenges the market-driven logic of education.

These two visions seem to coexist in global policy frameworks, but they are based on contradictory assumptions about the purpose of education. Can education simultaneously serve the demands of economic growth and environmental sustainability without one objective subordinating the other? Or are we experiencing another irreconcilable tension in which education policy attempts to balance competing imperatives without fundamentally considering their incompatibility?

In the following sections, we will explore how this contradiction manifests itself in policy frameworks, teacher training and curriculum design, and critically examine whether these competing logics can be reconciled or whether one ultimately marginalizes the other.

Measuring education through economic impact

Over the past 30 years, international organizations such as the OECD and the European Union have played a crucial role in promoting a market-oriented vision of education (Sorensen and Dumay, 2024). New Public Management (NPM) introduced

principles of business efficiency into education and higher education, focusing on performance metrics, school and teacher accountability, and curriculum alignment with labour market demands (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

An important example of this approach is the OECD report "Education at a Glance" (2010), that resonates with more recent work of the organisation (Égert et al., 2022) which states:

"Improving the performance of education systems and raising value for money is the main task for public policy. In the future, success will not be measured by spending levels or graduation rates, but by the educational outcomes achieved and their impact on economic and social progress."

Similarly, the European Commission's Rethinking Education (2012) report positions investment in education primarily as a means to boost competitiveness, stating:

"Investment in education and training for skills development is essential to boost growth and competitiveness (p. 2)"

This emphasis on employability has had a profound impact on teacher education. Influential documents such as the EU Framework for Key Competences (2018), the Teachers Matter report (OECD, 2005), and the Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future (EC, 2020) have viewed teachers as economic assets responsible for optimizing student achievement in order to improve employability. This focus on skills-based education has influenced EU funding strategies and led to initiatives that promote STEM education, digital skills, entrepreneurial education and lifelong learning as essential components of a modern education system. Policy frameworks such as the Education and Training Monitor consistently link student learning outcomes to economic performance indicators and reinforce the idea that education should be measured by its contribution to labour market preparation.

In parallel, international policy has promoted partnerships between schools and businesses, entrepreneurship education and greater involvement of private sector actors in education policy. Programmes such as knowledge alliances and entrepreneurship education initiatives promote closer collaboration between schools, universities and businesses, preparing students not only for employment, but also for economic independence and innovation-oriented careers.

However, this market-oriented approach raises fundamental questions about the prioritisation of educational goals. While the issues raised from an economic perspective cannot be ignored, there is a danger that defining educational success in terms of employability and competitiveness neglects the broader social and ethical dimensions of learning. As critical scholars have pointed out (Sin et al., 2019), such

policies often lead to a narrowing of the curriculum by emphasising directly measurable skills while neglecting broader intellectual and civic skills. The focus is mainly on qualification (Biesta, 2021) and neither on socialisation nor on subjectification.

A shift toward sustainability and transformation

While market-oriented education policy has sought to reconcile learning with economic growth and the adaptability of the labour market, a parallel but contrasting vision of education has gained prominence in recent years: one that sees education as a key lever for sustainability, climate resilience and social justice. At the heart of this shift is the idea that education cannot merely serve as a mechanism for adapting to economic change but must actively contribute to shaping a sustainable future.

The UNFCCC Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) initiative positions climate literacy as an essential component of global education policy, and UNESCO's 2030 Roadmap for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) explicitly calls for a transformation of education systems and advocates for schools that promote climate literacy, ethical responsibility and interdisciplinary problem-solving:

“Educators remain key actors in facilitating learners’ transition to sustainable ways of life, in an age where information is available everywhere and their role is undergoing great change. Educators in all educational settings can help learners understand the complex choices that sustainable development requires and motivate them to transform themselves and society. In order to guide and empower learners, educators themselves need to be empowered and equipped with the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours that are required for this transition” (p. 36).

Similarly, the European Commission’s Council Recommendation on Learning for the Green Transition and Sustainable Development (2022) recognizes environmental competence as a fundamental skill that must be integrated into teacher education and lifelong learning framework (Bianchi et al., 2022).

Discussion: The role of teachers as transformative intellectual

In contrast to the prevailing models that see teachers as facilitators of predefined knowledge, Giroux’s (2018) concept of the teacher as a transformative intellectual offers a radically different vision. This perspective rejects the illusion of a “*neutral*” curriculum for teacher education and recognizes that all pedagogical decisions (such as curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and pedagogical strategies) are deeply political (Biesta, 2021). In a world facing unprecedented climate challenges, teachers cannot be trained only to “deliver” education; they must be prepared to critically challenge dominant narratives and empower students to envision and enact alternative pathways for sustainability and social justice.

This shift requires a rethinking of the fundamental assumptions of teacher education. If sustainability and social change are to take centre stage, teacher education must go beyond teaching climate change expertise. It must cultivate the ability to question economic paradigms that reduce education to the development of human capital (Brennan, 2017). This means not only incorporating ecological and ethical perspectives into curricula, but also promoting a pedagogy of resistance in which teachers and students together critically examine the socio-economic structures that cause the climate and environmental crises. It should also mean that the lesson deliberately becomes an “*interruption*” where the student is consulted by the teacher by saying “*Hey, you, look at there [the outside world]!*”: The student can thus learn about the wider world, understand the power of their actions and encounter freedom and responsibility (Biesta, 2021). If this encounter with the outside world is successful, the student can authentically accept the challenge of facing the questions posed by the world.

However, this approach poses a direct challenge to the logic of market-driven education. As long as education is evaluated from the perspective of the economy and the labour market (e.g. employability of graduates, adaptability of the workforce and institutional performance metrics), transformative sustainability education will remain marginalized. The question is not only how climate education should be integrated, but whether it can meaningfully coexist in a system that ultimately subordinates’ education to economic growth.

Rather than looking for compromises that mask these contradictions, recognizing this aporia forces us to ask: What do we really expect education to achieve? If education is to be more than a means of perpetuating existing economic systems, then it must actively encourage the imagination to envision alternative futures. This question is not incidental to teacher education, it is its crucial challenge. Are we preparing educators to maintain the current framework, or are we creating the conditions for a radically different future?

Conclusion: The priorities of education

In his critique of half-education (*Halbbildung*), Adorno (1951/2003) warned against the illusion that education could remain unaffected by external forces. He argued that no system of knowledge can be fully understood without first recognizing the extra-pedagogical realities that shape it. Today, this insight is more pressing than ever. Education is no longer just about imparting knowledge; it is a battlefield where competing imperatives clash.

This contradiction is not merely a policy challenge but a structural aporia, an unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tension. Can education simultaneously serve the needs of economic productivity and the radical transformation necessary to combat climate collapse? Can teacher education produce professionals who are both responsive to the market and critically engaged agents of change? The assumption

that these priorities can be seamlessly reconciled underestimates the ideological ruptures at play.

Aristotle reminds us that when two goals are treated as equally important, one inevitably subordinates the other: when climate education is embedded in a market-driven model, it risks becoming a decorative accessory - an instrumentalized gesture that leaves the deeper economic logic of education untouched. Conversely, a genuine commitment to sustainability would require a fundamental rethinking of the purpose of education, away from an instrument of economic optimization and towards a vision of learning as collective survival.

This is not just an abstract philosophical dilemma, but a crucial question for teacher education today. The way teachers are trained reflects thinking about the role of education in society. Should teacher education continue to focus on maximizing the adaptability of the workforce, or should it actively cultivate the ability to question, disrupt and reconceptualize existing structures?

Allan (2008) proposes not to dismiss aporias as obstacles to be overcome, but to understand them as sites of critical reflection. If we take this seriously, then we should not try to “*balance*” economic imperatives with sustainability concerns, but recognize the impossibility of serving two masters equally. This realization forces us to ask a more radical question: what future do we want education to build?

Teacher education is at the centre of this tension. To insist on resolving the contradictions in education would be to deny the reality of competing priorities. Instead, we should recognize them for what they are: deep structural tensions that reveal the limits of our current framework. If education is to be more than a function of the present, it must claim the ability to shape the future (Biesta, 2015). This is not a technical adaptation, but a profound political and ethical choice. And it is one that teacher training must urgently face up to.

References

- Adorno, T.W. (2003). Theorie der Halbbildung [Theory of Halbbildung], in Tiedemann, R. (ed.) *Soziologische Schriften I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. (Trad. it.: Marietti Sol-mi, A. (ed.) (2010) *Teoria della Halbbildung*. Genova: Il Melangolo).
- Allan, J. (2003). Inclusion and exclusion in the university, in Booth, T., Nes, K. and Stromstad, M. (eds.) *Developing Inclusive Teacher Education*, pp. 140–155. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Allan, J. (2008). *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bianchi, G., Pisiotis, U. and Cabrera Giraldez, M. (2022). GreenComp – The European sustainability competence framework, in Punie, Y. and Bacigalupo, M. (eds.) *EUR 30955 EN*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/13286>
- Biesta, G. (2015). What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism, *European Journal of Education*, 50, 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12109>
- Biesta, G. (2021). *World-centred education: A view for the present*. London: Routledge.
- Brennan, M. (2017). Struggles for teacher education in the age of the Anthropocene, *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, 69, 43–66. http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2520-98682017000200003&ndlng=en&ndtlng=en .
- Égert, B., de la Maisonneuve, C. and Turner, D. (2022). A new macroeconomic measure of human capital exploiting PISA and PIAAC: Linking education policies to productivity, *OECD Economics Department Working Papers*, No. 1709. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a1046e2e-en>
- European Commission. (2016). *A new skills agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Council. (2018). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for LifeLong Learning*. 2018/C 189/01-13. Brussels: European Council. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&id=7](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&id=7).
- European Council. (2020). *Council conclusions of 26 May 2020 on European teachers and trainers for the future*. 2020/C 193/04. Brussels: European Council. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020XG0609%2802%29>.
- European Council. (2022). *Council recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition and sustainable development*. 2022/C 243/01. Brussels: European Council.
- Giroux, H.A. (2018). Teachers as transformative intellectuals, in *Thinking about schools*, pp. 183–189. London: Routledge.
- Norwich, B. (2013). *Addressing tensions and dilemmas in inclusive education: Living with uncertainty*. London: Routledge.
- OECD (2005). *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*. Education and Training Policy. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264018044-en>
- OECD (2010). *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2010-en>
- Rasmussen, P., Larson, A., Rönnerberg, L. and Tsatsaroni, A. (2015). Policies of “modernisation” in European education: Enactments and consequences, *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(6), 479–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904115610783>

Sin, C., Tavares, O. and Amaral, A. (2019). Accepting employability as a purpose of higher education? Academics' perceptions and practices, *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(6), 920–931.

Sorensen, T.B. and Dumay, X. (2024). The European Union's governance of teachers and the evolution of a bridging issue field since the mid-2000s, *European Educational Research Journal*, 23(2), 237–260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041241234695>

UNESCO. (2021). *Education for sustainable development: A roadmap*. [online] Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802>

Imagining a shift in supervision paradigm to help PhD candidates access employability beyond academia

Ghada Challah

*Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès
Département Sciences de l'éducation et de la formation
5 All. Antonio Machado
31058 TOULOUSE Cedex 9
France
gchallah0@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how PhD students are supervised in Education and Adult Learning Sciences in France and if they are well-equipped and oriented to employability beyond academia. In this paper, we present findings of a mixed-research design. The qualitative approach explores how supervisors practice supervision and how they guide PhD students to careers beyond academia. The quantitative approach explores the motives of PhD students to embark on a PhD in mid-career and their future perspectives after degree completion. This paper sheds light on supervision approaches, management styles and employability of PhD students.

KEYWORDS

Supervision, supervisors, PhD students, career trajectories, adapt.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente comment les doctorants sont accompagnés en Sciences de l'éducation et de la formation en France et si ces derniers sont bien outillés et orientés vers l'employabilité au-delà du milieu académique. Dans cet article, nous présentons les résultats d'une recherche mixte. L'approche qualitative explore la manière avec laquelle les directeurs de thèse encadrent, guident et orientent les doctorants vers des carrières en dehors du milieu universitaire. L'approche quantitative explore les motivations des doctorants qui entreprennent un doctorat en milieu de carrière et leurs perspectives d'avenir après l'obtention de leur diplôme. Cet article met en lumière les approches d'encadrement, les styles de gestion et l'employabilité des doctorants.

MOTS-CLÉS

Encadrement, directeurs de thèse, doctorants, parcours professionnel, adapter.

Introduction

The aim of this research (Challah, 2022) is to provide a better understanding of doctoral supervision in France by looking at this practice through the eyes of PhD supervisors and PhD students.

Extensive research tackle supervision (Madan, 2021; Hockey, 1996), challenges of doctoral studies (Roos, Löfström, Remmick, 2021; Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, Lonka, 2012), success and perseverance (Durknen, 2019; Bourdages, 2011), career opportunities after degree completion (McAlpine and Austin, 2018; Main, Prenovitz and Ehrenberg, 2019; Leclercq, 2008), management styles (Gatfield, 2005), supervision conceptions (Lee, 2008) while other studies reveal that embarking on a PhD as a high-risk project (Powel and Green, 2007). However, few studies focus on the academic path of non-traditional PhD adults pursuing a PhD in mid-career as well as their career trajectories and aspirations after degree completion in France.

This research aims to examine how PhD supervision is practiced in France in Education and Adult learning Sciences and what are the PhD students career perspectives and objectives of pursuing a PhD in mid-career. This research is crucial due to the significant output of supervision practices, career positions and opportunities after degree completion.

Another aim is to understand how PhD students are supervised and how they view their future career opportunities after degree completion. This research is therefore crucial for different reasons. It provides a panoramic view of supervisees' career aspirations, explores the reasons of embarking on a PhD in mid-career and examines how PhD supervision is practiced.

It is well-known that supervision in Humanities differs from Sciences. In Humanities, PhD students choose their PhD project, structure it, suggest how to proceed in data collection and navigate their milestone. As for Sciences, PhD students work in collaboration with their supervisor, conduct their research in a laboratory with their peers and are in a close relationship with their supervisor.

In that context, we aim to explore studies related to doctoral supervision, especially, conceptions of supervision, different management styles, career perspectives, lack of academic positions. Our research questions are:

- to what extent do supervisors adapt their practice to the needs and career perspective of PhD students?
- how do supervisors provide guidance to careers beyond academia?
- what are the profiles of mid-career adults embarking on a PhD programme
- what are the career perspectives of professional adults pursuing a PhD?

In this PhD research, we carried out semi-structured interviews with PhD supervisors and we sent an online questionnaire to PhD students via their doctoral schools.

Conceptions of Supervision (Lee, 2008)

Lee (2008) considers that there are two approaches to supervision. The first is related to the concept of research supervision conception and how supervisors approach supervision. The second refers to the supervisor's doctoral experience when he was a PhD student (Table 1).

	Functional	Enculturation	Critical thinking	Emancipation	Relationship Development
Supervisors Activity	Rational progression through tasks	Gatekeeping	Evaluation Challenge	Mentoring, supporting constructivism	Supervising by experience, developing a relationship
Supervisor's knowledge & skills	Directing, project management	Diagnosis of deficiencies, coaching	Argument, analysis	Facilitation, Reflection	Emotional intelligence
Possible student reaction	Obedience Organised	Role modelling	Constant inquiry, fight or flight	Personal growth, reframing	Emotional intelligence

Table 1 : A Framework for concepts of research supervision (Lee, 2008)

Lee (2008) identified five approaches. The "*Functional*" refers to project management. It relies on a well-organised and reasonable deadline according to the evolution of the research. The "*Enculturation*" relies on encouraging the PhD student to become a member of the disciplinary community through attending conference, publishing or conducting research. The "*Critical thinking*" invites the PhD student to answer intriguing questions and analyse his/her work. The "*Emancipation*" implies that the PhD student is able to manage his/her own project. The "*Relationship Development*" is considered as a unique relationship according to the personality of the PhD student and the supervisor. Hence, the importance to adjust the supervisory style to the profile of the PhD student.

Management Styles of Supervision (Gatfield, 2005)

According to Gatfield (2005), supervisors have different management styles. Emerging from management, Gatfield's research (2005) is based on the dimensions of the supervisory relationship and the different styles of conduct of supervisors. The author sheds light on the supervision process and management styles by developing a conceptual model providing an explanation of the managerial dimension of supervision (Figure 1).

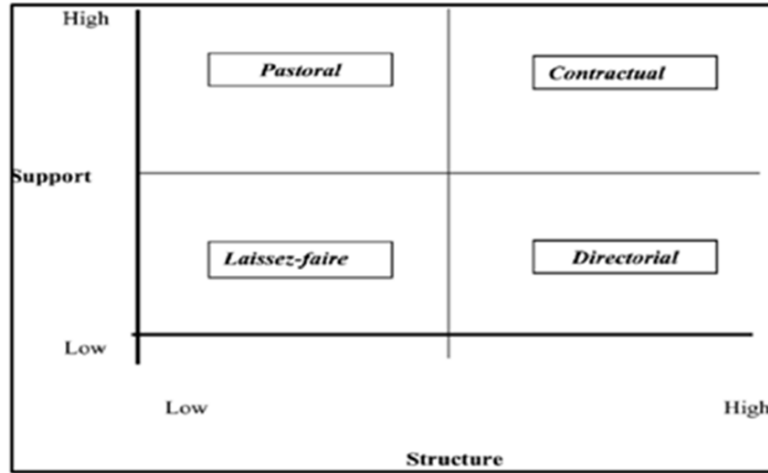


Figure 1 : A supervisor Management Grid (Gatfield, 2005, p.317)

As presented, the four quadrants illustrate four management styles, namely the “Laissez-faire” style which reflects a fragile work environment and fairly weak support. As a consequence, the PhD student does not achieve a high level of motivation and does not develop management skills. As for the “Pastoral” style, it reflects a fragile work environment, high support and offers “*considerable personal care and support but not necessarily in a task-driven directive capacity*” (p.218). The implication of these management styles is that the PhD student does not develop management skills, but benefits from the support offered by his supervisor. The “Directorial” style reflects a well-structured work environment and little support from the supervisor who maintains a close and regular interactive relationship with the PhD student who is highly motivated and engaged in structured activities such as setting objectives and meeting deadlines. The “Contractual” style illustrates a framework of work and significant support. The supervisor provides guidance, demonstrates good management and interpersonal skills, guides the PhD student to funding structures and ensures timely completion. Hence, the PhD student is highly motivated, becomes capable of taking initiatives, evolves in his research and work independently.

A close reading of this model shows that the supervisor’s ability to adapt to the needs of the PhD student is a determining factor in supervisee’s success and time of degree completion. According to this model, the supervisor adopts a variety of supervision styles and oscillates between these different styles according to the different phases of the research. This leads us to the three phases and the different supervisory styles that come into play throughout supervision (Figure 2).

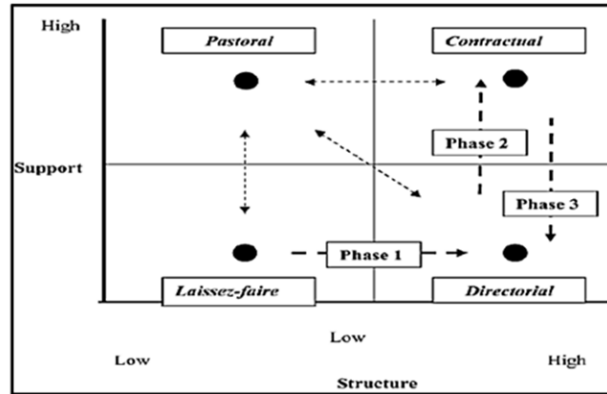


Figure 2: Supervisory Management Grid with changes over time (Gatfield, 2005, p.322)

As presented in the grid, “Phase 1” constitutes the beginning of supervision. Considered as a discovery period of the dissertation subject by the PhD student, it involves very little “Framework/Structure” and limited “Support” which leads to a “Laissez-faire” style. Once past this initial phase, the PhD student begins to have an evolving dissertation topic and research questions. In “Phase 1”, the supervisor guides and offers more “Structure” to the PhD student, enabling him/her to develop the theoretical and methodological plan for his/her dissertation. This leads us towards the “Directorial” style and, in parallel, towards the work contract (i.e. towards the “Contractual” style) leading the PhD student to his own research work. This phase involves high levels of “Support” and “Structure”. While writing, the PhD student may need little “Support” while maintaining the need for “Structure”. The dotted lines imply that the supervisor can engage in a “Pastoral” style of supervision to provide the PhD student with considerable support to facilitate the next stage of his/her career as scholar-apprenticeship. This grid shows that the supervisor oscillates between different supervisory styles depending on the evolution of the research. Hence, it seems appropriate to consider supervision as a practice that requires adaptation and adjustment in order to meet the needs and expectations of PhD students.

Research Methodology

We adopted a mixed-method research design “[...] in which the researcher links, in some way (e.g. merges, integrates, connects), both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a unified understanding of a research problem” (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p.322). In this research, two tools are used to collect the data: semi-structured interviews and a survey questionnaire. The aims of the semi-structured interviews are to better understand how supervisors adapt their practice to the needs and career perspective of PhD students and how do supervisors provide guidance to careers beyond academia. As for the survey questionnaire, the aims are

to know the profiles of mid-career adults embarking on a PhD programmes and what are their career perspectives after degree completion.

Qualitative approach: Semi-structured interview (Bardin, 1997)

Semi-structured interviews are considered as a tool to understand, explore and analyse, more in-depth, supervision practices and opinions than would be possible through a survey questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews enable us to collect open-ended data and to discuss supervision practice in detail.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in three doctoral schools in France with PhD supervisors who are all specialized in “*Education and Adult Learning Sciences*” and who accepted to take part in the study. PhD’s supervisors’ interviews were anonymized, recorded, transcribed manually and analysed using content analysis. In order to analyse the interviews, we first had to categorize and classify the different elements on the basis of our interview guide.

Quantitative approach: Survey questionnaire to PhD students

To analyse the collected data, we eliminated incomplete responses, and out of (N=158), we retained (N=128) PhD students’ answers ; we classified the respondents according to three disciplines to highlight the most dominant discipline and identify age groups and future perspectives.

The results will therefore be presented according to these three disciplines.

- “*Education and Adult Learning Sciences*” makes up the first group and includes several branches, such as, adult education, teaching and teacher training.
- “*Psychology*” makes up the second group and gathers several branches, such as, organizational psychology and clinical psychology.
- “*Other disciplines*” refers to the third group and includes different branches, such as, history, geography and sociology.

Results and Analysis

In this part, we present the survey questionnaire results and the semi-structured interviews.

Survey questionnaire : Disciplines classification

The first step in the process is to classify the collected data to remove any incomplete responses. As a result, out of (N=158) PhD respondents, only (N=128) answers were retained. The operation is related to the grouping by discipline.

Following a brief observation, we noticed that the rate of PhD students belonging to “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” makes up the first group, followed by “Psychology”. They are the dominant disciplines. While the number of PhD students in “Other disciplines” constitutes a minority. We preferred to group them according to these three disciplines. The results will therefore be presented according to these three disciplines (Figure 3).

This classification has two aims. Firstly, to highlight which disciplines are most dominant and what are their specific characteristics. Secondly, to identify different issues related to each discipline in terms of age groups, professional experience, as well as different representations of PhD students with regard to career perspectives after degree completion.

Following data processing, we have established a classification according to the three disciplines.

- “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” presents 52% (n=66)
- “Psychology” presents 20% (n=28)
- “Other disciplines” represents 20% (n=26)

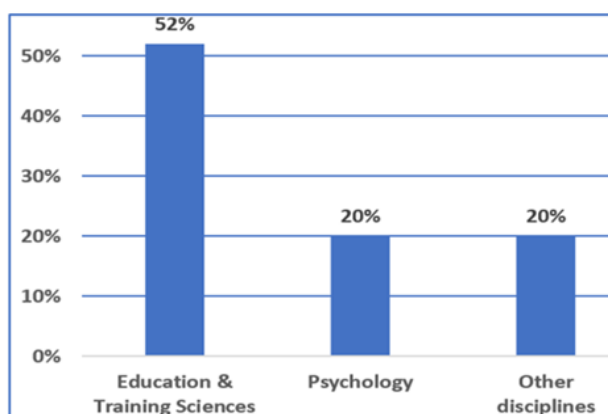


Figure 3 : Percentages of PhD students in the three disciplines

Demographic data : Age groups

Four age groups are identified in Figure 4. The first age group of [36-46[refers to PhD students enrolled in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and makes up the majority of those enrolled and represents 20% (n=26). The second age group of [25-35[represents 15% (n=19) of those enrolled in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences”. The third age group of [46-55[represents 13% (n=17) of the total number of PhD students. Both age groups [25-35[and [46-55[were evenly split, while, the age group [56+[constitutes 3% (n=4) of the population. The fourth age group of [56+-[.

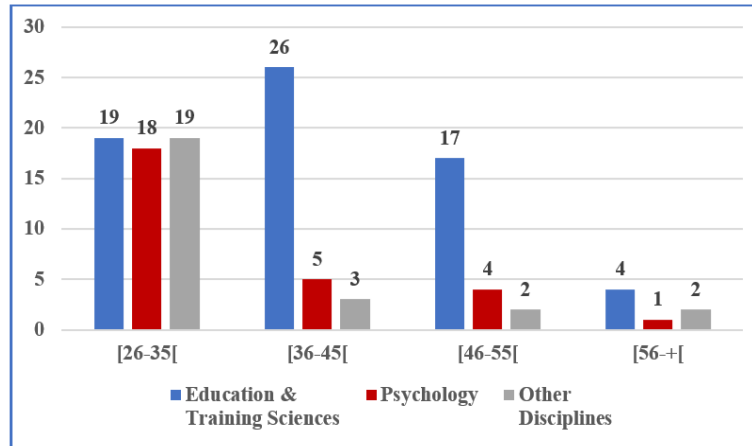


Figure 4 : The three age groups of PhD students in the three disciplines

The data reveal that that age group [25-35[constitute the initial training PhD students. This category represents the “*neo-doctoral*” or the “*apprentice-researcher*” PhD students. As for the age groups [36-45[, [46-55[and [56+[, PhD students’ enrolment in a doctorate is to meet a professional goal.

Although there is a difference between the different age groups in the three disciplines, age group [25-35[which constitutes “neo-doctoral students” is dominant. There is a clear representation of the different age groups in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” compared to “Psychology” and “Other disciplines”. The different age groups reflect different PhD students’ profiles, which raises the question of supervision practices according to the needs of PhD students.

The age group [36-46[constitutes a significant proportion of the population and is characterized by the value attributed to the degree, professional experience and career perspectives.

As for [56+[, PhD students are adults returning to studies, having their own expectations and needs. Similarly, the value and meaning of PhD is not the same as that of the three age groups.

Summarily, the data show that PhD students age group in “Other disciplines” is limited to a very young group which is not the case for “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and “Psychology”. Furthermore, age groups [36-45[and [46-55[account for five times fewer doctoral students. With regard to [56+ age group, this population refers to adults returning to studies, with their own expectations and needs. Similarly, the value of the degree is not the same as that of the three age groups. Moreover, the data show that the supervisee population is limited to a very young group in “Other disciplines”, which is not the case for “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and “Psychology”. Furthermore, the age groups [36-45[and [46-55[have

five times fewer doctoral students. Disparity can be explained by the high level of professional integration in “Psychology” which explains the number of PhD students in the three age groups.

The “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” discipline attracts a group of PhD students with different approaches to research, different professional experiences and different age groups. The age group [36-45] includes many PhD students, revealing a growing awareness of the need of research and highlights the value and the impact of a PhD in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences”.

As for “Psychology” PhD students’, professional integration plays a crucial role in the commitment to doctoral training which explains the gap between the first age bracket and the other age brackets compared to the other disciplines.

We asked a multiple-choice question (4 items) to PhD students about their future perspectives followed by added comments (Figure 5).

The question is : what do you want to become after degree completion?

1. Teacher-researcher
2. Researcher
3. Teacher-trainer
4. I do not know

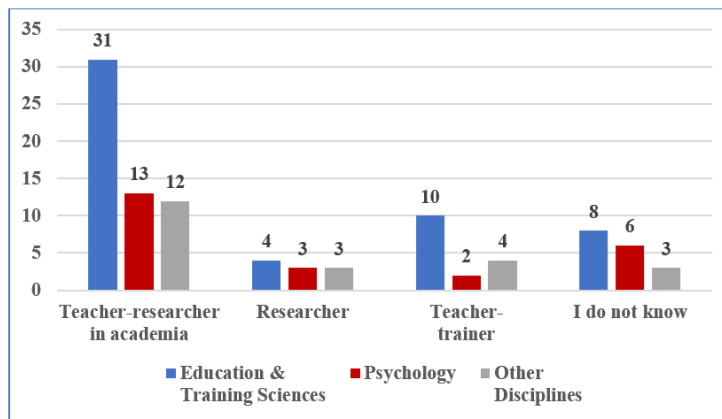


Figure 5: Future perspectives of PhD students after degree completion

Question: what are your future perspectives after degree completion? Provide comments.

The “Teacher-researcher” item shows that academia remains the primary option for PhD students. It also shows a balanced distribution between “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and “Other disciplines”, constituting twice as much as the number presented for “Psychology”. As for the second item, “Researcher”, the numbers related to “Psychology” and “Other disciplines” are balanced and represent

twice as high as the number of “Education and Adult Learning Sciences”. Furthermore, the numbers for “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and “Other Disciplines” are balanced in relation to the “Teacher Trainer” item and are twice as high as the number for “Psychology”. As for the last item, “I do not know”, the items are balanced in relation to “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” and “Other disciplines” and make up half the number presented for “Psychology”.

Briefly, academia remains the first choice for PhD students in all three disciplines.

As for the comments provided by the respondents, they are classified according to the following themes:

- Theme 1: The reality of university landscape (limited number of positions, lack of MCF positions, etc.) (Table 2).
- Theme 2: Retaining, evolving in his career seeking ‘professional security’ (Table 3).
- Theme 3: Career perspectives (research/publishing/trainer) and lack of orientation towards the private sector (Table 4).

The nature and reality of university landscape

Becoming a teacher-researcher in academia is the most reasonable step after degree completion. Six PhD students out of all respondents would like to become teacher-researcher (Table 2). But is this wish feasible? What is the probability to become true?

Theme 1 : The reality of university landscape	
☞	<i>'there won't be any teaching-research positions left by the time I submit my dissertation!'</i>
☞	<i>'I would like to join a university to continue this wonderful adventure'</i>
☞	<i>'possibly a teaching-research post. In any case, I plan to pursue research and writing in parallel with my work as a clinician'</i>
☞	<i>'teaching in higher education if possible'</i>
☞	<i>'A teacher-researcher in higher education, but I would like to continue working a part-time job and be involved in initial training'</i>
☞	<i>'I am a remedial teacher and a part-time teacher-researcher, I would like to stay as I am'</i>

Table 2 : Comments provided by six PhD students

Regarding the reality of the university landscape, becoming a teacher-researcher remains a wish and PhD students are conscious of this reality. Keeping aside this reality, numerous obstacles pertain to becoming a teacher-researcher in academia such as being qualified by the CNU, applying for the position and the audition which may not take place at all, or which may take place but without access to the position.

Another type of comments, drafted by PhD students in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences”, provide a rationale for “professional security” and reflect theme 2 (Table 3).

Theme 2 : Retaining, evolving in his career seeking ‘professional security’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ ‘I want to keep my job’ ↳ ‘The dissertation will help me keep my post in as a teaching manager in paramedical higher education as a result of reengineering of studies and the move to 4 years of initial training’ ↳ ‘Developing the research mission within my institution’ ↳ ‘A dream...if I can’t achieve it, I’ll stay a trainer’ ↳ ‘I am already a trainer at a training centre, and my career evolution will be at the training centre; my workplace provides funding of my PhD’ ↳ ‘This PhD will enable me to keep my post as head of teaching staff, given the reengineering of paramedical studies and the increase in the number of years required to reach Master 2 level’

Table 3: Comments drafted by PhD students

The comments reveal that maintaining one’s position or evolving in one’s career leads to the ‘professional security’ hypothesis which is a characteristic of “Education and Adult Learning Sciences” PhD students.

Career perspectives beyond academia (research support, teaching, publishing, etc.) and lack of orientation towards the private sector

The third theme focuses on career perspective beyond academia. University leaders should come up with different PhD programmes to respond to the evolving labour market. Doctoral schools are invited to inform, to train, and to equip PhD students with skills that enable them to meet the needs of careers beyond academia. Moreover, ensuring doctoral programmes in line with the demands of the labour market is crucial.

The lack of orientation towards the private sector was not mentioned directly by PhD students’ which implies the lack of orientation towards the private sector.

Semi-structured interviews

In this part, we are presenting how fifteen supervisors or (PU) practice supervision, their supervision conceptions and management styles.

According to the collected data, we identified five supervision conceptions presented in Table 4. The first conception is namely “professional vs developmental” and implies that supervisors support different profiles and are product-focused while others feel responsible for ensuring the conditions for PhD students to succeed. The

second conception is “the evolving dimension of supervision”. As for the third conception, it refers to “the educational entanglement”. Concerning the fourth conception, it is related to the “research subject”. While the fifth conception, it sheds light on “co-supervision”.

First conception : “professional vs developmental”
<i>S1: ‘the role of the PhD supervisor is to provide support and to monitor the work as closely as possible [...] supporting doctoral students to the best of their abilities’</i>
<i>S2: ‘a role in setting the frame’</i>
<i>S3: ‘supporting doctoral students in their research work’</i>
<i>S5: ‘is also to ensure that the student can produce a piece of writing with a methodological conceptual framework [...] professionalise students in the teaching-research profession’</i>
<i>S8: ‘reflect on the posture of the research in relation to the posture of the practitioner’</i>
<i>S6: ‘professionalise students in the teaching-research profession’</i>
<i>S11: ‘to succeed have a good PhD’</i>
Second conception : “the evolving dimension of supervision”
<i>S11: ‘we’re all in the same boat and the boat has to move forward and everyone in the boat has to do things. S in fact you have to manoeuvre the boat called the dissertation, we’re going to build the boat, and I’m the director and there are scientific guarantee responsibilities and accompanying responsibilities’</i>
Third conception : “the educational entanglement”
<i>S5: ‘avoid any dispersion’</i>
<i>S4: ‘help candidates to build a project that they can identify with, that interests them and that is recognisable by the community’</i>
<i>S10: ‘more support, regulation, maintaining the pace, maintaining desire’</i>
<i>S11: ‘provide support, we’ll say human support here’s a scientific aspect and the human aspect, but it has to be done in interaction with the PhD student, so in fact it is sharing with the person’</i>
Fourth conception : “the research subject”
<i>S6: ‘it is taking an interest in the “definition of the subject, methodology, etc”</i>
<i>S7: ‘more pedagogical aspects’</i>
<i>S9: ‘helping in research-design, theoretical framework [...] encourage him to critical thinking’</i>
Fifth conception : “co-supervision”
<i>S12: ‘co-supervision¹, with an MCF, enables him to have a better visibility of the practice of supervision [...] possible co-supervision is with a director from another speciality’</i>

Table 4 : The five supervision conceptions of PhD supervisors

Discussion

We explored how supervisors practice supervision in “Education and Adult learning Sciences” and presented their approaches to supervision. They focus on the dissertation and how to let PhD students acquire the making of research. As for career guidance, PhD students mentioned the lack of positions to become a teacher-researcher (MCF) in academia but they did not mention any further career perspectives beyond academia. This implies that supervisors are rooted in academia and do not have a clear vision about the labour market and how PhD students, especially those specialized in “Education and Adult Learning Sciences”, are able to find a career beyond academia and what are the needed skills. Moreover, the supervisors talked about adaptation during the different phases of the research but

they did not provide indicators related to it. This point sheds light on the dissertation without taking into account the PhD student's career perspective.

Moreover, according to NOTE FLASH DU SIES (N°25-Septembre 2024), doctors' employability in humanities and social sciences are less satisfied with their professional situation. Among the promotion of 2020, 83% of employed doctors are satisfied with their professional situation one year after their degree. However, the level of satisfaction varies according to discipline. It is higher in exact sciences and applications (86%) and life sciences (83%) than in social sciences (79%) and humanities (74%).

We also explored why supervisees in mid-career embark in a doctorate. While becoming a teacher-researcher in academia remains a dream for the majority of PhD students who are conscious of the lack of positions, others have different career perspectives such as evolving in the same career, having a promotion or even keeping his own career.

As for the qualitative data, we identified and presented five supervision conceptions in the theoretical framework (Lee, 2008).

The first conception is namely "professional vs developmental". Concerning the "professional" item, supervisors support different profiles and are "product-focus" (Voyer, 1992, p.107). While the "developmental", supervisors feel responsible for ensuring the conditions for PhD students to succeed (Voyer, 1992, p.108).

Regarding the "time-frame", it refers to the idea of a non-linear, variable rhythm, punctuated by key moments at different stages of the research. This process, is characterized by "strong moments of productivity" and "fragmented" times. The fragmented times consist of reworking and reconstructing the writing. This process enables the supervisor to adjust his/her supervision according to the evolution of the dissertation, to interact and communicate effectively with PhD student. This conception is particularly interested in the quality of the product; the main focus is to succeed and to achieve a good PhD. This sheds light on the importance of the PhD student's own research work. It is a personal piece of work that requires to be deeply involved and being involved depends on various conditions such as: guiding, helping and orienting the supervisee.

The second conception is namely the "evolving dimension of supervision". The third is the "educational entanglement". The fourth refers to the "research subject". The fourth is based on "co-supervision".

Moreover, we identified two types of behaviours adopted by supervisors. The 'Relational behaviour: professional or personal' and the "Task-centred behaviour: product and process". Both behaviours remind us of the study of Wade, Keane, Dietz, and Hay (2010) related to the supervisors' styles and candidate relationships.

Relational behaviour: professional/businesslike or personal

The relational behaviour implies a focus on the research such as the organization and progression of the various stages of the research, deadlines, key concepts, theoretical and methodological framework. At this stage, personal aspects are not taken into consideration and are not a priority for the supervisor.

Unlike the professional, the supervisor is interested in the person and tries to find out PhD students' difficulties and personal characteristics. Throughout the various intervention, the emphasis is placed on the relationship as a personal relationship based on trust develops.

Task-centred behaviour: product and process 'product orientation' or 'process orientation'

The "Task-centred behaviour" reflects the absence of the supervisor in terms of time and energy. However, the relationship can be either:

- A 'product orientation' based on the results and a focus on the various tasks of the research work; in this case, the frequency of meetings is intense, and the supervisor focuses on the progress and advancement of the research and a schedule must be adhered to.
- A 'process orientation' based on the supervision process leading to the research results. Supervisors consider themselves as managers, encouraging PhD students to progress and develop. If the supervisee is confronted with writing difficulties or delays, the first type of supervisor cancels the planned meeting because he only wishes to meet the student on the basis of a written work. The second type will try to intervene and organize meetings to come up with a solution or to solve the difficulty in question.

RELATIONSHIP ORIENTATION	TASK ORIENTATION		
	NO/LITTLE	YES PROCESS	YES PRODUCT
BUSINESSLIKE	<i>Delegation</i>	<i>Expert guide</i> - director - innovator - coordinator - monitor - broker	<i>quality controller</i>
PERSONAL	FRIEND	COACH	EDITOR

Table 5 : Typology of Supervisor-PhD candidate relationships, Wade, Keane, Dietz and Hay (2010)

Supervisors mentioned the benefits of co-supervision. According to Watts (2010), 'horizontal team where colleagues have a mutual respect and willingness to learn from one another creates a more satisfying teaching and learning environment than when one supervisor takes the lead and the second gives support (...) Co-

supervision also works best when it is student centred, and when co-supervisors view student learning as the primary goal of doctoral education. Individually, each co-supervisor must enjoy team work, be flexible and open to new ideas, and enjoy sharing academic pursuits and accomplishments with others.

Four additional benefits are also specified by Bourner and Hughes (1991) who consider that : 1) “two heads are better than one”, this idea is criticized by Rugg and Petre (2004) who suggested that the “risk of supervisory incompetence is reduced and the likelihood of successful program completion is increased when joint supervision occurs”; 2) the PhD student will benefit from both points of view; 3) “avoiding dependency”, since there are co-supervisors a student lacking confidence is less likely to become dependent on one individual to direct their work. By learning to interact with two academics who work well together and yet have their own perspectives, the supervisee learns that there are multiple points of view and that academic discourse promotes the development of rigor in the conduct of scholarship. These points echo the point of view of (S12) who considers that supervisee will benefit from both points of view and will avoid dependency. As for the fourth point, it refers to “insurance”, in other words “*it means that if one supervisor leaves for any reason, there remains another supervisor to guide the student*”. Watts (2010), considers that this “insurance” is an “*advantage of team supervision in the unfortunate situations of illness, unplanned extended leave, or the death of a supervisor*”. Such times are referred to as “*intellectual bereavement*” by Delamont, Atkison and Parry (2004,p.84). Watts (2010) states that “*team supervision clearly protects students from the traumatic upheaval caused by the loss/withdrawal of a supervisor who is the only supervisor on the project and, given the duration of the doctoral project, this benefit should not be underestimated*” (p. 339).

In addition of the four benefits of co-direction/supervision, Bourner and Hughes (1991) add that “*There is variability in the extent to which co-supervisors complement one another [...] being complementary is an asset as it increases the repertoire of skills and knowledge available to students*”.

In this study, supervisors are perceived as being disconnected from practical realities beyond academia and their main focus is the product. As a matter of fact, a question arises whether PhD graduates have developed significant skills during their journey and if they can provide substantial value to careers beyond academia.

Conclusion

The findings reveal supervisors’ conceptions, management styles and supervision practice. During supervision, supervisors main focus is to enable supervisees to become researchers regarding their career perspective. Supervisors are interested in the process and the product, and supervise according to their own “on the job” approach. Moreover, the findings reveal different professional trajectories

and future perspectives of supervisees. The majority aim at becoming university professors. While others pursue a career beyond academia.

The study highlights different needs of both supervisees and supervisors. Supervisees need to be fully informed about different careers beyond academia. Hence, responding to different career perspectives through training supervisees during their first year are crucial points to consider.

Training supervisees could be a part of their research and an opportunity to embark in the workplace to be familiarized with the norms and values of the career. Understanding the hiring practices and criteria, career cultural norms and values and being trained during PhD help supervisees change their representations on becoming professor in academia and enhance the value of the degree. Not surprisingly, some supervisees ignore the value of the degree.

Doctoral schools are called to analyse the requirement of the changing labour market and to come up with PhD programmes in response. Doctoral schools are invited to provide supervisors with a detailed comprehensive career guide in which required skills are identified in terms of careers beyond academia. The guide will help supervisors adjust their supervision according to the needs of supervisees and their career perspectives.

Interestingly, the findings are to be taken into consideration for further research: career perspectives beyond academia and the value of the doctorate as a research work.

References

- Bardin, L. (2013). *L'analyse de contenu* (2nd ed.) Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bourdages, L. (2001). *La persistance aux études supérieures: le cas du doctorat*. Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Challah, G. (2022). *L'accompagnement des doctorants : spécificités et enjeux*. PhD thesis, University Lyon II, Lyon.
- Bourner, T. and Hughes, M. (1991). Joint supervision of research degrees: Second thoughts, *Higher Education Review*, 24(1), 21–34.
- Creswell, J.W. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2004). *Supervising the doctorate: A guide to success*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Durnen, A.K. (2019). Doctoral perseverance: An intrinsic desire. In B. Holmes (*et al.*) *Doctoral student perspectives on motivation and persistence: Eye-opening insights into the ideas and thoughts that today's doctoral students have about finishing the doctoral degree* (pp. 39-46), Education Doctorate Books. 1, Winona State University Winona State University.
- Gatfield, T. (2005). An investigation into PhD supervisory management styles: Development of a dynamic conceptual model and its managerial implications, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 27(3), 311–325.
- Hockey, J. (1996). Strategies and tactics in the supervision of UK social science PhD students, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 9(4), 481–500.
- Leclercq, V. (2008). Docteurs et doctorants en sciences de l'éducation: entre trajectoires professionnelles et préoccupations scientifiques, *Recherches and Éducatives*, (1), 27–45.
- Lee, A. (2008). How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research supervision, *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(3), 267–281.
- Madan, C.R. (2021). A brief primer on the PhD supervision relationship, *European Journal of Neuroscience*, 54(4), 5229–5234.
- Main, J.B., Prenovitz, S. and Ehrenberg, R.G. (2019). In pursuit of a tenure-track faculty position: Career progression and satisfaction of humanities and social sciences doctorates, *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(4), 1309–1336.
- McAlpine, L. and Austin, N. (2018). Humanities PhD graduates: Desperately seeking careers?, *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 48(2), 1–19.
- Powell, S. and Green, H. (2007). *The doctorate worldwide*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

State higher vocational schools as regional centres for promotion of lifelong learning

Helena A. Jędrzejczak*, Karolina Messyasz, Magdalena Smak***

** Educational Research Institute – National Research Institute*

ul. Gorczewska 8

01-873 Warszawa

Poland

[*h.jedrzejczak@ibe.edu.pl*](mailto:h.jedrzejczak@ibe.edu.pl)

[*m.smak@ibe.edu.pl*](mailto:m.smak@ibe.edu.pl)

*** Uniwersytet Łódzki / University of Lodz*

Faculty of Economics and Sociology

Polskiej Organizacji Wojskowej 3/5,

90-255 Łódź

Poland

[*karolina.messyasz@uni.lodz.pl*](mailto:karolina.messyasz@uni.lodz.pl)

ABSTRACT

In this article, we undertake reflection on the importance of State Higher Vocational Schools as institutions that implement and promote the idea of lifelong learning and the role they play in their regions. Analysing the relationship between the ideas through which these SHVSs were established and their functioning, we attempt to answer the question of whether state vocational colleges are or can be regional centres for supporting LLL. The quantitative and qualitative analysis presented in the article of the formal, non-formal and informal educational offer directed to the local community (understood not only as traditional students) indicates that the SHVSs are local centres of LLL and have great potential in this regard, especially in cities located far from metropolitan areas. State vocational colleges are conducting their role of accessibility and affordability by facilitating education for those of economic and social exclusion, they contribute to workforce development and engage citizens in different forms of education and civic participation and community engagement. At the same time, not all of them realize this potential to the fullest.

KEYWORDS

Higher Vocational Schools, HE and Regions, HE and Labour Market, Lifelong Learning, Third Mission of Universities

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous réfléchissons à l'importance des écoles professionnelles supérieures publiques en tant qu'institutions qui mettent en œuvre et promeuvent l'idée de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, ainsi qu'au rôle qu'elles jouent dans leurs régions. En analysant la relation entre les idées qui ont présidé à la création de ces écoles et leur fonctionnement, nous tentons de répondre à la question de savoir si les écoles professionnelles publiques sont ou peuvent être des centres régionaux de soutien à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. L'analyse quantitative et qualitative présentée dans l'article sur l'offre éducative formelle, non formelle et informelle destinée à la communauté locale (comprise non seulement comme les étudiants traditionnels) indique que les écoles professionnelles supérieures publiques sont des centres locaux d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie et ont un grand potentiel à cet égard, en particulier dans les villes situées loin des zones métropolitaines. Les établissements d'enseignement professionnel publics remplissent leur rôle en matière d'accessibilité et d'abordabilité en facilitant l'éducation des personnes victimes d'exclusion économique et sociale, ils contribuent au développement de la main-d'œuvre et engagent les citoyens dans différentes formes d'éducation, de participation civique et d'engagement communautaire. Dans le même temps, tous ne réalisent pas pleinement ce potentiel.

MOTS CLÉS

Écoles professionnelles supérieures, enseignement supérieur et régions, enseignement supérieur et marché du travail, apprentissage tout au long de la vie, troisième mission des universités

Introduction

In our paper we present the role played by State Higher Vocational Schools in providing tertiary education in disadvantaged areas. We also emphasize functions they play in building the culture of lifelong learning for all local citizens – not only students, contributing to social cohesion.

State higher vocational schools – goals of establishment, public role

State Higher Vocational Schools (later: SHVS or colleges) are public tertiary educational institutions, financed from the state budget. There are currently 31 such colleges, teaching 4% of the population of students in Poland. However the number of students is scarce, we argue that their impact on the local cultural and educational environment is valid.

They were established in response to the administrative changes of the 1990s. Poland's earlier administrative structure assumed the existence of 49 small provinces – in each voivodship there were governmental offices, Voivodship's Labour Offices, etc. In 1999 the number of provinces was reduced to 16. As part of a policy to prevent the degradation of cities that lost their provincial status, to raise their prestige, vocational colleges were established in them.

SHVS exemplifies the theory of regional development, which assumes the existence of a quadruple helix describing the cooperation between science, society, business and public administration. Knowledge and social connections that are allowed by the colleges are base for innovation. Regions do not have to wait for external donations to thrive (Olechnicka et al, 2025). Building effective networks of cooperation and transfer of innovations is a chance for those regions to stop depopulation. Vocational colleges support local traditions and heritage – building memorial rooms, naming themselves after regional heroes or creators.

SHVSs have several important functions — educational, cultural and support for the local labour market. Their fulfilment was intended to strengthen local human capital and the economic development of the region. What distinguishes the SHVSs from standard universities is the provision of education in the form of industry specializations with a mandatory 15-week apprenticeship. Due to the structural change in Poland that took place in the 1989 and the development of private enterprise, especially in the SME sector, the labour market was looking for management personnel and personnel to plan and account for the finances of small and medium-sized enterprises — hence the courses related to accounting and bookkeeping in SHVS are popular. In the 31 established SHVSs, important courses were also those preparing for medical professions — nursing, lifeguarding and pedagogical courses.

Theoretical context: the ideas of lifelong learning

The theoretical framework for our text is the concept of Lifelong Learning, derived from the Enlightenment maxim “Have the courage to be wise.” The belief that lifelong learning stems from a natural human need, and the role of the state is to enable its realization. In recent decades, it has become a new paradigm shaping thinking about learning, education, and organizational solutions that support it. Whether LLL is approached more from a humanistic perspective, focused primarily on the needs of the individual, or a neoliberal one, responding to the needs of the labour market ((Holford i Mohorčič Špolar, 2012); (Olssen, 2006)), state vocational colleges support people in pursuing LLL, and give or are expected to give young people from smaller urban centres and rural areas the opportunity to study. However, this is not only the increase in human capital, but also in social capital and social mobility. Diplomas allow young adults to build their careers and gain social advancement.

Second, they have a diverse range of offerings in the areas of non-formal education and informal learning, aimed at residents of the cities in which they operate. Thirdly, various studies show that access to lifelong learning opportunities is uneven and depends, among other things, on the cultural capital possessed and the place of residence of the person wishing to undertake learning (Pieńkosz, Petelewicz, Piotrowska, 2025); (Jaworski, Sarnowska, Wiczorkowski, 2024).

Colleges develop an offer for non-traditional students – adults who want to upskill or reskill. Students aged 30+ constitute only 5% in public academic universities, in comparison to 19% in public vocational colleges and up to 36% in private vocational colleges (Wasilewski et al, 2024).

Methodology

The purpose of the research was to gain knowledge about various aspects of the activities of SHVS contributing to the promotion of lifelong learning in aspects:

- enabling people living in smaller centres to study (formal education — traditional students)
- creating an offer for non-traditional students (formal education, but aimed primarily at those entering adulthood)
- creation of non-formal education offer — courses, training, postgraduate studies,
- conduct informal learning activities aimed at the general public.

Our research is based on data obtained from several studies. Our data set consists of:

- *Desk research* on contemporary and historical functioning of SHVS: full sample (30 SHVS), carried out in X-XII 2024,

- Qualitative research on validation of prior learning outcomes (VPL) in higher education institutions — a total of 10 IDIs in 2 such colleges, carried out in 2018-2019,
- Qualitative research on supporting lifelong learning by colleges in small cities — 22 IDIs and 13 research walks with employees and participants in LLL support activities conducted by 4 SHVSs, carried out in 2022 and 2023,
- Ethnographic observations in 6 of them during research visits to SHVS in 2020-2023.
- Qualitative research of Academic Career Offices — 2 IDIs conducted in 2024,
- *Desk research* on the functioning and offerings of VPL for both qualitative studies (VPL and LLL in higher education institutions) — 2018 and 2021.

The collected data were subject to quantitative and qualitative analysis. We wanted to find out whether it is possible to identify models of the functioning of SHVS (e.g. regionally, by size of the SHVS, specific labour market), and how these models may differ from other types of public and non-public HVS in Poland, what are the specifics of their activities and what demand they respond to.

Characteristic of SHVS

Spatial distribution

The analysis of spatial distribution indicates that the majority of provinces have public vocational colleges (only 3 out of 16 provinces do not have them). However, there is a noticeable disproportion between provinces, as some have five or four colleges on their territory, while others have only one. This is the result of the historical dependencies mentioned at the beginning, related to the administrative reform of the state. Some provinces (Wielkopolska, Małopolska, Subcarpathian, Lower Silesia, Lublin) with a larger number of SHVSs have more former provincial cities in their current territory. It is difficult to identify another reason, since these are provinces that are different in terms of area, population, or GDP per capita.

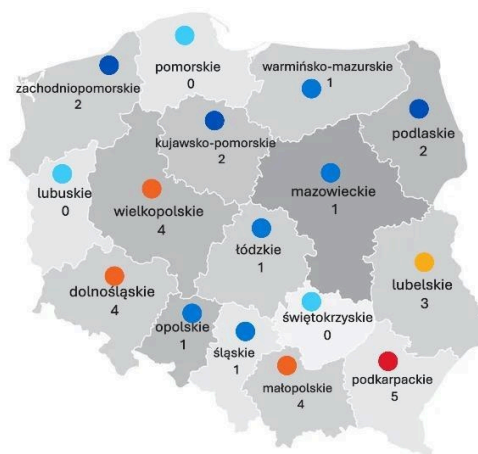


Figure 1. Number and distribution of vocational higher schools by voivodeship in Poland in 2023.
Source: own study

Analysis of the educational offer did not show that the specifics of the region significantly differentiated it. Analysing the available programs and courses, it can be concluded that the offer is directed at supporting the SME sector and the public sector (e.g. teachers, civil servants, health care). SHVS educate in practical courses, providing staff that will be needed in the region, such as medical rescue, nursing, pedagogy, administration, technical courses, such as construction, mechanics and machine construction, automation, food production and safety, production technology and management, and internal security, management, finance and accounting, and philological courses (English, French, Polish philology). We have identified unique courses, referring to the traditions of the region or the industry still operating there. Out of the unique courses, we can distinguish herbalism (Krosno, Subcarpathian voivodeship), economy in agricultural and forest ecosystems (Sanok), metallurgy (Glogow, Lower Silesian voivodeship), industry 4.0 engineering (Walcz, West Pomeranian voivodeship), BIG DATA in economic and social analytics (Jelenia Gora, Lower Silesian voivodeship), horticulture (Skierniewice, Lodz voivodeship), the art market and management in culture (Zamosc, Lubelskie voivodeship), sports and tourism in mountain areas (Nowy Targ, Małopolskie voivodeship), renewable energy and energy management, Jazz and stage music (Nysa, Opolskie voivodeship), Graphic Design and visual technologies (Nowy Sącz, Małopolskie voivodeship), chemistry (Tarnów, Małopolskie voivodeship).

Formal education

A total of 43634 students were enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at public vocational colleges in 2023. Their number varied between colleges, ranging from 430 to 3,461 students.

- 3 colleges had less than 500 students,
- colleges — between 500 and 1,000 students,
- 8 colleges — between 1001 and 1500 students,
- 9 colleges — between 1501 and 2000 students,
- colleges — more than 2,000 students, while it should be noted that it was actually more than 2,400 students,
- 1 college started in October 2024, so there is no data for it on the number of students.

The data shows significant variation in the number of students at analysed SHVSs. As many as 30% of colleges (9 out of 30) have fewer than 1,000 students. The largest number of colleges (17 out of 30, or 57%) have between 1,000 and 2,000 students. Only 4 colleges (13% of the total) are large centres with more than 2,000 students.

31 colleges provide a total of 130 different fields of study. As the college, which was established in 2024, only runs one course of study and the number of students is unknown, it was excluded from the analyses. The most popular courses offered in SHVSs are:

- **Nursing** — **28 colleges** educate in this field at the bachelor's (undergraduate) level, and 25 educate at the graduate level,
- **Pre-school and early childhood pedagogy** — **21 colleges** educate for a unified, 5-year master's degree program,
- **Internal security** — a total of **21 colleges** educate in these 2 programs for undergraduate level and 10 for graduate level,
- **Education** — **19 colleges** educate in this field at the bachelor's level and **10** at the graduate level,
- **Administration and Emergency Medical Services**, which **each** offer **15 colleges** for undergraduate studies and significantly fewer (5 and 1, respectively) for graduate studies.

Finance and Accounting available at 14 colleges for undergraduate studies and 3 for graduate studies; Logistics - available at 13 colleges for undergraduate studies, 7 for graduate studies.

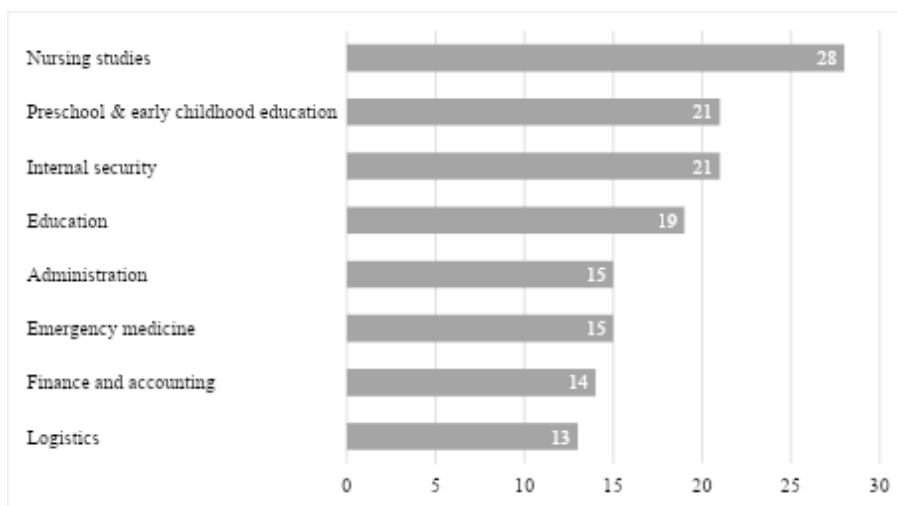


Figure 2. Number of Higher Vocational Schools offering 8 most popular fields of study. N=30.
Source: own study.

The analysis showed that all colleges prepare their students to work in 4 major areas: health care, education, public administration and security, business and management, related mainly in services. Medical and health-related fields are the most popular group in the entire range of studies offered by state higher vocational schools. The second most popular group of fields of study are those related with education. They prepare students for work in schools, educational counselling centres and entities conducting extracurricular activities. The third key group of fields of study are those that prepare students for activities supporting the public administration sector. They provide the skills needed to work in public and local government administration, labour market institutions and crisis management. The fourth group of fields of study prepares to work in business services (probably local and regional business). This does not mean that SHVS do not educate for the needs of other industries. There are also technical fields of study related to manufacturing, construction, mechanics and IT. Often, these types of fields of study are related to the industry present in a given region.

The prevalence of medical and pedagogical faculties can be explained by the fact that some analysed colleges were created from the transformation or incorporation of Pedagogical Colleges (which train early childhood education teachers) or Medical Colleges (which primarily train nurses). Thus, they have both experience and an ethos of service to Poland and people in this area.

SHVS do not attempt to compete with universities in theoretical sciences, but focus on pragmatics. This approach is reflected in the analysed data. It seems that the availability of an offer is related to the demand for a certain level of education. We observed that graduate programs are less popular, but with certain exceptions. All colleges offer them, but only in 2 to 9 fields of study; meanwhile the range of bachelor

programs varies from 5 (in smaller colleges) to 22. There is a high continuation rate in nursing – as many as 25 colleges also offer second-cycle (master's) programmes. Twenty-one SVHS offer uniform master's programmes in preschool and early school education. This is a response to changes in education law requiring higher qualifications from preschool and grades 1-3 teachers. Fields related to internal security are very popular at the first-cycle level (21 colleges), but are much less frequently continued at the second-cycle level (10). The situation is similar in pedagogy (19 to 10). It can be assumed that for many students, a bachelor's degree is sufficient to start working. Furthermore, the courses offered are very practical in nature.

It can be concluded that SHVSs serve as 'regional vocational academies', providing medical (nurses and paramedics), educational and administrative personnel who are key to the functioning of the state at the local level (hospitals, schools, offices). On the other hand, they provide education for the needs of the local labour market.

Non-formal education

Colleges undertake activities in the field of non-formal education and support for informal learning. They target different social, age and professional groups: children and youth, students, working people, seniors, whole families and all residents. Of course, the completeness of the offerings of different colleges varies in this regard. Non-formal education offerings consist of:

- postgraduate studies,
- matriculation preparation courses,
- vocational courses and training for adults,
- language courses for different age groups,
- courses, training, and internships for current students.

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of analysed colleges offer postgraduate programs. The number of courses varies from 0 in 7 colleges to 38 (!) in one medium-sized college. At the same time, it should be noted that the large number of offered courses does not mean that they are actually opened every academic year. State vocational colleges primarily offer courses related to education, management, and health care. Many colleges offer specific courses, such as programming in a specific language. Arguably, the unique name of the course is meant to be an incentive for potential students.

State Higher Vocational Schools offer programmes for a wide range of recipients in various areas (preparation, further education, retraining, etc.). The structure of the non-formal offer responds to various needs: recruitment of future students (matriculation courses), labour market demand (vocational training, postgraduate studies), increasing opportunities on the labour market (dedicated courses for current students), soft skills training (language courses). The data show

significant differences in the potential and activity of individual colleges – some treat non-formal education as a priority, while others completely ignore this segment.

Informal learning and non-traditional students

Informal learning consists of:

- **Science popularization activities:** science festivals and picnics, nights of science, open lectures, debates, talks, booths at city events, e.g., presenting experiments;
- **Activities aimed at professionals:** seminars on a selected topic (e.g., plant protection or active techniques in education), scientific and practical conferences (to which anyone can listen);
- **Activities related to culture and heritage:** cultural events: concerts, exhibitions, film screenings with expert commentary, thematic city walks (e.g., historical, architectural), literary meetings — discussions and with authors, art classes;
- **Activities aimed at special audiences:** for children: “*Children's University*” — Weekly classes for the youngest, science picnics; for children and young people: regular cooperation with schools (e.g., support of polytechnic departments for local secondary technical schools); for seniors: University of the Third Age run by the university or support for a UoTA run by another entity.

State vocational colleges are the group of universities that are opening up the fastest and most widely to non-traditional students — those entering or returning to college in adulthood. They are introducing various solutions to better meet the needs of potential students and creating solutions that are more accessible for working people. These include:

- Afternoon studies, or full-time studies, are held during the week, but after 5 p.m. They are available to everyone, with no age restrictions or prerequisites.
- Study in a “*learn and work*” mode, which takes place on selected weekends at the university and 2–3 days a week at the university or online. They are free of charge. In some colleges, taking them requires a condition, such as being over 30 years old and having or seeking employment.
- The possibility of recruiting or passing part of the course based on validation of the effects of prior learning, obtained through informal learning or non-formal education. In Poland, unfortunately, this possibility is only in its infancy, and the legislation imposes several restrictions on it (for example, it is limited only to the moment of recruitment, while it is not possible to apply to current students) (Jędrzejczak, Gola i Michalik, 2020).

The solution that could work, i.e. academic education at PRK level V, unfortunately does not function in any university. This is due to the imperfection of Polish legislation (Trawińska-Konador, Dokowicz, 2020).

The data indicates that some of the State Higher Vocational Schools are becoming local centres of knowledge, culture, social integration and professional activation. The popularisation of science in the form of science festivals, picnics and scientists' nights makes knowledge accessible to the general public, not just students. The organisation of cultural events builds prestige. Activities aimed at different age groups serve to stimulate passion, update professional knowledge and promote social inclusion. Adapting the offer to the needs of working people and those returning to education allows them to improve their qualifications without giving up their jobs. In the context of the number of students discussed earlier, it can be said that these are micro-scale activities. However, from the perspective of smaller urban centres, their significance takes on a completely different dimension.

Public role

SHVSs are important institutions in the local educational market. They are often “*the only schools of choice*” for young adults from less urbanized regions of the country, therefore equalizing their educational opportunities. Studies in public universities are free of charge, however covering the costs of moving to a bigger city, renting a flat (public dorms are scarce) is seldom available for families of lower socioeconomic status, living in smaller towns and rural areas. Many times, SHVS graduates were the first in their families to obtain a college education. An important factor in the popularity of these schools was their ability to study close to home without the expense of moving to a big city. At their highest, the number of students exceeded 100,000. Due to demographic changes, the number of students at public vocational colleges has been declining in recent years. At present (data for 2023), there are 43.6 thousand traditional students. Moreover, some percentage of young adults is choosing private colleges which offer mostly online classes and easier exams.

However, due to their small size, they allow direct contact between students and lecturers and can conduct courses even with low numbers of groups and provide more individualized assistance, both in academic struggles and in matching suitable internship or job offers. Therefore, we can observe different patterns in conduct of students and professors – less focused on gaining points in the scientific race, more on relational transmission of knowledge and skills.

Orientation to socially-needed fields of study allows graduates to find their way in the labour market. These institutions are to prepare personnel for local and regional entities in both private and public sectors, which is intended to mitigate the effects of the country's metropolisation, polarisation-diffusion development and the phenomenon of the so-called “*brain drain*”. Moreover, creating educational opportunities for medicine, nursing, midwifery, medical rescue, with well-equipped training facilities, mitigates the trend of exodus of people from rural areas. Agricultural faculties give possibilities for those who want to stay on their family farms, modernize and transform them or attract those who formally need such a diploma to acquire agricultural land. Thirdly, cooperation with local employers is

developed — employers present their offers of internships or specific jobs, they also appear at SHVS giving lectures and presenting the specifics of work in locally operating industries. Moreover – they assist in program boards advising changes in curricula. In turn, career centres provide career counselling services or facilitate its use in the Provincial Labour Offices, thereby contributing to greater employability of graduates (over 90% are working in a few weeks after graduation, ELA). Fourthly, the SVHSs have modern infrastructure — well-equipped laboratories, practice rooms for medical and pedagogical professions, campuses adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, mothers with children, seniors, and dormitories.

SHVSs have an offer for other social groups as well. There are “Children’s universities” for youngsters aimed in science popularization activities, language courses for teenagers, preparation courses for matriculation exams, a variety of courses and training for adults, postgraduate studies, Third Age Universities for seniors. A wide range of postgraduate studies and courses and training provide opportunities to expand skills. Unfortunately, numbers of beneficiaries from those types of activities are not monitored, however, collected data allows us to conclude that the realization of public policy of spreading access to education and the idea of lifelong learning is present in SHVS.

Despite differences in regional economies between parts of Poland (rural, industrial, maritime, etc.), we were unable to identify significant patterns in educational offer between colleges regarding size or geographic part of the country or size of the college. All of them were focused on socially needed fields of study (health, education, business). Some regional specific plays role in construction of post graduate faculties: hunting management in mountain agricultural and forest ecosystems, beekeeping, agriculture and agribusiness economics (also for non-agriculture graduates), herbalism, dietary supplements and natural cosmetics, education, and rehabilitation.

Summary and conclusions

The functioning of a higher education institution shapes both the image of the city and the region and strengthens their cultural identity. It also contributes to increasing the professional and social mobility of residents (Szewczuk, Kogut-Jaworska, Ziolo, 2011) and to restoring the importance of lost values, especially in social terms (Rogošić, S., Baranović, B., 2016). This has an impact on raising the level of education, civic awareness and personal culture of residents.

The existence of SHVS is ennobling for small and medium-sized cities. The promise or plan to establish it is sometimes used as an electoral incentive for residents to support the current local or national government. At the same time, the larger cities where the SHVS is located are striving to turn it into a higher category academia, or university. At the same time, this may create a risk that the city authorities will try at

all costs to “*keep the college alive*”, even if some of them may not meet the criteria for teaching quality or have a very small number of students.

The authorities of the analysed colleges maintain close relations with local governments. This has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, close relations allow for more efficient organisation of projects aimed at residents, shorter paths to project approval and obtaining permits from city authorities. On the other hand, in some cities, a phenomenon of collusion among local elites has been observed; in others, there is a risk of such a phenomenon occurring. Relations between universities and city authorities can be too close, which creates a risk of corruption and decisions being made on the basis of social relationships rather than merit. Representatives of university authorities are sometimes members of local councils. This may seem natural (after all, they are representatives of the local elite), but it does create the risks mentioned above.

SHVSs are also part of the local labour market, supporting it by training professionals for local companies, but also giving employment to graduates. Their important role in shaping the local labour market is also provided by their extensive cooperation with the socio-economic environment, especially enterprises where students can do their internships.

Thanks to local access to higher education, young people do not have to go to big cities, which has the potential to reduce the depopulation of smaller towns and cities. Moreover, for those entering formal education in adulthood, there are opportunities to combine studies with family and work life where they live; many of them — residents of small and medium-sized cities — probably wouldn't have taken it, due to the cost and time of commuting to larger cities.

Public vocational colleges are true local centres of lifelong learning (Jędrzejczak, Osowska, 2022). This is due to their staff and premises base, as well as their skilful use of opportunities to obtain additional funding, e.g. from EU funds earmarked for the development of smaller cities and poorer regions and — more broadly — competence development, Norwegian Funds, as well as private funds. The funds they obtain allow them to organize forms of public access such as: open thematic lectures, science festivals and nights, science picnics, urban thematic walks (e.g., architectural, natural, historical), some of which take place outside their walls and are presented as a way to spend time pleasantly, rather than just learning. These events become the basis for cooperation between colleges and other entities supporting lifelong learning. An example of such entities, which were most prominent in the completed research, are local libraries or community centres. Forms as important for social cohesion as Universities of the Third Age are examples of good cooperation — even if their organizer is a cultural institution, every university surveyed provides an important part of the teaching staff.

In conclusion, the research and analysis carried out showed that public vocational colleges are local centres of LLL and have great potential in this regard,

especially in cities located far from metropolitan areas. At the same time, not all of them realize this potential to the fullest. Examples of this phenomenon include:

- the lack in some colleges of the actual possibility of recruiting based on validation of prior learning outcomes,
- the lack of provision of PRK level V education, however, which is due to unfavourable legislative conditions of the state,
- offering paid curricula.

Despite some shortcomings, it is difficult to even imagine these cities functioning without state vocational colleges. Although some cities also have private colleges, and some forms of promotion of lifelong learning by local authorities, state vocational colleges are conducting their role of accessibility and affordability by facilitating education of those of economic and social exclusion, they contribute to workforce development and engage citizens in different forms of education and civic participation and community engagement.

Findings can be used to formulate public policy regarding higher education, especially its founding and flexibility for curricula creation. All 31 colleges receive approx. 22 mln euro – dotation equal to one academic university.

However, when shaping public policies related to the financing and support of this type of higher education institution, it is necessary to balance arguments from several perspectives:

- economic efficiency: determining what level of funding is acceptable to the state, especially given the low number of students,
- the role that colleges play in the cities and regions in which they operate, including in particular improving the functioning of peripheral areas and reducing their depopulation caused by migration to larger cities in order to obtain higher education,
- the quality of education, including reliable control of general academic and medicine courses, which are increasingly offered by these universities due to their prestige. Doubts about the quality of education in these fields stem from their recent launch and the general problem of assessing the quality of higher education in Poland. Of course, this also applies to non-public universities.
- taking into account the issue of scientific research conducted by these universities and the possibility of applying for grants. The staff try to do this because of the prestige, the ambitions of the employees and the possibility of obtaining additional funds for research. At the same time, their scientific position is low, so scientists rarely receive funding. This is in line with the initial idea of these universities, which have a professional rather than an academic profile. The question of whether, with social and market changes, SHVS should be allowed to apply for grants, e.g. in a separate programme, remains open and also requires consideration of the concept of how these universities function and the social role they play.

It is necessary to subject the objectives set for SHVS to scientific reflection, examine how they function in relation to the objectives, and then consider both modifying the objectives (due to the changing social, political and economic situation) and the desired modes of operation for this type of higher education institution.

References

-
- Holford, J. and Mohorčič Špolar, V. A. (2012). Neoliberal and Inclusive Themes in European Lifelong Learning Policy. In: S. Riddell, J. Markowitsch i E. Weedon, *Lifelong Learning in Europe: Equity and Efficiency in the Balance*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Jaworski, P., Sarnowska, A. and Wiczorkowski, R. (2024). *Uczenie się osób dorosłych 2022*. Gdańsk: Główny Urząd Statystyczny
- Jędrzejczak, H. A., Gola, W. and Michalik, S. (2020). *Lifelong learning at universities. Validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal education and informal learning as an example of the implementation of the idea of lifelong learning*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.
- Jędrzejczak, H. and Osowska, M. (2022). *Small towns facing the challenges of lifelong learning*. Warsaw: Educational Research Institute.
- Naczelna Izba Kontroli (2018). *System oceny jakości kształcenia w szkołach wyższych*. Warszawa: Naczelna Izba Kontroli.
- OECD. (2007). *Qualifications Systems Bridges to Lifelong Learning*. OECD Publishing.
- Olechnicka Agnieszka, Chumachenko Artem, and Płoszaj Adam (2025) Bridging Europe's Innovation Divide: How European Union Research Policy Drives Growth in Less Developed Regions. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations 2025*, 5(11).
- Olssen, M. (2006). Understanding the Mechanisms of Neoliberal Control: Lifelong Learning, flexibility and Knowledge Capitalism. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25(3), 213-230.
- Palmer, A. (2017). Lifelong learning is becoming an economic imperative. *The Economist*.
- Pieńkosz, J., Petelewicz, M. and Piotrowska, K., Determinants of Learning in Adulthood. Testing of the Cultural Reproduction Theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 75(2), 132–152.
- Rogościć, S. and Baranović, B. (2016). Social capital and educational achievements: Coleman vs. Bourdieu. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 6(2), 81-100.
- Solarczyk-Ambrozik, E. (2016). *Lifelong learning for labour market needs*. (E. Solarczyk-Ambrozik, Red.) Poznań: Academic Publishing House of Adam Mickiewicz University.
- Trawińska-Konador, K. and Dokowicz, M. (2020). *Proposed changes to the regulations concerning education at level 5 of the Polish Qualifications Framework*. Warsaw: Foundation of Polish Rectors.

**Integration and career transitions:
lifelong learning pathways**

A nomadic and lifewide learning

Embodying transitions between university and educational work during internship

Maria Livia Alga*, Chiara Sità**

** Departement of Human Sciences University of Verona
Via Lungadige Porta Vittoria, 17
37129 – Verona
Italy
marialivia.alga@univr.it*

*** Departement of Human Sciences University of Verona
Via Lungadige Porta Vittoria, 17
37129 – Verona
Italy
chiara.sita@univr.it*

ABSTRACT

This article explores the topic of transitions in relation to the future of educational professions, with a focus on internship and the central yet vulnerable and precarious role of students in knowledge construction processes. Transitions characterise the spatial dimension of the learning experience in the lifeworld dimension of educational nomadism: students simultaneously attend a multiplicity of contexts, often very different, which can be considered as places of learning, alongside which the university can find its place as an educational institution. What kind of contacts, questions, recursions or contradictions emerge from the connection of sometimes radically different spaces? A broad image of the training environment implies thinking of it as dynamic, characterized by multiplicity, fragmented and at the same time composed of interacting parts, sometimes in agreement and sometimes in conflict.

KEYWORDS

Internship, higher education, formative ecology, embodiment, transitions.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la question des transitions en lien avec l'avenir des professions éducatives, en mettant l'accent sur les stages et sur le rôle central, mais également vulnérable et précaire, des étudiants dans les processus de construction des connaissances. Les transitions renvoient à la dimension spatiale de l'expérience d'apprentissage dans le cadre plus large du nomadisme éducatif : les étudiants évoluent simultanément au sein d'une multiplicité de contextes, souvent très hétérogènes, qui peuvent être envisagés comme des lieux d'apprentissage. Dans cette configuration, l'université est amenée à redéfinir sa place en tant qu'institution éducative parmi d'autres espaces formatifs. Quels types de contacts, de questionnements, de récursivités ou de contradictions émergent de la mise en relation d'espaces parfois radicalement différents? Une approche lifeworld de l'environnement de formation conduit à le concevoir comme un système dynamique, caractérisé par la multiplicité, la fragmentation et, simultanément, par l'interaction entre ses composantes, tantôt convergentes, tantôt conflictuelles.

MOTS-CLÉS

Stage, enseignement supérieur, écologie formative, embodiment, transitions.

Introduction

In mid-May, university life is very lively. Lessons, meetings, seminars and conferences follow one another. During a break I walk down the long corridor that separates the seminar room from the green area where about twenty people were camped: the students had pitched some tents to protest against the high rent and the housing emergency. Thermoses, blankets, backpacks and paintbrushes among books, balls, bicycles, biscuits and banners had definitely changed the university landscape, usually much more anonymous. The claim is clearly expressed: *“We wish we could live here in Verona! We often hear about our future as a goal to strive for, a path to train and commit to. For our generation, however, the present itself is oppressive. We would like to be able to study without being tied to exploitative work experiences, which do not guarantee regular contracts and protection. For those who have neither family nor State support, university becomes only a forced passage towards an unfair world of work. This is not what we want, we want to live university as an experience of growth. We want to be part of the communities in which we study. We want to be students with dignity, not just spend time in classrooms or passing exams. We want to take care of ourselves and our relationships, to be actors and actresses of this community. Enough with the rhetoric of lazy youth! Housing is the basis of our vision of university. It is not just a slogan, it is the request of our generation. Without a home, without a future!”* (fieldwork journal, may 2023, Verona).

During the protest, students questioned the connection between the material conditions of learning, the quality of participation in civic life, the political meaning of education: how to participate in the construction of a knowledge intrinsically open to the community and its evolution? This excerpt is taken from the ethnographic diary that I wrote between 2022 and 2023 as part of the research entitled "Building educational professionalism: the role of university internships in the training of socio-pedagogical educators after law 205/2017¹ at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona (northeastern Italy). The main objective of the research was to understand the specificity of the learning process in the internship of educators enrolled in the Degree Course in Educational Sciences: in what way does the internship, in its articulation between academic training and the world of services, constitute a place for building skills and consolidating professional identity? In this sense, it is necessary to underline the specific quality of the training device of the internship. In fact, as a connective device that links the academic world, the network of services, the social fabric and living environments, the internship is the best means to compose community partnerships with training purposes. Recognizing that the knowledge of socio-pedagogical educators is constructed nomadically in a lifewide framework, that is, in a heterogeneous plurality of institutional, community and training contexts, this article explores the topic of transitions in relation to the future

¹ This law establishes a degree in Educational Sciences as a mandatory requirement for access to the profession of socio-pedagogical professional educator.

of educational professions, with a focus on the central yet vulnerable and precarious role of students in knowledge construction processes.

The precariousness of learning: being homeless and pedagogically nomad

Economic and housing precariousness, and the labor exploitation of students are a daily issue with a decisive impact on learning paths. Several studies (Manzo, 2015; Cillo, 2017) analyze the factors that contribute to delineating this condition in Italy, including the insufficient supply of student housing by universities, the lack of public policies, the gentrification of historic centers and the deregulation of the market for rentals for students, the flourishing of the expensive and unsustainable rent private market. Faced with the reduction of university welfare and in a condition of precarious housing, young people are entering as flexible workers in an increasingly precarious and less protected job market: paid work is a constituent element to cope with the direct cost of university studies and general maintenance costs. A relationship breakdown, the loss of a parent's job, being fired or evicted without notice, the end of a non-renewed rental contract, the death of a family member, a delay in the payment of financial support, a cut in contributions are the most common biographical or structural causes of a rapid slide towards a poverty line (Mulrenan, Atkins, Cox, 2018). *“Some students deprive themselves of the bare minimum and put their physical balance at risk due to lack of financial means”* (Dequiré, 2007, p. 108). Dequiré provocatively asks: alongside the category of working poor, will we see the new classification of studying poor emerge?

The studies examined mostly outline the homelessness of students as a state of need and source of anxiety that generates feelings of not belonging to life contexts and can have effects on the ways of acquiring knowledge. In fact, as Barnett writes, those who work in academic institutions have many empirical findings on the anxiety, sense of loneliness and difficulties of a large part of students. However, the scholar continues, these are data in line with those of the general population that has gone through the collective trauma of the pandemic and finds itself living in a world characterized by the environmental crisis, by an increasingly less dignified world of work, by a permanent state of war, just to mention some crisis factors. Is there a specificity of the student condition? According to Barnett (2022), it is important to understand how a double typology of uncertainties – those that characterize the contemporary era and those that characterize being in a path of knowledge – meet. Exploring the symbolic aspects intimately connected with being in training, he states:

higher education is – all too often – a site of student homelessness. (...) a higher education is liable to present a homelessness. In modular or interdisciplinary programs, the students around one change, the tasks and the frameworks change, the mode of being required by the various disciplines – within the student's program of studies

– alters, the teachers change and the character of the assignments change. Moreover, as stated, we are wanting students to step outside of themselves, and to find some distance between their taken-for-granted understandings of the world and enter a new form of understanding, where all is recognised as being contingent. We are wanting students, in short, to make themselves home-less, to leave their earlier homes and throw away the key. We are asking our students to be pedagogical nomads. This, then, is the challenge in front of higher education in the twenty-first century, to afford the students a home even while it renders them homeless. And, remarkably, this is often achieved by the pedagogical processes in higher education. Students come to feel that they have entered a new kind of home, a home without a home; a nomadic home indeed. (Barnett, 2022, pp. 3-4).

Articulating the approach to the issue of student homelessness, Barnett proposes it no longer only as a collateral consequence of the scarce public investment in education or of the processes of urban transformation but as an unavoidable and desirable phase of becoming a subject in re-search. In this sense, the symbolic passage between homelessness and nomadism occurs, which, although similar, are not at all coinciding concepts. Thinking of oneself as homeless is something other than inhabiting the house in its mobile dimension. Being pedagogically nomadic approaches this nuance of rootedness without fixity. Juggling different approaches to knowledge, becoming familiar with a plurality of codes and languages, inhabiting interdisciplinarity, and above all learning to learn in a qualitative variety of contexts are recognized as constitutive components of the university path.

Topographies of lifewide learning: borders and transitions

Which are the topographies of learning in the processes of transgenerational construction of socio-pedagogical educators' identity? Even if the requirement of a degree is necessary for access to the world of work, the academy has lost its social status as the only or primary body for the transmission of knowledge. It is a question of recognizing sinuous paths between the theoretical, experiential, community and institutional dimensions that integrate spaces of a different nature as places of training.

A first pedagogical concept that brings us closer to understanding this nomadic and ecological reality of the search for knowledge is the notion of lifewide learning. A lifewide look emphasizes the spatial dimension of the learning experience. It starts from the fact that students simultaneously attend a multiplicity of contexts, often very different, in various ways considered as places of learning, next to which the university can find its place as an educational institution. The adverb “next” translates into spatial terms the increasingly widespread idea according to which knowledge is “*generated by heterogeneous groups of actors, no longer only by traditional academic networks which, more and more often, become only a hub (and often not the most relevant) of a wider network*” (Galimberti, 2018, p. 91). Investigating this educational landscape and the nomadic positioning of the students opens up different scenarios of investigation: on the one hand it pushes us to question the contemporary role of

universities in relation to the environment, on the other this theory allows us to read the students' learning paths in a key of autonomy, transversality and creativity, perhaps partially removed from the rigidity and predictability of educational institutions.

We will focus on this second aspect. The theoretical framework of lifewide learning raises two significant issues: first, the qualitative plurality of spaces must be read in a non-static way that privileges the relationships, influences and trajectories created in the learning experience. Furthermore, if the learning space is generated while the subject of learning itself takes shape, it is necessary to look at this process from the inside, in its making. That is, once the multiplicity of contexts and their constant reciprocal interaction have been affirmed, the question remains: thanks to and despite what motives do these contexts influence each other? What kind of contacts, questions or contradictions emerge from the connection of sometimes radically different spaces? A broad image of the training environment implies thinking of it as dynamic, characterized by multiplicity, fragmented and at the same time composed of interacting parts, sometimes in agreement and sometimes in conflict.

In this framework we can bring attention to the borders that mark the spaces of transition between different contexts, places of encounter and conflict, negotiation, mixing and creativity, suture. Crossing the borders between contexts and educational practices is a multifaceted gesture in learning processes; *“moving across the boundaries of different sociocultural settings is not only inherently difficult also potentially beneficial for the learners since it represents an opportunity to develop new skills and capacities”* (Popov, 2023, p. 4). Conceptualizing and valorising the crossing of the boundaries of different training contexts by trainees also means betting on the development of their metacognitive competence aimed at understanding the relationships between the contexts in which they learn and the contextual practices they are learning to negotiate (Di Masi, Surian, 2018). Becoming capable of making transitions in such a training ecology also reveals the ability to establish continuity and connections, understood as *“the mental capacity to cross experiences and contexts by building a meaningful framework”* (Sità, 2020, p. 63).

Embodying transitions during internship

As a connective system linking the academic world, the network of services and the social fabric, the internship represents an experience of educational nomadism and plays a crucial role particularly in the transition to the world of work. Approaching the intersection zones and thresholds that this device generates, a formative space emerges that is rich in experiences but without public visibility, inhabited mostly without awareness of its potential: Is it possible to better understand what formative events take place by crossing these thresholds? How can we establish a vision of the internship as an eco-political space in which students have the opportunity to build a

professional identity within communities of practice that foster inter-institutional research work?

Having conducted a 5-year study on a German university-school partnership integrating teacher training, research and education, Akkerman and Bruining have developed a framework for analyzing learning and research processes that cross several thresholds simultaneously, identifying three in particular: institutional (interaction between organizations), interpersonal (relationships between professionals acting on the basis of different institutional practices), intrapersonal (participation of a person in multiple institutional practices). Here we will especially highlight the third declination of the action of boundary crossing since it allows us to focus on the action of the student in the internship. In fact, by intrapersonal, differently from what the translation would immediately tend to suggest, we do not only indicate intimate conditions of multiplicity relating to distinct parts of the self, but also those situations in which *“people simultaneously participate in intersecting practices and literally come to embody the boundary”* (Akkerman, Bruining, 2016, p. 248). This image of the trainee as a subject who embodies the frontier is a theoretical key to reading, as we will see, the research data. By “frontiers” Akkerman and Bruining mean the sociocultural elements that create differences between practices and bring discontinuity in actions and interactions.

They identify four macromodalities through which learning can be triggered when people cross borders: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. At the intrapersonal level, these four modalities correspond respectively to: a situation in which the subject becomes aware of the fact that she is participating at the same time in different practices and contexts that she is able to identify and live separately, knowing how to identify her distinct modalities of participation in one and the other (“identification”); when the subject seeks a way or procedures to align and harmonize his participation in the different practices, we are in the case of “coordination”. In this theoretical framework, “reflection” refers to the condition in which the subject feels involved in a process of reviewing her own participation in relation to the positions expressed by others; finally, when a person creates a hybrid position in which previously distinct ways of thinking, doing, communicating and feeling are integrated, it is the moment of “transformation”.

All these models of crossing educational borders can be found in the trainees’ experience. Their positioning as boundary crossers and the attempt to establish continuity where they encounter a diversity of institutionalized practices and contexts is very challenging. Akkerman and Bruining state that the role of the boundary crosser often ends up being the only link between separate contexts and for this reason on many occasions it is linked to managerial and power positions. In the case of trainees, however, if without a doubt they often end up being the only bridge between universities and some educational services, it is however certain that they do not occupy a position of power in the structures where they train. Looking at boundary crossers not so much from the point of view of the assigned hierarchical positions but in terms of their practices, actions, thoughts, the concrete challenges that the trainees

find themselves facing can emerge. From the research of Akkerman and Bruining, for example, it emerges mainly that embodying the border requires the ability to enter into dialogue with the actors of different practices and contexts but also to establish an internal dialogue between the different perspectives that one is subjectively able to assume. In a study on non-accredited internships, Popov (2023) states that learning in transition has specific effects on the development of horizontal expertise and on the renegotiation of identity. Horizontal expertise is understood as the outcome of recursive activities of crossing boundaries in the workplace and manifests itself as the ability to identify, negotiate, combine and orchestrate resources and activities to work on hybrid problems, thanks to the development of different levels of symbolic mediation. Students can therefore expand the range of conceptual resources and practices with the awareness that crossing borders also implies constant work on oneself and on one's vision of the world.

Mapping transitions: research methods

Launched in January 2022 at the Human Sciences Department of University of Verona, the research "*Building educational professionalism: the role of university internships in the training of socio-pedagogical educators*" was structured into a multi-method study aimed at producing an internship support model as a result of the participation of the components of its educational ecology: university teachers and tutors, tutors of the host institutions, students. The subjects were involved through different research tools: a questionnaire with 90 students and 150 host institutions, 11 semi-structured interviews with students and 4 focus groups with a total of 32 company tutors. During the first phase of this research, 3 focus group meetings were held, for a total of 12 hours, with 10 students during their internship activity. Subsequently, the data collected were used as 'mirror data' in a series of 5 group meetings according to the Change Lab methodology, aimed at shared analysis between teachers, students and tutors of the support system between universities and local institutions and at building a new model.

In this contribution we will focus on focus groups; the three meetings, each lasting 4 hours, addressed crucial issues for understanding the trainees' experiences: expectations, desires and questions that guided the choice of service through a reconstruction of a training eco-map; trainees' postures and significant scenes of daily life in the service during the internship; support practices experienced as an intern and experimented in the field. In particular, we will focus on the use of the eco-map as a tool to reveal the nomadic and lifewide nature of learning.

During the research we invited a group of ten students enrolled in the second year of Educational Sciences to draw an eco-map of the learning experience that had begun a couple of years earlier, starting from four elements: stages, questions, meetings, events. The stages were to be understood as significant moments, for example courses or exams, that marked the path; the questions as gateways or vectors that inspired or moved to continue the path. Indicating the meetings highlighted the value of relationships; the item "events" was intended to think of historical, collective

events that had fully entered their learning space. The proposal was to be understood in a lifewide key and therefore each item could be declined transversally to the living environment of each student.

Discussion

A lifewide look at the learning processes during the internship emphasizes the plurality of spaces and their organic composition, having the merit of highlighting their dynamism, boundaries and proximities, approaches and distances. Reading their complex evolutions also implies thematizing tensions and contradictions that can arise at the intersection between training places and living environments.

Teresa: I couldn't imagine myself just studying. For me, the most important things have always been "outside" the university. I'm talking about an associative world, about social spaces. It would be interesting if the university also gave space to these needs within it.

Federica: The first few times after class I said to myself: I can't wait to go to the bar in front of the university with the others to talk about the class, because otherwise where can I find my space for growth? (Focus group students, 2022)

In general, students say they are looking for free spaces, easily accessible, and as unbureaucratic as possible, but what is interesting, in order to understand the concrete learning process in a lifewide perspective, is to ask: in what terms do they conceive the relationship between these places and the university? Students mostly perceive a distance, a separation between the places of the community, of volunteering and the academic ones. However, taking note of this is not a sufficient reason to give up either one or the other: this separation is in fact perceived as fictitious, as a lack, something to recover as essential for the purposes of an education faithful to one's ideals. From these words clearly emerges the constant work of many students, the bridge that they embody and cross daily to connect the fragments of their nomadic educational adventure.

During the internship, a new guest entered the mother-child community: she recognised me because we both frequent the same neighborhood, called *Veronetta* (that is the most multicultural area of Verona and the area we usually frequent with friends and university students.) This woman and me, we know each other by sight. I explained to my tutor that for me it would be impossible, in the workplace, not to meet familiar faces. I am engaged in social spaces in *Veronetta*. Many people who live in difficult situations turn to these spaces; we have been taking care of vulnerable people in the neighborhood for years. The tutor asked me to immediately conclude the internship path, because the acquaintance between me and the user could interfere with both her and my path. (Giovanna's internship report, 2022)

The dimension of the neighbourhood is particularly relevant in this ethnographic research; the university, various associative spaces and socio-educational services are in fact located in *Veronetta*, one of the most multicultural districts of the city which, due to this particular residential configuration, represents an interesting example of coexistence between various cultures of living. In Giovanna's story, the category of proximity between informal meeting places, associative, educational and professional places plays a significant role. "To frequent" is the verb that is most often used to indicate familiarity with the life of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, but also an active involvement in participating in self-managed spaces that contribute to thematizing and seeking answers to some social problems. However, during the period of Giovanna's internship in a neighbourhood far from Veronetta, a contradiction emerges in the relationship between the spaces of the lifeworld learning map that leads to an irreconcilability; due to Giovanna's familiarity with the life of Veronetta, she is advised to change the internship location since, according to the educational service tutors, the "*distance/distinction*" between the user and the intern is missing. This episode introduces a new element in the lifeworld mapping of learning spaces: it complicates the presence of a plurality of qualitatively different training spaces by introducing the variability of distance. It is therefore not only relevant which spaces can be mapped but also at what measurable and symbolic distance they are located. In fact, frequenting the same neighbourhood or certain social places is interpreted by the educational service tutors as an excessive closeness between the user and the intern, while Giovanna interprets it as an inevitable element since participation in neighbourhood activism characterizes her experience in an essential way.

Highlighting the points of tension between training spaces shows that places sometimes have qualities that can be read as incompatible or at least in need of radical mediation. Reflecting on an eco-map therefore promotes not only a form of learning about oneself and one's path in global terms but can also reveal institutional limits, rules and implicit professional ones, promoting a more conscious transition of students towards the world of work.

Conclusion

In light of these findings, the question of how to design training programs capable of recognizing and valuing lifeworld learning becomes central. The empirical material suggests that learning emerges precisely in the interstices between institutional, informal, and community-based spaces, rather than within any single, clearly delimited context. Consequently, training programs should move beyond a spatially and symbolically bounded conception of learning and explicitly acknowledge the educational relevance of students' social, civic, and territorial engagements.

A first recommendation concerns the recognition of proximity as a pedagogical resource rather than exclusively as a risk to be managed. Giovanna's experience

shows that institutional norms tend to interpret closeness between interns and users as a lack of professional distance, while students experience such proximity as an inevitable and meaningful dimension of their learning biographies. Designing lifewide-oriented training programs therefore implies rethinking criteria of professionalism, making room for reflective practices that help students critically interrogate their own positions, rather than enforcing rigid separations between “personal” and “professional” spaces.

Secondly, training programs should integrate tools and moments dedicated to mapping learning ecologies. Practices such as eco-mapping can function not only as reflective devices for students, but also as institutional instruments for making visible the plurality of learning spaces, their distances, overlaps, and tensions. Recognizing lifewide learning thus requires shifting from an evaluative logic based solely on predefined competences toward a process-oriented approach that values students’ capacity to navigate, connect, and negotiate heterogeneous learning environments.

Finally, a lifewide perspective calls for greater institutional responsibility in mediating tensions between learning spaces. Rather than delegating to individual students the burden of bridging fragmented educational worlds, training programs could provide structured spaces for dialogue between universities, internship sites, and community organizations. In this sense, recognizing the value of lifewide learning does not simply mean legitimizing what happens “outside” the university, but actively redesigning educational pathways to accommodate complexity, contradiction, and situated forms of knowledge.

In conclusion, designing new training programs informed by a lifewide approach entails a paradigmatic shift: from controlling learning contexts to accompanying learning trajectories; from emphasizing distance to cultivating reflexive proximity; and from standardized training models to ecologically grounded educational practices. Such a shift is essential if education is to remain faithful to students’ lived experiences and to the ethical and social dimensions that increasingly characterize contemporary professional learning.

References

-
- Akkerman, S.F. and Bakker, A. (2011). Boundary crossing and boundary objects, *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 132-169.
- Akkerman, S. and Bruining, T. (2016). Multilevel Boundary Crossing in a Professional Development School Partnership, *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 25(2), 240-284.
- Atkins, J., Cox, S. and Mulrenan, P. (2018). I get up in the night to cry: The impact of homelessness on higher education students in London, UK”, *Critical Social Policy*, 38(1).
- Barnett, R. (2022). The homeless student – and recovering a sense of belonging, *Journal of University teaching and Learning Practice*, 19(4).
- Cillo, R. (eds.) (2017). *Nuove frontiere della precarietà del lavoro Stage, tirocini e lavoro degli studenti universitari*, Ca' Foscari-Digital, Venezia.
- Dequiré, A.F. (2007). Le monde des étudiants: entre précarité et souffrance, *Revue Pensée Plurielle*, 1(14), 95-110.
- Di Masi, D. et Surian, A. (2018). Transizioni riflessive: i pazienti nello sguardo dei tirocinanti, in Zannini L., D’Oria M. (eds.), *Diventare professionisti della salute e della cura. Buone pratiche e ricerche*, pp. 185-194. FrancoAngeli, Milano.
- Galimberti, A. (2018). Dal mito al mercato? I Dilemmi dell’Università nella cultura della performance, Alla ricerca di modi creativi di giocare con il vocabolario neoliberista, *Civitas educationis*, a. VII, n. 1.
- Manzo, L.K.C. (2015). *MI Generation. Il Piano di Governance delle Politiche Giovanili della Città di Milano*, Comune di Milano.
- Popov, J. (2023). Learning in unaccredited internship as development of interns’ horizontal expertise, *Vocations and Learning*, Springer.
- Sità, C. (2020). La bioecologia dello sviluppo umano, i contesti e le pratiche educative per l’infanzia, in Lazzari, A., Pastori, G., Sità, C. and Sorzio, P. (eds.), *Prospettive educative per i servizi zero-sei. Itinerari di teoria, pratica e ricerca*, Bergamo: Junior.

Interrupted trajectory of professional transition

A case study of identity tensions experienced by a nursing assistant enrolled in nurse training

Vanessa Pleven*, Hugues Pentecouteau, Jérôme Eneau*****

** CREAD - University of Rennes2
2 Place du recteur Henri Le Moal
CS 24307 – 35043 – Rennes
France
vanessa.pleven@univ-rennes2.fr*

*** CREAD - University of Rennes2
2 Place du recteur Henri Le Moal
CS 24307 – 35043 – Rennes
France
hugues.pentecouteau@univ-rennes2.fr*

**** CREAD - University Rennes2
2 Place du recteur Henri Le Moal
CS 24307 – 35043 – Rennes
France
jerome.eneau@univ-rennes2.fr*

ABSTRACT

Céline, a nursing assistant, embarks on a nursing education program, driven by a personal development project encouraged by her colleagues and a desire for professional advancement. However, this trajectory is marked by significant tensions between her projected identity as a nurse and her inherited and socially assigned identities as a mother, a woman, and a nursing assistant. Family constraints, the structure of the training program, difficulties in social integration, and disillusionment experienced during clinical placements contribute to a process of demotivation leading to eventual withdrawal. The analysis reveals a pragmatic identity reconfiguration rather than a definitive abandonment, highlighting the limitations of the current training framework.

KEYWORDS

Identity transition, nursing education, withdrawal, trajectory, professional socialization.

RÉSUMÉ

Céline, aide-soignante, s'engage dans une formation en soins infirmiers, pensant réaliser un projet de soi porté par ses collègues et par un désir de progression. Pourtant, cette trajectoire est marquée par des tensions fortes entre son identité projetée d'infirmière et ses identités héritées et assignées de mère, de femme et d'aide-soignante. Les contraintes familiales, l'organisation de la formation, la difficulté d'intégration sociale et les désillusions en stage entraînent un processus de démotivation jusqu'à l'interruption. L'analyse montre une reconfiguration identitaire pragmatique plutôt qu'un abandon, soulignant les limites du dispositif de formation actuel.

MOTS-CLÉS

Transition identitaire, formation infirmière, interruption, trajectoire, socialisation professionnelle.

Introduction

Professional retraining in healthcare professions represents an opportunity for personal and social development, but it can also generate significant identity tensions. This group of learners aligns with the definition of non-traditional students (Bean and Metzner, 1985), who are considered at greater risk of academic failure or dropout. While numerous studies in higher education have focused on the processes of dropout and, more recently, on persistence, few have specifically addressed the multiple identity challenges faced by nursing assistants transitioning into nursing education.

The case study presented here illustrates the challenges encountered by adult learners returning to education by exploring the mechanisms through which identity tensions emerge and influence the socialization process, understood as a social experience (Dubet, 1994). It draws on Dubar's (1998, 2010) theories of socialization and Boutinet's (2012) work on life projects.

The first section briefly outlines the methodological approach. The second section presents the results in the form of a trajectory following a temporal progression. Finally, the third section discusses the contributions and implications of the study.

Method

This case study analyses the life narrative of Céline, a 44-year-old mother of three and nursing assistant who discontinued her nursing education in the second year of her undergraduate program, despite achieving strong academic results. Drawing from her narrative, this article aims to identify the various identity and socialization tensions at play throughout her life trajectory, using biographical research methods (Bertaux, 2016). The data collected were thematically analysed to highlight identity tensions, disillusionments, and coping strategies encountered along her path.

Results: A training project as a self-project between Hopes, Support, and Constraints

Céline's entry into nursing school reflects a deeply personal identity transition, driven by personal ambition and validated by her colleagues. These colleagues play a crucial role as *significant others* in the sense described by Dubar (2022), opening a pathway toward a new professional identity. They encourage her by recognizing her aptitudes: *"The nurses would say to me, 'Come on, I'll show you your future job.' They already sensed that I was interested in pathologies, medications, all of that."* This support reinforces Céline's sense of legitimacy in considering this career shift. Her professional project is thus shaped through the validation offered by her nursing colleagues who, by inviting her to explore the profession, legitimize her aspirations.

However, this ambition is constrained by family responsibilities. Céline postpones her training due to her role as a single mother: *"I was alone with my three children. I thought it was a bit too complicated."* The birth of her youngest child and the arrival of a new partner change this dynamic, making the project more feasible. Her age becomes a trigger a sense of urgency emerges: *"I told myself I had to do it now, because later might be too late."* The training becomes a self-directed, existential project (Boutinet, 2012), made possible by improved family circumstances (older children, supportive partner) and motivated by the temporal pressure felt at age 44.

Her enrolment thus marks an identity transition enabled by the temporary alignment of personal conditions. This project, both personal and existential, entails a reconfiguration of priorities and life rhythms. While Céline anticipates the difficulty of such an undertaking, the challenges she eventually encounters go beyond her initial expectations.

Tensions between assigned and projected identity

A gendered mental load

Once enrolled in the nursing program, Céline faces a significant tension between her role as a student and her roles as a mother and woman, which remain constantly activated within the domestic sphere. *"I feel a bit guilty [...] When it comes to school, I kind of let them manage their own studies,"* she admits. Daily household responsibilities remain unchanged despite her new educational commitments, resulting in persistent guilt: *"While I'm sitting at my desk, nothing is getting done around me."*

This difficulty in stepping away from domestic responsibilities reflects an embodied *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972), where women internalize and carry the mental load of managing the household. Céline speaks of her need to *"manage things,"* illustrating the dissonance between her inherited identity and the one she aspires to. Rather than alleviating these gendered expectations, the training intensifies them.

Although she had hoped that her new family structure would ease her academic journey, Céline continues to shoulder the bulk of domestic tasks. She voices guilt over *"skimming through"* her role as a mother and describes the overwhelming burden caused by the dual pressures of academic demands and gendered mental load. This gendered assignment, also embodied in her reliance on her own mother for childcare, illustrates the internalization of social norms. The training program thus becomes a site of identity tensions, where inherited roles hinder the realization of a projected professional identity.

An exhausting daily life

Céline's decision to remain in her home in order to preserve family stability increases her fatigue: *"I know that during the last placement [...] it was a 45-minute drive for me [...] You were really happy when the weekend came, just to rest, because*

I was exhausted.” What was initially intended as a strategy to balance her multiple roles eventually becomes a major source of exhaustion.

Vacations become vital moments of relief: *“I think I was also better able to disconnect and relax during my holidays.”* The combination of overwork and academic pressure creates fertile ground for growing doubts about her commitment to the training.

Disillusionment and questioning the training

Dissonance between expectations and reality

Céline quickly expresses disappointment with the content of the training: *“Maybe I idealized the training.”* She discovers a significant gap between her initial expectations and the realities of the nursing profession: *“These are two different jobs [...] They don’t carry the same responsibilities either.”*

She criticizes the lack of hands-on training: *“There are very few practical exercises in class. So when you arrive on placement, well, you’ve done very few technical procedures.”* The work-study model, which is supposed to support the acquisition of practical skills, appears ineffective from her perspective.

Despite receiving *“very good results,”* she does not feel legitimate: *“Just because you have good grades doesn’t mean you feel like a nurse.”* This discomfort may reflect a mismatch between academic assessment and professional development (Fernagu and Vidal-Gomel, 2022). For Céline, professionalization is rooted primarily in practice, not in knowledge she considers abstract: *“Courses that ultimately don’t make any sense.”*

Céline comes to realize a misalignment between her idealized expectations of the training and its actual demands: the program is not a mere continuation of her role as a nursing assistant but rather a more demanding identity reconfiguration. The theoretical university content, perceived as disconnected from practical realities, leads to feelings of overload and disengagement. The lack of practical training and the difficulty of leveraging her prior experience in the context of nursing education deepen her distress. Céline values field experience but does not feel technically prepared, which reinforces her sense of illegitimacy.

Difficult social integration

Integration into student work groups also proves challenging: *“It’s too much because, well [...] there are some who work too much and don’t leave any room for you.”* Céline highlights a lack of cohesion between recent high school graduates and students undergoing professional retraining like herself. This contributes to her sense of isolation and self-doubt: *“I think it made me lose confidence in myself.”*

The issue resurfaces during clinical placements: *“Always having to adjust to a new team.”* Each new placement requires a fresh effort to integrate, where her assigned role as a student is poorly defined. Feedback from supervisors is

destabilizing: “*You’re too slow,*” “*You don’t take enough initiative.*” The ambiguity of expectations fosters a strategy of withdrawal: “*You just sit there for a while [...] then you end up doing nothing.*”

These integration difficulties emerge both in academic group work and in clinical settings. Céline feels out of sync with younger students, mentioning a lack of maturity and commitment on their part. The divide between highly motivated students and those she perceives as being there “by default” leads to a process of disidentification. During placements, she experiences contradictory injunctions—to take initiative while also remaining within the bounds of her student role. The lack of recognition for her prior experience as a nursing assistant and the absence of a clear framework regarding expectations result in a loss of orientation, reinforcing a retreat strategy.

The construction of a hindered professional identity

Clinical placements: between catalysts and barriers

While some placements, such as those in psychiatry or private practice, are experienced positively, others are perceived as harmful. Céline highlights a lack of supervision and kindness: “*We’re supposed to be in a caring profession, but you’re dealing with people who clearly are not.*” The symbolic violence encountered during these placements reflects a disabling environment (Fernagu and Vidal-Gomel, 2022).

One particularly difficult placement acts as a turning point: “*You come out of there in tears.*” Feedback from clinical supervisors deeply affects her: “*She looks like a nursing assistant doing nurse’s work.*” This external judgment calls into question the very identity transition she believed she had initiated.

Céline’s clinical placements are uneven: while some foster learning and a sense of discovery, others marked by insufficient supervision and lack of recognition generate distress. The positive experiences are not enough to compensate for the limited practice of technical procedures, which hinders the consolidation of her professional nurse identity. Rather than confirming her progress, placements become painful sites of dissonance between the identity she aspires to and the reality she encounters.

Contrasting sources of support

The support Céline receives is ambivalent. While some peers demonstrate empathy and certain placements help maintain her motivation, she expresses disappointment with institutional support: “*There’s nothing really in place to help you regain your confidence.*” She finds the pedagogical support lacking, which further erodes her motivation.

Although Céline benefits from informal support provided by colleagues, friends, or peers, she perceives the institutional support, particularly from instructors, as insufficient. This lack of structured guidance during critical moments undermines her sense of competence and belonging. While supportive placements allow her to

persist, the absence of formal support mechanisms leads to feelings of isolation and a training experience marked by self-reliance.

From perseverance to disengagement

An inner resistance

For two years, Céline fights an internal battle: “*I didn’t do all this for nothing. I’m going back.*” She draws on a self-motivating inner discourse. Yet doubt is ever-present: “*There was a little voice saying, ‘You’re going to quit, you’re going to quit.’*” This voice becomes increasingly insistent, gradually taking over her mental space.

The accumulation of tensions, progressive exhaustion, and cognitive overload eventually lead to emotional and cognitive disengagement: “*Even if the motivation was really strong, after a while it just becomes discouraging.*” Céline describes a steady rise in fatigue, stress, and anxiety. Discouragement sets in, driven by a perceived failure to balance her various roles. Solitary introspection dominates: “*I just kept brooding on my own.*” This psychological erosion results in a gradual disengagement and emotional distancing from her initial project.

This inner narrative, built on the investment she has already made, is ultimately undermined by chronic fatigue, everyday pressures, and the ineffectiveness of her coping strategies.

Persistent doubts about commitment, reinforced by professional judgments

Doubt is a constant throughout Céline’s journey. She frequently mentions the recurring “little voice” urging her to stop. Doubt becomes a structural element of her experience, raising questions about the legitimacy of her project, her sense of belonging to the professional group she aspires to join, and her ability to succeed.

A critical clinical placement becomes the breaking point: hurtful comments, disqualification of her skills, and a reversion to her former identity as a nursing assistant. She feels humiliated, judged, exposed. The stark contrast between her sustained efforts and the final evaluation marks a rupture. She realizes that the significant others (supervisors, clinical educators) do not endorse her identity transition.

A rational decision to preserve herself

The decision to withdraw becomes a self-preserving act: “*I’m not going to the scaffold. So I protected myself.*” Céline anticipates her departure, begins seeking work as a nursing assistant, and rationalizes: “*Maybe what I really needed was a change of workplace, not of profession.*”

Her withdrawal is the result of a cumulative burden: fatigue, overload, family constraints, disillusionment with the training, critical feedback during placements, and financial pressure. Every role she assumes adds to her daily strain, contributing to an

overwhelming saturation. Discontinuing the program appears to be the only viable means of self-preservation—a rational choice in the face of cumulative impossibility.

She does not view her decision as a failure, though she expresses lingering disappointment: “*I’m disappointed, but at the same time, I think I wouldn’t have been capable.*” Her account reflects a fragile balance between the need to protect her well-being and the grief of renouncing her aspirations.

Céline frames her decision to withdraw as a necessary act. She speaks of self-preservation and does not express shame about leaving. In her interactions with others, she oscillates between a need for legitimacy and fear of being judged. Support from her close circle—partner, mother, children—helps her maintain an identity coherence “for others.”

Towards a reconfiguration of the identity trajectory

Securing professional continuity

Céline does not reject the healthcare field: “*I’m not closing the door,*” she says regarding a potential return to nursing school. However, she prioritizes identity continuity within her original profession as a nursing assistant, now in a new facility perceived as more stable and reassuring.

This return to a familiar identity functions as a form of refuge, a way to maintain personal coherence (Lahire, 1998). She even mentions the possibility that her new hospital might later support a return to nursing school, suggesting a strategy of contextual security.

Far from being experienced as a rupture, the interruption is interpreted as an adjustment. Céline secures a position as a nursing assistant, resuming a familiar, reassuring role. She keeps the option of returning to training open, under more favourable conditions. This return is not a renunciation, but rather a means of preserving identity continuity within a more secure framework.

The need for social recognition

The validation of her decision by close others is essential: “*My partner understood me,*” “*Even my own children understood.*” This need for approval reveals how the legitimacy of her trajectory depends in part on recognition from significant others (Dubar, 2022).

She admits having delayed disclosing her withdrawal: “*I didn’t dare tell him. I was afraid of his reaction.*” This tension between the need for social justification and the assertion of self illustrates the recognition stakes tied to interrupting a socially valorised educational pathway.

Analysis and discussion

Céline's journey highlights the complexity of professional identity transitions within the context of nursing education. Far from following a linear progression toward a new identity, this process unfolds within a web of tensions involving social roles, personal aspirations, and systemic constraints. Céline's case illustrates how the projected identity of becoming a nurse comes into conflict with the inherited identities of mother and nursing assistant, creating ongoing inner conflicts. While initial support from significant others may legitimize the project, gendered habitus and social expectations can hinder the actualization of this projected identity. Professional identity thus remains suspended between legacy and aspiration.

The dissonance between the expectations placed on the training and its actual content, perceived as abstract, overwhelming, and lacking in support, intensifies feelings of inadequacy. Training, initially idealized as a springboard, reveals itself to be a source of overload and inconsistency. Theoretical knowledge appears disconnected from practical realities, and clinical placements can be hostile. The absence of recognition for pre-existing competencies and the symbolic violence experienced during placements undermine the internalization of the nursing role. In this light, academic success carries limited weight if it is not accompanied by identity validation from significant others.

The decision to interrupt the training can therefore be understood less as a rupture than as a pragmatic reconfiguration of the self-project. It reflects a desire to preserve personal equilibrium while keeping the door open for future engagement. By choosing to return to her role as a nursing assistant, Céline opts for an identity reconfiguration—one that safeguards her well-being without abandoning the possibility of future development. Her trajectory becomes a fluid one, marked by continuous negotiation between lived constraints and deferred aspirations. The self-project endures, though in alternative forms.

This case highlights the importance of *empowering and individualized support* (“*environnement capacitant*”) (Fernagu and Vidal-Gomel, 2022), capable of accompanying learners through their identity transitions. In this sense, trajectories such as Céline's invite a rethinking of training not merely as a site for knowledge acquisition, but as a space for recognition, negotiation, and identity safeguarding.

The analysis reveals that the training project is grounded in strong aspirations for social mobility and professional recognition, supported by a foundation of prior professional experience. However, identity conflicts stemming from the multiplicity of roles, particularly those of mother, student, and healthcare worker, intensify cognitive overload and reinforce the sense of disconnect between initial expectations and the reality of the training, which is perceived as overly theoretical and poorly supported during placements. While self-motivation and social support strategies may accompany these complex and multifaceted transitions, they are often insufficient to sustain persistence in education. The decision to interrupt training appears as a rupture in what is commonly imagined as a linear trajectory. Yet, this interruption also takes

on a protective function, preserving identity in a complex process of identity reconfiguration.

This case further reveals a *gendered dimension* in the decision to withdraw, partly rooted in the cumulative burden of roles outside of training, which is inadequately supported, and partly in the limitations of current nursing education systems to meet the specific needs of adult learners in professional transition. The analysis underscores the necessity of adapting these systems by offering more individualized pathways that acknowledge prior professional experience and diverse life configurations. It calls for strengthened social (Greer and Kirk, 2022) and practical support—especially during clinical placements—and the creation of *empowering learning environments* (Fernagu and Vidal-Gomel, 2022). Such adjustments could help prevent disillusionment, alleviate identity tensions, reduce attrition, and facilitate the successful integration of learners into health professions.

Conclusion

Céline's experience illustrates the multiple tensions inherent in a professional identity transition trajectory, particularly within the context of nursing education. While her project was well-considered and initially supported, it encountered a series of structural and subjective constraints that gradually eroded her engagement. Rather than serving as a space for transformation, the training environment emerged as a site of identity tension, highlighting the critical role of empowering environments, pedagogical support, and social recognition in the success of such pathways.

Her decision to interrupt the training does not signify failure, but rather a strategic and protective reconfiguration of her identity. This choice reflects an ability to redefine a viable trajectory within a context of cumulative constraints, revealing the complexity and plasticity of professional identity dynamics.

References

-
- Bean, J.P. and Metzner, B.S. (1985). A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition, *Review of educational research*, 55(4), 485–540.
- Bertaux, D. (2016). *Le récit de vie*. Paris: Armand Colin (128).
- Bourdieu, P. (1972). *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Librairie Droz.
- Boutinet, J.-P. (2012). *Anthropologie du projet* (2e éd.). Paris: Presses universitaires de France (Quadrige).
- Dubar, C. (1998). Trajectoires sociales et formes identitaires. Clarifications conceptuelles et méthodologiques, *Sociétés contemporaines*, 29(1), 73–85.
- Dubar, C. (2010). *La crise des identités: l'interprétation d'une mutation* (4e éd.). Paris: Presses universitaires de France (Le lien social).
- Dubar, C. (2022). *La socialisation: Construction des identités sociales et professionnelles*. Armand Colin.
- Dubet, F. (1994). *Sociologie de l'expérience*. Paris: Éd. du Seuil (La Couleur des idées).
- Fernagu, S. and Vidal-Gomel, C. (2022). Environnement capacitant : regard pluriel, *Travail et Apprentissages*, N° 23(1), 7-10.
- Greer, T.W. and Kirk, A.F. (2022). Overcoming Barriers to Women's Career Transitions: A Systematic Review of Social Support Types and Providers, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 777110. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.777110>
- Lahire, B. (1998). *L'homme pluriel: les ressorts de l'action*. Paris: Nathan.

Learning space, developmental space

How do beneficiaries of employment-oriented programs navigate for their professional transitions?

Céline Hoffert*, Maria Pagoni, Emmanuel Triby*****

** Université Paris Nanterre
200 avenue de la République
92001 Nanterre Cedex
France
celine.hoffert@parisnanterre.fr*

*** Université de Lille
4 rue Paul Duez
59000 Lille
France
maria.pagoni-andreani@univ-lille.fr*

**** Université de Strasbourg
4 rue Blaise Pascal
67081 Strasbourg cedex
France
triby@unistra.fr*

ABSTRACT

Adult learning has become essential in the face of societal transformations, facilitating professional transitions. In France, various programs support individuals in managing their careers, reflecting a broader shift in responsibility from institutions to individuals. While these programs have distinct goals, their functions can overlap. This research examines how individuals navigate these programs and manage the tensions between individual and social stakes, using the notion of space as a heuristic and analytical operator. Grounded empirically in the Accreditation of prior learning (APL, VAE) and applied heuristically to other employment-oriented programs, the model highlights epistemic and developmental dynamics, showing how beneficiaries actively appropriate, negotiate and reconfigure programs and their guidance.

KEYWORDS

Space, experiential learning, guidance, transition, development.

RÉSUMÉ

L'apprentissage des adultes est devenu essentiel face aux transformations sociétales, en facilitant les transitions professionnelles. En France, différents dispositifs soutiennent les individus dans la gestion de leur carrière, reflétant un transfert accru de responsabilité des institutions vers les individus. Bien que ces dispositifs poursuivent des objectifs distincts, leurs fonctions peuvent se recouper. Cette recherche examine comment les individus naviguent dans ces dispositifs et gèrent les tensions entre enjeux individuels et sociaux, en mobilisant la notion d'espace comme opérateur heuristique et analytique. Ancré empiriquement dans la Validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) et appliqué de façon heuristique à d'autres dispositifs visant l'emploi, le modèle mobilisé met en évidence des dynamiques épistémiques et développementales, montrant comment les bénéficiaires s'approprient, négocient et reconfigurent activement les dispositifs et leur accompagnement.

MOTS-CLÉS

Espace, apprentissage expérientiel, accompagnement, transition, développement.

Introduction

Adult learning has become increasingly necessary in the face of rapid societal transformations. Academic and professional trajectories are yet non-linear, marked by breaks, reorientations, and successive transitions. As Perez-Roux (2013) notes, a transition involves “a shift from one state or situation to another” with temporal, spatial and transformative dimensions (p.325). These transitions are accelerating, reinforcing the need for individuals to adapt continuously and to construct meaning in relation to work and learning. *Lifelong* and *lifewide learning* (Carré, 2020) are therefore resources for facing uncertainty and establishing one’s place in society.

Across Europe, public policies aim to promote and secure professional transitions through guidance, certification, and training programs. At the same time, they reflect a shift in responsibility from collective structures towards individuals, who are increasingly expected to actively manage their career paths and mobilize available programs. This tension between institutional support and individual responsibility, shapes how transitions are experienced and negotiated.

Within this European context, France also provides several programs to support the growing responsibility of individuals. For instance, Professional Development Counselling (*Conseil en Evolution Professionnelle*, CEP) helps individuals construct career projects, Accreditation of Prior learning (*Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience*, VAE) recognizes skills developed through work experience, and Work-Study Continuous Training (*Formation Professionnelle Continue par Alternance*, FPCA) promotes skill development through alternating periods of training and professional activity.

Although the institutional objectives of these programs may differ, their functions can overlap in practices. For example, VAE not only validates experience but may contribute to learning and to build new professional projects. This highlights the difference between the intended purposes of programs and the ways individuals actively appropriate them (as shown in the theory of instrumental genesis, Rabardel, 1995).

This research examines how individuals navigate employment-oriented programs and manage the tensions between personal and institutional stakes. The notion of space is mobilized as a heuristic lens: an analytical operator that helps capture how beneficiaries invest institutional programs, and how learning and development emerge through this navigation. Grounded in the VAE program, the model is first used to understand individual navigation in this context. It is then mobilized to explore its potential relevance for other employment-oriented programs, acknowledging that its applicability remains to be empirically tested.

Background of the research

In France, Law No. 2018-771 of September 5, 2018, reinforces individuals' responsibility for actively managing their own employability and career trajectories. The law promotes the freedom to choose one's professional future through the individualization of training rights, notably by granting individuals direct control over their training entitlements and by encouraging autonomous decision-making regarding training and certification pathways. This shift also reconfigures the role of guidance in employment-oriented programs. Counsellors are expected to assist individuals in navigating available programs, but also to help articulate personal projects with labor market needs. These programs are thus positioned both as tools of public policies and as resources that individuals are expected to mobilize strategically throughout their professional lives.

Within this framework, we focus on three complementary French programs: CEP, VAE and FCPA. All three are regulated by labor laws and oriented towards employment and professional mobility. They are experience-based, using past experience as a resource for projecting oneself into the future. In addition, they include forms of individualized guidance that function both as a normative framework and as an opportunity for reflection and personal development. These programs support learning and/or development, with varying emphasis depending on the program and the individual.

Conseil en Evolution Professionnelle (CEP)

CEP is a free program for anyone seeking to build a training and/or a career plan. It is embedded in the French Labour Code (Articles L6111-6 to L6111-6-1 and Articles R6111-5 to D6111-7). It has two levels: an initial analysis of the situation and request, helping individuals understand their environment and identify next steps; and assistance in formalizing and implementing their project.

CEP may serve as an entry point or a relay to VAE or FPCA, when additional training or certification needs are identified.

Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE)

VAE enables individuals to obtain a diploma without attending courses, by analysing their past experience in a dossier. The process involves four steps: choosing a diploma, applying for eligibility, preparing a dossier, and presenting it to a jury, which may grant a full, partial or no validation.

VAE may lead candidates to FPCA. Indeed, outgoing beneficiaries tend to seek a new diploma through training programs, they also tend to seek another diploma through VAE ((Hoffert, 2024). This program may also lead to CEP. Indeed, in cases of partial or no validation, candidates may need to redefine their academic and/or professional project.

Formation Professionnelle Continue par Alternance (FPCA)

FPCA combines theoretical coursework with on-the-job learning. Targeting adults already engaged in professional activity, it enables professional transitions or reorientation through certification. A key feature is the development of a research-based dissertation addressing a problem rooted in the beneficiary's work context. Alternating instruction and workplace experience fosters reflection, peer exchange and conceptualization. Training sessions, led by trainers-researchers, provide theoretical and methodological tools aligned with each beneficiary's research and professional needs.

FPCA often encourages participants to pursue further studies, including at the doctorate level.

Theoretical framework of the research: space as an analytical operator navigating employment-oriented programs

In educational and adult learning sciences, the notion of space has been increasingly used to account for the situated, relational and dynamic dimensions of learning and activity. We briefly revisit non-exhaustive influential approaches to clarify their contributions and limits for analysing employment-oriented programs. We situate our own model as a complementary and operational framework. Importantly, it was not constructed by extending existing models. The review identifies a theoretical and analytical need, while the model itself was developed through articulation of key concepts and inductive analysis of VAE empirical.

Existing approaches to space in education and work

In French, *espace* covers a wide semantic field (Lautier, 1999, cited in Heddad, 2017). Cristol (2022) emphasizes that space can be understood as a *perspective of lifeworld*, engaging cognition and emotion, and shaping *learnance* (*infra*, Carré, 2020).

Several models conceptualize space in various disciplines. Kolb and Kolb (2005) focus on configurations emerging from learning modes (concrete/abstract; active/reflexive) and social or institutional contexts, offering limited leverage for analysing institutional norms and guidance. Heddad's (2017) activity space model emphasizes co-construction through activity (given, modified, emergent), but is tied to physical and organizational settings. Duclos (2023) proposes a heuristic cartography of planned, situational, and fortuitous spaces articulated through four poles (design, play, exit, wild). It highlights tensions between structure and emergence, but it does not provide an operational model for empirical programs analysis.

Taken together, these approaches underline that space is a dynamic construction shaped by activity, interactions and institutional arrangements. Yet they

provide limited analytical tools for examining how individuals engage with highly regulated employment-oriented programs, in which institutional norms, guidance relationship and personal projects are tightly interwoven over extended transitional trajectories.

Conceptual grounding and construction of the space model

Our model was not derived from the models reviewed above, with the partial exception of Heddad's work on activity space. It was built on four key concepts: *learnance* (*apprenance*, Carré, 2020), *experience* (Barbier, 2013), *program* (*dispositif*, Albero, 2011) and *space* (Heddad, 2017).

The concept of *learnance* (Carré, 2020) postulates that any situation, whether or not it explicitly aims at learning, can become a learning opportunity if the individual is disposed to learn. Learning thus emerges from the encounter between endogenous (disposition, biography), exogenous (institutional and social contexts) and enactive (the situation as lived) factors. This perspective invites to consider beneficiaries not as passive recipients of training but as active subjects of their learning.

The concept of *experience* (Barbier, 2013) is not reduced to past activity but becomes learning through its elaboration and communication. The activity of narrating, formalizing and addressing experience to others produces transformations in meaning and understanding. This perspective is relevant for programs where beneficiaries are required to elaborate their professional experience and make it intelligible to institutional actors.

The concept of *program* (Albero, 2011) distinguishes between *idéal* (as designed and prescribed), functional (as implemented) and lived (as instrumented by actors). This distinction allows to analyse employment-oriented programs not only as policy instruments but also as lived arrangements that are appropriated, transformed, and sometimes diverted by actors.

Finally, the concept of *space* (Heddad, 2017) articulates activity, experience and program. Space is understood as both given for activity and constructed by actors within action. It allows to grasp how institutional prescriptions and individual actions are configured, negotiated and transformed in practice.

Three hypotheses were formulated: (1) Candidates articulate multiple spaces while engaging with the VAE program; (2) This articulation constitutes a learning process; (3) Guidance facilitates candidates' articulation of these spaces.

A complementary and operational space model

The resulting model (Hoffert, 2024) conceptualizes space as an analytical operator emerging from the analysis of the VAE program. It distinguishes three analytically distinct but empirically intertwined spaces: instrumental, intimate and social (Figure 1).

The *instrumental space* refers to the domain of rules, norms, tools, and prescribed procedures that structure the program. It includes administrative steps, evaluation criteria, formal requirements, and guidance framework, embodying the institutional and regulatory dimension of the program.

The *intimate space* designates the candidate's inner world. It is within this space that meaning making and reflexivity develop, often remaining partially invisible to institutional actors.

The *social space* encompasses real and symbolic interactions with others. It includes relationships with counsellors, peers, juries, and significant others. This space mediates between institutional prescriptions and individual experience.

These spaces are articulated through two transversal dynamics. The *epistemic dynamic* concerns the transformation of experience into knowledge through problematization, conceptualization, and formalization. The *developmental dynamic* concerns personal transformation through awareness, normalization, and emancipation, understood as a relative autonomy achieved through appropriation of program resources.

Three logics structure these dynamics: *elaboration* (problematization and awareness), *comparison* (normalization and conceptualization) and *addressing* (formalization and emancipation).

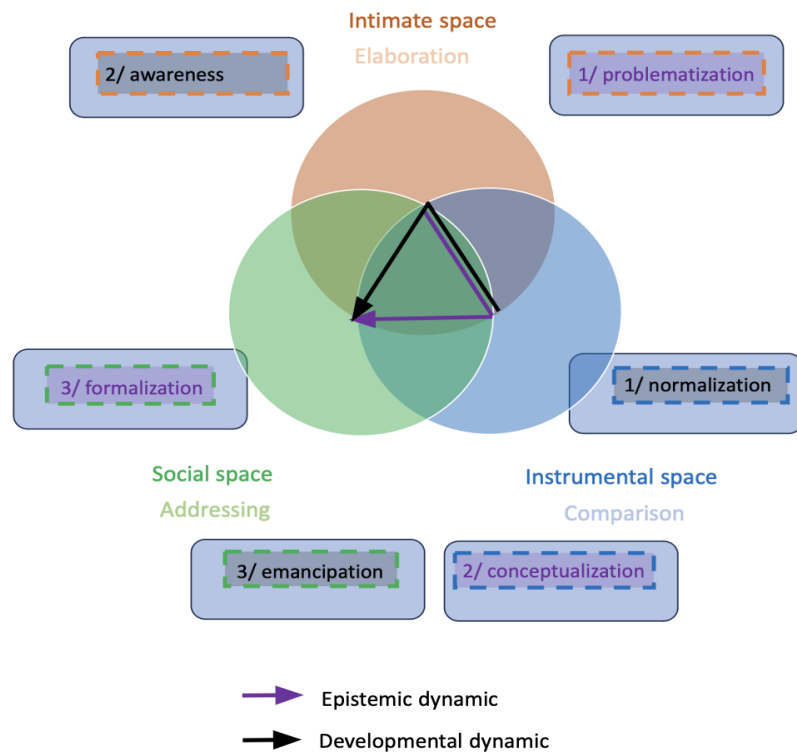


Figure 1: Space model (Translated from Hoffert, 2024, p. 315)

Although this model was developed within the specific context of VAE, the preceding contextual analysis has shown the VAE, CEP and FPCA share a number of structural features. On this basis, the model is not presented as directly applicable to other programs, but as a candidate analytical framework whose relevance can be explored in other employment-oriented programs.

Methodological framework

Our methodological architecture reflects the dual objective of the research. On the one hand, it aims to account for the empirical grounding of the space model, which was inductively constructed through investigation of the VAE program. On the other hand, it seeks to explore the heuristic relevance of this model for analysing other employment-oriented programs, without claiming empirical validation beyond its original field of construction. This methodological positioning explains why the model is presented prior to the methodological section: it is both the outcome of a research process and the analytical lens mobilized in an exploratory manner.

Methodological grounding of the space model (VAE)

The space model is grounded in qualitative doctoral research focusing on VAE. The aim of this investigation was to understand how candidates engage with the VAE process, and how space is both prescribed by the program and constructed through candidates' lived experience.

Empirical data were collected from both VAE alumni (n=33) and VAE counsellors (n=14), using complementary qualitative methods. These included semi-structured interviews with counsellors, analysis of written traces produced by alumni as part of their VAE dossier, narrative interviews conducted after diploma validation, and focus groups with counsellors. The focus groups were designed to document collective professional interpretations of beneficiaries' learning and space construction. Together, these materials made it possible to document alumni' trajectories, their relationship with institutional norms, the role of guidance, and the resources mobilized throughout the VAE process.

Data were analysed using a qualitative interpretive approach combining categorical and inductive analysis. Some analytical categories were defined *a priori*, notably those related to engagement in learning, while others emerged progressively from the empirical material. This analytical process led to the identification of the three interrelated spaces (*supra*). These spaces were initially constructed as analytical categories and subsequently articulated into a space model. The model was further refined through in-depth analysis, allowing to explore how beneficiaries articulate spaces and how learning and developmental dynamics unfold over time.

Methodological positioning of the CEP and FCPA analyses

The analyses proposed for CEP and FPCA do not rely on empirical data collected through the spatial framework. Rather, they draw on the expertise and insights developed by researchers in prior studies of these programs, which are used to explore the potential applicability and heuristic value of the space model. This is explicitly exploratory.

Regarding the CEP, Pagoni (ed., 2022) conducted a large-scale study in the Hauts-de-France region over a two-year period (2017-2019). This research involved 35 interviews with CEP counsellors, 11 self-confrontation interviews based on recorded observations, and 352 questionnaires completed by CEP beneficiaries. The study focused on counsellors' professional development and on the support of secure career pathways.

Regarding the FPCA, Sanojca and Tribby (2022) adopted a research-training approach grounded in 18 years of experience coordinating a Master's program in training engineering. This work draws on observational and analytical data from student dissertations as well as from research seminar sessions. In addition, a survey of former students and semi-structured elicitation interviews were conducted to explore processes of valorisation within the training context.

These bodies of work are not reanalysed here as empirical material. Instead, they provide empirically rich contexts that allow us to formulate hypotheses and analytical propositions regarding how different employment-oriented programs may configure distinct articulations of spaces, as well as different dynamics.

Analytical findings and heuristic perspectives

Given our exploratory orientation, the following section does not present results in a conventional sense. It articulates analytical findings derived from the VAE investigation and formulates heuristic perspectives for analysing other employment-oriented programs through the space model.

Analytical findings from the VAE program

First, VAE process involves the articulation of multiple spaces. Candidates do not engage with the program within a single, homogeneous framework. Rather, they construct and invest instrumental, intimate and social spaces in the course of their engagement.

The instrumental space is structured by institutional norms, rules, evaluation criteria and tools (ex. dossier). For instance, the empirical material shows how beneficiaries progressively align their narratives with academic formats while comparing norms.

The intimate space is related to reflexivity, identity, and meaning-making. The empirical material reveals moments of doubts, reevaluation of past trajectories, or reconfiguration of self-image triggered by the elaboration of the dossier.

The social space is composed of interactions with advisors, peers, and informal support networks. The empirical material highlights how candidates rely on both institutional and non-institutional relationship to sustain their engagement and finally emancipate themselves from the program.

Second, the articulation of these spaces constitutes a learning and development process in itself. Learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition or validation of competencies. It emerges though the candidates' capacity to negotiate tensions between spaces: for example, transforming lived activity into communicable knowledge, or reconciling personal experience with institutional expectations. From this perspective, learning and development appear as processes of articulation and transformation rather than a linear accumulation.

Third, guidance plays a mediating role in this articulation. Support practices contribute to creating conditions that enable candidates to engage. With and articulate the different spaces. At the same time, informal resources and networks also play a decisive role. Empirical material illustrates how guidance can help candidates appropriate tools, while also showing that they seek support beyond the formal program.

The analysis highlights the singularity of space construction. Spaces are not only prescribed by the program, they are enacted differently depending on candidates' familiarity with institutional norms, prior educational trajectories, and lifeworld.

Heuristic perspectives for the analysis of the CEP and FPCA programs

Building on these analytical findings, the space model is mobilized as a heuristic lens to explore how other employment-oriented programs might configure learning and development through different articulations of spaces.

Applied to CEP, the model invites the hypothesis that the intimate space may play a significant role, as requests for counselling often emerge from uncertainty, transition, or questioning. However, this intimate space may remain partially inaccessible in early stages of counselling, as professional norms and institutional expectations structure the demand analysis. The instrumental space may thus be mobilized pragmatically, for example as beneficiaries draw on format tools, procedure or documentation provided within the state-guided program to plan or adjust their projects. Similarly, the social space may function as a mediating arena, primarily through interactions with counsellors, where beneficiaries could negotiate expectations and align personal goals with institutional frameworks and public policy objectives.

Building on this articulation of spaces, we hypothesize that developmental dynamics (awareness, normalization, emancipation) may be particularly salient in CEP, reflecting how individuals navigate between personal aspirations and policy-influenced program structures, while epistemic dynamics (problematization, conceptualization, formalization) may remain more implicit or be externalized through specific tools such as skills assessments or workshops.

A different configuration can be hypothesized for FPCA. Here, the intimate space may function as an *interstitial zone* in which individuals reconcile personal, professional, and training temporalities, contributing to the legitimation of their training project and reflection on its implication for their identity. The social space may emerge through the public exposure of the training project within academic and professional environments, generating discussions around legitimacy and value. The instrumental space may be strongly structured around dissertation, which could operate as a tool for articulating experiential knowledge with academic references.

This configuration allows to hypothesize a stronger activation of epistemic dynamics, as beneficiaries engage in problematization, conceptualization and formalization, while simultaneously experiencing developmental transformations through reflection on practice.

The analytical grid (Figure 2) was constructed for the purpose of this publication as a heuristic tool. It illustrates how the space model can be operationalized to examine instrumental, intimate and social spaces, as well as epistemic and developmental dynamics, across different employment-oriented

programs. It is not a presentation of empirical results for CEP or FPCA, but a visual support for interpreting and generating hypotheses.

Building on these hypotheses, the model could inform future tools to explore the expression of epistemic and developmental dynamics. Such tools, potentially including pre- and post- questionnaires, would guide subsequent research on how programs foster learning and development, while remaining aligned with the model's heuristic logic.

Epistemic dynamic	Problematization	The individual identifies and defines a problem encountered in their past or present experience. The problem is formulated in relation to the context in which it arises. <i>E.g., I couldn't understand why my team wasn't following the procedures, even though they were clearly stated.</i>
	Conceptualization	The individual abstracts or generalizes the problem by engaging it with theoretical concepts. <i>E.g., It seems to me that there are several reasons why procedures may not be followed: they may lack clarity or relevance. If they lack clarity, the team cannot comply with them; if they lack relevance, the team does not want to follow them.</i>
	Formalization	The individual presents their explanation of the encountered problem, making it intelligible to various interlocutors, whether experts or non-experts in the field and/or discipline. <i>E.g., The procedures are clear since some people do follow them. I therefore believe that they lack relevance because they were not developed collaboratively and were not tested against real-world conditions.</i>
Developmental dynamic	Normalization	The individual compares their past or present practices to the standards they are confronted with. <i>E.g., When writing a report for my company, I must be very concise (professional standard), whereas in an academic discussion, I must explicitly detail my method (academic standard) and link it to relevant literature (university norms).</i>
	Awareness	The individual brings to light a knowledge or skill they had not been consciously aware of before. <i>E.g., I realized that incorporating insights from my readings made my argument more objective—not just my own opinion, but one supported by authors who share similar perspectives.</i>
	Emancipation	The individual describes a process of liberation from constraints or biases, marking a departure from a state of dependency (material, emotional, cognitive, etc.). <i>E.g., From now on, I will take the time to read articles whenever I encounter a problem, even if it is not explicitly required by my employer; this is now part of my personal methodology.</i>

Figure 2: Grid of analysis

Analytical scope, biases and limitations

The distinction between instrumental, intimate and social spaces is analytical: in lived experience, these spaces are often intertwined and dynamically reconfigured. The model should therefore be understood as a tool for analysis, rather than a descriptive typology of experiential reality.

Methodologically, the model relies primarily on narrative data and written traces. This orientation facilitates analysis of reflexivity, meaning-making and explicit learning processes, but it may underrepresent more tacit, embodied or situational

dimensions of learning and development that are less accessible through discourse-based materials.

The space model developed is grounded in an in-depth qualitative investigation of the VAE program. This anchoring makes the model particularly sensitive to academic programs characterized by strong institutional framing, formalized procedure, and explicit guidance practices. It's relevance for non-academic programs, such as CEP, constitutes a contextual limitation.

Finally, the analyses of CEP and FPCA presented here do not rely on empirical data collected through the spatial framework. They are intentionally heuristic, exploring the model's transferability and analytical relevance rather than establishing empirical validation.

Conclusion

We proposed a space model to analyse how individuals engage with employment-oriented programs in professional transition. Grounded in the VAE program and heuristically applied to CEP and FPCA, the model treats space as an analytical operator rather than an environment.

The entry through spaces provides a way to conceptualize individuals' ability to create both material and ideational situations, with the support of their facilitators. These situations go beyond merely responding to institutional injunctions, they foster learning and development.

This approach highlights the interplay of dispositions, both internal and external, shaped by situational and contextual factors (the *mesology* in the sense of Berque, 2016), that enable individuals to *move* (reposition themselves relative to their close social circles, colleagues, and society) and *take time* (disrupting institutional, social, or personal temporal structures to reclaim moments for themselves, enhance their value, and construct new intelligibility in an evolving world). These processes create the necessary conditions for successful transitions.

Within this framework, key notions such as *aesthetic experience* and the distribution of the sensible (in the sense of Jacques Rancière, in Hamidi et al., 2025) may serve as cognitive instruments for articulating the passage from experience to knowledge, from activity to learning. This transition is facilitated by the dynamic interplay between career and employment projects, the resources and constraints embedded in institutional programs, and the formal and informal support they provide. Another space emerges alongside the three initial ones: the *civic space*, where social positioning takes place and projects gain full meaning.

We propose defining space in educational and adult learning sciences as an enactive and fortuitous construction of the individual; exploring instrumental, intimate and social spaces; shaped by both constrained and deliberate choices; allowing elaboration, comparison, and addressing; and ultimately serving learning and development.

Analysing space within employment-oriented programs also helps clarify the challenges and limitations of these programs. As tools for adapting to labor market transformations, they shape both professional and academic trajectories. By mobilizing beneficiaries' past experience, these programs enable individuals to appropriate both the program and their own learning path.

References

-
- Albero, B. (2011, juin). Approche trilogique des dispositifs en formation : pourquoi est-ce que les choses ne fonctionnent-elles jamais comme prévu ? *Colloque OUFOPREP*, pp. 59-63. Nantes, France.
- Barbier, J.-M. (2013). Expérience, apprentissage, éducation. In L. Albarello, J.-M. Barbier, E. Bourgeois and M. Durand (dir.), *Expérience, activité, apprentissage*, pp. 65-92. PUF.
- Berque, A. (2016). Perception de l'espace, ou milieu perceptif ? *L'espace géographique*, 45 (2), 168-181.
- Carré, P. (2020). *Pourquoi et comment les adultes apprennent. De la formation à l'apprenance*. Dunod.
- Cristol, D. (2022). Pour une mésologie de l'apprenance. *Phronesis*, 11 (4), 112-132.
- Duclos, L. (Dir.) (2023). L'espace comme condition de l'expérience. *Éducation permanente*, 237(4), 5-20.
- Hamidi, B., Jaudon, R. and Marchiori, D. (Dir) (2025). *Jacques Rancière et les arts. Esthétiques de l'égalité*. De l'incidence Éditeur.
- Heddad, N. (2017). L'espace de l'activité : Une construction conjointe de l'activité et de l'espace. *Le travail humain*, 80, 207-233.
- Hoffert, C. (2024). Cheminement apprenant de candidats à la Validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) dans l'enseignement supérieur français. Apport heuristique de la notion d'espace. *Thèse de doctorat en sciences de l'éducation et de la formation*, Université de Strasbourg et Université de Lille.
- Kolb, A. and Kolb, D. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces. Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of management Learning and Education*, 4 (2), 193-212.
- Pagoni, M. (dir., 2022). *L'accompagnement dans le cadre du Conseil en Evolution Professionnelle. Professionnalisation des conseillers et sécurisation des parcours professionnels*. Connaissances et Savoirs.
- Perez-Roux, M.-T. (2013). Transition professionnelle, In Jorro, A., *Dictionnaire des concepts de la professionnalisation*, pp. 325-328. De Boeck Supérieur.
- Rabardel, P. (1995). *Les hommes et les technologies. Approche cognitive des instruments contemporains*. Armand Colin.
- Sanojca, E. and Triby, E. (2022) Négociation des savoirs et socialisation professionnelle. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 57(1), 162-180.

Supporting skilled immigrants as non-traditional learners in professional integration

The role of post-migration support mechanisms for skilled immigrants' employability and professional integration

Mehran Jamshidi

*The University of British Columbia
(UBC) - Sauder School of Business
2053 Main Mall
V6T 1Z2 – Vancouver
Canada
Mehran.jamshidi@sauder.ubc.ca*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how skilled immigrants, as non-traditional adult learners, engage in informal, relational learning processes during their initial professional integration post-migration in Canada. Drawing on ongoing EdD research and Bourdieu's theoretical framework, including social and cultural capital, habitus clivé, symbolic violence, and illusio, the study focuses on immigrant project managers' navigation of evolving workplace expectations. Through thematic analysis of interview data, the findings highlight the ways in which professional identity, communication practices, and unspoken norms shape the integration journey. The study contributes to current understandings of professional integration by emphasizing the learning dimension of this process and considering how support mechanisms can complement the valuable skills and experiences that skilled immigrants bring.

KEYWORDS

Skilled immigrants, professional integration, non-traditional learning, social and cultural capital, post-migration support mechanisms.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore comment les immigrants qualifiés, en tant qu'apprenants adultes non traditionnels, s'engagent dans des processus d'apprentissage informels et relationnels lors de leur intégration professionnelle initiale après la migration au Canada. S'appuyant sur une recherche doctorale en cours et sur le cadre théorique de Bourdieu, incluant le capital social et culturel, l'habitus clivé, la violence symbolique et l'illusio, l'étude se concentre sur la manière dont des chefs de projet immigrants appréhendent les attentes professionnelles en constante évolution. À travers une analyse thématique des données d'entretiens, les résultats mettent en lumière la manière dont l'identité professionnelle, les pratiques de communication et les normes implicites façonnent le parcours d'intégration. Cette recherche contribue à une meilleure compréhension de l'intégration professionnelle en soulignant la dimension d'apprentissage de ce processus et en examinant comment les mécanismes de soutien peuvent compléter les compétences et expériences précieuses que les immigrants qualifiés apportent.

MOTS-CLÉS

Immigrants qualifiés, intégration professionnelle, apprentissage non traditionnel, capital social et culturel, mécanismes de soutien post-migratoires.

Introduction

In an era of intensified global mobility and talent migration, countries like Canada rely increasingly on skilled immigrants to address labour shortages and contribute to innovation and economic growth (Reitz, 2007; Hou et al., 2020). In Canada, immigration pathways such as the Federal Skilled Worker (FSW) program aim to attract highly qualified professionals by assessing factors such as education, age, work experience, and language proficiency. Although the program also awards points for adaptability and arranged employment, many applicants are unable to leverage these categories effectively. Moreover, obtaining immigration status through formal qualifications alone does not necessarily lead to smooth or immediate professional integration (Chand and Tung, 2019).

Skilled immigrants often encounter challenges that go beyond credential recognition. These include difficulties navigating unfamiliar workplace norms, leadership expectations, and communication practices shaped by cultural and field-specific dynamics (Guo, 2013; Bourdieu, 1986). While these experiences do not reflect deficiencies in immigrant capabilities, they point to the complexity of adapting to new professional fields and the presence of often-invisible structures of legitimacy and belonging.

Project management is a cross-disciplinary profession that involves leading teams and coordinating resources to deliver defined objectives within constraints of time, scope, and budget. Unlike regulated professions such as medicine or engineering, project management is not governed by a single licensing body in Canada, nor is it confined to a particular industry. Project managers operate across a wide range of sectors, including construction, healthcare, information technology, and finance, each characterized by distinct workplace norms, stakeholder expectations, and communication practices. As a result, the profession is shaped by context-specific social and cultural dynamics that are often unspoken. For skilled immigrants, navigating these expectations may involve informal and experiential learning processes, not due to a lack of expertise, but because these norms are field-dependent and typically acquired through experience within the local context.

Rather than offering a critique of immigration policies or settlement programs, this research seeks to illuminate the experiential dimensions of professional integration. By examining how skilled immigrants adapt and re-establish social and professional identity, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of integration as a dynamic, field-dependent process. It further explores how support mechanisms might be better aligned with the lived experiences of skilled immigrants, providing insights of relevance to educators, policymakers, and employers alike.

Skilled immigrants are approached in this study as non-traditional adult learners whose learning occurs primarily through informal and experiential professional experiences rather than formal education. Learning is understood as a socially situated and relational process through which individuals interpret workplace norms, negotiate professional identity, and engage in meaning-making within specific professional fields (Guo, 2013). Professional integration is conceptualized as a socially situated

transition through which individuals reposition themselves within new institutional, cultural, and relational contexts following migration. Within this process, professional identity is viewed as relational and evolving, shaped through participation, recognition, and negotiation within specific professional fields (Bourdieu, 1990). Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of social and cultural capital, habitus, symbolic violence, and illusion, and informed by adult learning perspectives, the paper examines how these dynamics unfold within Canadian professional settings.

Purpose of the study

This paper aims to examine how skilled immigrants, specifically immigrant project managers, experience professional integration as an informal and relational learning process following migration to Canada. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice and adult learning perspectives, the study explores how participants interpret workplace expectations, negotiate professional identity, and engage with post-migration support mechanisms within Canadian professional fields.

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu's concepts and skilled immigrants as non-traditional learners

This research seeks to understand professional integration as a learning process shaped by social structures, cultural expectations, and identity negotiation. Rather than attributing integration outcomes to individual shortcomings or policy deficiencies, this study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical tools, particularly social and cultural capital, habitus, field, symbolic violence, and illusion, to interpret the experiences of skilled immigrants in the Canadian labour market.

Social and cultural capital

Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as the value of networks and relationships, and cultural capital as a combination of embodied dispositions, institutional credentials, and cultural knowledge. These forms of capital are field-dependent; what is recognized and valued in one professional context may not transfer seamlessly to another. For skilled immigrants, this means that their professional expertise and behavioural norms, though effective in their country of origin, may not align with expectations in their new environment. This mismatch does not reflect a lack of ability but rather illustrates how fields operate with implicit norms that require situated learning.

Habitus and habitus clivé

Bourdieu's notion of habitus is also central to this analysis. Habitus refers to the durable ways of thinking, acting, and being that individuals develop through their life experiences. When immigrants enter a new field, such as the Canadian professional

workplace, their pre-existing habitus may clash with local practices, leading to what Bourdieu (2000) terms *habitus clivé*, a condition of internal tension between established dispositions and new expectations. This condition often requires individuals to reconfigure their professional identity in ways that are emotionally and cognitively complex.

Symbolic violence and doxa

Relatedly, symbolic violence refers to the subtle ways in which dominant norms are legitimized and internalized, often without conscious awareness. For skilled immigrants, this can manifest in situations where their foreign-acquired credentials or leadership styles are not recognized, even if they formally meet job requirements. The expectation of “Canadian experience” can function as an unspoken norm (*doxa*), shaping employer perceptions and influencing integration outcomes. These processes are rarely explicit, making them difficult to challenge or navigate without targeted support.

Illusion and professional commitment

The concept of illusion captures the implicit belief in the legitimacy of the field’s rules, the sense that success within a given system is both meaningful and achievable. Skilled immigrants often demonstrate strong commitment to engaging with their new professional environment, yet may encounter conflicting signals about what constitutes competence or belonging. Understanding this dynamic sheds light on the emotional and relational aspects of integration.

Integrating adult learning perspectives

While Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice provides the primary analytical framework for this study, selected adult learning perspectives are used to illuminate how learning unfolds within everyday professional contexts. Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) highlights learning through action and reflection, while transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) informs the analysis of identity negotiation and meaning making when participants encounter dissonance between prior professional dispositions and new workplace expectations. These perspectives support, rather than replace, the sociological analysis by providing language to describe how skilled immigrants engage in learning as they navigate field-specific norms and professional belonging.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a social constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013). The aim is to explore how skilled immigrants understand and experience their professional integration in Canada, with particular attention to the relational, identity-based, and learning dimensions of this

transition. Rather than seeking generalizable conclusions, this approach values participants' situated perspectives and the contextual dynamics shaping their narratives.

Participant selection and recruitment

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling (Patton, 2015; Noy, 2008) to ensure variation in background while focusing on immigrant project managers who immigrated to Canada through the Federal Skilled Worker (FSW) program between 2010 and 2020. All participants had secured at least one project management role post-migration. Recruitment occurred through professional associations, LinkedIn outreach, and industry referrals.

Data collection

At the time of this phase of the study, four interviews had been completed. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in person or via video conferencing. The interview guide covered themes such as credential recognition, workplace expectations, communication practices, access to networks, and post-migration learning experiences. The guide is refined iteratively as new insights emerge.

Data analysis and dual-perspective design

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) guides the data interpretation process. Initial coding focused on recurrent patterns related to identity shifts, professional adaptation, and learning strategies. As more data is collected, themes are refined and compared across cases to build a deeper understanding of integration as a learning process. Analysis is guided by Bourdieu's theoretical lens to ensure sensitivity to field-specific norms, capital recognition, and implicit inclusion or exclusion mechanisms.

To gain a more holistic understanding, the study also includes interviews with hiring managers who have experience recruiting immigrant project managers. This dual perspective enables a more nuanced exploration of how integration is shaped by both immigrant and employer experiences.

This paper draws on four in-depth interviews conducted at the time of the conference presentation. The intent of the analysis is not to produce generalizable claims, but to offer analytically rich insights into how professional integration is experienced and interpreted as a learning process. The small sample allows for close engagement with participants' narratives, sense-making, and relational experiences, supporting the development of conceptually grounded themes that illuminate the learning dimensions of professional integration. As part of an ongoing doctoral study, the findings presented here are exploratory and illustrative in nature.

Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity is integrated throughout the research process. As a skilled immigrant and project management professional, I maintain a reflective journal and engage in peer debriefing to remain aware of how my experiences influence interpretation (Berger, 2015; Etherington, 2004). Rather than attempting to distance myself from the study, I embrace a reflexive stance that acknowledges positionality while prioritizing participants' voices.

Findings: Thematic insights into professional integration

This section presents four preliminary themes derived from interviews with four immigrant project managers, Adnan, Annabelle, Marco, and Ming, residing in Metro Vancouver. These themes reflect the participants' narratives about their experiences navigating Canada's labour market and provide insight into how professional integration unfolds as a relational, emotional, and adaptive process.

Misrecognition of capital and the challenge of validation

Participants consistently spoke of the gap between their internationally acquired qualifications and how these credentials were perceived by employers in Canada. While their education and work histories were recognized during the immigration process, they often found that these assets did not translate into immediate job opportunities. Marco, who had worked extensively as a project manager in the Philippines, expressed frustration when told he needed to return to school in order to be competitive in the job market:

“They said, ‘You have a gap; you need to go back to school for two years.’ I thought, ‘How does that make sense?’ I have been doing this work for years.”

This experience was echoed by Annabelle and Adnan, who both questioned the disconnect between being selected through the FSW program and the lack of recognition they faced upon arrival. Rather than being discouraged, participants described engaging in self-reflection and learning about local hiring expectations. Ming described this process as one of “starting over, not in skills, but in how to present those skills in a way employers understand.” These insights highlight the field-dependent nature of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and suggest that misrecognition can become a catalyst for learning and adaptation rather than a simple barrier.

Habitus clivé and professional identity tension

The process of integration often involved internal conflict, especially when previously effective professional behaviours clashed with new cultural expectations. Participants shared that leadership and communication styles they had developed over years of experience were sometimes misinterpreted in the Canadian context.

Annabelle recalled being told she came across as “too aggressive” when advocating for her team:

“Back home, as a woman, I had to be assertive to be heard. Here, that same tone is read as pushy or confrontational.”

Ming similarly reflected on the discomfort of promoting his own achievements. Coming from a workplace culture where team accomplishments were prioritized over individual recognition, he found it difficult to engage in performance reviews and job interviews that emphasized self-advocacy:

“In our culture, you praise the team, the manager. You stay humble. Here, they want you to sell yourself. It’s not easy to change that overnight.”

These tensions exemplify what Bourdieu (2000) calls *habitus clivé*, a disjuncture between the dispositions formed in one field and the expectations of another. Participants did not describe this tension as a failure but as an emotionally complex process of navigating new norms while trying to retain a sense of professional authenticity.

Learning through informal and experiential means

Much of the learning described by participants occurred outside formal training environments. Instead, it took the form of observing colleagues, seeking feedback, volunteering, and networking. Marco recounted the importance of the Vancouver Public Library, where he found resources to better understand behavioural interviews and workplace culture. Adnan described how informal conversations with peers gave him insight into unspoken rules:

“I learned more from chatting with someone over coffee than from any official workshop. People told me how things really work.”

Participants highlighted that while they came with strong technical skills, the real learning involved understanding relational dynamics, workplace hierarchies, and expectations around collaboration and leadership. These processes align with experiential learning through action and reflection (Kolb, 1984) and illustrate how skilled immigrants actively reconfigure their professional practices through informal, relational, and everyday workplace interactions.

Reflections on post-migration support

All participants acknowledged the value of Canada’s post-migration support services and expressed appreciation for the intent behind them. At the same time, they shared reflections on how these services could be further refined to support field-specific integration. Annabelle, for instance, emphasized the importance of mentorship from professionals in her own industry:

“It’s one thing to learn how to write a resume, but it’s another to have someone from your field say, ‘Here’s how we do it here.’ That makes a huge difference.”

Adnan recalled receiving generic advice during his job search but wished for more tailored guidance:

“They said, ‘Adapt your resume to the job posting.’ That’s helpful, but I wanted someone to say, ‘Here’s a job, here’s what they’re looking for, and this is how your experience fits.’”

Participants did not critique existing programs but highlighted the need for layered and profession-sensitive support. Their comments suggest that integration services can be most impactful when they build on the existing expertise of immigrants, offering relational, contextualized, and peer-informed pathways for professional re-engagement.

Discussion: Interpreting findings through Bourdieu and adult learning lens

This discussion draws on Bourdieu’s sociological theory and adult learning perspectives to interpret the findings in a manner that respects both the structural nature of integration and the agency of skilled immigrants. Rather than approaching professional integration as a deficit to be corrected or a binary outcome of employment, the study illustrates how integration functions as a relational, identity-based, and context-sensitive learning process. Each theme identified in the findings reveals the ways in which skilled immigrants engage in meaning-making, negotiate shifting identities, and build new forms of capital across social fields.

Navigating capital recognition in a new field

Interpreted through Bourdieu’s concept of social and cultural capital, the theme of capital misrecognition exemplifies how foreign-acquired educational and professional capital may be devalued in the Canadian labour market, not necessarily due to overt rejection, but due to subtle symbolic structures. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1986) understanding of how the value of capital is contingent upon its alignment with the rules and expectations of a given field. Skilled immigrants often find that their prior experience and qualifications, while sufficient for selection into Canada, require rearticulation within a local frame to be perceived as relevant by employers.

What emerges here is a complex form of learning, not only about the norms and symbols that govern professional acceptance but also about the social meaning of their existing capital. This learning takes place through observation, narrative reflection, and trial-and-error adaptation. Rather than viewing this process as one of loss or replacement, participants describe it as one of translation, transforming capital so that it resonates with the expectations of the new context. Such translation is not automatic; it demands strategic learning and professional discernment.

Identity, habitus clivé, and emotional dimensions of transition

This experience was evident in the participants' struggle to reconcile long-established professional dispositions with new expectations. The tension between assertiveness and modesty, directness and deference, or leadership and consensus-based communication created moments of dissonance that were not only behavioural but deeply emotional.

This dissonance reflects what transformative learning theorists (Mezirow, 2000) describe as a "disorienting dilemma", a moment in which one's assumptions are questioned, and the learner must reassess their identity, role, and values. For participants like Annabelle and Ming, learning how to "fit in" professionally did not mean abandoning prior values but developing hybrid strategies that allowed them to navigate new norms without losing authenticity. This identity negotiation was described as tiring, sometimes invisible, and often unsupported, highlighting the affective and social labor involved in integration.

Informal learning as a mechanism of integration

Viewed through Bourdieu's emphasis on field-specific norms and recognition, a central insight from the study is the role of informal learning as a key mechanism in participants' adaptation and professional integration processes. Unlike formal onboarding or training, participants learned through situated, contextual, and relational interactions. They volunteered, networked, conducted self-study, and relied on peer advice. These forms of learning reflect experiential and relational processes through which participants navigated field-specific norms and gradually established professional legitimacy through participation, observation, and interaction.

Such informal learning is often unrecognized but fundamental. It shapes not only how skilled immigrants gain entry into professional roles but also how they develop a sense of professional legitimacy. Participants described building competence through repeated exposure, feedback, and sense-making, emphasizing the iterative and responsive nature of integration. Importantly, this mode of learning positions immigrants not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active agents constructing and reconstructing their professional identities through social engagement.

Reframing support as professionally and relationally embedded

These reflections suggest that support mechanisms are most effective when they facilitate access to field-specific norms, networks, and forms of recognized professional legitimacy, extending beyond generic job-seeking advice to foster context-specific, relationship-based learning environments. Programs that include mentoring from experienced professionals, peer-based exchanges, and field-specific knowledge sharing may offer more relevant and affirming pathways for skilled immigrants.

This perspective aligns with adult learning principles that emphasize relevance, contextualization, and collaboration. Participants were not seeking corrective interventions but spaces where their knowledge could be validated, translated, and enriched. The suggestion is not to replace existing support models but to complement them with mechanisms that recognize the relational and field-specific challenges skilled immigrants face.

These insights reinforce the need to reframe integration as a situated learning process that intersects with identity, power, and professional belonging. Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, doxa, and illusion, when combined with adult learning frameworks, offer a powerful lens through which to understand the complexity of professional integration. They reveal that what is often viewed as a technical transition is in fact a profound social learning journey, one that calls for nuanced, responsive, and inclusive forms of support.

Conclusion

This study has explored the professional integration of skilled immigrants in Canada by framing their experiences through Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and adult learning theories. Rather than viewing integration solely as the alignment of skills with job opportunities, the research emphasizes the relational, field-specific, and identity-based learning processes that unfold after migration. Skilled immigrants are not only navigating unfamiliar labour markets but are actively engaging in meaning-making, social negotiation, and informal learning to reposition their capital in ways that resonate with local norms and expectations.

The findings show that misrecognition of foreign-acquired capital often prompts complex learning efforts, not as remedial actions but as strategic responses to the tacit demands of the new field. These responses reflect significant emotional and cognitive labor, as individuals reconcile longstanding professional identities with emergent cultural and communicative expectations. Rather than abandoning their previous dispositions, participants developed hybrid practices that allowed them to maintain authenticity while adapting to contextually specific norms. This adaptive work exemplifies habitus clivé and underscores the affective dimensions of integration.

Informal and experiential learning emerged as central to this process. Participants drew on relational spaces, mentorship, volunteering, peer exchanges, and self-guided exploration, to build their understanding of workplace culture, performance expectations, and communication norms. These practices reveal the importance of recognizing skilled immigrants as non-traditional adult learners who are already equipped with deep expertise and a capacity for reflective adaptation.

Importantly, the study highlights how post-migration supports, when relationally grounded and field-sensitive, can complement immigrants' existing strengths. Participants did not critique the availability of services but expressed a desire for more structured mentorship, sector-specific guidance, and more collaborative modes of support. These preferences call for a shift in how integration is conceptualized: not as

a task to be completed, but as an ongoing, socially embedded learning process that involves recognition, reciprocity, and co-construction.

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of skilled immigrants' journeys by moving beyond technical framings of employability. It underscores the need for inclusive frameworks that recognize the intersection of structural dynamics and personal agency in integration. While findings are based on a preliminary sample and ongoing EdD research, they provide grounded insights into how professional integration can be better supported through learning-informed and relational approaches.

Future research may extend this work by examining how these learning processes vary across different sectors, how employers perceive and respond to immigrant adaptation, and how integration frameworks can be designed to foster mutual learning between immigrants and receiving institutions. As the study continues, the intention is to further explore these complexities and contribute practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to support meaningful and equitable professional integration.

References

- Banerjee, R., Verma, A. and Zhang T. (2019). *Labour market integration of skilled immigrants: Challenges and opportunities*. Institute for Canadian Citizenship.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In: Richardson J (ed.) *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, pp. 241–258. New York: Greenwood,.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Chand, M. and Tung, R. L. (2019). Skilled immigration to fill talent gaps: A comparison of the immigration policies of the United States, Canada, and Australia. *Journal of International Business Policy*, 2(4), 333–355. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-019-00039-4>.
- Chowdhury, T.A. and Turin, T.C. (2023). Systematic disparities in job market integration for skilled immigrants in Canada: A critical review. *Societies*, 13(3), 75.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using ourselves in research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Guo, S. (2009). Difference, deficiency, and decolonization: Critical pedagogy and immigrant adult education. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 22(1), 1-18.
- Guo, S. (2013). The changing nature of adult education in the global context: New challenges and possibilities for immigrant adult learners. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 19(1), 31-46.
- Hou, F., Picot, G. and Zhang, Y. (2020). *Selected indicators of the labour market integration of immigrants in Canada*. Statistics Canada.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344.
- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Reitz, J.G. (2007). Immigrant employment success in Canada, part I: Individual and contextual causes. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 8(1), 11-36.

**Process of creative
and emancipatory learning**

Analytical model for studying the emancipatory effects of open cooperation

Elzbieta Sanojca*, **Jérôme Eneau****

** CREAD - University of Rennes2
2 Place du recteur Henri Le Moal
CS 24307 – 35043 – Rennes
France
elzbieta.sanojca@univ-rennes2.fr*

*** CREAD - University of Rennes2
2 Place du recteur Henri Le Moal
CS 24307 – 35043 – Rennes
France
jerome.eneau@univ-rennes2.fr*

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to publicise the work in progress by two French researchers on the possible emancipation of a group of individuals engaged in cooperative dynamics in their workplace. To do so, it proposes a critical re-reading of the question of emancipation in the light of theoretical considerations that enable the concept to be resituated in a social, and even political, understanding of the aims of adult education and training. The conceptual foundations proposed in this paper lead to the formalisation of an analytical framework and observable indicators for understanding emancipation - understood as a process of awareness, commitment to action and achievement of objectives - in its more or less individual, collective, social or political dimensions

KEYWORDS

Emancipation, open cooperation, non-formal education, adult education.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce chapitre vise à faire connaître le travail en cours de deux chercheurs français sur l'émancipation possible d'un groupe d'individus engagés dans des dynamiques coopératives sur leur lieu de travail. Pour le faire, il propose une relecture critique de la question de l'émancipation à l'aune de considérations théoriques permettant de resituer le concept dans une acception sociale, voire politique, des finalités de l'éducation et de la formation des adultes. Les bases conceptuelles proposées dans cet écrit conduisent à la formalisation d'un cadre d'analyse et d'indicateurs observables pour appréhender l'émancipation – entendue comme un processus de prise de conscience, d'engagement dans l'action et d'atteinte d'objectifs – dans ses dimensions plus ou moins individuelles, collectives, sociales ou politiques.

MOTS-CLÉS

Emancipation, coopération ouverte, éducation non formelle, formation des adultes.

Introduction²

At the heart of the educational project in adult education, the question of emancipation has been addressed extensively in our previous work, from an individual and inter-individual point of view: much of it has aimed to better situate and understand the relationships between emancipation, autonomy and self-education (Eneau, 2016), but also and above all to examine the way in which this horizon, for adult education and training, could (or should) be thought of with and by others (Eneau, 2005). These 'social dimensions' have been examined in terms of reciprocity, trust and recognition and, in the context of instrumented systems, in terms of cooperation and collaboration (Eneau, 2012; Sanojca, 2018).

In this latter approach, asking the question of individual emancipation invites us to ask the question of the collective, insofar as certain forms of collaboration and 'open cooperation', in particular, require us to consider the relationship between the individual and this collective and, conversely, the possible emancipation of a group of individuals, taken as a whole, depending on the development, empowerment or emancipation of individuals taken separately (Caillé, Chanial and Tarragoni, 2016). It is within this broad framework of the social and political issues at stake in this work, and more specifically in the possible contributions to CREAD's 'Cooperative and collaborative research' research programme, that this contribution aims to enrich reflection on the issues of cooperation and emancipation in adult education and training.

Following on from our previous research linking emancipation, cooperation and collaboration, we have chosen here to investigate an emerging notion in the field, those of 'open cooperation', which will enable us to resituate the question of emancipation in this practice, illustrating it with possible declensions of such reflections based on the results of a field survey. This chapter aims to present the ongoing work of two French researchers on the potential emancipation of a group of individuals when they are engaged in cooperative dynamics in their workplace. This research thus brings together questions of emancipation in individual, collective, social and political dimensions with the modalities of "open cooperation" in a professional context. In order to do the above, this chapter offers a critical re-examination of the issue of emancipation in light of theoretical considerations that allow the concept to be repositioned within a social, or even political, understanding of the aims of adult education and training. Going beyond the question of individual emancipation, whether desired or desirable, as the goal of the education or training process, implies questioning its collective dimensions (Eneau, 2016, 2017). In particular, emancipation will be studied here in a professional context, since it is a question, beyond this polysemous concept, of 'situating' it in a particular environment

² This chapter is an adaptation for the English-speaking community of a chapter from a book currently being published in France, entitled "La coopération ouverte comme facteur d'émancipation au travail" ("Open cooperation as a factor for emancipation at work").

(Caillé et al. 2016). With this issue in mind, the first section will address the question of the transition from one scale to the other, returning to epistemological considerations that will enable us to better identify the theoretical and axiological issues involved. The next section will propose an extension of the dimensions of cooperation and collaboration, already relatively well identified in the literature, understood as a way of 'working and learning together' (Sanojca, 2018): the contours of new forms of 'open cooperation' will then be clarified. Lastly, the question of dimensions and indicators will be addressed in order to identify the links that can be established between emancipation and open cooperation, and to consider their contribution to adult education and training.

The conceptual foundations proposed in this article finally lead to the formalisation of an analytical framework and observable indicators that help to understand empowerment in a professional context. This form of emancipation is understood as a process that (1) begins with an awareness of the obstacles to the exercise of one's professional activities, (2) continues with an investment in possible areas of action, and (3) culminates in the achievement of objectives with an individual, collective, social or political dimension.

Emancipation: a critical re-reading of theoretical foundations and social aims

In education and training, the aim of emancipation, like that of autonomy, is usually understood in the sense inherited from the Enlightenment, as escaping from the state of minority, freeing oneself from the authority of others and, more generally, as the ability to "*think for oneself*", in a Kantian and "*continental*" tradition. More specifically, in the North American "*transformative vision*", it is understood as the ability to deconstruct socially accepted representations (presuppositions, perceptions and perspectives of meaning). More broadly, from both a moral and an axiological perspective, it aims to transform the actual, performative or embodied processes of domination (Eneau, 2016; Eneau and Langar, 2022).

According to these points of view, different forms of conscientization need to be questioned in order to understand the multiple dimensions of emancipation (Eneau, 2016), at different levels: (1) the 'individual' level of awareness of one's own knowledge including, for adults in particular, implicit or unvalued knowledge; (2) the 'collective' level of this awareness, to identify where and how difficulties, forms of domination or non-recognition are shared; (3) the 'social' level, by questioning the influence or reproduction of the social organisation of the difficulties experienced at individual and collective levels; (4) the 'political' level, where awareness of collective actions that could lead to possible social transformation may emerge, with the limits that the context often imposes.

From an epistemological point of view, this division into levels or scales of analysis presents, as with any categorisation, obvious issues of reification or essentialization to which the question of emancipation cannot be reduced. Nevertheless, if we are to examine the relevance of such a categorisation in order to operationalise its examination, from a methodological point of view, two series of

questions then arise, relating in theoretical terms to the relevance of such an approach in terms of levels, scales or dimensions, on the one hand, and to that of the praxeological constraints that such a 'reduction' induces, on the other, in particular by limiting to specific contexts the apprehension of the emancipation of individuals, collectives or social groups.

On the first point, and in addition to the previous works already mentioned on the meanings of emancipation in adult education and training, the distinction between work, work and action proposed by Arendt (1961/1994) in her book *The Human Condition* remains entirely relevant. Rather than the individual/society dichotomy presented by the usual meanings of the study of autonomy or emancipation (individual autonomy vs. collective autonomy; emancipation of the learner or worker vs. emancipation of a social group or oppressed collective; etc.), the distinction between work and emancipation in adult education and training remains fully relevant. cf. Eneau, 2016), Arendt proposes, as Ricoeur summarises in his preface, to go beyond the separation between the 'private domain' and the "public domain" (Ricoeur, 1961/1994) and to look instead at a continuum with multiple possible deployments, and not simply on a scale or at certain levels. Drawing in particular on the work of Jaeger and his *Paideia* (1934/1964), Arendt shows that Greek terminology was considerably enriched over the course of the evolution of ancient thought, leading to the study of human activities from different, non-reducible angles. The historical and comparative study carried out by Arendt, like that taken up by Jaeger, would probably take us too far to discuss here these philosophical developments and the necessarily richer meanings of the terminology proposed by these two authors to speak of pedagogy, education, culture, even social justice or even politics³. For the time being, however, let us remember that the "*Greek solution*", to paraphrase Arendt, leads us today to describe a broader range of applications for these different philosophical domains by studying, at the very least, the spheres of the intimate, the private, the public and the common through the Greek terminology of (1) *idion* (the private order), (2) *oikeon* (the domestic order), (3) *koinon* (the common order) and (4) *politikon* (the order of the city). These etymological and semantic distinctions are currently being taken up in various fields of the Human and Social Sciences and pave the way for the study of emancipation in a variety of spheres, depending on the fields of application or study in which the issue is necessarily to be considered in a contingent manner.

Indeed, if this distinction allows, from a theoretical point of view, to enrich the examination of the perspectives of emancipation in different dimensions or at different levels, from the most individual (*idion*) to the most collective (*politikon*), it also and above all allows to enrich the logics of studies of the "forms" of emancipation

³ It will be remembered that not separating questions of pedagogy and education (or training, since Jaeger speaks of *Formung* and *Bildung*) from those of culture, social ideals and therefore justice and democracy, remains a major issue, in Jaeger's work as in that of Arendt. Nor can questions of ideals (of *arete* and *humanitas*) or more broadly of axiology be detached from the intellectual and political context of the construction of the work of the two authors, in the face of the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century in particular.

in particular contexts or environments, in particular practices or for particular social groups. These “particular emancipations” and different “grammars of emancipation” (Caillé et al., 2016) offer several advantages. Like work on identity or recognition, which seeks to go beyond a binary approach (identity for oneself vs. identity for others; recognition by oneself vs. recognition by others) both theoretically and methodologically and opens up the questioning to multiple spheres and interpretative logics⁴, such a deployment for emancipation also offers new possibilities. These relate both to the perspective of studies restricted to these plural and differentiated logics, on the one hand, but also to specific contexts, where the forms and stakes of emancipation are not necessarily played out in the same way depending on the nature of these contexts or the populations concerned.

This differentiation can be seen in a number of recent studies, covering a wide range of sectors, inspired by multiple disciplinary frameworks and using a variety of methodologies: the non-formal education sector for young people in Brazil, adult entrepreneurship training in France, women's entrepreneurship in Senegal, human resource management in India, a psychological model for studying complex learning processes or a comparative study of education systems at European level.

Despite their wide variety, what these studies have in common is a concern for concrete operationalisation, in a given sector or for a specific population, producing dimensions, factors or determinants of such a “particular emancipation”, in a given context. The question of such operationalisation (evaluation, even measurement) of emancipation is then open.

The dimensions of open cooperation

The notion of “*open cooperation*” can be understood in terms of its various dimensions. To begin with, we need to clarify the terminology used in the studies when describing cooperation and/or collaboration. These two terms will be understood here in the broadest sense, beyond the lexical controversies that still dot the research literature today (Sanojca and Eneau, 2024). Following Corriveau and Savoie-Zajc (2010), the synonymous expression we prefer is that of “working together” against a backdrop of “*a more or less intense interactional dynamic that develops between people and that holds as its ideal a collaborative culture, where people work in cohesion, around a common goal, in interdependent relationships*” (Corriveau and Savoie-Zajc, 2010, p. 7). From this broad perspective, a particular form of cooperation/collaboration emerges, which is not limited to a “*home group*” (family, team in the same organisation, social group, etc.) but remains open to people who voluntarily participate in the production of a “*collective work*” (idem).

⁴ On the contributions of Ricoeur and Honneth and this plural vision, see Eneau and Langar (2022).

Beyond "*cooperation/collaboration*", in the broad sense, this more specific aim amounts to taking an interest in what Candau (2012) calls "*open cooperation*", in that the people involved in this way of working together interact beyond their group to which they belong. The notion of openness associated with cooperation can then be understood in three dimensions: (1) openness of the structure (example of free software communities); (2) openness of the community or collective (observable in its rules of operation and governance, both formal and tacit); (3) openness of resources (sharing of resources, both for the players, learners or participants, and for citizens more widely).

The open structure refers to the first writings in which the term open cooperation appears. This is the case of a book on the UNIX operating system written in 1992 by David A. Curry. In describing the origin of the design of this system, the author uses it to explain the possibility of sharing files without being limited by security constraints. The term "*open cooperation*" is linked to a work environment that is diametrically opposed to the private environment (in which it was used was one of open cooperation, not one of privacy) (Curry, 1992, p. 7). This idea of a structure with permeable boundaries is echoed by Zaklad (2003) when he describes "*structurally open cooperation*", which covers working conditions where people can change the internal organisation of the group as well as the functional characteristics of the artefacts they use. In other words, professional conditions (technical and organisational) imply that the collective has considerable leeway to construct its own operating rules, which include conditions that favour the implementation of joint work.

The need for an open collective is in line with a long-standing debate on how to work as a collective and the nature of the work carried out by several people, when we talk about cooperation. The basic idea confronts two points of view: that of an innate human ability to link up to cooperate beyond kinship ties and that of the construction of cooperative links out of an interest in survival or expected gains, more or less explicit (Tomasello, 2009). Candau, for his part, proposes to overcome this tension and argues for an "*open cooperation*" approach in contrast to a "parochial" altruism, limited to the group to which one belongs (family, ethnic group, nation, etc.), which he associates with a form of "*closed cooperation*". Altruism that goes beyond the boundaries of this group is then the main distinguishing feature of open cooperation (Candau, 2012, 2017). With the massive development of digital practices, recent decades have seen the emergence of various forms of collectives working together (networks, communities of interest, communities of practice, etc.) in which the cooperative or collaborative mode of working is one of the operating principles, both in presence and at a distance. To understand the identity of these collectives, sociologists studying companies and communities have introduced the terms "ephemeral aggregation", "cooperative nomadism" or "cooperative individualism". In these works, the emphasis is on flexible and ephemeral groupings of individuals, formed around similar interests, generating partial adhesions in a specific field (in the context of professional life, for example). The notion of openness therefore also relates to this notion of flexibility, i.e. the ease with which individuals can enter and leave a group. Open cooperation therefore implies the existence of an open collective,

in which "*unity and common ground are sought through adherence to common projects*" (Bauwens, 2020, p. 103).

The opening up of resources, as the third characteristic of open cooperation, is tantamount to talking about the sharing of these resources, their "*free access*" or at least facilitated access. Expressed in terms of sharing, or even "*sincere sharing*" (Gilliot and Karmann, 2023), this characteristic conditions the effectiveness of cooperative or collaborative work and its potential for innovation. Indeed, it is in relation to the capacity for innovation that the term "*open cooperation*" first appeared, to describe the roots of a "*bottom-up innovation model*". Associated with the sharing of resources and uses, in the description of the participative Web, this term designates a law of efficiency, in a cooperative model of innovation which "*needs spaces of open cooperation to be able to develop*" (Aguiton and Cardon, 2008, p. 81). The same link between openness and sharing can be found in Da Focescă (2015), who stresses, for example, the need for alliances between companies with a high level of corporate social responsibility to encourage innovation in the environmental field: open cooperation, in this context, would be a condition for satisfying this objective.

While there is as yet no consensus in the scientific literature as to the definition of this "*opening up of resources*", the social uses to which it refers are developing, benefiting from digital environments that facilitate the circulation and sharing of all kinds of resources. As early as 2012, the term "*open cooperation*" entered the vocabulary to mark the horizon of action of the promoters of social innovation, seeing it as the sign of a profound change in culture, in a society where work is organised in a compartmentalised and hierarchical way. The terms "*sharing*", "*copying*", "*reusing*", etc. refer to some of the practices that open cooperation requires. At the same time, we are seeing the emergence of ways of protecting these collectively produced resources, such as "*creative commons*" licences, which set out the conditions under which they can be accessed and re-used by any user, extending usage rights beyond those of the creators alone. Promoted since 2001 as a marker of an alternative form of value, it has become the legal support for a new mode of production based on the sharing of resources and knowledge, clearly placing it in the field of the general interest.

From dimensions to indicators

Modelling this theoretical development can provide an analytical framework for questioning the links between emancipation and open cooperation (Figures 1 and 2 below).

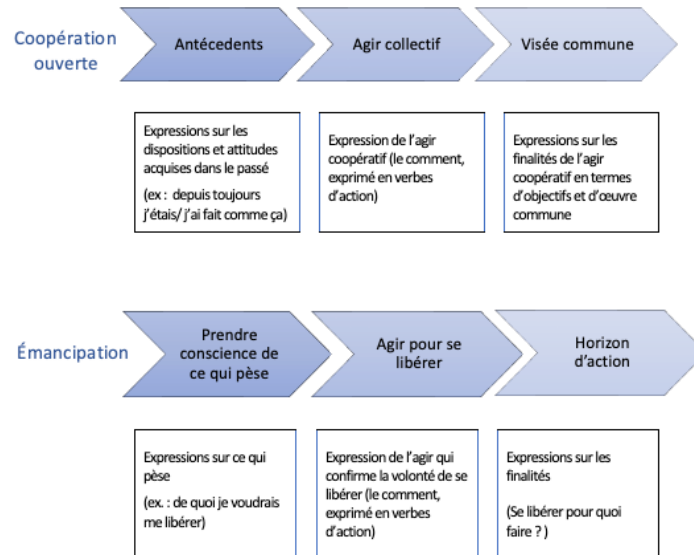


Figure 1: Before/during/after logic of two processes: open cooperation and emancipation

The first figure illustrates the idea that open cooperation and emancipation can be approached from the point of view of three temporalities of observation of their deployment (before/during/after), following the example of what was implemented in a previous research work on cooperation/collaboration in adult education (Sanojca, 2018). By setting out the four areas of application of emancipation (individual, collective, social, political), Figure 2 establishes a link between these two processes, focusing on the question: how can we become emancipated by practising open cooperation?

However, in order to verify the robustness of this theoretical comparison, or to make the necessary modifications and adaptations, we need to examine what actually happens on the ground when a process of open cooperation takes place, and how this process can shed light on, or even clarify, over time, the construction of one or more “forms” of emancipation.

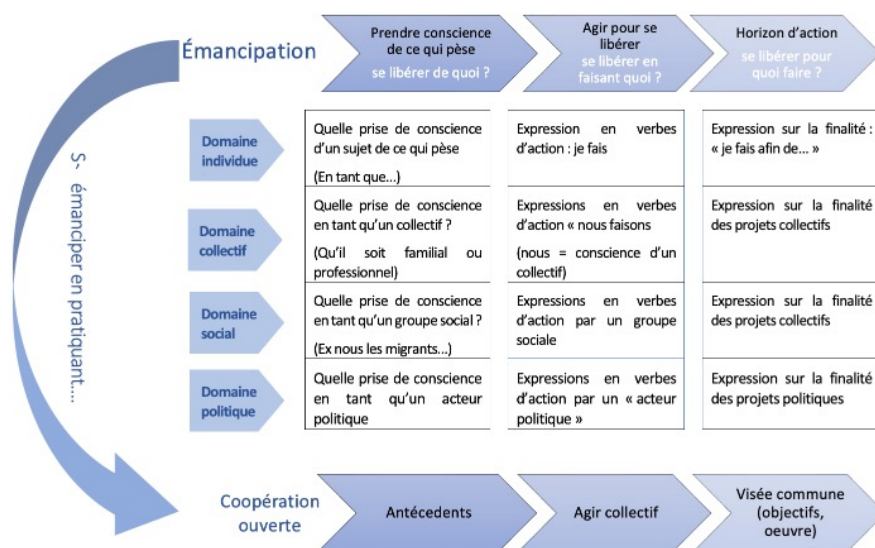


Figure 2: Integrating the different dimensions of emancipation into the process of open cooperation.

At this stage, various methodological options are conceivable. The main difficulty is to grasp the longitudinal aspect of the emancipation process, which the most accomplished studies, to our knowledge, have only made possible at a 'macro' level through quantitative and comparative studies. In this case, the measurement of emancipation 'levels' is limited to a comparison of a 'before' and an 'after' of adult education and training systems and modalities, studied through indicators of accessibility, availability, appropriateness to needs and social commitment, but basically dependent on factors that are difficult to measure (cultural and socio-economic contexts, degree of social cohesion, cultural values, etc.) (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). These indicators, constructed as part of a Europe-wide study based on two available databases (2008 and 2016), are therefore relatively irrelevant on the scale of more restricted systems where the question of axiological and political dimensions will be of particular interest to us (commitment to "*shared goods or works*", etc.). This is what Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2021) emphasise in their study, inferring links between the political history of the countries studied or the degree of democratic development, which reduces the relevance of such less "measurable" indicators in a given, possibly more homogenous, context.

Another methodological option, in line with work on open cooperation as a process, draws on Engeström's approach to study it in terms of an "*analysis of activity in a real situation*" (Sanojca, 2018; Sanojca and Briand, 2022). Despite the obvious methodological limitations, this time linked to the collection of verbatim reports in a process temporality studied at three points in time (at the start of the training, during and at the end), the main advantage of this operationalisation is that it enables the process to be studied from the angle of the reorganisation of an "activity system" and the "transformation" (or not) of the professional practices observed. According to

Sanojca and Briand (2022), the path of this evolution can be modelled as follows: if the appropriation of a concept, i.e. the gradual construction of meaning and attribution of value, is the starting point, the most mature form of transformation manifests itself in actual practices, coupled with an awareness of the links between the responsibility to act as a professional and the issues facing society. Applied to the collective production resulting from open cooperation, this model can help us to understand the investment made by the players involved. This is one of the hypotheses that remains to be verified empirically.

This second option allows us to consider emancipation not as a measurable result, a point of arrival or the state of an individual who becomes an 'emancipated subject' (which is, moreover, a pedagogical aim par excellence), but for what it covers in terms of process. From this angle, we take up Rancière's idea of shedding light on this process by analysing emancipation practices, in which the subject feels free to exercise his or her abilities (Rancière and Wald Lasowski, 2023).

Conclusion

These orientations lead us to formalise a framework for analysis and observable indicators, combining the temporal axis of the process (before, during, after) and the 'dimensional' axis (from the individual to the political) illustrated by Figure 2 using concrete examples, in the table below, where the verbatim reports can illustrate the participants' awareness of having committed to, developed or achieved objectives in terms of emancipation, corresponding to dimensions that are more or less individual, collective, social or even political.

The theoretical orientations proposed here invite us to examine, with the support of empirical data, the links between involvement in this form of 'doing together in open cooperation' and the desire to have a space of freedom to think and act. The primary function of this empirical comparison would be to verify the relevance and robustness of the analytical framework proposed in this paper. The results to be expected would then correspond to the question: under what conditions can open cooperation practices be emancipating or not?

References

-
- Arendt, H. (1961/1994). *Condition de l'homme moderne* (1st ed. *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958). Calmann-Lévy.
- Boyadjieva, P. and Ilieva-Trichkova, P. (2021). *Adult education as empowerment. Re-imagining lifelong learning through the capability approach, recognition theory and common goods perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Caillé, A., Chaniel, P. and Tarragoni, F. (eds.), (2016). S'émanciper, oui, mais de quoi? *Revue du Mauss*, n° 48.
- Candau, J. (2012). Why cooperate? *Terrain anthropologie et sciences humaines*, 58, 4-25.

- Candau (2017). Just power, closed cooperation and open cooperation. In C. de Vos (ed.). *À qui le pouvoir ? Hommage à Jean-William Lapierre*, pp. 124-139. L'Harmattan.
- Corriveau, L. and Savoie-Zajc, L. (2010). Introduction. In Corriveau, L. and Savoie-Zajc, L. (Eds.), *Travailler ensemble dans les établissements scolaires et de formation*, pp. 7-12. De Boeck Supérieur.
- Curry, D. A. (1992). *UNIX System Security. A Guide for Users and System Administrators*. Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- Eneau, J. (2005). *La part d'autrui dans la formation de soi*. L'Harmattan.
- Eneau, J. (2012). Educational reciprocity and developing learner autonomy: the social dimension of self-directed learning. In K. Schneider (ed.) *Becoming Oneself: Dimensions of "Bildung" and the Facilitation of Personality Development*, pp. 29-54. VS Verlag.
- Eneau, J. (2016). Self-training, empowerment and emancipation. De quelques problématiques de recherche en formation d'adultes. *Recherches et Educations*, (16), 21-38.
- Eneau, J. (2017). From self-directed learning to self-formation: transforming the self through Bildung. In A. Laros, T. Fuhr and E.W. Taylor (Eds). *Transformative Learning meets Bildung. An international exchange*, pp. 165-178. Sense Publishers.
- Eneau, J. and Langar, S. (2022). Paul Ricœur et Axel Honneth: deux recours fondateurs pour l'éducation et la formation des adultes. In M. Fabre, A. Kerlan, et C. Chauvigné (eds.). *Les fondements de l'éducation des adultes. Phronesis*, vol. 11 n° 3, 98-119.
- Gilliot, J. M., and Karmann, M. (2023) Enseigner la transition écologique et sociétale, un renouvellement des postures? *Proceedings of the "Questions de Pédagogie dans l'Enseignement Supérieur" conference*, June 2023, online at: <https://qpes2023.sciencesconf.org/444661/document>.
- Jaeger, W. (1934/1964). *Paideia. La formation de l'homme grec* (1st edition in German Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1934). Gallimard.
- Rancière, J. and Wald Lasowski, A. (2023). *Penser l'émancipation: dialogue avec Aliocha Wald Lasowski*. Editions De L'Aube.
- Ricœur P. (1961/1994). Preface to H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 5-32. Calmann-Lévy.
- Sanojca, E. (2018). Collaborative skills and their development in adult training. The case of a hybrid training. *Doctoral dissertation in Educational Sciences*. Université Rennes 2.
- Sanojca, E. and Briand, M. (2022). The "commons" as a new value in adult learning. *Proceeding fo the ESREA's Triennial Conference: "New seeds for a world to come"*, September 29- October 02, 2022, Milano.
- Sanojca, E. and Eneau, J. (2024). Collaborative learning. In F. Meyer, K. Rocher and N. Roland (eds.). *Encyclopédie du numérique en éducation* (in preparation).
- Tomasello, M. (2009). *Why We Cooperate?* The MIT Press.

Disrupting the pipeline

Employability skills and adult learning in the creative arts

Samantha Broadhead*, Sharon Hooper**, Henry Gonnet***

** Leeds Arts University
Blenheim Walk
LS29AQ - Leeds
England
sam.broadhead@leeds-art.ac.uk*

*** Leeds Arts University
Blenheim Walk
LS29AQ - Leeds
England
sharon.hooper@leeds-art.ac.uk*

**** Leeds Arts University
Blenheim Walk
LS29AQ - Leeds
England
henry.gonnet@leeds-art.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

Education is often described through the metaphor of a “pipeline,” especially in the UK, where it is frequently portrayed as broken. This image suggests a linear journey in which young people move through stages of schooling, acquire the right skills, and emerge ready to enter the creative industries as productive workers. Yet this industrial metaphor sits uneasily with the increasingly fluid and complex nature of contemporary work. This study takes a different approach by exploring the employability skills that adult learners bring with them when they return to arts education, and how these skills support both individual and collective learning. Drawing on narratives from 13 participants in the Learning Returns project, the research maps their experiences against a consolidated set of employability aptitudes identified in recent reports. Creativity, adaptability and communication emerged most strongly, highlighting how adult learning journeys are iterative and how arts education can prepare people for diverse, imaginative and evolving careers.

KEYWORDS

Employability, skills, adult learning, creative arts, pipeline.

RESUME

L'éducation est souvent décrite à l'aide de la métaphore du « pipeline », en particulier au Royaume-Uni, où elle est fréquemment présentée comme défailante. Cette image suggère un parcours linéaire dans lequel les jeunes passent par différentes étapes scolaires, acquièrent les compétences adéquates et émergent prêts à intégrer les industries créatives en tant que travailleurs productifs. Cependant, cette métaphore industrielle ne correspond pas à la nature de plus en plus fluide et complexe du travail contemporain. Cette étude adopte une approche différente en explorant les compétences professionnelles que les apprenants adultes apportent avec eux lorsqu'ils reprennent des études artistiques, et comment ces compétences favorisent l'apprentissage individuel et collectif. S'appuyant sur les récits de 13 participants au projet Learning Returns, la recherche met en parallèle leurs expériences et un ensemble consolidé d'aptitudes professionnelles identifiées dans des rapports récents. La créativité, l'adaptabilité et la communication sont les qualités qui ressortent le plus, soulignant à quel point les parcours d'apprentissage des adultes sont itératifs et comment l'éducation artistique peut préparer les gens à des carrières variées, imaginatives et en constante évolution.

MOTS CLE

Employabilité, compétences, formation des adultes, arts créatifs, pipeline.

Introduction

When considering the relationship between education, skills and the creative industries, the notion of a pipeline is often discussed, where in the UK it is conceptualised as broken (Carey et al., 2019; Broadhead et al., 2022). In spite of renewed policy focus on the creative industries the pipeline, it seems, continues to be broken. Giles et al. (2025) point out, the UK's creative industries are now part of the government's Industrial Strategy as a priority sector. But it can be seen that the education and skills system have not been able to keep pace. There is now a widening gap between the skills the workforce has and what employers say they need.

The 'pipeline' metaphor evokes the idea that people, usually young people, go through the education system, passing through various stages where they learn the right skills to be employable within industry. At the end of the pipeline the graduate or apprentice seamlessly enters the world of work ready to become a productive worker. Education is of service to the employer and also the wider economy. However, is a contradiction that the metaphor of a pipeline with its linear and industrial connotations is used in relation to employability, when the nature of work is becoming more complex and fluid.

This study considers employability skills from a different perspective; it asks what are the employability skills adult learners returning to arts education come with? How are these skills that are acquired in previous employment useful for learning (for the individual and the cohort). This inquiry informs a much larger project that aims to promote sustainable and inclusive growth in the creative industries and is part of the Yorkshire and Humber Policy Innovation Partnership led by Professor Gary Dymski.

The Learning Returns arts-based project collected narratives from 16 participants about their experiences of returning to education in order to study a creative subject. As part of this project the participants reflected on how previous experiences and job roles had benefited their return to learning.

In an attempt to pinpoint the skills that are often valued by educators and employers a range of recent reports related to employability were reviewed (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2024; Kingston University and YouGov, 2024; Wicklow and Gamble, 2024; British Academy, 2022; 2020; 2017) along with three frameworks that identify employability skills, two of these focus on the creative arts (Prospects, 2024; University of the Arts, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). Core and transferable skills were identified and combined from all these sources to establish a comprehensive set of employability skills/aptitudes. The three aptitudes that were most often represented in the reports were creativity, adaptability and communication. This corresponds with the OCED (2021) report *Future of Education and Skills 2030* that argues that the more social, emotional and imaginative skills will be needed by employers as operational tasks become automated.

The stories about returning to arts education were analysed by referring to the comprehensive set of employability skills that had been identified from the literature. Explicit and implicit references to these skills were identified in the participants' stories.

The findings show how adult learning journeys in the creative arts are not necessarily linear but can be circuitous and iterative. They also suggest that education is not only a service for prospective employers but can prepare people for more imaginative and multifaceted careers that may or may not include partial retirement. For example, participants may have portfolio careers, that include part-time work similar to their previous job roles, alongside more fulfilling but precarious freelance work.

Context for skills and the creative arts in the UK

For many reasons the cultural and creative industries have been deemed to be in crisis during the previous 10-15 years. Firstly, the impact of the English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) on the uptake of arts subjects in schools has led to less people undertaking arts at A-level and subsequently to progressing to a creative arts degree. The introduction in 2011 of the EBacc has been detrimental to the arts because they are not seen as core subjects (Thomson et al. 2020; Bath et al., 2020; Fautley, 2019). Secondly, the impact of the pandemic led to a decline in arts and cultural activities which in turn led to a loss of skills through people leaving the creative industries. Easton (2020) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the creative industries and the pipeline of talent entering those industries. Thirdly, the Conservative government appeared to be hostile to the creative arts, suggesting that certain degree courses were of low value and threatening to limit the student numbers on these courses. Generally, there has been a growing and pervasive lack of understanding about the significance of culture and arts to the economy, local communities and to the well-being of individuals. Hopefully the recent changes in the UK government policy can give hope to those working in the cultural and creative industries.

Those who argue for the importance of creative education come from two schools of thought. Many believe that creative education is important in its own right and should provide the skills so that people can go and work in the arts and culture sector. Cole et al. (2024) discusses the potential for investing in arts and culture as a means of addressing many of Labour's policy goals. In particular they call for investment in skills for the heritage sector and the creative industries.

A second perspective is that a creative education can nurture important skills that can lead to employability in other sectors. Taylor et al. (2022) argue that the essential employment skills expected to be most in demand in the future labour market are those associated with creativity and sociability including analytical/creative; interpersonal; self-management; and emotional intelligence. Preparations that are

needed in education and training, and within the working population, to meet this demand. Therefore, the value of creative education also can lie in those transferable skills needed across all careers.

The Labour government elected in 2024 announced a £270 million funding boost for arts and culture. Along with the announcement it is noted that regional growth is to be boosted by £67 million for culture projects, these interventions are designed to support the *Government's Plan for Change*. The aim is to develop local engagement with culture and increase opportunities to gain creative skills, acknowledging the important role the creative industries have in the UK economy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025a). The Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP (Culture Secretary) stated that,

"Everyone across the country should be able to access arts and culture in the place they call home. This support will empower our cultural organisations to continue playing an essential role in developing skills, talent and high-quality careers in every corner of the UK".

Creative skills can be learned from informal and formal learning opportunities. During recent times there have been many reports that argue for the importance of employability skills from graduate study. Many reports written by creative arts education providers seek to demonstrate how creative courses teach employability skills (University of the, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). However, education is often represented as a machine where the output is a series of employability skills. Whilst an education in the creative arts seems well placed to provide the skills that can be applied to job roles, in both the creative industries and in other sectors, such an education is much more than a service to supply the "pipeline" into the job market. Also, the discourse is often about "young people". Nandy from the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport argues that,

"Arts and culture help us understand the world we live in, they shape and define society and are enjoyed by people in every part of our country. They are the building blocks of our world-leading creative industries and make a huge contribution towards boosting growth and breaking down barriers to opportunities for young people to learn the creative skills they need to succeed".

Where does this place those returning to education who are in their 40s, 50s, 60s and so on, who study creative subjects for many reasons? The barriers to studying the arts are compounded for adult learners, but for many, creativity is part of self-identity (Butcher and Clarke 2022). To what extent do these people return to education already with these employability skills and do these skills actually help them learn? So, this inquiry asks if it is possible to disrupt or reverse the thinking about the relationship between skills, education and employability in the case of adult learners.

Research approach

Learning returns is an arts-based research project that has been developing over the previous five years since 2020. People who had returned to education to study the arts were asked to tell their stories and share their insights through a series of short films. These films were posted on a YouTube channel named Learning Returns. Arts-based methods can show how experience and meaning is complex and multidimensional. The arts can enable research communication to adopt multiple languages other than speech or writing, communicating in a multi-sensorial fashion. Words, images and sounds captured by film can convey meanings that are not limited to cognition but can also evoke feelings. Ways of knowing can include emotional, aesthetic and intellectual responses to the world and can heighten a researcher's grasp of human experiences.

Arts-based research is an approach that can delve into adult learning because it is "*research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience*" (Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2014: 1). Arts-based methods are an important means for researchers and participants to observe and reflect on their lived-experiences.

When considering the quality of arts-based research, validity, significance, reproducibility, reliability and exportable generalisations can often be meaningless when evaluating outcomes. Leavy (2015) identified a range of tenets that could act as quality indicators for arts-based research, such as authenticity, truthfulness, political consciousness-raising and emancipation.

Recruitment

The University Alumni office contacted former adult learners who had returned to education later in life to study the arts asking if they wanted to be part of the Learning Returns project. At first, four people responded and gave informed consent. These participants had studied sculpture, calligraphy, socially engaged art and fine art. After the original four had contributed to the project they helped recruit a wider range of people. "*Snowball*" is a method of recruitment where participants are asked to suggest possible contributors from their networks. The four participants asked their contacts to email the researchers if they wished to be part of the project. Snowballing as a method of recruitment does have some issues as it is reliant on the social capital of the participants. Consequently, the snowball recruitment is effective in contacting "*hard to reach*" populations that researchers do not have access to.

The snowball recruitment approach was successful as from the original four, the number of participants increased to 16. In addition to this, the types of art subjects studied by the participants widened to include creative writing, printmaking, drawing and textiles.

Method

Researchers organised with participants a time which was convenient to all parties when they could film content for a Learning Returns video [film and video are used as meaning the same thing for the purposes of this account]. Filming took place in various arts studios and classrooms at the University, and where a suitable backdrop could be installed and the sound levels from the surrounding environment could be controlled. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of arts education as adult learners and how they had continued their arts practices outside of formal education. Approaches to lighting, seating and backgrounds were designed to frame the contributors as they spoke to the camera and to give a visual continuity to the films. The participants were reassured that if they were not happy with their performance at any time, then this could be edited out. They were encouraged to speak freely. The researchers aimed to keep the filming sessions relaxed and informal.

The subsequent footage was edited down from between 7-15 minutes of footage to approximately two minutes and the final versions were sent to the participants and research team for their approval. The editing process was iterative between the researchers in consultation with the participants. The editor kept in mind the need to capture the authentic stories of the participants, avoiding narrative smoothing where the authenticity of an account is compromised by the desire to “*tell a good story*”.

Ethics

The safety and well-being of the participants were the first priorities of the project. The researchers shared with the participants the ethical risks of the films being hosted on YouTube and being visible to a world-wide audience. They were given an information sheet and consent form that explained the aims of the project, the reasons why the research was being undertaken, what participation entailed and the right to withdraw at any time. The channel was monitored to ensure there were no hostile comments posted, which would be removed (none have occurred so far). Participants can request the removal of their film at any time from the YouTube Learning Returns channel. Before filming began it was reiterated that the participant should think carefully about the public nature of YouTube before consenting. To mediate against any ethical risks only the first names of the participants were used and any professional information about their arts practices was only included at the participant’s request. The project gained ethical approval from the University’s Ethics Sub-Committee.

Analysis

A range of recent reports were reviewed to identify key employability skills (National Centre for Universities and Business, 2024; Kingston University and

YouGov, 2024; Wicklow and Gamble, 2024; British Academy, 2022; 2020; 2017). Three additional frameworks were also drawn upon. They identified employability skills, two of these focus on the creative arts (Prospects, 2024; University of the Arts, London, 2024; Leeds Conservatoire, 2024). Core and transferable skills were identified and combined from all these sources to establish a comprehensive set of employability skills/aptitudes (see Table 1). The three aptitudes that were most often represented in the reports were creativity, adaptability and communication. This corresponds with the OCED report Future of Education and Skills 2030 that argues that the more social, emotional and imaginative skills will be needed by employers as operational tasks become automated.

A set of employability skills has been identified that is a combination from those mentioned in the reports. The list comprises: Reliability, Enterprise, Self-discipline, Creativity, Imagination, Originality, Critical thinking, Analysis, Decision-making, Problem-solving, Resilience, Adaptability, Communication, Listening skills, Organisation, Curiosity, Initiative, Management, Collaboration, Digital skills, Independence, Numeracy, Personal development. It is of note that many of the skills can be associated with creativity, emotional intelligence and communication and this is in line with other findings (Taylor et al., 2022).

These skills were employed as codes with which to analyse the Learning Returns videos. Two researchers watched the films independently, then met to agree with their findings. When a participant explicitly mentioned a skill in their account their comments were transcribed into a spreadsheet.

The research process can appear to be linear and occur in clear stages, for example, collecting data, analysing/interpreting the data and then writing up the findings. But often within arts-based research the process is often more iterative and/or cyclic. It could be argued that all the stages of the project involve some levels of analysis through reflection on the work-in-progress. In practice the analysis of the films was iterative, developed through a de-contextualising and re-contextualising cycle.

Prospects	National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) 2024.	The Kingston approach	Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy (SHAPE)	Creative Attributes Framework (CAF)	Leeds Conservatoire skills matrix	Combined skill set
Reliability						Reliability
Commercial awareness				Enterprise		Enterprise
Self-Discipline						Self-discipline
Creativity	Creativity	Creativity	Creativity	[Creativity implied]	Creativity	Creativity
	Imagination					Imagination
Originality						Originality
Critical Thinking	Mental flexibility	Critical Thinking				Critical thinking
Analysis		Analytical skills	Analysing			Analysis
Reasoning	Decision-making /judgement		Decision-making	Self-efficacy		Decision-making
Problem Solving		Problem solving/ process skills	Problem-solving			Problem-solving
Resilience		Resilience		Resilience		Resilience
Adaptability	Adaptability /flexible mindset	Adaptability	Adaptability	Agility	Adaptability	Adaptability
Communication		Communication skills	Communication	Communication/story telling	Written and verbal communication	Communication
					Listening skills	Listening skills
Planning					Organisation	Organisation
Research			Designing research and collating evidence	Curiosity		Curiosity
Leadership	Ability to act	Initiative		Pro-activity	Leadership	Initiative
Management						Management
	Emotional and social skills	Building relationships	Working with others	Connectivity	Teamwork	Collaboration
	Digital skills	Digital skills			IT skills	Digital skills
			Independence			Independence
					Numeracy	Numeracy
	Continual learning and development				Personal development	Personal development

Table 1: Collation of employability skills

Findings

Explicit skills mentioned by participants

All the skills on the list were mentioned by at least one of the participants in their film. However, the most referenced skills were organisation, communication/listening skills and enterprise skills. The discussion of findings will focus on the three most referenced explicit skills mentioned by the participants. The discussion will then go on to consider those participants' skills which are implicit in the films or can be inferred from their stories even though they are not explicitly mentioned. Finally, it will be argued that there are skills which did not come up as employability skills in the frameworks, however, they were demonstrated by the participants and were seen to be helpful in their learning, these were having confidence; being reflective and being caring.

Organisation

The management of time when returning to learning is something that is important for all students but especially so when that student has other commitments. Ensuring that tasks are done on time and deadlines are met was seen by the participants as an important skill they brought to education from their work and life experience. Ann commented that she had "*been a manager, so I was used to organising people and organising my time*".

Frances saw a continuum with her past skills from her previous career being integral to her future aspirations. Within her account she shows how different skills are interrelated.

"I haven't decided - but probably to continue doing the project management, but in a more creative field. Rather than - I was doing digital and telephony delivery, so it was all very technical. If I do project management again, I'd want it to be creative, so putting things on and organising things and being involved in that more creative environment"

Frances demonstrates creativity and enterprise and planning what she wants to do after she has finished learning. She also is confident in her organisational skills and mentions digital and technical skills. She appears to have all these different competencies, but returning to education has allowed her to aspire to practice these in a creative context.

Communication and Listening

John thought about what skills he had brought with him that made his learning experience run smoother, "[from work life] *getting along with people and knowing*

how to communicate with people." In art and design education there are a lot of learning tasks that involve teamwork and collaboration, so having good communication and social skills would be an asset. This is reinforced by Hafifa, who recalled that:

"[during her studies] we'd sit and work together and talk about things that we liked. We'd have crit groups where we'd talk about and critique each other's work. And that really helped, having other students critique your work."

Ingrid's comment again showed how communication skills sit with other capabilities

"Listening and being able to offer advice were a main part of my role, but also being able to get anywhere on time and finishing things. Being able to stand up and teach as well, and prepare and make preparation for lessons and stuff like that."

Ingrid makes the point that effective communication can also involve good time management, organisation and preparing what and how to speak to a particular group. Returning to learning with some experience of teaching could not only give insight into the structures and processes of learning but could also mean the student has empathy for the teacher, understanding the pressures and challenges from their perspective.

Enterprise

If enterprise is about identifying opportunities and using them to ones' advantage it can be seen that many of the participants had used their enterprise skills to get back into education. However, many had gained this from their previous work life and were applying them to their educational journeys. Anna showed her tenacity in building her career through recognising opportunities, *"I'd started my career in marketing - I'd done chartered institute of marketing exams and worked my way up through various companies and ad agencies."*

Gemma also talked about how she was building her connections. Like Anna, she is aware that sometimes building a business or freelance career takes time and involves being engaged in a diverse range of activities. Gemma commented that

"I've got some work now through light festivals. I have continued to build my networks and use those networks, and I have been able to work in festivals, exhibitions and group exhibitions for the last few years."

Ingrid had made enterprise the foundation of her previous job

"I worked as a career consultant at a local university. I spent a lot of time advising people about their future careers and starting businesses."

Which she recalled was knowledge and experience she was able to apply in her own learning journey.

By listening to the participants talk about their previous experiences and the skills they had gained from their employment it was clear that these were also useful skills for learning. The films showed that it might be better to think of a suite of skills that operate together, rather than breaking them down into individual competencies as is the approach taken by many reports on employability.

Within the films there were implicit references to skills in the stories told by the participants. As people who had returned to education, it was clear they were all engaged with decision-making. Going back to study as an adult learner means making complex and sometimes difficult decisions. They were also clearly interested in self-development, often to pursue their dream to be a creative practitioner. The participants clearly had good communication skills as they could tell their stories in an engaging manner. They were also able to target their messages to an imagined audience, who may be interested in returning to education later in life. Many of the participants talked about being creative before they returned to education. These implicit skills helped these students thrive and succeed in their chosen courses of study.

Skills not referred to in the employability list

When analysing the films, it became apparent that there were skills mentioned or enacted by the participants that had not been identified in the various frameworks as contributing towards employability. The first skill was confidence (something that can improve with practice), some of the participants thought they had the confidence to approach tutors and technicians with questions, of admitting they did not know something in comparison with their younger counterparts who were not always comfortable in doing that. Anna reflected on the confidence she had when starting her writing course, *“to shout up and send an email in to your tutor or your peers and instigate those conversations.”*

Secondly, many of the participants were reflective thinkers. They reflected on their experiences, their work, their course and themselves. John reflects that,

“I felt that there were lots of people on that course like myself who were going through changes. Different ages, different stages in life. But we were all trying something to try and progress forward in the creative world.”

This was close to but not quite the same as critical thinking. In the arts reflecting on one's own practice is an important activity that leads to improving the work. The stories that the participants tell where they reflect on their lives and identity their own strengths and weaknesses involve continuous reflection.

Thirdly, one participant talks about coming to education with a wish to care for people, another mentioned that they wanted to guide others. For example, Hafifa talks about setting up an art group to help people,

“It's through National Health Charities where elderly Asian women, mainly from a South Asian background, are at home and they're isolated. This is a way of bringing them together through art.”

Sally said she always had a caring disposition and it was this that motivated her to go into art therapy. Those caring, nurturing skills are not mentioned as employability skills, yet they are important when working with other people.

Conclusion

Due to the crisis in the cultural and creative industries many commentators and researchers have sought to protect the arts' subjects in schools, colleges and universities by demonstrating the employability skills that can be gained by studying a creative subject (Ashton et al., 2023). Also, an argument is made that graduates with the correct skills are needed to fix the broken pipeline in to the creative industries.

Adult learners problematise the notion of a pipeline of skills serving the creative industries. Firstly, they are returning to education with many of the employability skills already. Their learning journeys allow them to capitalise on their capabilities while they are learning but also outside of education when they practice those skills in a new context and with a new focus. Some adult returners may work in the creative and cultural sectors, however, very often they are looking at enriching their lives as a whole. When looking towards retirement they may be seeking different modes of work that could be more flexible and part-time. They maybe more interested in setting up their own creative business, rather than serving an employer, where all their learning, life and work experiences can be drawn upon. They may mix paid and unpaid work together. The skills the adult learners have acquired throughout their lives are used to enable a better life for themselves and their families.

The participants' stories also show how creativity can be a suite of skills. To create something new in the world there needs to be organisation, reflection, critical thinking, problem-solving and curiosity. It would be an exaggeration say there is a causal link between art education and the skills favoured by the students surveyed (creativity, etc.), because similar skills can be found in other fields. They are probably characteristic of adults returning to education with a wealth of professional and life experience.

It is also interesting that some skills are high-lighted more than others. Confidence, reflection and caring skills are those which are valued by the participants, but do not seem to be recognised as those contributing to employability. The outcome of a list of skills springing from a course of study loses the contextual significance of practices that are much more than part of a creative machine. Adult learners bring with them skills that need to be understood in their complexity and how they contribute towards a good life.

Acknowledgements: Bobby Rae the Learning Returns graphic designer; Dr Konstantinos Kollydas, University of Birmingham provided suggestions for supporting literature.

References

- Ashton, D., Bennett, D., Bulaitis, Z. H. and Tomlinson, M. (2023). In the name of employability: Faculties and futures for the arts and humanities in higher education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 22(2), 103-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222231160409>.
- British Academy (2020). *Qualified for the future quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills*. London: The British Academy. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/1888/Qualified-for-the-Future-Quantifying-demand-for-arts-humanities-social-science-skills.pdf>.
- British Academy (2022). *SHAPE skills at work: Case studies from graduates of the social sciences, humanities and arts*. London: The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4414/BA1096_SHAPE_SkillsAtWork_V8_Digital_Pages.pdf.
- Broadhead, S., Thomson, P. and Burns, H. (2022). *What are the long-term benefits of investing in art, craft and design in education for learning, culture, wellbeing and society?* Preliminary report. <https://lau.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/17751/>.
- Carey, H., Florisson, R. and Giles, L. (2019). *Skills, talent and diversity in the creative industries*. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.
- Cole, A., Lloyd, N. and Dodd, F. (2024). Arts for us all: putting culture and creativity at the heart of national renewal. *Fabian ideas*, 665. London: Fabian Society. <https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/ARTS-FOR-US-ALL-Mobile-Format.pdf>.
- Easton, E. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on diversity in the creative industries*. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, Led by Nesta. <https://www.pec.ac.uk/policy-briefings/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-diversity-in-the-creative-industries>.
- Fautley, M. (2019). The implications of evaluation and educational policy reforms on English secondary school music education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 120(3), 140–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2018.1532369>.
- Giles, L., Carey, H. and O'Brien, D. (2025) Skills Mismatches in the UK's Creative Industries. *Creative PEC State of the Nations Research Series*. <https://pec.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Creative-PEC-Skills-mismatches-in-the-UKs-Creative-Industries-12-Feb-2025.pdf>.
- Kingston University and YouGov (2024). *Future skills, The Kingston approach*. Kingston University and YouGov <https://cdn.kingston.ac.uk/documents/user-upload/kingston-university-83c0c7036df-kingstonreportv20digital-final-.pdf>.
- Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford publications.
- National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB). (2024). *Collaboration for future skills: Bridging higher education and industry to meet the skills needs of tomorrow*. <https://www.ncub.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Collaboration-for-Future-Skills-Report.pdf>.

- Prospects (2024). *What skills do employers want?* <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/applying-for-jobs/what-skills-do-employers-want>.
- Savin-Baden, M. and Wimpenny, K. (2014). *A practical guide to arts-related research*. Springer.
- Taylor, A., Nelson, J., O'Donnell, S., Davies, E. and Hillary, J. (2022). *The Skills Imperative 2035: What Does the Literature Tell Us about Essential Skills Most Needed for Work?* Working Paper 1. National Foundation for Educational Research. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED619280.pdf>.
- Wicklow, K. and Gamble, D. (2024). *The value of creative graduates: Research report 2024*. UKADIA and GUILDHE. <https://guildhe.ac.uk/guildhe-and-ukadia-launch-new-report-the-value-of-creative-graduates/>

Being a tertiary education student with disabilities in the Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan

International mindedness at the service of inclusion

Marhabo Kholmurodova*, Andrea Mattia Marcelli**

** Master of Arts in Teaching
American University of Central Asia
7/6 Aaly Tokombaev Street
720060 – Bishkek
Kyrgyz Republic
km11895@auca.kg*

*** Institute of Education
American University of Central Asia
7/6 Aaly Tokombaev Street
720060 – Bishkek
Kyrgyz Republic
marcelli_a@auca.kg*

ABSTRACT

Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO), in Eastern Tajikistan, faces geographic isolation, economic hardship, limited job opportunities, and recurring social tensions. This context makes GBAO significant for studying how Higher Education (HE) influences local human development. This paper examines this influence through two educational biographies of individuals with special needs in Khorog, the provincial capital. These biographies highlight how tertiary education can address the intersections of special educational needs and ethnic minority status. Findings demonstrate the potential of internationally oriented HE programs to foster essential skills and adaptability among students. By integrating global perspectives with local community education, HE can effectively address regional challenges and enhance career readiness.

KEYWORDS

International mindedness, inclusive education, educational biographies, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, marginalized communities.

RÉSUMÉ

La province autonome du Haut-Badakhchan (GBAO), dans l'est du Tadjikistan, est marquée par l'isolement géographique, la précarité économique, des opportunités limitées et des tensions sociales. Ce contexte permet d'étudier comment l'enseignement supérieur (ES) influence le développement humain local à travers deux biographies éducatives d'étudiants à besoins spécifiques à Khorog. Ces récits révèlent comment l'ES internationalisé peut répondre aux défis liés aux besoins particuliers et à l'appartenance ethnique minoritaire, tout en renforçant compétences et adaptabilité professionnelle. En intégrant perspectives mondiales et besoins locaux, l'ES peut efficacement contribuer au développement régional.

MOTS-CLÉS

Esprit international, éducation inclusive, biographies éducatives, province autonome du Haut-Badakhchan, communautés marginalisées.

Introduction

GBAO: Cracking an inaccessible field

Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO) exemplifies what Hagberg and Körling (2014) describe as a “*terrain inaccessible*”: a setting where heightened surveillance and periodic restrictions have contributed to a climate in which social research is widely perceived as sensitive, and where recent legal and policy analyses have raised questions of serious human rights concern (Swerdlow et al., 2025). In such a context, even securing a single in-depth interview is a rare occurrence.

As Gusterson (1997) argues, participant observation—a central method of anthropology—was designed for small, face-to-face societies and does not travel well into settings where access is tightly controlled by powerful actors. In GBAO, where researchers are anything but “*loitering strangers with notebooks*” who can blend into everyday life, fieldwork similarly cannot rely on long-term immersion. Our ethnographic data collection therefore relied on rare, carefully negotiated windows of access—a challenge similar to those described by Nordstrom and Robben (1997) in “*Fieldwork Under Fire*”.

In a context where social research is ordinarily understood as being extremely sensitive, and despite limitations due to the inevitably reduced sample, the ethnographic findings of this study show how participation, learning conditions, and self-advocacy can be supported in tertiary students by mitigating issues arising at the intersection of: (1) special educational needs, (2) ethnic minority belonging (Varsik and Goročovskij, 2023), and (3) the delivery of internationally oriented HE programs. Within these constraints, interviews deliberately focused on everyday educational trajectories and future plans rather than on explicitly political themes, as a way of protecting participants while still documenting how they navigate higher education.

Consistent with ethnographic work in challenging settings, our inquiry retained an exploratory and only partly structured character, with lines of inquiry that emerged progressively rather than being fully specified from the outset. Accordingly, the paper draws on a deliberately focused body of work on inaccessible fields, international mindedness, and inclusion in international HE, rather than attempting an exhaustive review.

International mindedness

In his study on the history of international education, Hill (2012) defines “*international mindedness*” as the learning outcome of international education, which comprises ways of thinking that promote empathetic relationships and openness to the Other. At a basic level, this could be understood as a type of education that both results from international cooperation and is imbued with intercultural awareness of what

occurs in other countries. A more historical reading of education for international mindedness also highlights the benefits of a global education system (Hill, 2012).

As Hill (2012) recounts, the formalization of international education took shape in the Twentieth century, when national education systems began to give way to private schools initially aimed at training the sons of diplomats, and later extended to families eager to provide their children with first-rate education in an increasingly interconnected world. Drawing on UNESCO's "*Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding*", its values emerge as follows: "*respect for all,*" communication, "*solidarity and co-operation,*" and "*readiness on the part of the individual to participate in solving the problems of his community, his country and the world at large*" (UNESCO, 1974, p. 2). In particular, concerning higher education, the Recommendation maintains that civic engagement and equal opportunities are paramount not only as curricular content but also as the key values underpinning educational opportunities that are "*adapted to people's real interests, problems, and aspirations*" (UNESCO, 1974, p. 5).

Hence, international mindedness is treated here less as an attitudinal self-report and more as what becomes observable in institutional arrangements and everyday learning interactions: language practices, cross-cultural contact, rules around participation and assistive tools, and the forms of support that make inclusion workable. In this perspective, international mindedness is a useful lens for examining whether internationally oriented HE programs respond to the concrete aspirations of students whose opportunities are shaped by special educational needs and ethnic minority status.

International educational institutions as inclusive communities

According to MacNaughton and Peter (2015), inclusion is at the forefront of international education and it is a benchmark of international mindedness in educational settings. According to these authors, schools and academia play an important role in creating inclusive communities, not just because they should *train for* inclusion but also because they should be designed to be *hubs for* inclusion. The critical analysis of MacNaughton and Peter (2015) shows that "inclusion" is defined differently across countries and political bodies (including international agencies such as the United Nations) and is at risk of being confused with social cohesion—which might coexist with oppression—and labour market insertion. To counter these misunderstandings, they propose to see inclusion in light of participation and engagement, to be addressed with a social justice mindset— which is consistent with the values of international education. Accordingly, inclusion is understood as: (a) an imperative; (b) a form of shared empowerment; (c) a process that does not suppress identity.

This leads the authors to identify a series of challenges that are typical of inclusion in higher education settings that strive to attain the goals of international education:

One challenge for higher education is the growing worldwide need for professionals who possess the ideals and attributes to translate social inclusion

philosophy into practice. University programmes addressing social inclusion and global citizenship must model inclusive practices. In this way, social inclusion must influence virtually every aspect of higher international education: institutional structures, faculty, students, curriculum and pedagogy. (MacNaughton and Peter, 2015, pp. 376–377)

Hence, they identify five principles:

1. “*institutional structures*” and practices need to be fully aligned with a social justice approach, including their mission and vision;
2. higher education establishments should try to recruit *international faculty*;
3. students’ cohorts are not just international because they come from different countries, but because they come from *different ways of life and underrepresented groups*;
4. curricular content should include topics that promote the understanding of individual and collective action in a global context;
5. “*pedagogical activities*” might be structured in a way that value the identity of students.

Taken together, these principles suggest that international higher education institutions can function as important sites for recognising and supporting students at the intersection of special educational needs, ethnic minoritisation and global mobility.

Context and motive of the study

Considering these principles of international mindedness for inclusion, it is relevant to examine how they might impact regions characterized by multiple challenges. One such setting is Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO).

Located in eastern Tajikistan, GBAO is a challenging environment in terms of both human and physical geography. Among the difficulties that affect the region: impervious mountain areas, low incomes, reduced professional opportunities, and simmering conflicts (Kłyszcz, 2023). These features make GBAO a distinctive setting for studying how higher education impacts the lives of current students and alumni—especially those who experience special educational needs and belong to an ethnic minority—with implications for policies aimed at the human development of the region. Because GBAO remains under-researched, this study offers an initial, idiographic contribution to a better understanding of how international mindedness could be integrated into HE not to suppress local needs, but to amplify and address them through community education (Marcelli and Salerno, 2022) and career adaptability (Savickas, 2021), and provides one entry point for understanding how higher education can either reproduce or mitigate these intersecting forms of vulnerability.

Methodology

Educational biographies

Biographical information hereby reported constitutes the partial result of a broader post-graduate project inspired by Rasouli's (2023) work on neighbouring Afghanistan, which tackles the connections between professional development and access to tertiary education in remote areas. Methodologically, we draw on Brown's (2022) account of educational biography as a way of tracing educational trajectories through biographical materials rather than through large-scale datasets. In this perspective, educational biographies often rely on semi-structured or unstructured interviews as the main data collection method. An example is that of Osella and Osella (2000): though geographically distant from this one, their research provides a model for collecting information on educational biographies that supplements Rasouli's take. Moreover, biographies are also recommended when it is necessary to "*encourage emotional disclosure and intimacy*" (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005, p. 131), which is the case when it comes to issues of education and inclusion.

Educational biographies do not necessarily take the form of long written life histories; in this study, three relatively short interviews focused on schooling, transition and work are treated as educational biographies because of their biographical orientation and analytic use (Brown, 2022). This choice allowed us to work with narratives that participants could share without directly commenting on ongoing political repression, while still situating their educational decisions in time and place.

All interviews took place in Khorog between December 2024 and January 2025 and lasted an average of 95 minutes each. Any additional clarifications provided by P03 outside the recorded interviews were treated as contextual testimony and reported as such, without independent verification. They were audio-recorded and transcribed, and we returned to the transcripts several times, looking for turning points in how each participant narrated schooling, transition, and study choices. We first built a short, case-based account for P01, P02, and P03; only afterwards did we read across cases to see what kept recurring at the intersection of SENs, ethnic minority belonging, and international HE. The "*Results*" sub-sections are organised around those recurrent points (facilities, materials and technologies, rules, pedagogy, international mindedness, wellbeing), rather than around a pre-set coding grid.

A purposive sample for educational biographies

When collecting educational biographies, the sample of interviewed participants must be purposive to enable the collection of in-depth data. That is not inherently problematic because, as Etikan *et al.* (2016) show, the complexity of fieldwork might make purposive sampling preferable to probabilistic means. This generates interesting idiographic turns, which reflect the contingent overlap of sampling, findings, and researcher-driven hermeneutics. This begs the question of

whether methodological choices could be independent of the relational setting of a qualitative study—especially when the latter is heavy on the idiographic dimension. Within this approach to educational biographies (Brown, 2022), our sampling strategy aimed to capture three contrasting yet connected educational trajectories linked to the same institution. In line with the ethical and security constraints outlined above, participants were not selected because they had publicly expressed dissent, but because their everyday educational paths illustrate how international higher education is experienced locally under conditions of risk. Accordingly, these are the participants chosen for this specific report drawn on the GBAO Educational Biographies Project.

Participant 01

Participant 01 (code: P01) is a male student in his early twenties. He is enrolled in a tertiary education institution based in GBAO, which adopts an international approach to its organization and curriculum. At the time of data collection, he was enrolled in a program of global economics. Formerly, P01 attended post-secondary preparatory courses at the same institution, with the goal of improving his conversational English.

Participant 02

Participant 02 (code: P02) is a female student in her late teens, currently enrolled in a post-secondary preparatory program at the same institution attended by P01 and about to begin her journey in tertiary education in GBAO.

Participant 03

Participant 03 (code: P03) is a female educator in her mid-forties, working as a teacher in vocational post-secondary education delivered by the investigated tertiary education institution. The choice of including a facilitator as a research participant was necessary not only to assist with the occasional clarification of native terms, but also because her testimony could enrich the information reported by the younger P01 and P02, that is, by compounding it with anecdotes and other relevant details concerning their educational career. Additionally, the well-known facilitator, despite the obvious risk of involuntarily exercising asymmetric power over her students, was pivotal in gaining their trust for the purpose of the study.

All participants are residents of one of the main settlements of GBAO, where they regularly attend classes.

Ethical considerations

Procedures used on participants and data were reviewed by the Internal Review Board of Convitto Salesiano San Luigi (Gorizia, Italy; Ref. No. 2025001, 1st March 2025), which was chosen not just because it represented the main funding body of the activity, but also because of its scientific committee's long-range experience dealing with cases of marginalization and educational inclusion. Consent from participants was collected during the recording process. Interview recordings were stored in an encrypted drive based in the European Union, compliant to the General Data

Protection Regulation. Recordings were used solely for the purpose of transcribing the interviews' output and *not* meant for publication. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, refuse to answer, and leave the interview without the need to justify their choices—highlighting the elective nature of participation. Even though interviews were biographical in nature, the IRB required all data to be anonymized as much as possible, which includes some details about their special needs that might make participants identifiable. In addition, interview guides were designed to avoid asking participants to comment directly on current security incidents or to attribute responsibility for repression, in order to minimise potential reprisals and to keep the focus on their educational biographies. Interviews were conducted in English and Shughni (the local Pamir language), and quotations are always reproduced in English with light smoothing limited to grammar, preserving participants' phrasing where it carries meaning.

Results

The themes reported below emerge from this cross-case biographical reading and should be read as idiographic patterns across three linked educational trajectories, rather than as statistically generalisable findings.

General information

Main challenges affecting the participants

Both Participant 1 (P01) and Participant 2 (P02) report specific health conditions that impacted their learning experiences. During the interview, P01 disclosed a back injury and P02 reported a visual impairment. P03—that is, the tertiary education facilitator who assisted them in different capacities—additionally reported that P02 is not always eager to enter details about her SENs (“*she rarely shows her difficulties*”), which usually result in longer reading times and challenges with reading materials in general. Concerning P01, P03 mentioned recurrent anxiety issues connected to university tests, which, however, are undiagnosed and have not been formally assessed in clinical terms.

Motivation to pursue HE

P01 and P02 presented themselves as highly motivated when it comes to tertiary education. In particular, P01 describes the desire to achieve “*positive change in society*” through his newly-developed “*skills in economics*.” P02 describes herself as “*enthusiastic*” and reports high levels of engagement. Concerning her enrolment at a post-secondary institution, she claims she “*expect a good level of education and good facilities in which I can achieve all my goals*” (P02). This attitude is documented also by P03, who says “*she enjoys participating in activities and discussions, often engaging with her classmates*.” Neither student mentioned lack of motivation as currently connected to their SENs.

Access to adequately designed facilities

Concerning SENs, the first emerging theme is that of “*access to adequately designed facilities*”. This issue was especially stressed by P01, who drew on his experience of back injury and the resulting movement and gait disorders. He reported studying mathematics for two years at a local State University: despite education being “*good*” and teachers being “*competent*”, P01 lamented lack of equipment, which made it difficult for him to navigate the architectonic maze of the old State University building. This meant lack of elevators, poor lighting to study, and the near impossibility to reach the third floor of the building in full autonomy. The interviewed facilitator concurs with his narrative: “*The boy, with back problems, may struggle with navigating physical spaces on campus, including stairs and other areas that are not easily accessible. This can limit his ability to participate fully in classes and campus activities*” (P03). Another issue mentioned by both P01 and P03 was the need for “*lighting*” and a “*comfortable environment*,” considering P01 connected this with the fact “*classes were cold*,” it is possible that, by “*lighting*,” they both meant “*heating*” rather than good lights and windows. This is treated as a reasonable inference rather than a definitive clarification.

Tangible elements of learning: access to materials and technologies

The second, emerging theme was reported by both participants and particularly stressed by P02: the availability of “*digital and multimedia technologies that compensate for sensory impairments*”. More specifically, her previous experience at school was characterized by a paucity of teaching materials: “*Teachers had no audios with readings, [but] at [the university] there are audios*” (P02); later, she adds: “[and] *interesting videos [...] providing interesting facts*” (P02). The post-secondary preparatory classes are deemed “*easier*,” that is, “*because we have the things we need*” (P02). This leads her to conclude: “*Modern technologies are integral [sic] part of education, improve education*” (P02). The interviewed facilitator explains: “*The girl, who is visually impaired, encounters difficulties accessing standard learning materials, as she requires enlarged text and adaptive technology, which may not always be readily available*” (P03). Asked about specific technological solutions, the instructor replied:

“For [P02], technology integration was crucial [...], the use of phones was permitted to help her access information, and instructors shared slides during lectures to enhance her understanding. Additionally, texts were enlarged, and audio versions of materials were provided, which greatly facilitated her learning experience. These accommodations made a significant difference in their ability to engage with the curriculum and succeed academically” (P03).

Norms and code of conduct: institutional attitude towards differentiation

The discussion concerning access to compensatory technology and differentiated resources and materials opened a third theme: “*refusal by teachers and*

school leaders". In fact, all participants reported that the lack of such resources was not only due to the financial limitations of the previously attended institutions; rather, they maintained, it was also a matter of rules and of how educational interactions are conceived. During the conversations, the female student was very vocal when describing her previous situation: "At school, we could not use the phone and modern technology to study. Some rules were so strict. Now we have less rules" (P02). Later in the exchange, she reiterated: "[At my previous school] there was a strict rule: not using [the] phone, not using technology while studying" (P02). Were there any exceptions? "In some cases, we can. If we have some problems finding new vocabulary" (P02). In her account, therefore, institutional rules appeared as a separate barrier from material scarcity.

Pedagogy

The interviewed students with SENs also reported that attending a post-secondary institution that provides international education meant not only material improvement, but also marked changes pertaining the "intangible aspects of learning". P02 believes courses are now "enjoyably" and "interesting." She says: "I like the way of teaching" (P02), both in terms of content and pedagogy. Remarkably, she compared her new learning environment with the previous one: "[Formerly] we did not practice speaking, but [at my new institution] we practice speaking" (P02). Both P02 and P01 praise group work: "At the Sate University we have classes without groupworks [...]. A lot of teamwork" (P01). Although the phrasing is fragmentary, P01 contrasts the scarcity of group work in his previous institution with the emphasis on teamwork in the current one.

International mindedness

The female student says: "We [now] feel ourselves more free [sic] with friends and courses," meaning "a lot of discussion, self-expression" (P02). Confronted with that statement, the interviewed educator explains that P02's social efforts were frustrated by her "difficulty making eye contact" (P03), which is likely due to her visual impairments.

Concerning friends and classmates, the male student maintains that, whereas the State University involved "same people from [the] same country," attending an "English based university" meant for him the possibility to encounter "people from different countries," and concludes: "[There, you] exchange your culture, traditions, beliefs, and values" (P01). The same student declares he learnt the following from his international classmates: "They are more hardworking and eager to study. At first, I did not like it but ended up doing the same thing" (P01).

The interviewed educator declared that "Programs like "global encounters" and "innovative labs" encourage cross-cultural interactions and collaborative projects" (P03) and adds that the international "wealth" of the institution does not only derive from a diverse cohort but also from "a diverse faculty from various parts of the world, enriching the academic experience with different perspectives and

teaching styles” (P03). Also, the curriculum itself is tailored to “*international standards,*” which enables students to receive a “*globally relevant education,*” including “*internships*” and “*fellowship programs [...] in an international context*” (P03). Taken together, these accounts describe international mindedness less as an abstract disposition and more as a set of everyday encounters, practices and institutional arrangements.

Mental wellbeing

Although both student participants initially avoided the topic, they eventually reported on how access to an international education setting signified an apparent improvement in their mental health.

Despite enjoying new international friends, P01 confesses that his new institution, despite all its accessibility, means an increased workload. And this might result in further risk to the mental health of students: “[There are] *lots of assignments. Students get stressed and depressed*” (P01). If anything, the difference with the State University, which for P01 is the main term of comparison, is that, in the new institution, students “*can refer to a specific person in charge for that position. That expert helps and sustain students*” (P01). As further illustrated by the interviewed educator, in a separate setting from that of the interviews, “[P01] *experiences some nervous system issues, making him anxious when faced with extra pressure. It is thus important to create a calm and supportive environment for him*” (P03).

This is only partly mirrored by the female participant, who explains: “*At high school we had a special person. Sometimes I talked with her, but I have never asked for help*” (P02). Asked for clarifications, P02 stated “*I did not need it*” and declined to elaborate further, but later she added: “*I believe that [my current institution is supporting us in difficult situations]*” (P02). This is mirrored by the terse realization of the male participant: “*In my previous academic institution, nobody honestly cared*” (P01).

Upon further inquiry, the interviewed educator explained that her institution provides “*counselling services*” that, in her own words, “*can help both students manage stress, while individualized support plans can empower them to advocate for their needs*” additionally, she maintains “*extracurricular activities may promote their social connections*” and let them “*engage comfortably with peers*” (P03). We did not independently assess these services, but report them here as part of the institutional picture described by P03.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper explored how international mindedness within higher education (HE) settings contributes to inclusion, specifically addressing students with special educational needs (SENs) in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO). Findings from two student educational biographies, complemented by an educator

account, highlight critical alignments with MacNaughton and Peter's (2015) five principles of international mindedness for inclusive higher education.

(1) First, regarding institutional structures and practices aligned with social justice, the investigated institution demonstrated a significant improvement in accessibility, showing practical inclusion through infrastructural adaptations—particularly relevant for P01's mobility challenges. (2) In addition, consistent with the principle of recruiting international faculty, the participants highlighted the benefits of exposure to diverse teaching methods and global perspectives, which enhanced their educational experiences. (3) Alongside this, aligning with the principle that student cohorts should represent diverse life experiences, both participants underscored the value of interactions with international peers, enabling cultural exchange, positively impacting their motivation and learning approaches. (4) At the curricular level, content designed to promote global understanding was identified through the participants' appreciation of internationally oriented coursework, which cultivated discussions and skills related to global citizenship, notably reported by P01's engagement in relation to a social science programme. (5) Taken together, these features were reinforced by pedagogical strategies effectively valued student identity, fostering open expression and self-advocacy, particularly for P02, whose previous educational environments lacked differentiated instruction and accommodations.

In sum, across participants' accounts, "*international mindedness*" appears most concretely as (i) access arrangements, (ii) interactional norms that permit participation, and (iii) curricular and extracurricular opportunities that widen students' feasible choices. Nevertheless, despite these alignments, areas for improvement emerged. For example, workload pressures reported by P01 suggest a need to carefully balance academic rigor with mental well-being—an essential aspect of inclusive education that supports sustained participation.

In conclusion, this analysis suggests international mindedness, when authentically implemented through an inclusive lens, may support educational participation and perceived wellbeing for students with SENs in challenging geographic and socio-economic contexts by shaping concrete conditions of access and everyday pedagogical relations. HE institutions in regions similar to GBAO may consider the deliberate integration of these five principles to foster environments where inclusion is both structural and experiential, creating more equitable opportunities for all learners.

References

- Brown, A. (2022). The Craft of Educational Biography, in Bailey, L.E. and Hinton, K. (eds) *Racial Dimensions of Life Writing in Education*. IAP, 203-223.
- Ellsberg, M.C. and Heise, L. (2005). *Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists*. Washington (DC, USA): World Health Organization, PATH. <https://www.path.org/our-impact/resources/researching-violence-against-women-a-practical-guide-for-researchers-and-activists/>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S.A. and Alkassim, R.S. (2016). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling, *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Gusterson, H. (1997). Studying Up Revisited, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 20(1), 114–119. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24497989>.
- Hagberg, S. and Körling, G. (2014). Inaccessible Fields: Doing Anthropology in the Malian Political Turmoil, *Anthropologie and développement*, (40–41), 143-159. <https://doi.org/10.4000/anthropodev.308>
- Hill, I. (2012). Evolution of education for international mindedness, *Journal of Research in International Education*, 11(3), 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240912461990>
- Kłyszcz, I.U. (2023). Gorno-Badakhshan and Karakalpakstan since 1991: understanding territorial autonomy in Central Asia, *Central Asian Survey*, 42(3), 500-517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2023.2233557>
- MacNaughton, G. and Peter, D. (2015). Social Inclusion: A Core Value of International Education, in *The SAGE Handbook of Research in International Education*. 2nd ed. SAGE, 368-382.
- Marcelli, A.M. and Salerno, V. (2022). How transformative are community education projects? Meta-analysis of two case studies, *Mizar: Costellazione di Pensieri*, 16. <https://doi.org/10.1285/124995835V2022N16P24>
- Nordstrom, C. and Robben, A.C.G.M. (1997). Accidental Anthropology, in Nordstrom, C. (ed.) *Fieldwork under fire: contemporary studies of violence and survival*, pp. 62-80. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Osella, F. and Osella, C. (2000). *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*. London (UK), Sterling (VA, USA): Pluto Press (Anthropology, Culture and Society).
- Rasouli, N.M. (2023). *Exploring the socioeconomic impact of higher education on private university graduates in Afghanistan: a case study*. Brac University.
- Swerdlow, S., Ferreira, A. and Callahan, T. (2025). Pursuing Accountability for Crimes against Humanity in Tajikistan: International Criminal Court and Germany's National Courts, *ASIAC - Studies on Central Asia and the Caucasus (SCC)*, 2, 111–138. <https://doi.org/10.36253/asiac-3465>
- Savickas, M.L. (2021) *Career Adaptability*. Boston: 48HRbooks.
- UNESCO (1974). *Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the General Conference at its 18th session, Paris, 19 November 1974*. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000011563>
- Varsik, S. and Gorochovskij, J. (2023). *Intersectionality in education: Rationale and practices to address the needs of students' intersecting identities*. OECD Education Working Papers 302. <https://doi.org/10.1787/dbb1e821-en>

Multiliteracies and learning careers: Fostering critical and creative educational pathways for adult learners

Patricia A. Gouthro*, Susan M. Holloway**

** Faculty of Education - Mount Saint Vincent University
166 Bedford Highway
B2T 1E7 - Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada
patricia.gouthro@msvu.ca*

*** Faculty of Education - University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
N9B 3P4 - Windsor, Ontario
Canada
holloway@uwindsor.ca*

ABSTRACT

Using a multiliteracies framework generates possibilities for more creative and critical assessments of the kinds of learning needed to support adults as they create their career pathways. Challenging a narrow, neoliberal discourse, this theoretical framework can be applied to encourage educators to think about more creative strategies that incorporate multimodalities, are attentive to cultural and linguistic diversity, draw in new technologies when appropriate, and considers social justice as a thread that should always be woven into all adult learning experiences. The paper draws on a national SSHRC funded research study that looks at unique sites for adult learning experiences in community and explores how these be used as a resource to generate discussion about key issues pertaining to lifelong learning and career pathways.

KEYWORDS

Multiliteracies, learning careers, critical adult and higher education, neoliberalism.

RESUME

L'utilisation d'un cadre multilittéraire ouvre la voie à des évaluations plus créatives et critiques des types d'apprentissage nécessaires pour aider les adultes à tracer leur parcours professionnel. Remettant en question un discours néolibéral étroit, ce cadre théorique peut être appliqué pour encourager les éducateurs à réfléchir à des stratégies plus créatives qui intègrent la multimodalité, tiennent compte de la diversité culturelle et linguistique, font appel aux nouvelles technologies lorsque cela est approprié et considèrent la justice sociale comme un fil conducteur qui doit toujours être intégré dans toutes les expériences d'apprentissage des adultes. Cet article s'appuie sur une étude nationale financée par le CRSH qui examine des sites uniques destinés à l'apprentissage des adultes au sein de la communauté et explore comment ceux-ci peuvent être utilisés comme ressource pour susciter des discussions sur des questions clés liées à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie et aux parcours professionnels.

MOTS CLE

Multilittératie, parcours d'apprentissage, éducation critique des adultes et enseignement supérieur, néolibéralisme.

Introduction

Career pathways have become ever more complex in a world characterized by globalization and massive migration (Guo, 2015; Kloubert and Hoggan, 2020). Beginning with an overview of current factors shaping teaching practices in adult and higher education, this paper explores how a multiliteracies framework can bridge connections between adult education and the workforce through creative and critical pedagogical approaches. It offers a concise summary of challenges facing learners in developing careers in a neoliberal context and argues that a multiliteracies framework can inform teaching possibilities for adults related to their learning careers. To illustrate, we draw upon examples from a recently completed Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) nationally funded study on multiliteracies for adolescents and adults to demonstrate how visits to community-based sites could be used as resources to foster learning connected to multiliteracies to explore learning careers. The paper concludes by considering the implications for adult and higher education scholars and practitioners in drawing upon a multiliteracies framework to inform their own educational practices.

Current contexts

In Canada, and in other countries with high levels of migration and learners coming from different cultural sectors, educators working in adult and higher education contexts are challenged to create meaningful and engaging educational opportunities for learners who come from diverse backgrounds, with varying language capabilities and levels of preparation for their studies, as well as disparate career aspirations. In many instances, educators working in higher education contexts lack skills or educational preparation to support students who are non-native language speakers, yet they are expected to find ways to deliver their programs and help students to attain success, even though many of their students may struggle with having sufficient academic English (or French, or whichever language that is the language of instruction) preparation to do well in their studies. Adult educators may draw upon a wide range of pedagogical approaches to work with students who are striving to learn a different language to participate better in their new host society (Gravani et al., 2024). While providing scaffolding strategies for students who come from plurilingual backgrounds, they must also attempt to maintain academic rigour, and challenge students who have higher levels of language and academic proficiency so that all higher education students are able to participate in meaningful learning experiences.

In addition to newcomers, there are other populations within Canada who have been historically disadvantaged and who continue to struggle in accessing lifelong learning. Battiste (2013) notes that Indigenous learners face unique challenges navigating the education system, as their belief and value systems often do not align well with mainstream educational practices. African-Canadians as well as other racialized groups similarly struggle to attain success in schooling.

Research on non-traditional students in Europe, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Merrill et al., 2020), explores how learners are expected to navigate a global job market to forge successful learning careers, and considers the role of educators to prepare and support them on this journey. Research also indicates that graduates who come from marginalized backgrounds may continue to encounter barriers and frustrations in transitioning to the workplace from higher education as they are less likely to have the skills, capabilities, and networks that learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds possess that may situate them in a better position to attain success (Finnegan et al, 2019). Beyond the classroom, there are numerous socio-economic and structural factors that create added barriers to career success. Within a neoliberal society, increasingly employment is precarious, and responsibility for achievement is offloaded to the individual learner. Failure to attain permanent, full-time employment is seen not as a systemic problem within the global marketplace, but rather as a personal failing of the individual's decisions and capabilities in carving out a successful career pathway.

Career development in neoliberal times

While educators cannot assume responsibility for changing the economic and social structures of the societies that their students will be living and working in, understanding better the challenges that they face may help educators to consider what kinds of capabilities and skills their students will need to be successful. In addition, those in decision-making roles in government and higher education can develop programming or advocate for policies that may widen the opportunities for students to transition effectively to the paid workforce.

For educators, it is useful to understand the characteristics of lifelong learning in connection to the challenges of career development for learners in a neoliberal context. Neoliberalism is characterized by a focus on the marketplace, competition, and individualism (Gouthro and Holloway, 2023). As Fleming (2018) states, "*neoliberalism does not aim to increase well-being but drives for a more competitive society and economy*" (p. 2). In a neoliberal context, the responsibility for learning is devolved onto the individual learner, with the State assuming minimal responsibility. The learner is charged with making wise choices in their educational and career pathways. Competition, rather than cooperation or support, is emphasized. Increasingly, decision-making processes, administrative practices, and program development, is determined by the values of the marketplace. Adult educators, however, are often motivated to work towards a more just society, by being attentive to inequities and creating learning spaces designed to benefit and support learners striving for success. Experiential learning, learning that requires students to work collaboratively with others, and problem-solving capabilities are all important in lifelong learning.

In their editorial, Thomsen et. al. (2022) state that career development must be understood from an interdisciplinary approach and argue that critical theory can offer insights into how the complexities of decision-making and opportunities for careers

are shaped by power within society. They overview five key characteristics of critical theory that include: a) the idea of a radical imaginary – whereby improved, alternative ways of living and being in a society can be envisioned; b) attention to power – that involves recognizing “*power imbalances and the struggles and dynamics between different forms of power*” (p. 482); c) unmasking ideology – to explore how systems and structures work and how these benefit some people and disadvantage others; d) a dialectical relationship – to explore the tensions and connections between the individual and the social context; e) a sense of transformative agency – which acknowledges limitations while considering possibilities. For this final point, the authors explain (p. 482):

“Agency is bounded by context and circumstances, with different individuals having different resources to shape their lives and the world around them. But critical theory also notes that when individuals come together into collective, the potential for transformative agency increases.”

Thus, Thomsen et al. (2022) offer an alternative to a neoliberal approach by instead using a critical lens to consider career development for students entails not only a focus on the individual learner, but also takes into account broader social, political, and economic factors that may impact on their career trajectories.

A focus on career development not only involves students learning the content area of their particular discipline, but also the skills and capabilities that they will require over the trajectory of their long-term career pathway. As Billett (2024) explains with employability, “*it is not just about securing employment, it is about sustaining the ability to be employed in a changing work environment*” (p. 145). He explains that there are five different categories of learning to take into consideration in developing these capacities: a) language and literacy skills; b) cultural practices – that involve understanding the culture and society that one is living and working in; c) world of work – which he defines as having a good grasp of different areas of work and networks; d) occupational skills – specifically needed for particular occupations; and e) work/life – that entails the ability to understand and balance the demands of work with other aspects of life.

Multiliteracies

This section looks at how we have drawn upon, reworked, and adapted the theory of multiliteracies to apply to adult learning contexts. “Multiliteracies” is a term coined by the New London Group (NLG, 1996), an international group of literacy experts who came together because they recognized that literacy as it was being taught in schools did not reflect the literacy used more broadly in society. They believed that there was a disconnect between literacy and meaning making taught in schools and contemporary communication usage in people’s civic, home, and work lives.

Multiliteracies, as initially set out by the New London Group (1996), was a two-pronged postulate. They contended that recognition and representation of cultural

diversity and multimodality (combining two or more modes such as audio, visual, linguistic, tactile to make meaning) must be salient features of pedagogy. Within multimodality, they had the prescience to herald the importance of technology. While these two tenets have continued to be the foundation of multiliteracies, the field has evolved over the last 30 years. In our research, we have *slightly reworked* this model by placing a greater emphasis on two additional dimensions of multiliteracies that have been underlying tenets to this theory: digital literacies and social justice, to develop a theoretical framework that better explains key aspects of adult learning experiences. We also focus on *linguistic* as well as *cultural* diversity to consider how effective teaching and learning for adults must take into account the increasing number of learners who come from different linguistic backgrounds. While most research in multiliteracies has focused on young children, we believe it has important implications for adults (Holloway and Gouthro, 2024).

The **Multiliteracies framework** we have developed focuses on 4 key areas:

The adapted model of multiliteracies that we developed – which more fully emphasizes attention to linguistic diversity, digital literacies, and social justice issues – presents a coherent model that is easily accessible to adults and captures both creativity and criticality in its approach. Using the concept of “*literacies*” in the plural better captures the sense that the world now communicates in a plethora of ways through technologies, multimodality, nuanced cultural mores, and plurilingualism.

In recognizing the complexities of the changing language of workspaces, and preparing adults for their careers, Kalantzis et al. (2016) note that “*the communicative demands placed on workers have changed greatly, and a large part of the reason for this is the new social relationships of work*” (p. 45). Rather than simply following commands down a hierarchical chain, workers must now engage in nuanced “*informal, interpersonal discourse*” (p. 45) in team environments. Adult learners come from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Meeting their needs is a current reality in these times of mass migration, globalization and plurilingual societies and need to factor into the types of education that will be effective in supporting career development. Multiliteracies provides a framework for learning that has, at its heart, a commitment to social justice, whereby education can offer opportunities for “*learning and literacies that would nurture more productive and more egalitarian working conditions*” (p. 45). To do this, multiliteracies can incorporate pedagogical strategies to support learners coming from diverse and multilingual backgrounds and strive to bridge the digital divide by incorporating technologies that may enrich learning experiences. A multiliteracies approach fosters creativity through learning that incorporate different modalities such as oral, spatial, gestural, and tactile opportunities for learning (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015), which are very reflective of most workplace environments.

Kalantzis et al. (2016) explore multiliteracies through what they term as “drivers” that conceptualize future workforce characteristics in relation to adult learners who can develop dispositions and skills for employability that still maintain social justice perspectives. For example, the driver “*Globally Connected World*” is defined as “*increased global interconnectivity [that] puts diversity and adaptability at*

the centre of organisational operations” (Kalantzis et al., 2016, p. 47). These drivers are markers of emerging workforce changes that reflect ‘disruptive shifts that are likely to reshape the landscape (i.e. both the contemporary and future “*workscape*”)’ (p. 47). “*Novel and Adaptive Thinking*” is one of the skills Kalantzis et al. (2016) discuss in relation to the “*Globally Connected World*” driver. This skill, which they suggest is needed by the future workforce, is defined as “*proficiency at thinking and coming up with solutions and responses beyond that which is rote or rule-based*” (p. 48). In this envisioning of the future workforce, Kalantzis et al. (2016) maintain that “*success as a worker in the present and conceivable future demands a fresh and extensive repertoire of knowledges and skills that go beyond traditional academic skills*” (p. 49), which they articulate through relationships between new drivers of future workplaces and the skills that must be developed to meet those demands.

Research Study

The research that we draw upon in this paper is from a recently completed Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight grant that included interviews, observations, document analysis, and original film footage of classrooms and learning spaces. In this study we explored how multiliteracies can inform critical and creative approaches to teaching adult learners through its emphasis on social justice, the use of multimodalities and digital technologies, and support for learners with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Our research received Research Ethics Board clearance and adheres to the Canadian Tri-Council policies on ethics in research. We used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and comparative case studies for our methodology. This methodological approach is iterative in that there are three stages: *coding* that involves characterizing the data using short gerund phrases; *focused codes* that capture unique points and surmise emerging themes, and *memo writing* in short prose paragraphs that offer deeper descriptions and analyses. The case studies involved locations in two Canadian provinces: Ontario and Nova Scotia and included different sites such as high schools as well as adult learning sites and community-based organizations such as a French language learning institute; a multicultural council that teaches English as an Additional Language (EAL) program; an artistic dance centre; a national immigration museum; a classical music organization that offers interactive concerts; and a university art gallery.

Our participants included adult educators, adult learners, high school teachers, high school students, policy makers and administrators. For purposes of this paper, we only focus on the adult participants and learning sites. Participants could choose whether or not they wished for their identities to be publicly identified or not. Some participants wished to be publicly named to share the type of work they do while some chose to keep their identities confidential. In that instance, in this paper we simply refer to the individual as “a participant”. Secondly, participants had options regarding which methods to participate in. For instance, a participant might have chosen to be observed teaching but not want to be filmed. In this paper we include an interview

with one participant at an art gallery, and two participants who chose to be interviewed jointly at a museum. Thirdly, all participants were provided with a transcript of their interview and given the opportunity to revise it.

We used four methods in this research: (a) face-to-face semi-structured interviews that lasted between 1-2 hours each; (b) observations in which we took field notes using pen to paper usually over the course of about three months for approximately 3-4 hours each time); (c) document analysis that included lesson plans, photos of the learning spaces, samples of assignments that the adult educator or learner may have created, or resources for the students such as useful video links, or brainstorming notes about developing curriculum; (d) original film footage of teaching, performances or tours embedded within our research sites.

A website from this project, The Multiliteracies Project can be found at: www.multiliteraciesproject.com. The site is available in English and French; the two official languages of Canada. The MLP includes short video interviews of adult educators and learners talking about key ideas from the longer interviews they did with us. The website includes film excerpts of real teaching in our participants' classrooms, art, music, or dance spaces, and other learning sites. We also offer brief, interpretive commentaries and provide information about our publications should visitors wish to go deeper in learning about our research using multiliteracies in adult lifelong learning contexts. The MLP web platform was recently archived at co-author Susan's university for it to have long-term stability and accessibility. While the site was still live, it garnered a fair amount of attention with over 250,000 visitors.

Findings

Two different examples from our research study on adult learning sites in Halifax are shared in this paper. The first is the Art Gallery at Mount Saint Vincent University. Although small in scale, the art gallery plays an integral role in both the university and the local community in hosting exhibits and running programming that often addresses issues of inclusion, with a particular focus on that aligns with the university's mandate to support women. In considering how the multiliteracies framework applied, through our visits to the art gallery we could see evidence of the four different areas we have outlined a) multimodalities; b) cultural and linguistic diversity; c) technology; and d) social justice, were used in different ways in various exhibits and programming. Some of the exhibits incorporated various kinds of technology, such as video or audio recordings that would add another dimension to the exhibit. Other exhibits offered cultural insights through more traditional displays. As a part of her role at the Art Gallery, one of the participants we interviewed would research and develop narratives for various tour groups that aligned with their unique backgrounds and interests on different exhibits, whether the tour was arranged by a professor for a class coming from a particular discipline or from a local community-based organization.

This participant explains:

“One [exhibit] that comes to mind that on the surface seemed simple, was about hooked rugs. It was 150 years of hooked rugs that came from across Canada. It was not a show that we produced. It was a touring production. It came with what we call didactic panels or interpretive texts that were pre-made and we stuck them on the wall. Often we prepare our own texts but where this was a very thematically organized exhibition, there was a narrative that came with it, so I enjoyed that exhibition for teaching purposes very much because although it just looked like it was about textiles or hooked rugs, specifically, you could draw Canadian history out of that, you could talk about gender, you could talk about home economics, you could talk about economy, about industrialization, the Canadian history of urbanization over the 20th Century. You could talk about textiles specifically if you had a group of students from NASCAD [local arts college] who were in textiles, the ins and outs of the materials and the techniques. You could also talk about older people, because often people who are rug hookers are older. We also had people from the YMCA [community organization] come in, a group of New Canadians coming in who were coming from Syria, so they could connect to the textile industry and history in Syria of rugmaking there, to that which was in Canada”.

Thus, in designing these tours tailored to specific groups, this Art Gallery participant reflects upon how textiles can be the starting point for conversations that we note could also be brought into play in a much broader context when thinking about learning in connection to the workforce and career development. Rug hooking becomes a material touchstone for visitors to learn about textiles as central to industrialization, the economy, and home economics in various countries and time periods. In terms of multimodality, the experience of touching the rugs and visually enjoying the colourful patterns, provide important means of engaging learners. Textiles also invoke a key principle of multimodality, which is that materiality symbolizes and reflects social, cultural and historical norms. A multiliteracies framework also emphasizes the need to value cultural diversity. One strategy to support a more inclusive approach to learning may be to develop an appreciation for the artistic expressions of different cultures and societies, such as their unique patterns and skills evidenced in rug hooking.

In terms of considering how technology shapes interaction and communication, in this case, a hooked rug can represent key aspects of industrialization, which in turn give insights into how careers have been shaped historically. Rowsell’s (2013) research contends that for learners *“the professional and economic landscape of their future will demand that they be inventive and creative”* (p. 148). Through Rowsell’s interviews (2013) with professionals specifically within textile industries, she finds that these professional designers constantly make *“choices”* (p. 141) regarding what to include in their designs. Recalling the example of Kalantzis et al.’s (2016) *“Novel and Adaptive Thinking”* as an important skill for the future workforce, decision-making is part of this skill set that involves making many choices. In this hooked rug exhibit at the Art Gallery, visitors are invited to contemplate that artistic design in textiles is also emblematic of

how workforces have very particular ways of building their final products forged through inventive thinking, designing, and technical skills. It also raises questions about how much individual artistic creativity or career possibilities in design may be impacted by new technologies, such Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the future.

In thinking about connections to learning, the workplace, and career development, an exhibit such as this one about the hooked rugs could also provoke a discussion of social justice issues such as the deskilling of women's labour. An example one of the authors (Patricia) has shared with her class when exploring gender and work is about her mother-in-law, Rachelle, who was an extremely talented seamstress who worked at a small company making custom-made draperies. Yet when she had to go on unemployment insurance, she was furious that the government staff member reviewing her application insisted that she label herself as unskilled labour. A critical examination of gender and skills could also be expanded to consider the circumstances of migrants who often face a similar devaluing of their work skills and experience when they move to another country.

The second example comes from The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, located in Halifax, which was the first point of entry for many immigrants who came by boat to Canada, often then debarking on long train journeys across the country to settle into new lives and careers. In thinking about how a visit to a museum site could be used to provoke discussion amongst learners about transitions to the workplace, we consider an exhibit at Pier 21 where visitors board a real train car. Incorporating a multimodal element of different sensory experiences, the visitor physically steps up into the train and sits down in the train seat. Technology is used to have a screen mimic the view out of a train window. The landscape of a new and vast country rolls by as the train passes through the Maritime provinces into Quebec, crosses central Canada and then the sweeping prairies, before winding through the Rocky Mountains and ending up on the Pacific coast. In Kalantzis et al.'s (2016) exploration of multimodality, they describe "spatial mode" in part as the need to "*envision journeys and create itineraries*" (p. 377). This exhibit invites imagination, in considering the idea of a journey to a new and unknown destination. As part of the exhibit, visitors are encouraged to think about what you will need to pack and bring on this journey and reflect on what you might hope to encounter in the future. Some of the trepidation of this journey mirrors the uncertainty that many learners feel when they transition from formal education into a workplace. It also taps into the different aspects of lifelong learning that are involved in transitioning into a new life and career – around not only the physical space and place that might be new, but also the cultural and linguistic differences and expectations, the preparation that one might need to be successful, and reflection on what one brings on a journey and how it may aid them in the future. From a social justice perspective, it also raises concerns about social structural barriers that minorities and immigrants may face.

In an interview, one of the participants who worked at the museum, explains:

"I find that the interconnection between how things are framed now when it comes to immigration and refugees, and how they have been framed in the past is really interesting, and I think is really necessary for people to see those

connections because there are a lot of people who will say, you know, the tropes about refugees today or immigrants today are not the same as immigrants and refugees in the past. But the reality is that people said that about those immigrants and refugees at those times as well going all the way back to the Irish potato famine. Going back even farther than that, and so I think it is great to be able to, in a very concrete way, point to that nothing about these negative statements is really new. It is all just recycled”.

What is significant here, from a social justice perspective, is that in teaching adult learners to be reflective about how they might access and develop careers, part of the skill set that theories such as critical theory and multiliteracies propose is that there needs to be attention to power in society that impacts on home, community, and workplace environments. While achieving their career goals, adult learners must cultivate the capacity to look at bigger patterns (knowing that history always informs the present), dare to envision a new design in the fabric of societal norms, and “develop the skills to speak up, to negotiate and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives” (Kalantzis et al., 2016, p. 46).

Implications for adult and higher education

A multiliteracies approach may inform strategies for teaching adult learners as they develop their unique careers. This more holistic approach to teaching resonates with the work of critical and feminist educators who draw upon arts-based strategies for teaching and research (Butterwick and Roy, 2018) and who raise critical questions about digital literacies for adults (Smythe, 2018). Adult educators, whether in formal contexts such as colleges or universities, or non-formal contexts such as Language Schools, may wish to draw upon the rich learning opportunities afforded through multiliteracies by incorporating visits (real or virtual) to community-based sites such as have described through our research. These sites can spark engaging conversations and offer opportunities for critical and creative learning experiences that may help students develop their learning careers.

References

- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich.
- Billett, S. (2024). Learning across working life: Learning experiences and individuals' participation, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 46 (2), 143-154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10158037X.2023.22211650>.
- Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. (2015). The things you do to know: An introduction to the pedagogy of Multiliteracies, in Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. (eds). *A pedagogy of multiliteracies: learning by design* (1st ed.), pp. 1-36. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Butterwick, S. and Roy, C. (2018). Introduction to finding voice and listening: The potential of community and arts-based adult education and research, *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*. 30 (2), 1-9.
- Finnegan, F., Valadas, S., O'Neill, J., Fragoso, A. and Paulos, L. (2019). The search for security in precarious times: Non-traditional graduates perspectives on higher education and employment, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 38 (2), 157–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2019.1567613>.
- Flemming, T. (2018). Learning careers and transformational learning: Challenges of learning and work in neoliberal spaces, in Merrill, B., Galimberti, A., Nizinska, A. and González-Montegudo, J., *Continuity and discontinuity in learning careers: potentials for a learning space in a changing world*, p. 1-13, Brill.
- Gravani, M. N., Slade, B., Brown, M., Jögi, L. and Borg, C. (2024). From Learner-Centered Education (LCE) to Emancipatory Learner-Centered Education (ELCE): A comparative case study of language education for adult migrants in four European countries, *Prospects*, 54 (1), 175–190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-023-09633-0>.
- Guo, S. (2018). Researching transnational migration and lifelong learning, in Milana, M., Webb, S., Holford, J., Waller, R. and Jarvis, P. (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning* (1st ed.), pp. 53-74. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holloway, S. M. and Gouthro, P. A. (2024). Multimodal learning through arts-based organisations, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 64 (1), 12-32.
- Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., Chan, E. and Dalley-Trim, L. (2016) *Literacies* (2nd ed.). Cambridge UP.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures, *Harvard Educational Review*, 66 (1), 60-92.
- Rowse, J. (2013). *Working with multimodality: rethinking literacy in a digital age*. Routledge.
- Smythe, S. (2018). Adult learning in the control society. Digital era governance, literacies of control, and the work of adult educators, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 68 (3), 197-214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074713618766645>.
- Thomsen, R. Hooley, T. and Amriager-Anderson, K. (2022). Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 50 (4), 481-490. <http://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2106551>

This e-book revisits and expands upon a number of contributions presented at the ESREA Conference in Rennes, in 2025, entitled “Learning careers, higher education and workplaces: supporting transitions in times of complexity”.

It is dedicated to the exploration of processual, contextual, theoretical and methodological perspectives on these phenomena in order to better understand how transitions from higher education to the labour market take shape and how career development and identities unfold across working life. A constellation of constructs and meanings are often connected to transitions when we start interrogating their configurations and the possibility to partially plan or foresee their effects. In this sense, the concept of flexibility, the notion of employability and the complex domain composed by those competences that should allow smooth passages from one professional context to another are part of the investigation.

The Conference was held 27-29 Mars 2025 in Rennes (Brittany), with the support of ESREA, of the Rennes 2 University, Rennes Metropole, Region Bretagne, and the involvement of the doctoral students in Adult Education of the research team CREAD.

About the editors

Jérôme ENEAU, Full Professor, Rennes 2 University.

António FRAGOSO, Full Professor, Universidade do Algarve, Convenor of Access, Learning Careers and Identities network.

Andrea GALIMBERTI, Associate Professor, University of Milano-Bicocca, Convenor of Access, Learning Careers and Identities network, Convenor of Working Life and Learning network.

Elzbieta SANOJCA, Associate Professor, Rennes 2 University, Convenor of Working Life and Learning network.

Rachel METZGER, PhD in Adult Education, Rennes 2 University.

Vanessa PLEVEN, PhD Student in Adult Education, Rennes 2 University.

Rennes 2 University / ESREA - ISBN : 978-2-9564498-1-2

