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Improving Employability Through Stakeholders in European Higher Education: The Case of Spain



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We distinguish four employability strategies and test with a database of 230 Spanish university centers how different stakeholders try to influence them. Academic employability seems to be the main goal of university governors, as they emphasize curricula improvements to introduce practical contents. By contrast, and probably because of their interest in specialized teaching associated with their own research, professors prioritize as an alternative the development of interpersonal management skills and sharing of alumni experiences. Other stakeholders with greater market orientation have a comparatively marginal impact. Reform proposals therefore aim to rebalance the influence of stakeholders, though not necessarily by means of structural reforms in decision-making bodies. In fact, by differentiating several employability strategies, we have observed that governance reforms may generate overly optimistic expectations, as stakeholders may support only a subset of strategies, which may not even be the most important ones.

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Introduction

If we agree that a fundamental goal of university students is to improve their employability (i.e., to find a satisfactory job in the shortest time possible), then the situation of graduates from some European countries leaves ample room for improvement. Since the turn of the century, several extensive surveys have warned about the rather low ratings graduates assign to their employability in countries like the UK, France, Italy and Spain (Allen and van der Velden, 2011; Schomburg and Teichler, 2006). According to these data, graduates are especially dissatisfied with the work they find, use few skills acquired in university, and reveal that their jobs require more competencies than they have. Also, they are particularly concerned about job stability (which is compounded by the issue of low wages) and their professional prospects. Finally, they are slow to find their first jobs, and often have temporary contracts in their first years after graduation.

While there are economic and social factors that can explain these results, universities tend to bear much of the responsibility. And, while this scenario would be a cause of concern in virtually any context, the challenge is even greater for universities in many European countries that are currently suffering financial constraints and high unemployment rates. Hence, although there are many relevant factors affecting employability strategies in universities (higher education funding, recruitment of teaching and research staff, or the corporate culture of each country are just a few), we focus here on how stakeholders can influence strategies for improving student employability and propose specific reforms.

We define a stakeholder in an organization as any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objective (Freeman, 1984, 25). Based on previous classifications (Reavill, 1998; Sallán-Leyes, 2000), we identify ten groups as stakeholders in centers offering higher education degrees (COHEDs): university teaching staff, university governors, alumni, students, administrative staff, employers, public administration, trade unions, the media, and local community members, including students' families.

We chose stakeholders to analyze how to improve employability for two reasons. First, because the literature confirms their strong influence on the strategies adopted by any organization (Epstein et al., 2015; Gallardo-Vázquez and Sánchez-Hernández, 2014). Second, because the structural changes in governance that affect the power of stakeholders can be carried out without the need for financial commitments and lead to stable and long-term results (Daake and William, 2000). This is why many authors assign stakeholders a fundamental role in determining the correct direction in which to take public services (Blomgren et al., 2005; Yang and Callahan, 2007). On the other hand, Spain constitutes an interesting setting for this study, as one of the countries in which Schomburg and Teichler (2006) and Allen and van der Velden (2011) found more opportunities for improvement. Mora (2002a) suggests, for instance, that training in Spanish universities offers little adjustment to the professional profiles demanded by today's society, so university leavers would not be

“professionals” but graduates with excessively generalist training. Not surprisingly, Spanish employers give a low rating (5.5/10) to university graduates in terms of their preparedness to start working (ANECA, 2004).

From a theoretical point of view, we provide a novel classification of four possible strategies that promote employability in universities: 1) academic interventions based on curricula improvements; 2) teaching of business protocols including the transmission of values and skills required for employment; 3) matching or pairing with the workplace; and 4) feedback that enables current students to learn from the experience of alumni. Empirically, our work offers two important contributions. First, conducting an empirical study on stakeholders is valuable, given that such research is scarce in the service sector and virtually absent at university level. Most related studies have focused on the relation between the degree of development of the environmental strategy and the importance placed by managers on different stakeholders (Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Henriques and Sadorsky, 1999). Second, we aim to offer evidence on the present process of change in European higher education, a process in which employability occupies an important place as a measure of a university's overall performance.

Employability and stakeholders

There is controversy over to what extent universities pay lip service to the business world on the matter of employability. Some authors state that employability should not be considered an indicator of a university's performance, because it reflects a narrow view of educational targets and amounts to a threat to academic freedom (Billett, 2009; Harvey, 2000). Others point out that employability is not achieved by the university alone, but also involves other relevant factors such as status, power, gender, race or capital (Collins, 1979; Moreau and Leatherwood, 2006; Weber, 1968). Finally, Kehm and Teichler (1995) or Knight and Yorke (2004) suggest that the emphasis on employability only reflects that employers avoid their responsibilities for providing specific training by passing them on to the educational system.

By contrast, building on human capital theories (Becker, 1964), a second strand of literature states that universities should afford their graduates a large proportion of their labor skills (Cox and King, 2006; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). From this point of view, employability does not damage higher education, but rather enhances its response to changes in society (Holland, 2006). The fact is that today's changes in the economy and in the labor market are pushing governments and employers to consider higher education as a main contributor to national development and economic growth (Harvey, 2000; Mason et al., 2003). Thus, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process have established employability as one of the main targets of universities up to 2020 (The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).

Our own perspective assumes that employability should be one of the main targets of universities, and that it is completely compatible with other targets that are not market-oriented. We define employability as the combination of qualifications – knowledge, skills and personal attributes – which enable graduates to obtain a job and to succeed in their chosen occupations, with benefits for themselves and for the whole labor market, community and economy (Yorke, 2006). In this scenario, universities should develop strategies that enable their graduates to enter the labor market under the best possible conditions in a minimal period. As mentioned above, such strategies can be grouped into the following four types (Table 1): academic, business protocol, job matching, and alumni feedback.

We define academic employability strategies as the actions taken at an academic level to improve graduate employability, and analyze the following aspects:

- The extent to which the curriculum comes close to business reality – for instance, by inviting employers to participate in curricular development (Knight and Yorke, 2003; Mourshed et al., 2012).
- Access to and use of technology – potential for daily access to the Internet; learning to use databases and different telecommunications alternatives; knowledge of basic and advanced computer programs; or, provision of laptops for all students (Bennett et al., 1999; Knight and Yorke, 2002).
- Knowledge of languages – teaching of some subjects in other languages; language learning courses; activities that simulate future work in other languages; and, offering exchange placements in foreign universities (Brennan et al., 2001). Such activities are especially relevant for non-English-speaking students.
- Tutorials to help students adapt and become integrated in college life – to facilitate learning processes; to help them make decisions about their curricula and itineraries; and, toward the end of the course, to join the labor world (Knight and Yorke, 2002; Morey et al., 2003).
- Possibility of double degrees, to enrich and diversify learning experiences.

The second strategy for improving employability relates to business protocol. We define this as a set of actions that may improve graduate employability by transmitting the values and core competencies that will be necessary for their future careers. We analyze the following actions:

- Training in personal attributes – e.g., loyalty, honesty, accountability, decision making, problem solving, willingness to get involved personally in the workplace, written communication skills, etc. (Knight and Yorke, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2010).
- Training in interpersonal skills – teamwork, initiative, planning, coordination and organization, oral communication skills, leadership, negotiation skills and conflict resolution (Harvey, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2010).

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