

TO FIND A JOB OR A LIFE? THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONING TO WORK AND THE POST-PANDEMIC FUTURE EXPECTATIONS OF YOUNG GRADUATES

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Abstract

The transition to work represents one of the most important challenges for the higher education young graduates. To find a job has effective implications in the process of entering adulthood and being able to do it during or after the period of the Covid-19 pandemic imply unprecedented challenges.

In Portugal, obtaining a higher education continues to play a decisively role to reduce the country's structural geographic/social dichotomies and to represent the main instrument of social modernization and promotion of upward social mobility. However, and despite the evolution felt over the last decades in terms of the number of higher education students, of graduates and of higher education offer, the scientific research continues to show that a direct relationship between family social contexts and academic/professional trajectories persists.

We intend to analyze the process of transition to work, the professional trajectories, the working conditions and the professional expectations of a non-representative sample of 195 higher education young graduates from three institutions located in the center of Portugal.

The results show that having a higher education degree and a regular job did not change the process of transition to adulthood for most of the young graduates, and more than half of those, up to the age of 30, assumed that they continue to live with their parents and maintain the same job, located in their residence area. These conditions indirectly reflect precarious working conditions in terms of contract/remuneration and, sometimes, an underrated job with vertical mismatch and low level of required skills.

Age proves to be an important variable in this process, with the older graduates (+30) having better working conditions, supported in a professional career already established even before obtaining their degree.

Globally, the expectations of younger graduates regarding their professional future, are, despite all, positive, even though they are aware that this post-pandemic era will involve greater risks and difficulties in relation to the labor market, including: the increased unemployment, the temporary and precarious work, the decreased wages and economic growth, and the increased emigration.

Keywords: Transition to work, precariousness, youth, skills, job expectations.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the democratization of the higher education in Portugal, which occurred from the end of the 80s of the 20th century, including the creation of the binary system, there was a progressive increase of the number of students and graduates. This revolution in educational offer has unquestionably contributed to the increasing of the qualifications of younger people and to the economic development of the country, bringing it closer to other European countries. However, in the last decades we have seen the emergence of the perception that obtaining a higher education degree does not guarantee an automatic integration into the job market.

Issues such as the relationship between training/employment, employability, job insecurity and delaying the entry into adulthood, gradually emerge as clear concerns for students, graduates, parents and higher education institutions. It is in this context that the concept of employability emerges, as a way of considering the mechanisms that facilitate access to employment, of analyzing the main causes of unemployment and the difficulties of transitioning to the job market, realities that increasingly affect the most qualified (Harvey, 2001^[1]; Tomlinson, 2012^[2]). Initially is being associated with the acquisition of qualifications and skills that would help the transition to the job market, trying to observe and understand the relationship between education and employment, fundamentally the growing phenomenon of not using the most qualified human resources. Progressively, it added aspects associated with self-employment and entrepreneurship (Moreland, 2006)^[3] highlighting its multidimensionality and complex operationalization. Nevertheless, it has been used to measure the performance of higher education

institutions, especially in terms of the time it takes for graduates to access the job market. Its genesis goes back to the theory of human capital (Becker, 1964)^[4], being directly associated with the individual capacity and responsibility for acquiring skills and other attributes that could speed up the access, maintenance and search for employment (Hillage and Pollard, 1998)^[5].

Despite the assumption that more educated individuals have guaranteed employment, the increase in the available number of graduates has implied a growth of the dynamics and of the unpredictability between the offer and the demand of jobs and a multiplication of risks in the labor market, to the extent the relation between higher education and the job market has been broken (Tomlinson, 2012)^[6]. Consequently, we see that an increasing number of higher education graduates is accepting jobs below their level of qualifications, as the economy does not generate qualified jobs at the same rate as the offer. At the same time, economic crisis contexts significantly affect this movement, forcing young people to accept low-quality jobs, with lower salaries than it would be expected in times of growth (Kahn, 2010)^[7].

It is unquestionable that recent graduates, in a pandemic context, faced increased and potentially decisive risks, in the development of their careers. There were widespread deficits in decent work, putting into question their aspirations in relation to personal and professional life's, covering all dimensions of work, including the work opportunities, the fair income, the working conditions, the equal treatment and social protection and the labor rights, multiplying situations of underutilization of labor, underemployment and unemployment (International Labor Office, 2020)^[8].

When graduates enter into the job market and do not find a job that matches their qualifications (vertical mismatch) or find a job below their qualifications and in an area different from their academic training (double mismatch) they are in a difficult situation and earn significantly less (Meng; Wessling; Mühleck; Unger, 2020)^[9].

Those are problems that have challenged universities and polytechnics that have intensified their perception of such issues, and consequently tried to adapt training offers, promoted a progressive approach to the needs and realities of the world of work (Delaney; McGuinness; Pouliakas; Redmond, 2020)^[10], including by creating mechanisms to support the transition to work for its graduates, establishing direct collaborations with employers and promoting more entrepreneurial education and self-employment.

This problematic cannot, however, just be analyzed in an educational and economic perspective. The integration into the labor market has clear sociological consequences, being fundamental for young people in their process of transition into adulthood, supported by the creation of conditions for structuring their personal and family future (Sousa, 2021)^[11]. Several difficulties are progressively observed along these paths (Suleman, 2022)^[12], specifically in terms of financial and residential autonomy and of the postponement of projects and life expectations.

The lack of job stability means that young people see their personal development towards adulthood being conditioned. If we add to these circumstances the fact that, at the beginning of the 2nd decade of the 21st century, we experienced a global pandemic, we see that recent years have posed new challenges to young graduates. At the same time, it is unquestionable that factors such as economic crises directly influence the set of difficulties experienced in the process of transition to work, with direct consequences on jobs and working conditions (Kahn, 2010^[13]; Ortega; Martin, 2012^[14]; Pérez; Santos, 2020^[15]).

The speed and level of changes in the world of work have intensified, and this trend is not expected to decrease in this post-pandemic period. Most jobs will disappear by 2040 and will be replaced by new ones (Meng; Wessling; Mühleck; Unger, 2020)^[9].

The demand for highly qualified and socially committed people is increasing and changing, and the role of education and culture are fundamental to strengthening cohesive societies and European identity. European labor markets have generally been able to absorb rapid increases in the supply of highly qualified young people in recent decades. However, this process, not only is being differentiated between different countries, but also has not occurred without the progressive emergence of an increase in overeducation of graduates (a phenomenon whereby workers occupy jobs for which they have an educational qualification superior to the educational requirements of the work), with excess education among young graduates being positively related to the percentage of temporary employment in the labor market (Delaney; McGuinness; Pouliakas; Redmond, 2020)^[10]. For some, a temporary contract may be an inevitable part of the process of accessing a more suitable or permanent job.

At the same time, we are witnessing circumstances where young graduates may accept precarious working conditions, in order to access professions that are closer to the area of academic training.

It is assumed by the theory of occupational mobility (Sicherman; Galor, 1990)^[16] that these behaviors may be related to strategies for future access to internal promotions or for upward occupational mobility between employers. However, these attitudes could constitute a trap (Albert; Davia; Legazpe, 2023)^[17], as they could be understood, by future employers, as a sign of low abilities and skills, especially if the mobility between jobs that are characterized by inadequacy is very high, accumulating low levels of specific human capital. At the same time it could establish a routine of escaping unemployment (Verhaest; Omeij 2009)^[18] or promote a disincentive for employers to create high-quality positions for graduates (Dolado, Jansen and Jimeno 2009)^[19] and higher levels of vertical and horizontal incompatibility. This problem is more evident in contexts of economic crisis, when unemployment rates increase and competition for jobs reaches higher levels. Consequently, graduates will have a greater probability of remaining in incompatible positions, not only when unemployment rates are higher, but also if employment protection standards do not encourage/support job change.

In the last decade, a significant percentage of graduates have shown clear difficulties in finding good jobs, and at the same time employers often assume that they are unable to find people with the skills they need.

In a period where technology assumes a preponderant role in work, digital Taylorism was associated with the loss of jobs and income, especially in the area of routinized services. With the emergence of artificial intelligence, we are seeing a new phase of this process, with a significative growth of the potential for personalization according to character, vision, habits and tastes (Lauder; Mayhew, 2020)^[20].

This new context adds new challenges, and the proximity between education and job market gains new relevance, particularly in terms of interpersonal skills, problem-solving ability, teamwork and communication skills.

2 METHODOLOGY

This analysis is based on an online questionnaire applied to 195 graduates from three polytechnic higher education institutions, who obtained a diploma between a year and a half and two years ago. We wanted to analyze the process of transition to work, the professional trajectories, the working conditions and the professional expectations.

In relation to the variables used to frame the professional situation of the graduates, it was considered: the type and characteristics of the job; the type of contract; the working hours and the level of wage. In this context, bearing in mind the contextual variables (gender, age and residence), we preferably used the Likert scale (Odetti, Tiburzi, Mondino, & Güemes, 2009)^[21], to highlight perceptions about the relationship between academic formation and employment, the role of the graduate obtained in the professional expectations in a post-pandemic period. As for the relationship between diplomas and work, it was supported by the subjective approach of the overeducation concept (McGuinness, 2006)^[22] and by the Job match concept (Meng; Wessling; Mühleck; Unger, 2020)^[9]. The sample is random and is not representative of the universe of graduates. The descriptive and correlational statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS.

3 RESULTS

In terms of the characterization of graduates, 71.3% of respondents are women, 48.2% are between 21-25 years old and 33.3% between 26-30 years old, 52.3% of graduates up to the age of 30 live with the parents. Regarding professional situation, 76.3% of respondents claim to have a regular job, of which 54.2% are working their first job, 12.8% are unemployed (4.6% are still looking for their first regular job) and 10.9% continued their studies. As per their professional characteristics, 82.7% of graduates work full-time and 17.3% in part-time (it should be noted that of these, more than 60% have been employed at this work for less than 6 months, mainly with administrative and commercial functions). In relation to working conditions, 32.1% have fixed-term contracts, 36.1% are permanent employees, 21.4% are interns and 10.1% are independent workers. As for income after taxes, 40.5% earn between 601-800 euros and 20.8% between 400-600 euros. We observe that there is a direct relationship between lower incomes and contractual instability, the workers with permanent contracts having the highest incomes.

These data show a high employability rate. However, the working conditions reveal an evident precariousness in income and also at contractual level, particularly in relation to graduates working in administrative, commercial, communication and marketing areas. Although the huge majority is working full-time, young people who work part-time have the lowest salaries and already held more than one job (this situation mostly reflects a reproduction of precarious professional trajectories). Nevertheless, we

can see that salaries tend to be low and across all professions, except for some professional technical areas (Nursing, Electronics and automation) and for respondents who have been carrying out their professional activities for a longer period, having stable contracts and careers already established before obtaining their diplomas.

The type of work reveals bigger relevance than the seniority in that job in accessing the best income. This work context is reflected in the fact that 30.8% state to be actively looking for a job. They are mainly young people, with more precarious conditions (self-employed and salaried workers, who have lower incomes and part-time work) and who are employed in less qualified jobs, far from their areas of academic training (75% of commercial workers, 78.6 % of public attendance workers, 47.4% of administrative workers). When asked to justify their answers, graduates assume that they are looking for better working conditions in terms of contract and salary, as well as looking for a profession closer to academic diplomas.

Despite these working conditions, 70.2% of graduates who have a regular profession assume that the lower qualification for their job is a superior diploma, 19.9% that is the compulsory education (12th year) or less (those who practice no qualified professions), 56% assume the importance of the diploma in acceding to the job, 29.2% say they are very satisfied and 43.3% are satisfied with their current work.

These replies are surprising, given the previous data. Consequently, it is relevant to analyze the level of compatibility between the profession, the training held and the employers' use of their academic qualifications.

Graduates assume, in a 1 minimum to 5 maximum scale, an average of 3,5 about the compatibility between training area and the profession and 3,4 in the use of academic qualifications and skills. Graduates of the areas of Informatics Engineer, Nursing and Occupational therapy (professional areas more valued during covid-19?) show the higher levels. On the opposite side, the ones that have the most precarious conditions recognize that the use of their qualifications is low (commercial workers, administrative workers, public attendance workers and factory workers). When asked about the skills most applied in the exercise of work, the results show that even graduates who accomplish functions closer to their areas of academic training do not use the following skills: negotiation skills (97,1%); capacity for initiative (90%); innovation capacity (88,8%); possibility of decision making (86,5%); foreign languages (85,9%); relational skills (82,4%); flexibility at work (73,5%) and mastery of information and communication technologies (65,3%). These contexts reveal the effective working conditions of young people and justify the fact that 52,8% assume the desire/need to continue studying, especially at the master level (69.2%). The main motivations continue to be related to the employment situation already mentioned in the active job search positions: seeking better working conditions at contractual level, wages and searching for a profession in diploma area. Despite this, graduates do not express disappointment with the course, but rather with the training institutions (around 70% express dissatisfaction a lot of dissatisfaction), blaming them for the lack of support in the transition to work.

As for future expectations, they are generally optimistic, 46% expect the job offer in their areas of training to be expanded at a regional, national and international level and the symbolic image of diplomas is positive, assuming that increases the probability of finding/changing jobs and professional stability, the possibility of progressing in their career and improve their life. They are, however, more critical of the importance of diplomas in increasing social status and wages. They also reveal clear concerns regarding future labor risks, in the post-covid period, being mostly pessimistic about the possibility of the increasing of temporary work, precarious work, job competitiveness, unemployment, social inequalities, emigration and the deterioration of the wages and economic growth.

In general, young graduates reveal evident pessimism, it is noted that it is those who carry out more precarious activities who show more negative expectations regarding all the issues addressed about their professional future.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Despite the high employability, graduates mostly work in jobs with precarious working conditions, with low wages, with fixed-term contracts or independent work and part-time work. These circumstances may justify their low expectations regarding work and their professional future, which may explain the fact that they present high levels of job satisfaction. These circumstances, in practice, affect their personal life and life projects, considering that the majority do not have residential autonomy, continuing to live with their parents, remain single and assume the intention to continue their academic training, as an attempt to improve their professional situation.

These positions express an evident delay of entering in adulthood, as a direct consequence of an absence of financial and residential autonomy and intrinsically the impossibility of establishing one's own family unit. Graduates not only reveal positions of asking responsibility of the training entities, specifically for the low support in the process of transition to work, but also express elevated perspectives on the importance of diplomas in the job market, proving that they are recognizing their symbolic value, despite its non-materialization in their personal and professional life. The youth of the respondents and the difficulties and challenges of the post-covid period may explain some of these perceptions, namely the lack of autonomy and awareness of the complex reality of the process of transition to work, and the belief that the diploma and training institutions could be a protective factor in the post-pandemic period.

This dichotomous posture remains when analyzing the type of professions performed and the skills required and applied in the work. Although the majority assume that a superior degree is the most appropriate level for the job held, there is a fragile relationship between the level of training and the job performed. This situation is revealing the limitations of the subjective analytical approach to overeducation, with a symbolic and functional overestimated use of diplomas.

Consequently, we can assume that, effectively, many graduates perform an underrated job, with vertical mismatch and low level of required skills (with the exception of graduates who perform more technical functions in the areas of health and engineering). The situation is worse for those who have more precarious work situations, where there is evidence of double mismatch (graduates who work in commercial areas, customer services and administrative functions).

Considering the real conditions of the applicability of qualifications and skills, this analysis reinforces the evidence of a functional precariousness in the conditions and exercise of work, questioning the adequacy and effective use of degrees, even for some of those who assume that they hold employment in their diploma area. It can also be seen that there is not a large representation of mobility in the professional trajectories of graduates, with only 36% claiming to have held more than one job after obtaining the diploma, and in these cases, the situation reflects the precariousness of work and not a strategy for accumulating skills to project a professional future.

As for the fact that the remaining 70% of graduates had only one job during this period, even if with less attractive working conditions, it could reflect either the period of post-covid economic crisis, or their expectations of improvement in the job they have, or future opportunities in national and international labor market, or just an inevitability.

Those who kept the jobs they already had before finishing the course, have better working conditions, higher incomes and effective contracts. However, it was not possible to verify if it was the diploma that allow a significant improvement in their working conditions.

We can conclude that the professional situation of graduates directly influences the process of entry into adulthood and their future academic and professional expectations.

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