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At the career crossroads – building employability by non-traditional students

This article presents a certain part of research that was conducted under the European research project called EMPLOY – *Enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in HE*. The aim of the article is to show the issue of employability in the context of constructing career paths by Polish non-traditional students. In order to interpret the research results the author used Mark L. Savickas' concept of career construction. Referring to biographic interviews conducted with non-traditional students, the author pointed out several ways of planning a career, which she calls the paths of “further education”, “temporariness towards a better future”, “biographic hitchhiking” and “pursuing one's passion”.

Keywords: employability, non-traditional students, career paths, constructing a career

Introduction

Complexity and uncertainty of the labour world undergoing permanent changes bring about new challenges for individuals and societies. The transformations of social and economic reality, cutting down employment costs, the popularity of short-term employment made the perception of employment for security and stability anachronic. This situation has created new challenges for employees, one of them being developing skills of planning and managing one's own career in the lifelong perspective. Career paths have become more and more complex and unpredictable, and employability is considered to be one of the basic skills.

A specific group affected by those transformations are students. Strengthening the employability of students and graduates is one of the key assumptions of the Bologna Process. The formulated priorities, regarding, amongst others, strengthening of graduates' employability and the necessity of improving the quality of cooperation between universities and employers, have been directly reflected in the subsequent waves of reforms of higher education in Poland.

The universities were given a specific role of building the students' employability potential. The tasks, such as enriching school curricula with learning results that strengthen social competences, organisation of projects that offer internships, following graduates' lives and developing the activity of academic career services, all aim to create the possibilities to learn how to build students' careers and improve their employability (Kurantowicz, Nizińska, Monteagudo, Padilla-Carmona, 2017).

In this article I will refer to the research carried out under the European research project called EMPLOY – *Enhancing the employability of non-traditional students in HE*, financed under the Erasmus+ programme, 2014-1-UK01-KA203-001842-TP. The project was executed by six European universities: the Warwick University (Great Britain), the project leader, University of Lower Silesia (Poland), the Stockholm University (Sweden), the Algarve University (Portugal), the Sevilla University (Spain) and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Its main goal focused on improving the effectiveness of entering labour market by graduates, by preparing tools such as the catalogue of good practices of higher education schools in the area of strengthening and increasing employability of graduates, as well as the model of counselling which supports and improves the employability of non-traditional students/graduates.

In this project 'non-traditional' students were defined as mature students who come from families of low social and economic background or from ethnic groups which are underrepresented in the higher education, or are disabled, and/or are the first generation that wants to receive higher education. In Poland, it is difficult to indicate specific actions or projects that address the issue of strengthening employability tailored for non-traditional graduates, because that group is not recognised as separate in the general population of students and graduates of higher education schools. However, referring to European research (Finnegan, Merril, Thunborg, 2014), one can say that, everywhere, entering the labour market by former non-traditional students takes longer and is often burdened with the risk of taking on a job which is below one's qualifications, compared to traditional student group.

The research strategy adopted in the project involved carrying out 20 biographical interviews with non-traditional students of the final year of first-grade studies per each project partner. Moreover, a year after the first conversation the researchers met again with the research participants in order to learn what had changed in their life following graduation and how they were coping on the labour market. In this article I want to look at employability in the context of building career paths by Polish non-traditional students. I will attempt to answer two questions: how did non-traditional graduates build their own employability potential during their time at university and how are they building their careers at present?

The ability to plan one's own career

Jim Hillage and Emma Pollard (1998) wrote that the concept of “the ability to be employed” (in the Polish literature a direct translation of the term “employability” has become common) is not explicit and precise, because it is used in different contexts and characterised by multiple meanings. The earliest and the most general understanding of this concept focused on the problem of obtaining and maintaining employment. Together with changes taking place on the labour market, the competition growth and the instability of the surrounding world, some organisations started seeking new methods of HR management that allowed to increase the flexibility of business operations. People started thinking about employability as in the categories of “adjusting” an employee to the requirements of further work. As Izabela Marzec noticed, this approach was connected with perceiving the “employability” concept in the context of professional usefulness, discussed usually in the situation of recruitment and selection processes, as well as the extent of adjusting candidate’s predispositions to the needs of specific workplaces (2010).

Currently, when we talk about the ability of coping on the labour market, the aspect of employee’s responsibility for the development of their own career and the skills of prediction and adjustment to changes, are emphasised (Forrier, Sels, 2003; Hillage, Pollard, 1998; Marzec, 2010; Świgoń, 2014). Furthermore, more and more attention is paid to the fact that the employability problem goes far beyond key skills and is treated as a specific mix of personal features, convictions, comprehension and the ability to make an effective reflection based on experience (Yorke, 2006).

This way of thinking about employability emphasises the importance of independence in creating, identifying and executing chances for professional development and is compatible with contemporary career theories. As Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska wrote “contemporary career study demands to take into account multiple changes in the labour world, which confronts employees with new requirements. The most important ones include the growth of the career role and improving the ability of planning, managing and monitoring one’s own career in the life-long perspective” (2012, p. 72).

In the context of unpredictability and transformations taking place in the labour world, career is treated more and more often as a construction, a way of life that consists of episodes and events creating a life construct, re-constructed and co-constructed with reference to the situation and context in which it arises (Wojtasik, 2003; Minta, 2014).

An example of a theory which stresses mutual dependency between the social world and individuals’ aptitudes is Mark L. Savickas’ concept of building a career. According to the author, an individual career pattern depends on the social and economic level of parents, individual’s education and talents,

as well as on the features of character, concepts of oneself and career adjustability, including possibilities given by society. The essence of this theory lies in the perception that the choice of a career, adjustability and development are an integrated process. The comprehension of individual professional behaviours is based on the consideration of four issues: individual's life structures, their professional personality, the ability to adjust the career and the leading theme of the subject's life. Therefore, professional behaviours and career development shall not be considered as separate from individual's other life dimensions, but they are perceived as a process, in a holistic, permanent and contextual way, as a key dimension of life design (Cybal-Michalska, 2015, 2012; Savickas, 2011; Wojtasik, 2003).

In his concept Savickas emphasises the importance of giving meanings to professional behaviours and experiences. According to him, a career is a subjective construction, on whose basis individuals give meaning to past events, current experiences and future attempts, by intertwining them into their life theme. The meanings included in individuals' biographies constitute their equipment for the process of adjusting themselves to social changes which will be taking place in their professional life (Minta 2014, 2016). Describing the process of constructing a career, the author uses the concept of „career adaptability”. It is defined as a “psycho-social construct, which means that a unit has resources and is ready to cope with current and upcoming professional development tasks, transitions connected with work and personal difficult situations. The adjustability allows an individual to shape a scope of their social environment, because individuals join a society and regulate their own professional behaviours, taking into account development tasks and transitions experienced in professional roles, which are imposed by a community” (Savickas 2005 in Minta 2016, p. 75).

The context of developing careers of non-traditional students

While asking questions about the ways of constructing careers by non-traditional students, it is worth paying attention to the fact that this group is characterised by “rich biography” and life experience. These are people who at the same time fulfil several highly demanding social roles (of a student, an employee, a parent), their previous educational experiences are not positive and their personal environment is not always a motivating and supportive life context. Polish non-traditional students, in most cases, are the first generation in their families to continue their education up to the HE level. It is difficult to clearly specify their families financial and economic status. Generally speaking, it was defined as “average”, but in several cases a difficult financial situation was the reason for not starting the studies immediately

after graduating from the secondary school. The priority for those people was to start a job and become financially independent.

One of the important factors that regulate the process of career construction are difficulties and barriers, which almost all graduates of higher education face the moment they enter the labour market. The present social and economic situation, and the increase in the number of the unemployed with higher education degree suggest that finding a job immediately after graduation is impossible. Looking at the labour market from the perspective of non-traditional students, one can say that perceiving uncertainty is its characteristic feature, and results from experiencing such situations by themselves. The reality of their employment is an uncertain, temporary and short-term reality. However, very often, it is their conscious choice or life necessity – a job that is not connected with the studies specialisation is treated solely as a source of income (Czubak-Koch, Monteagudo, Nizińska, Padilla-Carmona, 2017). Surely, their thinking about future and plans connected with it focus on finding employment based on an employment contract, which brings the assurance of stability and safety. However, at the same time, they are aware that getting a permanent and secure job is nowadays unreachable. The uncertainty of the labour market means not only the difficulties in finding a dream occupation, the unemployment and temporary work, but also the fact that a university degree does not guarantee them any stability. The following utterances seem to corroborate it:

There is no work. The situation is disastrous for us, the young ones, it forces us to work on junk contracts or be on the dole (...) The employees expect us to have experience, but where shall we get it? There is nowhere, where we can do it (...) (Szymon).

The studies are no longer the warranty of success. Now, everyone has a degree and no work after studies. We are fully aware that we study, but it is not sure that we will have a job in accordance with our degree. This is sick, because where can we gain experience, when we go on the dole after the graduation (Sylwia).

It is not like that – you finish studies and close a certain stage. And then you start a job and have it all the time. And you treat it as another stage. Being on the labour market today is a question of constant development. It is the question of chasing the proverbial bunny. You must chase it in order to keep yourself on this labour market (Dominik).

During my studies I was thinking that the most important thing is to find a job based on the employment contract, the so-called permanent one. This was to be a guarantee of safety and something better than those temporary contracts. But today I already know that nothing on that labour market guarantees safety. The most recent example, the new reform and it's nothing that I am employed on an employment contract, for when they close our lower secondary school there will be no work. So, there is nothing certain, no one knows what will happen. Either something from the top, or some grassroots factors (Małgorzata).

Experiencing this specific discrepancy between plans and possibilities of their fulfilment can be metaphorically described as a moment of stopping during a journey, of planning one's career at the crossroads of one's own experiences and aspirations on the one hand, and the offer of one's social, political and economic environment on the other. Listening to students' narratives, their stories of "life themes", their biographical stories and descriptions that create the picture of their life, as well as hearing about their ways of acting in the reality governed by the rules of the labour market, one cannot help an impression that the skills of seeking, finding and maintaining work, and first of all, the sense and ways of estimating the chances for professional success, are a specific constellation of coincidences, events, environment and personality features and one's own actions. Referring to the narratives of non-traditional students, I selected a few areas, which are given specific meanings in the context of career planning. Those areas are called the paths of „further education”, „temporari-ness towards better future”, „biographic hitchhiking” and the path of „pursuing a passion”. As much as the first three are a little close to one another, the fourth one clearly stands out.

Non-traditional students on career paths

What is characteristic of Polish non-traditional students is their attempts to achieve "full" higher education degree. After finishing the studies of the 1st grade, they plan to continue their education at the complementary master's level. They think that only when they obtain a master's degree, the so-called "full qualifications", will give them a chance to find a job in the profession they have been training for. In their opinion, having of a degree of higher education is a basic requirement inscribed in the professional development and career. Moreover, they feel the need of gaining extra competences by means of participation in various courses and training sessions, in order to boost their appeal on the labour market. The importance of this strategy is emphasised in particular by graduates who are already present on the labour market (for over three years), because, as they say, continuous improvement of their own skills, combined with "being up to date" with employers' expectations, allows them to feel as a competitive employee in their present workplace, increases their promotion chances, and influences their self-confidence and motivation to seek a better job. This path can be defined as a "path of further education" or life-long education, but not necessarily linked to one's own development that makes life deeply meaningful or indicates a high degree of "believing into a diploma" and "faith" in legitimacy of the so-called full qualifications. We can see this in the following excerpts:

I will tell it this way, if I want to work in school, I must do the master's, so that I can later do those subsequent stages of teacher's professional development.

In addition, when I was doing my internship, the headmaster of that school was saying that it was necessary to have a master's degree. Currently, I'm feeling that I have already got something, but it is still too little (Katarzyna).

Now I already think differently. I've got a feeling that the finish line is still ahead of me, so the time on the complementary master's studies is kind of a last leg of the journey, which needs to be well-played. Gaining as many qualifications as possible. Doing at least a few courses. For the time being, I've enrolled in Marta Bogdanowicz' course of "the Method of a Good Start", but next year I will also think about something (...). I want to do it for myself to feel safer on the labour market. No employer will believe that I can work with this method if I don't have a formal certificate (Ewa).

I am going to study psychology for masters. This will be a kind of another element of my education. All in all, I could have done it at once, but it turned out that my path was to be as it was and I'm glad about all my experiences. Of course, I will be doing training connected with my job, because my profession requires continuous self-education. But I think that finishing the studies will be the last big step (Urszula).

The possibility of one's own development, improving skills and extending the knowledge on courses and training. It means controlling what I have, what I can, what I have achieved, but also being aware of what is happening on the labour market. Working, I am always learning (Jakub).

One can say that "further education" as one of the constructed career paths, is based on the meaning given to competences, whose credibility is "supported" by a diploma. Non-traditional students at the university are already following that way, therefore their current experiences define their further tracks of career adjustability. However, they treat "playing the role of a student" rather narrowly, and usually limit it to actions that result from obligatory requirements of participating in classes. Attendance at lectures and classes is most often their only activity at the university. The non-traditional students do not take part in additional and non-obligatory classes. Only part of them participated in non-obligatory internships organised by the school, usually under the intra-university projects. However, this participation did not result from their own need to engage in new activity forms, but was a consequence of taking advantage of the offer and proposals put forward to them by the university. Most of them did not actively seek possibilities of doing an internship, apprenticeship or voluntary work. However, some of them could not do it for important reasons. They talked about it in the following way:

I had an offer to take part in the internship organised by the school, however, because I work shifts and have a specific work schedule, I couldn't make it (...). Unfortunately, I did not participate in courses and training (...). I would be keen on taking part, if only someone had offered them(...) Which ones?... For example, the modules on assertiveness, better motivational courses, how to be more confident. Something like that (Aneta).

During studies I took part in student internships. (...) I have no time for other forms, because work and studies take a lot of time, not to mention family (Anna).

The main reason declared by the students was lack of time and difficulties finding time both for professional and parental duties. Using Savickas' language, one of the „life themes” of non-traditional students is the experience of being simultaneously a student, a parent and an employee. A non-traditional student is focused on finding any employment, even if it is not connected with the studies' profile, or he or she often gets employed in completely different sectors from the profile of their education. On the one hand, this situation stems from practical thinking and responsibility for their own and their family's financial situation, on the other – it is a result of knowing employer's requirements. In the students' opinion, what employers expect from the potential employees is, first of all, professional experience. They treat the lack of experience as a barrier to find employment, therefore, sometimes they undertake a job, which they do not like for various reasons. However, they decide to take it in order to gain experience in a position they will want to get in future, or to get a document that will certify their professional internship. This specific „sacrifice for a good cause” is treated by them in a pragmatic way, so that they can learn the character of work in a given institution, get to know the environment and build a social network. It is another career path built by them, which can be defined as a “path of temporariness towards a better future”. This future is to be related with the adaptation to the experienced work conditions. Here are the examples:

Now I've decided to take a job very far away from the place where I live. I commute as many as 50km, it takes me over three hours every day. This is a lot. I'm not going to move out of my town, so I also know that I will work here only a year and then, with this experience, I will be looking for a job in my area. Last year, I had an interview for a job in an integrative kindergarten, but I know that I had lost against a girl who had experience (Karolina).

For the time being I'm working in a private nursery. It is not my dream job and I don't plan my professional career in this place. I must admit it is tiring. The atmosphere is not nice and I would rather work with older kids, but I've decided to start somewhere, enter this environment and, first of all, to gain some experience – because it is necessary for finding a job. Generally, I have some experience: I've worked as a waitress, during holidays as a camp teacher. And as soon as I have the master's degree in early education – I will be looking for a better job (Kamila).

Being a non-traditional student means having a baggage of biographic experiences. Taking into account social and cultural contexts and the non-traditional students' life experiences intertwined with them, building a potential of one's own employability seems to be a process of a lifelong learning not only by means of studying at a school of higher education, of participation in courses or

workshops, but also by means of everyday life. Daily life situations, crises, and transition moments require adjusting, breaking with current ways of acting in the world and building new methods of a rational organisation of the life world. This path, located between biography of a non-traditional student and the processes taking place in the social life environment can be called “biographic hitchhiking”. Similarly to a hitchhiking journey, which is full of unexpected events and changes taking place while getting to know new people and places, planning one’s own career that requires communication and interaction with the world, with others and oneself, is a process characterised by changes of the “pace of life”, and it often happens by accident, as we shall see below:

After graduating from the secondary technical school, I started working in a shop (...). After having a son I stayed at home, then I had a daughter, so I completely didn’t think about my professional life. (...) But when my son was five and my daughter was three, my husband had to change work for a worse one, unfortunately, so it was necessary to look around for something. And in this way I landed a job working at the market stall. (...) Later my husband started working as a driver and the problems with time organisation appeared (...). So, again, I had a period of “not working”. And then I developed a kind of fear and anxiety about the future. Thoughts about retirement, about safety. But I didn’t do anything about it then. And, then, at school I met one family, who built a house in our area and we agreed that I will look after their child. (...) But, only work in the nursery, for the time being I’m only a nursery helper, motivated me to start studies. Now, when I finish and graduate, I would like to change the job, find something in a kindergarten. So this is my professional experience. (...) Surely, the work in the shop and at the market was not developmental. I don’t know how to say it, but I was working because I had to, because such were the needs in the family. And there was no other possibility... But now when I think of it... it seems to me that I had no other idea for myself. (...) Then the work as a nanny. Ok, it was by accident. A total accident. But it was rather a good, fortunate accident, because then I started thinking differently about myself and the idea of further learning came to me. Anyway, also my friend, she had been already studying here, was strongly encouraging me. Somehow, I didn’t believe that I will make it. But, just so, still the same friend, helped me find the job in the nursery (Lena).

After I have found employment in XXX I stopped thinking about work and a professional future at all. I will tell you frankly, for a long time I was involved in juggling those duties, home, work, children, home, work, children. So, I didn’t have space and time for myself at all. I started thinking about myself, about what I do and how I work only when my health problems started. (...) When I started to have those health problems I started looking for solutions for myself (...). I was in contact with many people and they were saying that I am a kind of a counsellor... (...) and I just thought that maybe... (...). I noticed that I somehow attract people and I put it all together and then the idea of social work came up. But I was aware then that studies are needed. And one aunt of my husband was encouraging me to take on the studies here, at this university, because she also studied here, she completed her education (...). She said, the times are changing, look around. (...) Now, I would like to first write, finish the bachelor’s thesis and have my viva. During the last placement

in „Z street” it was wonderful and I think we fell in love with each other. I have signals from them that they would like me to work with them and I would also like to finish the degree (Lila).

The path of “biographic hitchhiking” includes the following conflicting tendencies: accident and passiveness versus actions and coping in life situations. One can say that the path is cobbled with transitions, difficult personal situations and the potential of readiness to meet professional challenges. Building the potential of employability is an integrated process of simultaneous adjustability and using opportunities that turn up or emphasise the leading life themes. In this process of “career adjustability”, the personal environment creates the context for action requirements, ways of coping, formulated expectations, and is a source of feedback on the effectiveness of actions. In particular, “significant others”, a proper group of normative reference is a source of motivation to change, giving the individual support and suggesting new ways and action directions. In this aspect, the received support is a question of “accident” situated in social interactions. However, this “randomness” can become a source of reflections on an experience learnt in a concrete situation and can constitute the basis for further actions. It may be a turning point in seeking one’s own identity and giving sense to one’s life.

Building one’s own identity, as an active process of building employability can be found in yet another path I distinguished – “pursuing a passion”. For the research participants, whose utterances were classified as such, having a hobby for a long time becomes a driving force of engaging in action. The following fragment of an interview provides an example:

I have set myself a goal and would like to achieve it. And everyone knows that one should fly high. If you like what you do, if you love what you do, it seems that there are no limits at all. This means it is possible... it is clear that in Poland the market is tough, because it is a closed circle (speaking about journalism – added by M. Cz-K) and rather narrow, so there are few such workplaces. However, the experience which, let’s say, I already have, at such a young age, because I have experience in working in regional and national papers, so I think there is no such limit. (...) In the secondary school, I started writing for an internet portal about Polish football. And so, I started writing. Also, after the first year of studies, by accident I saw on the Internet that Polish TV was opening a contest for a paid internship in Woronicza street, so I sent my application, my texts, and some other materials, and after three days they called me and offered a one-month internship. On the one hand, it’s so much luck, but I’m not sure... But, on the other hand, I had wanted to do it for a long time. Ever since I was a small boy. Already in the secondary school I knew what I wanted to do, which job I wanted to have and all my actions had a concrete goal. I was trying my hand at it. (...) Of course I made mistakes, I could not always pull myself together, but it is normal. (...) Always, even when I was on an unpaid internship I was doing my best, I wanted to be recognised from my best side, but I always had a chance to learn from others. I learnt a lot from others. Nowadays, I don’t stop, I am moving to Warsaw, because for a journalist it’s easier to find a job there (Jakub).

Passion as a non-material value, as a resource, gives sense and meaning to experiences. Referring to Etienne Wenger's words, who wrote that „experiencing identity in practice is a way of being in the world” (1998, p. 151), one can say that building the potential of one's own employability is shaped under the influence of participating in actions of an institution, and in interactions with others, who can become a source of meanings for an individual. However, as Manuel Castells noticed, identities “become identities solely and exclusively when social actors internalise them and construct their own sense around this internalisation” (2008, p. 23). Therefore, sense becomes “a symbolic identification of targets of their actions” (*ibid*). In this case, passion becomes a basis for formulating anticipation, the source of aspirations and a specific signpost that leads to the goal through commitment, seeking solutions and possibilities and coping with problems. While following the path of “pursuing a passion” is important to understand one's own actions by giving them a meaning, it allows to understand one's very self and also to “establish” one's position in the world in relation to the expectations and requirements formulated by others. In this case, it happens through the lens of employer's expectations, but also through the way in which an individual perceives their professional role and themselves in this role.

Conclusion

Each society creates social, political and economic conditions of life which produce a certain model of life success. However, what is inextricably connected with striving for success, are the co-existing barriers that limit chances for development and social promotion (Malewski, 2000). Thinking of the employability potential as a skill of adjustability to changes, one can say that, to a great extent, its basic indicator is the ability of people to identify chances and factors that create an active context of possibilities and conditions for acting with the simultaneous awareness of limitations.

As Joanna Minta pointed out, “the more non-linear and mosaic character of contemporary careers increases the group of the participants of labour world, who feel fears and anxiety related to constructing their current and future life way” (therein, p. 113). An independent construction of a career requires from a human being the readiness to constantly learn about oneself, to confront one's needs, expectations and skills with the possibilities and requirements of the labour market (Minta, 2014, p. 113). Constructing the paths of their careers by non-traditional students is mainly based on the category of “adjustment” of their professional situation to the needs connected with the character of a given occupation. Basic elements of this strategy are proper education and experience gained on-the-job. Non-traditional students very often perceive finishing their

studies as a beginning of a new journey, new perspectives and new possibilities. However, this path, despite the fact that it clearly defines the journey destination, quite often means the maintenance of a *status quo* of playing a role of a student, since, quoting Peter Alheit, it very frequently levels off “educational deficits” experienced in life and unfulfilled “educational wishes” (Alheit, 2002, p. 69). Therefore, the framework of constructing careers by non-traditional students are the meanings given to their current experiences, and not the far-sighted vision of their professional future. Sometimes, entering the path of one’s own career triggered by a collection of various circumstances, may, although not always, be related to searching the sense of one’s life. What is visible in some biographies of non-traditional students are incidents – turning points which push them to undertake new actions. Those events, sparking change, happen while interacting with others and are the source of reflection, evaluation and an attempt to re-define one’s own life. Counselling can play an important role in those events. What is recognised as unusual in the group of non-traditional students is a path that makes it possible to pursue a passion, which allows for dreams to come true. The people who are on that path, do not seek counsellors’ help.

Translated by Katarzyna Szostak

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