

**HIGHER EDUCATION EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMMES AND EXPERIENCES:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ITALY, NIGERIA AND PALESTINE**

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ABSTRACT

The employability of young graduates has gained increasing importance in the world of work of the 21st century. Higher education (HE) institutions churn out millions of graduates annually to the labour market, but at the same time, employers highlight their lack of requisite skills to sustain employment opportunities. The literature extensively illustrates the relevance of employability programmes in supporting the connection between these two parties throughout the educational process. This paper presents the findings of a comparative analysis on the extent to which HE institutions' employability programmes in Italy, Nigeria, and Palestine promote career development skills in young adults. The analysis highlights different backgrounds and levels of structuring of the programmes for reducing youth unemployment. Nonetheless, a common trend is observable in the strong synergy with stakeholders in the development and organisation of programmes in order to respond to labour market requirements and students' aspirations.

KEY WORDS

employability programmes; higher education; labour market; skills; comparative analysis



SISYPHUS

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 02,

2022, PP 107-128

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25749/sis.25656>

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**PROGRAMAS E EXPERIÊNCIAS DE EMPREGABILIDADE DO ENSINO
SUPERIOR: UMA ANÁLISE COMPARADA DE ITÁLIA, NIGÉRIA E
PALESTINA**

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RESUMO

A empregabilidade de jovens licenciados tem vindo a ganhar cada vez mais importância no mundo de trabalho do século XXI. Todos os anos, as instituições de ensino superior (HE) produzem milhões de licenciados para o mercado de trabalho, mas, ao mesmo tempo, os empregadores realçam a sua falta de competências exigidas para sustentarem oportunidades de empregabilidade. A literatura ilustra amplamente a importância dos programas de empregabilidade no apoio à ligação entre estes dois lados ao longo do processo educacional. Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma análise comparada sobre os programas de empregabilidade de instituições IE na Itália, na Nigéria e na Palestina e de como estes programas promovem competências para o desenvolvimento da carreira, em jovens adultos. A análise realça diferentes origens e graus de estruturação dos programas para reduzir o desemprego juvenil. Mesmo assim, observa-se um traço comum na forte sinergia com as partes interessadas no desenvolvimento e organização de programas de modo a responder às exigências do mercado laboral e às aspirações dos próprios estudantes.

PALAVRAS - CHAVE

programas de empregabilidade; ensino superior; mercado de trabalho; competências; análise comparada



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UN ANÁLISIS COMPARATIVO DE ITALIA, NIGERIA Y PALESTINA**

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RESUMEN

La empleabilidad de los jóvenes titulados ha cobrado cada vez más importancia en el mundo laboral del siglo XXI. Cada año, las instituciones de educación superior (ES) producen millones de graduados para el mercado laboral, pero al mismo tiempo, los empleadores destacan su falta de habilidades necesarias para mantener las oportunidades de empleo. La literatura ilustra ampliamente la importancia de los programas de empleabilidad para apoyar el vínculo entre estos dos lados a lo largo del proceso educativo. Este artículo presenta los resultados de un análisis comparativo de la medida en que los programas de empleabilidad en instituciones de educación superior en Italia, Nigeria y Palestina promueven habilidades de desarrollo profesional en jóvenes. El análisis destaca diferentes orígenes y grados de estructuración de los programas para reducir el desempleo juvenil. Aun así, existe un hilo conductor en la fuerte sinergia con los actores en el desarrollo y organización de programas para responder a las demandas del mercado laboral y las aspiraciones de los propios estudiantes.

PALABRAS - CLAVE

programas de empleabilidad; enseñanza superior; mercado de trabajo; habilidades; análisis comparativo



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Higher Education Employability Programmes and Experiences: A Comparative Analysis of Italy, Nigeria and Palestine

Glenda Galeotti, Debora Daddi, Oyekunle Yinusa, Abdallah Al-haddad

INTRODUCTION

The mismatch between young people's career aspirations and their work positions is often related to poor knowledge and skills with regard to the labour market and professions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Dream-jobs report states that approximately half of the 15-year-old young males and females of 41 countries claimed to expect to work in one of just 10 known jobs by the age of 30 years (OECD, 2017a). The qualification and skill mismatch implies a lack of economic recognition for workers, or a high risk of expulsion from the labour market, and for firms, high costs due to the adequate training of their workers, lack of innovation and low productivity (Pucket et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that young people's understanding of themselves, the world of education, training and work and their employability skills influence the effective transition to the labour market and have positive effects on personal and professional choices and development (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). Nevertheless, activities that support the transition - from a lifelong learning perspective - are still marginal, managed by staff who are frequently inadequately prepared and with largely insufficient economic resources (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). On the other hand, investing in youth aspirations - including career intentions - contributes to achieving decent work, in terms of healthy work-life balance, social protection, career development and flexibility, and to improving social mobility (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020; WEF, 2020). As a consequence of the transformations of the world of work and society at large, the mismatch between qualification and skills possessed and labour market demands affect graduates each year (OECD, 2017b, 2018).

Around the world, some tertiary education systems are addressing this challenge by supporting graduates' transition to the labour market through programmes and services dedicated to connecting youth aspirations, Higher Education pathways and labour market requests. Moreover, the literature extensively highlights the relevance of employability programmes and experiences that support the connection between these parties throughout the higher educational paths. It is against this backdrop that the definition adopted of employability refers to the process of acquiring, maintaining and developing skills and knowledge to enter and remain in the labour market (Boffo & Fedeli, 2018; Peeters et al., 2019; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

This paper aims to analyse the programmes and experiences of several Italian, Nigerian and Palestinian higher education organisations, and to highlight the approaches adopted to foster employability. Furthermore, the adoption of a comparative strategy in the analysis of these initiatives underlines the common and distinct dimensions of current programmes geared towards the effective insertion of young students and graduates in the labour market and their accompaniment in the construction of their career development projects.

EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRANSITIONS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

The concept of employability has been defined differently over time, thus pointing to its multidimensionality and complexity. In this paper, “employability” is taken as a body of related knowledge such as skills, values and personal attributes that increase graduates' chances of securing employment in a competitive labour market.

It should be noted that the associated body of knowledge also supports individuals' successful career progression in any field of endeavour, which ultimately benefits the workforce (employees), society and the entire economy of a nation (Yorke & Knight, 2006). Although there appears to be a prevailing public view that employability is about being employed, for the sake of clarity, Hillage and Pollard (1998), Harvey (2003), Yorke and Knight (2006) argue that employability goes beyond this idea to include the development of creative and innovative skills and competences that can enable individuals to develop themselves and their career paths.

In the field of education, many contributions can be found in Anglo-Saxon pedagogical literature on how the employability dimension can enhance the interrelationship between higher education and the labour market (Boffo, Federighi, & Torlone, 2015). In fact, the category of employability, as understood by Boffo, Fedeli, Melacarne, Lo Presti and Vianello (2017), is defined as ‘a central category, from which it is necessary to rethink the university training process and through which it is important to decline the curricula of the various courses of study’ (p. 162).

In the same vein, the first definition of employability is by Hillage and Pollard (1998), according to whom it represents:

(...) the ability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes he or she possesses, the way he or she uses these resources and presents them to employers, and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which he or she seeks employment. (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 3, cited in Boffo & Tomei, 2020, p. 20)

The concept of employability, as defined above, is based on a recognition of the increasingly close interconnection between universities and the world of work (Yorke, 2006). From this perspective, the notion of employability implies the development of skills, by the students themselves, that can enable their effective insertion in work contexts, allowing them to remain there even in situations where there are changes or transitions. Thus, this category is not limited to the objective of helping an individual find a job, but rather sets itself in the direction of procedural development which involves the individual's entire professional life, even in the medium and long term. This aspect is subsequently addressed by Lee Harvey (2003):

(...) Employability is more than developing attributes, techniques or experiences just to enable a learner to get a job, or to progress in their current career. It is about learning, and the emphasis is less on 'employability' and more on 'skills'. In essence, the emphasis



is on the development of critical and reflective skills, to empower and improve the learner. (Harvey, 2003, p. 1, cited in Boffo & Tomei, 2020, p. 20)

Yorke and Knight (2003; 2004; 2006) highlight the fundamental importance the relationship between higher education and economic development has gained since the 2000s. It is in this sense, therefore, that the study of the transformation processes of society and the economy at a global level has a direct impact on the educational and training dimension of individuals in formal education.

Hence, the approach that emerges from this construct identifies higher education courses as the privileged context for developing these skills and competences.

This definition offers two interpretations of employability that are central to understanding the transition of young adults to the labour market: having the tools to effectively enter the labour market and the ability to adapt to its changes; and stimulating, on the other hand, higher education to provide adequate knowledge and skills to enable young people to navigate this market.

METHODOLOGY

This section seeks to clarify the methodology used to explore the programmes for employability and transition of higher education students to the labour market implemented by the University of Florence, the University of Lagos and the University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS).

The comparison departed from an analysis of each country's context during the Adult Education Academy 2021, within the scope of the Erasmus+ INTALL project (International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning), and organised by the Julius Maximilian University, Würzburg in Germany. The comparative study was structured as follows (Bereday, 1972; Phillips, 2006; Terzaroli & Yinusa, 2019):

- Identification of levels of analysis of the theme Employability and transition of young adults from higher education to the labour market. Three levels were identified, namely a macro level concerning employability policies, a meso level concerning programmes developed by Higher Education, and, finally, a micro level related to best practices in specific training contexts. The present analysis focuses on the meso and micro level. The guiding research question is: *What are the educational actions or programmes that implement policy recommendations?*
- In view of the following recommendation, “Detailed description of the educational phenomena in the countries to be investigated” (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014, p. 118, cited in Terzaroli & Yinusa, 2019, p. 94), the paragraphs below focus on providing an overview of the programmes implemented at the local level.
- Defining categories of comparison. The main emergent categories are related to the policies implemented in the country under study, the curricular and extracurricular activities offered by the universities under analysis, and, finally, the role of the stakeholders in collaborating with the

university contexts in order to generate valuable opportunities to test themselves.

- Juxtaposition - identification of similarities and differences among the three countries, seeking to highlight common and divergent aspects regarding the implementation of specific policies and programmes.
- Interpretation and conclusions. To highlight the reflections and hypotheses arising from the previous phase by giving an initial interpretation to the collected data.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES

Young adults' entry into the labour market is characterised by instability which, in turn, determines an element of risk for all those facing not only a transitional phase of their professional life, but also a process of defining their personal life dimension and entering adulthood (Furlong, 2009; Heinz, 2009; MacDonald, 2002).

From this perspective, the study of the transition from university to work, and full integration in society through the working dimension, plays a central role in understanding the challenges that young adults encounter. The effective transition from formal education to work is, in fact, the fundamental core for the implementation of the individual's aspirations (Heinz, 2009).

Thus, it is clear that the transitions experienced by young adults nowadays (Heinz, 2009) differ considerably from those experienced by their parents. The current economy requires a greater investment of energy and time and the challenges and obstacles that reduce its linearity make the transition from one condition to another more complicated (Furlong, 2009).

Hence, the transition to work represents a key element of the training process (Cambi, 2007), as it is not just an event in the life of the individual, but one that involves the entire dimension of meaning, direction and planning (Biasin, 2012).

The European Commission (2011) underlines "the need to build a greater connection between higher education and society as the capacity of European higher education institutions to play their role in society and contribute to the prosperity of Europe remains underused" (p. 2). On the other hand, the Council of the European Union invites member states to implement specific and targeted actions, which can identify solutions to these challenges with the aim of supporting young adults in their transition from university to work (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017).

This framework has been implemented in Italy through a series of regulations that have increasingly identified the importance of universities as primary actors in active labour market policies and in supporting the transitions of young adults. Legislative Decree No. 276/2003, implementing Law 30/2003, the so-called *Biagi Law*, introduces the focus on job placement activities and graduates' transition to work in the context of higher education (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017).

It is precisely within higher education pathways that training opportunities can be identified which enable different individuals to develop skills that are essential for an effective transition to work, but above all that support young adults in building their professional careers.



Educational pathways can be divided into two broad groups: curricular activities that facilitate the acquisition of employability skills (Yorke, 2006) and opportunities beyond the academic curriculum and their constant dialogue within the university institution (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017).

The main strategies adopted by universities within the curriculum pathway can be summarised as follows (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017):

- Adapting the disciplinary content of traditional courses in order to stimulate students' communication skills and competences.
- Building employability skills within courses of study through work-related learning (e.g., by face-to-face meetings with professionals in the sector, offering student case studies, etc.).
- Creating compulsory (in terms of credits) modules specifically related to employability for students in each course of study.
- Encouraging the activation of specific internships, in line with students' professional interests and perspectives in order to make this experience even more meaningful. In addition to developing employability skills in the field, an intentional internship offers students the opportunity to network for the future.

In addition to this curriculum area, there is also a reflection on how to develop employability at the extracurricular level, which is considered today the pathway that has been most implemented by Italian universities (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017).

These strategies and activities can be mainly based on (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017):

- Extra-curricular activities that may involve the student in the enhancement of a wide range of transversal skills, such as being part of the students' union, playing the role of representative, being a tutor and providing support within the university.
- Encouraging participation in workshops, conferences and symposia organised by specific companies and organisations. They too can be important for many aspects of building employability, including increasing networking.
- Establishing Job Placement and Career Services activities to accompany the student in the transition from university to the labour market.

As stated by Candia and Cumbo in the 2016 Italia Lavoro report, the Job Placement and Career Services represent the most important extracurricular programmes within the international context, consequently making them “a hub, a place for building links between multiple actors that dot the university world (students, teachers, companies, organisations, institutions, bodies, etc.), facilitating opportunities for exchange, growth and collaboration” (Candia & Cumbo, 2016, cited in in Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017, p. 440)¹

At a micro and national level, the Job Placement and Career Services of the University of Florence are constantly and continuously engaged in creating a work culture, acting as a reference for the transitions of each graduate. Their main task is to accompany, support and foster the development of university students and graduates' employability process. They support students, undergraduates, graduates and PhDs to guide them in their

¹ Paragraph translated by the author.

professional choices, addressing their uncertainties about the future, building a constellation of connections with the world of work to foster knowledge and transversal skills to be used once they leave university (University of Florence, 2021).

In fact, the services for the promotion of employability are increasingly entrusted with issues such as disseminating recommendations for preparation, promoting an understanding of vocational training and deepening the knowledge of the labour market. The Career Service not only fulfils the role of a service for students, it is also a site for the construction of teaching and research actions (Terzaroli & Yinusa, 2019) and the creation of a community involving representatives, teachers, career officers, tutors, professional experts and organisations (Boffo, 2018).

The Career service proposed by the University of Florence is divided into services which target companies, with a view to establishing a profitable and direct relationship with the world of work; and services aimed at students and graduates, drawing together the needs and requests of both interlocutors (students and companies) (Nistri & Santioli, 2020).

The main objectives are related to students' ability to (Nistri & Santioli, 2020):

- Acquire concrete knowledge of the local, national and international labour market.
- Identify and guide their personal strategies to access the labour market.
- Manage active job searches in a competent and autonomous manner.
- Recognise and develop employability skills, proactivity and entrepreneurship for a better transition from training to work.

The Placement model, in force at the University of Florence since 2016, divides the activities into four lines, each of which consists of a series of specific actions and services (University of Florence, 2021)²:

1. *Career Education*: to accompany the development of awareness in the construction of an individual's career project by enhancing transversal skills through workshops, laboratories, and seminars.

The services offered are:

Skills Map: a workshop that supports students' planning of their career path from an entrepreneurial perspective through the Personal Business Model Canvas.

Job orientation seminars: a periodic cycle of meetings to provide information in order to facilitate young adults' conscious entry into the world of work. The seminars are usually held over four days and distributed among the different subject areas; they involve companies from specific sectors (Nistri & Santioli, 2020).

2. *Educational Activities for Employability Skills (Formarsi al lavoro)*: to provide information and useful tools to facilitate entry into the labour market.

The services offered are:

Pathway for the development of transversal competences: building a professional future: three modules to support the development of tools to improve the effectiveness of job applications, Curriculum Vitae, Cover Letter and preparation for the selection interview.

² It should be noted that all the services described in this section are available exclusively online due to the current Covid-19 pandemic.



CV Check: offers a personalised review of the Cover Letter and Curriculum Vitae to contextualise individual knowledge, skills and competences.

Light Assessment Centre: this service offers the opportunity to participate in an assessment simulation by administering group and individual tests simulating the company's context. Upon completion of the tests, a group reflection is promoted on the specific soft skills demanded by employers.

Mock Interview: offers the possibility to simulate a selection interview with the participation of recruiters from various businesses and organisations (Nistri & Santioli, 2020).

3. *Meeting with employers and companies (L'impresa si presenta)*: becoming acquainted with companies and establishing a direct channel between universities and the labour market.

The services offered are:

Career Day: Online event during which participants have individual video interviews with the companies and professional firms to which they sent their applications.

Career Lab: the representatives of firms introduce their professional areas, open job or internship positions, meet groups of graduates and undergraduates with specific skills and conduct job interviews.

Employer presentation: Students and graduates are given the opportunity to come into direct contact with the labour market by becoming acquainted with companies and professional agencies, with their point of view, selection process and techniques, the profiles they are seeking and the skills required (Nistri & Santioli, 2020).

4. *Entrepreneurial Skills Development*: stimulating the development of innovative ideas, boosting the acquisition of transversal skills and entrepreneurial skills.

The services offered are:

Entrepreneurial Training Programme (Palestra di Intraprendenza): This is a two-day training programme aimed at promoting entrepreneurial skills through Design Thinking and the LEGO Serious Play methodology (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). It represents a formative moment where participants meet witnesses and become acquainted with business contexts and networks, to open new perspectives and put themselves to the test. More specifically, the objectives are to analyse the needs of the context, to generate an innovative solution through teamwork, and to prepare a final elevator pitch. The aim of this activity is to create spaces for innovation and to strengthen entrepreneurial skills.

Impresa Campus: Impresa Campus Unifi – in collaboration with the Florentine University Incubator – is a free training and accompaniment course geared towards stimulating the development of innovative business ideas and disseminating entrepreneurial skills among young people at university. It provides theoretical training activities accompanied by practical exercises on the following topics: team building, entrepreneurial propensity, business model, idea and market validation, effective communication and elevator pitch (Nistri & Santioli, 2020).

It should be noted that during the Covid 19 Pandemic, all the services described above were provided online.



In conclusion, such services for students should become part of everyday academic life and beyond. They represent innovative experiences and on-the-job training of interesting educational relevance (Boffo, 2020, cited in Nistri & Santioli, 2020) since:

The mission of the University, also through the Job Placement and Career Service activities, is geared towards the future of people. Indeed, its educational community bears considerable responsibility in accompanying the growth of young adults towards full personal and professional development. (Boffo, 2020, cited in Nistri & Santioli, 2020, p. 7)³

HIGHER EDUCATION EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMMES AND EXPERIENCES IN IN NIGERIA

Higher education in Nigeria has not been adequately producing graduates with the required knowledge, skills and attitude (KSA) to function effectively in the labour market. This has added further pressure on higher education institutions to focus more on improving students' employability programmes and experiences.

Under the leadership of former President Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, with the support of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the government conducted an in-depth analysis of the Nigerian labour market and proposed a strategy to introduce a training module on entrepreneurship education in the tertiary education curriculum. The rationale behind the introduction was to equip university students with the basic knowledge and skills required to set up an enterprise and enhance their employability in the labour market. This development led to the creation of Entrepreneurship and Skills Development Centres throughout the higher education institutions in Nigeria (Adeyemo, Ogunleye, Oke, & Adenle, 2010). These Entrepreneurship and Skills Development Centres are entrusted with the responsibility of organising programmes and activities (such as talent hunt, entrepreneurial competition, skills and development training) geared towards enhancing students' employability and entrepreneurial competence.

Some of the programmes that sharpen students' experiences of employability are discussed below:

Career Advisory Centres

These centres are established in every higher education institution to foster students' career and employability development. The name given to these centres varies from one institution to another. Some institutions may refer to such centres as counselling services, or career services and/or job placement services. For example, at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, the centre is referred to as a counselling unit. Annually, this unit organises a job placement programme in collaboration with private organisations and corporations for undergraduate students in the third and final year respectively. The aim of this programme is to increase students' employability opportunities in the labour market. Final year students are given the opportunity to meet with representatives of companies and

³ Paragraph translated by the author.



multinational organisations. This programme provides room for students to network with and be recruited by potential employers.

Employability Innovation Challenge

In 2019, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos, Nigeria, launched an innovative challenge programme entitled *Professor Ogundipe Innovation Challenge* (University of Lagos, POIC, 2021).

The initiative gives opportunities to all undergraduate students in federal universities in Nigeria to showcase their talents and ideas for career development. The programme is geared towards cultivating and promoting idea generation, skill development and talent management among undergraduate students. This innovation challenge is a form of employability and entrepreneurship competition, spearheaded by the entrepreneurship and skill development centre of the institution to breed fresh graduates that will become intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs upon conclusion of their degrees. It seeks to equip students and graduates with the qualities that will make them attractive to every prospective employer.

Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES)

The SIWES programme can also be regarded as an internship. These SIWES/internships are synonymous with a teaching practice programme. They are undertaken by all third- and fourth-year level students of higher education institutions (ESDC-UNILAG, 2021).

These programmes are established to enable undergraduate students to prepare for industrial work so as to acquire the practical skills, knowledge, understanding and values that will develop their employability skills for the labour market.

Incubation and Co-working hub

This programme provides students with the opportunity to experience coaching sessions with leading industry experts in the co-working hub provided by the institutions.

Its aim is to enhance the employability and entrepreneurial mindset of students towards idea and business creation. The incubation and co-working hub allow students to have access to state-of-art facilities and technology, and a joint network of distinctive people and companies. It should be noted that not all higher education institutions have incubation and co-working hubs. This is a new development that has recently emerged in some of the higher education institutions, such as the University of Lagos, Nigeria (ESDC-UNILAG, 2021).

Experiences

In higher education institutions in Nigeria, students have been found to be far more interested in employability programmes than ever before. This may be due to their awareness of the challenge of unemployment in a competitive labour market. This should serve as an alert to higher institutions to improve their provision of employability programmes that will translate into greater success for students and institutions at large (Yinusa & Adeku, 2021).

HIGHER EDUCATION EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICES IN PALESTINE

The Gaza strip is considered one of the most densely populated areas in the whole world, with a total population of 2,000,000 (stat 2020) in an area of only 360 km². This region is confronted with precarious employment prospects, as the unemployment rate in Gaza has peaked to 46% (stat 2021) with a year-on-year increase of approximately 3%. In 2020, over 300,000 people were unemployed in the Gaza strip (PEBS, 2021).

Considering these high unemployment statistics in the Gaza strip, an intervention to curb the incremental rate of unemployment was sorely needed.

Four types of organisations may be involved in this intervention:

- Governmental Organisations.
- Private Sector (social responsibility).
- NGOs.
- Educational institutions

This paragraph focuses on the main educational institutions' interventions to overcome the blight of unemployment. The three main employability programmes in the educational institutions are as follows (Al Shobaki, Abu-Naser, Amuna, & El Talla, 2018; Tahrawi, 2020):

1. Temporary employment programmes.
2. Entrepreneurship and start-ups.
3. Freelancing and E-work

This section offers a description of these three main types of programmes and establishes a comparison between the impact of each programme, focusing on the University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS) as a case study.

1. *Temporary employment programmes.*

A temporary employment programme is a governmental, NGO and University intervention seeking to provide a temporary employment opportunity for unemployed graduates for a specific period of time (6 months at most) (Al-Ghefari, 2015; Msallam, Abu-Naser, Al Shobaki, & Al-Habil, 2019).

The graduates in this type of employment work with limited rights (e.g., they are not entitled to compensation, health insurance or holiday credit) (Al-Ghefari, 2015).

Given the example of UCAS, other universities should follow suit since they have an important role to play in this type of employment, namely (Al-Ghefari, 2015):

- To prepare graduates for temporary employment programmes.
- To liaise with the Ministry of Labour and NGOs, in order to implement a joint employment programme.
- To implement a temporary employment programme, granted by a set of donors.

Annually, there are over 1000 temporary job opportunities.



2. *Entrepreneurship and start-ups*

Over the past 3 decades, entrepreneurship has become a growing trend as a means to confront the high unemployment rate (Aldammagh, Samia, Abdalmenem Mazen, & Al Shobaki, 2020). In Palestine, "incubators" are types of institutions that mainly belong to universities, such as the BTI incubator at the Islamic University – Gaza, the Alnajah Technology incubator at Alnalah University, and the UCASTI incubator at the University College of Applied Sciences (Msallam, Abu-Naser, Al Shobaki, & Al-Habil, 2019).

UCAS' efforts to support young people to become entrepreneurs are performed in the following manner:

- a. Providing technical and financial support through the UCATI incubator. This incubator offers support to graduates by providing all the facilities necessary to make their start-ups successful (Msallam, Abu-Naser, Al Shobaki, & Al-Habil, 2019), such as:
 - Providing a free workspace.
 - Providing full entrepreneurship training.
 - Providing a seed fund for their start-ups.
 - Providing a consultancy service for their start-ups.
- b. Empowering all UCAS students with entrepreneurship skills through a mandatory course (UCAS, 2018).
- c. Providing a training course for graduates in entrepreneurship and small businesses to enable them to launch their own start-ups (Msallam, Abu-Naser, Al Shobaki, & Al-Habil, 2019).

3. *Freelancing and E-work*

The term freelancing refers to a work arrangement that is not restricted to a location, time or fixed salary. Nowadays, all Palestinian incubators, such as UCAS, PICTI and BTI, aim to enhance graduates' employability through freelancing programmes (Tahrawi, 2020).

As stated by Mohammed Abuhassiera (2021), UCASTI intervenes in this field by conducting a set of freelancing projects such as elance, pal lancer and e-work projects. These projects focus on building the capacities of young adults in two main fields:

- Technical skills: referring to the skills required to make youths more competitive (e.g., graphic design, android, UI/UX, translation, interior design ...etc).
- Freelancing skills: acquainting young people with the freelancing platforms and enabling them to create a strong profile and apply for jobs on these platforms.

These types of programmes provide approximately 200 opportunities per annum for graduates to become able to work as freelancers (Abuhassiera, 2021).

COMPARISON AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis of the state of the art in the three countries provides an overview of the trajectories undertaken to support the employability of students and young adults, beginning with activities targeting students' acquisition of knowledge of the labour market, practice and development of a mindset and the skills required to breast the work challenges more effectively.

Proceeding in accordance with the comparative method, four main categories were identified, which explained the framework and structure adopted by the authors, and the similarities and differences presented by each country were analysed.

Firstly, our findings suggest a three tier general framework relating to the policies provided in the three countries under study. In the case of Italy, it is the *Biagi Law* that establishes the existence of apparatuses within Italian universities dedicated to the Placement and Career Service of students. Also, the current Nigerian policies support the importance of strategies for the development of young adults' employability skills which has led to the promotion of such programmes by the International Labour Organization; in the Palestinian context a synergy of actors may be observed, such as governmental organisations, NGOs, educational institutions and the private sector to support the working future of young people.

Secondly, the programmes and activities proposed by the authors, which are mainly divided into two groups constituting the most analysed categories, are highlighted, i.e. activities integrated within the university curriculum and activities beyond its sphere.

With regard to the university curriculum, in Nigeria, internship is observed to be the main vehicle for students' employability. Thus, within the Nigerian context, a particular teaching practice programme, namely the *Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES)*, is noteworthy for its main objective of addressing the great lack of employability skills in young graduates. The internship represents one of the most used curricular programmes for students' understanding of the world of work, which is also the case in Italy. It is thanks to this programme that many graduates question their skills and seek strategies to work on their own areas of improvement to then pursue development channels within the extra-curricular area.

It is also important to underline that the Italian context sets itself the ambitious objective of integrating inspirational content into traditional university lessons by proposing work-related learning activities within the study courses, which take shape as a result of meetings with professionals in the sector and company case studies. The aim is to create a bridge between the academic world and the world of work. In terms of extra-curricular activities, apprenticeships, an experience common to both Italy and Nigeria, are highlighted. The Palestinian context, on the other hand, underlines the existence of programmes, referred to as *Temporary jobs*, i.e., temporary work opportunities lasting around six months and offered through a partnership between universities and NGOs. The aim is to allow young graduates to try their hand at a first real job, not only to be financially rewarded but also to test themselves in a new working environment.

The ever-increasing link created between universities and the various local stakeholders is of fundamental importance, and cuts across all the categories discussed so far. Indeed, collaboration with bodies, government institutions, private agencies, non-profit organisations, etc., is key to better support the development of young graduates' employability skills.



A table summarising the comparative analysis is shown below, with particular emphasis on the definition of the categories, similarities and differences among the three countries under study.

Table 1
Programmes to promote employability in Higher Education: similarities and differences among Italy, Nigeria and Palestine.

| Similarities and differences | Italy University of Florence | Nigeria University of Lagos | Palestine University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS) |
|--|--|---|--|
| Comparative Category 1: Policies | | | |
| Differences | Law 30/2003 (<i>Legge Biagi</i>) | International Labour Organisation (ILO) | Governmental Organisations, Private Sector, NGOs and Educational institutions |
| Comparative Category 2: Curricular activities | | | |
| Similarities | Internship | Internship and Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) | Not present |
| Differences | Adaptation of the content of the Bachelor and Master Course and Work- related learning (meeting professionals, case studies). | Not present | Not present |
| Comparative Category 3: Extra-curricular activities | | | |
| Similarities | Workshops, conferences, specific programmes to acquire employability skills. | Workshops, conferences, specific programmes to acquire employability skills. | Specific programmes to acquire employability skills. |
| Differences | Apprenticeship | Apprenticeship | Temporary employment programmes |
| Comparative Category 4: Role of stakeholders | | | |
| Similarities | Active in programme implementation | Active in programme implementation | Active in programme implementation |

In order to understand what the specific programmes offer students/young graduates in terms of employability skills, particular attention must be given to the category of extra-curricular activities that the Italian, Nigerian and Palestinian universities integrate with the existing educational offer.

As can be seen in Table 2, these activities mainly comprise three actions, namely the implementation of real centres dedicated to Job Placement and to the support of

students' professional careers, programmes to support the development of entrepreneurial skills and Business Incubator services to accompany the student, or the young graduate, on a path towards knowledge of the world of start-ups and its conception.

It is important to emphasise that, thanks to active collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, all three of the university realities set forth herein, are running programmes that are not limited to providing students with a greater understanding of the tools to effectively enter the labour market, or internship or apprenticeship experiences. The observable underlying rationale is that of training individuals who are active players in their own future. The activities proposed in the field of entrepreneurship development, from entrepreneurial skills training programmes to incubation and start-up creation courses are an example of this. They therefore represent, together with the Job Placement and Career Service and the Career Advisory Centres, the frontier of the present and the future, providing students as individuals with new opportunities for personal and professional growth and development.

Although there are some differences in the programmes developed by the universities examined in this paper, they all concur that there is considerable need to support the development of employability skills in the broadest sense, such as the ability to remain, live and navigate within the labour market and to grasp its needs and most imminent challenges.

Table 2

Extra-curricular activities: similarities and differences among Italy, Nigeria and Palestine

| Main Comparative Category Extra-curricular activities | Italy University of Florence | Nigeria University of Lagos | Palestine University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS) |
|---|---|--|---|
| Descriptor 1 Career and Guidance Services | Job Placement and Career Service | Career Advisory Centres | Not present |
| Descriptor 2 Entrepreneurial Programmes | Entrepreneurial Skills Development (Palestra di Intraprendenza) | Entrepreneurship and Skills Development Centres; Employability Innovation Challenge. | Entrepreneurship and start-up development |
| Descriptor 3 Business Incubator Services | Impresa Campus programme (Florentine University Incubator) | Incubation and Co-working hub | Entrepreneurship and start-up development |
| Other activities | Services for the implementation of tools for entering the labour market | Collection of students' experiences | Freelance and E-work |



CONCLUSIONS

Despite the diversity of the contexts and the substantial differences in their Higher Education systems, this comparative study highlights several common features and the strengths of the programmes provided by the three surveyed organisations.

Firstly, the close link created between employability skills and entrepreneurship skills is noteworthy. Some of the active programmes in the three countries are grounded on this premise, given the high rates of youth unemployment, and therefore tackling this problem is considered a priority. In fact, many researchers acknowledge the impact of entrepreneurial skills and level of schooling on graduates' professional growth and employability skills development (i.e. Abelha, Fernandes, Mesquita, Seabra, & Ferreira-Oliveira, 2020; Mittal & Raghuvaram, 2021). At the same time, entrepreneurship at the graduate level is considered a significant resource for enhancing the country's development at local and national levels and overcoming the internal imbalances (Suleman, Videira, & Araújo, 2021).

Secondly, the importance of stakeholder involvement in these programmes as a strategic issue for their success cannot be understated. In fact, employability is the result of HE and employers' support of the development of knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to successfully transition to the labour market (Kinash, Crane, Judd, & Knight, 2016). On the other hand, adoption of the same strategy should not be restricted to curricular activities but also extended to extracurricular activities. Generic skills, self-awareness and self-directedness, reflective practice and relationships through networking appear to be essential to a graduate's success, as well as the formation of professional identity and the transfer of learning from higher education to the career (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018).

In line with the arguments of many scholars, the future challenge for these Higher Education programmes is strengthening the link between curricular and extracurricular activities or initiatives with a view to young people's acquisition of employability skills. This may be achieved by fostering collaboration with the stakeholder towards the same objective, and through the commitment, missions, strategic design and cohesive pedagogies that support students in building the conditions for their career development and self-entrepreneurship (Pereira, Vilas-Boas, & Rebelo, 2020).

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Glenda Galeotti contributed to the study conceptualization and design of the contribution and supervised the writing work. She also wrote the introduction and conclusions.

Debora Daddi, Oyekunle Yinusa and Abdallah Al-haddad elaborated the theoretical framework of the topic, declining it according to the three countries involved in the contribution.

Debora Daddi discussed the methodology, the data analysis, the comparison and the interpretation.

All the authors were involved to the writing of references and resources.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors of the contribution express their sincere gratitude to the comparative group's moderator, Professor Vanna Boffo, for her passion and attention in approaching with the topic, and a warm thanks to all the professors, students, practitioners and professionals who took part in the Adult Education Academy 2021, enriching everyone's learning.

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Received: October 16, 2021

Accepted: January 25, 2022

Published online: June 30, 2022

