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In Search for Employability Strategy: Emergent Approaches by Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This paper explores the formation of employability strategies in higher education institutions (HEIs), focusing on whether they result from deliberate planning or emerge organically from institutional dynamics. While employability is a key indicator of education quality, its integration into HEI strategic goals, plans, and practices remains underexplored, especially outside Anglo-Saxon contexts. Through case studies of four Italian and Portuguese HEIs, the study tests whether employability strategies are explicitly designed or evolve through a mix of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. The findings support the latter, showing that strategies often emerge through the ex-post rationalisation of spontaneous actions and procedures. However, challenges like vaguely defined targets, poor communication, and resource limitations can fragment efforts and undermine sustainability. By shifting the focus from strategy classification to strategy formation, this study provides insights for HEIs still developing their own employability approaches.

Keywords: Employability; Higher education institutions; Strategy; Strategy formation; Emergent strategy

1. Introduction

Graduate employment, which assesses the labour-market status of recent graduates, has long been a focal point for higher education institutions (HEIs). However, recent years have seen the emergence of the broader concept of employability, which captures the long-term coherence between an individual's educational path and professional career (Burke *et al.*, 2017). The employability of higher education (HE) graduates has become a prominent topic in the debate on education outcomes (Burke *et al.*, 2017; Green & Henseke, 2021), as it serves as a proxy for the quality of HEIs and the level of professional performance expected from their graduates. National and international rankings based on graduates' employability shape the choices of students and employers, and influence the allocation of public resources to HEIs (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018; Capano & Pritoni, 2020). Developing an effective employability strategy has therefore become imperative for HEIs, not only to fulfil their educational

mission but also to compete effectively in attracting students and funding (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019).

However, growing awareness of the importance of graduate employability does not always translate into a clear employability strategy within HEIs. On one hand, attention to employability strategies is uneven across the globe. While several countries now recognise graduate employability as an issue (Fakunle & Higson, 2021; Saito & Pham, 2021), research and empirical evidence still concentrate in Western countries, and particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, where public institutions were the first to require HEIs to implement an employability strategy (Holmes, 2013; Blackmore *et al.*, 2016). On the other hand, the persisting confusion between employment and employability often reflects in the preference for short-term employment-oriented plans and indicators (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018).

In recent years, a growing number of papers has explored the topic of HEI employability strategy. Theoretical contributions to classify employability strategies (Holmes, 2013; Hooley *et al.*, 2023) have been tested by empirical analyses that confirmed a range of diversified paths by HEIs (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016; Bennet *et al.*, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Hooley *et al.*, 2023). However, more recent research has shown that tensions often exist between official employability strategies and their understanding by HEI members (Divan *et al.*, 2019; Sin *et al.*, 2019). These contributions have opened the door to less normative and more explorative analyses. Earlier focus on classification, in fact, often assumed an intended employability strategy for all HEIs and coincidence between official and implemented approaches, thus overlooking dynamic processes of strategy creation and transformation.

A deeper understanding of the development of an employability strategy could promote better alignment between official and actual plans and may also support HEIs still exploring their own path towards graduate employability. Accordingly, this study focuses on the formation of employability strategies to assess the hypothesis of planned strategy, which frames strategy as an explicit and purposeful plan fully designed before deployment, versus the hypothesis of emergent strategy, where the adopted plan is gradually shaped by the interaction among players and circumstances (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). This paper explores the two alternative hypotheses based on four case studies of Italian and Portuguese HEIs. Interviews with academic staff in charge of employability programmes and officers from employability and career services provided the main information source, further supplemented by official HEI documents.

The research outcomes support the hypothesis of employability strategy as an emergent path. In all four case HEIs, an employability strategy has been developing from the combination and the ex-post rationalisation of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of the external environment, especially national norms and the availability of information sources, in raising awareness and guiding the formulation of an employability strategy.

Besides highlighting the emergent nature of the employability strategies at the case HEIs, shifting attention from strategy classification to strategy formation outlines how strategy results from a socialisation process (Nonaka, 1994), which is inevitably accompanied by tensions among the actors involved. This study also points out how the ability to govern these tensions is a critical factor in establishing an effective employability strategy.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the background literature on HEI employability strategies and highlights how strategy formation can bridge the gap between intended and realised approaches to employability. Section 3 outlines the methodology adopted in the empirical analysis, whose results are presented in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the empirical findings, while the final section offers some concluding remarks.

2. The employability strategies of HEIs

In the recent decades, the understanding of employability has shifted from a narrow skill agenda focused on the ideal characteristics of labour suppliers to a broader notion of lifelong employment and career success (Burke *et al.*, 2017). In the case of graduates from HE, employability refers to "the likelihood that [a graduate] will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment" (Holmes 2013, p. 541), that is, "one where most of the skills used are usually acquired in the course of tertiary education" (Green & Henseke, 2021, p. 4). Accordingly, employability is a context-specific construct measured by long-term-oriented indicators (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), such as perceived underemployment and overqualification, or employer satisfaction with graduate employee work (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018).

Three main factors motivate interest in HEIs' impact on graduates' employability. Firstly, skills-displacing technological change increases the demand for high-skilled work (Green & Henseke, 2021) and emphasises the dynamic and relational dimension of professional skills, particularly in the context of graduate occupations (McGuinness *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, the increased heterogeneity of graduates' skills that accompanies the massification of HE (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2022) entails a higher risk of underemployment or even unemployment for individuals endowed with

lower employability. Thirdly, the shift towards target-driven management practices to increase HEIs' efficiency and free resources in support of educational and research missions (Capano, 2014; Capano & Pritoni, 2020) has resulted in the inclusion of employability measures among the indicators used by public agencies to assess HEI outcomes (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018). Employability has therefore assumed a dual meaning for HEIs, with each aspect crucial for success. On the one hand, employability is an outcome that concurs in forming HEI rankings and constrains access to public funding. On the other hand, it becomes a tool for building an HEI's reputation and outperforming competitors in the race for student recruitment and the securing of public and private funding.

A significant literature exists on graduates' and, increasingly, employers' understanding of employability (Tomlinson, 2012; Humburg *et al.*, 2017; Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2022). In contrast, the role of HEIs in the employability discourse is still an under-researched topic (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016). Empirical studies often classify HEI employability strategies based on Holmes' seminal paper (2013), which distinguishes between a possessional, a positional, and a processual approach. In the possessional approach, employability descends from identifiable personal skills and attributes. Employability strategies based on the possessional perspective thus focus on detailing employability requirements and signalling their acquisition by means of formal credentials that complement a HE certificate. In contrast, the positional approach associates employability with an understanding of the labour market based on individual social and relational capital (Tomlinson, 2012). Related employability strategies target elite students by enacting HEI reputation and selection mechanisms that reinforce pre-existing students' status and perpetuate the segmentation of student population. Eventually, the processual approach frames employability as the dynamic outcome of a practice of career self-management (Burke *et al.*, 2017; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017). Individual experiences shape the progressive emergence of a graduate identity whereby graduates "act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed" (Holmes, 2013, p. 549). The processual approach thus provides a rationale for HEI engagement in actions to develop students' self-awareness as professionals.

Field research based on Holmes (2013) supports theoretical expectations on strategy typologies in some cases (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016). However, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) report a prevalence of strategies inspired by a processual approach, while other authors highlight the existence of mixed solutions besides archetypal forms (Bennet *et al.*, 2017; Hooley *et al.*, 2023).

The literature that seeks to identify HEI employability strategies displays awareness of the diversity among students and graduates and acknowledges the complexity of graduates' labour markets. However, by assuming that a strategy exists, classification studies often overlook the obstacles and ambiguities encountered by HEIs on their journey towards an employability strategy. Recent contributions adopt a more critical approach by stressing the dynamic nature of strategies and the non-linear relationship between strategy adoption and implementation. Some authors report non-aligned understandings of the meaning and aims of employability among HEI academic staff (Sin *et al.*, 2019; Sin & Amaral, 2021) and resulting tensions between institutional positions and current practices (Divan *et al.*, 2019). The fungibility of operational tools[1] (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019) and the trade-offs that often accompany the deployment of employability actions (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022) further intensify these ambiguities. Additionally, the extensive use of short-term indicators of labour market outcomes to gauge employability goals (e.g., employment rates one year after graduation) confirms confusion between employability and employment (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018), hence ambiguity on the targets and contents of strategic plans for employability.

The analysis of strategy formation could usefully complement the classification of employability strategies to provide additional insight on the antecedents of a sound employability strategy. Business studies have long outlined the gap between leadership plans and intentions and what the organisations actually do. Mintzberg (1978) first introduced the notion of emergent strategies to connotate coherent patterns of decisions and actions that do not result, or only partially result, from explicit planning. In emergent strategies a consistent pattern of action arises over time in the absence of intention about it. In contrast, intended strategies are derived from clearly articulated goals shared with all organisation members by means of communication plans and deployed in an environment sufficiently benign to guarantee that plans unfold as intended (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). However, even in a supportive environment the imperfect rationality of decision makers and the variability of the internal and the external environment inevitably imply some level of accommodation. Real world strategies thus locate along a continuum between the extreme poles of pure intended strategies and perfectly emergent strategies.

Empirical analyses confirm the hypothesis of a continuum of hybrid solutions between planned and emergent strategies in business contexts (Idenburg, 1993;

[1] For instance, work-integrated learning can provide *ad hoc* certificates to participating students (possessional approach) and also contribute to the development of graduates' identity (processual approach).

Neugebauer *et al.*, 2016). An emergent approach in strategy formation reduces tensions among stakeholders (Efrat *et al.*, 2022), provided that the new strategy gets embedded in the organisational context. To this aim Mirabeau and Maguire (2014) stress the need of legitimating emerging strategies by engaging organisation members and adapting the organisational structure.

The opposition between planned and emergent strategies has proven fruitful to understand the formation of the overall organisational strategy also in the case of HEIs. Mixed planned and emergent strategies have been identified (Meyer *et al.,* 2012; Frølich *et al.*, 2017), particularly in unpredictable environments (Mallon, 2019). Compared to business organisations, HEIs often display strong identity values, high discretion among academic staff, and multiple objectives with respect to teaching, research, and third mission (Frølich *et al.*, 2017). Emergent approaches therefore assume peculiar importance in smoothing tensions when a new strategy challenges institutional identity or when competing strategies involve contrasting narratives (Holstein *et al.*, 2018).

Research on HEI emergent strategies within specific areas of action is still limited. In the case of internationalisation strategies Soliman *et al.* (2019) show how emergent approaches gain legitimacy by embedding in the broader HEI strategy. In this perspective, formal planning complements strategy emergence by establishing a new language that codifies new goals, approaches and procedures, thus favouring their integration into the organisational culture (Mallon, 2019). However, to the author's knowledge no study yet addresses strategy formation in the specific area of employability strategy.

3. Methodology

Emergent employability strategies by HEIs were explored by means of a multi-case study approach (Yin, 2018) based on four public HEIs from Italy and Portugal. A case study approach seems particularly appropriate to appreciate strategy formation, which cannot be separated from the context and the people it originates from.

Several reasons justify a focus on Italy and Portugal, beyond the opportunity to offer additional insight on HEI employability strategies outside Anglo-Saxon countries. After an initial push provided by the Bologna process (Sin *et al.*, 2019; Kroher *et al.*, 2021), the discourse on graduates' employability has been gaining momentum in both countries due to a contrast between the sustained growth rates of tertiary-educated working-age population, among the fastest ones in Europe, and a notable decline in the

wage premium of higher education[2] (Green & Henseke, 2021). At the same time, both countries implemented effectiveness- and efficiency-enhancing changes in HEI governance, including the monitoring measures mandated by state agencies as part of the overall quality assurance of the HE system (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). However, significant differences also exist. On the one hand, Italian HEIs face greater evaluation pressures that limit their autonomy, whereas Portuguese governments have granted HEIs more independence (Capano & Pritoni, 2020). On the other hand, the more stringent compliance requirements imposed on Italian HEIs have contributed to the availability of systematic labour market forecasts and graduate surveys (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Particularly notable is the role played by AlmaLaurea, a consortium of 80 Italian universities that conducts regular surveys on graduates' labour market outcomes one, three, and five years after graduation and provides a platform for managing student internships and post-graduation placements.

The four case HEIs were selected to display similarities in the organisational environment and culture. Location in industrialised areas with low unemployment rates and high demand for HE graduate skills was expected to reduce pressure for short-term employment goals in favour of longer-term employability targets. Attention to graduates' employability is also motivated by the competition that all case HEIs face from more prestigious universities in the main cities of their respective regions, which likewise offer HE graduates more attractive careers compared to local labour markets. An organisational culture potentially conducive to employability actions provided an additional selection criterion. For all case HEIs, emphasis on local networks and resources results in strong external partnerships in research, student recruitment, teaching, and placement. Despite these similarities, the case HEIs differ in size, impact, and specialisation (Table 1), allowing for varied relationships between these dimensions and the nature of the employability strategy (Eisenhardt, 1989). In addition, the Portuguese HEIs reflect the dual nature of the Portuguese HE system, featuring research-oriented universities (Por1) and polytechnics (Por2) that are more responsive to local economic needs (Tavares & Amaral, 2019).

[2] According to Eurostat (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/explore/all/all_themes), from 2003 to 2023, tertiary education holders aged 15-64 increased by 79.7% in the EU, 110% in Italy, and 188.3% in Portugal. Among those aged 25-34, the rise was 75.2% in the EU, 135.4% in Italy, and 148.5% in Portugal. Meanwhile, from 2006 to 2018, gross earnings at Purchasing Power Standard grew by 20% for all employees in Italy but only 2% for professionals. In Portugal, the increases were 9.9% and -4.4%, respectively. The corresponding figures were 26.8% and 18.2% for Germany, and 19.2% and 9,2% for France, respectively.

Table 1. Main features of the case HEIs

HEI		Ita1	Ita2	Por1	Por2
Foundation year		1982	1968	1973	1994
Enrolled students (2022)		~15,000	~21,000	~20,000	~6,000
Decile of 2022 Scimago ranking [(a)]		2nd	5th	2nd	9th
Teaching and research domains	Humanities	X	X	X	
	Economics	X	X	X	
	Management	X	X	X	X
	Medicine and Health	X		X	
	Science	X	X	X	
	Engineering and Technology	X	X	X	X

[(a)] *Scimago overall university ranking, https://www.scimagoir.com/*

The original data supporting this study were gathered from nine face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in early 2022 with academic and, when possible, careers service staff in charge of providing employability services (Table 2). To maintain anonymity, the subsequent sections of the paper will refer to each case HEI using an abbreviation of the originating country followed by a sequential number (*i.e.*, Ita1, Ita2, Por1, and Por 2). In each HEI interviewees are identified by a letter that specifies their role within the organisation (P for professors and A for members of the administrative staff) and a sequential number (Table 2). No career service staff were interviewed at Por2, as they primarily perform administrative tasks under academic supervisors, while an interview with the head of career services at Ita2 was eventually cancelled due to bureaucratic reasons.

Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours, during which interviewees were asked to report the meaning attributed to employability by the respondents' institution, changes in the importance of this concept, the actions undertaken to promote graduates' employability, collaboration with stakeholders in employability development, and the tools to monitor employability goals. Given the substantial tenure of all participants with their HEI (Table 2), interviewees were asked to report changes they subjectively perceived in their professional experience and, when possible, substantiate these changes with facts and documents.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Due to the amount of available information (nine documents, each averaging around 4,000 words), a thematic qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with no software support seemed the most suitable instrument of inquiry. The research team, including the author, followed a two-step procedure to extract key information on the employment strategy of each case HEI. Initially, each researcher separately coded the interview texts to highlight references to employability drivers, official institutional strategies, supportive organisational structures, actions taken, and acknowledged challenges. The researchers' coded text

grids were then collectively integrated and discussed to address and resolve differing perceptions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For the purposes of this paper, coded interview transcripts and text grids were carefully reviewed using a deductive approach to identify themes centred around the three key elements that according to Mintzberg (1978) and Mintzberg and Waters (1985) distinguish planned from emergent strategies: presence of intended targets, communication plans for shared understanding, and alignment between planned and realised actions.

To complement the semi-structured interviews, official documents were retrieved in the spring of 2022 from the websites of the case HEIs. These included strategic plans and, in the case of HEI Por1, employability reports. Additionally, the HEI websites were used to double-check information on the organisational structures for delivering employability services collected during the interviews. Given the limited attention paid to employability in the strategic plans of case HEIs, a simpler checklist of employability references was used instead of a thematic analysis (Table 3).

Besides further validating the interview-based evidence, and in line with past research (Farenga & Quinlan, 2016; Divan *et al.*, 2019), the adoption of a mixed method that integrates interviews and institutional documents allows to overcome the shortcomings of purely website-based analyses (*e.g.*, Bennet *et al.*, 2017), which risk to emphasise official narratives and overlook the gap between intended and realised strategies (Divan *et al.*, 2019).

Table 2. Case HEIs and interview participants

HEI	Interviewees	Background	Tenure	Age
Ita1	P1 – Professor, Vice-Chancellor for placement and internships	MSc, Technical	36	63
	P2 – Professor, Department delegate for recruitment and placement	PhD, Humanistic	17	48
	A1 – Director, Career service unit	MSc, Humanistic	21	49
Ita2	P1 – Professor, Vice-Chancellor for placement and internships	PhD, Technical	10	37
Por1	P1 – Professor, Vice-Chancellor for social engagement	PhD, Technical	30	59
	P2 – Professor, Faculty Dean for placement and internships	PhD, Technical	27	52
	A1 – Director, Faculty Career service unit	PhD, Technical	19	41
Por2	P1 – Professor, Vice-Chancellor for entrepreneurship and employability	PhD, Business	12	36
	P2 – Professor, Faculty Dean	PhD, Technical	16	49

Table 3. Employability official documents

	Ita1	Ita2	Por1	Por2
Strategic plan …				
… reports employability targets				X
… reports graduates' employment rates	X	X		
… uses employability for employment	X		X	X
Employability report			X	

4. Outcomes

To characterise the strategic approach to employability by the case HEIs, this section organises the collected evidence in three paragraphs, each one centred on one of the three elements that allow discriminating between intended and emergent approaches (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Accordingly, the first paragraph focuses on employability targets, the second one on communication plans to share employability targets across the organisation, and the third one on the intentionality of implemented actions.

4.1. Employability targets

The analysis of official documents provides a valuable starting point for identifying the goals that shape the employability strategies of the case HEIs, each of which periodically publishes a strategic plan, in line with the requirements of the respective state agency for HE quality assurance (ANVUR for Italy and A3ES for Portugal). As openly acknowledged by Por1, HEIs are aware of "an increasing logic of external regulation, scrutiny, and accountability, most visibly expressed through auditing and monitoring activities, as well as performance evaluation, which in turn lead to increasingly detailed planning practices at various levels of the organisation" (Por1 strategic plan).

The strategic plans reveal significant commonalities across the institutions in the mix of processual and possessional perspectives on student education (Holmes, 2013). For instance, the strategic plan of Ita1 declares a focus on the "education of informed citizens and the training of young people equipped to face the challenges of the future world of work". A strong connection with the local community is another common feature, as exemplified by repeated statements alluding to "engagement with the local community" and "training for the local area's needs". This local focus is a deliberate approach by the case HEIs to address competition from larger HEIs in nearby major cities and to facilitate the university-to-work transition for their graduates.

However, a closer examination of the strategic plans shows a significant gap in how employability is addressed. In three out of four cases, employability is not explicitly mentioned as an institutional objective, and supportive actions in career guidance, work-integrated learning, or soft skills development primarily target improving employment rates. Even in the case of the exception, Por2, the indicators associated with employability tend to focus on short-term measures of graduate employment, such as immediate job placement rates, rather than adopting a broader, long-term perspective on employability.

A consistent issue across all four institutions is the misuse of the term "employability" to simply mean "employment". This confusion is reflected not only in their strategic plans but also in the employability reports regularly issued by Por1, which primarily focus on short-term employment and unemployment statistics for recent graduates.

The interviews conducted with institutional stakeholders mirror the findings from the official documents. There is widespread alignment with the educational mission that emphasises a processional and possessional approach to employability.

> *The general meaning we attribute to the term 'employability' relates to […] supporting students approaching graduation and graduates to understand the essential skills required to enter the job market […] what is the most suitable path for one's profile and career, and also the characteristics specific to one's passions, as well as providing some more pragmatic support (Ita2, P1).*
>
> *We don't just want to train individuals focused on meeting specific market needs, but we also want to educate citizens (Por2, P2).*

However, there is also a clear acknowledgment that the governance of these HEIs often lacks a deeper understanding of employability, which may explain the narrow focus of the strategic plans on immediate job outcomes rather than on a more comprehensive employability strategy.

> *Based on my experience, this university gives a very pragmatic meaning to the term employability, namely the number of students who find employment after graduation. I have not yet noticed, […] certainly not within the governance, the meaning of 'we give our students the opportunity to start off on the right foot when they seek employment, we give them the opportunity to be happy in their work' (Ita1, P1).*
>
> *At [Por1], issues related to career guidance and employability are implicit in the university's positioning strategy, but not in an explicit or univocal manner (Por1, P1).*

4.2. Communication of employability targets

The effectiveness of a communication plan depends on the clarity of the institution's strategic goals and the suitability of the supporting organisational structure. In this regard, all the case HEIs present significant problems. As discussed earlier, the case HEIs either fail to specify any employability targets in their strategic plans or, as in the case of Por2, conflate employability with short-term employment targets. The absence of clear, focused targets is accompanied by no dedicated budget and no specific organisational structures for employability. As a result, in all the case HEIs, employability initiatives are not a primary responsibility for the involved administrative and academic staff.

The organisational structures that manage employability actions in the case HEIs reflect a historical focus on student recruitment and job placement, as is apparent from job titles in Table 2. Por1 stands out for coupling the administrative support for employability with pedagogical development and for its decentralised structure, with employability support provided at the faculty level to acknowledge, according to its

strategic plan, “a natural tension between a common mission and specialised [discipline-specific] projects”. In contrast, the other HEIs maintain a centralised approach to administrative support for employability.

In all four institutions, administrative staff handle bureaucratic procedures and manage structured, periodic actions such as internships or career days, while academic staff take on roles as planners, coordinators, and facilitators. This includes both officially appointed officers responsible for employability projects and other academics who contribute on their own initiative.

Despite these efforts, interviewees recognise that a communication plan is lacking, not only to clarify employability goals but also to identify and coordinate the diverse range of employability initiatives spontaneously developed by lecturers and researchers and to facilitate the selection and dissemination of best practices.

> *The university should be a bit more aware of the need to promote [employability] initiatives not only among students but also among faculty members. There should be a more significant communication plan to let everyone know about these initiatives, and perhaps there should be more collaboration with the faculty (Ita1, A1).*
>
> *Every time a company wants to get in touch or there’s an initiative that we want to involve students in, whether it’s conducting a survey, addressing issues, or identifying areas for improvement, it’s always quite complicated. We are always dealing with a lot of people and very diverse initiatives (Por1, A1).*
>
> *Certainly, there are many department-level initiatives that may not necessarily be specifically designed under the umbrella of outgoing guidance, but they connect students with local organisations and companies (Ita2, P1).*

Another common concern from the interviews is the limited budget and personnel allocated to employability actions, and the lack of recognition for managing employability projects[3]. In addition to rational concerns, these remarks also reflect the mixed emotions of the personnel involved, torn between the passion for participating in employability projects and the stress and fatigue of working with limited resources and unclear incentives.

> *Every year [the career day] brings in a significant amount of profit for the University, and every year it’s a battle to allocate part of that money to further placement activities (Ita1, P1).*
>
> *We are just creating more work. With each event we are just creating more work for ourselves (Por1, A1).*
>
> *What happens with professors and researchers is that we do not earn more based on the number of projects with companies [...] We all do this out of mission and passion (Por1, P1).*

4.3. Emergent nature of employability actions

The interviews outline long lists of initiatives, projects, and events aimed at fostering graduates’ employability. Alongside more established, recurring actions, such as career days or job interview simulations – also mentioned in the HEIs’ strategic plans – the

[3] No rewards for additional management responsibilities were reported by interviewees.

reported initiatives also include more innovative and creative projects, such as a library of on-demand videos on entrepreneurship and employability, inter-departmental soft-skill training experiences, or alumni mentoring programmes. Both official documents and interviews stress engagement with business companies and public administrations, even in non-technical degree programmes. For instance, the strategic plan of Ita2 remarks how "networking with local employers has proven to be a strategic lever for the placement of our students".

In each case HEI, the range of embedded, co-curricular, and extra-curricular employability actions spans across all the typologies identified in the literature[4]. Intra-institution variety and inter-institution similarity reflect a rational approach to the design of employability interventions that leads one to question if "different [underlying perspectives] actually result in qualitatively different provision, or whether such debates actually serve as ideological cover for similar practices" (Hooley *et al.*, 2023, p. 16).

If the contents and the classification of employability initiatives yield no significant insights into their intended or emergent nature, a deeper understanding may emerge from patterns in employability-related decision-making. In all case HEIs. this perspective reveals a dynamic landscape of employability initiatives that develop and evolve in response to local needs and circumstances.

Evidence gathered from interviews with both academic and administrative staff shows that participants feel free to launch new projects and enhance existing ones, only constrained by limited resources.

> *We are free to choose the initiatives we want (Por1, A1).*
>
> *We have an innovative competition in which we evaluate students' entrepreneurial projects [...] We haven't been doing a follow-up afterwards, and I intend for it to happen. What I aim for is that, in some way, if the students wish to progress with this idea into something more structured, we can also provide support to these students (Por2, P2).*
>
> *We have been the first service to enter the university's quality system, so for many years now, all activities have been recorded [...] We have all the data we need, among other things, to understand how to redesign the activity for the following year, if any modifications are necessary (Ita1, A1).*

Institution-wide initiatives and practices often emerge as an ex post rationalisation of earlier experiments or procedures that were initially developed at more decentralised levels.

> *Until some time ago, the departments themselves were the ones who, in some way, promoted [employability] initiatives (Por2, P1).*
>
> *We are considering the initiatives and processes that have been implemented [...], and therefore, an incremental re-evaluation of the actions that are already in place (Ita2, P1).*

[4] For instance, Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) distinguish between capability development, curriculum composition, career development learning focus, career development learning initiatives, work integrated learning, and key stakeholder partnerships.

Nevertheless, autonomy can prove challenging for decision-makers, especially under high uncertainty and when, as in the case of the academic staff, delegates may lack field-specific competences. Two academic interviewees openly manifested a need to compare their own perspectives with those of colleagues from other HEIs.

Another factor influencing employability-related decision-making is the availability of data, critically affected by the HEI's institutional environment. The procedures governing career services seem leaner and more consolidated in the Italian HEIs, also due to their membership in the aforementioned AlmaLaurea consortium. Portuguese interviewees report challenges in managing partner networks and addressing the diverse needs of students that stem from a lack of suitable software platforms and benchmark data.

> *What I intend to do is an observatory on employability [...] At the moment, we don't have indicators. That is the big problem (Por2, P1).*

5. Discussion

The collected interviews and official documents highlight the secondary role that employability holds within the case HEIs. There are no specific targets, strategic plans, or communication strategies in place, and only limited resources are dedicated to actions supporting graduate employability. It seems that the formal commitment to employability has not yet been fully integrated into the official organisational strategy.

Interviews revealed a lack of proactive planning in developing employability-related processes. Instead of designing comprehensive procedures, the case HEIs largely rely on adapting initiatives originally developed at decentralised levels or responding to external stakeholder demands and stimuli, such as national evaluation agencies or, in the case of the two Italian HEIs, the AlmaLaurea consortium. Concerns were also raised regarding the low budgets allocated to employability, primarily absorbed by the administrative staff, often understaffed and overburdened.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the employability actions outlined in interviews and official documents go beyond the simple goal of improving graduates' employment levels. High-level academic delegates, career service officers, and members of the academic staff, despite limited resources, inadequate communication, and poor training in employability tools, actively engage in designing and delivering a coherent set of actions that target employability from a processual perspective (Holmes, 2013). The commitment of the staff to their HEI missions, which emphasise serving the needs of local stakeholders, explains how decentralised efforts remain aligned even without strong central guidance or control. This engagement results in a broader, more holistic approach to graduate employability, which, although unintended, aligns with the HEIs' overall goals.

Soliman *et al.* (2019) suggest that specific area strategies should be integrated into broader HEI strategies to ensure effective communication and acceptance. However, at the case HEIs, the development of an employability strategy seems to follow the reverse trajectory: decentralised, non-budgeted actions, deeply rooted in institutional values and norms, are laying the groundwork for future formalised employability strategies that will align with the comprehensive HEI strategy. It can be argued that emergent strategies are forming across the case HEIs, though with limited awareness among top management and staff.

This emergent approach, while beneficial in some respects, presents risks in the long term. The case HEIs may face fragmented understandings of employability and incoherent actions across the institution leading to staff demotivation and missed synergies. Strong leadership will be essential to transforming these emergent processes into a deliberate strategy (Mirabeau & McGuire, 2014), embedding consistent employability practices throughout the institution (Blackmore *et al.*, 2016), and managing the inevitable tensions that arise from competing approaches developed in different parts of the organisation (Holstein *et al.*, 2018). At some point, a shift from an emergent to an intended strategy becomes crucial, as the articulation of a formal strategy can guide the organisation in new directions, enabling the socialisation of institutional goals and revitalising organisational values and rituals (Mallon, 2019).

However, a premature push from emergent to intended strategy, driven by normative or legislative interventions that compel HEIs to formalise their employability approaches, could be counterproductive. Lessons from other countries suggest that such external mandates can create discrepancies between intended and realised strategies, resulting in tensions between HEI management and staff (Kinash *et al.*, 2016; Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Divan *et al.*, 2019). A softer approach might be more effective, perhaps driven by accountability to national evaluation agencies. These agencies are already encouraging HEIs to pay attention to graduate employment rates within their strategic plans. For example, the Italian agency ANVUR includes the percentage of graduates employed one and three years after graduation in its periodic assessments, while the Portuguese A3ES requires reporting on unemployment rates[5]. In the future, these agencies could push for greater attention to employability indicators as well.

The role of data availability in shaping the focus of employability actions, along with the importance of a coordinated institutional effort to standardise data collection and

[5] See https://www.anvur.it/attivita/ava/accreditamento-periodico/linee-guida-per-laccreditamento-periodico for ANVUR and https://a3es.pt/sites/default/files/Gui%C3%A3o%20ACEF-PERA%202018-2023_PT_V1.0.pdf for A3ES.

distribution, clearly emerges from the four case HEIs. While Portuguese HEIs need to devote significant effort to autonomously collect information on their graduates' careers and professional satisfaction, Italian HEIs can take advantage of the systematic benchmark data periodically provided by the AlmaLaurea consortium and use this information when designing employability actions.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper makes two significant contributions to the literature on HEI employability strategy. First, the findings from the empirical analysis reinforce the idea that the discourse on employability is still evolving, and its integration into HEIs' strategic plans cannot be assumed. In many countries, the employability narrative is at an early stage, characterised by a loose normative framework and the absence of consolidated indicators or established practices. The experiences of the four case HEIs discussed in this paper illustrate not only the challenges but also the opportunities that arise from exploring institution-specific paths to an employability strategy.

Second, by shifting the focus from the classification of strategies to the process of strategy formation, this analysis underscores the emergent nature of employability strategies across the case HEIs, irrespective of their national context, institutional type (university or polytechnic), specialisation, reputation (as measured by international rankings), or size.

The emergent employability strategies of the case HEIs exceed the limitations set by the modest intended employability targets. However, while these four case studies demonstrate that an employability strategy can develop even in the absence of explicit planning, they also highlight critical factors that could undermine the sustainability of such an approach. Vaguely defined employability targets and the consequent lack of a communication plan, the limited resources allocated to employability initiatives, and a heavy reliance on post-hoc rationalisation of employability practices rather than proactive planning risk creating fragmented actions and perceptions, potentially demotivating staff and leading to missed synergies.

By addressing the potential challenges that arise when employability strategies are still developing, this paper offers valuable insights for other HEIs still navigating their own employability journey, extending beyond the geographic focus of this study. A top-down approach to designing employability strategies risks hampering creativity and frustrating decentralised engagement by creating a fracture between official narratives and on-the-ground experiences. In contrast, systematic communication efforts to socialise diverse perspectives on graduate employability and share existing experiences could harness the commitment of HEI staff to education, helping to shape common

goals and plans. Simultaneously, institutional actors may prefer public investment to raise and support overall awareness of the importance of graduate employability rather than adopting a normative approach to HEI engagement on employability.

Future research could address the limitations of this exploratory study by broadening the scope beyond the four HEIs examined here. Expanding the analysis to include HEIs in more diverse countries could help to explore the impact of differing institutional frameworks. Additionally, examining HEIs in more varied local labour market conditions would offer insight into how these factors shape the sensitivity of HEIs to graduate employability. The inclusion of larger HEIs, which may have more structured approaches to employability, and a deeper exploration of financial constraints, especially as they relate to the public or private nature of institutions, could further extend the understanding of how employability strategies form and evolve. As a final remark, the cross-sectional analysis provided in this paper offers initial evidence on the formation process of HEI employability strategies. However, more robust information can be expected from future longitudinal studies.

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