

“Employability” through curriculum innovation and skills development: a Portuguese case study

by

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Over 50% of Portuguese graduates are out of work for more than six months after leaving university, against the OECD average of 42%. This suggests that universities need to do more to improve graduates' chances on the labour market and, in many ways, the Bologna reform provided European Union universities with an opportunity to tackle this issue. This paper describes how the Bologna process led to reform at the Catholic University of Portugal's Faculty of Economics and Management, starting in 2005. Undergraduate studies were reduced from four to three years and strategies were implemented to improve graduates' employability. The primary aspect of the reform was a competency-based approach to curricula development, along with the creation of three new courses dealing specifically with transferable skills: critical thinking, systemic thinking and communication and teamwork.

« L’employabilité » à travers l’innovation dans le curriculum et les compétences : une étude de cas au Portugal

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Plus de 50 % des diplômés portugais restent sans emploi pendant plus de six mois après avoir quitté l’université, alors que la moyenne de l’OCDE est de 42 %. Ceci suggère que les universités doivent faire plus pour améliorer les chances des diplômés sur le marché du travail, et la réforme de Bologne a, par différents moyens, donné aux universités de l’union européenne l’occasion de résoudre cette question. Cet article décrit comment le processus de Bologne a guidé une réforme au sein de la Faculté d’Économie et de Gestion de l’Université Catholique du Portugal, et ce depuis 2005. Les études de premier cycle ont été réduites de quatre à trois ans et des stratégies ont été mises en œuvre pour améliorer l’employabilité des diplômés. L’aspect fondamental de la réforme a été une approche du développement des programmes axée sur les compétences, en plus de la création de trois nouveaux cours portant spécifiquement sur des compétences transférables : la pensée critique, la pensée systémique, ainsi que la communication et le travail d’équipe.

Introduction

The notion of “employability” conveys the idea that individuals are now increasingly responsible for their own welfare and that of society, therefore they must acquire specific knowledge and skills, especially the knowledge and skills that employers need (DfEE, 2000). It also relates to a broad global context developed around the idea that knowledge is the new basis for wealth (Thurow, 2000, p. 13). In the words of Hillage and Pollard (1998, p. 1), “employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required”. In other words, it is individuals – rather than the labour market – who determine their own employability. European Union (EU) employability policies have been “challenged by those who question the extent to which labour market inclusion and social inclusion can be equated” (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p. 204). This is because policies centred exclusively on the supply side of the labour market fail to acknowledge the fact that, to a large extent, it is the labour market that determines one’s chances of finding employment. If there are few jobs available, employability will be low, even if applicants are highly educated and have the required skills. Moreover, the emphasis on one’s employability obscures employers’ recruitment practices. These can at times be discriminating, in particular those in relation to female applicants (Gaskell, 1987; 1992).

Political and corporate agendas suggest that universities are primarily responsible for developing graduates’ employability. Thus, if individuals are ultimately responsible for their employability, universities are accountable for ensuring the conditions for students to develop their employability. The Bologna process was one of the main drivers of curriculum restructuring in the EU. As a result, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and convertibility have broadened the limits of potential labour markets for EU graduates. Moreover, restructuring has fostered the guiding notion of employability along with the necessity to establish adequate contexts for transferable skills development.

This paper briefly discusses the notion of employability and some of its implications, namely the functionalist approach which resonates in the discourses of both politicians and corporate leaders. The second part of the paper describes how the Bologna reform process was implemented at the Catholic University of Portugal’s Faculty of Economics and Management (FEG), where curriculum innovation led to programme reform, as described below.

Employability and the skills agenda

Employability, “the new buzzword in labour market policy circles” (Peck and Theodore, 2000), is still a notion under scrutiny. Peck and Theodore see in it a “kind of supply side fundamentalism”. In their view, it is an ideological notion that overlooks the demand side of labour markets by concentrating exclusively on the supply side. However, “There is little doubt that structural shifts have created mismatches between labour supply and demand” (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p. 203). Thus, employability fails to address a number of labour market contingent factors affecting one’s employability, and firm size is a case in point. The actual number of jobs available is another paramount factor. In addition, the current emphasis on the supply side of the labour market also disregards employers’ recruitment and selection practices. These can overtly be a source of social exclusion and discrimination, therefore affecting ones’ employability. Moreover, the discourse of employability calls for university curricular reform in order that labour market needs may be met.

The notion of employability implicates that of skills, and since the 1990s many European governments placed the skills agenda at the core of labour market policy. Thus, “the skills agenda continues to be promoted in policy at national and institutional level” (Holmes, 2001). The political emphasis on employability also appears to be a way to build a bridge between business and education (Taylor, 1998). Close relationships between universities and the corporate world may then be seen as a way to avoid the mismatch of skills developed. Nevertheless, “many academics are suspicious of closer links to business” (Harvey, 2000, p. 5). It seems that in OECD countries co-operation between business and schools has developed because universities have lost touch with the realities of labour markets, and therefore fail to respond to firms’ needs in terms of knowledge and skills that are required at entry-level positions (OECD, 1992). This functionalist approach seems to have prevailed and, in the words of Morrow and Torres (1995, p. 60), universities, and indeed the school system at large, are regarded as “a mechanism of selection and assignment of persons’ pre-existing statuses”. Hence, universities became responsible for creating the conditions for graduate employment. It appears that the political and corporate skills agendas fail to acknowledge that “the employability of graduates should not be seen as the primary focus of higher education” (Harvey, 2000, p. 4).

Field structure

In Portugal, only 0.4% of firms operating in the country are large companies while 97.3% of them are small or micro-sized. This means that 2.3% of firms are medium-sized (IAPMEI, 2008, pp. 1-5). Together, micro, small and medium-sized companies provide 75.2% of all jobs and generate 56.4% of the country’s wealth. This particular structure of the corporate field challenges general and abstract

assumptions regarding employability. Small and micro-sized firms are unlikely to employ university graduates. Although the Portuguese corporate discourse on employability follows the general trend, it fails to address the specificities of the economic structure and to clarify which needs universities are failing to meet. Therefore, if graduates’ employability is to be improved, change would perhaps need to be made on the demand side of the labour market. However, it has been persistently argued that graduate unemployment is concentrated in the fields of studies that have lost touch with the reality of the labour market, such as philosophy, history or sociology. So, if employability enhances one’s transferable skills rather than scientific and technical ones, then the first degree should be of little relevance and graduates should be hired according to their knowledge, skills and competences, not their degree subjects. This leads to further remarks on the demand side of labour markets and, more specifically, employers’ recruitment practices.

Recruitment and selection

The emphasis on employability masks the fact that corporate recruitment and selection practices tend to be discriminatory. The emphasis on transferable skills enhances applicants’ social origins and families’ early cultural investments. In other words, well-read and well-spoken applicants are more likely to be successful, and one’s skills and one’s personal qualities are a source of innovation and productivity for the economy (Brown et al., 2004). If this is true, employers may be actively contributing to the social reproduction of advantages that are perceived as individual abilities. In addition, if graduates’ attributes are so crucial, they should weigh “more in the recruitment processes than the graduates’ degree subject” (Harvey (2000, p. 7). Employers in the United Kingdom are keen recruiters of graduates from apparently ill-suited subjects: “For example, many large accountancy and management consultancy firms seek history, classic, social science or physics graduates rather than accountants” (Harvey, 2000, p. 7). In Portugal, however, the degree subject is of paramount importance in recruitment (Guimarães, 2006). Hence, if the “transferable-skill discourse” were genuine, subject-specific knowledge would not be a primary criterion in recruitment. There are, of course, four main exceptions: health-related fields, engineering, law and architecture. In such cases, the degree subjects are directly related to the professional activity. However, management and economics are two fields of study favoured by employers, which suggests that management and economics graduates benefit from the contradictions in employers’ discourse and practice. In other words, while employers emphasize the virtues of transferable skills, they actually prefer to recruit according to the candidate’s degree subject. For this reason, graduates with a management or economics background are more likely to find an entry-level position than graduates from other fields.

Educational contingencies

It was the prevalence of supply-side discourse and policies that led Portuguese universities to focus on graduates' employability. The start up of career services in the mid-1990s was one way of tackling the issue. However, it was the Bologna reforms that steered deep institutional and curricular change, while the EU Qualifications Framework – as well as its national adaptations – determined the desirable outcomes of education. Therefore, while discussing the meaning and relevance of notions at academic levels, educational systems have had to adjust to meet the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) outcomes. At FEG, in Porto, this was a long and somewhat complex process. Being a faculty with relatively sound connections in the corporate world, it was understood that employers should be considered as stakeholders. The main challenge was to find ways to maximise their contributions. Mobilising the academic staff was yet another challenge as restructuring the curricula led to some anxieties regarding the possibility of academic standards being downgraded and of eventual job losses. There was a risk of increasing “instrumental learning” (Harvey, 2000, p. 7), given the temptation for teachers to ensure that students display apparently desirable skills and downgrade academic and scientific standards. The process of curriculum innovation at FEG was fuelled by consideration of all these issues. Finally, however, there was consensus around the idea that the faculty needed to be careful not to concentrate its activity exclusively on labour market outcomes. A competency-based approach was developed and implemented using a five-stage process, starting in 2005. The outcomes started to be assessed in April 2010.

Curriculum innovation at FEG

Stage one: skills valued on the labour market

In the wake of Bologna, the Lisbon treaty's definition of the strategic goal for higher education was “to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy of the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion ...” (European Council, 2000). This goal reinforced Bologna's guidelines towards co-operation among higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as curricular reform.

FEG is a small faculty (at the time of writing it had 798 enrolled students and 74 teachers) within the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), along with several other faculties: law, psychology and education, theology and arts. Nowadays it offers dynamic and flexible academic programmes which closely reflect the university's ties with the business community. The faculty has evolved thanks to a far-reaching and ongoing reform process, based on a major reassessment of the curriculum. To help guide this process – which commenced in 2005 – in-depth interviews of employers and alumni took place, the aim being

to understand which subjects were relevant at entry level. This led to a revision of the choice of courses on offer at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and some of the course subjects were discontinued. In line with the Bologna reforms, curricular restructuring included reducing the length of undergraduate studies from four to three years. Employers appreciated the scientific results of graduates' university training but criticised their systematic lack of transferable skills. Their views were in tune with the survey conducted by Cabral-Cardoso *et al.* (2006), which concluded that both graduates and employers considered that HEIs needed to boost transferable skills development.

The interviewees identified a number of skills valued on the market: teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking, client orientation and integrity were the most commonly cited (Oliveira *et al.*, forthcoming). Interviewed alumni revealed that there was insufficient distinction between the work undertaken by management and economics graduates. They were therefore in favour of placing transferable skills development at the heart of curriculum innovation and development. This meant that innovative teaching and assessing practices were required, especially in relation to developing and assessing students' transferable skills, although other contexts are equally relevant for developing students' skills, namely extracurricular activities and work experiences (Oliveira *et al.*, 2010). Data from the interviews was then used to steer the following stage.

Stage two: curricular deconstruction

The second stage of innovation was marked by curricular deconstruction, and faculty discussions of the curriculum focused on learning outcomes. A number of objectives guided the discussions. First, the subjects offered by the faculty should be diverse so as to provide students with a cosmopolitan and broad vision of the world. Second, it was necessary to identify a common set of subjects to be offered simultaneously to students of economics and management. Third, the objective of curriculum deconstruction was not simply to reduce the number of subjects, but rather to clarify the aims and learning outcomes of all the subjects on offer. Lastly, it was decided to minimise undergraduate specialisation and defer this to postgraduate level. One output of this stage was an outline of the new undergraduate curriculum structure comprising 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), which allows a student to progress on to the next stage.

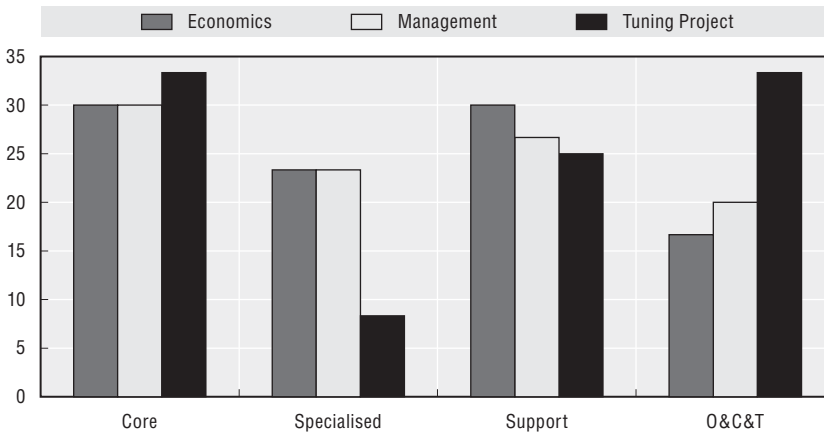
Stage three: curriculum redesign

Redesigning the curriculum meant structuring the different subjects across six semesters. Students were advised to take ten subjects per year. The curriculum was modularised around six ECTS subjects and, drawing on the Tuning Project (2002, p. 48), it was redesigned around four categories of subjects:

core; specialised; support; and organisation, communication and transferable skills (O&C&T). During their three years of studies, students were required to take nine core subjects, which “make up the backbone of the respective science” (e.g. microeconomics, macroeconomics, finance, etc.) (Tuning, 2002, p. 48). They were required to take seven specialised subjects, allowing for in-depth study in subject areas (e.g. accountancy, international economics), eight to nine support or complementary subjects (e.g. statistics, mathematics, ethics, sociology) and three mandatory courses focusing on transferable skills. These transferable skills (critical thinking, communication, teamwork, systemic thinking and entrepreneurship) are specific subjects, i.e. where reality confronts theory. To ensure the development of transferable skills, a three-year implementation programme was developed and is detailed below. After redesigning the curriculum the faculty was able to measure the transferable skills.

Figure 1 compares FEG’s curricular structure against the Tuning Project. The proportion of specific courses is higher at FEG than in the Tuning Project (about 25% at FEG compared to under 10% in the Tuning Project). Conversely, transferable skills (organising and communicating, plus other transferable skills) are better represented in the Tuning Project than at FEG (around 20% at FEG compared to over 30% in the Tuning Project). However, at FEG transferable skills are also included in regular courses such as ethics, sociology, micro and macroeconomics, which require and develop communication skills, critical thinking and sometimes teamwork. As a result, transferable skills are likely to be graphically underrepresented.

Figure 1. **FEG’s curricular structure compared to the Tuning Project**



Source: Oliveira, E. (2009), “Employability, Transferable Key Competencies and Curricular Innovation”, presentation based on “Employability and Entrepreneurship: Tuning University and Enterprises”, paper presented at the Thematic Cluster Meeting “Erasmus’ Contribution to the Bologna Priority Action Lines”, Brussels.

Stage four: mapping transferable skills

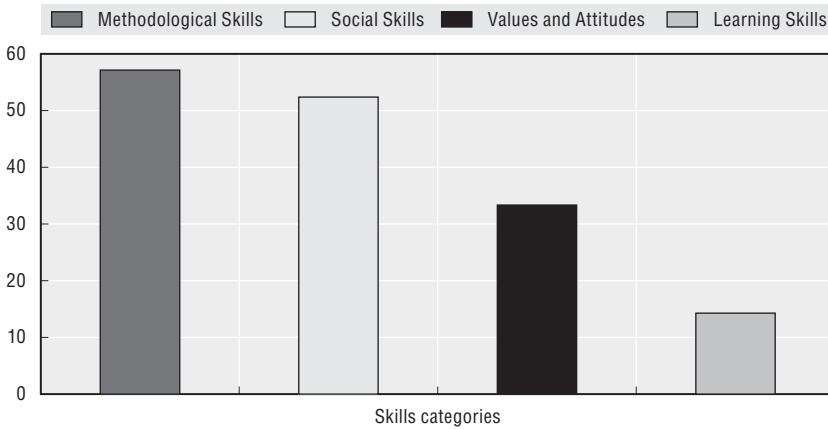
This stage consisted of “identifying the transferable skills involved in each subject, group of subjects and academic years” (FEG/DCO/Equipa PIC, 2008, p. 6). Initially, the Starfish model (Evans, 2001) was used to map the transferable skills. It is based on a set of different but interrelated skills enabling successful moves in one’s career. Skills are grouped around five clusters of personal skills and competences, namely: methodological, social, values and attitudes, learning, and technical skills. These are “interlinked and interdependent of human actions” (CEDEFOP, n.d., cit. in Evans, 2001, p. 3). Mapping the transferable skills entailed two complementary actions: i) the identification of transferable skills within subjects, and ii) self-assessment of pedagogical practices. Teachers were invited to explore opportunities for skills development and encouraged to explore innovative pedagogy. Initially they were given a template with a description of the mapped transferable skills to serve as a benchmark with which to assess students. They were then encouraged to develop their own assessment tools, based on the template. Meanwhile, students were given the list of transferable skills included in the syllabus (Figure 1); this list details the specific set of skills under assessment in each subject. This is an ongoing process, as each year teachers must reassess their pedagogical practices and adjust the set of skills that they intend to develop and assess.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of subjects that allow for the assessment and development of transferable skills. A little over 50% of them assess and develop methodological skills (personal and work organisation, problem solving, creativity, systemic thinking); 50% of subjects assess and develop social skills (written communication, oral communication, interpersonal relationship, team work); while only 30% of them assess and develop values and attitudes (responsibility, persistence, integrity and ethics, motivation to learn). Just over 10% of them assess and develop learning skills (adaptation to change, quality and excellence, knowledge and information management, learning skills) These figures suggest that more efforts are needed to promote the development of students’ life-long learning skills.

Figure 3 illustrates teachers’ assessment practices at FEG throughout the three-year implementation process. Tests are predominant, followed by individual assignments, group assignments and participation. The importance of class presentations is secondary, and these are concentrated on second- and third-year subjects. Further efforts, therefore, are required to ensure adequate and diverse contexts for developing life-long learning skills.

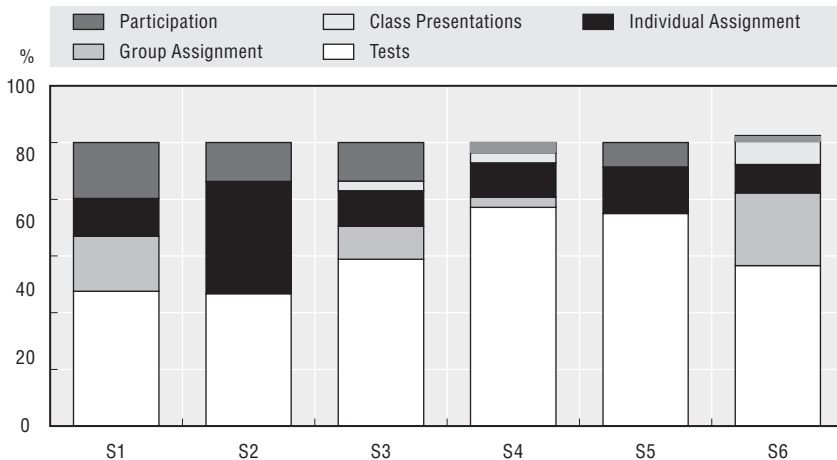
Assessment practices (Figure 3) are consistent with the distribution of skills embedded in the curricula (Figure 2). They also suggest that academic staff should reflect upon their own teaching practices to further enhance

Figure 2. **Transferable skills embedded in the curricula**



Source: Oliveira, E. (2009), “Employability, Transferable Key Competencies and Curricular Innovation”, presentation based on “Employability and Entrepreneurship: Tuning University and Enterprises”, paper presented at the Thematic Cluster Meeting “Erasmus’ Contribution to the Bologna Priority Action Lines”, Brussels.

Figure 3. **Assessment practices in relation to an undergraduate degree in economics and management studies**



Source: Couto, A. (2009), internal document, Faculty of Economics and Management.

expected outcomes, i.e. the development of knowledge, aptitudes and skills described in the EU Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework. In stage four students are also encouraged to self-assess their transferable skills through an online questionnaire, after which they are advised to enrol in an individual coaching programme.

Stage five: individual coaching for students

The coaching programme, which is not mandatory, starts with an explanation of its goals and methodology. Some of the main goals are to raise skill awareness and promote self-reflexivity on skill development opportunities and the continuity of the coaching process. Individual coaching is specifically geared towards the promotion of life-long learning skills. The first step of the coaching programme involves discussing the individual skill self-assessment report produced by the aforementioned online questionnaire. The second step involves identifying students' expectations, goals and needs. An exploratory stage follows, which encourages students to explore vocational experiences and extracurricular activities. The fourth stage leads to identifying the skills that students need to develop further. An action plan is then drawn up, detailing the means and goals of transferable skill development. At the end of the process, students are encouraged to build an individual skills portfolio, a collection of supporting evidence of skills developed during the whole process (FEG/DCO/Equipa PIC, 2008, pp. 9-17). Since the beginning of the coaching programme in 2007, 440 students have been involved in coaching sessions (55% of the total number of students enrolled at FEG). It should be noted that most demand for individual coaching has been from high achievers. Also, in the first year, most demand was from female students (around 75%) although in 2008 there was a gender balance among those seeking individual coaching.

The three-year programme

To embed skills even further in the curricula, three new courses have been created, focusing specifically on a set of transferable skills. These are Project I (first year), Project II (second year), and Final Project (senior year). Project I addresses critical thinking; Project II promotes communication skills and teamwork. The Final Project encourages students to consolidate their knowledge base and to be autonomous (systemic thinking). This involves applying their knowledge to work or work-related situations and taking responsibility for decision making and the outcomes of their work, even if they are under technical supervision. The three courses constitute a shift in the pedagogical paradigm, *i.e.* from being centred on the teacher to focusing on the student and on learning outcomes. They are incrementally structured, and the curricula reform meets both the EU's and the NQF's specifications which "uses eight references based on learning outcomes (defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence)" (Portuguese Ministry of Education, 2009). Knowledge is understood as "advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles"; skills pertain to "advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study" and finally, competence serves to "manage complex technical or professional

activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision making in unpredictable work or study contexts; taking responsibility for managing professional development of individuals”. Still according to the NQF, education shifts its focus “from input (lengths of a learning experience, type of institution) to what a person holding a particular qualification actually knows and is able to do” (*ibid*).

Project I

Project I aims to develop students’ **critical thinking** and literacy. By the end of the semester, students should demonstrate the ability to self-assess their learning process, manage their time, organise learning activities, gather and process information and write and read effectively. By the end of Project I, students should be able to communicate clearly and logically. The learning outcomes are consigned to a learning portfolio, which includes the students’ own selection of documentation concerning the activities carried out during the course. The course subject is organised in weekly workshops conducted by teachers with different academic backgrounds. Activities are co-ordinated and a common teaching note ensures a degree of activity and content commonality. Students have access to an online platform and to web tools, such as forums and chats. Students also follow a problem-solving centred methodology providing them with a varied set of activities such as analysing texts, improving literacy skills, analysing media, debating, substantiating ideas, analysing graphs and tables, identifying mistakes, placing a subject in context, using metaphors and taking notes. They also work on image interpretation, assessment and review as well as writing a short film script.

Multidisciplinary is ensured by including additional subjects in Project I, namely, ethics, macroeconomics, mathematics and accounting: the teachers involved identify essay topics and suggest reading and other reference materials. The interdisciplinary trait of Project I enables students to apply their acquired writing and critical thinking skills to the above-mentioned subjects. To help build the learning portfolios, in 2009 the faculty provided four capacity building workshops on a yearly basis to mitigate students’ difficulties. Currently, these workshops are provided on demand. Initially, the idea of building a learning portfolio was new to most of the students who failed to see its purpose and even usefulness. Although students’ portfolios were monitored at various stages and they were given feedback, the final version still demonstrated a gap between the aims of the assignment and the actual work delivered. More often than not, the portfolios were merely descriptive and lacked reflection of the course work and achievements. This outcome might be due to the fact that previously workshop attendance was not mandatory and that only 37 out of the 200 enrolled students benefited from it.

Project II

The goal of Project II is to develop **communication and teamwork** skills. By the end of the course, students should be able to work in self-regulated teams and to communicate effectively within a group and to a large audience. The learning outcomes are demonstrated throughout a 15-minute oral presentation that should be imaginative and innovative. In addition, they must submit a 3 000 word report on a temporary assignment conducted in a local manufacturing company. The course has been organised with weekly sessions offering diversified activities such as database research, field studies, oral presentations and communication workshops. There are also supervisory meetings with tutors who, as in Project I, have different academic backgrounds.

Co-operation with the business world takes place in different ways. One way is by having mentors: generally these are senior professionals who mentor a group of students. Mentors typically introduce students to work-related contexts. More specifically, they simulate five job vacancies and students are required to apply for them. Applicants go through a virtual recruitment process entailing CV analysis and the best 10% of each application group undergo a job interview. At the time of writing, internships have been offered to 21 students and company representatives have participated in the classroom activities of 7 courses.

Team coaching is also available to students wishing to improve their teamwork performance. Coaches encourage teams to find alternative and more effective ways to organise their work and stress the importance of anticipating future situations. They promote the development of students' oral communication skills, between team members (in the form of assertiveness) and through contact with the outside world (the ability to deliver a presentation in public). The best overall performers, both as a team and as individuals, as well as those who make the best presentation, are offered a six-week internship in one of the companies with which the faculty has ties, and in 2009 five companies awarded nine internships.

Final Project

The purpose of the Final Project is to encourage **systemic thinking**. In other words, students are encouraged to mobilise, apply and integrate the knowledge learned throughout their three years in college. Students may choose one of three alternatives: carry out an internship; write up a business plan or diagnose a company's performance (in the case of business students) or resolve three case studies (only for economics students). Regardless of the option chosen, students are encouraged to establish contacts with companies and arrange visits and interviews in order to collect data for their final reports. They must also attend meetings with their supervisors every two weeks, except if they are engaged in internships.

As a rule, students work in groups of five and benefit from six hours of team or individual coaching sessions to help them to improve their presentation skills. The purpose is to lead students to reflect, individually or as a team, on the internship, business plan or case studies. They are also encouraged to apply the knowledge they have acquired. At the end of the semester, students give a skills demonstration before a jury consisting of members of academic staff and representatives of local businesses. At the time of writing, 30 representatives of companies and other organisations have participated on juries and evaluated skills presentations.

So far, students who have chosen the Final Project and opted for an internship have provided positive feedback on the experience as a whole. Apparently it increases students' awareness of three things: i) the usefulness of academic knowledge previously seen as redundant; ii) the impact of individual work on the overall operation of a company; and iii) the challenge of meeting schedule requirements. Those who opted to complete a business plan seem to have learned to operationalise business concepts and to find data to support them. Finally, students who conducted organisational or applied studies in economics seem to have understood the role of theoretical knowledge when applied to organisation and economic issues. Overall, this has been a tough and closely monitored process based on trial and error.

Conclusions

Current emphasis on employability puts universities under pressure to ensure the contexts which enable students to develop the level of knowledge, skills and competences defined by the EU Qualifications Framework and the NQF. The fact that employability focuses on the supply side of labour markets leaves a number of demand-side contingencies out of the equation. Our main concerns are the structure of the Portuguese economy and employers' recruitment practices. The former has created a dearth of jobs for graduates while the latter seem to promote rather than prevent forms of discrimination on the labour market. These may be due to the emphasis on transferable skills, which may overestimate applicants' "personal capital" (Brown *et al.*, 2004), that is to say, skills that to a certain extent are the outcome of families' early cultural investments (Brown *et al.*, 2004; Bourdieu, 1979; 1986). Empirical studies also suggest that the prestige of a graduate's university may operate as a major recruitment criterion (Guimarães, 2006), which further reinforces the discriminative process referred to above. Thus, promotion of employability must comprise both sides of the labour market.

Another concern is that the corporate discourse on employability has to be challenged. This is because, like many of their counterparts in the United Kingdom (Harvey, 2000), Portuguese employers tend to take graduates'

knowledge base for granted (Oliveira *et al.*, forthcoming). However, unlike the former, Portuguese employers are prone to recruit according to the applicant's degree subject (Guimarães, 2006). Therefore, it is probable that the shortage of jobs for graduates is partially related to employers' vision of the world. In other words, if transferable skills are paramount, then the subject of the first degree should be a secondary issue.

Universities need time to reflect upon such matters, especially in light of data stemming from recent research. However, time has been an issue, since the Bologna process urged EU universities to undertake reform rapidly. As described above, reform at FEG was based on a competency-based approach. The decision to embed the development of transferable skills in three specific subjects (Projects I, II and Final) was the outcome of a discussion involving institutional leaders, academic staff and main stakeholders, employers and alumni. However, FEG would have benefitted from being able to reflect upon the changes to be implemented over a longer period.

The reform process has not yet gained the full co-operation of all members of staff, and in this respect time is still an issue. Fear of downgrading academic standards and job losses has eventually been overcome, but since this is an ongoing process, occasionally negative reactions do occur. It also takes time to build a network which includes alumni and business people, and this is indispensable for ensuring the success of Project II and the Final Project. This process is progressive, and time is needed to ensure that students master skills and knowledge. Moreover, the three new subjects (Project I, II and Final) will not be entirely successful unless students take ownership of their goals, and this too needs time and a change of attitude.

Diversity is yet another issue of great importance. The new subjects call for a multidisciplinary setting, given the multiplicity of assignments, tasks, pedagogical and assessment methodologies, not to mention co-operation with business representatives. Therefore, all the activities as well as the players involved need to be carefully co-ordinated. The overall impact of the three new courses is yet to be fully determined. However, lessons learned so far from the Final Project have helped to structure postgraduate degrees, since university-business collaborative activities have inspired those put in place at postgraduate level. Admittedly, the three new courses have not yet been fully accepted by all students and academic staff. Students still complain about the hard work and tough schedules, and only a third of teachers are currently involved in project-related activities (Project I, II and Final). Hence, there is still a long way to go to reduce the amount of academic and pedagogical conformity which is at the root of teachers' resistance and reaction to the curriculum innovation process. However, it is hoped that the encouraging results of the ongoing assessment will gain the support of many more teachers and students.

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ANNEX

A brief description of the online self-assessment questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises three sections. The **first section** relates to vocational experiences that significantly facilitate the development of transferable (or “soft”) skills. It includes work experiences, volunteer work, civic engagement, geographic mobility and further training. Students are expected to rate such experiences according to their relevance and duration.

The **second section** – the skill assessment questionnaire – comprises a set of 17 soft skills organised into four groups:

- i) Methodological skills (problem solving; systemic thinking; personal management; creativity).
- ii) Social skills (communication, assertiveness; interpersonal relationship; team work).
- iii) Skills related to values and attitudes (persistence; responsibility; integrity and ethics).
- iv) Learning skills (motivation to learn; openness to change; pursuit of quality and excellence; knowledge management).

The **third section** assesses the vocational development of students using Savickas’ paper “Student Career Concerns Inventory” (2002), adapted by Ramos *et al.* (2002).

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