Between adaptation and equity. Access to the labour market for non-traditional students and graduates[1]

Entre la adaptación y la equidad. Acceso al mercado laboral para estudiantes y graduados no tradicionales

María Tenorio-Rodríguez[2], Teresa Padilla-Carmona y José González-Monteagudo
Universidad de Sevilla

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la transición al mercado laboral de estudiantes y graduados no tradicionales desde las teorías sociológicas del capital cultural. Se ha empleado una metodología cualitativa con 40 entrevistas realizadas a estudiantes y graduados no tradicionales, empleadores y personal universitario. En el análisis se exploran tres temas: i) requisitos y habilidades exigidas en los procesos de selección; ii) barreras que encuentran los estudiantes y graduados no tradicionales en la inserción laboral; iii) limitaciones en los procesos de selección sobre equidad. Los resultados muestran que el acceso al empleo cualificado está limitado por formas legítimas de capital cultural y social gestionadas por los empleadores que pueden ser perjudiciales para los graduados no tradicionales. También se ha puesto de manifiesto la necesidad de mejorar el reconocimiento de los perfiles específicos de los graduados no tradicionales. Se recomienda modificar el enfoque del déficit y responsabilizar a los empleadores de la mejora de sus prácticas y políticas en materia de acceso al empleo, tomando la equidad y la justicia social como puntos de referencia éticos.

2   **Correspondencia:** María Tenorio-Rodríguez, mtenorio@us.es, Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación. Universidad de Sevilla. C/ Pirotecnia s/n, 41013, Sevilla, (España).

Palabras clave: estudiantes no tradicionales; selección de personal; justicia social; capital cultural; enseñanza superior; investigación cualitativa.

Abstract

This article focuses on non-traditional students and graduates in their transition to the labour market, from sociological theories of cultural capital. A qualitative methodology has been employed, with 40 interviews conducted with non-traditional students and graduates, employers and university staff. Three themes are explored in the analysis: (i) requirements and skills demanded in the selection processes; (ii) barriers faced in the labour insertion; (iii) limitations in the selection processes regarding equity. The results show that access to skilled employment is limited by legitimate forms of cultural and social capital managed by employers, which may be detrimental for non-traditional graduates. The need to improve recognition of the specific profiles of non-traditional graduates has also become apparent. It is recommended that the deficit approach be changed and that employers be held accountable for improving their practices and policies regarding access to employment, guided by equity and social justice as ethical benchmarks.

Keywords: non-traditional students; labour recruitment; social justice; cultural capital; higher education; qualitative research.

Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century, university institutions across Europe are expanding and reaching out to an increasingly heterogeneous population. Thus, today's university welcomes a growing group of students with different characteristics from the historical profile, including adult and working students, from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, with family burdens, with disabilities, first generation, immigrants and ethnic minorities. We use the term "non-traditional student" to refer to these groups of students (Crosling et al., 2008).

At the same time, many economies have suffered from substantial imbalances between supply and demand for this type of education in the labour market. In Spain, this increase in the supply of university graduates and the insufficient demand capacity of the Spanish economy (Ariño et al., 2012) has meant that the possession of a university degree is not a guarantee for finding qualified higher-level employment. However, it does increase the possibilities (Ortiz & Rodríguez, 2016).

This situation has led to increased competitiveness in the labour market and higher qualification requirements for access to skilled employment (Mareque& De Prada, 2018). University graduates have been required, along with the diploma, to meet various requirements, such as language skills, postgraduate training, advanced courses, work experience, mobility and internationalisation activities, and a set of skills that are not necessary for the job, leading to over-qualification (Fundación CYD, 2018).

Research indicates that non-traditional graduates face specific difficulties in making significant transitions to the labour market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). They need more time to find high-skill jobs and are more likely to find jobs below their skill level and therefore less interesting and lower-paying (Purcell et al., 2007). Although we found

some international studies which focus on the experiences of non-traditional students at the university level (Gibson, 2015; O'Shea, 2016), little research has been done on their access to and retention in the labour market. In this scenario, questions arise such as do university students have equal opportunities of access to qualified employment when they complete their training, and are recruitment processes fair and equitable? It is necessary to understand the reality of non-traditional students and graduates in today's labour market to identify whether institutions are developing practices based on social justice.

The current labour market context

In this section, we investigate the recruitment processes, focusing on the requirements and competencies that are relevant for access to qualified employment. Studies have shown that language skills have become crucial in the selection and promotion of staff (ANECA, 2009). Stays abroad can increase the level of employability of their participants and could become a competitive advantage in the labour market (Zuhäl, 2015), or even facilitate the achievement of more skilled jobs (Endes, 2015). A postgraduate degree reduces the risk of unemployment and allows access to better salary levels (EAE Business School, 2015), often becoming a requirement or an aspect valued positively by employers (Adecco, 2016), and therefore have a significant impact in terms of employment (Michavila et al., 2018).

The current labour market demands workers with a high level of skills and abilities, capable of solving problems and adapting quickly, with interpersonal skills, labour flexibility and capacity to face contexts of uncertainty and accelerated change (ANECA, 2009). In short, the labour profile usually includes factors such as greater availability, assumption of new roles, the adaptation of labour behaviour to changing environments and acquisition of new skills. Pallisera et al. (2010) conclude that in today's society it is essential to acquire transversal skills, such as teamwork, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, decision making and communication skills. Generic or transversal competencies are a constant demand from employers and a requirement for employability (Bartual&Turmo, 2015).

Contributions of the theory of cultural capital

Despite the expansion in participation, inequalities in retention and success in higher education are found. Academic failure and dropout are related to the educational level of parents (Rodrigo et al., 2012) and the economic resources available for the maintenance of the student during his or her university years (Ariño& Llopis, 2011). Higher education fails to accommodate the heterogeneity of its student body (Padilla et al., 2019), and there is little evidence that increased participation alone will lead to equality in the labour market (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

The current relevance of information and communication technologies also has implications for inequality. Indeed, the benefits of technologies have not been equally felt by all social groups. In Spain, there is a significant digital divide, which is related to social factors that generate inequality, such as gender, age, income level and place of residence, thus affecting the most disadvantaged groups (Vera and Rodríguez, 2017).

The context of the social spaces that Bourdieu calls "field" is comparable to a game with its own rules. To enter a field, which in this case is the qualified labour market, one must possess the habit that predisposes one to enter that field and not another; in that game, and not another. One must possess at least the minimum amount of knowledge, or skill or "talent" to be accepted as a legitimate player (Bourdieu, 1993). Everyone has a set of internalised dispositions that unconsciously incline people to "act or react" in specific ways in social fields, and that is the result of personal, family, social and academic experiences that constitute the stories of students, for which Bourdieu used the concept of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1993). The habitus is strongly conditioned by social class and by economic capital. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as "a form of knowledge, an internalised code or a cognitive acquisition, which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). The concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital should be understood in a compatible way with the agency capacity of the social actors since we do not locate in a perspective of sociological determinism.

Selection criteria can limit the fairness of job selection processes, both in terms of who enters the market, and in terms of how "the good candidate" is defined. In a study by Burke and Whitty (2018) on teacher selection processes, it is stated that the dominant narrative may suggest that those who do not have the characteristics that fit the current definition of "the brightest and the best" will no longer be welcome as teachers. This is worrying for several reasons. Gore et al., (2016) argue that cultural diversity is vital in the selection of teacher candidates, as it reflects the heterogeneity of cultural backgrounds in society at large. Furthermore, if we do not make this recognition, there will be a bias in the selection system, against those who come from environments whose past achievements are limited, but whose potential for development could be relevant (Zipin& Brennan, 2006).

Objectives

In a labour context where selection criteria are based on meritocracy and the valuation of privileged knowledge by the dominant classes and not others, this study aims to understand the reality of non-traditional students and graduates in today's labour market. To this end, we used in-depth interviews to (1) Identify the requirements and competencies demanded by employers in selection processes; (2) Describe the barriers that non-traditional graduates face in accessing qualified employment; and (3) Explore the limitations of labour market insertion processes concerning the desirable ideals of equity and soc0ial justice.

Method

This is a qualitative study, which has included participants from three different profiles: students and graduates; private employers; university staff. For students and graduates, a biographical-narrative approach (Elliott, 2005) has been adopted, which means capturing the richness of experiences and the broader meanings of those experiences (Benson et al., 2010). In-depth biographical interviews were conducted with

these participants, in which the narrator and the researchers explored the aims of the study in greater depth. The interviews are situated within a conception of reality as socially constructed, fluid and dependent on the specific contexts in which narratives are generated and shared (Atkinson, 1998). In the case of private employers and university staff, the semi-structured interview format has been used, which is considered more suitable for collecting data from practitioners, professionals and experts.

Participants

A total of 40 interviews were conducted. On the one hand, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with 23 non-traditional students and graduates of the University of Seville (Spain), including people with two or more of the following traits: first generation; adult workers; people with children; people with disabilities; individuals from immigrant or ethnic minority backgrounds. In addition, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the perspectives of private employers (10 participants, including managers, directors and human resources staff) and university staff involved in employability (7 participants, corresponding to technical staff, managers and lecturers).

Participants were selected by purposive sampling, quota sampling to ensure heterogeneity of traits on non-traditional profiles, and snowball sampling by inviting respondents to identify new participants. The selection of participants was carried out simultaneously with the collection and analysis of data. This selection was carried out until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that the additional information obtained from new informants did not provide new data that would improve the understanding of the research problem (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Instrument

The biographical-narrative interviews used with students and graduates investigated on family, social context of origin, university itinerary, experiences at university, transition to the labour market, perceptions of employability, and future expectations. The semi-structured interview guidelines with employers and university staff explored career path, employability skills, job selection strategies, non-traditional graduates in selection processes, the role of the university, and guidance services. There was had a specific section for employers and another for university staff, with the aim of gathering perspectives related to these two profiles.

The interview guidelines for students and graduates, employers and university staff were generated in the context of the European EMPLOY project (González-Monteagudo, 2010). These guidelines were constructed collaboratively by the lead researchers of the project, following a review of the relevant scientific literature. Subsequently, the three guidelines were adapted to the Spanish context by the national project team. Finally, the three guidelines were sent to two Spanish experts from outside the project, who validated the content, after the inclusion of some suggestions for improvement.

Data analysis procedure

The analysis was carried out from a double deductive-inductive perspective, by identifying textual fragments related to the research goals and by the identification and emerging categorization of units of meaning from the narratives produced. The use of the qualitative analysis program NVivo 11 allowed us to organize, manipulate, classify and analyse the data. Codification tasks have been carried out through the creation of `nodes´ by emerging themes. As a result, a set of categories was established, which correspond to the three objectives set: requirements and competencies demanded in the selection processes, barriers to access and limitations of the labour insertion processes in relation to the desirable ideals of equity and social justice.

The focus was not only on the 'what' (topics and contents), but also on the 'who', 'when' and 'why' (Riessman, 2008), opening up the research and analytical process to questions related to relationships, contexts and transition dynamics experienced by the participants.

Results

Requirements and competencies demanded in the selection processes

The job selection process usually has a first phase consisting of a curriculum screening and a second phase of interviewing. Regarding the first phase, employers point out that issues such as language skills or postgraduate qualifications are not essential requirements for the job, since in many cases, university degree training would be sufficient to perform the job. This is confirmed by Reyes, a manager of Human Resources:*"- Is a master's degree a must? -No. It would be appreciated, but it is by no means essential. With the knowledge that a degree provides, it would be more than enough"* (Reyes, private employer, male)

The CYD Foundation (Foundation for Knowledge and Development) (2018) states that the demand for highly qualified positions exceeds the supply. Consequently, this situation leads to an increased demand for highly qualified workers. The imbalance implies the existence, on the one hand, of unemployed university graduates and, on the other hand, of university graduates working in jobs for which such a high level of studies is not required (over-qualification). Although they are not explicitly demanded and although in many cases they are not necessary for the job, issues such as language or postgraduate qualifications place candidates with these profiles in a more advantageous position. Therefore, this additional training becomes a critical element of achieving qualified employment. Bartual andTurmo (2015) state that the importance of English is widespread, even when it is not necessary for the activity of the company, and that knowledge of languages is used as a discriminatory criterion in the recruitment of graduates. Human resources managers stated: *"Titles are important because the world is competitive. When you find someone with just a degree, saying "I can't speak English" … well, it's okay. But when you start to assess CVs, this will remain in the last place. That doesn't mean that you aren't the best candidate; you just weren't the best candidate at that moment"* (Mencar, private employer, female). *"If you have several* [applications],

you'll notice that; and let's say the requirements get higher according to the variety you have in front of you. I only ask for the number one point, which is to have university studies, but (...) this candidate has two points, because he also has a master's degree, and someone else also has languages (...) Mainly the degree and from there, it depends on the demand because I have to make selection" (Hista, private employer, female).

Students and graduates try to meet these requirements. In the following quotations, we can observe how the interviewees emphasise the practical value of these requirements since they become elements that allow them to be ahead of other candidates in the selection processes: "*As a rule, in the labour market it is valued to have a Master's degree, it is one more thing that sums, as well as the language; that is to say, those are the rules of the game in the labour market*" (Legna, graduate, male). "*The company uses any excuse to take people out of the initial job selection process… because the level of English and all those other requirements are just for throwing out CVs… Actually, nowadays, almost all the people who are unemployed are young and well educated*" (Gracia, student, female).

The second phase of the selection process usually consists of an individual or group interview, in which another set of skills is demanded. Hista and Teer, responsible for Human Resources, refer to communication skills, physical presence and say that, even though you are a good professional, you have to "know how to get that job": "*Even if you are very good, but if you do not know how to express yourself in what you want to say (...) it prevents you from finding work, not because you are not good professional but just because you really do not know how to get that job*" (Teer, employer, female). "*I'm interviewing, I'm doing interviews and (...) Wow, [what I look for is that] he's got some nerve talking, communicating skills, ability to express himself. I value that very much. And the physical presence too*" (Hista, employer, female).

We note that to successfully pass the interview, it is not only necessary to be competent for the job applied for, but also to possess additional characteristics and skills. In a highly competitive labour market, where a basic qualification loses value, other social resources and forms of cultural capital can have a significant impact (Merrill et al., 2019).

Access barriers encountered by non-traditional graduates

For non-traditional students and graduates it becomes an almost unattainable goal to respond to the set of demands that are requested from the labour market, since most have time limitations, economic difficulties, family or work responsibilities, lack of contacts and guidance and other difficulties: "*I have had to be, at the same time, in the university lectures and in the bar; leaving the bar and entering lectures, leaving lectures and entering the bar; that has taken me some time that others would have used to study, but the problem is that I had to pay my own studies*" (Arias, student, male).

The literature clearly shows that non-traditional students face financial pressures, family responsibilities, and other significant study constraints (Reay et al., 2009), which result in greater time constraints than traditional students (Burke & Dunn, 2006; Devlin et al., 2012). One immigrant student states that it is not always the best who arrive, but those who endure the pressure of this system. It is worth asking which social groups might be able to "hold their own" and place themselves in a more advantageous position in the labour market: "*This does not mean that those who endure are the most mediocre, but*

those who go all the way, those who have decided to go all the way. There are very valuable people that the system has not picked up (...) that the system should take more into account, because practice is showing us that it does not take it into account enough" (Alejandro, student, male).

The concept of meritocracy has worked as a seemingly objective and scientific measure, which has systematically disadvantaged minority groups (Burke et al., 2017; Gibson, 2015). According to Devlin (2013), it may be tempting to think that, with skill and will, university students of low socioeconomic status will succeed; after all, many have succeeded. However, with such a limited line of thought, it follows that the relative failure of minorities is a consequence of their own internal deficits, and not the result of the injustice of the system itself (Gillborn &Youdell, 2000). Through the logic of neo-liberalism, the individual is held responsible for "failure", instead of placing subjects in broader social and educational structures, systems and processes that reproduce inequalities (Burke & Jackson, 2007; Desjardins, 2013). This idea is reflected in the testimony of Teer, responsible for human resources in a health clinic: *"Maybe I want a person with your own characteristics, but your interview was awful, because you gave me information that I didn't need, you have showed me things that weren't ideal, which on the contrary are negative for you; you don't express yourself well; you don't know how to summarise the information that I want to hear (...) So, this means that you can't find a job"* (Teer, private employer, female).

Employers find soft communication skills, self-confidence, leadership and sociability valuable. These cross-cutting skills are more prevalent among graduates from advantaged socio-cultural backgrounds and less common among working class graduates (Read et al., 2018; Reay, et al. 2009). Studies focusing on selection processes in higher education show that language capital functions as a form of exclusion, because "good communication" is judged from a white, upper-class perspective (Burke & Jackson, 2007). One of the students stated that she felt insecure and lacked the skills to "know how to sell herself": *"I'm very shy, I think it would be hard for me to do the first interview, to sell myself, and I think that would be difficult (...) I'm a person with a lot of mistrust, in the sense that I'm very insecure about myself, I think about things a lot (...) the point is that I don't know how to sell myself. I am not very good at highlighting what I know or things like that"* (Manda, student, female).

It is important not to simply label non-traditional students and graduates as trouble-makers, although the general constraints they usually face must be recognized (O'Shea, 2016). The ways in which students differentiate themselves and experience these differences are often misunderstood as differences in innate potential and capacity, rather than as the interaction of embodied dispositions, intersubjective field relationships and social structures (McNay, 2008).

Limitations of the processes of labour insertion concerning the ideals of equity and social justice

Factors such as age, sex, ethnicity and social class influence an individual's employability. This fact implies that not all graduates who received the same education have similar work opportunities (Harvey, 2001). The discriminatory practices that graduates may face in the labour market are often overlooked in the employability debate (Harvey et al., 2017). Lore is a Roma girl, who says that those who `show up´ have

more difficulties in a selection process: *"I don't see it as unfavourable because my father is Roma, so it's normal. But it's true, I've already mentioned it, that there are people who have a stigma with that, in the appearance, (...) if you look like a Roma, then that makes people think otherwise (...) if you add to that you have Roma "appearance" and sort of an accent, then that's already..."* (Lore, graduate, female)

Ethnic minority graduates are less likely to be in full-time paid employment, and the unemployment rate is higher for African Americans and Latinos (Harvey et al., 2017). Teer is a human resources manager, and she says that a Peruvian doctor candidate who was selected had to change his accent and expressions. These statements reflect the fact that, even though non-traditional profiles are favoured for labour insertion, they believe that they need to hide or conceal their personal or social characteristics: *"You have to acquire the same form of communication (…). Not everything, because there are expressions that do not change, but there are others that do; and the doctor, for example, had to change certain expressions. Mostly because he had to adapt here"* (Teer, private employer, female).

The profile of the adult graduate is also a barrier to employment. The report on the employability of university graduates in Spain of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (2015) states that employment rates decrease for those graduates who finished with more than 40 years. A person in charge of Human Resources considers that "something had to happen" (in a negative sense) for that person to finish the degree at a mature age: *"That mature graduate has it very difficult, that graduate is going to have many difficulties because you already say: well, what happened? Because something happened to you so that you, at that age, could finish your degree, because you had to do something wrong before (...) So, it is very complicated; it is very, very complicated"* (Pepe, private employer, female).

Graduates with disabilities are less likely to be employed full time and their employment rates are particularly low (Brett, 2016; Harvey et al., 2017). Employers interviewed are reluctant to respond to the needs that people with disabilities may have in such a position. The testimony of Manda, a visually impaired girl, reflects how in the recruitment process she was evaluated based on her visual impairment without considering her ability for the job: *"It wasn't really an interview where they asked me what I could do or anything. I felt very uncomfortable, but not because of the interview itself, but because they were not really interviewing me about what I was studying, what I like to learn (...) They were really telling me: "you are no good because you can't see" (...) they judge me because of my visual disability, which sometimes happens. I thought it didn't happen, but it does"* (Manda, student, female).

The Foundation for Studies in Applied Economics (Conde-Ruiz & Marra, 2016) has published a report showing that women have worse rates of labour participation, suffer more unemployment or underemployment, and are overqualified for the job they hold. In addition, they were paid less and their family situation affected them more than men. We present the testimony of Maria, who is considering preparing for competitive examinations to enter public employment, since she perceives that being at the age to have children makes it difficult to be hired: *"At 35 I can probably have babies, so maybe they won't hire me or, if the company is in Madrid, at 35 they say: "this woman has stability, and she won't move from her place". Then it's more complicated. While in public employment competitions, as they are launched by the state, you just get it or not, no matter your situation"* (Maria, graduate, female).

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to understand the reality of non-traditional students and graduates in the current labour market in Spain. This research constitutes an original contribution to this under-researched topic.

Our first goal tried to identify the requirements and competencies demanded by employers in the selection processes. Although they are not always indispensable for the development of the job, this research has verified the importance of implicit requirements for labour insertion, such as postgraduate training and language skills. These issues are often used as a means of selecting candidates, simplifying and making the recruitment process for university graduates cheaper.

In a highly competitive labour market, small differences in forms of cultural capital can have a significant impact, according to Merrill et al. (2019). Employers refer to a series of characteristics and competencies that are considered crucial for successfully passing the job interview, such as communication skills, self-confidence and, in short, "knowing how to get that job". Those students who manage to position themselves in a more advantageous position or who are finally hired, are not necessarily better professionals, but they have successfully adjusted to the established selection process.

Another goal was to describe the barriers that non-traditional graduates face in accessing qualified employment. Results show they find obstacles to overcome the phases that usually make up the selection process. They have difficulties in reaching the implicit requirements due to time limitations, economic challenges, work or family responsibilities. Therefore, according to Gibson (2015), the discourses of meritocracy harm non-traditional students. In any case, graduates try to comply with such demands, usually not for a formative interest, but to place themselves in a more advantageous position vis-à-vis their competitors and to become more attractive when they present themselves to employers. Thus, graduates adjust to externally established interests, reflecting the ideological power and the lack of voice of graduates, especially non-traditional ones, in these processes.

In addition, the skills required to conduct interviews are not easily met by non-traditional profiles. These elements refer, in Bourdieu's terms, to what are considered valid and legitimate forms of cultural and social capital that help facilitate the success of students familiar with the norms and discourses of the middle and upper classes, but lead to the exclusion of students with low economic and cultural capital. The latter are then victims of a type of discrimination that prevents their success. Moreover, through the logic of neoliberalism, the individual is held responsible for "failure", instead of placing subjects in broader social and educational structures, systems and processes that reproduce inequalities (Burke & Jackson, 2007; Desjardins, 2013). Thus, the system justifies that the relative failure of minorities reflects their own internal deficits, and is not the result of the injustice of the system itself (Gillborn &Youdell, 2000).

The third objective was to explore the limitations of selection processes about the desirable ideals of equity and social justice. Although not explicitly, discrimination based on age, sex, ethnicity, background or disability still exists in selection processes (Brett, 2016; Conde-Ruiz & Marra, 2016; Harvey, 2001; Harvey et al., 2017). Therefore, non-traditional profiles assume the added burden of having to prove their suitability for the job they are applying for, beyond their non-traditional profile. There is a ten-

dency in the selection processes to hide or conceal the specific characteristics of these graduates, trying to offer an image that fits the traditional profile, which has been historically recognised as legitimate. All this shows the existence of erroneous recognition practices in the selection of candidates (Fraser, 1997). Often, such manifestations are so subtle that they are overlooked, but they once again reproduce social exclusions and inequalities (Burke & Whitty, 2018).

The inequalities found in the retention and success of university students related to their family backgrounds and available resources (Ariño& Llopis, 2011; Rodrigo et al., 2012) are also perceived in the transition to employment. In line with the contributions of Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), the expansion of participation alone does not lead to equality in the labour market or society.

Selection processes include rhetoric and expressions related to fair and equitable processes. However, these processes continue to reproduce inequalities and disadvantage non-traditional graduates. These discriminatory practices are often overlooked in debates on employability (Harvey et al., 2017), reflecting a market-oriented concept of employability and missing issues related to the social dimension.

Access to the labour market is more than a question of individual will and responsibility. It is necessary to change the approach based on the deficit, making employers, human resources managers, counsellors and university staff responsible for improving their practices and policies regarding access to employment, having equity and social justice as social and ethical references. Thus, selection processes should be limited to assessing those requirements that are necessary for the job to be performed, leaving aside demands that are discriminatory or of a social distinction nature. Such practices should reflect the heterogeneity of society's cultural background, highlight those elements that have historically been ignored or not sufficiently recognised, and manage labour selection processes from the perspective of the social justice paradigm.

The successive discussion of the three central categories of the study (requirements and competences demanded, barriers to access to employment, limitations of job selection processes) shows that there is a strong relationship between the three categories, as the conclusions generated in all three categories are consistent with each other. Indeed, the intensification and broadening of the requirements and skills demanded is detrimental to non-traditional profiles. This implies higher barriers to access to skilled employment. Moreover, the limitations of recruitment and human resources practices in companies increase the objective difficulties of graduates with situations of inequality or cultural or personal diversity. On the other hand, the perspectives coming from the three profiles of the participants (students and graduates; employers; university staff) have shown a great coincidence in certain aspects (criticism of university training; difficulty of adaptation of universities to a competitive and changing labour market; need for greater collaboration between the groups involved), but, on the other hand, they have highlighted important differences, particularly in relation to the recruitment processes developed by employers. The process of data collection and analysis has shown that theoretical saturation had been reached, in the sense that the last cases interviewed and the data analysed showed no relevant contributions to the content of the three core categories.

This research is a contribution in an under researched area, which has so far not been of much interest to universities, counsellors and employers. From this perspective, this study aims to positively influence debates, processes and practices on employability and

labour market access for non-traditional profiles, contributing to the enhancement of the social and inclusive role of higher education. In this context, taking into account the results of the study and the relevant literature, ten operational implications on employability and recruitment processes are presented, addressed to employers, university managers, counsellors and teaching staff: a) selection processes should be limited to assessing the relevant requirements for job performance, leaving aside discriminatory or socially distinctive requirements; b) to promote equality, heterogeneity and cultural diversity, enhancing access for underrepresented or discriminated groups; c) recruiters should question their own approaches and socially accepted assumptions about selection and access to employment; d) universities should avoid discourses and practices that favour meritocracy and competitiveness; e) to broaden the vision of employability, integrating perspectives of care, reciprocity, democracy, concern for the common good and responsibility; f) to make visible the history and culture of excluded and underrepresented groups in order to counteract existing stereotypes and prejudices; g) to foster students' personal awareness and confidence so that they can develop their career path with a greater sense of agency and aspiration; h) to improve teacher training on diversity awareness and care; i) to encourage students' reflection on their experiences and pathways, so that they become more self-aware about class, gender and ethnic inequalities; j) develop critical thinking skills in students, so that they learn to become social actors promoting justice and equality (Bartual&Turmo, 2015; Burke, Crozier & Ila Misiaszek, 2017; Merrill et al, 2019; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

For the progress in all these questions it is necessary the networking of the groups involved, including students, counsellors, lecturers, managers, employers and other key stakeholders. The commitment to an inclusive and fair university implies understanding the ideological and political perspective that underlies the different ways of addressing employability and access to the labour market of non-traditional groups. This challenge transcends the context of this research and relates to social and educational practices based on ideals of emancipation, common good, equity, individual autonomy and social empowerment. It is necessary to take into account student inequalities in order for the university to develop an inclusive role and contribute to the deepening of democracy (Giroux, 2016).

The two main limitations of this research were the following: a) the difficulty for employers to avoid the discourse of political correctness and to express real practices regarding the job selection processes of non-traditional graduates; to handle this issue, cross-checks have been established (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975); b) this research has been carried out in a single university, which prevents the results from being generalisaded. However, the evidence and findings presented may be transferable to similar contexts, to enhance debates, policies and good practices on employability and higher education.

References

Adecco. (2016). *Informe Adecco sobre el futuro del trabajo en España.* Adecco.

Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación. (2009). *Los procesos de inserción laboral de los titulados universitarios en España. Factores de facilitación y de obstaculización.* ANECA.

Ariño, A., Llopis, E., & Soler, I. (2012). *Desigualdad, diversidad y universidad. Condiciones de vida y de participación de los estudiantes universitarios en España,Ecovipeu 2012.* Campus Vivendi, Observatorio de la Vida y Participación de los Estudiantes y Ministerio de Educación.

Ariño, A., & Llopis, E. (2011). ¿Universidad sin clases? Condiciones de vida de los estudiantes universitarios en España (*Eurostudent IV).* Ministerio de Educación.

Atkinson, R. (1998). *The life story interview*. Sage.

Bartual, M.T., &Turmo, J. (2015). Educación superior y competencias para el empleo. El punto de vista de los empresarios. *Revista Complutense de Educación, 27*(3), 1211-1228. doi: 10.5209/rev_RCED.2016.v27.n3.47645.

Benson, R., Hewitt, L., Heagney, M., Devos, A., &Crosling, G. (2010). Diverse pathways into higher education: Using students' stories to identify transformative experiences. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 50*, 26-53.

Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S. J. (1975). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*. John Wiley.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* Polity Press.

Brett, M. (2016). Disability and Australian higher education: Policy drivers for increasing participation. In A. Harvey, C. Burnheim& M. Brett (Eds*.), Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of A Fair Chance for All* (pp. 87-108). Springer Publishing.

Brown, P., & Hesketh, A. (2004). *The mismanagement of talent: employability and jobs in the knowledge economy.* Oxford University Press.

Burke, P. J, Crozier, G., & Ila Misiaszek, L. (2017). *Changing pedagogical spaces in higher education: diversity, inequalities and misrecognition.* Routledge.

Burke, P. J., & Dunn, S. (2006). *Communicating Science: exploring reflexive pedagogical approaches. Teaching in Higher Education, 11*(2), 219-232. doi: 10.1080/13562510500527743.

Burke, P. J., & Jackson, S. (2007). *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions*. Routledge.

Burke, P. J., & Whitty, G. (2018). Equity Issues in Teaching and Teacher Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(3), 272-284. doi: 10.1080/0161956X.2018.1449800.

Conde-Ruiz, J.I., & Marra, I. (2016). *Gender gaps in the Spanish labour market. Estudios sobre la Economía Española 2016/32.* FEDEA.

Crosling, G., Thomas L., &Heagney, M. (2008). *Improving student retention in higher education. The role of teaching and learning*. Routledge.

Desjardins, R. (2013). Considerations of the impact of neoliberalism and alternative regimes on learnings and its outcomes: With an empirical example based on the level and distribution of adult learning. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 23*(3), 182-203. doi: 10.1080/09620214.2013.790659.

Devlin, M. (2013). Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: conceptualising the success of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(6), 939-949. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2011.613991.

Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education*. Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

EAE Business School. (2015). *Empleabilidad de la Población Cualificada.* ÍndiceAutonómico *de Empleabilidad 2015*. Strategic & Research Center EAE Business School.

Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research. Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.

Endes, Y. Z. (2015). Overseas Education Process of Outgoing Students within the Erasmus Exchange Programme. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 174,* 1408-1414. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.768.

Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition.* Routledge.

Fundación Conocimiento y Desarrollo. (2018). *Informe CYD 2018.* CYD.

Gibson, S. (2015). When rights are not enough: What is? Moving towards new pedagogy for inclusive education within UK universities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(8), 875-886. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1015177.

Gillborn, D., &Youdell, D. (2000). *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform and equity*. Open UniversityPress.

Giroux, H. A. (2016). La educación superior y las políticas de ruptura. *Revista Entramados-Educación y Sociedad,3*, 15 – 26.

González-Monteagudo, J. (2010). Biografía, identidad y aprendizaje en estudiantes universitarios no tradicionales. Estudio de caso de una mujer trabajadora. *Profesorado. Revista de Currículum y Formación del Profesorado, 14*(3), 131-147.

Gore, J., Barron, R. J., Holmes, K., & Smith, M. (2016). Who says we are not attracting the best and brightest? Teacher selection and the aspirations of Australian school students. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *43*, 527–549. doi: 10.1007/s13384-016-0221-8.

Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Edwards, D., Clarke, J., & Reyes, K. (2017). *Student equity and employability in higher education. Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.* Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Harvey, L. (2001). Defining and Measuring Employability. *Quality in Higher Education, 7*(2), 97-109. doi: 10.1080/13538320120059990.

Mareque, M., & De Prada, E. (2018). Evaluación de las competencias profesionales a través de las prácticas externas: incidencia de la creatividad. *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, *36*(1), 203-219. doi: 10.6018/rie.36.1.275651.

McNay, L. (2008). *AgainstRecognition.*Polity.

Merrill, B., Finnegan, F., O'Neill, J., & Revers, S. (2019). 'When it comes to what employers are looking for, I don't think I'm it for a lot of them': class and capitals in, and after, higher education. *Studies in HigherEducation,45*(1), 163-175. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1570492.

Michavila, F., Martínez, J.M., Martín-González, M., García-Peñalvo, F.J., Cruz-Benito, J., & Vázquez-Ingelmo, A. (2018). *Barómetro de Empleabilidad y Empleo Universitarios. Edición Máster 2017.* Observatorio de Empleabilidad y Empleo Universitarios.

Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. (2015). *Datos y cifras del sistema universitario español. Curso 2014-15.* MECD.

O'Shea, S. (2016). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': first-in-family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *HigherEducation, 72*, 59-78. doi: 10.1007/s10734-015-9938-y.

Ortiz, L., & Rodríguez, J. (2016). *Expansión educativa y devaluación parcial de los títulos.* Observatorio Social de "la Caixa".

Padilla, T., Martínez, I., & Herrera, D. (2019). Just facilitating access or dealing with diversity? Non- traditional students' demands at a Spanish university. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults,* 1-15. doi: 10.3384/rela.2000-7426.ojs850.

Pallisera, M., Fullana, J., Planas, A., & Del Valle, A. (2010). La adaptación al espacio europeo de educación superior en España. Los cambios/retos que implica la enseñanza basada en competencias y orientaciones para responder a ellos. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación,52*(4), 1-13. doi: 10.35362/rie5241784.

Purcell, K., Wilton, N., & Elias, P. (2007). Hard lessons for life-long learners? Age and experience in the graduate labour market. *Higher Education Quarterly, 61*(1), 57-82. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2006.00338.x.

Read, B., Burke, P. J., & Crozier, G. (2018). 'It is like school sometimes': friendship and sociality on university campuses and patterns of social inequality. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 41*(1), 70-82. doi: 10.1080/01596306.2018.1457626.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 32*(1), 1–19. doi: 10.1080/01411920902878925.

Riessman, C.K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage.

Rodrigo, M. F., Molina, J. G., García-Ros, R., & Pérez-González, F. (2012). Efectos de interacción en la predicción del abandono en los estudios de Psicología. *Anales de Psicología, 28*(1), 113-119.

Strauss, A.,& Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques.* Sage.

Tomlinson, M., & L. Holmes. (2017). *Graduate Employability in Context.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Vera, J.A., & Rodríguez, C.K. (2017). Capital cultural y competencias digitales en estudiantes universitarios. *Ventana informática, 36,* 99-116. doi: 10.30554/ventanainform.36.2389.2017.

Zipin, L., & Brennan, M. (2006). Meeting literacy needs of pre-service cohorts: Ethical dilemmas for socially just teacher educators. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 34*(3), 333–351. doi: 10.1080/13598660600927513.

Zuhäl, Y. (2015). Overseas Education Process of Outgoing Students within the Erasmus Exchange Programme. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 174,* 1408-1414. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.768.