

# The transition between university and work

## Young adults looking for themselves

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper looks at the transition from university to work place as an educational moment, with repercussions on the creation of personal and social identity. It is an important opportunity for learning, change, reflexivity and human development, despite the presence of numerous critical factors. Hence the need, for the young adult looking for the first job, to develop the right awareness to deal with uncertainties, choices and inconveniences related to this passage of individual history and, for sector studies and university system, to consider more carefully the specificities of this phase. The paper also presents in summary the results of an exploratory survey on the transition, to deepen some trends, and outlines the vocational training tasks and the responsibilities of university teaching management to bring the work, and its practices, increasingly at the center of the attention of institutional, territorial and political actors*

**Keywords:** young adults, transition, university, work, identity, vocational training

### 1. BEYOND THE “LIMBO” OF TRANSITION

There is a particular moment in individual history, immediately following the conclusion of an

important training course, such as the academic one, during which the person is called to make some decisive choices for his professional future which affect, in the case of young people, also on the structuring of adult identity.

The transition from the world of training to that of work identifies the time between the end of the training moment and the beginning of the employment one.

This phase is a crucial event in personal life, varies according to the generation concerned [1], holds important potential in defining the career of individuals and, at the same time, influences macroprocesses such as economic productivity, effectiveness of the education system, cc.

It is a particularly complex period, characterized by a plurality of possible options: the hypothesis of returning to the training circuit, to improve further; the idea of a transfer, perhaps abroad, for an internship or to learn a foreign language better; the desire to enter the world of work immediately, sometimes frustrated by the continuing employment crisis and the general transformation of the professional market.

In the transition, the person experiences the time, which is not easy, of change, waiting and uncertainty. Its duration is variable and depends on some variables: the characteristics of the curriculum,

the gender factor, the psycho-social profile, individual expectations and specificities, the employment and social trends of one's own territory, the incisiveness of the policy tools active for youth groups, family influence, etc. which are combined with wider variables such as the liberalization of markets, globalization, the development of new technologies.

It is a period that can take place under the sign of inactivity or of intense self-experimentation, in a game of multiple balances between personal resources, expectations, external influences, expected behaviors. The choices made do not always obey the rational cost/benefit calculation and a certain weight is attributable to random events [2].

Within the studies on the school-work transition, even today, the themes to be explored and the issues to be analyzed are many and it is still quite far from having a detailed knowledge of the social, cultural and economic processes that preside over them or that derive from them. Also in the international literature the concept of "school-to-work transition" is relatively recent [3] in the face of a general, scarce practical impact of intervention policies in support of youth employment [4].

The discontinuity of work experiences, the risk of unemployment, the continuous demand for adaptation, the rapid obsolescence of knowledge has allowed the transition to expand beyond the phase of life that coincides with the transition to adulthood, to connote a condition permanent, non-linear, cyclical and recursive that accompanies the plurality of passages that can affect working life today.

For this reason, the transition from training to work is not to be considered only as a sort of "pathology" produced by flexibility, or as a more or less prolonged passage towards adult life. In the key of long life learning, by our point of view, it can be read as a structural condition with which all individuals, from modernity to the present day, are confronted. In this sense, it is useful to change the perspective with

which it has traditionally been analyzed and to assume a paradigm of a procedural nature that highlights how it is realized through a series of events, in which expectations, constraints and opportunities give rise to dynamic and interdependent, changing and open to outcomes that are anything but obvious.

Young people have been hit hardest by the global economic crisis of recent years, which has led to high unemployment rates in Europe and many other countries. Competition for talent is fierce among organizations, while many companies suffer from low productivity and unused human capital. For these reasons, it is more important than ever to support young adults in achieving a positive transition to their working life through an adequate understanding of the critical factors affecting it [5].

In Italy, for example, the younger generations are not fully prepared for the new socio-political-economic challenges and the ever-increasing levels of competition present in a society that has to continually deal with economic and social changes on a global scale and with the employment trends of other European countries. The training system fails to guarantee equitable access for the various population groups to higher and more qualifying study paths, fueling inequality and compressing social dynamism. In our country, there is also a population that is among the oldest from a demographic point of view which, in addition to having to deal with the problem of the economic sustainability of the elderly, pays for the delayed conquest by young people of full autonomy, with an evident impact on the timing of realization of some important life goals [6]. Within the European panorama, in Italy (and subsequently in Greece) the probability of employment within one or two years from the end of the training course is lower and, moreover, there is a North-South territorial gap (to the detriment of this last), also present at the European level [7], with a clear gender difference that penalizes women, even in the presence of a higher level of

education than men [8].

In addition, the duration of the transition time from training to employment influences the possibility of entering the labor market according to quality and adequately remunerated regulatory and contractual paths [9]. Longitudinal studies have shown that facing this phase with ease is indicative of promising career developments [10].

Taking note of the critical issues that the transition to work brings with it, with repercussions not only on the career path, but on the construction of the personal and professional life project [11], here we want to look at it not as a more or less prolonged period of inertia and unnerving occupational waiting, often full of frustration and discomfort, but at an important opportunity, especially for the young person, of personal and social empowerment. This is the right time to do many things: gain information on the characteristics and trends of the employment market, which is sometimes lacking; test their resources in training or internship periods; perfect their skills, specify preferences, desires.

The current situation of general criticality of the labor market requires, among other aspects, legislative reforms, in all OECD countries, to encourage and protect youth employment and thus help young people to enter the professional market without risk or to get stuck in the trap of temporary work [12].

The key, once again, is in adequate training: providing young graduates with specific adaptive resources can increase their chances of finding satisfactory employment [13].

## **2. YOUTH, WORK AND IDENTITY**

Work takes on the role of a backbone in the process of building individual and social identity. It has always represented the emblem of formal entry into adulthood [14]. From a pedagogical point of view, work is "experience and project" that goes beyond

being an instrument for acquiring some resources to become a fundamental device in the definition of individual identity, as well as in the perception and practice of belonging. It permeates training processes and education, intertwining with the task of citizen training and personality development [15].

The process of building personal identity takes place, from a psychosocial perspective [16], through the experimentation of apparently dissonant dimensions such as continuity and discontinuity, stability and change which in any case guarantee integrity and unity to the person, even in the face to major changes. In this sense, the transition period between training and work can, in effect, be associated with the Eriksonian moratorium: a typical moment of adolescence, of waiting and of active experimentation to seek and identify one's own place in the own social context of belonging.

Faced with objective difficulties in placing oneself on the social scale and defining oneself in relation to a group or community, the professional role represents an important point of reference for recognizing oneself and for communicating one's identity to others. If the question "Who am I?" has always drawn on answers and definitions from the world of professions, today, due to the flexibility required by the system, the link between identity and employment is particularly problematic.

Work is the first factor in social life to feel strongly threatened by uncertainty; especially in Western societies, the automation and computerization of tasks and roles generates a lower volume of human resource use within production companies such as to even talk about the "end of work" [17]. At the same time, new models of capital management are emerging.

The professional one is also an area in which there is a massive invasion of commodification processes [18]: of knowledge, skills, competences, etc.

The historical, social, economic and cultural

conditions in which we grow up today influence the development of individual identity [19] and are profoundly different from the past. Young adults live longer in the family of origin, known as the "adolescent family" [20] and, consequently, parents feel the duty to further exercise their protective, nurturing and financial support functions even if the children they have long since reached the age of majority, but they do not have a stable job and are not self-sufficient.

Istat [21] and Eurostat [22] data show how employment relationships, for the young adult group, are now for the most part fixed-term, with a very high probability of precariousness.

The indeterminacy of the working conditions that await young people can affect two important characteristics of the identity construction process: the ability to define oneself and the possibility of realizing one's aspirations [23].

We are aware that the professional role may not be the same throughout life and it may happen, at times, that it is not the result of an intentional choice on the part of the subject but rather dictated, for example, by emergency reasons such as supporting oneself.

When you rely on the most profitable job offer, or the most available on the market at that time, without tying this choice to an intentionally organized professional project that meets your personal characteristics, expectations and motivational roots cannot be solid. Thus it happens that the workplace becomes like a "camping", in which the tent is pitched for a few days, but which could be abandoned at any time, if the comforts offered are considered insufficient or unsatisfactory [24].

Following the introduction of the model that R. Sennett defines as "flexible capitalism", and in the context of the more general transition from labor capitalism to consumer capitalism, within the professional itinerary of the individual there is an

objective difficulty in draw a narrative continuity from the professional roles, sometimes heterogeneous, that everyone is called to fill during their existence, such as to legitimize and give meaning to their life project: "how can we decide which of our traits deserves to be kept within an impatient society that focuses on the moment? These are the challenges that the new capitalism poses to character" [25].

The main problems would concern the difficulty in pursuing long-term goals in an economy that revolves around the short term; the maintenance of mutual loyalty and commitment bonds within companies subject to constant restructuring.

Professional identity is severely tested within organizational mechanisms structured around precariousness, temporariness, the risk of unemployment.

Although the transition from a moment of training to entering the job market today may not exclusively interest the young person, it is true that he, more than others, lives this delicate phase with particular evolutionary commitment.

Being in the transition provides quite advantageous dimensions such as the possibility of safely exploring the external world and its dynamics, dedicating oneself to the analysis of one's inner world, searching for desires, needs and expectations, preparing oneself to implement life choices in a more aware and responsible.

At the same time, however, employment uncertainty and economic precariousness expose the risk of greater dependence on the family system, to a sort of problematic procrastination of the typical tasks of adulthood (independent housing choice, choice of partner, procreation, etc.), to a conflict between the current self and possible selves, to vulnerability from a motivational point of view, to the inhibition of planning skills, to a certain disengagement towards the future perspective, generating, in some cases, the conditions predisposing to discomfort and to social

exclusion.

The particular phase of the transition, to be useful for the development of the young adult, must be conducted in a dynamic way, as a moment of growth in which to recognize one's knowledge, skills and competences and use them as a point not of arrival, but of departure in putting into practice effective choices and actions, even in a general framework of uncertainty in the professional world.

The possibility of intercepting formal learning opportunities (enrollment in specialization and in-depth courses, internships, etc.) and informal (volunteering, sports practices, travel experiences, etc.) allows you to acquire knowledge and advantageous experiences to develop an image self explicit, realistic with respect to context variables, predisposed to change.

For this reason, the importance of having empathic, relational and emotional self-management skills should not be underestimated in order to face the first encounter, not always easy, with the job market.

It is then up to the welfare system and youth social policies to build adequate "catwalks" to face the transition period and cope with the waste of energy, the uncertainty of outcomes, possible disappointments, the load of expectations, etc The transition phase thus becomes an important opportunity for learning, reflection and human training in the belief that individual professional history should not be undergone but managed, that is, consciously acted out and appropriately governed.

### **3. A PARENTHESIS. RESULTS OF A WORK TRANSITION SURVEY**

We participated in a research qualitative project, promoted by "Luigi Sturzo Research Institute" (Rome) and by the Faculty of Education of the Salento University (Lecce), which involved a portion of young people from Apulia (South Italy) in

the transition phase between training and work. The sample (about two hundred people who have just graduated) was interviewed using a multiple choice questionnaire which used the Likert scale for measuring attitude.

Some of the results of that survey are briefly resumed here to frame the particular critical areas that have emerged more closely and which, probably, can be used to understand, confirm and also deepen some important aspects of the transition.

It is a group of young adults who have conducted a very specific training course or who had already been entered, albeit recently, in the world of work in the area of cultural heritage.

The subjects interviewed affirm that the choice of the university course was entirely personal, little conditioned by the family, in very few cases influenced by school vocational training, based on study perspectives considered interesting and taking into account the opportunities regarding the possible increase of their general culture. All this motivates their preference, much more than the job prospects. It therefore seems that the choice of the university course cannot be traced back to rational elements, but is expressed and pursued in highly self-centered terms. From the same survey emerges a strong desire of recent graduates to experiment with a multiplicity of occupational contexts, before identifying the most on line with one's expectations and actual skills. Young people also say they are willing to change the work project they originally set out for themselves, in search of the one that best suits their aspirations. The component of experimentation, dynamism and vivacity that we wanted to associate with this phase therefore appears to be confirmed.

This datum, however, implies and supposes that the choice of the course of academic study must have been oriented towards pathways that are not really specific, and rather broad enough to allow for subsequent options and specifications.

This also explains the widespread need, clearly expressed by the interviewees, to perfect the skills already acquired, and also clarifies the willingness (or perhaps even the desire) to get back into the game despite having just graduated from the master's degree. It is not surprising, then, that young people recognize that they have been able to develop solid theoretical foundations, usually considered in very positive terms, but encountering a certain distance from the context of the professions due to the lack of internships and internships which they say they could scarcely enjoy during the years spent in university.

In a framework of this type, which restores the image and the problems that are usually linked to the idea of transition, three trends can nevertheless be grasped which seem worthy of emphasis because they solicit reflections capable of broadening and deepening the themes of vocational training and issues related to the choice of profession and employment.

The first general fact, on which to focus attention, is related to the marked propensity of the interviewees to move to look for a job.

Indeed, these subjects appreciate the transfer as far as it leads. The data could suggest a sort of "evasion trend", motivated by socio-cultural reasons or by existential hardships. In fact, in the perception of the young people interviewed, it seems that the region of residence is not perceived as an attractive and stimulating territory from a professional point of view, due to the actual difficulties of integration: perhaps they have faced the possibility of excessive discrepancy qualitative compared to the qualification achieved, or characterized by the provisional nature and temporariness of the position to be filled. The fact is that they try to escape far away.

The image of foreign countries, which the matured sample, has been strongly affected by the explosion of information and telematic technologies recorded in the last twenty years. The internet network, in particular, allowing to communicate and interact in

real time with every point of the planet, greatly influences the perception of space and time: both participate in a double movement of "symbolic expansion" and "perceptual contraction" [26] and are involved in a process of "disaggregation", which involves the unblinding of social relationships and their restructuring over indefinite space-time arcs, under the influence of even very distant variables [27].

The second trend is linked to the first: among the employment search methods, a prevalent slice of the sample prefers the consultation of offers published online. Along inside the informal channel in the search for a job, usually represented by the "word of mouth" among their knowledge, today the network is configured as a device to combine professional supply and demand already widely used and in strong expansion. On the web it is possible to consult a very high number of job offers every day by simply visiting the recruiting sites. In some cases, they are structured in such a way as to provide targeted and timely information, so as to make the internet a gigantic employment agency, which is also systematically used by a substantial part of the companies.

The interviewees show that they know and like the potential provided by the network which, despite its limitations, has advantages: more information and more contacts in less time.

The data in question, among other aspects, recalls the complex problem of online participation: access to information on the web is, yes, free and potentially possible for anyone with an internet connection but, still today, it highlights inequalities and points out fractures (generational, economic, cultural, social, etc.) even in the advanced societies of the so-called "cultural capitalism" [28].

Twenty years after the beginning of the third millennium, it must be recognized that the internet is still an elitist phenomenon: typical of the industrialized Western world, of the younger, more affluent groups. For these reasons, the network almost tends to build

"visibility hierarchies" [29], based on prestige and power. The same demographic analyzes of Internet users and on-line recruitment sites indicate that the users are generally highly qualified people, with a high level of education and, of course, with a good experience in the field of new technologies [30].

The third trend identifies a certain distrust of territorial employment centers and a very low attendance of them. The interviewees prefer to rely more on a virtual channel, such as the internet, and not on a "real" one, in the sense of tangible, present and more accessible on their own territory as the employment centers.

It is reasonable to assume that among the young members of the sample there is a form of distrust towards institutions, especially those traditionally responsible for managing the problems related to the search for a profession. This would not be surprising, if what emerges from a severe national study is true for which it can be stated that the institutional mediation of the relationship between school or post-school education and entry into the world of work no longer enjoys any trust [31].

The trend would probably derive from not having found, in these bodies, effective support measures and adequate ways of professional guidance; there would be no effective mediation capacity between supply and demand for work, adequate responses, convenient stimuli.

#### **4. EDUCATE TO CHOICE. THE TASKS OF ACADEMIC GUIDANCE**

From the reflections carried out so far and from the results of the research above, a series of solicitations may derive, which are summarized here. They are useful for identifying some directions of intervention and as many paths for reflection for academic vocational training as a complex and permanent function, not limited only to the training-to-

work transition phase.

The vocational training, for the objectives it sets, is identified with the same educational process, integrates and goes beyond the phase of the simple supply of information to configure itself as an important opportunity to educate to continuous change, autonomy, aptitude for provide appropriate responses to the environment, to take a stand at the right time and in the most appropriate form [32].

The outgoing university guidance services prove to be fundamental in explaining the characteristics of the different occupations and the framework in which they are placed, thus contributing to the preparation of the subject who is faced with the transition through deepening, identification and validation of interests and skills in view of the development of a professional project and job placement.

From our point of view, there are three tasks for university guidance in the perspective of transition.

The first task concerns education in choice. Sometimes an employment perspective is chosen by obeying reasons relating to one's own interests, personal inclinations, which are not always actually experienced in the field and, often, only stated. They should be able to combine the consideration of other factors, such as the knowledge of the needs of the local context, the careful evaluation of the more general trends of the labor market, the awareness of the absorption rate of the context of the professions with respect to some profiles.

Educating to choice, in proactive and not self-centered terms, is also useful for countering the myths and fashions of contemporary culture that can affect the formation of personal identity and the vocational skills of the person, such as the myth of autonomous realization, that of spontaneism, the provisional nature of the choices, the identity of the borrowed. On closer inspection, for example, the myth of self-realization on the one hand seems to emphasize the role of the person

and his autonomous choices, but in fact it isolates him and deprives him of any vocation, if the latter term is to be understood as an appeal that it comes from the context, from the social, from the culture, and therefore as a response that the subject is required to give [33].

A second cluster of issues and tasks concerns the need to bring the theme of guidance back to the center of education and training interest.

Academic guidance identifies a complex function, to be declined both on the training front and on that of professionalization, with different tasks for teachers, for educational structures, for university services. By expanding the framework of responsibilities and directions of intervention (incoming selection, career monitoring, quality assessment, prevention of dispersion, mentoring, support for motivation, introduction to the profession,

## **5. EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND TRANSITION CARE**

Talking about management of academic vocational training means elaborating a management vision of learning, which allows for strategic-planning application choices, related to the reading of needs, identification of problems, hypothesis verification and evaluation of results, within an organic framework of systemic interventions to be planned and implemented.

In terms of vocational training, a neglected segment in Italian universities is precisely that relating to the transition to work [34]. The mere presence of the curricular internship, within the educational offer of the degree course, may not be sufficient to acquire the appropriate and useful skills for a professional integration. Probably, moreover, the vocational training when it is activated only at the exit, it does not always bring about the necessary maturation to project itself into the world of work.

It is necessary to devote more attention to

etc.), it becomes clear that it is no longer possible to ignore promote a "educational management of guidance". It is a question of elaborating a management vision that allows strategic-planning application choices, no longer exposed to the heterogeneous occasionality of interventions.

A third direction of intervention concerns the opportunity to work so that the problem of vocational training does not pertain solely to the university institution, but is declined as a shared responsibility among the other stakeholders: families, contexts and training and specialization bodies, informal, the media, the territory and its needs, the world of professions, the university, which remains open to sharing best practices, developing synergies, and interinstitutional collaboration.

"care for the transition" [35], that is "to be concerned with the gift of time, the gift of ideas, the gift of thinking about innovative spaces, original teaching, expert skills to reinforce baggage of knowledge, to imagine a future beyond and different for today's young adults, who will be the professionals of tomorrow (p.46) [and so] implement the internship as a training action, introduce work-related teaching, open to testimonies privileges of territorial actors, with the aim of bringing work and its practice into university classrooms "(p. 50).

This can allow universities to be permanently linked to the world of work, its dynamics and needs, allowing young graduates to enter it more easily.

The world of work is constantly evolving and the university seems to struggle to keep up with it: for this, system actions are needed, agreed upon by all stakeholders.

The education of the future requires educational institutions to become, from traditional spaces for the transmission of knowledge, to places in



which to "teach how to live", to guide, guide, accompany the construction of the human person in their own identity and professional development [36].

In this director, educational management has a challenging and crucial task in the perspective of transition: to be the glue between the protagonists of the training process, in the diversity of their skills and expectations, through a management model of a participatory type, oriented towards growth of all the services in charge and the development of the people involved.

Only if understood as a "shared responsibility" [37], each within its own sphere but together with the others, will educational management be able to respond to the challenges of change and the expectations of those who still intend to invest personal resources in the university and planning intentionality to become a better citizen [38].

It is hoped, in the years to come, a significant improvement and a general strengthening of collaboration between all contexts dedicated to training and those of work. Valid and appropriately designed of vocational training and management actions can act as a support for the transition from training to work, allowing easier crossings between the two important moments of personal history

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