

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT FROM BEGINNING TO END AND BEYOND

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The present volume is the result of a three year PRIN Research project called *Employability and Competences*, which was developed in Italy in order to respond to the need for innovation and modernization in higher education. A consortium of universities (Padova, Firenze, Siena, Napoli Parthenope) conducted the research within the higher education system starting March 2014 and ending March 2017. The volume collects a relevant number of contributions of scholars that take part to the last conference in Florence, organized in March 2017.

This book had a significant impact, since it is calling into question the long tradition of teaching (transmission) in Italian universities, the innovation of teaching and learning in higher education and the challenge of employability consulting the Italian scientific community around four major foci of the research: didactics, traineeship, guidance and calling, and employability and transitions.

The purpose of the research was to generate new strategies, models, methodologies to modernize the traditional Italian university system, to create space for teaching and learning and to connect the university programs with the professional communities in order to improve employability after the economic crises of 2008.

Guiding research questions for the book included: How can we innovate the teaching and learning in higher education in our traditional context? How can we listen to the needs of the students and connect them with those of the labor world? How can we promote work-related teaching and learning in our courses? How can we manage the transitions from the university to the labor market, how can we train faculty to respond to these new challenges and students to be active and engage them during the college?

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These questions were explored by five research groups of four Universities (Padova, Firenze, Siena and Napoli Parthenope). Surveys and qualitative research designs developed with interviews, focus groups and observation. More than 20.000 students responded to the surveys and were involved in the studies.

This book is organized around two main parts.

Part I discusses the related research themes and how they help to establish a strong rationale for the PRIN project.

In chapter I Michelangelo Vianello, together with Anna Dalla Rosa e Barbara Barbieri, presents a three-wave longitudinal study, that investigated the role of mentoring on calling development, in the second chapter Barbara Barbieri discusses some reflections and results arose from the study on the calling construct presented by the colleagues of University of Padova.

In chapter II Monica Fedeli and Daniela Frison introduced innovative constructs of teaching: student voice, work-related teaching and learning and the related implications in higher education. The aim is to share with the community the results of the research, how we can listen the voice of our students and how we can design work-related practices for promoting employability in the classroom. Some case studies, data analysis and methodological recommendations in both contributions are presented to give clear indications of some implications for practice.

Claudio Melacarne, and Maura Striano present the internship and the importance of supporting this kind of situated and embedded learning experience for students and how it can generate awareness about their future professional choices.

Francesco Lo Presti, Bruno Rossi and Antonella Cunti focus their chapters on guidance as a pedagogical tool, and considers how guidance can develop meaningful paths for young people at the beginning of their university career. The main areas of interventions, the strengthens and weaknesses of the practices are discussed as well as how to improve some of these approaches to be more successful.

In the last chapter of Part I Vanna Boffo and Paolo Federighi deal with the last segment of the chain of higher education: employability and transitions, in particularly how to promote employability in higher education and how to support students during the transition from university to work and to attempt to match and connect the competences taught at university with those needed by the labor market.

These topics were discussed during the final conference organized in Florence with the contributions of international scholars invited to add global perspectives into the research and to create and stimulate the community to go beyond these results and to develop new ideas on the basis of the research results collected in the last three years.

Part II of the book is a rich collection of descriptive and empirical studies on the main topics of the project. We asked colleagues of the Italian pedagogical community to present their contributions in order to enlarge the perspectives and with the aim of improving, innovating and changing our higher education system. This aim is encouraged in the report on *Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* (European Commission, 2013) which states: higher education institutions need to create environments and feedback mechanisms and systems to allow students' views, learning experience, and their performance to be taken into account (p. 28).

Another key recommendation is the involvement of students and business in curricula design, such that: «curricula should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnerships among teaching staff, students, graduates and labor market actors, drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability» (p. 41). Furthermore, there should be an emphasis on providing counseling and mentoring services helping ensure that make their way to graduation and beyond. This part of the book is divided in four sections and each section deals with a theme related to the project.

Chapter I Didactics is a collection of studies on the didactics in the higher education. Valentina Grion, Concetta Tino, Nadia Sansone, Donatella Cesareni, Ilaria Bortolotti, Glenda Galeotti, Gilda Esposito, Daniela Maccario, and Nicola Adrian present some issues related to teaching in classroom, and to promote service learning, teachers' development and innovation involving students and teachers together.

Chapter II Internship deals with informal learning setting and traineeship. Giordana Szpunar, Barbara Barbieri, Manuela Gallerani, Cristina Palmieri, Andrea Galimberti, Tania Morgigno, Marina Barioglio, Maria Benedetta, Gambacorti Passerini, Alessandra Romano, and Patrizia Sposetti. This section is a collection of practices and studies developed in higher education and schools in order to give value to the informal experiences of situated and embedded learning, considering the role of students and teachers and how they can create partnership with organizations and labor market.

Chapter III Guidance & Calling is dedicated to the educational guidance and how to promote educational development during the guidance process. Furthermore, this section explores the new concept of 'calling' and its role in education and for the development of students' skills in order to improve their persistence in higher education and facilitate their entrance in the labor market.

Pierluigi Malavasi, Sergio Bellantonio, Natascia Bobbo, Silvia Lazzaro, Valentina Paola Cesarano, Marianna Capo, Maria Carolina Galdo, Maura Striano, Alessandra Priore, Marco Schiavetta, Sonia Startari, and

Barbara Barbieri present studies and practices related to guidance and calling developed in different fields of higher education from the medical to the international setting and with students with disability that give us a rich range of insights to take into consideration in our pedagogical community for future research.

Chapter IV Employability and Transition discusses from different perspectives the need to manage and improve the work transitions in higher education in order to foster employability. Massimiliano Costa, Andrea Strano, Maria Luisa Iavarone, Fausta Sabatano, Gaia Gioli, Cristina Lisimberti, Stefano Polenta, Carlo Terzaroli, Francesca Torlone, and Alessandra Vischi offer the readers classroom and informal learning experiences and practices. They provide concrete suggestions how to develop or implement new strategies for supporting students in the transitions and creating employability skills during college. Policies and university career services are taken into consideration as well as part of the discussion for the area.

In conclusion a personal note and acknowledgments is provided about the people who managed, supported and developed this project with us. We mention first the colleagues, with whom we had and still have the privilege to work; prominent scholars and friends who had never given up during this long journey that was rich of new insights, discoveries in term of research, but also difficulties and weaknesses. Francesco Lo Presti, Claudio Melacarne and Michelangelo Vianello and ourselves. We were in charge of the realization of the project and won the challenge to follow the research from the beginning to the end. This was a great opportunity for our career development. We grew up together united by the passion for research, with a constant attention to the results and the pleasure found in working hard and together. All this makes our community stronger and capable to share, builds informal relationships and develops a sense of empathy that became an instrument of creating better research and learning opportunities. Each of us was the leader of a research team, in which other colleagues, young scholars, and PhD students collaborate and make all that we reached possible!

Finally, our sincere thanks to all the colleagues of the entire pedagogical community that contributed in different ways to the development of the project and to the authors of this book. Most of them went through different phases of the project and share with us their studies and their consideration in many occasions.

Looking back, we feel more confident, that we will manage other projects together, looking beyond... We really want to create new opportunities and challenges to work together and to develop communities of scholars that are interested in thinking critically how to innovate the educational field and give young people the opportunity to grew up in a more engaging educational environment!

*References*

European Commission 2013, *Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.