Employability and Inclusion of Non-traditional University Students: Limitations and Challenges

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Abstract

In recent decades employability has become more visible and is part of the agenda of European universities, leading to a closer link between higher education and the labour market. In this context, the objectives of this study are: to analyse the approach to employability developed by the university; to find out the influence of employability policies on non-traditional students; and the alignment of the development of employability with the democratic mission of the university. Qualitative research has been carried out at one public university in Southern Spain, based on 40 in-depth interviews, undertaken with non-traditional students and graduates, employers, and university staff. The main results obtained are: the employability approach is based on the acquisition of key skills, in the framework of neoliberal policies; the opportunities offered to students to improve their employability are unevenly distributed and, therefore, scarcely available to underrepresented students; and the market-oriented concept of employability damages non-traditional students. The development of the democratic and inclusive role to be developed by the universities requires challenging the policies and practices on employability, that are based on neoliberal perspectives. This involves the visibility of the power relations at stake as well as the promotion of critical and reflective pedagogies, with the aim of questioning and reducing the inequalities faced by non-traditional students.

Keywords: employability, higher education, inclusive education, neo-liberalism, non-traditional students

Employability is a key objective of the Bologna Process. In the last decades, employability has become more visible, and currently it is a central element in the agenda of European universities, with a greater focus on the labour market and the relationship between training and employment (Hernández-Carrera et al., 2020). On the other hand, today's university hosts an increasing volume of "non-traditional students" (Crosling et al., 2008), who present different characteristics from the traditional historical profile of middle-class students. The results of a Europe-wide survey (Hauschildt et al., 2019) show that 37% of students are over 25 years old, 23% have a migration background, and 43% are first-generation students. In different international and disciplinary contexts, the category of non-traditional students includes older adults, women, people bringing different levels of cultural or economic capitals, people with disabilities, first-generation students, people of immigrant origin, or belonging to ethnic minorities.

Although there has been a significant expansion and massification of higher education, this is not always reflected in equal opportunities for access to graduate employment. Research indicates that some students, particularly from non-traditional profiles, face specific difficulties in achieving effective labour market transitions (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), need more time to find high-skill jobs, are more likely to find employment below their skill level and are paid lower wages (Purcell et al., 2007). The question of whether students with vulnerable profiles gain the same benefits from higher education as their middle and upper-class peers is central to discussions on employability. Employability policy managers do not always take into account the needs presented by the heterogeneity of the student body (Reid, 2016). Moreover, equity policies have focused mainly on access to the university system, with little attention to graduate outcomes (Bennett, 2019). The social dimension of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) implies the need for all groups of students, regardless of their personal or social circumstances, to have the opportunity to access university and complete their studies. The London Communiqué (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2007) states that the EHEA is based on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, equal opportunities and democratic principles, pointing out that higher education must play a key role in promoting social cohesion, reducing inequalities and contributing to a sustainable, democratic and knowledge-based society.

It is essential to take into consideration the inequalities present in the student body and the social effects of higher education if it is to prosper as an inclusive institution and contribute to the deepening of democracy (Williams, 2016; Giroux, 2016). In this context, some questions arise, to which this study attempts to provide answers:

- how is employability developed by universities?
- to what extent does the dominant conception of employability reproduce inequalities?
- in the specific case of non-traditional students, does the current approach to employability take into account the goals of social inclusion and the democratic role of the university?

It is, therefore, necessary to understand the approach to employability developed by universities, to consider whether these institutions are actively developing the social and democratic function that is championed in many discourses on the current challenges facing universities.

Literature Review

Development of Employability from the University and its Challenges for Non-Traditional Students in Neo-Liberal Contexts

Employability was introduced into the European Union strategy in the late 1980s, becoming one of the main guidelines for education policies and active employment policies (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The concept of employability uses a combination of two perspectives: a first perspective, focused on employment, which refers to access, maintenance and progress in work; and a second perspective, focused on skills acquired during training (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). Human capital theories consider that investment in education brings both social and individual benefits. The social benefits are the creation of a highly-skilled workforce, which will drive economic growth. Individual benefits are described in terms of career progression, earnings and increased labour market mobility (Valadas et al., 2018). The role of higher education in this context is twofold: to equip students with the skills and attributes (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours) they need in the workplace, and to ensure that graduates have the opportunity to maintain or renew the expertise and attributes demanded by the market throughout their working lives (Clarke, 2018).

The European projects CHEER (1998-2000) and REFLEX (2002-2004) were relevant to the development of research on higher education and employment. They were devoted to researching the transition from university to the labour market, and the skills and professional profiles required by employers in different sectors of work. Subsequently, the promotion of employability has been one of the focal points of the Bologna Process. In addition, the European project EMPLOY (2014-2017) aimed to improve the transitions of non-traditional students into the labour market. Thus, in recent decades employability has become more visible and is part of the agenda of European universities, developing a closer link between universities and the world of work. This context has led to the development of several employability initiatives, including external placements, international mobility programmes, extracurricular activities such as volunteering, courses and career guidance services (Clarke, 2018; O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017). In this context, it is assumed that students are willing and able to invest money and time in such initiatives to improve their skills and employability (Vallina, 2014).

Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union have highlighted the importance of higher education in creating a more skilled workforce, capable of contributing to economic competitiveness and social development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). This implies understanding education as a source of human capital formation, for which training has to be adapted to current social developments and changing labour markets. In this context, education is anchored in a mainly economic perspective, focusing on costs and benefits. This perspective emphasises the relevance of the rate of return or profitability of the investment made in education (Laval, 2004). The theory of Human Capital assumes that an individual increases his or her productivity by investing in his or her education. This gives access to better salary levels and to socially valued jobs, which makes his investment in education profitable (Becker, 1993).

Although human capital theory has shown that investment in human capital is often profitable and productive, this approach simplifies the complexity of factors that interact in the relationship between training and work, and ignores both the importance of social inequalities and the unequal starting positions of students (Dubet, 2011). Human capital theory, which has generally been accepted uncritically, is not a valid tool for addressing issues such as the reduction of inequalities in access to training or the social and educational inclusion of students

with low cultural and economic capital. This approach forgets and overlooks the fact that a person's relationship with working life brings is strongly connected to identity characteristics including social class, gender, ethnicity and more (Laval, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to resort to socio-critical theories, which can help to understand much better the relevance of social structures in relation to university education, the acquisition of skills and the successful transition to the qualified labour market (Giroux, 2016).

A risk when researching non-traditional students is to overcome the potential danger of adopting a labelling and deficit-based perspective. Although references from a variety of approaches are cited in this paper, it is important to emphasise that this research aims to overcome this pitfall. In this sense, it is relevant to highlight and recognise the capacity for agency and initiative of groups that are under-represented or suffer from structural inequalities.

Non-traditional students may go to university in more significant numbers than before, but they are less "successful" than traditional students. This is especially true when measured in neoliberal terms, emphasising individual success and the student consumer model (Sanders-McDonagh & Davis, 2018). Different authors allude to an increase in inequality, produced by the application of neoliberal policies in education systems, mainly affecting non-traditional students. According to Torres (2016), the legitimation of neoliberalism that is spreading from universities has legitimised the increasing concentration of wealth in the last hundred years and an extraordinary increase in inequality. Neo-liberal policies based on market "solutions" can hinder true inclusion and reproduce traditional class and ethnic hierarchies (Apple, 2001). Giroux (2015) argues that, in neoliberal societies, there are voiceless and powerless groups, such as low-income groups, ethnic minorities, the unemployed and immigrants. Giroux argues that neoliberalism feeds on inequality, making it the antithesis of democracy. To improve the living conditions of individuals, it is necessary to break the link between "poverty and inequality" on the one hand and "economic development" on the other. It is not possible to speak of social development if inequality is not progressively reduced, as development implies the full realisation of all human rights (Martínez, 2013). Development is about transforming people's lives, not just the economy. For this reason, education and employment policies must be considered through the double lens of how they promote economic growth and how they directly affect individuals (Stiglitz, 2006).

Higher Education as a Democratic, Inclusive Sphere
Reclaiming higher education as a public good gives relevance to a set of both economic and social effects, which contribute to the formation of more informed citizens, the deepening of democracy and a more inclusive society (Giroux, 2016; Williams, 2016). Already in 1998, the World Conference on Higher Education, organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), declared that higher education institutions should respond to this challenge by making human and social development an integral part of their daily activity (Corbett, 2008). The higher education sector must identify and implement the type and extent of change needed to prepare students for their economic, but also social, commitment (Bennett, 2019).

With the influence of neoliberalism on higher education, the notion of higher education as a public good is mostly reduced to a private good. Consequently, there is not always interest in higher education to understand pedagogy as a deeply civic, political and moral practice; that is, pedagogy as a practice for freedom (Giroux, 2016). The success of non-traditional students is not necessarily a key issue for those who develop and regulate higher education policy from a neo-liberal approach (Sanders-McDonagh & Davis, 2018). Giroux (2015) states:

> Only through such a formative and critical educational culture can students learn how to become individual and social agents, rather than disengaged spectators or uncritical consumers. At the very least, they should learn how to think otherwise and to act upon civic commitments that "necessitate a reordering of basic power arrangements" fundamental to promoting the common good and producing a strong democracy (p. 10).

To encourage this critical approach and integrate it into universities, it is necessary to develop the teaching of critical thinking skills. In the specific case of non-traditional groups, progressive and innovative methodologies, based on reflection, involved writing, and group narrative methodologies, can improve the skills to analyse, interpret and evaluate the structural and personal factors that operate in the development of university careers and in the transitions from training to the labour market (González-Monteagudo, 2010).

The dominant concept of employability represents a neo-liberal vision that is based on individual characteristics and ignores the role of the set of institutions involved (Brown et al., 2003). Employability understood as the attainment of skills and attributes for employment overlooks the needs of learners (Tronto, 2013). Therefore, a vital issue is to understand who defines the need for employability and from what point of view. It is necessary to question whether employability is an economic imperative and one of individual responsibility, or something that requires collective agreement, based on notions of reciprocity, democracy, concern for the common good and responsibility. This perspective raises the debate about the ideological power at stake and the limited influence of the voice of students, taking into account the structural dimensions of both broad society and higher education systems (Reid, 2016).

Considering critical perspectives is crucial to open up spaces for both social transformation and the reconsideration of the role of higher education regarding inequalities and social inclusion. In this context, the theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) can be a helpful tool for understanding social actors in educational contexts, including precarious groups. The context of the social spaces that Bourdieu calls "field" is comparable to a game with its own rules. The field of higher education institutions would be linked to factors such as the characteristics of the education system, access opportunities, qualifications, material resources and teaching processes. In relation to employability, other factors are added, such as the possession of key competences, time available for the acquisition of merit, participation in extra-curricular activities and understanding of labour market dynamics. Therefore, "players" or students need strategies, resources and dispositions to "play". In this game, they have different dispositions or *habitus*, that lead them to act or react in a specific way in the social field, and that are the result of personal, family, social and academic experiences that constitute the students' stories. The *habitus* is strongly conditioned by social class and economic capital. Bourdieu (1993) 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" (p. 7).

The contributions of Bourdieu and others are not limited to identifying the factors that constrain social actors, since the ultimate objective of the sociology of cultural reproduction is to provide tools to subordinate groups so that they can develop a social agentivity that transforms and overcomes the conditions of domination existing in societies of cognitive and neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2015; Laval, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

This study set out to understand the development of employability at the university level and its impact on non-traditional students. To do this, the following objectives were employed:

- To identify the employability approach developed by the university, based on the opinions of students, managers and teachers.
- To understand the influence on non-traditional students of the employability policies and practices developed by the university.
- To analyse the development of the university's employability, concerning its democratic mission.

Methodology

A qualitative and interdisciplinary approach has been used to analyse the university's approach to employability, the influence of employability measures on non-traditional students and the consistency of employability development with the university's democratic mission. The study was carried out in one of the Spanish public universities with the highest number of enrolments. This institution has a significant presence of non-traditional students and is located in southern Spain, the Spanish region with the greatest mismatch between supply and demand of highly qualified employment.

This is a biographical-narrative study (Elliott, 2005), which captures the richness of non-traditional students' experiences and the broader meanings of those experiences (Benson et al., 2010). This method allows us to delve into the complex interactions that people make day to day, in time and space, shaping their individual and social identities, constructing and reconstructing personal and social stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995).

Participants

In-depth biographical interviews were conducted with 40 participants. Firstly, 23 students and graduates were interviewed, belonging to the different branches of knowledge (Health, Engineering and Architecture; Social and Legal Sciences, Arts and Humanities; and Sciences). These participants met one or more characteristics that define the profile of non-traditional students (adults; working-class and part-time students; people with dependent children; students with disabilities; people from immigrant origins or ethnic minorities; first-generation students; students from a family with low economic capital). A second group, composed of 17 participants from the same city were interviewed and included the following profiles: public and private employers, guidance and support service technicians, curriculum practice managers, and university professors working on the employability of their students.

Non-traditional students are not identified in Spanish universities, making it difficult to select them for the research interviews. Participants were invited using a purposive sampling method: the authors made an initial contact with those students and staff that they already knew, as well as through academic and social networks. Additionally, participants were also selected using the snowball sampling technique, inviting the already selected participants to identify further candidates. The search for participants was carried out until saturation was reached, which means that the information collected no longer contributed to deepening the analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth biographical interviews were used to collect the data from students and graduates. An interview script was created following the model developed by González-Monteagudo (2010), addressing issues such as the social context of origin, academic and personal paths, and the transition to the labour market. Discussion in this article focuses on three key dimensions: experiences at university, university training, and employability at university. Semi-structured interviews were used for employers, curriculum practice managers and lecturers. The script, in this case, was focused on specific topics related to the research goals.

The analysis was carried out using two perspectives: deductive and inductive. The deductive approach consisted of identifying textual fragments related to the review of the literature. The inductive approach was based on the construction of emerging categories derived from the interview data. A qualitative analysis programme, NVivo 11 software, was used to organise, manipulate, classify, and analyse the data.

Ethics

The study was conducted in compliance with ethical standards. Participants were informed about the purposes of the research and gave their consent to participate voluntarily. Their data is kept confidential, protecting their anonymity and privacy. The rights and integrity of the participants were guaranteed at all times (Erickson, 1986).

Results

Employability Approach Developed by the University

Several studies confirm the need to adapt university training to the needs of the labour market, providing its recipients with the necessary knowledge and skills (Walsh & Powell, 2018). In line with this, participating employers identified that the university must provide students with the necessary skills to respond to the needs of the market.

> *And a university needs to be much closer to the real world of business to really start preparing students who really have what it takes.* (Gel, private employer, male).

According to Kascak et al. (2011), key skills have become mandatory elements in educational planning at all levels, essential to produce the human capital needed for the labour market. The testimony of Albert, university technical staff, reflects the relevance of this issue.

> *...there are skills that are general, that we notice a lot that students lack. As soon as they join a work team, they have to know how to work in a team, they have to know how to adapt to a change. (...) When a company needs a trainee, rather than selecting them by degree, we will try to select them by competences* (Albert, university technical staff, male).

With this approach, students go through the process of transformation from "raw materials" to "finished products" (Pitan, 2017), which are presented to employers (Holmes, 2013), offering them the product they expect (Clarke, 2018). In the following quote, a teacher explains an activity they carry out in their subject to work on employability:

> *...they have to offer themselves, to address the company to tell them what they can bring to the company (...). I think that this initiation to the professional side*

> *is crucial (...) that they look for a place, and that in this interview they prepare themselves well so that they give the best of themselves so that the employer does not say no to them; they cannot go with a no, they must prepare the first interview very well* (Debono, university professor, male).

Employability, understood as the acquisition of key competences, is an unrealistic approach and does not fully capture the complexity of preparation for work (Jackson, 2016), as it does not take into account the influence on the employment of individual characteristics, the impact of perceived employability or labour market factors (Clarke, 2018). Bourdieu (1988) argues that a student's responsiveness to employability is not merely a matter of skills of a particular type for employment, as it involves his or her social and educational history, cultural understanding and customs. If it is assumed a reductionist approach to employability based on a "toolbox" that students must acquire, the social dimension tends to be circumvented. In this way, issues of cultural capital and unequal power relations between individuals and groups are not taken into account (Kendall & French, 2018).

The dominant discourse on employability places the responsibility for maintaining employment on graduates as individuals (Veld et al., 2015). In individualising the social, all social problems and their effects are interpreted as individual errors, rooted in the lack of individual responsibility (Giroux, 2014). Employers, academics and university technical staff hold students responsible for improving their employability. Thus, university technical staff state that students should participate in extracurricular activities and be oriented for work before finishing their studies.

> *A student has to know the services that his unit provides and maybe he has to spend some time to find out because there are many students who don't know that they have a career guidance service and they are missing out on many things (...) I would dare to tell you that students miss out on almost everything, in the sense that, man, they are focused on their studies* (Albert, university technical staff, male).

> *We operate on demand; that is, until the time comes, I am not going to worry about moving around and seeing what services there are. I think that work should be done well before the last year to get my CV on track. If I don't look for a job orientation until the last year, maybe I haven't been doing volunteer work that would be of interest to me* (Cai, university technical staff, female).

Extracurricular initiatives can emphasise student responsibility to ensure the success of graduates (Burke et al., 2017). According to Bennett (2019), most employability enhancement activities offered at higher education institutions are extracurricular, tend to be unpopular and attract students who need them least.

The influence of Employability Measures on Non-Traditional Learners

O'Connor and Bodicoat (2017) state that opportunities for graduates to improve their employability are not equally available to all. Indeed, students who are disadvantaged or who have low social, cultural and economic capital are not in a position to take advantage of such opportunities (Bathmaker et al., 2013).

The case of international mobility is illustrative. Universities call for international mobility placements to study at international universities. Stays abroad can confer a competitive advantage in the labour market (Zuhäl, 2015). However, non-traditional students may not take advantage of international mobility opportunities in the same way as their peers (Reid, 2016). Legna is a graduate with a dependant, and Gioser is a student with a physical mobility limitation. Both argue that they have encountered difficulties in undertaking an international mobility experience during their studies.

> *The thing is that now, because of my family situation, it can't be; otherwise, I would have already left with an Erasmus, a year off learning language and new things. I would have left, I am very clear about it (...) my mother is already old, I don't have any siblings either, she is alone, she is sick, that is to say, I cannot leave her alone like that* (Legna, graduate, male).

> *I didn't want to ask for it, because I didn't feel comfortable to do it (...) I took a long time to shower and dress a lot, to soap my head I couldn't raise my arms, I got tired (...) how can I go outside to depend on myself? In my house, there is always my mother or someone who can give you a hand, but going off by yourself? I didn't dare* (Gioser, student, male).

Some universities stipulate that students enrolled in bachelor's degrees must prove, before finishing their studies, that they have obtained a level of linguistic competence in a foreign language. One of the objectives of this measure is to promote employment among university graduates in the European labour market. Those who have family or work responsibilities have limited time to study the language during their studies, so they usually leave it until the end of their university career, often delaying the achievement of the degree. Adult students, who often enter the university system with a lower level of English, face many difficulties in acquiring this competence. Also, some students report that the cost of tuition, class attendance and examinations is a significant financial hardship.

> *If it is so compulsory for me, to get my degree, to have English, if it is as important as organic chemistry, put it in the same plan, in the curriculum. You put organic chemistry and B1 in English, but don't tell me "take your B1 and bring it from an academy" (...) to pay for all those things, I have to pull my savings* (Botico, student, male).

To carry out the curricular practices, the university establishes measures for students with special academic needs, to try to adjust to their needs. Most students say that these measures are essential. The employers interviewed consider that internships can be a positive measure for the insertion of non-traditional students, as they bring the business world closer to profiles that are more difficult to insert.

> *They have a problem when they come in. Now, once they enter and are known, they usually have no problem again. That is to say, at the moment they have problems... "this one is Dominican, this one is from I don't know where, we'll see", but when you know him, and you see how he works, you see how he gets involved in that company, if there is work he's not going to miss it* (Arte, private employer and university teacher, male).

As Tomlinson (2017) points out, the formal and informal experience at university can significantly improve students' employability. However, the literature shows that non-traditional students face financial pressures, family responsibilities and other significant study constraints (Reay et al., 2009), which result in more time constraints than traditional students (Devlin et al., 2012). In addition, non-traditional students have few opportunities to socialise or gain alternative social and cultural experiences (Crozier et al., 2008). Boti, an adult student, says that he has difficulty participating in such activities because of time constraints, as he combines work and study.

> *I have not asked to participate in more things because of lack of time, because I come here in the afternoon, and in the morning I work. Besides, I've had to adapt my schedule, that's a tremendous story. I come in at a quarter to seven in the morning (...) so that I can leave at two or so so that I can be here at three. That way, for four years; and at the weekends, to study and prepare your work* (Boti, student, male).

Improving employability by focusing on extracurricular activities implies a deficit model that highlights the shortcomings of working-class students. It fails to recognise the structural constraints faced by the most disadvantaged and vulnerable students (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017).

The Development of Employability under the Democratic Mission of the University

Universities are committed to economic goals and market interests which perpetuate inequities and fail to address the needs of diverse student groups (Apple, 2005; Wilderson III, 2012). While some participants argued that the functions of the university should be above the needs of the market, they made no mention of an approach to employability that takes into account factors such as social class, gender or ethnicity.

> *... to train people for the productive system, no, no. The university has to be above that. The productive system, what companies need, depends on factors and policies that do not necessarily coincide with the politics of what we do at University* (Popy, university technical staff, male).

The concept of meritocracy is detrimental to non-traditional students (Gibson, 2015), obscuring that opportunities for graduates to improve their employability are not equally available to all. There is evidence that inequality in higher education persists for many students after graduation (Finnegan et al., 2014; Pitman et al., 2019), suggesting that inequalities found in universities are reproduced in the labour market. According to Martínez (2013), higher education institutions must avoid competitive efficiency and discriminatory academic excellence, more typical of technocratic models that rely on assumptions of school meritocracy. Claudia is a recent graduate, who has taken courses and obtained accreditation for language skills to "fill out" her curriculum and be able to meet demands that respond to external interests. Her testimony also reflects the lack of professional objectives and a lack of meaning in her actions.

> *Well, the truth is, I have no idea. I know that this year I've been studying English, I've been taking courses to "fill in", so to speak, my CV, but I don't exactly know what to do* (Claudia, graduate, female).

Sanders-McDonagh and Davis (2018) confirm that radical pedagogies increase students' critical skills, personal awareness, knowledge and confidence, enabling them to perform better

in the academy and the labour market. The university can promote the reflection of individuals on their past life experiences and their impact on the present self, with the awareness of class and gender inequalities as "being different", as well as reflection on their future self and its transformations (O'Neill et al., 2018). Non-traditional students have stories that reflect the exclusion and invisibility they have suffered:

> *I come from X [the neighbourhood with the highest poverty rate in the city], I live there, my parents are from there (...) People studied knowing that the normal thing was to have a career, but I studied knowing that it was the abnormal thing (...) it is strange that you, being a woman, being a Roma, and from a marginal neighbourhood, it is strange that you are intelligent and you like science* (Lore, graduate, female)

For Freire (2009), education as a political project of freedom is key the oppressed developing a discourse free from the domination of their cultural heritage, while for Giroux (2014), critical thinking is the backbone of true democracy. Sanders-McDonagh and Davis (2018) argue that critical pedagogies work to disrupt the neoliberal narrative and help correct the persistent inequalities faced by non-traditional students. In this context, innovative and progressive teaching methods are crucial. The students interviewed emphasised the need to carry out activities that encourage reflection and participation, as they consider that these activities have been very scarce during their training. For example, Alejandro describes a good practice of a philosophy class, in which students develop an active role in their learning, favouring critical thinking and involvement:

> *The speaker gives his or her vision of these texts, and then there is a round table discussion around what is going to be talked about so that the speaker becomes one more of the classroom. A little bit we distort the idea of teacher-student, that hierarchy that is sometimes unfavourable to education (...) philosophy can be given in a different way to how it is usually given at university* (Alejandro, student, male).

Botico states that, during his time at the university, he has never engaged in debates or perceived the values traditionally associated with this institution.

> *What there is a lot of books, notes, slides; but I have not seen the values that are traditionally associated with the university, I have never seen them encourage a debate, not only on the political issue but on the very subject of our work as a pharmacist* (Botico, student, male).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to understand the development of employability at the university level and its impact on non-traditional students. This has included identifying the approach to employability developed by the university. Employers and university staff believe that education must adapt to evolution and change caused by market dynamics through human capital formation (Walsh & Powell 2018). Employers and university staff consider that the university has shortcomings in this respect. To address this situation, they propose the development of policies and practices to improve relations between universities and the labour market. According to Jackson (2016) and Kendall and French (2018), employability, understood as the acquisition of key competences, does not fully capture the complexity of

preparation for work and eludes the social dimension, issues of cultural capital and unequal power relations between individuals and groups.

The employers interviewed put the responsibility for access to employment on the university graduates themselves. This is consistent with the contributions of Veld et al. (2015) and Giroux (2014). Of particular relevance is the participation in extracurricular activities, following the "rules of the game" and the meritocracy present in the labour market. Thus, non-traditional students must commit themselves to an organisational plan that responds to external interests, with those who do not understand or respond to these rules being considered guilty or problematic. This situation reflects the ideological power at stake and the limited role of students (Reid, 2016). Furthermore, according to O'Connor and Bodicoat (2017), basing improved employability on extracurricular activities is reduced to a deficit model of what working-class students lack and does not recognise the structural limitations faced by those less advantaged.

This research has further sought to understand the influence of employability measures on non-traditional students. These students often face financial pressures and family and work responsibilities that make it difficult for them to participate in the activities offered by the university, thus placing them in a precarious position in today's labour market. Therefore, opportunities for students to improve their employability, such as international mobility experiences or language proficiency accreditation, are not equally available to all.

Internships can be a measure for the insertion of non-traditional students, being important to establish internships in all degrees and to dispose of indicators that guarantee their quality. The university has established measures aimed at alleviating the difficulties encountered by non-traditional students, such as having priority in the choice of the internship centre or adaptations for obtaining linguistic competence. However, the development of employability should not be limited to such measures and should recognise the power relations in which it is embedded.

Lastly, it was analysed the development of the university's employability according to its democratic mission. The participants recognised that the role of the university must go beyond the demands of the market. However, they do not refer to the influence of social factors, individual characteristics or unequal power relations on the employment outcomes of graduates (Clarke, 2018; Kendall & French, 2018). This reflects a market-oriented concept of employability and the fact that issues related to social inclusion are overlooked in debates on employability. Non-traditional students are disadvantaged if universities perpetuate the meritocracy of labour market dynamics. Institutions would inadvertently reproduce social inequalities if they respond only to economic objectives above any mission as a democratic public sphere.

Non-traditional students often try to "fill in" their curricula by adapting to ideals of meritocracy and competitiveness prevailing in the labour market without attributing meaning to their actions. Thus, students reflect a lack of sense of agency, confidence and self-awareness. The attitude of critical thinking necessary for a truly democratic society is often not promoted at University (Giroux, 2014). Too often it does not offer a space for debate and for promoting self-reflection on life experiences, the influence of context of origin, class and gender inequalities on present and future "self". These practices foster students' critical skills, self-management of their own lives, and help correct the inequalities that non-traditional students face (Martínez, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2018; Sanders-McDonagh & Davis, 2018).

Neo-liberalism permeates the current political, economic and social project of our societies, so the inequality it causes transcends the field of action of universities. Reducing this influence would be a much more global political task. Nevertheless, it is fair to recognise that the measures being taken in institutions to respond to non-traditional students help to resolve specific barriers for those students, always within neoliberal frameworks.

The dominant concept of employability represents a neo-liberal version (Brown et al., 2003) that assumes subtle mechanisms of exclusion and prevents true inclusion. It is necessary to reconfigure this concept and apply an alternative lens that makes visible the power relations at stake. If universities are to have a social impact and prosper as inclusive institutions, they must promote practices that are in line with their democratic mission. Consequently, in the words of Freire (2009), critical pedagogy must be understood as a practice of freedom, for the awareness and liberation of the oppressed. In this way, students can learn to become individual and social agents and, in doing so, help to correct persistent inequalities.

This research has some limitations. One of them is the difficulty to get the employers' responses go beyond political correctness and describe their companies' actual practices, when dealing with non-traditional graduates. In this sense, cross-checks (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975) have been used to ensure the greatest possible sincerity in the responses. In addition, the study is based on interviews from one single university in Spain, which make it difficult to generalise based on the findings. However, the opinions and experiences presented in this paper may be transferable to other similar contexts, considering two complementary dimensions. On the one hand, neoliberal policies are having an increasing impact on many institutions and national governments worldwide, so the findings of this study could be useful in national and international debates on higher education. On the other hand, contrasting the opinions of students/graduates with those of employers/staff can help to better understand the problem of the employability of non-traditional students and assess the existing challenges to their full inclusion.

Acknowledgments

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