

University placement services: prospects and opportunities

ABSTRACT

This work analyzes the evolution of university placement services in Italy from their emergence to our days, with particular attention given to the objectives, aims, available services and professional competences involved.

Particular attention will be focused on the developments that such services will need to undergo in order to facilitate young people's transition to the workplace, and on the networks that need to be created between the different job market operators, in order to help the planning of university educational courses in line with the needs of the public and private workplace, and in order to create services capable of realizing work systems useful for job placement, such as, for example, higher-level apprenticeship contracts or the certification of job contracts.

If university is a multi-product enterprise capable of producing research and of training young people as high-level human capital, university placement services become a strategic service of the universities for placing on the market one of their outputs, that is, their graduates, in the best possible way.

The enhancement of placement services can be a strategy for the Italian universities that wish to achieve positive results in performance indicators linked to employment and employability.

KEYWORDS: career services, placement, career guidance

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THE EVOLUTION OF JOB PLACEMENT SERVICES IN ITALY

University placement services first appeared in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s as pilot projects within some universities, and by the beginning of the 20th century were established in 90% of all universities.

Placement in the 1990s was primarily a response of the universities to the first signs of difficulties in the job market for new graduates, through services made available to the new graduates and to companies: the former were offered services aimed at helping the definition of a professional project based on personal characteristics and on the individual's expectations, as well as information guidance to help job placement in a context characterized by strong information asymmetries.

Services were also created for companies, with the aim of reducing the costs and times of candidate pre-selections and above all of familiarizing the academic world of students, new graduates and teaching body with organizations that are increasingly complex from the point of view of human resources.

These services became a significant point of reference for the mediation between job search and job demand: the Alma Laurea research shows that throughout the 1990s and in the first years after 2000, job search through university placement services grew significantly in relation to traditional job search methods such as search through personal contacts or through answers to advertisements.

University placement services were started and developed within a practically absent legislative context: our law conferred career guidance functions exclusively to the Regions, which are entrusted with the realization of the so-called "vocational training"; the Treu law, in 1997, acknowledged the universities' role as promoters of vocational training and guidance, thus putting at the disposal of university placement services an important tool for placing young people in the job market.

Since the end of the 1990s, internships have represented for new graduates an important tool in their transition towards the job market, as for the new graduates they are a chance of testing their professional project within the vocational perspective of career guidance, an important opportunity for the acquisition of technical-professional competences, which the university curricula often lacked; at the same time internships represented for companies and organizations a tool for a testing and selection process on the field that reduced the costs and errors of the information asymmetries that characterize the selection process.

Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 20th century, the university and job market reforms redefined the tasks and roles of university placement services, bringing the two worlds closer still. These reforms found a European framework in the objectives defined by the Lisbon strategy, that is, that of "...creating the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world, capable of creating new and better jobs", which saw the European Union countries involved in the birth and growth of the society of knowledge that depends, among other things, on the combination of 4 elements: the production of new knowledge, its transmission through education and training, its spread through information and communication technologies, and its use within industrial or service processes.

The university reforms of the Ministerial Decree no. 509/99 and, more recently, no. 270/2004, recognize a fundamental role to vocational training and career guidance, both as a transition tool between the school system and the workplace and as an educational tool for the acquisition of technical professional competences and transversal skills.

Within this perspective, internships become both a tool of active work policy for helping the employability of the people involved and a training activity, characterized by the place in which this learning takes places, that is, the workplace, and by the type of knowledge acquired, the know-how which cannot

easily be acquired in other contexts. These two elements represent, so to speak, "the twin souls of vocational training and career guidance."

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIP IN THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES CONTEXT

However, the university reform started in 1999 emphasized the training value of internships. This resulted, in recent years, in a marked increase in the number of internships undertaken by university students, in spite of the difficulties on the part of companies, university lecturers and universities in managing such training with inadequate means and instruments. In this context it is easy to understand that universities can play a fundamental role in the creation of the economy of knowledge and that in these years they are facing great challenges such as: the increase in the demand for tertiary education, globalization of teaching and research, reorganization of knowledge and, lastly, the need to develop a close and efficient relationship between university and industry.

The didactic autonomy introduced in our country at the end of the nineties pushed the universities to build a dialogue with their own stakeholders and brought about a dialogue with representatives of the local industrial world in order to define course titles, determine training objectives and work out a general framework of training activities.

The university reform introduced in our country in 1999 opened up a very lively debate on this last point since, as far as training is concerned, it acknowledges a definitive role to industry in the planning phase of degree courses, through the creation of a career guidance committee, composed by representatives of the academic world and of industry, whose aim is to evaluate how the professional figures trained within the individual

degree courses match the needs of industry in terms of human resources and professional competences.

A second stage of collaboration between universities and industry, as provided by the Ministerial Decree no. 509/99 and confirmed by the Ministerial Decree no. 207/04, concerns guidance and vocational internships, which represent a further element of renewal of the university system since it is acknowledged that the location of production of knowledge and university training can go beyond the confines of the university classrooms, the training process is in a way externalized towards public and private companies, introducing within universities new learning systems and imposing new models of certification of acquired knowledge.

During the internship, knowledge and learning are created through different means than face-to-face teaching and education, as it takes place through interaction with the industrial context and the practice and application of knowledge, creating the need for an evaluation and certification system different from that of traditional systems.

The universities' promotion of internships contributes to the creation of the society of knowledge, as they encourage behaviors of interaction and exchange with industry that can generate positive results both on didactics, since the evolution of work experiences can show up deficiencies in the training side of the course of studies and lead to a consequent rethinking of the training contents, and on research and technology transfer.

However, it is important to rethink the role that universities must play in such training experiences, which must be more precise at the planning, monitoring and co-evaluation stages.

UNIVERSITIES INTERNSHIPS AND HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

As we said above, one of the fundamental objectives of universities is that of contributing to the training of knowledge

workers, that is, workers with high levels of instruction of high added value for companies, not easily replaced as they are capable of contributing significantly to the creation and dissemination of new knowledge and therefore of giving life to product or process innovations that allow companies and organizations to keep their competitiveness high and consequently ensure their permanence in the market.

Within this perspective, the learning process in a university study course represents, according to the theory of human capital, an investment by the individual in learning and training, which finds an answer and justification in the future returns that the investment in human capital will be able to generate, that is, the future income from dependent or independent jobs.

Therefore the advantage for an individual undertaking a course of university studies is linked to the chance of getting a job that will guarantee an income level that can repay the costs incurred in education and training.

According to this perspective, universities must be able to ensure for its own students the attainment of adequate levels of investment in human capital for their future placement in the job market and, consequently, an adequate financial return on the investment made in education and training.

This short premise can somehow help us to understand how the tool of internship, within a course of university studies, must be organized and managed in such a way as to represent, in line with the training objectives of the course of studies, a useful training experience for the student, capable of boosting his human capital, and, more generally, of making it possible for universities to train knowledge workers.

We will try to understand what type of knowledge can be acquired in the course of an internship. This element will allow us to establish how to plan an internship and also how to evaluate the acquired knowledge, and after having examined in what forms and modalities the learning process takes place, we will

be able to understand which monitoring tools to adopt, to recognize the types of people involved in the learning process and the characteristics they should have, and finally to identify the characteristics that the structures concerned should have in order to be considered adequate to the fulfillment of the learning process that a degree course wants to achieve.

The theory of human capital makes a distinction between generic human capital and specific human capital, where by generic is meant the general knowledge, acquired at different industrial sectors, which contributes to the worker's general training, which we could define as basic training, distinguishing it from the specific training acquired at a certain industrial sector or group of firms and which is of interest to a limited number of companies. The distinction is made to try to explain the advantage for individuals and companies in investing in training: companies tend to invest, that is, finance specific training, while workers tend to finance their generic training, as it allows them to fit in different job contexts, therefore increasing their job and employability prospects.

The concepts of specific and generic human capital can be raised again within a course of studies to try to answer questions which are often asked about the processes of university reforms: "What must universities teach? What instruction can be referred to external experts or to non university teachers? When can or must universities recognize and certify experiences and competences acquired outside of university classrooms?"

If we analyze the structure of a university course of studies, we see the presence of so-called basic or core teaching that has the objective of providing the student with a good basic education, that is, the elements that serve to form the general human capital of an individual. This knowledge must be such to ensure to an individual the capacity to acquire specific knowledge even in contexts outside of formal learning.

Such general teaching must guarantee the employability of the individual, that is, his capacity to develop a professional path in a context in which professions acquire increasingly richer contents, necessitating therefore the capacity of learning to learn in both formal and informal contexts.

Basic teaching represents the “know what” and “know why” knowledge that is imparted in academic classrooms, strictly linked to the research activities promoted by the lecturers.

The basic knowledge acquired in the university environment is therefore the result of a research activity that differentiates it from the knowledge acquired through primary and secondary instruction and within vocational training experiences.

However, since the objective of a course of university studies is that of preparing a professional figure capable of entering the job market, this person needs to possess specific technical competences.

There are different concepts of competence, taking a definition by Planas (2000), it can be defined as the combination of 3 factors: basic knowledge, technical knowledge and ability. The concept of competence is developed in order to translate the concept of human capital within organizations that tend to evaluate, and therefore to select individuals on the basis of competences required for the performance of a given role. The competence becomes the worker’s characterizing element within the organization in which he works and it is the sum of the training and education he received, of the technical knowledge linked to productive processes and to so-called transversal skills (i.e., ability to work in a team, ability to learn, etc.).

In this context it is obvious that a training internship within a course of studies contributes to the development of an individual’s human capital if it allows him/her to acquire technical knowledge linked to the industrial processes, that is, the know how that means doing something that allows the individual to increase his fund of knowledge and therefore of competences.

For the internship to meet this important objective a few pre-requisites must be present, and they need to be made clear:

- the professional figure that the degree course aims to form;
- the training objectives of the course;
- the training objectives of the internship;
- the presence of appropriate structures;
- shared tools of internship management;
- trained university and company tutors;
- an appropriate evaluation system of the internship.

Table 1. Roles, responsibilities and functions in the management of internships aimed at the acquisition of specific human capital.

Phase	Activity	People involved	Functions given
Preliminary phase	Definition of the training contents of the course of studies involving the definition of the professional figure and the generic and specific training contents	Academic body of course of study Stakeholder Students Families Companies	Competence Guidance
Planning of the training contents of the internship	Description of the times, length and specific activity of the internship within the firm	Companies involved Internship officer or university tutor	Competence Competence
Internship management	It represents the learning phase within the organization	Firm tutor University tutor	Competence Guidance
Evaluation	It represents the evaluation phase of knowledge acquired by each individual student	Firm tutor: qualitative evaluation University tutor Quantitative evaluation	Guidance Competence

Figure 1 shows the management process of the internship, the interaction between the different stages and interdependences: the preliminary phase is strongly determined by the planning ac-

tivity of the individual course of studies, including the guidance work with the people involved, from which follows the educational structure of the course, the educational plan and of course the educational contents of every individual course, including the internship. In the second planning phase, the training ob-

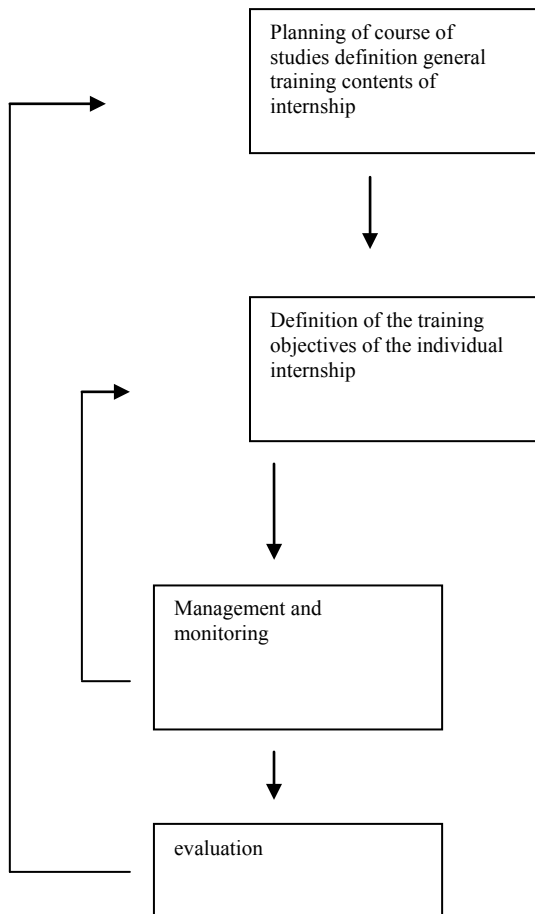


Fig. 1. Management process of internships aimed at the acquisition of specific human capital.

jectives of the internship are modeled on the individual company and individual worker, this phase can represent a test of the actual contents defined in the preliminary phase. In the third phase of internship management the focus is on the transferal of knowledge, learning, and therefore on the process of codification of the tacit knowledge within the organization and the creation of new knowledge. Finally, the last phase of evaluation of the internship produces a qualitative and quantitative certification of the experience which is useful for the student's education curriculum and which can have an effect on the redefinition of the course's training objectives. The evaluation of the internship is one of the most delicate and difficult aspects, in that it must use instruments that have been pre-arranged and planned in reference to the specific typology of the internship and therefore of the course of study. In Italy useful references for this kind of work can be the "Libretto formativo del lavoratore" (Record of training experience) prepared for the evaluation of learning within apprenticeship courses, and the experimental work done within a course of studies in Educational Sciences at La Sapienza University in Rome. At the European level, Cedefop's work of identification of the tools of validation and certification of formal and informal learning represents an excellent reference tool.

JOB PLACEMENT SERVICES AND REFORM OF THE JOB MARKET

The Biagi reform acknowledges for the first time the universities' role as mediation agencies with the capacity of offering career guidance services.

In such context universities effectively become job market operators capable not just of internship placement but of job placement as well. According to the Biagi law, universities can also organize master's degrees within higher-level apprenticeship contracts, and establish commissions for the certification of the

job contracts. In this sense the reform law of the job market has broadened the range of services that each university can offer. In this context, job placement services acquire a threefold function: offering career guidance and internships for students, helping degree courses to define educational objectives linked to the professional prospects required by the job market, developing job and work experience placement services that will meet companies' needs, as well as job meetings and career day to make students familiar with the job market and with professional figures.

As far as services for people are concerned, a majority of the universities organize welcoming, information, career and training services with the aim of encouraging an active job search, analysis of competences and the development of a professional project.

Among the services organized for companies by the universities are the provision of lists of graduates, pre-selection of candidates and monitoring of placements.

The varied range of services provided by university job placement services has led to the development of both structural and human resources structures, and the specificity of workers' roles and functions.

CONCLUSIONS

University job placement services started in the 1990s and in the intervening twenty years they underwent profound changes: from employment services to tools for helping employability. The reforms of the university system and of the job market have allowed a greater dialogue between these two worlds. The Gelmini and Sacconi document of September 2009 represents an important orientation instrument for universities. Drafted within a context of serious difficulties for the general economic system and of

crisis in the university system and the job market, it acknowledges the educational systems' fundamental role in developing transversal competences aimed at guaranteeing "a good life in the active society".

Placement services must become a multi-service center capable of offering career guidance services, in which career guidance activities must become increasingly part of the study curriculum and not just in the post-graduate phase, through new tools and methods aimed at supporting a methodological approach based on life design, that is, on the individual's capacity to guide his/her own career development within society and especially within the context in which he decides to work. Placement services must promote internships, that is, enhance informal learning, according to specific modalities and criteria which allow students to undertake training experiences that match their university studies and at the same time provide high career guidance value. Finally, they must help job placement, working to reduce the times and costs of transition for young new graduates. This necessitates the universities adopting tools and technologies that can meet the needs of a high number of users and companies, but above all working out agreement policies with public and private institutions in their area.

In this context the Europlacement project has created, within its project's website, a pathway for students and graduates to develop individual skills of self-evaluation and self-determination in the job market, and a second pathway for operators in university and non-university placement services to help the creation and planning of career guidance through modern technologies.

Within this context, the use of technologies indissolubly linked to the society of knowledge is valuable not just for its transferal of knowledge but for its development of new knowledge that will serve the individual's full realization throughout his professional life.

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