

How intentional are the employability strategies
of Higher Education Institutions?

Francesca Sgobbi
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ABSTRACT

An employability strategy communicates the commitment of higher education institutions (HEIs) towards students' future, signals effectiveness and efficiency in resource allocation, and positions HEIs against competing institutions. However, not all HEIs display the same awareness when it comes to the design of a coherent bundle of actions in support of their graduates' employability. This paper focuses on the formation of employment strategies to test the contrasting hypotheses of planned strategy, that frames strategy as an explicit and purposeful plan fully designed before deployment, and emergent strategy, where the adopted plan gradually unfolds from the interaction among different players and circumstances. Four case studies of Italian and Portuguese HEIs reveal emergent employability strategies that surpass the limitations set by modest intended employability targets. However, lack of guidance from an explicit action plan and limited resources may question the long-term viability of the emerging approaches.

KEYWORDS

Employability, high education institutions, strategy, strategy formation, emergent strategy

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I23, M10

1. INTRODUCTION

The employability of graduates from higher education (HE) has become a prominent topic in the public discourse of countries around the world, driven by the increasing attention of students and their families, businesses, and institutions towards the career prospects of young graduates (Tomlinson, 2012; Burke *et al.*, 2017; Green and Henseke, 2021). Graduates' employability

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signals the educational quality of a higher education institution (HEI) and significantly influences national and international rankings, which in turn impact the share of public resources allocated to each HEI (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018; Capano and Pritoni, 2020). Consequently, the development of an effective employability strategy has become increasingly imperative for HEIs, not only to fulfil their educational mission but also to effectively compete in attracting students and securing funding (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019).

However, awareness of the growing importance of employability for HE graduates does not always correspond to the design and deployment of a clear employability strategy. On the one hand, graduates' employability is still often confused with employment (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018). On the other one, the debate on the employability strategies of HEIs and their dissemination is unevenly developed across the globe. If graduate employability is now recognised as an issue in several countries around the world (Fakunle and Higson, 2021; Rees, 2021; Saito and Pham, 2021), research and empirical evidence is still concentrated in Western countries, where the concept first arose, and particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, where public institutions were the first to require HEIs the formal adoption of an employability strategy (Holmes, 2013; Blackmore *et al.*, 2016; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019).

In recent years the topic of HEI employment strategy has been explored by a growing number of contributions. Theoretical contributions have identified insightful approaches to classify the employability strategies available to HEIs (Holmes, 2013; Hooley *et al.*, 2023), tested by empirical analyses that confirmed the diversification of the paths adopted to improve graduates' employability depending on an HEI overall strategy (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016; Bennet *et al.*, 2017; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2017; Hooley *et al.*, 2023). However, more recent empirical analyses also suggest that tensions often exist between official employment strategies and their understanding by HEI academic and administrative staff (Divan *et al.*, 2019; Sin *et al.*, 2019). These contributions have opened the door to less normative and more explorative analyses. Earlier focus on the classification of existing approaches tended in fact to assume an intended employability strategy for all HEIs on the one hand, and coincidence between official and implemented approaches to employability on the other one, thus overlooking dynamic processes of strategy creation and transformation.

A deeper understanding of the formation of an employability strategy is needed to support those HEIs still exploring their own path towards graduate employability. Accordingly, this study focuses on the formation of employment strategies to assess the hypothesis of planned strategy, that frames strategy as an explicit and purposeful plan fully designed before deployment, against the hypothesis of emergent strategy, where the adopted plan gradually emerges from the interaction among different players and circumstances (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters,

1985). This paper tests the two alternative hypotheses based on the case studies of four HEIs in two Southern EU countries, Italy and Portugal. Interviews with academic staff in charge of employability programmes and officers from employability and careers services provided the main information source, further integrated by HEI official documents and plans.

The outcomes of the research support the hypothesis of strategy-as-pattern. In all the four examined HEIs an employability strategy is emerging from the rationalisation of top-down and bottom-up initiatives whose success strongly depend on voluntarism and individual effort further demonstrate that the external environment, especially national norms and available resources, play a significant role in raising awareness and guiding the efforts of HEIs towards the formulation of an employability strategy.

By switching attention from strategy classification to strategy formation this study highlights the emergent nature of HEI employability strategies. The ability to govern the tensions that inevitably accompany the ex-post rationalisation and socialisation of an emergent strategy thus becomes a critical factor in the establishment of a successful employability strategy.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on employability strategies in HEIs and highlights the significance of examining strategy formation as a means to bridge the gap between intended and realised approaches to employability. Section 3 depicts the methodology adopted in the empirical analysis. Section 4 presents the evidence from the four case HEIs. Section 5 discusses the findings of the empirical analysis, and the final section offers some concluding remarks.

2. THE EMPLOYABILITY STRATEGIES OF HEIs

In the recent decades the understanding of employability has shifted from a narrow skill agenda focused on the ideal characteristics of labour suppliers to a broader notion of life-long employment and career success (Burke *et al.*, 2017). In the case of graduates from tertiary education employability refers to “the likelihood that [a graduate] will gain what may be deemed as appropriate employment” (Holmes 2013, p. 541), that is, “one where most of the skills used are usually acquired in the course of tertiary education. [...] Those skills include, *inter alia*, cognitive skills, knowledge creation, management and planning skills, information-processing, and interpersonal skills” (Green and Henseke, 2021, pp. 4-5).

In this perspective, employability is a context-specific construct that stems from the interaction among students/graduates’ attributes and identity, HEIs, and employers (Kinash *et al.*, 2016). A significant literature exists on graduates’ and, increasingly, employers’ understanding

of employability (Tomlinson, 2012; Humburg *et al.*, 2017; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2017; Altmann *et al.*, 2018; Deming and Noray, 2020; Anderson and Tomlinson, 2021; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2022). In contrast, the role of HEIs in the employability discourse is still an under-researched topic (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016), despite their crucial role as both providers of graduates' skills and knowledge and mediators between the interests of public institutions on the one hand and those of citizens and employers on the other one (Holmes, 2013).

Three interconnected factors motivate interest in HEIs' potential impact on graduates' employability. Firstly, skills-displacing technological change increases the demand for high-skilled work (Green and Henseke, 2021) and emphasises the dynamic and relational dimension of professional skills, particularly in the context of graduate occupations (McGuinness *et al.*, 2021). Secondly, the increased heterogeneity of graduates' skills resulting from the massification of HE (Tomlinson, 2007; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2022) entails a higher risk of underemployment or even unemployment for individuals endowed with lower employability. This risk becomes particularly pronounced when sustained inflows of new graduates in the labour market out-grow the supply of graduate jobs (Green and Henseke, 2021). Thirdly, since the 1980s governments have extended target-driven management practices to formerly centralised and highly bureaucratised tertiary education systems. This shift towards a more goal-oriented approach has aimed to increase efficiency and free resources to focus HEIs on their educational and research missions (Capano, 2014; Capano and Pritoni, 2020), with graduate employability indicators typically included among assessed outcomes (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018). Employability has thus progressively assumed a double meaning for HEIs. On the one hand it is an outcome that concurs to form HEI rankings by public institutions and constrains access to public funding. On the other hand, assessing the employability of *alumni* becomes a tool for building the reputation of HEIs and outperform competitors in the race for student recruitment and funding. Devising and deploying an employability strategy, i.e., a coherent stream of actions to improve graduates' employability, gets therefore more and more important for HEIs.

Most of the existing empirical studies on HEI employability strategy aim at classifying adopted approaches based on Holmes' seminal paper (2013) that distinguishes between a possessional, a positional, and a processual approach. The possessional approach, for a long time the "mainstream" attitude towards graduate employability (Burke *et al.*, 2017), assumes that employability descends from identifiable personal skills and attributes that allow for career development. Employability strategies based on the possessional perspective thus focus on detailing employability requirements and signalling their acquisition to prospective employers, usually by means of formal credentials that complement a HE diploma. In contrast, the positional

approach associates employability with an understanding of the labour market that develops thanks to social and relational capital (Tomlinson, 2012). Employability strategies based on the positional approach favour elite students by enacting HEI reputation and selection mechanisms that reinforce pre-existing social positioning and status and perpetuate the segmentation of student population. Eventually, the processual approach frames employability as the dynamic outcome of a practise of career self-management (Burke *et al.*, 2017; Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2017). Individual experiences shape the progressive emergence of a graduate identity whereby graduates “act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed” (Holmes, 2013, p. 549). The processual approach thus provides a rationale for HEI engagement in enhancing graduate employability by means of curricular and non-curricular actions.

Field research on HEI employability strategies based on Holmes (2013) confirms theoretical expectations and highlights a connection between chosen strategy, target student population, and HEI reputation (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016). However, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2017) report a prevalence of strategies inspired by a processual approach, whereas Bennet *et al.* (2017) point out the existence of mixed solutions besides archetypal forms.

More recently Hooley *et al.* (2023) based on Sultana’s (2018) typology of technocratic, humanistic, and emancipatory rationalities that inform career education to propose an alternative tripartite classification of the perspectives underling HEI employability strategies. Close to the possessional approach, technocratic rationalities focus on the supply side of the labour market and stress the need to adapt graduates’ skills and attributes to employers’ requirements. Humanistic rationalities share with Holmes’ processual approach the emphasis on developing an awareness of professional identity. Additionally, however, humanistic rationalities highlight the importance of encouraging the exploration and development of personal interests and abilities beyond the realm of work. The third rationality identified by Hooley *et al.* (2023) takes a broader approach, emphasising the role of students and graduates as citizens, besides labour suppliers. The primary objective of the emancipatory rationality is to equip students with the skills and competences to understand the functioning of the labour market, not only with the intention of managing it but, if possible, of transforming it to advance their careers and enhance their chances of achieving sustainable decent work. In this perspective, employability becomes “a process of developing active citizens rather than just efficient labour market actors” (Hooley *et al.*, 2023, p. 15).

The empirical analysis by Hooley *et al.* (2023) concerns HEI attitude towards employability rather than the design and deployment of actual strategies. However, based on repeated runs of interviews with careers service and academic staff in a sample of 18 HEIs from

eight countries Hooley *et al.* (2023) classified the emerging rationalities as either technocratic or humanistic. Only one HEI seemed closer to an emancipatory rationality. In line with Bennet *et al.* (2017) the authors recognise that the boundaries between alternative approaches often tend to get blurred and acknowledge the existence of mixed solutions in a significant number of cases.

The literature that seeks to identify and qualify HEI employability strategies displays awareness of students and graduates' diversity and recognises the complexity of graduates' labour markets. However, by assuming that a strategy exists classification studies tend to overlook the obstacles and ambiguities encountered by HEIs in determining their own path towards graduates' employability. Recent contributions adopt a more problematic approach by stressing the dynamic nature of strategies and a non-linear relationship between strategy adoption and implementation. Some authors report non-aligned understandings of employability meaning and aims among HEI academic staff (Sin *et al.*, 2019; Sin and Amaral, 2021) and consequent tensions between official institutional positions and current practices (Divan *et al.*, 2019). The fungibility of operational tools² (Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019) and the trade-offs often encountered in the deployment of employability actions³ (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022) further intensify ambiguities. In addition, the large use of short-term indicators of labour market outcomes to assess the achievement of employability goals show a persisting confusion between employability and employment both among HEIs and among the public bodies that assess HEI outcomes based on those indicators (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2018), hence confusion on the actual contents and goals of strategic plans for employability.

The above findings suggest that analysis of strategy formation could usefully complement the classification of existing employability strategies to provide additional insight on which conditions support agreement on a coherent and possibly successful employability strategy. Business studies have long outlined the gap between leadership plans and intentions and what the organisations actually do. Mintzberg (1978) first introduced the notion of emergent strategies to connote coherent patterns of decisions and actions that do not result, or only partially result, from planning based on explicit goals. Intended strategies are derived from clearly articulated intentions that are shared with all members of the organisation by means of communication plans and deploy in an environment sufficiently stable or benign to guarantee that plans unfold as intended (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). However, the imperfect rationality of decision makers and the variability of the internal and the external environment inevitably imply some level of accommodation to account for imperfectly defined objectives, flawed communication, or

² For instance, work-integrated learning may support a possessional approach to employability by assigning *ad hoc* certificates to participating students as well as a processual approach by contribution to the development of graduates' identity.

³ For instance, embedding employability activities in classes has a direct impact on students' learning, but requires pedagogical skills and commitment by academic staff. On the other hand, the central provision of employability activities by career services allows for economies of scale and transdisciplinary approach but has a lower impact on students' learning (Jackson and Tomlinson, 2022).

unpredicted events. Real world strategies thus locate along a continuum between the extreme pole of pure intended strategies and perfectly emergent strategies, where a consistent pattern of action over time arises in the absence of intention about it.

Empirical analyses confirm the hypothesis of a continuum of hybrid solutions between the extreme poles of planned and emergent strategies depending on the conditions of the internal and the external environment (see, e.g., Idenburg, 1993; Slevin and Covin, 1997; Neugebauer *et al.*, 2016). An emergent approach in strategy formation helps reducing tensions among involved players (Efrat *et al.*, 2022), but only when the new strategy gets embedded in the organisational context. To this aim Mirabeau and Maguire (2014) stress the need of legitimating emerging strategies by committing organisation members and adapting the organisational structure by creating new teams, new procedures and routines, and new organisational objectives.

The opposition between planned and emergent strategies has proven fruitful to understand strategy formation also in the case of HEIs. A mix of planned and emergent strategies has been identified (Meyer *et al.*, 2012; Frølich *et al.*, 2017; Zabotto and Alves Filho, 2019), especially in less predictable environments (Mallon, 2019). HEIs typically display strong identity values, high discretion of academic staff, and multiple objectives with respect to teaching, research, and third mission (Frølich *et al.*, 2017). The use of emergent approaches to smooth arising tensions therefore assumes peculiar importance for HEIs, especially when a new strategy questions the established institution identity (MacDonald, 2013) or when competing strategies involve contrasting narratives (Holstein *et al.*, 2018).

Research on HEI emergent strategies within specific areas of action is still limited. In the case of internationalisation strategies Soliman *et al.* (2019) show how emergent approaches gain legitimacy by embedding in the broader HEI strategy. In this perspective formal planning complements strategy emergence by establishing a new language that decisively impacts organisational culture (Mallon, 2019). However, to the author's knowledge no study yet concerns strategy formation in the specific area of employability strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

Emergent employability strategies by HEIs were explored by means of a case study approach. Based on in-depth analysis, case studies allow investigating a phenomenon within the peculiar environment where it develops (Yin, 2018). A case study approach is therefore particularly appropriate to appreciate strategy formation, which cannot be separated from the context and the people it originates from. More specifically, this study adopts a multi-case method (Lijphart, 1975) based on four public HEIs from Italy and Portugal.

Several reasons justify a focus on Italy and Portugal, besides the opportunity to offer additional insight on HEI employability strategies outside Anglo-Saxon countries. After an initial push provided by the Bologna process (European Commission, 2014; Sin *et al.*, 2019; Kroher *et al.*, 2021), in both countries the discourse on graduates' employability has been gaining momentum due to a contrast between a growth rate of tertiary-educated working-age population among the fastest in Europe and a notable decline in the wage premium of higher education (Green and Henseke, 2021). In addition, in both countries HEI employability strategies are influenced by the monitoring measures implemented by state agencies as part of the overall quality assurance of the HE system (European Commission, 2019). However, significant differences also exist. On one hand, while both countries' governments aimed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of their HE systems by implementing governance changes in HEIs, Capano and Pritoni (2020) argue that Italian HEIs face greater evaluation pressures that limit their autonomy, whereas Portuguese governments have placed more emphasis on granting autonomy to HEIs. On the other hand, the more stringent compliance requirements imposed on Italian HEIs contribute to the availability of systematic data that informs discussions on employability. This includes regular labour market forecasts, regular graduate surveys, and work placement programs for all students (European Commission, 2019).

The original data was gathered from nine semi-structured interviews conducted in early 2022 as part of the BRIGHET Project financed by FCT. Interviews were held with academic and careers service staff in charge of providing employability services (Table 1) and concerned the meaning attributed to the concept of employability by the respondents' institution, changes in the importance of this concept, the actions undertaken to promote graduates' employability, the role played by the HEI and its stakeholders in employability development, and the tools used to gauge the achievement of employability goals. To maintain anonymity, the subsequent sections of the paper will refer to each case HEI using an abbreviation of the originating country followed by a sequential number (i.e., Ita1, Ita2, Por1, and Por2). In each HEI interviewees are identified by a letter that specifies their role within the organisation (P for professors and A for members of the administrative staff) and a sequential number to discriminate between multiple participants in similar positions (Table 1).

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The members of the research team, including the author of this paper, agreed on a two-step procedure to extract key comparable information for each case HEI. In the first step each researcher separately identified references to the primary drivers behind engaging with employability, the institutional strategy, the actions taken to support graduate employability, and the challenges acknowledged by the interviewees. The written grids prepared by each researcher were subsequently read and integrated by the other

members of the research team and jointly discussed to outline key facts and solve diverging perceptions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For the purposes of this paper, interview transcripts and report grids were carefully reviewed to identify and outline the three key elements of the employability strategies that distinguish between planned and emergent strategies (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). These elements include intended objectives, communication plans and solutions aimed at establishing shared understanding of employability targets, and the actions related to the employability strategy. Moreover, the interviews were supplemented by additional information retrieved from the websites of each HEIs concerning HEI strategic plans and, when available, employability reports and data on academic and administrative organisational structures to deliver employability services.

In line with past research (Farenga and Quinlan, 2016; Divan *et al.*, 2019), the adoption of a mixed method that integrates interviews and institutional documents allows to overcome the shortcomings of purely website-based analyses (e.g., Bennet *et al.*, 2017), which risk to overlook the gap between intended and realised strategies by emphasising official narratives (Divan *et al.*, 2019).

Table 1. Case HEIs and interview participants

HEI	Academic staff	Career service staff
Ita1	P1 – Professor, Vice president for placement and internships P2 – Professor, Department delegate for recruitment and placement	A1 – Director
Ita2	P1 – Professor, Vice president for placement and internships	--
Por1	P1 – Professor, Vice president for social engagement P2 – Professor, Faculty Dean for placement and internships	A1 – Director, Faculty level
Por2	P1 – Professor, Vice president for entrepreneurship and employability P2 – Professor, Faculty Dean	--

4. OUTCOMES

The four case HEIs were selected to display similarities in the characteristics of the organisational environment and the organisational culture. All case HEIs are located in industrialised areas of the respective countries characterised by comparatively low unemployment rates and a high demand for HE graduates skills. However, all case HEIs compete with more reputed universities located in the main city of their respective regions, as local businesses compete with the more attractive careers and the higher wages offered to HE graduates in larger cities. For this reason, in all cases the HEI mission focuses on serving the needs of local stakeholders. This mission is

pursued by means of intense co-operation with businesses, public administrations, and students and their families, and is supported by an organisational culture that emphasises local networks and local resources. Interviewees reported intense external partnerships not only in research activities, but also in student recruitment, teaching, and placement. However, the case HEIs still differ in structural dimensions, including size, impact, and specialisation (Table 2), allowing for the emergence of relationships among those dimensions and nature of the employability strategy (Eisenhardt, 1989). In addition, the two Portuguese HEIs reflect the duality of the Portuguese HE system, which includes research-oriented universities, such as Por1, and polytechnics, which have a vocational mission and are more responsive to local economic needs, such as Por2 (Tavares and Amaral, 2019).

4.1. Employability targets

To gain insight into the employability goals pursued by the case HEIs the interviews preliminarily explored the understanding of this construct and its practical implementation in day-to-day practices. When asked to provide the meaning of employability according to their HEI interviewees' definitions resonate a mix of process and possessional perspectives (Holmes, 2013) that sometimes also evoke an emancipatory approach (Hooley *et al.*, 2023).

The general meaning we attribute to the term 'employability' relates to the theme of helping or supporting students approaching graduation and graduates to understand the essential skills required to enter the job market [...] what is the most suitable path for one's profile and career, and also the characteristics specific to one's passions, as well as providing some more pragmatic support in preparing for the world of work, such as simulating job interviews or writing resumes (Ita2, P1).

Our mission is in that sense. To address immediate needs on one hand, but not to be subservient to immediate needs, rather to prepare [the students] for what is an industry of the future and with a future (Por1, P1).

We don't just want to train individuals focused on meeting specific market needs, but we also want to educate citizens (P2, Por2).

However, in several instances after the initial definition interviewees show a tendency to equate employability with employment, while in other cases there is an awareness of a discrepancy between the understanding of staff involved in employability initiatives and that of the HEI top management.

Based on my experience, this university gives a very pragmatic meaning to the term employability, namely the number of students who find employment after graduation. I have not yet noticed, except among a few colleagues with whom I have worked on these issues, but certainly not within the governance, the meaning of ‘we give our students the opportunity to start off on the right foot when they seek employment, we give them the opportunity to be happy in their work’ (Ita1, P1).

Table 2. Main features of the case HEIs

HEI	Ita1	Ita2	Por1	Por2	
Enrolled students (2022)	~15,000	~21,000	~20,000	~6,000	
Decile of 2022 Scimago ranking ^(a)	2 nd	5 th	2 nd	9 th	
Teaching and research domains	Humanities	X	X	X	
	Economics	X	X	X	
	Management	X	X	X	X
	Medicine and Health	X		X	
	Science	X	X	X	
Engineering and Technology	X	X	X	X	

(a) Scimago overall university ranking, <https://www.scimagoir.com/>

A similar contrast between broader definitions and narrower operationalisations arises from official documents. Employability never features among the main concerns of the strategic plans published on the HEI websites, even if existing references suggest a 360-degree approach to the technical and human training of the future graduates. However, the declaration of operative targets tends to conflate employability with employment rates. For instance, the strategic plan of HEI Por2 declares a willingness to promote employability by means of “a clear focus on fostering critical and independent thinking [and] active citizenship [...] through education”, while all indicators chosen to gauge employability improvements concern graduates’ short-term employment rate. In a similar way, the “Employability reports” periodically provided by HEI Por1 rather concern employment and unemployment rates by graduates’ discipline areas.

In summary, while the intended targets of HEIs emphasise graduate employment, interviewed staff tends to perceive employability objectives in a broader sense, closely aligned with the socio-educational mission of their institution.

The standard set by national agencies for HE evaluation may play a role in the identification of employability official targets with indicators of graduates’ employment rates. Both ANVUR, the Italian agency, and A3ES, the Portuguese one, include employment rates after

graduation among the indicators used for the periodical assessment of study programs, thus focusing the attention of HEIs on those measures.

4.2. Communication of employability targets

The interviews did not highlight specific initiatives aimed at communicating employability targets to internal and external stakeholders.

The university should be a bit more aware of the need to promote [employability] initiatives not only among students but also among faculty members. There should be a more significant communication plan to let everyone know about these initiatives, and perhaps there should be more collaboration with the faculty (Ita1, A1).

The HEI strategic plans and, above all, the structure and the resources allocated to the units that coordinate and deliver employability actions therefore seem to be the main tools to share employability intended and unintended objectives.

In all case HEIs the organisation of employability actions is based on three pillars: career services to manage structured and repetitive activities such as internships or career days; academic staff in charge of managing employability projects at the HEI or at the faculty/department level; and all the remaining members of the academic staff variously engaged in deploying either co-ordinated or individually planned employability actions.

The current organisation of formal employability actions reflects the legacy of a traditional focus on graduates' placement, as apparent from the job titles of academic staff in Table 1. Faculty and department delegates are expected to co-ordinate with HEI vice-presidents and with centralised career services but in the case of HEI Por1, whose strategic plan acknowledges "a natural tension between a common mission and the specialised projects" pursued by discipline-specific faculties. Accordingly, faculty delegates enjoy higher autonomy and coordinate with faculty-level education and career services.

In all case HEIs, institution-wide procedures often emerge from the *post-hoc* rationalisation of solutions and procedures that initially originated at a decentralised level.

Until some time ago, the departments themselves were the ones who, in some way, promoted [employability] initiatives. Not so much my office, not so much the vice-presidency for entrepreneurship and employability (Por2, P1).

A lot of bottom-up work is also being done, I would say, to begin socialising the cultural change associated with employability (Ita2, P1).

The procedures governing career services appear to be leaner and more consolidated in Italian HEIs, also due to their membership in AlmaLaurea. AlmaLaurea is a consortium of 80 Italian universities that offers a shared platform for managing student internships and post-graduation placements and conducts regular surveys on graduates' labour market outcomes one, three, and five years after graduation. Interviews with staff from the two Portuguese HEIs consistently emphasise the challenges resulting from the absence of such services or their fragmented distribution across faculties and departments.

What I intend to do is an observatory on employability [...] At the moment, we don't have indicators. That is the big problem (Por2, P1).

All interviewees are aware that formal delegates for employability manage and oversee only a minority of the existing initiatives, which are autonomously developed also by members of the academic staff and by career service officers. This is recognised as a valuable source of creativity, which, if harnessed through well-structured communication plans, could become a systematic resource for fostering innovation in employability initiatives and facilitating the selection and dissemination of best practices.

I feel that within the university there are many interesting initiatives related to career guidance, so we should work together more as a group, building a stronger network (Ita1, A1).

Certainly, there are many department-level initiatives that may not necessarily be specifically designed under the umbrella of outgoing guidance, but they connect students with local organisations and companies (Ita2, P1).

In my opinion, what is lacking in our university is more storytelling among one another (Ita1, P2).

Another common point arising from the interviews concerns the complaints about the limited resources allocated to employability actions in terms of budget and personnel, and the lack of recognition associated with the management of employability projects. These remarks confirm that the case HEIs still demonstrate a formal commitment to graduates' employability rather than integrating it into their strategic plans. They also reflect the mixed emotions of the personnel involved, torn between the passion of being part of employability projects and the stress and fatigue of working with limited resources and vague incentives.

Every year [the career day] brings in a significant amount of profit for the University, and every year it's a battle to allocate part of that money to further placement activities (Ita1, P1).

We need more people. We cannot monitor a graduate's journey (Por1, P1).

There is a severe understaffing issue because the office is called ‘placement’, but in reality, it also supports internships (Ita1, P1).

We are just creating more work. With each event we are just creating more work for ourselves (Por1, A1).

What happens with professors and researchers is that we do not earn more based on the number of projects with companies [...] We all do this out of mission and passion (Por1, P1).

Overall, the lack of a communication plan on HEI employability targets, the limited resources allocated to employability initiatives, and the large use of *ex-post* rationalisation instead of preliminary planning in employability practices communicate the secondary role attached to employability by case HEIs. Communication gaps involve both top-down and bottom-up information flows, with the risk of balkanising actions and perceptions, besides demotivating staff and missing potential synergies.

4.3. Actions implementation

Collected interviews outline a large number of actions, projects, and events aimed at fostering graduates’ employability. Alongside with more consolidated initiatives repeated in time, such as career days or job interview simulations, reported actions include also more innovative and creative projects such as the development of a library of on-demand videos on entrepreneurship and employability, inter-departmental soft-skill training experiences, or mentoring by *alumni*. Compared to other Italian and Portuguese institutes of tertiary education, the case HEIs place a much larger emphasis on the engagement with business companies and public administrations also in non-technical degree programmes. With the exclusion of embedded learning, students and graduates’ participation in employability initiatives is always voluntary.

In each case HEI the range of embedded, co-curricular, and extra-curricular employability actions spans across all the typologies identified in the literature⁴ (Kinash *et al.*, 2016; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019). Intra-institution variety and inter-institution similarity reflect a rational approach to the design of employability interventions already noted by Hooley *et al.* (2023), who question whether “different [underlying perspectives] actually result in qualitatively different provision, or whether such debates actually serve as ideo-logical cover for similar practices” (p. 16).

⁴ For instance, Bridgstock and Jackson (2019) identify six clusters of employability actions, namely capability development, curriculum composition, career development learning focus, career development learning initiatives, work integrated learning, and key stakeholder partnerships.

If the analysis of the type and nature of implemented employability initiatives provides no insight into HEI employability strategies, understanding may come from searching for a pattern in decisions and actions concerning employability. A common characteristics of the case HEIs is the trust demonstrated by top management towards the unwavering commitment of both academic and administrative staff members in aligning employability initiatives with the institution's core values and mission. This approach can be observed in the development of new lines of action. Participants in the interviews are highly confident in putting forward new ideas and prospecting their implementation.

We are free to choose the initiatives we want (Por1, A1).

We have an innovative competition in which we evaluate students' entrepreneurial projects [...] We haven't been doing a follow-up afterwards, and I intend for it to happen. What I aim for is that, in some way, if the students wish to progress with this idea into something more structured, we can also provide support to these students (Por1, P2).

Certainly, companies need an additional support, so we help them not only to understand how to manage our job market platform but also to identify profiles that could be more aligned with their job offers [...] It is an initiative of our office because I believe it is essential that we have a good understanding not only of our degree programmes but also of the employment prospects for our graduates when interacting with companies (Ita1, A1).

We want to explore initiatives that can facilitate, in a way, the customisation and personalisation of the student's path, incorporating skills that may also come from other parts of the university and other degree programmes (Ita2, P1).

At the same time, large delegation and autonomy rule also the expansion and continuous improvement of existing initiatives.

We have been the first service to enter the university's quality system, so for many years now, all activities have been recorded from start to finish, capturing satisfaction levels, participation rates, and more [...] We have all the data we need, among other things, to understand how to redesign the activity for the following year, if any modifications are necessary (Ita1, A1).

We are considering the initiatives and processes that have been implemented [...], and therefore, an incremental reevaluation of the actions that are already in place. For example, rethinking career days, re-evaluating internships, reconsidering the entire network of relationships with local organisations, and

beyond, to understand if there is anything missing [...], in order to expand and strengthen this network or seek synergies (Ita2, P1).

Nevertheless, autonomy can prove challenging for decision-makers, especially under high uncertainty and when, as in the case of the members of academic staff, delegates may miss field-specific competences. Two academic interviewees manifested a need to compare their own perspectives and choices with those of colleagues from other HEIs.

I would also be curious, if I may ask, to understand the situation of other universities both in Italy and abroad, as I have noticed that the interview project also involves Portugal. (Ita2, P1).

I am also interested in being involved in these types of interviews to better understand what is being done (Por2, P1).

5. DISCUSSION

The exam of the case HEIs in this study contributes to the debate on HEI employability strategies in two ways. Firstly, it shows that despite the decades elapsed since its initial introduction, the discourse on employability is still evolving and its integration in the strategic plans of HEIs cannot be taken for granted. Secondly, the analysis proposed suggests that when employability strategies are still under development, shifting from strategy classification to strategy formation can provide valuable insights to uncover emerging perspectives and address potential contrasts more effectively.

Employability still represents a secondary issue in the agenda of the case HEIs, irrespective of the national background and the nature of the institution (university or polytechnic). Employability has a limited space in the HEIs strategic plans, which rather indulge in the brilliant employment rates achieved by graduates. When employability is explicitly addressed, there is a notable contrast between the declared perspective, which aligns closely with a process/emancipatory approach, and the operational targets that tend to conflate employability with employment. Moreover, the strategic plans of the case HEIs never specify the actions that are supposed to result in the intended employability targets.

The limited importance attributed to employability by official documents is reflected in the insufficient allocation of resources to achieve the intended targets. Contrary recommendations in the literature (Mirabeau and McGuire, 2014), the adoption of employability goals did not entail the creation of new organisation units or the development of new procedures. Academic and administrative staff members already in charge of internship and placement duties are now

responsible of employability actions. An exception to this is observed in the case of HEI Por2, where a dedicated organisational unit for entrepreneurship and employability was established a few months prior to our interview to centralise previously scattered responsibilities. Furthermore, the interviews revealed a lack of proactive planning in developing procedures to govern employability-related processes. The case HEIs primarily rely on adapting procedures that were initially developed at decentralised levels or responding to the demands of external stakeholders, such as national evaluation agencies or AlmaLaurea in the case of the two Italian HEIs.

The interviews revealed concern on the low budget assigned to employability actions, primarily limited to administrative services' wages⁵, which were unanimously declared as understaffed. In addition, all the case HEIs invest limited resources to communicate top-down employability targets and initiatives, as well as to collect bottom-up information on the numerous projects and actions carried out by academic staff and career services along-side their regular responsibilities. Inadequate communication plans and channels negatively affect participation rates, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of planned actions. They also lead to duplicate efforts, loss of synergies, and risk of demotivating the initiators by limiting recognition of their efforts.

Nevertheless, the employability actions mentioned in interviews and official documents go well beyond the intended targets of graduates' employment levels. Despite limited re-sources, inadequate communication, and poor training in employability scope and tools, both high-level academic delegates, career service officers, and members of the academic staff actively participate in designing and delivering clusters of actions that coherently target employability from a process perspective (Holmes, 2013). Besides operative tools to bridge the gap between education and work such as career days, assistance with curriculum writing and job interview preparation, or placement services, students are provided with various opportunities that target the development of a more mature approach to work and career. These opportunities include internships, immersive courses that foster the development of both soft and technical skills, talks and seminars with entrepreneurs and managers, problem-solving on real-world cases, participation in national or international contests, and the chance to collaborate with students from different degree programmes to explore technical or societal challenges. Furthermore, all the case HEIs are either planning or already offering mentoring services to students and graduates, facilitated by alumni.

The internalisation of the HEI mission by organisation members, which centres on serving the needs of the local stakeholders, provides an explanation for the coherence of decentralised efforts even under weak central guidance and control. Graduates' employability in the broader

⁵ In no case do the HEIs academic staff receive additional reward for adding the management of employability initiatives to their research and teaching duties.

sense of lifelong employment and career success emerges as an unintended yet aligned objective that is consistent with the overall goals of the HEIs. Soliman *et al.* (2019) propose the integration of an area-specific strategy within the broader HEI strategy to facilitate communication and acceptance. However, strategy formation at the case HEIs appears to proceed in the opposite way. By grounding non-budgeted actions in-to the values and norms of their institution the members of the organisation establish the foundation for the future design of an intended employability strategy that aligns with the comprehensive strategy of the HEI. It can be argued that emergent strategies are developing at all the case HEIs, although there remains a lack of clarity regarding this awareness among both top management and staff members.

The four case studies confirm the impact of the external environment in driving the path of an emergent strategy (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). In all cases the high demand for graduates by local businesses conceals potential issues regarding the long-term labour market outcomes of graduates from the examined HEIs and redirects top management's focus away from employability. The shared emphasis on meeting the needs of the territory facilitates employability initiatives that capitalise on interactions with local stakeholders and reinforces the existing culture of mutual collaboration. It has to be noted that the autonomy of decentralised decision-makers and loosely structured budget and plans provide flexibility in response to unexpected events that may require operative changes or engaging in a new round of negotiation with external and internal partners.

Accountability to national agencies responsible for evaluating the HE system plays an important role in prioritising graduates' employment rates within the intended targets of HEI strategic plans. The Italian ANVUR includes the percentage of graduates in employment one and three years after completing their studies among the indicators for the periodical assessment of degree programmes, while the Portuguese A3ES requires the reporting of the unemployment rate⁶.

A difference between Italian and Portuguese case HEIs surfaces in relation to national information systems, whose availability conditions the prioritisation of employability initiatives. In the interviews, all Portuguese participants expressed frustration over the absence of national data on graduates' careers, leading each HEI to invest in developing their own dataset and collection system and hindering benchmarking with other institutions. They also reported investing in HEI-specific platforms to facilitate the matching between the demand and supply of student internships and graduate jobs. In contrast, membership in the AlmaLaurea consortium grants the two Italian HEIs access to periodic surveys on the professional paths and satisfaction

⁶ See <https://www.anvur.it/attivita/ava/accreditamento-periodico/linee-guida-per-laccreditamento-periodico> for ANVUR and https://a3es.pt/sites/default/files/Gui%C3%A3o%20ACEF-PERA%202018-2023_PT_V1.0.pdf for A3ES.

levels reported by graduates from all partner institutions. Additionally, AlmaLaurea provides the software infrastructure for managing internships and job placements. Consequently, these HEIs can direct their efforts towards providing additional services and enhancing existing ones.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The literature has stressed the growing importance that an employability strategy plays for HEIs to communicate commitment towards students' future, signal effectiveness and efficiency in resource allocation, and position against competing HEIs (Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019). However, the empirical analysis presented in this paper has shown that intended targets and strategies may diverge from the actual ones. By focusing on strategy formation, the empirical analysis has revealed emergent employability strategies that surpass the limitations set by the modest intended employability targets of the examined case HEIs.

Yet, although the four case studies demonstrate that an employability strategy can develop even without explicit planning, they also shed light on critical factors that impact the long-term viability of this approach. The continuity of academic and administrative staff's engagement with the employability discourse and the sustainability of undertaken initiatives may be questioned by the persisting lack of financial, organisational, and institutional support. While widespread organisational values centred on students and businesses' needs have so far driven the proliferation of essentially coherent initiatives, strong leadership is required to transform emerging processes into a deliberate strategy (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014). Additionally, strong leadership is necessary to embed consistent employability practices throughout the institution (Blackmore *et al.*, 2016) and manage the tensions that naturally arise when choices must be made between competing approaches or procedures developed in different parts of the same organisation (Holstein *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, strategy articulation has demonstrated its importance (Mirabeau and Maguire, 2014), as the socialisation of strategic plans not only makes goals and actions explicit but also revitalises organisational values and rituals, guiding organisations in new directions (Mallon, 2019). Nevertheless, caution is needed before endorsing normative or legislative intervention that compels HEIs to develop an intended employability strategy. Lessons from other countries have shown that such external mandates can result in discrepancies between intended and realised strategies, potentially leading to tensions between HEI management and staff (Kinash *et al.*, 2016; Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019; Divan *et al.*, 2019). Instead, public investment to raise and support overall awareness of the importance of graduate employability can yield more fruitful outcomes and foster transformative change.

As a final note, it is important to highlight two dimensions of an employability strategy that were not addressed in the interviews, indicating a potential lack of awareness in these areas. Firstly, the integration of many employability initiatives into regular curricula and the significant role of lecturers in imparting employability skills emphasise the connection between employability strategy and pedagogic approaches (Cook, 2022). Further efforts are needed to develop and provide training initiatives that support active and self-aware engagement in employability actions by lecturers. Secondly, considering the heterogeneity of students and *alumni*, a one-size-fits-all employability strategy is unlikely to be effective (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2022). The design of employability strategies (or the *ex-post* rationalisation of emerging strategies) should explicitly take student diversity into account.

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