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Paths bias in the configuration of graduates' professional insertion: Rethinking the significance of precariousness

Introduction

Within the project “MeIntegra – Markets and Insertion Strategies of Young Graduates”¹ we intend to present the *State of the Art* on the subject of young graduates’ professional insertion, in order to identify the main social, training, economic and political trends Higher Education institutions and the labour market face. This Project’s objectives are diversified², and include the following ones: *i*) to identify and characterise the competencies brought to work contexts; *ii*) to signal the employers’ practices of mobilization of competencies within the frame of a flexible labour force management; *iii*) to understand and explain the resistances and/ or good organisational and structural practices regarding innovation and competitiveness through the valorisation of the human factor.

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² This research began in 2006 and included, namely two diagnosis aimed at young graduates and corporations. Then, using a methodology similar to "research-action" Advanced Training Sessions and Workshops / Seminars were organised, and proposals emerging from the latter were used to improve the processes of professional integration and mobilisation with the involvement of the two target groups.

Encompassing the Northern region of Portugal, this research aims to know, on one side, the employability of young graduates from diverse and contrasting scientific fields, namely, “Technology and Engineering” and “Humanities and Social Sciences”, as well as the modalities of insertion in corporations, particularly regarding the latter’s practices of recruitment and selection. The questions that guided this research are diverse and encompassing: under which conditions do young graduates accomplish their transition to the labour market? Is there a correspondence between academic training and job? Which competencies are mobilised in the work context? Do they follow a growing profile of professional precariousness and uncertainty? How do they interpret the professional future in the context of current uncertainties? How to reconcile the demands of ever more intense work rhythms with private and family life? In their answers, do the young graduates mobilise the diverse theoretical contributes available in Social Sciences, particularly in Sociology, to explain the logics and strategies they follow³?

The expansion of higher education and the gradual increase of graduates have been followed by empirical evidences that point to the possibility of obtaining qualified job being linked to higher instruction levels (Smyth *et al.*, 2001; Iannelli and Soro Bonmatí, 2003; Machin and MacNally, 2007). However, access to the labour market does not present itself uniform and stable to most youngsters. So, in this communication we will use some empirical results in order to illustrate the growing fragmentation, individualization, and precariousness of work relations, which tend to characterise the career onset of qualified young staff. Also, we intend to contribute, even if shortly, to a critical revision of the concept of professional precariousness. Essentially, we intend to question the hegemonic reach of the phrase juvenile precariousness, visible in the mobilization of discourses full of antinomies: employment *vs* unemployment, sociability *vs* vulnerability, integration and social-professional identities *vs* segmentation and exclusion. Such reflection will allow us to rehearse a dimensional analysis of the concept of precariousness through the identification and restitution of other dimensions often forgotten in scientific analysis and especially in common

³ The questionnaire was applied to a universe of 1161 young graduates in 2004/05, coming from the scientific fields of “Humanities”, “Social Sciences”, “Technologies” and “Engineering”. The sample refers to a 40% quota, with a total of 464 valid questionnaires.

discourses on the matter (Marques and Duarte, 2003). Thus, the hypothesis proposed here rests on the assumption that different precariousness statuses can be observed, considering the young graduates' professional paths. This impels us to look for factors of explanation and understanding of the possible collective and individual logics of professional insertion.

1. The transition from University to the labour market

Until now, public policies have pursued certain objectives aiming to influence the education system to enlarge and to improve the opportunities for professional regulated education, whether in secondary and post-secondary levels (with the reintroduction of the technical and technological teaching in secondary school) and in higher education, so as to carry out the employability and internationalization demands, among others, envisaged by the Bologna Protocol. It is expected that it will be possible, then, to identify politically relevant scientific areas (and so eligible for accrued public funding), to increase student mobility within Europe, to set mutually recognizable diplomas as soon as degree equivalence is ensured, and also to give more dynamism to scientific and academic networks in the European context.

There are different approaches to this problem, according to the countries involved (Jobert, Marry and Tanguy, 1995; Hannan *et al.* 1999, Muller and Gangl, 2003), but most of them confront themselves currently with quite similar problems and challenges concerning the more or less predictable effects of these changes in higher education. These transformations are attached, primarily, to the extent of time spent in the education system (initial and life-long training), which is linked to a relatively recent trend to the feminization of university ranks, in spite of a minor presence in engineering and technology. Besides, we need to think about the consequences, a few of them already predictable, others still latent, related with school *massification* and with the diversification of the courses offered by the education system, where options appear today with a great opaqueness. As a matter of fact, while providing the entry of student publics that form a more and more heterogeneous universe regarding their social origins, school trajectories, vocations and professional careers, universities must wonder

not only about their curricula and pedagogic practices, but also about the professionalization, specialization and researching paths involved in their activities.

The organization and structuring of the education system ranks, as well as of the devices to access the labour market presuppose the universities' access to relevant information regarding teaching itself and their students' professional future. This will allow them to identify cognitive, process, relational, and other competencies considered nuclear for designing courses and their curricula. Such knowledge, necessary to all disciplines, should give clear directions and take into consideration not only the changes occurred in traditional jobs, but also the mapping of new professions whose frontiers seem more and more imprecise and broadening.

There is already, in Portugal, a reasonable legacy of substantial knowledge on this subject. It is possible to mention numerous authors, whose researches deal with juvenile cultures (Cabral and Pais, 1998; Almeida *et al.* 2002; Estanque and Nunes, 2003), as well as with comparative international inquiries, focusing on the Portuguese youth (Smithson, Lewis and Guerreiro, 1998). Besides these references, there are also surveys centred on universities that deal with, among other subjects, students' professional paths (cf. Arroiteia and Martins 1998, Alves, 1998, 2007; Gonçalves, 2001; Marques, 2006, 2007). As a matter of fact, the relations between academic training and the labour market have been central in (political, educational and scientific) public debates in the last decades. The choice of the approaches privileged in these debates is largely dependant on the political agenda of most advanced economies (cf. Pedroso *et al.*, 2005). Many of those approaches have been rapidly changing. Illustrative of this is the sequence of priorities ascribed during the last decades (Teichler, 2007): i) to the contribution of higher education to economic growth; ii) to the dangers of "over-qualification" and of the disarticulation between offer and demand; iii) to the diversity of education and to job opportunities; iv) to the growing incidence of graduate unemployment and to the precariousness of their work and employment conditions; v) to the emphasis on training "key-qualifications"; vi) and finally, to the trend towards the globalization of the young graduates' labour market.

As a social problem with diverse manifestations, the contexts and kinds of professional insertion currently analysed convene other explicative factors in terms of changes in the

productive and employment systems. One of them concerns the difficulties of professional insertion that strike graduates, and not just those deprived of academic qualification. More, the relative depreciation of initial training, linked to the “diploma inflation” effect and its correlative devaluation (Bourdieu, 1978; Passeron, 1982; Forgeot and Gautié, 1997), presupposes strategies of quick recycling of “disqualified” symbolic capitals, with particular incidence on the “social capitals” held by candidates to a first job. It is after all known that access to the first job depends more on the candidate’s personal and family networks efficiency. Likewise, we should be aware of the trend for a decreasing correspondence between the diploma and the profile required by available jobs, which may explain to a large extent the growing distortion of the students’ representations and expectations of forthcoming complex and extended (time and space) trajectories.

Finally, considering the demands of flexibility and polyvalence in several labour and job contexts, we find extremely diversified social realities (Beck, 2000). We may presume that many of these young workers, in the beginning of a career and holders of high academic qualifications, base their professional performances on autonomy and creativity, and that they also hold high organizational and professional expectations, particularly in highly competitive sectors (namely, the New Technologies of Information and Communication). Nevertheless, the conditions and processes of insertion and integration of these young graduates are extremely heterogeneous and depend on factors that escape the exclusive logic of the diploma’s employability value. In this sense, and within the frame of a de-regulation of the wage relation and the consequent expansion of atypical kinds of jobs, we may also underscore the increasing rates of sub-employment and unemployment, which warn us about the growing vulnerability and precariousness of employment relations.

2. Segmentation and status heterogeneity of young graduates

Regarding the current constraints of flexibility and globalization of the labour market, most companies expose social groups who have invested on their professional and academic training to a growing precariousness. If these used to present advantages over those who were deprived of such resources, in the current context of profound transformation of the productive and educational systems, employment relations

become much more volatile and non-prescriptive of the social actors' conduct. In fact, we watch the weakening of certain references of a salary-based society, such as those of the stability and predictability of professional trajectories, at least to qualified workers. It is known that uncertainty and the instability of the contractual relation, despite the diverse modalities it may assume according to each country, strike almost an entire generation, men and women, youngsters with or without diplomas.

Schematically, we will, on one side, contrast and identify the contexts of professional insertion of young graduates, resorting to a set of conventional indicators (e.g., time gap until obtaining the first job), and on the other, characterise the first professional experiences departing from the modalities of labour force management implemented by the companies, namely the contract forms the latter resort to.

So, time gap until obtaining the first job and/ or professional residence⁴ is the first information we have to characterise the onset of insertion trajectories. In general, the waiting extends from 1 to 6 months (52%), although a significant number of youngsters mention not having waited any time after the graduation conclusion (32%), particularly those coming from "Technologies and Engineering".

The main conclusions regarding the factors that influence the obtainment of the first job on the part of young adults converge in the importance ascribed to the school path, type and level of the diploma (specialization areas). However, there are youngsters who share such conditions and who may nevertheless show different paths. In fact, complementary factors allow the mitigation of the weight of the diploma when facing other criteria. We can, for example, mention family and social contexts as co-explanatory dimensions. Social origin implicitly translates the ability of resorting to family and friendship networks, being pointed out as one of the privileged tools in accessing the first job (Marques, 2006). In fact, the individuals declared resorting to personal contacts (26%), on one side, to ads/ openings, as well as to spontaneous applications, curricular/ professional residences (16%), on the other. Comparatively, few are those who resorted to employment organisations such as, for example, the

⁴ Regarding the public policies for employment, it is important to mention the role of the financial support offered to the companies/ organizations, which celebrate contracts of professional residence with young graduates.

Unidades de Inserção na Vida Activa (UNIVA) [Units of Insertion in Active Life] or the public Employment Centres of the *Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional* (IEFP) [Institute of Employment and Professional Training].

In fact, access to the labour market tends to assume diversified configurations in terms of contract statuses (Galland, 1984). If we consider the type of contract as the central argument of the up until recently dominant thesis, resting on the stability of the work relation as the first and most important representation of professional insertion to many young graduates, it is important to confront it with the research's results. Since only 15% of them declare holding a permanent contractual relation, we may refute such argument. This way, the alternative thesis, which has been proposed in recent years, rests on the preponderant use of the modalities of professional residence or juridical forms such as fixed duration contracts, or even service contracts in the recruitment of the labour force. Considering our results, this thesis is consistent and corroborated. Regarding this matter, we highlight the following data: 30% of the youngsters were pursuing their professional residence; 29% held a fixed duration contract; and 12% a service contract. Therefore, one of the features of current recruitment practices aimed at this segment of highly educated staff consists of the growing inclusion of "a-typical" employment forms as a generalised modality of human resource management (Rodrigues, 1991; Rauch, 2001; Celestin, 2002; Rebelo, 2003).

Equally, it can be confirmed, according to the results, that the graduates' current situation is that of full-time dependent workers (71%). However, other labour statuses tend to assume a growing importance. These include: inactivity (12%); independent worker/ employer (8%); unemployed (5%) and part-time worker (3%). So, we are before a trend towards the proliferation of diverse situations, which include different work conditions, statuses and expectations, even if in the graduate's view there is an important correspondence between graduation and employment, particularly in the same (64%) or in a similar field (20%). However, one cannot stop, as well, observing a significant relation between the grade's degree of correspondence to the job according to scientific areas⁵. In fact, it is especially graduates coming from technologies and engineering those who contribute the most to that perception of high correspondence

⁵ Statistically significant relation (Cramer's V =0,363).

(82,1%) against only 47,3% of graduates in humanities and social sciences, and taking also into account that 23,2% declare having a job in a field that is different from their academic training.

In this research, and despite future finer interpretation, the main trends of graduates' professional insertion trajectories found in international researches' (Teichler, 2007) are confirmed. Results show how the young graduates' transition to the labour market, the obtainment of a job/ work, and professional performances vary according both to social origin and school choices, and the impacts of experiences during the academic course and acquired competencies, specifically those related to extra-curricular activities and the residence period, and also according to the regional context and the employment dynamics. Before the growing intensification of work rhythms and precariousness of the labour status, we can argue, with some consistency, about the non-linearity of the young graduates' processes of professional insertion in work contexts. These tend to show the ever more hybrid training, residence, employment, unemployment, inactivity situations, among others, which contribute to the segmentation of the labour market, without the configuration of a homogeneous and continuous pattern in the relations between diploma and subsequent employment in a global society.

3. Rethinking precariousness: theoretical sketch

As we have been arguing from the start, the idea that professional insertion configures itself as a process objectified in professional practices, but also in creativity and in the ability to mobilize original values and new life-ways is accepted. This means that, apart from being each young person's individual question, the process of professional insertion constitutes itself as a collective and generational dynamic of our society.

Having contemplated professional insertion as a complex and not necessarily linear process, at least analytically, one can project an accrued meaning and content scope to the concept of precariousness. This is all the more so since one of the conclusions from Nicole-Drancourt's (1994) analyses, which have privileged longitudinal research strategies, brings attention to the fact of a long term perspective altering the idea of

professional precariousness and stability. So, and without entering the specific debate on the personal consequences of precariousness, it is important to bear in mind the reference frames closer to this problematic.

Consensually, the idea of precariousness is usually associated to the multiplication of atypical employment and to the growth of unemployment. Recently, a certain reciprocity has been setting in, regarding the so-called “a-typical”⁶ and “precarious jobs”. This is partly due to the fact that the new employment forms have emerged in a context where the labour market becomes more and more flexible (Goudswaard and Nanteuil, 2000), where labour regulation weakens and where companies strategically attempt to cut down labour force costs. This way, these new types of Job are associated to degradation in the quality of work. But, what seems plausible to support is that not all “a-typical” jobs are “precarious” jobs, these expressions being not equivalent, even if the two attributes tend to be related. One can admit that these new work forms can be a choice to some workers and, therefore, deprived of the imposition and constringent character inherent to the notion of precariousness.

Notice, also, that nowadays also the “typical” employment forms undergo evolutions in terms of work contract, such as individualization and the fluctuation of the employment relation, especially regarding pay and careers, management by projects and objectives, among others. Under some circumstances, these characteristics can lead to precarious work situations by an increase of constraints and real subordination, notwithstanding an alleged dilution of formal subordination. For this reason, the idea of stability should also be faced with caution when reduced to a “typical” job.

On the other side, the notion of precariousness has been predominantly represented and analysed as employment precariousness, appealing essentially to the existence of uncertain jobs, short (or at least determined) term work contracts, and to an effective or potential restriction of social rights. In this sense, the type of work contract tends to be the determinant factor of precariousness.

⁶ So defined by contrast with the profile of what has been socially and legally called “typical” dependent employment (employment during an undefined amount of time, full-time and including social protection).

But it is not only necessary, as we have seen, to distinguish a-typical jobs from those that are so on a voluntary basis from those that are not so. It is also important not to limit the dimensions of precariousness to juridical-institutional conditions, which appeal, among other indicators, to the work contract and pay. What seems important to us, and it is important to highlight it, is to assume the non-exclusivity of such argument, appealing to other dimensions related to the conditions under which the professional activity takes place and the set of representations and expectations produced from the work context. This way, one is considering indicators, which include work rhythms and intensity, schedule predictability, degree of autonomy and responsibility in task execution, relational networks, degree of work satisfaction, representations of work, professional and personal project, or the job's impact on other social spheres.

This way, we are expanding the concept of precariousness not just in terms of economic and social insecurity, but also according to the type of work, the material and symbolic pay and the social relations within the organisation (Castel, 1995). We are also including here the structuring dimension of socialization and social-professional integration that come from the work relation mentioned by Paugam in his most recent work, *Le salarié de la précarité* (2000). The author tells us that: “Today (...) one imagines the job relation as the determining dimension of integration and one forgets the work relation as had been studied, on one side, by Durkheim, and on the other, by the 1960's sociologists of work” (*ibidem*: 15)⁷. So, it is important to resume to the analyses of actual work experiences, refuting a certain idea of a crisis in the disciplinary field of the sociology of work, largely justified by the proclaimed “end of work” (Rifkin, 1997) or the “decentring” of its value (Méda, 1995). Castillho (1999), too, reinforces that position by calling attention to the lack of empirical analyses on work quotidiens, which support some current trends that define the known thesis of *single thought*.

⁷ To the author, most workers' “installation” in precariousness presents a growing heterogeneity, which is manifest in the diverse positions or situations that characterise workers according to their relation with the employment norm, as Paugam (2000: 14) has identified in his empirical work: *i*) those who hold a stable job, not risking losing it in the following years (stable un-threatened employment); *ii*) those who hold a job for over one year but who may lose it in the forthcoming years (stable threatened employment); *iii*) those who changed jobs, or knew a period of unemployment during the de previous year and who presently hold a precarious job, and who may lose it in the near future (unstable employment); *iv*) those who have been unemployed for at least two years; *v*) those who have been unemployed for more than two years (long term unemployment).

In fact, job and work relations are indispensable references within a discussion of professional precariousness. The first defines, essentially, social rights that contribute to form social identity. In this view, the multiple statutory classifications resting on the growing contractual vulnerability, which extends to more and more heterogeneous social groups is accentuated. Illustrative of this hierarchical arrangement are the cases of expressions such as “stable”, “precarious”, “residence”, “trainees”, “unqualified” youngsters.

The work relation recalls the *productive logic* of contemporary society, which turns each individual into a potential producer who acquires identity and the sense of being useful. So, besides extremes characterised by forced or lucid work, we can observe situations of compromise between certain aspects of work that intrinsically grant satisfaction and those who are accepted, under minor or major constraint, and rationalised to be more easily endured.

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Abstract

In the scope of **MeINTEGRA** project – “**Markets and insertion strategies of Young Graduates**” we intended to make the State of Art on the thematic of the professional insertion of young graduates, in order to identify to the main trends of social, formative, economic and politics changes that face the High Education Institutions and the Work Market. The aims continued in the scope of this project had been diversified, being to relate the following ones: i) to identify and to characterize the abilities carried to the work contexts; ii) to signal practical of mobilization of the abilities for the entities the employers in the board of a flexible management of the labour force; iii) to understand and to explain good resistances and/or practical structural organizational and to the innovation and competitiveness for the valuation of the human factor.

Enclosing all the North region of Portugal, this research aimed at to know, for one side, the employment of the young graduates proceeding from the University of Minho, as well as the modalities of insertion of these in the companies/organizations who have high staff. Therefore, in order to harness some of the main results in that research, this communication aims at to widen and to deepen our formative and professional knowledge on passages and trajectories of young graduates of the scientific

areas of "Social Sciences" and "Engineering's and Technologies". We will go ourselves to centre, over all, in the social constraints - logical of social reproduction, structure and functioning it system of high education and work market - and in the continued strategies of professional insertion, being distinguished the co-clarifying factors of the work market segmentation (e.g., course, gender, waiting time of the first job, activity sector, recruitment modalities, contractual situation). We may presume that many of these young workers, in the beginning of a career and holders of high academic qualifications, base their professional performances on the autonomy and creativity, as well as they share also high organizational and professionals expectations, particularly those who are placed in highly competitive sectors (namely those of the New Technologies of Information and Communication). Nevertheless, the conditions and the processes of insertion and integration of these young graduated are extremely heterogeneous and depend on factors that escape the exclusive logic of the employability value of the diploma. In this sense, and in the frame of a deregulation of the wage relation and consequent expansion of atypical kinds of job, we may as well notice increasing rates of sub-employment and unemployment, which warn us about a growing vulnerability and precariousness of the employment relations.