DOI: 10.2478/v10241-012-0017-3

Roberta Piazza*

The changing role of universities in Italy: placement services

ABSTRACT

The centuries old concept of a university as a self regulating body based on freedom and a priori trust granted by society as a whole is now in crisis due to the European reforms initiated in the nineties. Ambivalence and contradictions in the academic world itself have further accentuated this crisis, a crisis that now questions the role of knowledge in society and a university's very raison d'être. Consequently, while there is recognition of the right for autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge there is a perception that society should be able to turn to universities for assistance in solving its basic problems. From this comes a concept of a university, and of knowledge, increasingly ready to respond to the claims of its diverse stakeholders. These external pressures strengthen the links between a university and external economic and social developments.

Placement services are one of the methods used by universities to organize their connections to society and the external environment as a whole and is one that offers added value to the university's internal or external customers. Therefore, this study investigates the placement services in the Italian universities, with the aim to recognize capacity and limitations to reconceptualise their role in regards of Third Mission and manage them towards that.

KEYWORDS: *University, Mission, Career Guidance, Placement Services, Employment*

* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Roberta Piazza, Università di Catania, Dipartimento Di Processi Formativi, Via Biblioteca 4, 95124 Catania, Italy.

CHANGE IN THE UNIVERSITIES: THE THIRD MISSION

The centuries old concept of a university as a self regulating body based on freedom and a priori trust granted by society as a whole is now in crisis due to the European reforms initiated in the nineties. Ambivalence and contradictions in the academic world itself have further accentuated this crisis, a crisis that now questions the role of knowledge in society and a university's very raison d'être. Consequently, while there is recognition of the right for autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge there is a perception that society should be able to turn to universities for assistance in solving its basic problems (Moscati 2008). From this comes a concept of a university, and of knowledge, increasingly ready to respond to the claims of its diverse stakeholders. These external pressures strengthen the links between a university and external economic and social developments. Within today's Knowledge Society knowledge has taken on a competitive role in the economies of several countries as there are demands for ever larger numbers of graduates. Consequently, the traditional rationale for higher education is changing. A model of the university as a 'Knowledge University' is becoming increasingly accepted internationally, the university aims to use its resources to further economic development. Such a model can assist the development of a Knowledge Society where, according to the Regional System of Innovation formulated by Lundvall (1992), a useful tool to identify interactions between society and universities, knowledge is produced, consumed and stored via innovative tools and interface units. Consequently, the role of a university is increasingly defined by its ability to integrate with its environment (Montesinos, López and Mora, 2006).

According to the triple helix model designed by Etzkowitz and Leyedesdorff (1997) the opening up of universities to society and the development of links with business and government has forced the academic world to give consideration to a range

of interest groups (in terms of the control of issues that up to now have been the sole prerogative of the universities) and to acquire a market logic to allow it to remain competitive even in its core competencies of research and education. In the Anglo-Saxon world and Northern Europe the traditional autonomy of universities has encouraged them for some time to develop a network of economic and political contacts at local, national and supranational level thus adding to the 'first' and 'second' university missions (teaching and academic research) additional activities concerned with the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university functions outside the academic environment (the so called 'Third Mission') (Molas-Gallart and Castro Martinez, 2007; European Commission, 2003; Molas-Gallart et al, 2002; Polt et al, 2001;). Italian academia, however, has favoured the state and not the market as its principle external contact. In addition, the development of links to the world of work, the opening of dialogues with local institutions and the monetary value of awards, some of the elements required to develop the Third Mission, have helped to underscore the differences between science and arts faculties. Whilst the former have always maintained external contacts, arts faculties have due to the nature of the didactic work undertaken and the individual nature of its research, found it difficult to adapt to urgent external demands. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the concept of the entrepreneurial university (Clark 1998; Jacob, Lindquist and Hallsmark 2003; Etzkowitz 1983; Mello and Etzkowitz 2008) is becoming more widespread in advanced and developing countries whose attitudes, values and mission are emerging as a common academic format universities do not always succeed in developing, or even want to develop, close integration with the external environment or even with the use of services designed to achieve such a goal.

Placement services are one of the methods used by universities to organize their connections to society and the external en-

vironment as a whole (Montesinos, López, Mora 2006, 3) and is one that offers added value to the university's internal or external customers (Etzkowitz & Klofsten, 2005). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that amongst the indicators mentioned in the 2005 report from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) used to determine the distribution of 75% of its Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) for the period 2006-2008 there are activities that are "not best measured", "including data on students placements, engagement with non commercial organisations and staff dedicated to Third Mission activities" (Molas-Gallart & Castro Martínez 2007, 327).

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that during their evolution universities have always had links with society in general and that these institutions fundamentally considered themselves to be independent and free to chose to make relationships with external stakeholders based on their own ethos (Nedeva, 2007).

"In the neoliberal university such work continues, but has been (re)presented as a functional attribute. This reconceptualisation of the Third Mission from relational to functional has permitted government, through technologies of audit, accountability and performance measurement, to determine the precise nature of universities' functions in this regard and manage them towards those. In particular, universities must now pursue direct, immediate and demonstrable economic utility. As such, the Third Mission creates demands for universities to respond directly to the needs of employers when designing and delivering their educational programmes" (Boden & Neveda 2010, 41).

The adoption of the logic of the Third Mission risks changing the concept of the cultural and social education of the professional elite to a view of education as a set of practical and technical skills and knowledge useful to meet the demands of the knowledge society (Nedeva 2007, 95). The neoliberalisation of universities has thus provided governments with a means of capturing and controlling the discourse of employability with-

out resolving the problem of how to differentiate the quality of different types of higher education study and subsequent careers. "In short, the rapid expansion of higher education and lifelong learning is a symptom of the opportunity trap, not its resolution" (Brown 2003, 154).

THE SUPPORT PROVIDED BY ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE SEARCH FOR WORK

The 1999 measures (DM 509/1999) to reform the Italian university system contain certain elements aimed at reducing the distance between universities and the world of work. Included here are elements "aimed at helping with the choice of a profession via direct experience of the work sector to which the award can give access by means of careers guidance and training apprenticeships" and through the recognition of knowledge and professional skills acquired in the workplace in the form of university credits.

Progress to date, which can seem slow and late when compared to several other European countries, has been determined by the fact that the Italian university system has only recently had to add to its responsibilities that of an awareness of the workplace. A look at data concerning graduate placement in the workforce during the second half of the nineties shows that private contacts and personal relationships are the main method used when looking for work. Almost 60% of graduates used their contacts with friends, parents and relatives; 50% used formal, non-organised methods (replying to and paying for advertisements); 40% took part in public recruitment exams (formal, organized methods). Particularly in regions in the south of the country requests for work had a low success rate. The main method of matching a request with an offer was via personal relationships; almost 40% found their first job after graduating in this way; 30% found

employment via direct contact with employers; 15% via public recruitment exams and 10% by replying to advertisements. The contribution from universities was almost non-existent, equal to other organised institutions. In the same period European graduates who found work thanks to assistance from their higher education institution, though still a minority, accounted for 10-20% of graduates. What is more, work experience gained during a course, promoted by the universities, was an important criteria considered by employers when deciding who to employ. In Italy, however, far fewer graduates took part in workplace experience schemes than in other countries, very few took 'stages' and apprenticeships, less than 10% found work thanks to direct or indirect help from their university (Rostan 2006, pp. 111-163).

The three surveys carried out by ISTAT in 2000, 2003, 2006 on graduate recruitment indicate that approximately half of the graduates who found work after graduation found it thanks to contacts with the employer – direct contact or contact via relatives and friends. 5% of graduates found work thanks to a communication to an employer from the university, twice this number found work after a 'stage' in a company (Rostan, 2008).

According to research carried out by Alma Laurea on graduates in the workplace (2001-2005), a year after leaving university the main method for graduates of the old system to find work was via contact with employers, through personal initiative and thanks to connections with friends and relations. 10% of graduates found work with the indirect help of universities via 'stages' or other training activities undertaken after graduation (Alma Laurea 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006).The data coming from the cohort of graduates of 2000 (interviewed one, three and fives years after graduation) show that as time progresses direct contact with an employer from a personal initiative, whilst remaining the most important method to find work, is used less by graduates whilst the importance of information supplied by relatives and friends remains stable.

The data presented here indicates two principle methods of matching work requests and offers: direct contact between the graduate and employer and contact mediated by a graduate's personal contacts. The role of the university in promoting graduate employment "still appears to be very limited" (Rostan 2008, 164) and not appropriate to graduates' needs.

THE TARDINESS OF UNIVERSITIES: LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

The workplace is continually changing, globalisation is impacting on individuals' lives resulting in changes to organised structures and a substantial reduction in the workforce; the concept of a career is changing; opportunities to develop a career are diversifying; the workforce is becoming more international. University systems need to respond to these changing circumstances with new models and concepts. The matching model, the most dominant model since its formulation in the first decade of the 20th century (Skill Commission 2008), is no longer valid. The dominant guidance model, built on the principles of social constructivism (Bassot 2006), is based on the notion that knowledge about a career is not simply acquired by people, but is constructed through activity and in interactions with a variety of people (including career professionals, employers, teachers, parents, peers and so on). In this sense, the use of the bridge metaphor to explain the nature of career guidance, is not new to the field of careers work and career education and guidance (Sultana and Watts 2006; Trachtenberg et al. 2002). This metaphor helps to highlight the dialectically opposed tensions between the needs of individuals on one side and the needs of the government and employers on the other and the requirements of individuals to keep pace with change and continue to develop.

Career guidance as a support to the construction of an individual career development programme, linked to education, the acquisition of skills and abilities, to the interests of the individual and in tune with the workplace and professions can no longer be considered as a support for decisions and choices but rather should be seen as a strategy for consultancy, the planning of career paths, professional growth, development plans and professional training. All of this can be expressed in the much abused term 'lifelong learning' which allows guidance to be interpreted as an expert mentor and an awareness of how to manage one's own personal and professional position in the workforce (Tanucci 2009, 13).

The question of how lifelong guidance can prepare young people for an uncertain future remains problematic. As it is problematic to define if and how guidance "has a role to play in ensuring that lifelong learning is embedded into the lives of young people and adults, encouraging them to have a thirst for learning and the achievement of their potential. Each individual, whether at school, college, university or out in the workplace, is now expected to take charge of their own learning and development and engage in a process of lifelong learning. However, whether everyone will be in a position to achieve this is questionable and represents a further move from social responsibility to individual blame" (Bassot 2006, 6).

In such a scenario the university system seems tied to inconsistent ideas and assumptions and unable to meet current demands. What we see is a total lack of awareness in universities of the issues concerning careers guidance and at the same time uncertainty about its role, purpose and responsibilities regarding the new demands for support, advice and action in the sphere of career guidance at tertiary level. This is caused, at least in Italy, by the distance historically between a university and the professions and the workplace, or better, by a lack of interest

in the process of education – in placement into the workplace (Tanucci 2009).

It must be noted, however, that the problem of inadequacy or the total lack of career guidance services in tertiary education is present in several countries. In some countries, careers guidance, an activity that tends not to be professionalised in higher education, is limited at most to the choice of studies to be undertaken: the assumption seems to be that students can manage their own transitions into the labour market without any support. This may have been sustainable when their student body covered a small academic elite, who normally entered a narrow field of work related to their studies. It is much more questionable when the number of students is much larger and more diverse, and when the links between their studies and the fields open to them are much more complex (Watts Sultana 2004, 113).

However, there is unanimous agreement regarding the need to improve career guidance services in tertiary education. This means not only the creation of central careers services but also the provision in the university curriculum of career management courses, opportunities for work experience, and of profiling and portfolio systems. Already in 2004 in a report to policy makers the OECD recognised not only that few career guidance services were available for students in tertiary education but also that a major problem was the lack of professional skills able to meet students' career development and guidance needs. In addition, the reported noted a lack of trained careers counsellors. The following was also noted:

– The focus of existing career services is frequently narrow, often concentrating on personal or study guidance. Little attention is paid to career development and choice, including helping students to develop career management and entrepreneurial skills and to consider taking up self-employment options.

– The specific career guidance needs of particular groups of students – including students in transition from study to employment, students who are dropping out from or changing their courses, mature students returning to study, distance learning students, and international students, for instance – are often not catered for (OECD 2004, 20).

Further problems to be addressed by universities can be added to the above: the sourcing of relevant funding, particularly for public institutions; the assessment of the quality of career services as a part of the general assessment of the quality of tertiary institutions; the possibility of a link between placement services and the roles of teaching staff and links to the content of the academic curriculum; the development of links with external career guidance and employment services, as well as with employers, to ensure that career information and career guidance are appropriate, up-to-date and informed by accurate labour market information; ultimately the closer integration of career guidance into teaching and learning programmes across faculties and departments. Whilst there is no lack of initiatives in Europe to develop assessment criteria for placement services (Hughes & Gration 2006), one can only note in Italy a reluctance among universities to give consideration to such issues.

It must be noted that the Italian universities are still unsure of the best way to reconcile the often conflicting demands of research and teaching and the varying demands made by their external social partners. It is therefore very problematic to implement true reform with regard to careers guidance services, above all because this would require revision of some of the aspects of the way that the universities as institutions are governed and managed. This is largely due to Italian universities being unable to relate positively to the cultural, social, political and productive organisations of the regions they are located in. The universities, in reality, are refusing to meet society's needs as well as refusing to take on the responsibility to create and impart new

knowledge, both of which are fundamental to individual and regional well-being and general economic development.

Given the profound changes occurring in society surrounding them, the new demand being made on universities is certainly considerable: to play a key role in career guidance they must fundamentally revise their mission and organisational structure. Universities do not always have a clear picture of the requirements of the constantly changing society that surrounds them, or the evolving needs of business and the economy, both key sectors for the development of a country. Universities need to reconcile often contradictory demands: they need to preserve and record the knowledge of a whole society, create innovation, be accountable for vital public funds, carry out scientific research and provide services in a very competitive market. The long timeframe required to transform universities is delaying the moment when it can work with society around it to fulfil its duty to meet the demands of the Knowledge Society.

REFERENCES

Bassot, B. (2006). Constructing new understandings of career guidance: joining the dots, in H.L. Reid, J. Bimrose, (eds) *Constructing the Future IV: Transforming Career Guidance*. Stourbridge, Institute of Career Guidance.

Boden, R., Nedeva, M. (2010). Employing discourse: universities and graduate 'employability', *Journal of Education Policy*, 25: 1, 37 — 54.

Brown, P. (2003). The opportunity trap: Education and employment in a global economy, *European Educational Research Journal* 2, 1: 141–79.

Clark, B.R. (1998) *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities; Organisational Pathways of Transformation.* Oxford: Pergamon for IAU.

Conesa, F. (1997). *Las Officinas de Transferencia de resultados de Investigación en el Sistema Español de Innovación.*(Spain: The VALUE Report, UPV.

Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdorff, L. (eds) (1997) *University and the Global Knowledge Economy*. London: Pinter.

Etzkowitz, H. (1983) Entrepreneurial scientists and entrepreneurial universities in American academic science, Minerva, 21, 198–233.

Etzkowitz, H.E, Klofsten, M, (2005). The Innovative Region: Toward a Theory of Knowledge-Based Regional Development, *R&D Management*, Vol. 35, 3, 243-255.

European Commission (2003). *Thematic Trend Report: Industry–Science Relations*. Brussels, European Commission.

Fernandez E. et al. (1996). *Networking and Co-ordination of Actors and Programmes within Regions. Technology Transfer best practices in Europe* . Luxembourg: TII.

Hatakenaka, S. (2005). D*evelopment of Third Stream Activity. Lessons from International Experience.* London, Higher Education Policy Institute.

Hughes D., Gration G. (2006*). Performance Indicators and Benchmarks in Career Guidance in the United Kingdom.* Centre for Guidance Studies. CeGS: University of Derby.

Lundvall, B. A. (1992). National Systems of Innovation .London: Pinter.

Mello, J.M.C., Etzkowitz, H. (2008). New directions in Latin American university industry-government interactions, *International Journal of Technology Management and Sustainable Development* 7: 3, 193–204.

Molas-Gallart, J., Salter A., Patel P., Scott A. and Duran X. (2002). *Measuring Third Stream Activities*. Brighton, SPRU.

Molas-Gallart, J., Castro-Martínez. E. (2007). Ambiguity and conflict in the development of 'Third Mission' indicators, *Research Evaluation*, 16(4), 321–330.

Montesinos P., López M., Mora J. (2006*). The challenge of the University Management: University 3rd mission and continuing engineering education opportunities, IACCE 10th World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education*. April 2006 Vienna.

Moscati, R. (2008). La cultura accademica e le nuove funzioni dell'università, in Moscati, R. and Vaira, M. (eds*), L'università di fronte al cambiamento*. Bologna, il Mulino, 99-116.

Nedeva, M. (2007). New tricks and old dogs: The 'Third Mission' and the reproduction of the university, in *The world yearbook of education 2008: Geographies of knowledge/geometries of power – Higher education in the 21st century*, ed. D. Epstein, R. Boden, R. Deem, F. Rizvi, and S. Wright, 85–104. RoutledgeŁ New York.

OECD (2004). *Career Guidance. A Handbook for Policy Makers*. Paris.

Polt, W, C Rammer, H Gassler, A Schibany and D Schartinger (2001). Benchmarking industry-science relations: the role of framework conditions, *Science and Public Policy*, 28(4), 247–258.

Sultana, R.G. and Watts, A.G. (2006). Career guidance in Public Employment Services across Europe, *International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance*, Vol. 6. No. 1, 20-46.

Tanucci, G. (2009). Orientamento universitario: modelli e strategie per una nuova area di intervento, I.O. Innovazione Orientamento, *Rivista quadrimestrale del Centro Euroguidance Italy*, Anno 1 – n. 1 – gennaio-aprile, 13-22.

Tractenberg, L., Streumer, J. and van Zolingen, S. (2002). Career counselling in the emerging postindustrial society, *International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance*, Vol. 2. No. 2, 85–99.