

# Conceptualising, measuring, and supporting students' employability competences in higher education

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## 8. Impact Paragraph

### 8.1. Societal relevance

As a teacher trainer in the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, the French-speaking part of Belgium, I am currently seeing a number of initiatives aimed at reforming the landscape of HE in order to promote the socio-professional integration of students (Glatigny, 2021, November 16). More specifically, teacher training at both university colleges and universities is being overhauled to align it with developments in the profession (Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles, 2019) More specifically, HE institutions are looking to define competences that will enable graduates to navigate the labour market and adapt to new professional challenges (Mulder & Winterton, 2017). While the phenomenon is not new, what is constantly evolving are the competences and related supporting approaches likely to contribute to the ongoing professional development of the individual (Jackson, 2012; Nygaard et al., 2008).

That observation was the starting point for this dissertation. The aim of the dissertation was to define current employability competences by connecting two strands of research studying employability: HE and workplace learning research. Since HE prepares students for the workplace, it seemed a logical choice to bring both strands of research together. From there, the intention was to develop and validate a questionnaire allowing us to measure students' employability competences. In turn, we systematically reviewed the HE literature to gain insight into antecedents of employability. Finally, we zoomed into two specific and related antecedents: portfolio practices and reflective thinking and we questioned their impact on the competence-based employability of students in HE.

These studies provide:

1. A holistic definition of competence-based employability, which can be used as a framework for organizing competence-based education.
2. A questionnaire allowing students to self-assess their employability competences.
3. Insight into how to organize portfolio practices in such a way that it fosters reflection and the development of employability competences.

## **8.2. Past impact activities**

During my thesis, based on the questionnaire developed in the second study, I had the opportunity to co-develop "My Employability Scan". This is a self-assessment tool for students developed by the Employability Taskforce at Maastricht University, under the guidance of Ellen Bastiaens. This tool helps students to gain insight into their employability competences. It consists of two parts: a scientifically validated questionnaire to measure employability and, upon completion of this questionnaire, feedback provided to the student, giving insight into strengths and weaknesses and suggestions on how they can further develop their competences. The service also offers referral (if necessary) to support services. The "My Employability Scan" has been made available to every UM student since October 2019 and can be accessed via the student portal.

Additionally, we had the opportunity to share our research at the SIG14 conference on "Learning and Professional Development". At this conference, our conceptualisation of employability competences (Study 1) and the validated questionnaire (Study 2) were shared with an international network of researchers and educational developers. Our contribution was published in their book of abstracts: *Professional Learning and Development: From Innovative Research to Innovative Interventions 2020* (Ciraso-Calí & Roig-Ester, 2020).

As coordinator of the international relations office of the Henallux teaching department, I was able to organize international exchanges around the topic of my dissertation starting in 2019. For example, a team of Moroccan university trainers as invited to our institution to discuss practices for the development of students' employability, including portfolio practices. These outreach activities allowed us to discuss the practical implications of Studies 4 and 5.

## **8.3. Present impact activities**

The "My Employability Scan" is still in use today, and is reaching more and more students. For example, more than 16,000 students from 7 faculties at Maastricht University have completed the questionnaire so far.

The portfolio practice that was studied in this dissertation was launched in 2018. It is still being applied and has even grown in importance. While this practice was

introduced for future physical education teachers only, it now concerns all sections of the Henallux pedagogical department, involving a cohort of 350 students per year. The practice was refined based on the results obtained in Studies 4 and 5. Based on those insights, more emphasis is being placed on oral and written communication, encouraging students to adopt a more holistic perspective on interpersonal communication and giving them time to reflect on the components of interpersonal communication (Watzlawick et al., 2011). For example, students are encouraged to spend time reflecting on issues such as how they present themselves when communicating and trying to think about different perspectives before giving their opinion. Furthermore, we have included additional support for writing, in particular by setting up a team that co-teaches with a teacher exclusively committed to developing communication-related skills. We have also reviewed the assessment system. Previously assessment was carried out exclusively by the teacher. However, based on the finding that the support of peers was highly valued, peer assessment was introduced. Specifically, students now engage in a number of organized and structured formative discussions with peers throughout the process, and we have developed a peer assessment system using the Moodle Atelier tool (Cano & Ion, 2016).

#### **8.4. Future impact opportunities**

As far as the future is concerned, the University of Namur, which is organizing a master's degree program in teacher training, has put me in charge of the "professional development and professional integration" course. As part of this course, I intend to explore the potential of all the antecedents identified in the systematic literature review (Study 3). The teaching method I have designed for this course involves working with future teacher trainers to carry out action research in sub-groups (Mesnier & Vandernotte, 2012). Each sub-group will choose an antecedent identified in the literature review (Study 3) and conduct a needs analysis among relevant stakeholders (e.g., students, coaches) to develop a solution to effectively support this antecedent. For example, regarding the antecedents identified in the systematic literature review connected with *design of the learning intervention*, we could study the four *learning activities* highlighted: internships, interactive blended-learning courses, group video-assessment and real-life projects. The questionnaire from Study 2 will be used to identify impact

and to ensure that the areas for improvement are linked with employability competences.

The portfolio practice presented in Studies 4 and 5 will also be the subject of this needs analysis. Bearing in mind that the impact on e-literacy and balance competences was only slightly negative, avenues such as investing in well-being resources in portfolio practices will be explored (Vanhercke et al., 2016). Similarly, resources for presenting and reflecting on how to best use different e-platforms and communication applications in portfolio practice will be explored (Jain et al., 2021; Luka & Seniut, 2019).

Moreover, the insights yielded by the research in this dissertation inform the competence-based coaching system at Maastricht University's School of Business and Economics. Specifically, students in the master's program on Learning and Development in Organisations develop employability competences through such a yearlong trajectory in which they are supported by an academic coach (i.e., faculty staff), a professional coach (i.e., alumni from the program, employed in the L&D labour market) and their peer students. By means of team reflective meetings, individual assignments and coaching sessions, they develop four self-chosen competences and work on achieving six specific goals in relation to those competences. Students have reported having a positive experience in this course. They particularly value the coaching from their academic coach, as evidenced by an average score of 8.7 out of 10 in student evaluations over the past 3 years. A similar competence-based coaching track is currently being designed for the School's largest bachelor's program in International Business, in which a part of the trajectory will also adopt a blended format.

## **8.5. Conclusion**

This PhD project has its roots in field observation, the observation that today graduates need more than skills or competences directly related to their profession for their continuing professional development. This thesis has enabled us to transform this reflection into a research model and our results suggest a range of implications for teachers, program coordinators, and policymakers who adopt a competence-based approach to employability.

With regard to individuals, students often find it difficult to connect with the competitive labour market and lack the necessary skills to acquire and maintain employment. Our approach enables individuals to develop competences in a systematic and sustainable manner, learning from diverse activities and experiences, taking into account support and feedback from diverse sources and working on personal as well as professional goals.

Teachers and program coordinators, for their part, are responsible for helping students develop the competences they need to adapt quickly to a rapidly changing and versatile labour market. Our competence-based approach to employability provides guidance to assist this preparation. Specifically, results have shown that engaging in structured reflection, for example, by using a portfolio, improves the acquisition of those competences.

Finally, our studies aimed to reduce the gap between the competences that graduates need on the labour market and those that are taught. They responded to the call for more integrated approaches to employability research by bringing together two strands of employability literature, namely, workplace learning and HE, that lie on the same learning continuum. In that way our findings inform HE, which is generally seen as preparation for workplace learning, and contribute to research into knowledge transfer between different contexts such as education and the workplace.

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