

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

third international conference  
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

# education and/for social justice

University of Cagliari  
June 3-6, 2024



# PROCEEDINGS

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02

Cultures, Practices, and Change



Published by



ASSOCIAZIONE PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA  
Via Francesco Satolli, 30  
00165 – Rome  
Italy



Published in Open Access

APA 7<sup>th</sup> citation system:

Scuola democratica (Ed.) (2025). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change*. Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

Please cite your contribution as follows:

Smith, A. (2025). *Closing the Gender Gap in Education. Symmetrical Practices from a Didactical Laboratory in STEM Fields*. In Scuola democratica (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change* (pp. 72-84). Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

This book is digitally available at:

<https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/conference-proceedings-iii/>

ISBN 979-12-985016-3-8

3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference  
of the journal *Scuola democratica*  
*Education and/or Social Justice*

3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

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Vol. 2

**Cultures,  
Practices,  
and Change**

Organizers and partners

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# NARRATIVES AND BIOGRAPHIES IN EMPLOYABILITY DISCOURSE

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The work narrative has been stable in past decades, with a remarkable focus on the identity definition of the citizens and placing the onus of finding, staying and re-entering the labour market on the individual. In particular, after the pandemic, the meaning of work and the need to find a different work-life balance seems to be under revision in our society. Individual biographies are increasingly moving far from current narratives of work and employability. A study carried out at the University of Macerata seems to confirm this trend: against the push toward entrepreneurship, self-fulfilling through work, mobility for work and successful professional life as a successful life, the sample of students, future graduates, value work-life balance as a first desirable feature for a job, and life in the region of origin as the ideal place to live.

employability; career development; GenZ

## INTRODUCTION

The meaning of work has changed over the centuries, shifting from regular daily activity in the pre-industrial era (Polanyi, 1947) to the expression of self-fulfilment and skills deployment in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Méda and Vendramin, 2017). Universities were consequently asked to contribute to society's growth and well-being through Third Mission activities and by preparing employable graduates (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017). Universities then increased relations with external players, arranged new support services, e.g. career services (Kretovicks et al., 1999), and revised curricula and teaching and learning (Pegg et al., 2012) to support the acquisition of employability skills. Transversal and soft skills are considered enablers of the "employable individual" to access, stay, and re-enter the world of work in a continuous life design process (Savickas, 2012). Experiential learning is thought to be effective for developing generic skills in higher education (David, 2008; Mergendoller et al., 2006).

Additionally, work-based learning experiences could serve students' professionalisation needs and the university's needs to strengthen the links between academia and its region (Healey, 2005; Cyert and Goodman, 1997). Globalisation and digitalisation also pushed universities toward significant changes. In this rapidly evolving scenario, there was the 2020 Covid-19 shock. Concerning pedagogies for employability, the most remarkable impact was on work-based learning. Involved players

were not prepared for online internships previously limited to specific fields (Ruggiero and Bohem, 2016). New forms of work-based learning and new career development skills (e.g., online interviews) were suddenly essential.

Just after the pandemic, against the narrative of “normality”, it became clear that structural changes had happened in the work environment. In 2022, Eurostat statistics reported an increase in the share of workers from home (8% on average; peak 33% in Sweden). The Eurofund (2021) noted there will be “no looking back” about telework. Also, phenomena such as the *Great Resignation*, emerging attitudes such as the *Quite Quitting*, and the spread of the *YOLO (You live only once)* economy showed a rising evolution of the social conception of work – and possibly a revolution of the meaning of work. Work-life balance became a central concept, particularly for GenZ, as a signal of priority given to flexibility and time for family and leisure (Niezurawska et al., 2023).

Narratives still look at work as a crucial identity component: debates revolve around the potential validity of working from home, focus on innovative companies and start-ups, and pass the idea that success in life is booming on the job. Concurrently, a new generation of graduates is entering the labour market, and their attitude towards work does not necessarily align with this widespread narrative.

The specificity of the Italian context is also an essential feature in this subject: even if Italy is one of the European countries with the lowest share of graduates in the active population aged 25-64 (20.1% against the EU average of 32.8%, ISTAT 2021), the country is also characterised by a high level of overeducation (Mandrone et al., 2022) and low absorption of graduates into the labour market. Italy is also well-known for its low entrepreneurial intentions rate (GEM, 2023). Furthermore, Italy has the third oldest population in the world: in 2022, 24% of the population was over 65; the average population age was 46.4. Fertility is steadily decreasing fertility rate (1.2, the lowest of the EU), and the country is facing what has been defined in Italian as “the demographic winter”. Finally, it should be stressed that the country suffers from a strong brain drain phenomenon, accounting for 8% of the total number of graduates (+41,8% in the past 8 years, according to national statistics).

## 1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at the University of Macerata, a small-sized university located in a peri-urban/rural location in Central Italy. The University offers degrees only in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Following low participation in career guidance and placement programmes, a survey was undertaken better to understand students’ needs and perceptions about work. Concerning the latter, narratives of work were analysed, and the following assumptions were formulated:

- Assumption 1. Students are not confident to find a job after graduation.
- Assumption 2. A high number of students wish to move to vibrant labour market areas.
- Assumption 3. A high number of graduates wish to work remotely.

- Assumption 4. A high number of graduates would value secure employment.

### 1.1. Survey design

A survey was designed to verify the assumption. Like other issues on the placement's programme, the survey has been previously discussed with the students' representatives and promoted through them in the frame of the organisation of the Career Day (October 2023).

The survey opened to the entire student body in June 2023, closed in July 2023, and was managed by the central office for placement at the university. The questionnaire was composed of two main sections: the first section, whose results are not addressed by this article, was focused on career guidance needs; the second section investigated work perceptions by addressing the following topics:

- Job position, as interest in pursuing private or public careers or entrepreneurship journeys. References to this item were based on own elaboration and inputs from references from Eurofound (2021);
- Job location, as preferred geographical location, concerning labour market and professional goals; items in this sub-section were elaborated adapting inputs from De Hoyos and Green (2011) and Lindsay et al. (2003).
- Confidence in getting a job after graduation: items of this sub-section were based on Qenani et al. (2014) and UNIMC's students' revision.
- Relevance of job components: to understand the value of job components, items from the "Annual Population Survey UK" were used.

### 1.2. Sample composition

The survey was opened as an optional activity to the entire university student body (9.362 enrolled students in the academic year 2022/23): 308 valid answers were collected.

Respondents profile:

- Sex: 77,60% female; 21,43% male; 0,97% preferred not to choose.
- Age: 21-25 years old represented 62,34% of the respondents; 26-30, 4,87%; 31-35, 12,34%; 36-40, 7,17%; others were over 40.
- Study level: respondents most represented were from Master's (46,43%), followed by Bachelor's students (45,45%); others were enrolled in post-graduate courses, PhD, or lifelong learning courses.
- Study field: most represented respondents were from Education, followed by Humanities, Law, Political Sciences and Economics, which correspond to the number of enrolments of the university.

## 2. FINDINGS

Findings are presented according to assumptions.

**2.1 Assumption 1. Students are not confident of finding a job after graduation**

This assumption was verified utilising two items as follows.

How confident are you that you will find a job immediately after graduation? (%) And how useful do you think the study course you are doing is for finding a job? (%). Findings are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. Confidence to find a job after graduation

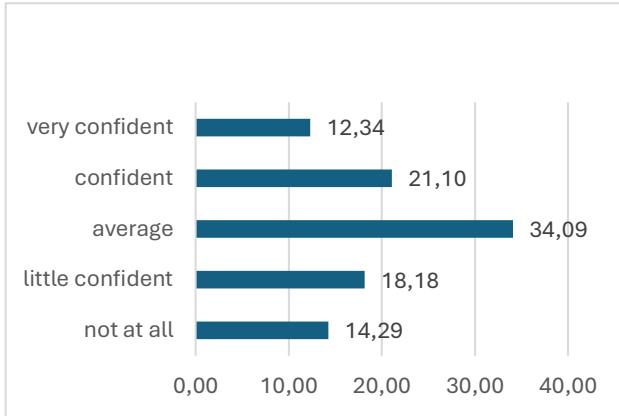
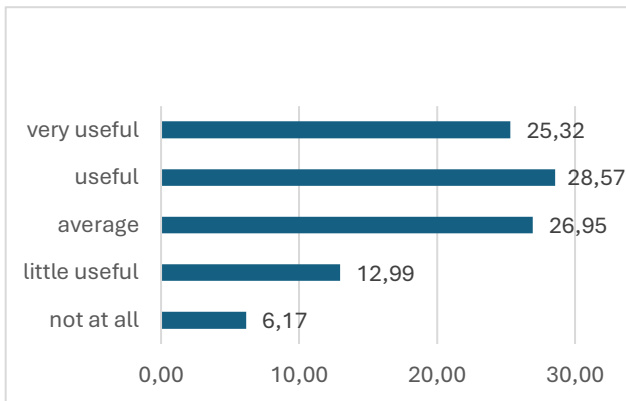


Figure 2. Perceived usefulness of the study course to find a job.

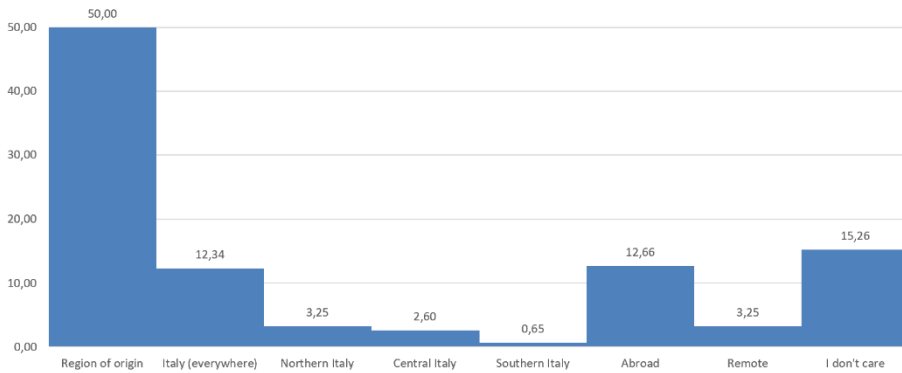


In general, students (future graduates) perceive their study course as applicable for work purposes: this is surprising against the narratives defining STEM degrees as ensuring easy access to the labour market.

**2.2 Assumption 3. A high number of students wish to move to vibrant labour market areas and Assumption 4. A high number of graduates wish to work remotely**

Half of the sample expressed the wish “to stay home”, meaning being back or staying in their region of origin. A small number of respondents look at abroad as a potential place to live; the most interesting result is that a very small number of respondents wish to work remotely.

Figure 3. Geographical preferences for work. Ideally, where do you prefer to work? (%)



**2.4 Assumption 5. A high number of graduates would value secure employment.**

The item “Ideally, which would be your preferred job position?” on a Likert scale of 1-5, highlighted a preference for public employment (4.13), followed by private employment as an employee (3.73), a position as professional (3.34) and finally as an entrepreneur (3.17).

Concerning items on job components, relevance is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Most relevant component of the job (%).

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Interesting job	30,52	17,86	18,51	10,06	10,71	7,79	4,55
Secure employment	25,97	15,26	16,56	12,66	14,29	10,06	5,19
High income	10,71	14,94	16,88	15,58	10,71	16,23	14,94
Contribute to society	11,04	14,29	12,66	16,23	13,96	15,91	15,91
Time for leisure	6,82	8,12	9,74	12,01	15,58	19,48	28,25
Time for the family	6,17	16,23	13,96	20,78	18,18	11,36	13,31
Helping others through work	8,77	13,31	11,69	12,66	16,56	19,16	17,86

Comparison by age – youngest segment (20-25); older segment (over 40) – highlighted a common trend, with slight differences in the item “secure employment” (7,29% of the youngest segment vs 12,50% of the oldest segment). Both samples identify “Time for leisure” as the most relevant feature of the desired job (24,22% of the youngest segment and 32,95 of the oldest).

**3. DISCUSSION**

Findings point out that the first assumption about the discouragement of young people in their working futures within the country is not confirmed: the sample seems to be relatively confident about the chosen study programs. Most

importantly, most of the respondents would like to live in the region of origin; therefore, there is little desire to move for better job prospects or to pursue remote employment. The picture highlighted by findings relates to a not-competitive life, possibly with a job as a civil servant, which in Italy is the most protected target of employees in turbulent times. Entrepreneurship is not as valued as expected.

Above all, links with societal trends about work are more consistent with the survey's results, in particular concerning the most critical components of work, which are aligned with literature on work-life balance: future graduates value time for leisure, for family, and seem to be less interested both in income and in finding interesting jobs.

Therefore, the way of life and priorities in life seem to be under revision in the population, including youths. Several areas of investigation should be deepened in the upcoming years to make career and placement services at the university suitable for the target. Universities should review their career development programmes based on narratives of success through work, branding, and competition. Furthermore, a dialogue should be opened with business players: usual approaches to pursue an understanding of the needs of the enterprises; it would be advantageous for the future to support enterprises in understanding and adjusting their structures based on the human resources needs. The university could also initiate a dialogue with the place by gathering positive forces from the place and stimulating reflection and joint design of possible futures.

#### Acknowledgements

I want to thank Prof. Laura Marchegiani for her insightful feedback on the manuscript.

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