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Improving Employability through Stakeholders in European Higher Education: the Case of Spain

ABSTRACT

We distinguish four employability strategies and test how different stakeholders try to influence them, using a database of 230 Spanish university centers. Academic employability seems to be the main goal of university governors as they emphasize curricula improvements to introduce practical contents. By contrast and probably because of their interest in specialized teaching associated with their own research, professors prioritize as an alternative the development of interpersonal management skills and sharing of alumni experiences. Other stakeholders with greater market orientation have a comparatively marginal impact. Reform proposals therefore aim to rebalance the influence of stakeholders, though not necessarily by means of structural reforms in decision-making bodies. In fact, by differentiating several employability strategies, we have observed that governance reforms may generate overly optimistic expectations, as stakeholders may support only a subset of strategies, which may not even be the most important ones.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, stakeholders, graduate employability, MANOVA.

Introduction

If we agree that a fundamental goal of university students is to improve their employability (i.e., to find a satisfactory job in the shortest time possible), the situation of graduates from some European countries leaves ample room for improvement. Since the turn of the century, several extensive surveys such as CHEERS or REFLEX¹ have warned about the rather low ratings that graduates assign to their employability in countries like the UK, France, Italy or Spain. According to these data, graduates from these countries are especially dissatisfied with the work they find, use few skills acquired in university and reveal that their jobs require more competencies than they have. Also, they are particularly concerned about job stability (which is compounded by the issue of low wages) and their professional prospects. Finally, they are slow to find their first jobs and often have temporary contracts in their first years after graduation.

While there are undoubtedly economic and social factors that can help explain this problem, universities tend to bear much of the responsibility. And while this scenario would be a cause of concern in virtually any context, the challenge is even greater in the case of universities in the European countries cited, since they are implementing the highly demanding requirements of the recently developed “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA). In particular, the new European philosophy, with the aim of meeting the demands of globalization and technological change, considers employability to be one of the main values that should inspire higher education in Europe (Bologna Declaration, 1999; Bergen Communication, 2005; Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).

¹ CHEERS (Career after Higher Education: a European Research Study) is a project carried out between 1997 and 2000 by a consortium of universities and research institutions in Europe with funding from the European Union, involving a survey in 1999 among more than 36,000 students in 11 European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) who graduated during the academic year 1994-1995. REFLEX (The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society) is a research project involving ten European universities with funding from the European Union, coordinated by the Research Center for Education and the Labor Market at the University of Maastricht, carried out between September 2005 and July 2006, and covering a survey of 40,000 students who graduated during the academic year 1999-2000 in 13 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland and United Kingdom).

There are obviously many relevant factors allowing universities to improve their employability strategies: university funding, policies for selecting teaching staff and the corporate culture of each country are just a few. In this paper we focus on how stakeholders can influence strategies for improving student employability, and propose specific reforms to improve the situation. We define a stakeholder in an organization as any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objective (Freeman 1984, 25). Based on previous classifications (Mundet, 2000; Reavill, 1998), we identified ten groups as stakeholders in centers offering higher education degrees (COHEDs): university teaching staff, university governors, alumni, students, administrative staff, employers, public administration, trade unions, the media, and local community members, including students' families.

We chose stakeholders to analyze how to improve employability for two reasons: first, because the literature confirms their strong influence on the strategies adopted by any organization (Johnson et al., 2006; Thompson, 1997); and second, because the structural changes in governance that affect the power of stakeholders can be carried out without the need for financial commitments and lead to stable and long-term results (Daake and William, 2000). This is why many authors assign stakeholders a fundamental role in determining the correct direction in which to take public services (Blomgren et al., 2005; Yang and Callahan, 2007). On the other hand, Spain constitutes an interesting setting for this study as one of the countries in which CHEERS and REFLEX found more opportunities for improvement. For example, Mora (2002a) suggested that training in Spanish universities offers little adjustment to the professional profiles demanded by today's society, so university leavers would not be "professionals" but graduates with excessively generalist training. Not surprisingly, Spanish employers give a low rating (5.5 / 10) to university graduates in terms of their preparedness to start working (ANECA, 2004).

From a theoretical point of view, we provide a novel classification of four possible strategies that promote employability in universities: (1) academic interventions based on curricula improvements, (2) teaching of business protocols including the transmission of values and skills

required for employment; (3) matching or pairing with the workplace; and (4) feedback that enables current students to learn from the experience of alumni. Empirically, our work offers two important contributions. First, conducting an empirical study on stakeholders is valuable given that such research is scarce in the service sector and virtually absent at university level. Most related studies have focused on the relation between the degree of development of the environmental strategy and the importance placed by managers on different stakeholders (Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Henriques and Sadorsky, 1999). Second, we aim to offer country evidence on the present process of change in European higher education, a process in which employability occupies an important place as a measure of a university's overall performance.

Employability and stakeholders

There is controversy as to what extent universities pay lip service to the business world on the matter of employability. Some authors state that employability should not be considered an indicator of a university's performance because it reflects a narrow view of educational targets and amounts to a threat to academic freedom (Billet, 2009; Harvey, 2000; Morley, 2001). Moreover and beyond the influence of economic factors, several authors also point out that employability is not achieved by the university alone. There may be other relevant factors such as status, power, gender, race or capital (Brown et al., 2003; Collins, 1979; Moreau and Leatherwood, 2006; Morley, 2001; Weber, 1968).

By contrast, other authors base their opinions on human capital theories (Becker, 1964) and state that universities should afford their graduates a large proportion of their labor skills (Cox and King, 2006; Hartshorn and Sear, 2005; Raybould and Sheedy, 2005). Today's changes in the economy and in the labor market are actually leading governments and employers to consider that higher education should contribute to national development and economic growth (Harvey, 2000; Mason et al., 2003). Holland (2006) states that an employability approach does not damage higher education but rather enhances its response to changes in society. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve

Communiqué (2009) goes further by establishing employability for the European countries involved in the Bologna Process as one of the main targets of universities up to 2020: “higher education should equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills and competences they need throughout their professional lives. Employability empowers the individual to fully seize the opportunities in changing labor markets”.

Our own perspective expressed in this paper assumes employability to be one of the main targets of universities today and that it is completely compatible with other targets that are not market-oriented. We define employability as the combination of qualifications —knowledge, skills and personal attributes— which enable graduates to obtain a job and to succeed in their chosen occupations, with benefits for themselves and for the whole labor market, community and economy (Yorke, 2006). In this scenario, universities should develop strategies that enable their graduates to enter the labor market under the best possible conditions in a minimal time period. As mentioned above, such strategies can be grouped into the following four types (Table 1): (1) academic, (2) business protocol, (3) job matching, and (4) alumni feedback.

We define academic employability strategies as the actions taken at academic level to improve graduate employability and analyze the following aspects:

- The extent to which the curriculum comes close to business reality, for instance, by inviting employers to participate in curricular development² (Knight and Yorke, 2003; Bologna Seminar, 2004; Mourshed et al., 2012).
- Access to and use of technology: potential for daily access to the Internet; learning to use databases and different telecommunications alternatives; knowledge of basic and advanced computer programs; or provision of laptops for all students (Bennett et al., 1999; Knight and Yorke, 2002).

² Many authors do not agree that employers participate in determining graduates’ skills. Kehm and Teichler (1995) state that employers try to avoid their responsibilities for providing specific training by passing them on to the educational system. Others such as Knight and Yorke (2004) consider that they express their opinions but give little in exchange. Our data confirm that there is less participation by employers in more theoretical qualifications, such as History or Philology.

- Knowledge of languages: teaching of some subjects in other languages; language learning courses; activities that simulate future work in other languages; and offering exchange placements in foreign universities (Brennan et al., 2001). Such activities are especially relevant for non-English-speaking students.
- Tutorials to help students adapt and become integrated in college life; to facilitate learning processes, to help them make decisions about their curricula and itineraries and, toward the end of the course, to join the labor world (Knight and Yorke, 2002; Morey et al., 2003).
- Possibility of double degrees, to enrich and diversify learning experiences.

The second strategy for improving employability relates to business protocol. We define this as a set of actions that may improve graduate employability by transmitting the values and core competencies that will be necessary for their future careers. We analyze the following actions:

- Training in personal attributes such as loyalty, honesty, accountability, decision making, problem solving, willingness to get involved personally in the workplace, written communication skills, etc. (Bologna Seminar, 2004; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2010).
- Training in interpersonal skills: teamwork, initiative, planning, coordination and organization, oral communication skills, leadership, negotiation skills and conflict resolution (Dunne and Rawlins, 2000; Harvey, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2010).
- Training in entrepreneurship and self-employment (Hines et al., 2009; Knight and Yorke, 2003): starting a company, development of business plans, resources available, etc.

We propose a third strategy related to job matching or pairing. This is defined as a set of actions to adapt the characteristics of individual students to those needed for a particular job.

Matching strategies include the following actions:

- Conducting job search business forums in which employers make themselves known and showcase their businesses; this may include on-site interviews at universities (López and Montañés, 2003).
- Establishing employment offices to arrange practical work experience during the latter years of study, even providing opportunities for students to gain work experience abroad (Mason et al., 2003; Crebert et al., 2004).
- Cooperating with private and public organizations to offer internships, either directly or through institutions like the Chamber of Commerce, business associations or other public bodies (Blackwell et al., 2000).
- Providing a business observatory to study and track the demands of businesses in the area, the competitive profiles needed and recruitment trends for the future (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Finally, we distinguish a fourth strategy related to alumni feedback. This covers actions to improve employability of students based on what can be learned from the experience of university alumni. Such strategies may include the following aspects:

- Existence of alumni associations: activities with alumni in which they share their experiences in the job market with current students; student visits to alumni's companies and even trainee recruiting (Bennett et al., 1999; Knight and Yorke, 2002).
- Provision of an occupational observatory, such as a department to monitor the characteristics of students in relation to the time required to obtain a job, their affinity for this first job, etc. (ENQA, 2005; Harvey, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2003).

These, in our view, are the strategies affecting graduate employability, and stakeholders may exert a crucial influence over them. In fact, the weakness of a strategy can often be explained by a lack of consideration of the stakeholders involved (Whitehead et al., 1989). Johnson and Scholes

(1993) suggest that anticipating the intensity and direction of stakeholders' influence is crucial for understanding the strategic choices of any organization.

Likewise, many authors have taken the position that the necessity to consider stakeholders in the management of public services is justified by the pressure they exert to ensure compliance with their particular interests (Yang and Callahan, 2007) or by the positive influence that meeting such interests has on the outcome for public services (Brignall and Modell, 2000). Moreover, dealing with stakeholders, whether external or internal, is considered one of the principles to ensure success in the public sector (Ostroff, 2006), and some authors such as Blomgren et al. (2005) even propose that they should be involved in governance decisions.

Not surprisingly, authors such as Tirole (2001) propose reforming the governance of organizations to encourage managers to internalize the welfare of stakeholders. Such changes would primarily involve structural reforms in decision-making bodies so as to achieve balance in the influence of the relevant stakeholders. This has been emphasized recently in numerous works, some of which seek to institutionalize concerns related to corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability within firms (Graaf and Herkströter, 2007; Kolk and Pinkse, 2007). In the light of the above, we aim to analyze the influence of stakeholders on strategies for improving student employability, and propose certain reforms.

Data and variables

The population consisted of all centers offering higher education degrees (COHEDs) that were included by the Spanish Ministry of Education within the university system for the 2004-2005 academic year. All of these COHEDs were sent a questionnaire addressed to the director or dean. Of the 933 COHEDs solicited, 230 directors and deans participated in the study, representing a response rate of 24.65%. With a 95% confidence level, these figures result in a sample error rate of 5.61%.

The stakeholders were divided into two groups according to the most common classifications in the literature: primary and secondary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson

and Preston, 1995; Wheeler and Sillanpää, 1998). The primary stakeholders are those who have a formal, official or contractual relationship with the organization, which could not exist without them (university teaching staff, university governors, alumni, students, employers and public administration). All others are considered secondary stakeholders (administrative staff, local community members including students' families, trade unions and the media). This distinction enabled us to examine whether there are differences between primary and secondary stakeholders such as those proposed in studies of environmental strategies (Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Henriques and Sadorsky, 1999).

Our study included 24 variables (Table 1). A first group of variables consists of the dependent variables: four constructs generated to measure the four strategies for improving employability. The second group comprises the independent variables, and the third group represents the control variables.

[Insert table 1 about here]

The four constructs that measure the intensity of the employability strategies were calculated as the sum of several items fulfilled in each COHED by its dean/director. Since the number of items associated with each employability strategy varied, we normalized the results to guarantee their comparability.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Additionally, in order to ensure that each set of items that make up each representing construct is valid and reliable, we determined their Kuder-Richardson reliability coefficients, equivalent to Cronbach's Alpha, as we dealt with dichotomous items. The values yielded by this indicator showed the following results for each employability strategy construct: academic = 0.646, business protocol = 0.727, job matching = 0.651 and alumni feedback = 0.602. According to Nunnally (1978), Churchill (1979), a coefficient of at least 0.60 is indicative of internal consistency. Van de Ven and Ferry (1980) even suggested lowering the minimum criterion level to 0.55.

The validity of content is confirmed, firstly, by a review of the literature, and secondly, thanks to comments from a group of experts (Spiro and Weitz, 1990) comprising six deans / directors of COHEDs with whom we conducted a pre-test. To check convergent validity, we ensured that all items of each measure correlated significantly with the resulting scale. To check discriminant validity between the constructs, we conducted an examination of the matrix of correlations between the four constructs. Specifically, the correlations reached values between 0.375 and 0.583, well below the cut-off point referred to by several authors (Bagozzi, 1994; Kline, 2005). To complement this, in line with recommendations given by Byrne (2009), we carried out a bootstrap analysis based on 500 random samples to determine the confidence intervals for the correlations. As shown in Table 3, the estimates are statistically significant in all cases, and the highest interval is always below the recommended cut-off point of 0.70. This strengthens the idea that the four constructs relate to relatively different dimensions or factors.

[Insert table 3 about here]

The second group of variables (independent variables) refers to the perception of deans/directors on the relevance of stakeholders when assessing employability. Thus, a stakeholder is relevant insofar as the director/dean of the COHED devotes time and attention to meet their concerns about graduate employability (Agle et al., 1999).

Finally, several control variables were included to isolate the net effect of each stakeholder's influence on the employability strategies:

- The number of different degrees awarded by the COHED: centers that award more degrees often possess more resources and, hence, carry out more initiatives to improve the employability of their students. Initiatives may involve organizing training courses for students and teachers as well as meetings with employers and alumni.
- The per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of each COHED's region: it is reasonable to expect that in areas with high per capita GDP it is easier to carry out activities with

employers such as collaborating with them in curricular design, holding employment forums, or establishing agreements on internships, company visits, etc.

- Academic recognition: position of each university in the Shanghai ranking. The COHEDs that belong to highly ranked universities often maintain a closer relation with recruiters, who are willing to pay higher salaries for the attributes embodied in their degrees (Hazelkorn, 2013). These attributes are apparently based on experiential factors (the success of alumni hired by recruiters' companies and their own experiences recruiting at the school), school's curriculum, quality of faculty, and ability to produce candidates with leadership potential and communication skills (GMAC, 2008; Olkin, 2004).
- Type of university: public or private. Private universities usually have fewer pupils per class, more personalized guidance, and greater contact with the business world. In addition, given the nature of these universities as primarily teaching institutions, the design of curricula would not normally be influenced by the research profiles of university teaching staff, which may further promote employability.
- Level of studies offered: COHEDs offering 3-year diplomas vs. COHEDs offering 5-year degrees. The former are led by teaching-oriented (rather than research-oriented) staff and have fewer students, so they can be expected to supervise and guide pupils' entry into the labor market. On the other hand, lower levels of funding make it difficult for them to organize activities that promote employability.
- The COHED's teaching area: the Ministry of Education of Spain has recognized five teaching areas (humanities, experimental sciences, social sciences, technical education and health sciences). COHEDs' strategies for enhancing employability are likely to differ depending upon the teaching area in which qualifications are offered. We included four dummies, omitting technical education as an area of reference because technical COHEDs have a distinctly higher level of employability than the rest.

Exploratory model and results

We present a descriptive analysis, including the means and standard deviations for the four employability strategies, respondents' evaluations of the relevance of each of the stakeholders, and the remaining variables. We observe that actions to improve graduate employability have an average rating, with much room for improvement. Of the four strategies considered, the business protocol strategy received the highest rating. In addition, the stakeholders considered to be most relevant for improving employability are university teaching staff, university governors, students and employers.

[Insert table 4 about here]

Examination of the correlations between respondents' evaluations of the adoption of strategies and the remaining variables in the model (Table 5) indicates several associations between them. Firstly, we find a positive relationship between respondents' assessments about stakeholders' relevance and the four employability strategies adopted in their COHEDs. This indicates that the more relevance given to stakeholders in a COHED, the better its results will be in the four employability strategies. Secondly, we observe a positive correlation between the number of different degrees offered by the COHEDs and three of the employability strategies. In addition, there is a positive correlation between employability strategies and other variables such as GDP, private university status and COHEDs offering 3-year diplomas.

[Insert table 5 about here]

With the aim of examining these descriptive results in greater depth, we performed a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine whether there are dependent relationships between the four employability strategies and the independent variables. Whereas a simple ANOVA tests for the difference in means between two or more groups, MANOVA tests for the difference in two or more vectors of means. In order to do so, it creates a new dependent variable (a linear combination of the dependent variables) that attempts to maximize the differences

between the groups. MANOVA is therefore better suited for considering the interrelationships between the dependent variables when they are not independent (Hair, 1999).

The first results of the MANOVA can be observed in Table 6, which shows the main effects of the independent variables with “all else held constant”; i.e., the effect of each of the independent variables is tested separately. Although there are a number of multivariate measures to examine the amount of variance in the data, we chose Wilks’ lambda and Pillai’s trace for the sake of simplicity. Wilks’ lambda is probably the most frequently used measure because it is the easiest to understand. It shows the amount of variance accounted for in the dependent variable by the independent variable. Pillai’s trace, on the other hand, is considered to offer the greatest protection against Type I errors (rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true) when dealing with small sample sizes like ours. Pillai’s trace calculates the amount of variance in the dependent variable which is accounted for by the greatest separation of the independent variables. Hence, according to the perspective of deans/directors, teaching staff and employers are the two stakeholders exerting a significant influence over the overall employability strategy of COHEDs. Additionally, we find that the employability strategy differs according to the number of degrees offered by a COHED and the public/private status of the university. Particularly, given that the correlations of both variables with the four employability strategies are positive (Table 5), we can expect the overall employability measure that MANOVA builds to be positively associated not only with the type of COHEDs that offer numerous degrees (probably as a result of its concern to match professional needs), but also with COHEDs that belong to private universities (in many cases founded by business firms themselves and, in any case, with their survival strictly depending on meeting customers’ needs).

[Insert table 6 about here]

In order to determine in greater detail to what extent each of the factors and covariables are significant in each of the dependent variables, Table 7 shows the results of the univariate analyses; i.e., the effect of each independent variable on each of the dependent variables.

[Insert table 7 about here]

This model explains a substantial portion of the observed variation in the dependent variables (see first row of Table 7). R^2 shows the portion of variance in each of the four strategies that can be explained by the variables included in the model. Notice that it was not our aim to explain employability per se, but rather to reveal how stakeholders influence strategies. The remaining rows reveal whether there are significant differences in employability strategies for the different levels of factors and covariables. Looking at the correlations presented in Table 5, we can also confirm the direction of the effects (*post hoc* tests that are typically administered with a MANOVA require more than three values).

Thus, the data reveal that the teaching staff influences the employability of their students by stimulating several actions within the business protocol strategy, which seek to help students fulfill their personal values and enhance the skills of communication, negotiation, conflict management and leadership, which are increasingly valued by recruiters (Maxwell et al., 2010). Furthermore, university teaching staff also has a positive influence on the feedback employability strategy. Teachers are therefore taking advantage of their contacts with alumni to act as intermediaries between alumni and current students in search of collaborative opportunities. Such collaboration can result in the transmission of professional experience or the provision of contacts with relevant companies that facilitate employability in the long term (McNally and Irving, 2010). The fact that the teaching staff apparently neglects academic employability is especially remarkable given their influence in curricular design. This result is probably consistent with the presence of conflicting interests between students and their teachers. Professors, being interested in more specialized and scientific teaching associated with their own research, may sacrifice academic employability to impose courses that rely on allegedly more scientific—but managerially unproductive—contents.

University governors are, in fact, the only stakeholders that apparently promote academic employability, maybe reflecting the lack of support that this strategy receives from the teaching staff. They can act on learning processes either directly or through other stakeholders by exercising their formally recognized legal authority. For instance, actions that depend upon the initiative of the

university governors alone are the creation of a tutorial service for students, endowment of funds so that students have access to information technology (e.g. the Internet and software), or the establishment of foreign exchange agreements with universities abroad. Actions taken through other stakeholders, by contrast, include improving the quality of teaching by providing incentives, improving the appropriateness of subjects taught based on discussion between university teaching staff and employers, and improving students' foreign language skills by requiring a minimum level of teaching in a foreign language. Be that as it may, either because the priorities of university governors are in other fields, or maybe because in public universities (to which 91.3% of the COHEDs belong) the teaching staff has key decision power in their election, deans/directors do not see a significant role in employability strategies apart from academic intervention.

Alumni as stakeholders influence employability strategies by adding value to students' professional qualifications through their job market experience (Jing et al., 2011). Feedback from them through associations, workshops or occupational observatories may thus constitute one of the key non-monetary support roles that is at least as important for students as any financial aid they may provide (Weerts et al., 2010). After all, recent evidence suggests that student scholarships, loans or campus jobs are not appreciated years after enough to make former beneficiaries reciprocate with their own contributions (Meer and Rosen, 2012).

Finally, employers have a significant influence on job matching employability. Most actions taken to improve this strategy, such as job forums with recruiters or visits by executives to universities (Connor and Brown, 2009; Mourshed et al., 2012) cannot be carried out without the participation of employers. Hence, they appear to be the best-suited stakeholders for directly adapting the characteristics of graduates to the demands of the labor market (Maxwell et al., 2010).

Regarding the control variables, results from table 7 confirm greater employability —for any of the four types— in COHEDs within private universities. Private universities, driven by intense marketing campaigns still rare in public universities, promote graduate employability

through their greater technological strength, fewer students per classroom, tutoring and better relationships with business (CIS, 2006; U.S. Department of State, 2005).

Secondly, the number of degrees offered by COHEDs positively influences the academic employability strategy. This finding is consistent with the assumption that the more degrees a COHED provides, the more likely it is to possess greater resources which can then be used, for example, for better computer facilities and access to databases, more opportunities to meet with employers to identify the most suitable subjects and content for study, and securing teaching staff trained to teach a range of subjects in a foreign language or to provide extracurricular activities in foreign languages.

The third significant variable is per capita GDP, since it has a positive impact on the job matching strategy. This finding is consistent with the supposition that being located in a more developed region makes it easier to provide business forums, on-site visits by employers, and employment offices/career centers for job placement assistance and internships.

We can also confirm that the academic recognition of the institution maintains a significant relation with the business protocol strategy. Apparently, COHEDs that belong to highly ranked universities try to differentiate their alumni in the market not so much for their stock of knowledge but for their values and interpersonal skills which, not by chance, are increasingly important for employers in a world where economic and technological change makes knowledge rapidly obsolete (Maxwell et al., 2010; MECD, 2011; NESTA et al., 2008).

Regarding differences in employability strategies between COHEDs offering 3-year diplomas and COHEDs offering 5-year degrees, academic employability is apparently higher among students from the former. This difference can be attributed to the latter's greater orientation towards research, so their actions to improve student employability may be less integrated into their teaching framework.

Finally, we found that job matching employability was weaker in humanities than in the technical education field. This might be because careers in humanities are less likely to stem from relations with employers through activities such as work experience or on-site employment forums.

Discussion

Although the main purpose of higher education is to improve student employability (Greenbank, 2012; Purcell et al., 2008), Spain—as well as other European countries—has not been successful enough (Farcnik and Domadenik, 2012). We suggest that one of the reasons may be the current configuration of stakeholders in the university system. Particularly, there is much room for employers and alumni stakeholders to make decisions, as these groups tend to show greater interest in encouraging universities to adopt a clear market orientation. Gonzalez and Wagenaar (2003), for example, have shown that university teaching staff want students to acquire basic general knowledge, while employers and university graduates place the emphasis on skills, such as the ability to solve problems, to apply knowledge in practice, and to work as a team. Poon (2012) suggests, for instance, that HR managers find a lack of commercial awareness in recent graduates. A second reason is that first-hand information from students has generally been ignored, though students are aware of the weaknesses in their academic training. Feedback from students could help refine subject content by removing redundancies and expanding unsatisfactorily addressed domains. Lastly, no links have been established with the public administration as a facilitator of strategies and as a transmitter of the objectives that are latent in the society to which it is answerable. Spain is one of the OECD countries that is below average in its funding per student enrolled (Hernández, 2006). This leads to a lower level of investment in actions in both theoretical and practical teaching and in tools to improve training, thus forcing Spanish students to spend more time searching for their first job than other Europeans (Jiménez et al., 2003).

Our work has several limitations. As in the environmental studies that investigate the attitude of stakeholders by surveying company directors, the view of university deans regarding the

relevance of the stakeholder groups in student employability is influenced by their values, beliefs and management practices (Buyse and Verbeke, 2003). To determine the interests of stakeholders regarding employability is not feasible for reasons of cost. We therefore use deans' perceptions regarding such interests as a proxy. Moreover, our work is limited to studying the influence of formal stakeholders, thus obviating the existence of informal stakeholders constituted on the basis of common interests; inclusion of informal stakeholders across all institutions would have been too costly in a quantitative study such as this one (Johnson and Scholes, 1997).

On the other hand, country specificities may be present. Regardless of how fast theories on university governance are disseminated across national borders, institutional and cultural peculiarities still influence management practices (Gooderham, 1999). This means that a particular stakeholder in —say— the USA or Germany may have a different influence on a particular type of employability than would be possible in the Spanish context. The influence of a potential country bias in the generalization of results is lower, however, for European countries. After all, most European universities share an important structural trait: they are fairly autonomous organizations that hardly compete with each other. European governments have in fact prioritized access to higher education over competitiveness, therefore maintaining income from tuition low and making direct public subsidies —generally linked to the number of students enrolled— support the bulk of their universities' budget (Aghion et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, the low bargaining power of stakeholders that are closer to market needs, such as entrepreneurs, business associations or students, have made graduate employability a secondary goal in practice. The recent emphasis of the Bologna process on employability is nothing else but the recognition of this common challenge on the way towards the establishment of a common European Higher Education Area. This challenge has become even more important in the present economic crisis given the reduction of public funding for higher education (Varghese, 2009), and increasing unemployment rates, especially for the youngest in society (Farcnik y Domadenik, 2012).

With due caution, accordingly, we posit that reform proposals must rebalance the capacity of stakeholders' influence. Our results suggest that the power held by university teaching staff may be excessive (Mora, 2002a). Though they seem to support both business protocol and alumni feedback employabilities, they do not show the same concern for academic employability. On the one hand, the teaching staff surely wish to provide a quality public service (Hodges, 1998), but on the other, they may reflect a very pragmatic concern in that universities with greater employability ratings may receive larger numbers of students (IUVE Foundation, 2005). Furthermore, their lesser interest in promoting academic employability might be related to their interest in more specialized and scientific teaching associated with their own research, so if curricular design depends exclusively on their criteria, they may sacrifice academic employability to impose courses that rely on allegedly more scientific—but managerially unproductive—contents. Spanish universities thus appear to provide an education with a strong theoretical emphasis, certainly at a relatively high level compared to other countries, but placing little curricular importance on teaching the skills and abilities that facilitate the transfer of knowledge to employment (Mora, 2002b). This evidence suggests that governance reforms should not only alleviate the power of teaching staff in Spanish universities, but also consider from a broader perspective that, even if all employability strategies are designed to achieve a common goal, the stakeholders are likely to support only those that advance their own interests.

Additionally, representatives of employers should be more present in the decision-making bodies that have the greatest influence in promoting the quality of work-related teaching and should participate in the design of programs that facilitate job placement for graduates (Hawkrige, 2005; MECD, 2011). This should reduce the gap between the skills developed by graduates and the skills demanded by recruiters (Maxwell et al., 2010). Additional appropriate actions include increasing informal partnerships with employers, similar to those developed in British universities (Harvey et al., 2002), such as participation in the continuous adaptation of curricula to the needs of the workplace (University of Dundee), qualifications for employers without requiring them to attend

classes in exchange for sharing their experiences with students (Liverpool John Moores University), and coordination by employers of business projects drawn up by students (Newcastle University).

Moreover, the involvement of current and former students in improving employability does not necessarily require structural changes in university governing bodies to increase their influence. The results of this strategy are already apparent, and have more to do with trade union demands than with improving employability. It is indeed an option to consider the institutionalization of improvement groups following the kaizen philosophy, or the organization of quality circles that, while emphasizing the rotation of graduates and present students, promote their participation in curricular design (Dill, 1997). Furthermore, it would be advisable to integrate work experience into students' study courses for two reasons. Firstly, this approach may enable experience to enhance employability. Students that have participated in practical work experience enjoy greater employability, obtain higher-level employment, and have enhanced job skills and responsibilities in their first jobs (INE, 2000). Secondly, such practices lead to feedback amongst students, as occurs in some American universities where students are required to earn practicum credits before they can graduate. During their practical work, regular group meetings are held allowing students to reflect together on their experiences (U.S. Department of State, 2005). To benefit from these measures would require the creation of a decentralized liaison between universities and businesses to coordinate work experience placements.

Finally, the public administration represents another stakeholder that can positively influence employability. In addition to being places of research and education, universities are also poles for regional economic development (Boe, 2007; Suarez and Galan, 2006). So, public administration should link the funding of higher education to each COHED's performance in terms of employability. This can be achieved by stimulating the participation of universities in programs like REFLEX, or indirectly through other initiatives that aim to supervise the internal and external quality of qualifications. Finally, the government should engage in actions parallel to those offered by the university. This is being done, for example, in the UK, where several organizations have

been set up whose sole purpose is to complement the employability skills of students and graduates (Raybound and Sheedy, 2005).

In summary, there is a long way to go in improving the employability of university graduates in Spain. Structural reforms that affect the bargaining power and expectations of stakeholders should form part of major initiatives in this area in order to generate long-term stable practices that are not necessarily linked to large financial outlays. Such structural reforms, however, are not sufficient. The experiences of other countries suggest that it is necessary to implement organizational formulas that encourage the participation of stakeholders—especially those with a greater market orientation—in improving employability.

Conclusion

Our results confirm that stakeholders do influence the strategies adopted by public organizations. However, in contrast with previous studies in the environmental sector (Buisse and Verbeke, 2003; Henriques and Sadorsky, 1999), we found that not all stakeholders are relevant. Or, to be more precise, although all stakeholders may share a common ultimate goal, some may not have any real influence on any of the strategies, while others are relevant in only some strategies. Clearly, this depends on their decision-making/negotiation capacity and on how each of the employability strategies affects each stakeholder. In particular, there are relevant stakeholders, such as students or the public administration, that lack influence while others, such as alumni or employers, do not have as much influence as would be advisable. University teaching staff, who have an intrinsic ability to influence student development, tend to only influence the strategies for improving employability that do not damage their own interests. These results should provide important evidence for policymakers in Europe, especially if we bear in mind the recent introduction of the EHEA, where knowing how to manage graduate employability will undoubtedly be a competitive advantage for universities.

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Table 1. Variables in the database

Variable name	Description
Employability strategies	
1. Academic	Construct which measures the degree of development of activities at the academic level to improve the employability of students
2. Business protocol	Construct which measures the degree of development of activities to improve the employability of students in terms of their adaptation to the world of work, through the transmission of values and core competencies necessary for their future professional performance
3. Matching	Construct which measures the degree of development of activities to adapt the characteristics of students to the characteristics needed for particular jobs
4. Feedback	Construct which measures the degree of development of activities to improve the employability of students by learning from the experience of alumni of the COHED
Relevance of stakeholders	
5. University teaching staff	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of teachers about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
6. University governors	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of university governors about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
7. Alumni	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of alumni about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
8. Students	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of students about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
9. Administrative staff	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of administrative staff about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
10. Employers	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of employers about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
11. Public administration	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of the public administration about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
12. Community	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of the community about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
13. Trade unions	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of unions about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
14. Media	Time and attention devoted by the management /dean's team to meeting the concerns of the media about employability. Measured with a five-point Likert-type scale.
Control variables	
15. Number of degrees	Number of different degrees offered by the COHED
16. Per capita GDP	Numeric value of per capita GDP of the autonomous community COHED

17. University's academic recognition	Five values according to the university's position in the ranking of Shanghai (ARWU): The value 1 is reserved for two universities that share the highest total score among Spanish universities; the value 0,75 is assigned to a university with the second highest score; 0,50 reflects the score of one university with the third highest score; and 0,25 is reserved for 5 universities that share the lowest score among Spanish universities in ARWU. Finally, the value 0 is assigned for universities that are not present in the ranking of Shanghai (ARWU).
18. Type of university	Two values: 1 for public university; 2 for private university
19. Level of studies offered	Two values: 1 for COHEDs offering 5-year degrees; 2 for COHEDs offering 2-year diplomas
20. Teaching area: Humanities	Two values: 0 for COHEDs not teaching degrees belonging to the branch of Humanities; 1 for those that do
21. Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	Two values: 0 for COHEDs not teaching degrees belonging to the branch of Experimental Sciences; 1 for those that do
22. Teaching area: Social Sciences	Two values: 0 for COHEDs not teaching degrees belonging to the branch of Social Sciences; 1 for those that do
23. Teaching area: Technical Education	Two values: 0 for COHEDs not teaching degrees belonging to the branch of Technical Education; 1 for those that do
24. Teaching area: Health	Two values: 0 for COHEDs not teaching degrees belonging to the branch of Health; 1 for those that do

Table 2. Constructs and associated items

Construct	Items for which respondents were asked to indicate whether (no /yes) each takes place at their COHED
Academic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Availability of daily access to the Internet for students 2. Assignment of laptop computer for each student to begin a course taught at your COHED 3. Inclusion of a tutoring system that specializes in advice throughout students' courses developed within the COHED 4. Information for students at the beginning of their studies on the possibilities of labor market access and on the specialties that are taught in the COHED 5. Information for students at the beginning of their studies about on-site resources available for employment guidance 6. Conducting meetings and agreements with employers to design and evaluate the curricula of the subjects taught 7. Consideration of the historic level of employment of graduates as a criterion for planning the courses taught at your COHED 8. Inclusion of basic computer courses (i.e. Microsoft Office® software) as a compulsory subject 9. Inclusion of English / French as a compulsory subject 10. Level of preparedness with regard to students' ability to use English in activities such as videoconferencing, writing a report or attending a meeting 11. Opportunity for double degree 12. Teaching of subjects in English (beyond English language courses <i>per se</i>) 13. Informative visits by students to businesses.
Business protocol	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Courses to prepare for students' entry into the world of work, such as resume and job interview preparation, explaining the different practices in the selection processes, etc. 2. Courses that promote skill development in individual students to reinforce their personal attributes such as critical capacity, honesty, working ability, initiative, creative thinking, decision making, risk taking, assuming responsibility, and so on. 3. Courses that promote skill development for working with others, such as communication, teamwork, negotiating skills and conflict resolution, decision making, time management, social skills, public speaking, completion of reports, etc. 4. Promoting self-employment through measures such as training in specific areas of business creation, development of business plans, the process of finding resources, etc.
Matching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access to the COHED's own exclusive employment office 2. Conducting exclusive job forums for the COHED 3. Presentations from companies and employers for students in the form of conferences, symposia, etc. 4. Conducting screening tests or interviews of students by businesses on the premises 5. Provision of information to employers on services available for hiring graduates 6. Conducting compulsory work experience for students during their academic course with the recognition of credits in the programmes taught 7. Availability of scholarships for internships in companies abroad during students' courses 8. Availability of job centers coordinated by the COHED based on direct agreements with companies at the end of courses 9. Follow-up of the characteristics demanded by prospective employers for graduates
Feedback	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Availability of an alumni association 2. Generation of jobs provided by alumni 3. Follow-up with graduates regarding jobs found 4. Monitoring how unemployed graduates seek employment (search sites, means, results, etc.).

Table 3. Results of bootstrap analysis for employability strategies

Parameter	Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
E1 <--> E2	0.364	0.261	0.468	0.010
E2 <--> E3	0.595	0.499	0.671	0.010
E3 <--> E4	0.555	0.450	0.638	0.010
E2 <--> E4	0.532	0.447	0.610	0.010
E1 <--> E4	0.483	0.381	0.585	0.010
E1 <--> E3	0.439	0.321	0.537	0.010

E1: Academic employability strategy; E2: Business protocol employability strategy; E3: Matching employability strategy and E4: Feedback employability strategy

Table 4. Descriptive statistics

	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min. Value	Max. Value
Academic employability strategy	230	5.173	1.706	1	10
Business protocol employability strategy	230	7.358	3.305	1	10
Matching employability strategy	230	5.091	2.430	1	10
Feedback employability strategy	230	5.337	3.189	1	10
Relevance of university teaching staff	230	3.04	1.083	1	5
Relevance of university governors	230	3.19	1.136	1	5
Relevance of alumni	230	2.56	1.172	1	5
Relevance of students	230	3.48	1.143	1	5
Relevance of administrative staff	230	2.01	1.034	1	5
Relevance of employers	230	2.84	1.226	1	5
Relevance of public administration	230	2.58	1.129	1	5
Relevance of community	230	2.38	1.102	1	5
Relevance of unions	230	2.12	1.077	1	5
Relevance of media	230	2.55	1.176	1	5
Number of degrees	230	3.22	2.808	1	14
Per capita GPD	230	19,260.20	3,992.50	13,012.00	25,742.00
University's academic recognition	230	0,112	0,265	0	1
Type of university	230	-	-	0	1
Level of studies offered	230	-	-	0	1
Teaching area: Humanities	22/230	-	-	0	1
Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	23/230	-	-	0	1
Teaching area: Social Sciences	107/230	-	-	0	1
Teaching area: Health	37/230	-	-	0	1
Teaching area: Technical Education	41/230	-	-	0	1

Table 5. Correlation Matrix (Spearman's Rho)

	<i>1.</i>	<i>2.</i>	<i>3.</i>	<i>4.</i>	<i>5.</i>	<i>6.</i>	<i>7.</i>	<i>8.</i>	<i>9.</i>	<i>10.</i>	<i>11.</i>
1. Academic employability strategy											
2. Business protocol employability strategy	0.375**										
3. Matching employability strategy	0.583**	0.419**									
4. Feedback employability strategy	0.535**	0.506**	0.554**								
5. Relevance of university teaching staff	0.230***	0.271***	0.223***	0.310***							
6. Relevance of university governors	0.293***	0.243***	0.262***	0.265***	0.599***						
7. Relevance of alumni	0.220***	0.191***	0.233***	0.302***	0.409***	0.413***					
8. Relevance of students	0.146**	0.162**	0.257***	0.165**	0.510***	0.509***	0.378***				
9. Relevance of employers	0.245***	0.203***	0.387***	0.300***	0.440***	0.341***	0.486***	0.310***			
10. Relevance of public administration	0.128*	0.146**	0.182***	0.215***	0.423***	0.503***	0.437***	0.487***	0.441***		
11. Relevance of administrative staff	0.185***	0.221***	0.241***	0.321***	0.380***	0.409***	0.272***	0.367***	0.359***	0.592***	
12. Relevance of community	0.147**	0.131**	0.204***	0.224***	0.317***	0.404***	0.304***	0.320***	0.416***	0.605***	0.765***
13. Relevance of unions	0.065	0.143**	0.098*	0.198***	0.303***	0.302***	0.333***	0.224***	0.426***	0.333***	0.458***
14. Relevance of media	0.154**	0.132**	0.213***	0.242***	0.362***	0.315***	0.372***	0.353***	0.364***	0.532***	0.593***
15. Number of degrees	0.231***	0.059	0.122*	0.102*	0.027	0.112*	0.037	-0.003	0.032	0.078	-0.002
16. Per capita GDP	0.225***	0.120*	0.247***	0.209***	0.099	0.058	0.097	-0.003	0.148**	0.149**	-0.013
17. University's academic recognition	0.107	0.152**	0.015	0.057	-0.021	-0.015	-0.021	-0.036	-0.094	0.008	0.020
18. Type of university	0.396***	0.241***	0.335***	0.271***	0.100	0.153**	0.129**	0.112*	0.122*	0.147**	-0.032
19. Level of studies offered	0.099*	0.108*	0.127*	0.098*	-0.066	-0.060	0.006	-0.184***	0.088	-0.036	-0.127*
20. Teaching area:Humanities	-0.121*	-0.153**	-0.256***	-0.037	0.058	0.056	-0.025	-0.020	-0.038	-0.033	0.006
21. Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	-0.044	-0.091	0.001	-0.010	0.069	0.0429	0.060	0.181***	-0.107*	-0.000	-0.086
22. Teaching area:Social Sciences	0.070	0.118*	0.048	-0.003	-0.064	-0.0815	-0.071	-0.060	0.083	-0.018	0.022
23. Teaching area:Health	-0.127*	0.038	-0.003	-0.019	-0.141**	-0.0781	-0.048	0.033	-0.024	-0.086	0.008

*** Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2-sided), ** Correlation significant at 0.05 level (2-sided), * Correlation significant at 0.1 level (2-sided).

Table 5. (Continued)

	<i>12.</i>	<i>13.</i>	<i>14.</i>	<i>15.</i>	<i>16.</i>	<i>17.</i>	<i>18.</i>	<i>19.</i>	<i>20.</i>	<i>21.</i>	<i>22.</i>
13. Relevance of unions	0.553***										
14. Relevance of media	0.653***	0.530***									
15. Number of degrees	0.077	0.142**	0.095								
16. Per capita GPD	0.107*	0.014	0.063	0.076							
17. University's academic recognition	-0.004	0.016	0.042	0.014	0.124*						
18. Type of university	0.073	-0.068	0.071	0.191***	0.361***	-0.153**					
19. Level of studies offered	-0.077	-0.018	-0.115*	-0.092	0.061	-0.131**	0.005				
20. Teaching area: Humanities	0.012	-0.001	0.045	0.082	0.001	-0.017	0.005	-0.261***			
21. Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	-0.051	-0.103	0.025	-0.096	0.007	0.168**	-0.051	-0.208***	-0.108*		
22. Teaching area: Social Sciences	-0.017	0.024	-0.003	-0.016	0.004	-0.061	-0.040	-0.194***	-0.303***	-0.311***	
23. Teaching area: Health	-0.026	0.012	-0.025	-0.284***	0.010	0.054	0.033	0.134**	-0.142**	-0.146**	-0.408***

*** Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2-sided), ** Correlation significant at 0.05 level (2-sided), * Correlation significant at 0.1 level (2-sided).

Table 6. MANOVA multivariate tests

Variables	Pillai's trace		Wilks' lambda	
	value	F	value	F
Co-variables				
Relevance of university teaching staff	0.037	1.919*	0.963	1.919*
Relevance of university governors	0.026	1.318	0.974	1.318
Relevance of alumni	0.018	0.891	0.982	0.891
Relevance of students	0.017	0.866	0.983	0.866
Relevance of employers	0.049	2.576**	0.951	2.576**
Relevance of public administration	0.007	0.371	0.993	0.371
Relevance of administrative staff	0.006	0.295	0.994	0.295
Relevance of community	0.002	0.089	0.998	0.089
Relevance of unions	0.013	0.678	0.987	0.678
Relevance of media	0.009	0.427	0.991	0.427
Number of degrees	0.033	1.590*	0.967	1.590*
Per capita GPD	0.021	1.068	0.979	1.068
University's academic recognition	0.024	1.210	0.976	1.210
Factors				
Type of university	0.060	3.194***	0.940	3.194***
Level of studies offered	0.015	0.765	0.985	0.765
Teaching area: Humanities	0.024	1.210	0.976	1.210
Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	0.004	0.222	0.996	0.222
Teaching area: Social Sciences	0.007	0.327	0.993	0.327
Teaching area: Health	0.019	0.989	0.981	0.989

*** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1

Table 7. MANOVA results of the effect between variables

	Employability strategies			
	Academic	Business protocol	Matching	Feedback
	F	F	F	F
Corrected Model	4.495***	2.040***	4.294***	2.638***
R ²	0.375	0.214	0.365	0.261
R ² corrected	0.292	0.109	0.280	0.162
Co-variables				
Relevance of university teaching staff	1.335	5.912***	0.076	2.660*
Relevance of university governors	5.150**	0.103	0.492	0.468
Relevance of alumni	0.645	0.942	0.001	2.493*
Relevance of students	0.238	0.349	0.545	1.078
Relevance of employers	0.546	1.059	9.496***	0.710
Relevance of public administration	0.041	0.007	0.154	0.846
Relevance of administrative staff	0.008	0.275	0.037	1.001
Relevance of community	0.092	0.257	0.180	0.188
Relevance of unions	0.555	0.176	1.690	0.001
Relevance of media	0.226	0.331	0.686	0.325
Number of degrees	6.067***	0.242	0.146	0.985
Per capita GPD	1.897	0.949	3.839**	1.967
University's academic recognition	1.568	3.732**	0.172	1.161
Factors				
Type of university	12.407***	2.336*	3.320*	2.453*
Level of studies offered	2.425*	1.057	0.716	1.446
Teaching area: Humanities	0.671	0.084	3.039*	0.069
Teaching area: Experimental Sciences	0.005	0.661	0.038	0.022
Teaching area: Social Sciences	0.385	0.578	0.010	0.757
Teaching area: Health	1.283	1.677	0.013	0.111

*** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.1