

Career Preparedness: The Role of Experience before a PhD

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OECD-wide the number of PhD holders has been growing every year, but job opportunities in the Higher Education Sector, as their privileged employer, do not seem to keep up with PhD holders' numbers

What do we know about PhD holders and PhD students?

- OECD countries witnessed a rise in their numbers (OECD, 2019; WEF, 2019)
- In Portugal the number of PhD students has been increasing exponentially, from 3.381 in 2000 to 21.763 students in 2020 (DGEEC, 2020)
- There is a scarcity of information regarding PhD students' professional experience background

We do not know where these students are in terms of professional experience before entering the PhD

What do we know about PhD holders' employability?

- Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been PhD holders' traditional career destination (DGEEC, 2021; Eurostat, 2017; OECD, 2019)
- In Portugal, 77% working in an HEI and 8% at the Private Sector (DGEEC, 2021)
- Academia is a sector that seems to not tend to expand or renew itself rapidly (der Boon et al., 2018; Fuhrmann et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2018)

Academia offers limited opportunities for long-term employment to PhD holders

What do we know about careers?

- There are current transversal shifts in employability trends and careers (Savickas et al., 2009), due to contextual transformations (Volkoff, 2011)
- New models highlight the importance of flexibility in career decision-making (Callanan et al., 2017)
- The careers are conceptualized as multidirectional projects, in alternative to the paradigm of a linear career throughout life (Baruch, 2004)

Although facing a specific challenge, the employability of PhD holders is linked to the shifts in employability trends

What do we know about work experience and career development?

- Career development can be understood as a social process supported on the individual-context interactions (Savickas, 2021)
- It is fundamental to experience diverse work situations, and contexts, to ensure a significant number of recognized possibilities for the development of one's own career path (Bersin & Sanders, 2019; Percy & Kashefpakdel, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022)

It is relevant to focus on the value of past work experiences as a resource that can be taken advantage of by PhD students

We realized that...

Past work experiences are a central aspect in the career development paradigm,

but there seems to be a shortage of information about PhD students' professional experiences prior to their enrolment in the PhD

We want to understand...

The extent to which previous professional experiences determine PhD students' feeling of preparedness to act on their career development

Participants and data collection

Quantitative research was conducted involving **377 Portuguese PhD students**

Considering the students' professional experience, four types were identified:

- Exclusively in the Academia context
- Exclusively in the Corporate context
- In more than one context
(Academia, Corporate and/or Public Administration)
- No professional experience

Measures and data analysis

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study

A total of 13 questions were included, aimed at assessing the students' perceptions about their preparedness to conduct career development actions

Items were presented on a Likert scale, from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree")

Non-parametric tests were used since the professional groups had different sizes and items did not follow a normal distribution

Findings

PhD students with more diverse past professional experiences report greater capacity for reflection both on the labor market and on themselves for the development of their career than PhD students with past professional experience exclusively in Academia or with no professional experience

“I feel I have the necessary skills to enter the labor market in my area of training and/or interest

“I feel able to identify the purpose I want to achieve through my work”

“I feel prepared to start a researcher/professor position in Academia after the PhD”

“I am able to outline an action plan to reach my career goals”

[illustrative example; not exhaustive]

Table 2

Differences between the students with professional experience in Academia and the students with experience in more than one context

	Exclusively in Academia		In more than one context		Significance p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
I can identify the skills I have developed through my academic, professional, personal, social and family experiences throughout my life	4.04	.63	4.26	.66	.015
I feel I have the necessary skills to enter the labor market in my area of training and/or interest	3.87	.84	4.18	.75	.015

Table 3

Differences between the students with no professional experience and students with experience in more than one context

	No professional experience		In more than one context		Significance p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
I am able to outline an action plan to reach my career goals	3.11	.91	3.59	.99	.035

Table 4

Differences between the students with no professional experience and professional experience on Academia with the students with experience in more than one context

	No professional experience		Exclusively in Academia		In more than one context		Significance p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
					4.10	.73	.045 .011

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idents from all professional

	No professional experience		Exclusively in Academia		In more than one context		Significance p.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
	2.68	.90	3.33	1.06			.015

[detail available in the communication]

Implications

The diversity of past work experiences also seems to be providing more opportunities to expand the students' self-knowledge for career development preparedness, which, as Greenhaus and colleagues (2010) identify, can contribute for the construction of more productive and satisfactory career paths.



Conclusions

The **possibility for students to be able to self-reflect upon their value proposition, and thus develop their power to construct their future career**, can be decisive when career trends are changing towards less linear and less homogeneous paths (Savickas et al., 2009)

Having past work experiences is essential for career development (Bersin & Sanders, 2019; Percy & Kashepakdel, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022)

These experiences can act to expand the range of known career-related choices one can make (Coimbra et al., 1994), and thus **contribute to development through a greater sense of preparedness to act upon their career development**

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