

## Capabilities for Education, Work and Voice from the Perspective of “the Less Employable” University Graduates.

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### 1 Introduction

During the last decade the benefits of higher education has been challenged from a utility perspective (Garrick & Rhodes 2000). According to the utility perspective the primary aim of higher education is to provide the labour market with a skilled work force and there are voices raised, questioning whether this goal is achieved (e.g Almerud et al. 2011; Korpi & Thålin 2009; Sahlén 2010). This idea is closely related to “employability” that has become an aim that governments around the world have imposed on national higher education systems to varying extents (Yorke 2006). However, employability is by no means an unambiguous concept – there are many interpretations, but Yorke (2006) states that most of them can be broadly subordinated under one of the three following categories: employability as demonstrated by the graduate actually obtaining a job; employability as the student being developed by his or her experience of higher education; employability in terms of possession of relevant achievements

It could be argued that the official debate, as well as the politics of higher education in Sweden, is very much influenced by the first interpretation; the proportion of graduates obtaining a job corresponding to their education is viewed as an important indicator of the quality of higher education (Dahlen 2010; National Agency for Higher Education 2010b; Prop. 2007/08:1; RiR 2009; SSCO 2009; TCO 2008). Consequently, young graduates facing trouble in getting a job corresponding to their qualifications is defined as a sign of failure on the part of the higher education system. A main point of departure in the official debate is that young people are not provided with the “right” possibilities to make educational choices that will give them a prosperous life (Almerud et. al. 2011; Sahlén 2010). The underlying notion is that non-instrumental choices, such as choosing an education that not obviously lead to a job, is a kind of un-informed mistake on the part of the student. Carrying the matter to its extreme, the measure suggested to prevent the “straying from the rational path” is that educations not obviously in demand on the labour market should not be offered or that the size of study allowance should be reduced for “unprofitable” educations (Fölster et al 2011).

In the present study the experiences of “less employable” university graduates are explored by applying a capability perspective (see Sen 1992, 1999). The concept “less employable” will henceforth be used when referring to the target group of the study, which is broadly defined as young graduates not yet employed in a job corresponding to their educational qualifications within a reasonable time after graduation<sup>1</sup>. Although having a university degree puts the

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, which is the authority assigned to review the quality of higher education, annually investigates the rate of labour market establishment associated with different educations. Graduates who completed their education between three and four years previous the time for each investigation constitute the sample.

individual in a general favourable position compared people with lower education, the situation of the "less employable" graduates is nevertheless relevant. The overall issue is the same; to what extent are young people provided with opportunities to form their lives based on what they have reason to value. The present study will focus on whether "less employable" young graduates appreciate their education as a capability enhancing experience and if not, what aspects they define as constraining.

To some extent, the study sets out from the "utility-assumption", i.e. that a qualified job is a central motive for young people's choice to enter higher education, and since this specific group of graduates seems to face some trouble in this respect, attention will be paid to what constraining factors they have experienced. However, the work-motive should not be taken for granted. A focal question of the study is whether other motives guided their decision and to what extent the education enhanced their capabilities related to other valuable aspects of life from the graduates' perspective. Hence, in contrast to the utility perspective reviewed above, the point of departure in the current text is that choosing a university education might be based on economic as well as intrinsic values (Walker 2009).

The capability approach (CA) is a useful tool for exploring people's expectations and their possibilities to realise those expectations in general. It is also a helpful tool for capturing a wider aim and meaning of higher education. In doing so, the distinction between capabilities (the extent to which a person is free to lead a life she has reason to value) and functionings (what a person actually is or does) is crucial. Although "not obtaining a job" (functioning) is the core principle defining the target group of the study, the focus is on young graduates' experiences of capabilities and here, the distinction between resources and capabilities is important as well. The availability of resources necessary for specific outcomes is crucial but does not automatically result in freedoms; the relation is heavily influenced by conversion factors, i.e. factors affecting the possibility to convert resources into capabilities. The significance of conversion factors highlights the social embeddedness of individual agency. For instance, resources in terms of an open and accessible higher education system do not mean "equal access". The individual's real freedom to enter higher education will be influenced by personal, social as well as environmental characteristics - e.g. self-confidence, family traditions and norms, infrastructure etc (e.g. Robeyns 2005).

Although resources solely is not enough they still constitute an important basis framing what opportunities there *might* be and with the purpose of "setting the scene", an account for available resources for education, work and voice will be given before the research questions are presented.

## 2 Context

That all education should be available to everyone on equal conditions irrespective of gender, social background and place of origin is a prevailing idea within the Swedish education system, an idea transformed in the extensive expansion of higher education since the middle of the 1990s (SOU 2007:81). In line with this, higher education is free of charge and there is a fairly generous state governed allowance system available, securing possibility to study for everyone irrespective of social background and financial situation. There is a variety of ways to achieve graduation both regarding content (variety of subjects), form (vocational programmes, general programmes, single courses) and organisation (distance learning possible, change of seat of learning/location, possibility to take a year off etc). Consequently, the *educational resources* could be defined as propitious.

*Resources for work* in the context of the study are closely related to educational resources. On a general level, having an academic exam is definitely a resource in itself since high employment rates and favourable working conditions are aspects proven to be positively associated with educational level. However, it is also known that there are differences related to kind of education (Wennström 2009; National Agency for Higher Education 2010b). Several studies, mainly conducted by student organisations, unions and other interest groups suggest that unequal access to labour market contacts during the time of study and qualified career and study counselling are the main reasons for the differences (Jusek 2011; Gemmel et al 2010; SSCO 2009). It is also stated that some fields of education are relatively unknown or underestimated on the labour market, i.e. employer's knowledge about what skills and competences the education provides, is assumed to be insufficient (Jusek 2011; Schoug 2008; Projekt Athena 2011). Consequently, the measures proposed by these organisations are more labour market contacts during the time of study together with more and better career and study counselling.

Since the suggestions mentioned above are proposed by interest groups, unions and the like, acting on the behalf of students and graduates interests, the *voice dimension* is highlighted. On a general level capability for voice could be described as the ability to express one's opinions and to make them count in the course of public discussion, commonly with reference to groups of individuals involved in social work practice (Bonvin & Farvaque 2006; Bonvin 2012). Hence, a crucial aspect of voice is whether the individual can choose between loyalty to the prevailing norms and prescriptions or voice in order to negotiate the content of the measures provided (Hirschman 1970). Looking at the target group of the study, the service and measures provided to unemployed and the regulations framing these measures is a relevant social work context. Still, the main focus concerning "the less employable" university graduates is resources necessary for voicing their opinions and to make them count within the higher education system, on the labour market and within the politics of education and work. According to Bohman (1996) the prevalence of collective actors such as trade unions or other interest groups is a crucial resource for creating genuinely public space where one's concerns might be taken into account. As reviewed above, there are such actors highlighting the situation of the "less employable" and in fact, the politics of higher education has taken their arguments into account. For instance, a political initiative was taken in 2009 when the Swedish National Audit Office was assigned to scrutinize the *measures promoting employability*<sup>2</sup> taken by the authorities concerned (RiR 2009). Another example of resources for voice is that all seats of learning are obliged to carry out follow-ups on student's views on their education in general (including aspects such as labour market relevance) as a part of the quality assessment of higher education (National Agency for Higher Education 2011).

Information about labour market options associated with different educations is another resource for voice. Such information is necessary for young people's ability to make a conception of "the good" (Nussbaum 2000, p 79) and to make educational choices in line with this conception. In Sweden, it is regulated by law that students should be given access to study – and vocational guidance and that the education providers should ensure that anyone who intends to begin an education have access to the information needed about that education

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<sup>2</sup> The Audit Office does not explicitly define employability, but state that enhanced employability through better development and career opportunities on the labour market are probably important motives behind people's choice to apply for higher education.

(Higher Education Ordinance §3, ch 6). To meet this requirement, there is at least one study counsellor employed at every department within the higher education system.

### 3 Research questions

Focusing on a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being and doings, the main issue at stake in the present study is whether the "less employable" university graduates perceive their education as an experience enhancing their possibilities to lead a life they have reason to value. More specifically, the questions raised are: Was their decision to enter higher education considered and based on aspects they had reason to value? Were their motives to enter university related to future job opportunities or rather pure educational values? Do these people resist the utility agenda or have they internalised it, but made the "wrong" choice of education? Do they consider that their educational experience come up to their expectations or not? If not – what is missing and what could have been done differently?

### 4 Methods

In the following section, the target group of the study will be described as well as the procedure for case selection. Thereafter, an account for the data collected will be given followed by a presentation of the methods used.

*Target group and case selection* Although education generally means improved labour market prospects and reduced risks for unemployment (OECD 2011, Jusek 2011: National Agency for Higher Education 2010a), the labour market of academics seems to be quite heterogeneous. For most fields of education, the opportunities vary considerably between periods of recession and upward trends, whereas some are generally insensitive (Wennström 2009). Another dividing line is between the three different *types of exams* available within the Swedish higher education system. There are vocationally oriented programmes, leading to an occupational exam, e.g. engineer, nurse and teacher. Above that, many faculties and departments offer general programmes within specific disciplines, such as political science, computer science, geography etc. Finally, the students may also design an individual exam composed by a number of single courses of his/her choice. In terms of labour market opportunities (here defined by employment rates, jobs corresponding to educational level/field of education and the time span between exam and the first job) vocationally oriented programmes are generally advantageous compared to general programmes and exams put together by single courses (National Agency for Higher Education 2010b)<sup>3</sup>.

Graduates with individually composed exams within the humanities and the social sciences are among the categories traditionally hit by less favourable labour market options and this group was selected to represent "the less employable". The sampling was made using following procedure; all students who completed an individually composed bachelor's degree, either within the humanities or the social sciences, at one of the bigger universities in the country during the period of 2007 and 2009 were selected from the university register. Accordingly, the target group had completed their education between two to four years previous the study, which is an interval within which it could be expected that a fairly stable labour market situation could have been established.

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<sup>3</sup> The analyses referred to do not distinguish between general programmes and exams composed by single courses, probably because the establishment of general programmes is a quite recent trend.

For the purpose of selecting relevant cases, a small inquiry, asking questions about their working situation since graduation, was sent to everyone who was under the age of 31 years (totally 140 individuals). In the inquiry, the respondents were requested to declare whether or not they agreed on taking part in a subsequent study further exploring their whereabouts after exam. Those with an unstable position at the labour market in terms of unemployment, employment in a job not corresponding to the education (or former experiences of the same) and who agreed on taking part in the subsequent study were contacted. Finally two male and seven female graduates aged between 26 and 30 agreed to take part in the study.

*Data and methods* Exploring capabilities for education, work and voice from the perspective of "the less employable" university graduates requires an understanding of relevant resources available to them as well as the uncovering of their personal experiences concerning the ability to convert these resources into freedoms and opportunities. The methods used to meet these requirements were interviews and document analyses. Document analyses were mainly used for identifying available resources (reviewed in section 2: Context). In order to reveal how these resources are put into practice, five university employees at the university where the young graduates completed their education were interviewed. Four of them were mainly dealing with strategic issues, whereas one of them worked as a career advisor. Since the view of labour market representatives constitutes an important conversion factor when focusing the transition from (higher) education to work, the labour market perspective concerning the target group and their education was taken into account by interviewing four employers, one union representative and four officials at the employment office<sup>4</sup>. Resources enabling students and graduates to voice their opinion and to make it count within public policy process were defined by the availability of organisations representing their interests and the extent to which the proposals of these organisations have a real impact. Both scientific studies and public discussions have served as a basis for this assessment. Questions about students influence have also been raised in the interviews with university representatives.

The nine university graduates selected were interviewed with the purpose of exploring their sense of capability. This is an issue that requires the uncovering of significant experiences, motives, expectations, notions and emotions - dimensions of the social reality preferably studied by qualitative methods (Flick 2002; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Accordingly, the study sets out from the assumption that it is possible to get access to people's lived experiences and emotions, an assumption that can be defined as an emotionalist point of view (Gubrium & Holstein 1997; Silverman 2006: 123). The primary issue for an emotionalist is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences, which is quite in line with the conditions required if revealing someone's sense of capability is the question at stake.

Commonly, the main way to generate this kind of data is through the use of unstructured, open ended interviews (Silverman 2006:118), which was the tool used in the present study. The unstructured interview allows for a qualitative depth, because the conversation can be based on ideas and meanings that are close to the interviewees themselves, which in turn enables the researcher to understand the meanings that the interviewees ascribe to different phenomena (May 1997).

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with three employers, one union representative and one official at the employment office were conducted by Karin Berg as a part of her report "The labour market of Sociologist – conditions and conceptions" (2011), internal document; department of Sociology and Work Science, Gothenburg University

With the purpose of being able to give full attention to the respondent and the situation, all the interviews were recorded and the empirical data consists of interview transcripts. The technique used to give the material analytic meaning was coding (Glaser & Strauss 2006). The categorization was based on the purpose of the study, which means that the overall categories, education, work and voice were predefined. At the same time, it was important to be open minded and sensitive for other aspects and any meaning that the interviewees ascribed to their experiences.

## **5 Results and analysis**

By way of introduction, there will be a short description of the nine university graduates' current situation. Thereafter, their experiences of capability for education, work and voice will be reviewed and analysed. For the purpose of readability, the interviewees have been given the following feign names; Tomas, Karin, Anna, Lisa, Louise, Erik, Sara, Eva, Maria.

Except for Anna and Erik, all the interviewees were in some kind of transitional phase at the time for the interviews. Karin's goal was to get an employment in a non-profit organisation dealing with the issues she was dedicated to. That the organisation stands for the "right" values was more important to her than the content of the job. Despite her rather low ambitions, she had so far not been offered any employment. Maria had experienced periods of unemployment mixed with a couple trainee jobs, mainly organised and supported by the employment office. At the moment, she held a post with conditional tenure working with unqualified tasks. She was not satisfied with her job, but she expressed great hopes in having an internal career within the company. In that sense, her current job was not only a means of livelihood, but also part of a strategy possibly ending up in a desirable work situation. Tomas, Lisa, Louise, Sara and Eva had continued their studies. Tomas and Sara was studying a master programme which was more or less a part of their educational plans at an early stage and to some extent based on expectations of improved labour market opportunities. For Lisa, Louise and Eva, the decision to apply for further studies was mainly a consequence of the hardships met in finding a job. All of them were actively looking for work after their graduation and they all had experiences of shorter employments; either in desirable jobs but with temporary contracts, or employments in jobs not corresponding to their conceptions of a desirable working life. Lisa and Eva finally decided to enter a vocationally oriented university programme, whereas Louise studied a master course.

### **Capability for education**

Capability can be defined as "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being" (Sen 1993, p 30). For the group of young people interviewed, to study at the university was indeed a valuable act and their stories indicate that there were no obvious obstacles restricting their freedoms to participate. On the contrary, the opportunity to study was more or less taken for granted. That the Swedish higher education system is open to everyone, that it is free of charge, and that there is a fairly generous state governed allowance system available, certainly explain much of this. However, as Nussbaum (2000) points out, our subjective preferences and choices are shaped by material as well as cultural circumstances. Our understanding of what opportunities that are available to us is deeply shaped by the social context and therefore, that all interviewees stated that they were brought up in an education friendly atmosphere, could be regarded as an important conversion factor (see also Robeyns 2005, p 99). Furthermore, a history of good experiences from school and a sense of being an "easy learner" are common features within the group of interviewees that also constitute significant conversion factors since they create self-confidence and a desire for knowledge.

*"To enter higher education at some point was always a matter of course. I've always liked to study and I was quite ambitious during both compulsory school and upper secondary school".* (Lisa)

Capability for education not only concern opportunity to study or not, but also whether people are able to choose the kind of education they have reason to value. Since all the interviewees except Maria stated that their choices were driven by personal interests all the way, at least up to bachelor's degree, the results indicate a strong sense of freedom to study based on personal preferences.

*"I have absolutely only studied out of personal interests and I have always been convinced that to do something you are committed to will pay off in one way or the other".* (Louise)

### **Capability for work**

For a majority of the interviewees, labour market expectations were not obviously a motive for entering higher education in the first place. If anything, increased employment chances could be described as a latent motive, something that was unconsciously regarded as a given consequence of education. Crucial to the capability approach is the process for people to come to a decision about what they have reason to value (Sen 1992, p 81) and in course of time, a desirable job, either corresponding to their education or a job within an organisation corresponding to their personal values, became a part of the plan. Having a university degree was then increasingly understood as an activity that would enhance their opportunities to get a desirable job. For everyone except Eric, this expectation was not met and the interviewees' freedoms to actually enjoy the lives they had reason to value were not obviously enhanced by their education. The focal question then is why this is the case, what resources or conversion factors are missing? The interviewees stories are dominated by constrains related either to the education provider or the labour market, which will be described below. The role of the employment office is also discussed.

*Constrains related to the provider of education:* In line with previous research (Jusek 2011; Gemmel et al 2010; RiR 2009; SSCO 2009) difficulties in entering the labour market were primarily explained by the educational system's shortcomings in providing measures facilitating the graduate's transition between education and work. Lacking elements mentioned were labour market contacts, guidance and a way to translate and communicate educational skills in a way that correspond to labour market demands. There is also a stress on the need for information on what you *are* in terms of vocational competence and identity, and what kind of jobs you can apply for.

Some of the resources mentioned were in fact available at the time when the interviewees studying but the conversion into freedoms was constrained by different factors. Although the university offered a practice course, the interviewees either had no information about it or expressed a strong critique against that it was offered first at master level and that it was poorly organized with few supporting structures arranged by the university:

*"Although the department had scheduled a work place located practice, they had no suggestions on where to go, they had no connections, they had not explored or prepared anything and it was very unclear regarding what should be done during the practice..., the instructions from the department on what they expected me to achieve were incredibly unclear".* (Louise)

The students themselves apparently had to find a proper employer and settle the agreements for the practice, and the lack of structure and support from the university seems to have jeopardized the quality of the experience. The fairly common notion among the interviewees is that elements of practice is desirable, preferably at an earlier stage of the education compared to the current situation, but it needs to be better organised in order to take away the responsibility from the students.

Lack of information might be viewed as a central constrain regarding the possibilities to convert resources such as study counselling and career advice into capabilities. At the time for their studies, the graduates knew about the existence of the study counsellors but did not recognize that their future working life was an issue for her/him. At the university, there was also a specific unit for career advice (Career Centre), but the interviewees had either no knowledge about it or thought that the service was designed for vocationally oriented categories of graduates. Bearing the support in mind that after all was within reach, it is stated that the resources ought to be made more visible to the students:

*"I had no idea at all that it (Career Centre) existed. Maybe I had heard about it a long time ago, maybe I had seen a small note somewhere or maybe someone once mentioned it incidentally, but I never gave it a serious thought. Then, a friend told me that a friend in common had been there and she thought I should check it out. So I went there and they have lots of good stuff.... I didn't get the information that there was someone there who could help me. That ought to be more involved at department level."* (Louise)

This suggestion is quite in line with the view of the career adviser who was interviewed. She states that students and graduates who look for support at the Centre usually have no idea regarding how and where their educational competences might be of any practical use. Most of them also seem to think that they are the only ones feeling that way and they are ashamed about their ignorance. In order to reduce those negative experiences the adviser advocates that some of the service provided at the Centre should be included *during* education instead. The adviser also highlights her own problem of having to rely on the study counsellors at each department in order to reach out with information to the students. Students' access to information about available resources is thereby heavily dependent on whether the counsellors are committed to the "work-issue" and on whether the counsellors are heard by their colleagues. According to the adviser at Career Centre, that labour market issues are given space and if opportunities are provided to convey such information might not be a matter of course since learning is the focus of an educational enterprise. The uncertainty of the flow of information put many students in an unfavourable situation – especially those who do not follow a coherent educational programme.

Erik is clearly of an opposite view when it comes to labour market connections. He takes up a critical attitude towards any politics aiming at "economization" of higher education. He regards himself as "spared" since he escaped these kinds of elements during his time of study. It should be noted that Erik is the only interviewee describing the transition between education and work as completely unproblematic. Still, one of the university employees express a similar point of view by highlighting that one should not assume that all students are interested in labour market connections. Her view is that many of those studying general educations within the humanities for instance, resist being imputed with a commercial way of thinking about education. Some of them have deliberately chosen an education based on pure interest and they do not expect that the knowledge acquired will be transformed into professional skills.

*Constraints related to the labour market:* Other aspects constraining the opportunity to convert the academic exam into capability for work were the graduates' experiences of the labour market's "resistance". A notion expressed is that their educations are not in demand because employers lack knowledge about the skills acquired through their specific educations. This notion is based on the fact that employers rarely look for professional categories corresponding to their educational profile: concepts equivalent to their studied disciplines do not occur in recruitment contexts. This is then experienced as something constraining the possibilities to market themselves as someone having the right qualifications.

*"When you have a general exam, it is not that easy to write the words, or to convert it to something that fits into what the labour market demands. It is not self-evident when you don't study a vocational education or something that more obviously fall into place within an occupation."* (Eva)

The labour market representatives tend to confirm these misgivings. According to one of the employment office representatives, employers cannot "decipher" what skills and competences some job seekers have since they lack knowledge about their educations. She states that this is particularly true for exams composed of single courses where the subjects do not clearly correspond to relatively established occupations. Consequently, the less known education one has the greater demands on your ability to market both your education and yourself.

An increasing focus on personal characteristics might also be defined as a constraining factor. For instance, the ability to present oneself in a way that fall the employer in taste is highlighted by several labour market representatives as well as the adviser at Career Centre. This is connected to a general surplus of job seekers with adequate skills; in order to sort and sift through all the applicants with qualifications corresponding to the demands, employers tend to look at more personal criteria. The focus on personal characteristics could imply a reduction in the relative importance of formal merits and by that, individuals with a less known education could benefit from such a development. But the present study indicates that the phenomenon has the opposite consequence. Interviews with labour market representatives indicate that employers tend to transfer a perceived ambiguity or vagueness of the less known educations *on* to the individual; since the educations are not perceived as having a clear direction towards a specific professional field, it is assumed that individuals who have these kind of educations are indecisive about their career and it is assumed that they will not as easily go into a role as an employee compared to someone who has an occupational training. When talking about individuals who have put together a general education package without a clear professional profile, one of the employment office representatives state that:

*"There is always a fear that these academics will fixate too much on problems or new ideas, that they will call everything into question and that they will not be productive"*. (Employment office representative)

A related tendency is the increased importance of social networks that is brought to the fore, preferably by the graduates. This is not viewed as a positive development – far from it! Louise names the phenomenon "the recommendation society" and is quite upset since being nice and attending to the social network seems to be more important than being educated:

*"You have studied for five years and you are damned good and skilled and then you realize that people get the job just because they are nice at the coffee break."* (Louise)

Despite her critical attitude, Louise and everybody else pay a lot of attention to their social networks. On the whole, every single social interface is looked upon as a potential source of employment options. This also holds for the social contacts established through the non-profit organisations most of the interviewees are committed to. Although the basic purpose is not to improve the list of merits, or to establish work related social connections, the interviewees regard the experiences received and the social contacts established within these organisations as significant opportunities to get a job.

*The employment office:* A last court that possibly could serve as a factor converting education into capabilities for work is the public employment office, which is the national authority assigned to match available competence with labour market demands. However, the confidence in the service offered by the office is very low. A majority of the graduates had not been looking for their support at all; either because they felt no need for it or because they thought it would be a waste of time. Karin, Eva, Anna and Maria actually did get in touch with the employment office, but their encounter could foremost be described as a constraining experience since no ways to overcome their hardships were proposed. A dominant experience reflected on is a reduced self-confidence as a consequence of the encounter. Karin and Eva state that, if anything, they were categorized as hopeless cases and they felt that their choice of education was questioned by the staff at the office. Furthermore, the staff seemed to lack all sorts of knowledge about their education and therefore, they did not offer any advice regarding what kind of job to apply for or what to do in order to improve their job chances:

*"I went to the employment office this winter and they were very negative. I felt very depressed. Well she (the employment office employee) said; 'There are only three relevant jobs right now and none of them suits you. It looks rather bad'. And then she questioned why I had chosen this kind of education since there were no jobs and I felt like, well, she wasn't that good at her job. I think her job is to help me realize what possibilities there are, not to be pessimistic."*  
(Eva)

### **Capability for voice**

The interviewees understanding of why they are facing problems in getting a desirable employment and what actions that should be taken to reduce the obstacles is very much in line with the view expressed by student organisations, trade unions and interest groups who more or less directly act on the behalf of students and young graduates. In that sense, the interviewees seem to have capability for voice. That their opinions count in the course of public discussion is also indicated by the fact that the issues and measures defined by these groups have been highlighted on national level, leading to political initiatives aiming at equalising the availability of "*employability promoting elements*" (RiR 2009:28). The voice of the students is also confirmed by one of the university employees interviewed who state that several of the resources that actually are in place (work place located practice course, services provided by Career Centre) are measures taken by the universities at least partly in order to meet students' requirements.

Still, to be able to convert "*employability promoting elements*" into capabilities requires that the students have knowledge about their existence and a notion of the relevance of using them. The interviewed graduates express that this was not the case. Here, the question of individual responsibility is brought to the fore. The capability approach understands people to be agents, i.e. a dignified and responsible human who critically reflects and make worthwhile life choices from alternatives that are available to her (Walker & Unterhalter 2009, p 15).

Here, it could be argued that it is the individual's responsibility to seek relevant information, but most people are quite young when they set off for university studies and it could be questioned whether it is reasonable to expect that labour market prospects would be of such interest that the students actively would look for information. This notion is also put forward by the interviewees.

*"When you get here as a 19-year old, you don't know that much about society or how the labour market works. I didn't think about it back then, but now, afterwards, I would have wanted much more information about how it works, what paths to take, what jobs you could get. There was no such information, no advice or winks about how to create a niche for oneself that could help you to move on."* (Lisa)

In the quote above, Lisa refers to some kind of nativity or light-heartedness - an attitude that most of the interviewees refer to when recalling their thoughts and emotions during their first years of studies. Another reason for not reflecting about the future is a (unconscious) conviction that a university degree more or less guarantees good job opportunities. According to some of the interviewees, taking the significance of education for granted was also reinforced by the fact that work related issues were never mentioned by teachers or other university representatives during the education: the value of education seemed self-evident from the university's perspective as well.

Age as a constraining factor regarding capability for voice is also highlighted by Maria in her experiences of encountering the employment office. After graduation, she contacted the office since she had difficulties in finding a job. At that time, she was young enough to be categorized as youth according to the employment office's definition. But the service, measures and programmes directed to "youth" are mainly addressing completely different situations compared to Marias, e.g. drop outs from compulsory school or upper secondary school. Maria tried to make her needs clear to the staff at the office but her efforts where fruitless.

*"I was defined as youth due to my age. Therefore, I was placed in the same group as people who recently left upper secondary school or even had dropped out from it. I almost felt that they offended me intellectually. ... I tried to explain that I needed support in my efforts to find a job, not a lecture in how to behave on the labour market...I asked if I could see an official in charge who worked with adults rather than youth, but that wasn't possible."* (Maria)

There were no real opportunities to negotiate the content of the measures and since the collaboration with the employment office is a prerequisite for economic benefits for those lacking other sources of income, exit was neither an option (Hirschman 1970; Bonvin & Farvaque 2006; Bonvin 2012). From Marias point of view, lowered self-confidence and mistrust regarding her competences are salient experiences connected to the general resistance she has met in her efforts to find a desirable job. The "help" offered by the employment office did not contribute with neither practical, nor emotional support – quite the opposite:

*"...for one thing, it was the practical part, that you sort of didn't get any help, and then it was the emotional part, that you were in a situation when you started to doubt whether you were as good as you thought, and I felt that they (employment office employees) added to that feeling rather than helped me to put up with it".* (Maria)

Before concluding, some final remark should be made. All the interviewees except Maria, and to some extent Lisa, state that they are pleased with their education and that they would choose the same education today despite all the uncertainties and troubles they have faced. Above all, pure educational values and ability for voice, such as personal growth, a widening intellectual horizon, ability for critical and analytic thinking, self-confidence, are aspects put forward when talking about the positive meaning of their education.

*...for my own part it has contributed incredibly much in terms of personal growth so to say, in terms of my understanding of the world and other people.” (Louise)*

Still, at the time for the interviews, the dominating perception of a valuable life among the interviewees includes university studies guided by personal interests **and** enhanced opportunities to get a desirable job. To make both ends meet raises some obstacles. The question then is what to do? Who ought to shoulder the responsibility and in what way?

## **6 Conclusions and recommendations**

Given the lack of knowledge about available resources in terms of study counselling and career advice, a possible measure would be to create an information system securing that all students are given real opportunities to make use of these services. A closer cooperation between the upper secondary education system and higher education institutions would probably be necessary. This would reduce the risk of making the wrong choice from the start. Nevertheless, making the wrong choice was not the main problem expressed by the interviewees. Instead, the expected contribution of the study- and career counselling would be to make work related aspects of the education clear, i.e. point out what kind of labour market skills and competences they achieve during their education and in what jobs these skills and competences might be useful. Perhaps the greatest challenge for universities and colleges concerning the information issue is the difficulties associated with the educational structure of single course students. Single course students are not involved in any given long-term relation with a specific provider of education (seats of learning, departments, and subjects might vary from term to term) which makes the flow of information more precarious. Consequently, the transient character and the unpredictability of the “single course route” need to be taken into account in order to enable *all* students to be real agents, to make informed choices and to shape their lives in the light of goals that matter.

Given the importance of labor market connections that are associated with good job opportunities, universities and colleges should review the form and quality of the practical features that are offered during the period of education. The interviewed graduates experience a general lack of connection between their education and working life of two interrelated kinds. First, the view is that the education includes too few and/or poorly organized practical events involving actual employer contacts and professional experience. Second, one experiences a lack of clear professional identity and understanding of the labour market contexts in which the education is useful. *Well-organized* labour market connections, such as work place located practice, are initiatives potentially attending to these problems. Furthermore, since it is argued that job opportunities increasingly depend on personal characteristics and private social networks, well organised work place located practice provided by universities and colleges could serve as a general equalising factor, enhancing the opportunities to get the necessary labour market contacts for those with less favourable conditions in terms of educational as well as social and personal resources.

Both the young graduates' perceptions as well as statements put forward by labour market representatives indicate that the labour market is characterized by an ignorance of what a general degree in disciplines not obviously associated with an occupation means. Among employers there are also statements indicating an unfavourable perception of the individuals who have a degree within this kind of education. Consequently, the current study points to a need for an increased knowledge and appreciation of these educations among employers, staff at the employment office and other labour market representatives. It also seems necessary to combat negative attitudes towards specific groups of academics. To do this, the higher education system, employers and other labour market representatives need to extend and renew their cooperation.

It could be argued that the main message conveyed in this study is a call for an equalization of opportunities between different educational paths concerning access to employability enhancing resources and conversion factors. This is an important issue, but as a final comment, I want to emphasize the risks posed by focusing on higher education as a means for work. A lot of young people study out of pure educational and personal interests and it is very likely that the single course route within less vocationally oriented subjects is the path of their choice. So far, the possibility to make this choice is quite good, but the current focus on getting a job as a given outcome of university studies is threatening this possibility. If a narrow employability perspective will unfold and further imprint the politics of higher education, the risk is that the supply of education will be governed by shortsighted labour market needs at the expense of wider social and political benefits such as personal development, enhanced civic participation etc (Walker 2009). To get these seemingly contradictory aspects together (to maintain the generous educational system providing opportunities for individuals to study out of interest (capabilities for education) and at the same time equalize the *possibilities* to transform the education into something in demanded on the labour market (capabilities for work), I think we need to make an effort to restore the value of non-vocational/"Bildung-oriented" disciplines and knowledge on the labour market and in society at large.

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