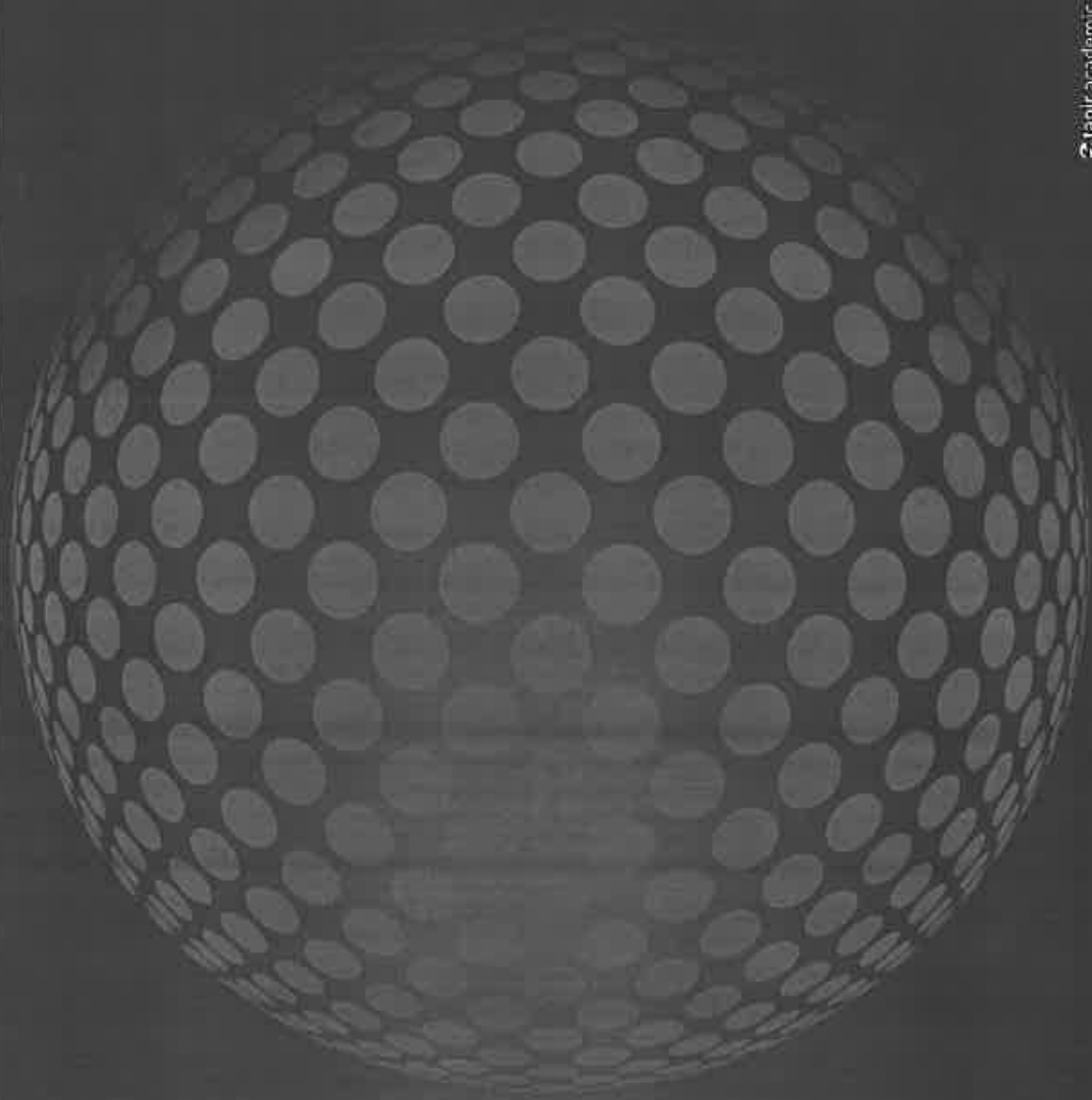


Leif M. Hokstad and Fabio Bento (Eds.)

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**Perceptions of quality
in higher education, rankings
and benchmarking**

Proceedings of Uniqua 2009

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Quality development through the graduates' perceptions and experiences

Ana Paula Cabral

Abstract

In the current *marketization* of Higher Education systems and the growing competition, institutions increasingly acknowledge the importance of assessing the graduates' satisfaction in achieving their career goals, work-relevant competencies and employer satisfaction as the starting point for the assessment of the institutional quality indicators settled in the teaching and learning process.

This paper presents a study about the graduates' perceptions and opinions of a Portuguese institution (ISPGaya – Gaya Superior Polytechnic Institute – Superior School of Social and Communitarian Development) aiming to determine the relationship between current work performance and the quality of their learning experiences in higher education. In a more specific way, we intend to characterize the academic/professional profile of the graduates; identify the main reasons for the enrolment in higher education, in the course and institution; assess the quality of the graduation course/institution according to the graduates' experience; identify the skills and abilities acquired; characterize the current professional situation; analyse the strategies and difficulties of job search; determine the association between the graduation and the employment field and identify needs of instruction.

The data were collected using a questionnaire composed of four sections: characterization; course/institution satisfaction; professional insertion and instruction needs. The outcomes allow us to emphasize some quality indicators such as quick professional (re)insertion, mainly in the area of instruction with high levels of employability, stability and professional fulfilment. On the other hand, the level of satisfaction with the quality of the course/institution may indicate the possibility of returning for attending post-graduation courses in a lifelong learning perspective.

Introduction

A major trend in Higher Education over the past decades has been the concern about institutional performance measurement based on an increasingly high governmental and societal pressure. Therefore, one outcome has been an attempt by institutions to apply industrial concepts, formulae and techniques to their management contexts. In fact, by following this industrial emphasis, institutions have been measuring their performance on the notion of quality. However, this concept is very ambiguous even in the commercial world where its synonyms range from luxury and merit to excellence and value: it can mean how well the product fits patterns of consumer preferences, the degree to which a specific product conforms to a design or specification or the level of excellence at an acceptable price and the control of variability at an acceptable cost' (Pounder, 2000).

In the commercial world, it seems that quality means different things and similarly, in the educational context, the notion is open to several interpretations depending on the perspective of the interested parties and is likely to vary with different political cultures, national traditions and education systems. In this scope, many authors oppose the idea of taking Higher Education as an example of a service industry. According to Gilroy et al (1999) there appear to be many similarities: Higher Education does offer a service to its 'customers' – the service of Education. According to Morley (2003, p. 129) "in a market economy, students are no longer perceived as recipients of welfare, but purchasers of an expensive product". On the other hand, as stated by Green (1994, p.13) "many of those currently working in higher education and grappling with the increasing pressures to demonstrate that the "product" they offer is at least as good as that offered by their competitors". However, in a climate dominated by all these managerialist tone and market discourse one important difference between service industries and Higher Education has to be made. Without, in any way, putting in question the student autonomy or their right to comment on the kind of 'service' they receive, it has to be accepted that students lack the overall understanding of their course, both its content and its underlying rationale. Moreover, students do not have a clear idea of what they are about to 'purchase' as a result of graduating from that course.

In addition, besides the gap between what a customer expects and what they are actually provided with, Parsuraman et al. (1985) identified a gap in the service provider's section of the model between what the service managers believe are their customers' expectations and what in fact those expectations actually happen to be.

According to Scriven (1996) evaluation should require some understanding of the nature and concepts of the core discipline, some analytical (not merely practical) work in more than one of the applied fields, including some competence in performing the evaluation-specific tasks, concepts and components (e.g. pedagogical skills). In fact, traditional forms of course evaluation feedback cannot support valid and effective judgements about a course if you don't join the several perspectives of the same "service", nor can they be used as a basis for planning future develop-

ments of that course. According to Gilroy et al (1999) if students' evaluation is the only criterion for evaluating the course then, in the same way as if only the course providers' views of a course were to be considered, the resulting evaluation is hopelessly biased and misinformed.

In an important sense, the service that the 'customer' seeks in higher education is prepared and developed by a whole system involved in the educational system: the administration/state, the curricula and the academics. However, we must point out the fact that students' perspective may be one of the references especially when it comes to evaluating the results of learning and teaching. Moreover, student participation in quality assurance has become widely recognized in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as Ministers declared in 2001 in Prague that students are important stakeholders on all levels and reaffirmed the importance of student participation in the 'European standards and guidelines on quality assurance' (EUA, 2007).

As stated by Hans-Uwe Erichsen (2003) quality assessment and assurance are or should be an essential part of the self-understanding of Higher Education not only based on concepts associated with how well financial support is being invested but also to guarantee the standards regarding students' expectations and their mobility, the expectations of the labour market and also of the "academic world." Therefore, embedding graduate evaluation into internal quality assurance systems can be a starting point for 'understanding the market and performance in key dimensions (to) enhance planning and promote development although taking into account the complexity and multidimensionality of the graduate's transition to employment'.

In this scope, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education's mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. In particular, the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review focused on a college's management of the student learning experience for its higher education provision also based on the need to identify students' views about their experiences as learners and to draw on these views in considering colleges' higher education provision (QAA, 2008)

According to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education standards (ENQA, 2005), an institution's information systems are expected to include, amongst other things, figures on graduate employability and student satisfaction with study programmes. In addition, graduate surveys provide valuable information on the monitoring of study programmes such as feedback from graduates, programme labour market relevance, achievement of intended learning outcomes as well as the assessment of the learning resources and student support, especially those referring to transition processes. Prades & Rodrigues (2007) state that this information is valuable for the academic institutions themselves, is key to employment services and turns to be essential to inform and guide students and graduates.

In this scope, many national level surveys have included sections such as the paid employment status, time use, adult education, barriers to adult education, helpfulness of formal education, learning skills, employment-related informal learning, learning

and work relations, labour process issues, job changes, household/family status, incomes and benefits but also dynamics of the labour market experience, school-to-work transition in terms of percentage of sample members employed and in school, number of jobs held and age at entrance into first job (Klerman & Karoly, 1995).

At the European level, the project *Careers after Higher Education: a European research study* studied the professional trajectories of graduates including some essential topics such as the proportion of unemployed, the average period for getting the first job, the average annual remuneration, the professional experience in a foreign country, the required skills (computer science, information/data collection and research, decision taking and ability to assume responsibilities), the satisfaction level with the trajectory and the current job, the personal development, the taste for knowledge and internationalization (Teichler, 2000).

In 2002, also in the European context, under the fourth European Program of the Target Socio-economical and Educational Research, the so-called Education Expansion and Labour Market developed a multidisciplinary comparative research between six European countries and the United States about students' trajectories and their relation with the development of the labour world.

In a wider approach, the *Comparative Analysis of Transitions from Education to Work in Europe Project* (Smyth, 2001) supported by the EU Educational Research Board developed a more comprehensive conceptual framework of school to work transitions in different national contexts and applied it to the empirical analysis of the transition processes across European countries.

In this scope, Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden (1997) based on the *Course Experience Questionnaire* (a development of work originally carried out at Lancaster University in the 1980s) demonstrated positive correlations with students' approaches to learning, perceived course satisfaction, academic achievement and reported generic ("enterprise") skills development. Also based on CEQ, Richardson & Kabanoff (2003) developed the *Workplace Relevance Scale* to measure course satisfaction based on five scales pertaining to Good Teaching Practices, Clear Course Goals and Standards, Appropriate Workload, Appropriate Assessment and Generic Skill. According to the collected results the graduates' judgement of the quality of their undergraduate study hinges upon the utility value of the knowledge and skills developed during their study to their current workplace.

More recently, Prades and Rodrigues (2007) developed a study in Catalunya (Spain) based on a survey to assess the graduate transition to the labour market focusing on the following key evaluation items: employment/unemployment rate, quality of employment, job functions, satisfaction with the training received, competences required, scope of practical work in the curriculum, career services, job functions and competences required.

In a general way, research suggests that the extent to which graduates attribute the success of this transition can be gauged from feedback they give regarding their experience and their employment outcomes (Richardson & Kabanoff, 2003). Overall, and according to the study developed by Menon (2002), evidence suggests that the

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satisfaction is likely to depend, to a great extent, on the perceived adequacy of his/her preparation for the labour market. In fact, Chadwick & Ward (1987) reported that the degree to which the university performed in the labour market was the strongest predictor of the student's willingness to recommend the institution to others.

Therefore, the need for changes in the professional preparation of the graduates brings the challenge of adopting new conceptions of knowledge in a more lifelong learning perspective and draws attention to the importance of developing more work-based learning programmes (Boud & Solomon, 2001), increasing vocational training (Abbott, 1999) and embedding employability into the curriculum (Yorke & Knight, 2006). On the other hand, the satisfaction ratings and the collected perceptions concerning the aims and character of their institutions provide valuable information that can be used as an alternative criterion in evaluating the effectiveness of higher education institutions (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008).

The institutional context

Gaya Superior Polytechnic Institute is a private polytechnic institute in the north of Portugal with approximately 900 students, mainly community student-workers. It was founded in 1990 to create and convey the latest science and engineering knowledge in ways that would be most useful to the society. The institution is structured into two superior schools: Social and Community Development Superior School and Science and Technology Superior School and the following graduation courses, fully adapted to the *Bologna System*.

The *curricula* have been continuously reshaped and adapted to satisfy the evolution of both students and the labour market but has remained true to its original mission of fusing academic inquiry with social needs and linking new knowledge to applications. The institution aims to promote the development of the personality of the students through a technical-scientific, socio-cultural integrated instruction.

As a higher education institution, its mission is to be fully adapted to the needs of the modern society and to the labour market, combining theory and practice. One of the institutional policies is centred on the dialogue among all the members of the educational community based on the continuous evaluation of its services.

Being aware of the urge for answers to these questions, the *Graduate Trajectories Observatory (GTO)* intends to collect and analyse information about graduates in the process of transition to active life by studying the contexts and difficulties of professional insertion, identifying the instruction gaps in order to develop support strategies.

This mission is based on the belief that a higher education institution must know the students and that this meeting must take place in the pedagogical relation and academic environment. To achieve this goal it is essential to collect data to characterize the students before, during and after their graduation and, at the same time, develop the professional skills that satisfy the work world demands.

Based on experience, the background and profile of the students (mainly student-workers from the community) tend to indicate that the students usually perceive higher education as a step for accessing different work tasks/positions, career progression and professional fulfilment.

These experiences and perceptions informally collected throughout the years is now the starting point for an institutional research line associated with quality and excellence.

Aims

The capacity to evaluate the inputs from the higher education system based on the graduate experience of the outcomes of study is the primary focus of this research with the testing of a measure of graduate perception of the relevance of their study experiences. Therefore, this study was designed to focus on the relationship between current graduate' work performance and their learning experiences in higher education. In a more specific way, the present study intends to

- characterize the academic profile of the graduates;
- point out the main reasons for enrolling and choosing the course and institution;
- assess the quality of the graduation course/institution;
- identify the abilities acquired with the perspective of preparation for the active life;
- analyse the needs for the acquisition of skills and instruction.

Methodology

The research design is based on the *Academic and Professional Trajectories Questionnaire* using closed answers so that the responses were standardized and the satisfaction with each of the issues could be assessed (Table 1).

Quality Assessment	Main reason for choosing that course	Acquisition of knowledge/personal interest; professional exits; experience in the area; professional fulfillment; useful career; payment; prestige; influence of family/friends; required average to enter; vocational tests; other
	Main reason for choosing the institution	Prestige of the institution; institution with the chosen course; schedules night/after-labour classes; location; recommendation of friends/family, other
	Course/ institution Quality Assessment	Scientific/pedagogical quality; administrative and academic services and resources, infrastructures and equipment.
	Level of competence	General/cultural knowledge, ability to work in a team, leadership/innovation, communication and critical skills
	Level of preparation for the professional life (five levels in the <i>Likert</i> scale)	
Current Professional Situation		

Table 1: Course Assessment items

The target population of the study are the graduates from the academic years from 2001 to 2006 ($N = 428$), and the sample is formed by 142 subjects/valid answers, what constitutes a return outcome of 33.1%.

Results

The collected data prove the fact that usually more than 70% of the students are student-workers attending after-labour classes. Therefore, this is the reason why issues associated with the expectations, perceptions and impact/changes in the workplace due to graduation are vital for the development of the institution as a learning reference and a professional partner for many of the region's companies and community institutions (Table 1).

Identification	
Gender and Age	The majority of the subjects are female (73.2%), with ages mainly between 25 and 29 years (54.9%).
Class Attendance Regimen and Student status	71.4% are student-workers and 75.6% attended the course in after-labour/night periods.

Table 2: Graduates' identification

2. Reasons for choosing the course and institution

Based on informally collected perceptions and experiences the first step was to determine the motivations for choosing the course and institution based on personal and professional items (Table 3).

Reasons for choosing the course and institution	
Reasons for choosing the course	Although disperse, the data indicated that 27.7% considered the possibility of getting a well-paid job, followed by the fact of having worked in the area (21.9%) or the possibility of acquiring knowledge of personal interest (15.3%), getting professional fulfilment (11.7%) or a useful job (10.2%). At the end, we find the influence of family/friends or teachers (5.8%), the professional exits (5.1%), the prestige of the course (1.5%) and other reasons (0.7%).
2. Reasons for choosing the institution	Data indicated that having the desired course and the location are the most determinant factors for the choice of this institution (both with 31.9%) followed by the schedules and attendance regimens (18.5%), the recommendation of family and friends (11.1%) and, finally, for the prestige of the institution (1.5%) and other reasons (5.2%).

Table 3: Level of Satisfaction with the course/ institution

It is easily understandable how the financial factor appears as the most important for the subjects mainly considering the current socio-economical situation and not factors as the acquisition of knowledge of personal interest or professional fulfilment. On the other hand, we have to take into consideration the fact that most of the subjects are student-workers. In fact, we can infer how a degree can represent the possibility of enjoying a different professional status and be a step towards professional fulfilment.

Moreover, this new professional opportunity is very frequently associated with a deep personal commitment towards the development of a new set of skills and opportunities and, in some cases, a new life project.

Regarding the private nature of the institution, the question of the reasons for being chosen is seen as vital for the assessment of the factors that constitute its main advantages. At this level it is relevant to point out the extent to which student-workers really need to attend mostly night/after-labour classes, close to their home and/or workplace. On the other hand, as the enrolment contexts are usually characterized by uncertainty and limited information, the role of the recommendation of family or friends or even some fellow workers, some of them attending the same institution or course, is understandable. In fact, the institutional marketing relies mainly on the informal relations/contacts that legitimize its quality and emphasize its regional strategic position.

3. Quality of the course/institution

This item assumes a central role in the assessment process as it is the epitome of the academic experience, which moves from the scientific to the administrative scopes (Table 4).

Quality of the course/institution	Five-point scale (1 = Very low and 5 = Very high quality)
The mean values indicate that the scientific and pedagogical quality has the highest scores (3.76) followed by the academic services (3.60), facilities and equipment (3.01), the Library (2.93) and, finally, the level of the global quality of the institution (3.56).	

Table 4: Quality of the course/institution

The results emphasize the satisfaction of the graduates with the scientific-pedagogical quality of the course and institution and its academic services, which, from the institutional point of view, is relevant as these are the two major pillars of the institution. The other factors were assessed with a medium level of satisfaction, which may be associated with the fact that in the institution, during their graduation process, the facilities were still limited and the infrastructures inefficient, although the situation has considerably improved since then.

of the subjects are female ages mainly between 25 and 30 years (75.6%).

75.6% of the subjects are student-workers and 75.6% attend the course in after-labour/night classes.

Institution

The first step was to assess the institution based on personal experience.

Institution
 In fact, the data indicated that the most valued aspect was the possibility of finding a job, followed by the acquisition of knowledge (21.9%), getting a degree (15.3%), getting a promotion (11.7%) or a useful experience (11.7%). In other words, we find that the most valued reasons for attending night/after-labour classes are: the recommendation of family or friends or teachers (5.1%), the possibility of getting a job (5.1%), the possibility of getting a promotion (1.5%) and other reasons (1.5%) and other reasons (1.5%).

having the desired institution are the most valued reasons for the choice of this institution (31.5%) followed by the recommendation of family or friends or teachers (21.9%), and, finally, for the possibility of getting a job (1.5%) and other reasons (1.5%).

4. Level of Competence and professional life preparation

The professional abilities and level of preparation for active life are a consequence of the new complexities and uncertainties of an economic and social environment marked by competitiveness, permanent need of innovation and where abilities and potential skills are always in demand.

Taking into consideration their experience and knowledge about the necessary skills for their personal and professional development, the graduates evaluated their instruction concerning specific content, general knowledge/culture, teamwork abilities, leadership and innovation, communication and critical abilities as the starting point for measuring their own perception of preparation for their professional life (Table 5).

Level of Competence Five-point scale (1 = Very low competence and 5 = Very high Competence)
The mean values indicate that teamwork ability is the strongest ability (3.79) followed by the development of critical abilities (3.71), communication skills (3.67), general knowledge/culture (3.62), leadership and innovation (3.59) and finally the specific content (3.57). When trying to evaluate the global level of ability a 3.74 level was achieved.
Professional Life Preparation Five-point scale (1 = Very low and 5 = Very high preparation)
The level of preparation for professional life is 3.54.

Table 5: Level of Competence and professional life preparation

The data indicate that the abilities associated with the professional activity in its relational component, namely the capacity to work in teams, is the most developed one, in fact, one of the most demanded and valued abilities in business. Afterwards, we find a set of abilities associated with personal/professional enrichment such as the development of critical spirit, communication skills, general culture and leadership and innovation that tend to have higher levels of competence than the specific content itself. What will have to be worked out is the evaluation of the course bearing in mind the adequateness of the contents/syllabuses and the effectiveness of the teaching/learning processes together with the acknowledgement of the set of skills and professional profile/experience of the students as soon as they start their academic experience.

Based on the previous analysis, we aimed to evaluate if there was an adjustment between the abilities considered to be essential for the achievement of the course objectives and for the instruction of competent, competitive, innovative and flexible professionals with a recognized professional performance and assured employability.

Therefore, according to the results the level of preparation for professional life is 3.54. Although being a very subjective indicator and changeable according to the professional area and experience, it allows us to point out the satisfying adequacy of the course to the requirements/contingencies of the work market.

5. Current Professional Situation

Employability is one of the major concerns nowadays and a decisive indicator of the quality of instruction and professional insertion effectiveness (Table 6).

Current Professional Situation
The data indicate that the great majority of the subjects are employed (87.5%), while only 4.4% are looking for the first job or unemployed and 3.7% are student-workers.

Table 6: Current Professional Situation

The analysis of the process of insertion of graduates reveals quite positive results, although we cannot forget that most of the subjects were already working during their graduation course and belong to different graduation years.

Conclusions

This study by using graduate surveys tried to assess graduates' academic experience and transition to the labour market providing clues for ways to improve the embedding of these indicators in processes involving the internal quality assurance of programmes and institutions.

One of the most relevant results relies on the meeting between the subjects' motivations and expectations towards the institution/course. In fact, the outcome of their academic experience tends to be achieved as the majority of the graduates are employed. This quality effort has come to frame a global picture of efficiency and prove the accomplishment of the objectives and educational project of the institution itself.

The graduates' perceptions concerning the quality of the institution can also provide valuable information and help to point out the potential areas of improvement, namely in the field of envisioning learning and instruction as privileged sources for personal and professional outcomes concerning the access to knowledge, the widening of perspectives and interests and self-positioning in the global market.

In order to increase the quality of the "educational service" we emphasize the need to fully integrate the three key elements involved in the process of graduate transition

to the labour market: defining and reviewing programme specifications in order to bring the graduates' work expertise into the class environment, practical work in the curriculum as a source of experience exchange and designing and evaluating actions that promote the transition from higher education to the labour market, specially strengthening the ties and setting bridges.

Moreover, a set of regulation and intervention strategies has to be undertaken combining the outcomes of these assessment initiatives with the institutional projects, always meeting the different perspectives and contexts. In fact, a great investment has still to be done on the development of other assessment tools and methodologies that involve not only the students but also the administration, the community and employers.

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