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# **The role of Universities' Career Services in improving the “skills match” between new graduates and employers: an international benchmarking**

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## INTRODUCTION

The opening argument of this thesis is that the new corporate trends and imperatives are shaping the skills that managers and employees need in order to allow companies to stay competitive in the current world. This new set of skills mainly refers to “soft skills”; differently from technical skills which are job-specific, soft skills include personal and interpersonal abilities that are transferable across different types of job and enhance the employability of individuals and, consequently, their chance to gain employment and to succeed in the job career.

In particular employers from all over the world are seeking talented new graduates equipped with this new set of skills but, at the same time, they think that today’s graduates are not ready for the world of work, and they are complaining about a “skills gap” in this population, mainly concerning soft skills. The presence of this gap between employers’ skills requirements and the skills owned by new graduates is the main issue tackled by this thesis.

There are three main participants contributing to the development of graduates’ employability or “work readiness”, including soft skills: the graduate him or herself, the university and the employer. However, universities are the primary responsible of the development of employability in their students, that means preparing them for the world of work and helping them with the transition into the labor market; in particular universities’ career services have a predominant role in this field.

Career services all over the world have been established with the primary purpose of directly connecting students and graduates with employers increasing their chance for employment, and in order to give incentives for reinventing the academic curriculum according to the professionalism and skills’ requirements of the corporate world, leading in turn to an enhanced students’ employability and thus to an easier transition of fresh graduates into the labor market. Moreover, from the employers’ perspective, career services represent the main channel through which obtaining a good match between their requirements and graduates’ profiles.

In the current years, higher education’s career services have to acknowledge the changing nature of their role, given the current trends in the labor market, and adopt innovative practices for improving graduates’ employability and, consequently, employment.

This work is principally aimed at providing interesting insights to the Cà Foscari’s Career Service in order to reinvent its practices for improving graduates’ employability and soft skills, and consequently the match between employers’ requirements and graduates’ profiles, overcoming the skills gap’s perception.

At this purpose, the main tools used in this thesis are a survey provided to employers connected with the Cà Foscari’s Career Service in order to obtain useful suggestions from the corporate world, and an international benchmarking conducted among the best universities’ career services all over the world, in particular in the USA, the UK and Italy, according to some international rankings and

references provided by some national associations, in order to take the cue from their activities and services offered.

The first chapter talks about the increasing importance of “soft skills” in today’s workplaces, starting from the description of the main trends that are shaping companies’ ways of doing business from the beginning of the new millennium and, consequently, the skills requested by employers in their employees and managers, focusing on those requested in today’s fresh graduates for internship or entry-level job positions. The theme of graduates’ employability is introduced, along with the contribution of soft skills in its development.

A review of the international literature in this field is made in order to create a list of the top ten soft skills employers look for in new graduates. Moreover the issue of the “skills gap” in graduates population and its possible causes is presented, highlighting the responsibilities of the three different subjects involved in its creation, the graduate himself/herself, the university and the employer.

The second chapter deals with the theme of universities’ career services and their fundamental role in preparing students for the world of work and supporting fresh graduates’ transition into the labor market, being the actual intermediary between the academic and the corporate world.

The chapter explains the historical and technological evolution of career services in higher education, focusing in particular in the USA, the UK and the Italian scenarios. For what concerns Italy, the case of the Cà Foscari University’s Career Service is presented, with an emphasis on its efforts at developing students’ employability and matching graduates’ profiles with employers’ recruiting needs.

The third chapter has the purpose of providing interesting insights and suggestions to the Cà Foscari’s Career Service, but also to all universities in Italy and around the world, through the analysis of the best practices in the employability field put in place by the best career services worldwide according to some respected national and international rankings and national associations.

The chapter contains an analysis of the practices described in the career services’ websites, along with the information received by email or Skype from some career services’ representatives that have been available to conduct an interview.

The fourth and conclusive chapter is intended to recap the best practices listed in the previous chapter and reports the interviews made to the Director and the Representative of the Cà Foscari’s Career Service in order to evaluate the feasibility of those practices inside it.

Companies’ suggestions for improving the academic world, and in particular for reinventing its practices aimed at developing students’ employability, have been collected through a dedicated survey and listed at the end of the chapter, in order to offer to the Career Service other useful insights coming from its network of companies.

# CHAPTER 1. The skill gap between employers' requirements and higher education's outputs

## 1.1. A changing working environment and the new skills requirements

The trends that are revolutionizing today's business environment from almost the beginning of the new millennium and that have consequently transformed employers' requirements regarding their workforce's skills, needed to maintain companies<sup>1</sup> competitive, have been recognized from many authors to be essentially these following six:

- **Advances in technologies:** We have entered a digital era in which automation, robots and artificial intelligence have substituted a lot of job profiles within organizational functions, and the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has made life easier, speeding communication and information sharing across the world, transforming today's workplaces.
- **Globalization:** It has facilitated production opportunities in foreign countries making outsourcing and integration of supply chain cheaper. National boundaries are becoming meaningless and almost no company restricts its business operations to them, also thanks to the development in technologies like Internet and the modern transportation systems.
- **Culturally diverse workforce:** In today's globalized markets there is a free flow of people across countries and cultures; students and graduates get overseas placement and young executives constantly move abroad for international assignments or between subsidiaries of multinational companies. For all these reasons workforce has become more heterogeneous.
- **Team-based organizational structures:** the majority of organizations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are run by teams<sup>2</sup> to successfully carry out activities that involve different organizational functions and expertise.
- **Speed of change:** Rapid changes in technology and competitive conditions force organizations to adapt quickly to them.
- **Flatter organizational structures:** To cope with the increasing complexity and the speed of change in the business environment, organizations have become leaner and levels of managerial hierarchy have been reduced.

Because of these factors of change, some ingredients have been added in the recipe of success in

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation the terms company and organization are used to express the same concept and stand for firms or businesses.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the result of a survey conducted by Fortune 1000 companies, in which 83% of them made use of teams (Bardia, 2010).

every organization: a new set of skills that must be present or developed in the workforce, the so-called “soft skills”, that will be analyzed in greater detail in the next paragraph (Bardia, 2010, Sensenig, 2009, Dutta, 2008). Soft skills comprise personal and interpersonal qualities<sup>3</sup>, in contrast to the “hard skills” that include the job-specific technical-professional expertise and knowledge (Robles, 2012).

Many authors have tried to analyze the new skills needed by employees, in particular as regards managerial positions, in the contemporary workplaces with a global perspective.

First of all, with the impact of the digitalization in the workplace and, consequently, the increasing automation of functions and job profiles, “reskilling” and adaptability should be the key words of the workforce’ skills revolution, because it will be essential for the organization to leverage inimitable human soft skills for all those activities which will still rely on human capital. In this way people strong in soft skills will avoid the loss of the job and companies will create value added through human potential. In fact, skills like creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership and rapport buildings cannot be easily substituted by robots and computers and can help creating a competitive advantage for the organization (Rusconi, 2017).

As Robert Kent, former Dean of Harvard Business School, said, “In business, communication is everything.”, Bardia (2010) argues that the most important skills for today’s workplaces are communication skills, because the trends listed before have increased business complexity and have linked a company’s success to the ability of its managers and employees to communicate effectively with each other and with external subjects who constantly interact with the company, such as customers and suppliers all over the world.

Communication skills and systems, in particular intercultural communication (Dutta, 2008), allow an organization, that act in a global environment, to receive and send messages and information in a proper and clear manner, overcoming all the barriers (cultural, spatial, temporal, etc.) and they allow culturally diverse work teams to interact effectively with each other overcoming cultural barriers to reach the common organizational goals.

With the advancement in technology, communication is becoming quicker, easier and pervasive, requiring employees with stronger communication technology skills; at last, with flatter organizations and less managerial levels, managers and employees must communicate with a higher number of people and, for this reason, must have substantial communication skills. In particular, the use of smart communication is preferred in today’s organizations, which requires employees to communicate effectively and also in the minimum time and less words possible, to keep up with the pace of change, complexity and the increasingly larger business network.

To cope with the challenges brought by globalization, cultural intelligence is another essential attribute for employees, in particular those occupying managerial positions, working in companies

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<sup>3</sup> Interpersonal qualities are also called people skills, that refer to the ability to relate and interact well with others (Oxford Dictionaries).

involved in some kind of international business, because it serves as a facilitator for intercultural interactions. Cultural intelligence can be seen as an individual's dynamic attribute, developed mainly through work/life experience in multicultural team/groups, that results in the capability to adapt to new cultural setting. Together with emotional intelligence, it facilitates individuals to work in a diverse cultural situation (Simpson, 2016).

Sensenig (2010) talks about five essential skills that employees must have to be fit for this changing global environment, in addition to the implied adaptability: the first is communication that is essential to effectively share information between people, as explained before; rapport building is also needed, given the importance of human relationships and networks in today's business environment, followed by conflict resolution because complexity and challenges gives rise to tension between workers; and the last are curiosity and ambition, which represent personal attitudes that become skills when applied in an effective way, driving the necessary change and reaching established objectives.

Other authors, such as Carnevale and Smith (2013), state that skills requirements of the world economic system has changed with the shift from the industrial era to the post-industrial era of the knowledge economy<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the traditional competition based on the mass-production of standardized products and services selling them at low prices has been replaced by a new competitive formula based on differentiation and value added creation. For the two authors the new competitive standards, and the relative skills needed to reach them, are:

- **Productive investment:** In the current knowledge economy, productivity is pursued through investments in the synergies between a new set of human skills and technology.
- **Quality:** It is valued by customers and it requires a series of new skills ranging from technical-professional competencies to the willingness and ability to take responsibility for the final product or service.
- **Variety:** To satisfy an increasing diversified demand, both domestic and global, variety within products/services selection is required and it is achieved thanks to flexible workers equipped with creativity and problem solving skills.
- **Customization and convenience:** Contrary to standardization, customization of products and services requires interpersonal, listening and communication skills that allow workers to empathize with customers' wants and needs, providing them with the convenience they look for.
- **Speed and continuous innovation:** These competitive requirements involve the ability to rapidly produce new ideas for improving products and services and the ability to deal with change.
- **Social responsibility:** Today's consumers want to satisfy certain needs that go beyond the material sphere, more connected with their values; thus, associating some values with a particular brand can make the difference in the competitive arena.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "knowledge economy" refers to an economy in which growth is dependent on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the information available, rather than the means of production (Oxford Dictionaries).

To recap, the contemporary knowledge economy has thus developed flexible technologies that requires workers who are technically prepared but equipped with a new set of skills in order to adapt to changing requirements on the job, in addition to interpersonal skills because of an higher customization required on products and services, and the high quantity of human interactions involved.

To conclude, the advancement in technology, the globalization of markets and the relative changes in the organizations' structures and daily operations have changed the work environment of today's corporations, leading to an increasing demand of a combination of technical knowledge and skills with a new set of soft skills in the recruitment and selection process of the workforce. Some skills have been recognized as very important or essential by the authors cited before: communication skills and adaptability above all, cultural intelligence, interpersonal skills, problem solving and so on. What they have in common is that all of them fall into the category of the soft skills.

Soft skills can be also called "21<sup>st</sup> century skills", an age in which the economy has become fast-paced and networked, with less job security and consequently higher labor mobility, and in which organizations and individuals are engaged in continuous improvement for attracting talents and increasing employability respectively (McLarty and Dousios, 2006). We will see in the next paragraph that both "talent acquisition" and "employability" are terms strongly related with the concept of soft skills.

### **1.1.1. The difference between hard skills and soft skills**

There are some difficulties linked to the definition of the term "skill". In the Oxford Dictionary "skill" is defined as the "*ability to do something well*", meaning that holding a particular skill involves performing a specific activity or task better than others, thus the term embraces the ideas of competency<sup>5</sup> and proficiency. In fact, the famous organizational theorist Richard Boyatzis uses the term competency to talk about skills, defining competency as an "*underlying characteristic of the person that leads to effective or superior performance.*" (Boyatzis, 2008).

Some authors further distinguish between skills and abilities, defining the latter as the generic characteristics and capacities that a person acquire at early stages of his/her life and then developed over time, allowing the individual to acquire a skill (Carnevale and Smith, 2013); but the two terms are commonly considered synonyms.

Skills have been distinguished by management theorist into cognitive skills, if the accomplishment of the related tasks involves reasoning, and manual skills, if physical dexterity is required to perform the tasks, thus creating the distinction between low-skilled work and high-skilled work.

Differently, psychologists tend to classify skills in terms of their economic value, that is directly proportional to the amount of time needed to acquire that particular skill (McLarty and Dousios,

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<sup>5</sup> Competency is a synonym of skill and refers to the ability to do something successfully and efficiently (Oxford Dictionaries). In this dissertation the terms skill, ability and competency are indifferently used.

2006).

Considering the recruiters' perspective, skills are a set of behavioral attributes and abilities that an individual bring to the organization, and that can be distinguished into two types: hard skills and soft skills (Mishra, 2014).

Hard skills includes all the technical-professional abilities and domain knowledge necessary to accomplish a task or activity, involving the use of equipment, devices, software, data and so on. For this reason they can be defined with the term "technical skills". They are job-specific and they can be taught, learned and perfected over time in addition to be quantified and measured, being closely related to the task performed. Hard skills comprise all the achievements that appear in a curriculum vitae, such as education and work-related knowledge and expertise; some examples are writing, reading and the ability to use software programs (Robles, 2012).

Soft skills, also called "transversal competencies", are a collection of personality-specific skills including traits, attitude, behaviors and talents brought by an individual to the organization, increasing its productivity. Thus, they refer more to who we are, rather than what we know. They are generic in nature (that is not job-specific) and for this reason they are strategic to good performance across all types of jobs. Given their subjective root, they cannot be easily thought, acquired, changed over time or measured like hard skills. Soft skills are continually developed through practical application in everyday life and they are called "soft" exactly because of their flexible nature in terms of learning and delivering (Robles, 2012; Mishra 2014).

There are many definition of soft skills; most authors have divided them into interpersonal or people skills and personal attributes or, again, into interpersonal skills, that involve the ability to handle interactions with others, and intrapersonal skills, that refer to the ability to manage oneself (Robles, 2012, Laker & powell, 2011); sometimes they are defined as survival skills in organizations, differentiators that make people gain a competitive advantage over others, and behavioral aspects relevant both in personal and professional life (Deepa & Seth, 2013).

Both types of skills are essential for organizational success in addition to employees' personal growth. For example even if an employee has all the technical knowledge and abilities to perform well his tasks but he misses the necessary communication skills to negotiate with his customers, this will negatively affect both personal and company's performance.

The use of soft and hard skills depends highly on the type of job position: lower level workers need to own more hard skills rather than soft skills, middle level employees should own a balanced set of both types, and at higher levels, such as at managerial levels, people should rely mostly on their soft skills (Rao, 2010). However there is an increasing awareness that hard, or technical skills, are not sufficient for succeeding in job performance even with regard to technical positions, considering all types of profession fields; in fact, job success highly depends on the ownership, acquisition or development of soft skills like self-management, leadership, conflict resolution and so on. (Laker and Powell, 2011).

In the past hard skills were the essence of human capital and they have been considered the only

skills necessary for employment for decades, but as the world has changed, also the skills required for the contemporary job profiles has changed. Some studies<sup>6</sup> found that 75% of an individual's job success depended on soft skills, in particular people skills, and only 25% on hard skills.

In fact, organizations need employees with strong interpersonal skills that allow them to interact adequately with the external world of customers, suppliers and government, and to be collaborative with colleagues, in particular when working in team.

Even a survey conducted by Harvard University confirmed this theory, stating that 80% of achievements in careers are determined by soft skills (Deepa and Seth, 2013). As a proof of this theory, Deepa and Seth (2013) have analyzed a lot surveys conducted among recruiters showing that successful managers in terms of speed of promotion are those with higher networking skills than average managers, and effective managers in terms of job performance and satisfaction of their subordinates and coworkers are those with superior communication skills. Other researchers found that in IT companies projects have failed mainly due to the lack of soft skills in their employees, in particular customer-focused soft skills, rather than a lack of technical skills.

Soft skills represent that specific part of the employability skills which is transferable in and applicable to many professional fields , jobs and activities (Robles, 2012). In general, “employability skills” are a set of skills that makes an individual employable, that is suitable for work (Oxford Dictionaries). Mishra (2014) defines them as the skills needed to get a job, to excel in terms of performance and succeed in the career path, so they must include for sure soft skills, but also all the fundamental hard skills, such as basic academic knowledge and work-related knowledge, needed for a completely satisfactory professional life.

### **1.1.2. The increasing request for soft skills in the recruiting and selection process of companies around the world**

Employers from all over the world and any type of business sector are constantly looking for candidates equipped with the right set of skills, both technical and transversal, which may contribute to the growth, competitiveness and success of their company. Being closely related to knowledge, skills are an essential ingredient for innovation and technological progress within the organizations and consequently for the economy as a whole (McLarty and Dousios, 2006).

Usually the recruitment and selection process starts with the definition of the ideal candidate, that refers to the potential applicant with the right set of skills who would be best suited for the job (Velasco, 2011).

Today employers seem to take for grant the presence of high skills endowment in a candidate and to give greater importance to soft skills during the selection of candidates, in particular for management

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<sup>6</sup> Studies conducted by Stanford research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs (Deepa, Seth, 2013).

positions. In addition to their transversal applicability and all their good qualities cited before, the principal argument in support of their importance is that soft skills are considered a predictor of excellent performance in the corporate world (Rao, 2010); in fact, people with developed soft skills are more likely to handle the challenging pressures that they will face in the workplace and business environments of today. Moreover, given that soft skills are difficult to acquire and to teach, and considering also the difficulties in soft skills “training transfer”, that is the extent to which what is learned during training is applied on the job, employers are more inclined to hire people who are already proficient in this type of skills (Laker and Powell, 2011). In particular SMEs highly value transferable skills when selecting future employees because, unlikely larger corporations, they are less willing to provide training or specific graduate development programs, preferring rather to hire people that could give an immediate contribution to the company (Velasco, 2011).

Comparing the results of a series of international researches in this field<sup>7</sup>, in general, the four most requested soft skills in today’s workplace have resulted to be:

- **Communication skills:** the ability to transfer idea and information.
- **Interpersonal skills:** the ability to build relationships.
- **Teamwork skills:** the ability to work in team.
- **Problem-solving skills:** the ability to find solutions to problems and solve conflicts.

In fact, researches undertaken in the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries show that employers highly value communication and interpersonal skills more than others, because they are a good predictor of the ability of an individual to cooperate with colleagues and offer a great customer service, both critical for the company’s overall business performance and success (Robles, 2012, Deepa and Seth, 2013).

These four skills derived by empirical researches made in the recruitment market confirm the skills cited in the first paragraph, considered essential by many authors for the new work environment.

## **1.2. Soft skills importance for graduates’ employability and employment**

Focusing on the young graduates<sup>8</sup> who enter in the labor market after their university career path, this paragraph will analyze in greater detail the specific employability skills that this type of candidates need to be attractive in the labor market and ultimately gain employment.

In general “employability” could be defined as a set of achievements (skills, knowledge, personal attributes, etc.) which increase an individual’s chance to get employed and be successful in the job career. In short, it refers to graduates attributes that will help them to get, retain and develop in a job

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7 Carnevale et al., 1990 ; Mitzenberg, 1994 ; Harvey et al., 1997 ; Obliger et al., 1998 ; Caudrin, 1999 ; Bill, 2004 ; Johnson, 2006 ; Jhon, 2009 (as cited by Mishra, 2014), Robles, 2012 ; Deepa, Seth, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Here the term “graduate” refers indifferently to Bachelor and MSc.

(Harvey and Knight, 2005). In fact, the concept of employability is different from that of obtaining employment because an individual can be employable but still not employed; it simply means that he or she is more likely to gain employment. Considering also the fact that the “massification” of higher education have increased the number of graduates without being accompanied by a proportional increase in the number of graduate job positions, employability has become a resource less scarce and so less valuable, diminishing the chance even for employable graduates to find a job (Artess and Mellors-bourne, 2017).

Harvey (2003) defines the graduate’s employability as a learning process which enables the learner to develop critical thinking and reflective abilities, enhancing his or her attractiveness in the labor market and, subsequently, enabling him or her to progress within a job career. Harvey says: “*Employability is more than about developing attributes, techniques or experience just to enable a student to get a job, or to progress within a current career. It is about learning...In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner.*”

Thus, graduate’s employability is not only composed by skills, both hard and soft, but also values, qualities, behaviors that, all together, make effective his or her transition into the labor market.

A review of the literature about graduates’ employability from 2012 to 2016 shows that the elements that make graduates more employable are soft skills; so we can state that soft skills largely contribute to enhance graduates’ employability (Artess and Mellors-Borne, 2017).

To have a clearer concept of graduate’s employability, that will be adopted in this thesis, the following elements contribute to its development (Andrews and Higson, 2008):

- **Hard skills:** technical/professional skills such as foreign languages, numeracy, the disciplinary expertise, digital skills.
- **Soft skills:** personal and interpersonal transversal skills
- Work experience and other life **experiences** relevant for the job

In their useful study about graduates’ employability skills, Ipate et al. (2014) prove that both in the review of the whole literature on the subject and in the advertisement material developed by employers worldwide, soft skills result to be more important in the hiring decision than hard skills.

We have by far surpassed the era in which a degree and the relative grade themselves were enough, associated with the name and the reputation of the university, for enhancing the employability of an individual, but today employers are looking for more sophisticated attributes when recruiting young graduates. As an evidence, Ivan Charner, director of Research and development at the National Institute for Work and Learning in Washington, in 1998 wrote that employers, during the hiring process of young graduates, relied mostly on credentials, the documents containing information about the educational path, the working experiences and the knowledge acquired by the candidate; however, Charner said, graduates could have engaged in many other activities during their life acquiring some

important skills that could be a predictor of their future job performance, as for example being responsible or working cooperatively with others.

Already in the far 19<sup>th</sup> century, some scholars wrote that certificates were not able to show all the qualities of candidates that employers were looking for in addition to basic education skills. In fact, the two authors said that employers, when selecting graduates for entry-level jobs, looked at personal qualities such as interpersonal skills and work-related behavior deducted from past performances. Even more so today a certificate as the diploma cannot be used as the screen for individual skills because it does not provide the whole picture of the employability or marketable skills of an individual that allow him or her succeeding successfully in the work environment. Credentials such as good academic grades matter more in the public sector (Charner, 1998; Velasco, 2011).

Within profit-maximizing companies, graduates are selected on the basis of their human capital, which the economist Gary Becker has defined as the stock of knowledge and skills that contributes to the individual's productivity and that, consequently, enters the company's production function. Commonly, the graduate recruitment and selection process is composed by two phases: in a first time employers evaluate the information contained in the CV to decide which job applicant is suited for the interview. In this phase the main challenge for employers is that human capital is not totally observable, and so they must rely on credentials. The second phase is the job interview, during which employers try to find out and assess candidate's skills to make the final hiring decision.

To prove which type of skills mainly contribute to determine the graduate's employability and, consequently, the final hiring decision, Humburg and Van Der Velden (2015) from the Research Centre for Education and Labour Market of the Maastricht University, conducted an experiment consisting in an online survey among 903 employers in different European countries<sup>9</sup>, finding out that employers prefer selecting graduates for the job interview on the basis of the occupation-specific human capital observable in the CV content, such as the coherence between the job requirements and the field of study and work experience. The importance assigned to these hard skills reflects employer's expectation that graduates endowed with professional or technical expertise will need a shorter adjustment period on the job and less training. Subsequently, the researchers have discovered that, after the second phase, employers prefer hiring graduates with higher interpersonal skills, assessed during the interview. Thus, the final hiring decision results to be influenced by the presence of a specific set of soft skills in the candidate.

Substantially, these results and those of many others researches show that hard skills are necessary for the first selection phase that is the CV screening, in order to get an interview, but graduates need to demonstrate their soft skills endowment during the interview phase to get employed (Robles, 2012).

Many studies in this field affirm that employers consider soft skills, in particular interpersonal,

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<sup>9</sup> Employers belonged to seven occupational fields (engineering, ICT, financial services, media and communication, policy and organization, and legal services) and nine European countries (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom).

communication and teamwork skills, as a crucial element when selecting graduates for entry-level positions, in addition to a good level of technical, work-related skills necessary for the job position. Referring to the young graduates' population, Harvey and Knight (1996) say: "*Employers are not looking for trainees but people equipped to learn and deal with change.*", and soft skills equip people with this kind of abilities. According to Carnevale and Smith (2013) the ability to "know how to learn", in fact, is a particular type of soft skill that allow people to easily achieve other more work-related skills, keeping up with the speed of change and the challenges in the modern workplaces.

Currently, an important challenge that employers must face when selecting graduates is represented by the increasing qualification of the available pool of candidates; in fact, the "massification" of the higher education has expanded the number of graduates worldwide, even in developing countries such as China and India, making more difficult for employers the identification of talents from the crowd, that is assessing which candidate could actually bring value to the organization (Velasco, 2011). However with globalization and the increased mobility of graduates across all the world, competitiveness within the graduate recruitment market has increased, thus employers have a higher pool of talents from which to choose (Andrews and Higson, 2008).

In such a globalised world, another particular concern expressed by employers of the most developed countries is the fact that less developed countries such as China and India have access to a copious and cheap supply of low skilled labor and, at the same time, are producing an increasing number of graduates each year, gaining access also to an high-level skilled workforce at lower wages. Thus, corporations of developed countries, such as US, UK and Australia, must develop new strategies of employer branding to attract and retain young talents who are adequately skilled to add value, sustain change and enhance innovation, in order to remain competitive in this global business scenario (Jackson, 2010).

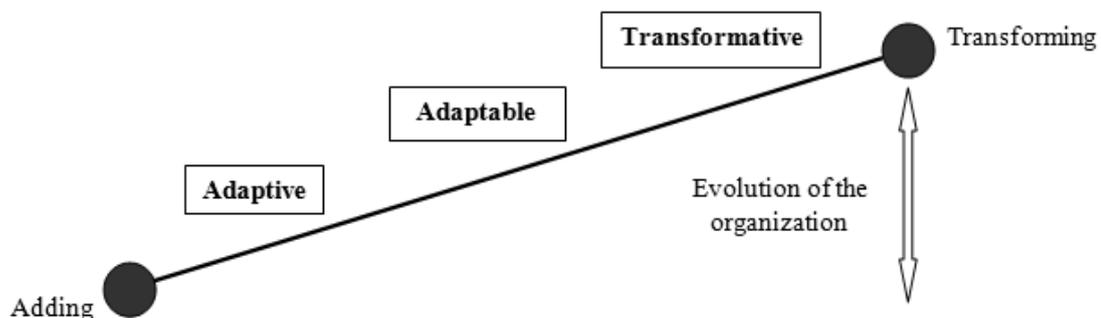
The importance of recruiting and selecting graduates with the right skills could be summarized by a sentence of J. Willard Marriot Jr., executive chairman of the American multinational Marriot International, who has underlined that his nation's long term ability to succeed in the growing global marketplace rely on the abilities of today's students (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006).

### **1.2.1. What employers want from modern graduates: the most requested soft skills**

Diverting the attention from the core hard skills that graduates need in their portfolio to be more employable, today's employers are looking for young individuals who are able to cope with a changing world. The most important skills that employers value in a graduate candidate are a set of interactive attributes such as interpersonal skills, team working, communication skills, and personal attributes such as multitasking, willingness to learn, flexibility and adaptability. The reality is that these attributes are more present in graduated rather than non graduated candidates, aside from the field of studies.

In essence, employers want adaptive, adaptable and transformative graduates inside their organizations: adaptive people are able to fit-in to organizational culture, bringing their personal skills and knowledge into the organization; adaptable people know how to learn increasing their skills and knowledge endowment in order to use it in face of change; people of transformative type use high level skills to facilitate innovative teamwork. These definitions do not represent distinct types of people, rather, employees of the right type must be able to assume all of these roles depending on the requirements of the situation, allowing the organization to evolve and grow. As the following figure shows, employees are expected to move along the employability continuum, from adaptation, simply adding their skills and knowledge to the organization, to shaping the organizational environment (Harvey, 2003).

**Figure 1.1: Employability continuum**



Source: Harvey, 2003

A synthetic list of the most requested soft skills in modern graduates, regardless of the level of the degree (undergraduate or graduate) and the academic background, can be derived from some national and international studies undertaken by the authors shown below during the last ten years, that confirms also the competences listed in the paragraph 1.1.2.

In 2006 a joint effort made by four US organizations<sup>10</sup>, *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, showed that employers looked mostly at communication skills, teamwork, work ethic and problem-solving when selecting graduates from any academic discipline (Brooks and Calkins, 2014).

Referring to business graduates, Andrews and Higson (2008) made a research across four European<sup>11</sup> countries, finding out that all employers agreed to prefer hiring graduates with strong communication skills, teamwork and innovative thinking. An interesting discovery made by the two authors is that, even if employers consider hard core business skills as an essential element in graduates' portfolio, high level of discipline-specific knowledge is insufficient by itself because graduates have to

<sup>10</sup> Among which: The Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resource Management.

<sup>11</sup> UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania.

communicate such knowledge in an effective way to get employed. This is an evidence of the fact that hard skills without the simultaneous presence of soft skills are insufficient for yielding graduates employability. Moreover, as explained before, employers prefer hiring graduates with strong soft skills that make easier for these individuals to learn quickly the other job-specific hard skills, still not present in their expertise, and providing them with ad hoc trainings. To better highlight this concept the CEO of The Association of Graduate Recruiters stated: “*Employers are looking for a reasonable level of skills to be further developed and the potential to develop those skills.*” (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005).

In 2007 Cleary and Fichtner study reported the skills requested in graduates of liberal arts by employers in New Jersey, finding that communication and adaptability skills were the most wanted.

In 2008 Holtzman and Kraft sent a survey packet to 145 employers in New Jersey asking them what were the most appreciated skills in business graduates, finding that communication skills were the most requested, followed by specific business knowledge (Holtzman and Kraft, 2011). This is an evidence of the fact that communication skills, in addition to be considered the most important soft skills for almost all employers worldwide, are also strongly transversal because they are requested in all types of graduates and in any occupational field.

In the same year Maxwell et al. (2010) found that employers connected with the MSc in HRM at Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland highly valued communication and problem solving skills.

In 2009 a survey was distributed by the scholars Brooks and Calkins among US employers of business graduates, receiving 831 useful answers confirming that the most valued skills were communication skills, interpersonal skills and work ethic.

In 2012, the already cited experiment conducted by Humburg and Velden found that interpersonal skills, which in this experiment included the ability to cooperate and communicate with others, were an essential requisite for the selection of graduates from many disciplines in 9 European countries (see note n.10).

A survey conducted in 2013 by Finch et al. among Canadian employers found that the most important skills for enhancing marketability of young graduates from any discipline were communication skills, work ethic, interpersonal skills and problem-solving. Coming back to Europe, always in 2013 three authors (Teijeiro, Rungo and Freire) showed that Spanish employers assigned great importance to problem-solving, responsibility and ability to learn. (Brooks and Calkins, 2016)

In 2015 the Business School Escp Europe has conducted a survey among almost 100 recruiters from 51 companies, asking them what kind of soft skills they look for in business graduates; the results shows that communication, teamwork, creativity and the ability to learn are the most requested skills (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2015)

In 2016 The University of Aberdeen in Scotland grouped together 45 employers of their network in an dedicated event in which they were asked to choose the most important graduates’ attributes from a list of 19 attributes and to arrange them into a hierarchy. The activity showed that the most frequently

selected attributes were the ability to communicate effectively for different purposes and in different contexts. In addition to communication, the others preferred attributes were team working and adaptability. Also the learning ability and personal development attributes were highly valued (Phoenix, 2016).

An interesting study that contributes to this analysis has been undertaken by three Romanian researchers (Ipate et al. 2014) who have made a synthesis of some worldwide surveys conducted from 1994 to 2012<sup>12</sup> about soft skills' importance in the graduates' selection process, creating a list of the 15 most required soft skills in this type of graduates. The three authors have then conducted a survey among 121 Romanian organizations asking their representatives to rank the importance they gave to each skill of the list in the context of the recruitment and selection process of economics graduates; in order of importance, the top five skills were: assuming responsibilities, goal orientation, communication skills, ability to work under pressure and teamwork.

Another important contribution is represented by an international study conducted by Denise Jackson (2010), who have created a list of skills, both hard and soft, with their generic definition, summarizing many sources, of no more than ten years before, derived only from employers' opinion (from any industry) about the most important competences sought in modern graduates (from any discipline) in the USA, Australia and the UK. The most important insight for this analysis is that the list of soft skills derived by Jackson includes all the skills listed before (only goal orientation is not cited), adding other important ones that deserve to be cited, given their coherence with the requirements of modern work environments and the international compass of this study:

- Decision management: making decisions in complex situations using available information.
- Critical thinking: thinking rationally, logically and coherently.
- Organizational skills: the ability to plan, coordinate and organize work, and the ability to manage time effectively.
- Lifelong learning: constantly seeking additional knowledge.
- Cultural and diversity management: the ability to learn from and work collaboratively with diverse people, in terms of race, culture, religion, age, gender, lifestyles and viewpoints.
- Emotional intelligence: it includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management.

To summarize all the findings, the following list represents the top requested soft skills in modern graduates by employers worldwide for all types of job occupation; the listed top ten soft skills, with their respective definition (Jackson, 2010), are those appearing more frequently, at least two times, in the studies cited before and are ordered on the basis of their importance (citation's frequency):

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<sup>12</sup> For instance the OECD Survey conducted in 2001 and the PricewaterhouseCoopers' Survey conducted in 2012.

1. **Communication skills (written and oral):** the ability to transmit information and ideas through clear and structured written texts and through effective presentational speaking.
2. **Team-working:** the ability to work constructively with others on a task
3. **Interpersonal skills:** the ability to relate well to and cooperate with others.
4. **Work ethic (or professionalism):** conscientiousness and ability to work efficiently.
5. **Problem solving:** the ability to analyze facts and use information to make decisions in order to solve practical problems.
6. **Ability to learn (or intellectual ability):** intellectual openness, flexibility and curiosity.
7. **Assuming responsibility (or accountability):** accepting responsibility for making decisions.
8. **Creativity and innovative thinking:** having originality and inventiveness in work.
9. **Adaptability and flexibility:** adapting to different situations and being flexible and open to new ideas and possibilities.
10. **Ability to work under pressure (or stress tolerance):** performing effective work under pressure.

### 1.2.2. An evidence from Cà Foscari Career Service's surveys

On the occasion of the Career Day 2013, The Cà Foscari's Career Service has involved a panel of 40 companies connected with its activities and services asking them, being active recruiters and employers of graduates, a feedback regarding the most preferred soft skills that should appear in the graduates' CV and in particular during the individual or group interview. The survey has been conducted in order to enhance the activities and services of work orientation for students and graduates. The results of the survey show that the three main requested competences were, in order of decreasing importance:

1. **Flexibility or adaptability** (66%);
2. **Problem Solving** (60%);
3. **Communication and interpersonal skills** (57%).

Another study has been conducted by the Cà Foscari Career Service on the occasion of the Career Day 2015, involving the opinion of 200 national and international companies about the ideal candidate's profile, always referring to the graduates' target. With this study, the Career Service's intention was to increase students and graduates' employability, giving them useful information for guiding them into the labor market.

The resulting ranking of the soft skills that make a graduate more attractive for employment, on the basis of companies' representatives' answers, was the following:

- **Initiative and flexibility** in performing different activities and tasks (74%);
- **Team-working** (68%);
- **Responsibility** (65%);
- **Willingness to learn and be trained** (52%).

Moreover, other two attributes resulted to turn a graduate into an ideal candidate: **reliability** and **work ethics or professionalism**.

These results have confirmed findings derived previously by the literature review in the field of graduates' recruitment, reporting the same skills included in the top ten soft skills' list.

In the current year (2017) a survey was jointly created by the author of this thesis and the Career Service's staff and sent to the Career Service's network of companies, including both national SMEs and big international organizations, in order to support this research and, at the same time, to provide useful and interesting information to the Career Service in the view of the next Career Day.

644 companies were surveyed and 90 of them answered. Questions have been submitted during April 2017 and are shown below with the corresponding answers:

- 1) How much soft skills weigh on the selection process of a fresh graduate for an internship or an entry-level job position in your company?
  - We consider only soft skills (1,1%)
  - A lot (62,2%)
  - Soft skills and hard skills have the same weight (34,4%)
  - Little (2,2%)
  - At all (0%)
  
- 2) Select from the list<sup>13</sup> three soft skills that you mainly look for in a fresh graduate.
  - **Team-working** (57,8%)
  - **Oral and written communication** (53,3%)
  - **Adaptability and flexibility** (38,9%)

These answers show that the majority of interviewed companies consider soft skills as a deciding factor when selecting fresh graduates and that they highly value skills such as teamwork, communication and adaptability/flexibility skills, confirming the results derived from the international literature in this field which put at the first two positions communication and teamwork.

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<sup>13</sup> The list contained the top ten soft skills listed at page 14 but also others, in addition to give the possibility of inserting an additional soft skill.

### 1.3. The existing global skills gap between demand and supply

Graduates are considered essential for the major part of organizations' business models but employers from all over the world are expressing concern about the presence of a notable "gap" between graduates' skills, that represent the supply or outputs provided by universities, and the requirements of their businesses for competing in an increasing global and changing market. The Times Higher Education published an article attesting that: "*There is a chasm between what industry wants and what universities provide.*" This skills gap can be defined as the perceived discrepancy between universities' curricula and the skills' set desired by employers, including both hard and soft skills (Brooks, Calkins, 2016).

Generally, the Association for Talent Development (ASTD) defines a "skills gap" as a significant gap between the organization's current capabilities and those it really needs to achieve its goals. It is the point at which the organization can no longer grow or stay competitive because it is not able to fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge and skills.

Organizations as the Boston Consulting Group and The World Economic Forum have predicted an increase in talent shortage by 2030 that will affect 25 countries. For this reason talent attraction has become a priority for many organizations, and it is strongly related to graduates' recruitment because graduates are considered bearers of potential talent and are recruited to inject it across the organization (Scott, 2014).

In particular, employers from developed countries are suffering mostly this skill shortage in fresh graduates because they share other two concerns that represent real threats: the first is that developing countries such as India and China are producing an increasing number of graduates, so companies in these countries can access an higher level skilled workforce at lower wages; the latter is represented by the migration process driven by globalization, making more difficult to retain domestic graduates inside each country's borders (Jackson, 2010).

There are a lot of analytic studies of the labor market that confirm the argument about the skills gap (Harvey, 2003): for example, Andrews and Higson (2008) have shown the evidence of this gap in some European countries, in particular UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania. An article recently publicized in the economic Italian journal *Il Sole 24 Ore* (Tucci, 2017) have highlighted the same problem in Italy. A more international evidence is given for instance by the research made by Jackson (2010) attesting the presence of the skill gap, regarding particularly soft skills, in UK, USA and Australia.

At the end of 2014 an online survey of 400 executives from private and nonprofit sectors was conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which highlighted the employers dissatisfaction about students and graduates ability of applying knowledge and skills to the real world.

At this purpose, Anthony P. Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Centre on Education and

the Workforce, argues that higher education must not be just academic, but also a job-training system, and the problem is that universities don't know how to produce the skills that employers expect in recent graduates. At the same time Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the common opinion that many skills should be cultivated in the workplace; but this doesn't happen in reality, because, as said before, not all companies are willing to provide training because of huge amount of time and money to invest (Fabris, 2015).

From an Asian perspective, Deepa and Seth (2013) surveyed 160 Indian hiring managers asking them about the quality of modern graduates entering the workforce: 82% perceived a gap between their skills requirements and the products of universities and 60% thought that the entrants lack the necessary soft skills for job success. Mishra (2014) analyzed the literature in this field, confirming a skill gap in the Indian Industry, that includes both hard and soft skills.

What matters more for this work is that this skills gap perceived by employers is substantially composed by soft skills; in fact, the majority of employers worldwide are complaining that graduates lack the essential non-technical skills required to conduct the daily job operations (for instance Roepen, 2015). Several reasons, already cited, contribute to create this soft skills gap perceived by employers in modern graduates, and they can be summarized into three points:

- Soft skills are difficult to teach and universities are still experimenting how to teach them.
- Soft skills are also difficult to learn because they are the result of a continuous learning process during the entire life. Thus, both universities and employers should be responsible for their development.
- Soft skills are difficult to assess and many employers do not use competency-based selection methods that allow them to adequately assess soft skills both in the selection process and in the job performance evaluation.
- Soft skills are difficult to transfer from theory and training to the real life, making graduates unable to readily apply these skills to the workplace.

### **1.3.1. The responsibilities of the stakeholders involved in the development of graduates' employability and soft skills**

There are three main participants contributing to the development of graduates' employability including soft skills: the graduate him or herself, the university (or HEI) and the employer.

In the current organizational cultures, predominated by short-termism, the commitment to provide education and training to recently graduated employees and support HEIs' programs is very low; in particular for SMEs that have less resources (capital, human and time) available to invest in these activities (Lashley, 2011). Thus, organizations seem to be reluctant to invest in soft skills training, reversing the responsibility for employability, and soft skills, development toward HEIs. However

HEIs worldwide seem to be unable to produce work-ready graduates equipped with the right set of soft skills and this results in a talent shortage in many developed countries.

Dumping the responsibility only toward universities is not the right strategy; in fact, employability is developed throughout the individual's life, not only through higher education.

Another important factor to consider is that greater employability benefits not only the individual but also the economy as a whole: governments through an higher return on investment; companies, and consequently industries, through creating value-added, innovation and increasing competitiveness; universities through increased reputation and higher employers engagement and industry connections, and at last graduates through more job and career progression opportunities. This means that the main stakeholders involved (the individual, the university and the employer) should be interested and responsible in developing employability throughout the student's academic path.

Employers should express clearly what they need from graduates in term of skills collaborating with HEIs; universities should feel accountable for developing employability skills in students and graduates and meeting employers' needs; in addition to the active involvement of the individual that must be committed in developing its personal and interpersonal skills in addition to the professional ones (Jackson, 2010).

Also Harvey (2003) states that the concern expressed by employers about the inaptitude of the higher education at creating work-ready graduates is not at all legitimate if we consider that the link between the graduate, university and employer is fundamental in determining the graduate's employability, which depends on the efforts of each single subject. Moreover, according to the author graduates' employability depends mostly on their engagement with employability development opportunities provided by HEIs (both curricular and extra-curricular activities) during their academic path and the other work and extra-curricular experiences made during their life.

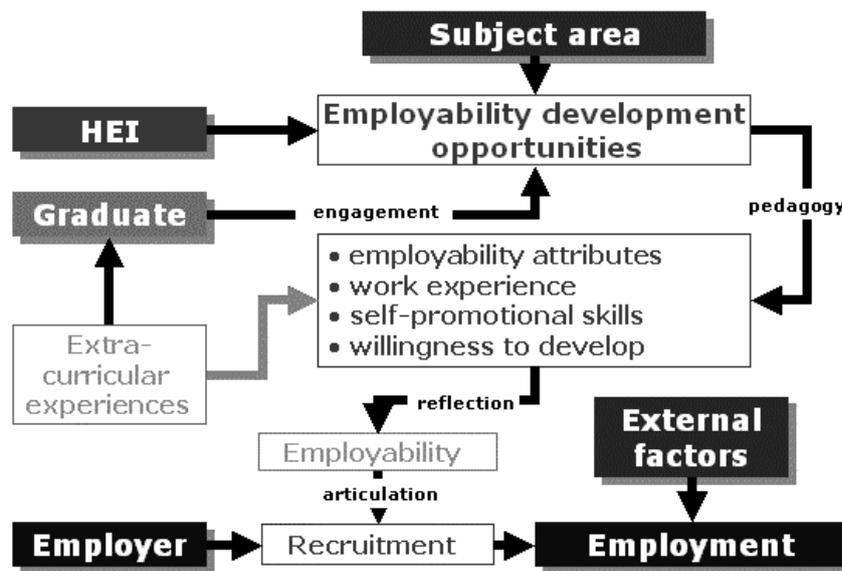
When talking about the job-inadequateness of graduate recruits, Sternberg (2000) hypothesized a failure in the transfer process rather than in the university curriculum, entailing that HEIs should better help students in the transition to the workplace. According to the author, for a successful transition from university to work, practical intelligence is required, that involves the use of tacit knowledge: a procedural knowledge that everyone learn in everyday life, usually not taught and verbalized. This attribute is very useful in a changing organizational environment in which employees must take responsibility for initiating their own development, and it is both a function of the opportunities offered by the higher education and the effort and engagement of the graduate in developing its employability skills.

According to Raybould and Sheedy (2005) and Scott (2014), a potential problem that creates the perception of the soft skill gap arises during the interview process, when recently graduated applicants cannot demonstrate their core transferrable skills because of some failure in the selection practices put in action by employers. The competency-based interview is a tool even increasingly used to overcome this problem because helps recruiters to assess the hidden expertise composed particularly by soft

skills such as problem solving, leadership or teamwork, and to identify potential shortages of the required skills. Another problem, according to the authors, is determined by the graduates difficulty in putting the knowledge and skills acquired at university into the working environment, thus a transfer problem.

The following diagram shows the model of graduate’s employability development created by Harvey (2003), which involves in the development process the three participants described before.

**Figure 1.2: A model of graduate’s employability development**



*Source: Harvey, 2003*

In this process the graduate can decide to engage in the employability development opportunities offered by HEI, that are influenced by the subject studied, because different subject areas requires different skills to develop; also extra-curricular experiences (both work and life experiences) represent an opportunity to enhance employability, whose development highly depends on the graduate willingness to develop. Employability is also articulated by employers in terms of experiences and skills requested for the job role during the recruitment processes. When the employability level of the graduate meets the specific requirements of the employer, employment is obtained, considering also other external factors (such us the crisis of the labor market that brings unemployment).

Maxwell et al. (2010) identify a more active role of employers in the employability development during the academic path of students, explaining that they should act in two ways: working in partnership with universities on the identification of the core skills they want to be developed in future graduates, and by assuming their share of responsibility in their development, for instance by providing real life case studies or projects and internship opportunities.

In conclusion, universities must ideate strategies to better match employers' needs for specific graduates' skills with the actual graduates' endowment. Students and graduates must exploit all the opportunities offered by their universities to increase both their personal and professional expertise. But also employers must be proactive, establishing working relationships with universities to increase the chance to meet their hiring needs and decrease the potential skills gap.

### **1.3.2. How universities can contribute to develop students and graduates' employability and soft skills?**

Universities across the world have for sure the responsibility of developing the employability intended as work readiness of their graduates. At this purpose their first challenge is to identify a specific set of hard and soft skills that employers highly value when selecting graduates for a job. This first step enable then to create a competency-based approach in the courses design and in other extra-curricular services provision in order to enhance graduates' employability (Ipate et al., 2014). Thus, meeting employers needs represents a real "customer driven product design" objective, that requires an examination of both demand and supply (Brooks and Calkins, 2014).

A set of general strategies deriving from a closer connection with the real world of work, already implemented worldwide, for enhancing graduates' employability are the following:

- Introduction into the current curricula employability elements such as case studies and role playing;
- Introduction of extra-curricular experiences such as conferences and seminars with guest speakers from the industry;
- Networking with employers and other external stakeholders in the labor market;
- Compulsory internship periods for students;
- Promotion of students mobility;
- Using institutional career services for coordinating employability strategies (Lasheley, 2011; Artess and Mellors-bourne, 2017).

According to many scholars and the corporate world too, soft skills training should be integrated into the academic education, and the role of work experience during the academic path, also known as students placement or internship, remains an essential element for enhancing employability because it provides students the ground for learning and testing the combination in practice of academic knowledge and the work-related skills, increasing also the connectivity between university and the world of work (Scott, 2014).

Harvey (2003) wrote that the relationship between graduates, universities and employers depend also on the effectiveness of the universities' central support services, known as career services, that have

been conceived to assist students in their employability development and support graduates in their search for work, intermediating between them and the corporate world.

### **1.3.3. Conclusions**

This chapter have dealt with the theme of the increasing importance of soft skills in today's workplaces, focusing on the soft skills' requirements in young graduates. A generic overview of the main trends that are affecting and revolutionizing the way of doing business from around the beginning of the new millennium has been presented; in particular globalization, technological advances and the speed of change require organizations that are able to compete in a global market with an increasingly diverse workforce, to take advantage of available technologies and to quickly and flexibly adapt to new conditions.

These new organizational imperatives are shaping the skills that managers and employees need to allow companies to stay competitive; in particular employers want to hire talented individuals equipped with strong communication, interpersonal and problem solving skills, able to adapt and learn continuously, therefore addressing their attention to the graduates pool because young and fresh graduates are considered bearers of talent and more suited to learn and develop these skills.

This new set of skills is part of the category of the soft skills, personal and interpersonal abilities that are transferable across different types of job enhancing the employability of an individual, that in turn refers to a set of attributes which increase the individual's chance to gain employment and to succeed in the job career.

However employers all over the world are concerning about the lack of this set of soft skills in young graduates that enter their workforce. This skills gap derives in part from the intrinsic difficulties of soft skills' teaching, learning, transfer and assessment, but it could derive also from the low commitment of the individual itself to develop these skills and mainly from the wrong responsibility sharing between the corporate and the academic world.

A suggestion is that of increasing the connection between universities and companies, making the latter active part in the development of employability and soft skills during the academic path of students. At this purpose, career services, that are a central support staff of universities, must act as an effective intermediary between the two actors and should have a main role in the employability development of future graduates.

## **CHAPTER 2. The role of universities' career services in the creation of the best match between graduates and employers**

### **2.1. The role of universities' career services in the world**

When a company decides to recruit new employees from the pool of fresh graduates, the university placement office can ensure a good match between employer's requirements and candidates' expertise. The placement office is better known as career center or career service and it is an effective intermediary between the academic and the corporate world, increasing graduates' chance to find a job and employers' chance of meeting the right candidates.

“Marrying” graduates and employers is not the only function of academic career services but it is their ultimate objective; in fact, in order to provide an “happy marriage” many other services and activities, in addition to job placement, are needed: from career counseling for students to the teaching of specific skills needed to be attractive in the labor market, that means equipping students with employability and soft skills and the ability to demonstrate these skills and knowledge to companies. Universities through their career services have therefore the double role to prepare the future labor force and to help graduates' inclusion in the labor market (Hinds, 1985; Staiculescu et al., 2015). Therefore, we can state that academic career services have been created to influence and increase both graduates' employability and employment.

When talking about the “best match” that career services try to create, we are not referring to find the best candidate universally, but the best graduate for a specific company and a specific job position. In fact, the role of career services in higher education should be assuring that the graduates who are “best” for a particular company's vacancy will meet the corresponding recruiter.

An element that career services should consider to increase the chance of creating the best match is that both sides, employers and graduates, must have a clear idea of what they want: individuals, even before graduation, should figure out what kinds of job positions will maximize their happiness and highlight the most their abilities, and then they should learn the best strategies for presenting themselves to the desired employers. On the other side, employers should determine specifically the personal features and abilities needed for each job profile and communicate them to the career centers and to the pool of candidates in a clear and fair way.

As a matter of fact, the chance of a good match increases if companies present all the real aspects of the entry level opportunities, the skills needed and both the advantages and disadvantages, in order to attract only the candidates who really love and fit with the position and increase the satisfaction and retention rate of hired graduates; in fact anxiety, frustration, disillusionment and resignation mainly occur if the individuals' expectations do not correspond to the reality of the workplace setting and the job tasks.

For companies, hiring “good fits”, namely graduates who fit well for the job position, and developing them to become tomorrow excellent top managers is the winning way to stay competitive, and career centers in higher education can be the effective intermediary to select these right candidates, avoiding a loss of money and time derived by hiring and training “bad fits” (Hinds, 1985; Salzman, 1985).

The two primary goals of career services, and the two main related functions, are (Hammond, 2001):

- Supporting students and graduates<sup>14</sup> in making appropriate decisions about their professional career path, in particular through the **career counseling** service;
- Assisting students and graduates in obtaining adequate employment or internship<sup>15</sup> experiences; through the **job placement** service.

Career counseling represents the process of developing knowledge and skills students or graduates need to direct and self-manage their professional path; it involves orientation and training to certain specializations and domains that fit with students or graduates’ personalities, and it serves the different purposes of directing the career choice, increasing employability, career development, or other aspects related to the job. Career counseling implies three stages, that are (Miclea, 2004):

- Career planning: it involves an initial evaluation of individual interests and skills, followed by the creation of an initial plan for employment;
- Job seeking strategies: it involves the teaching of ways and tools to search for employment opportunities, including networking skills, CV and cover letter writing and the skills needed to be successful in an interview;
- Career development: it is a process of identifying and learning optimal ways to develop the job career.

In particular today’s career counseling services provided by universities should have three goals: increasing students and graduates’ ability to plan and manage by themselves their own professional path, increasing employability of students and graduates, and, at last, communicating to students and graduates the real needs of companies thanks to the connections established with the corporate world.

The second service, job placement, refers to the individual support to find a suitable job or internship to students and graduates (Staiculescu et al., 2015).

All the other activities and services provided by career centers worldwide range between these two primary functions. In general, the main services provided by career services to their students and

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<sup>14</sup> When talking about career services, with the term “graduates” we are referring to recent graduates until one year since graduation.

<sup>15</sup> In this thesis also internships are considered when referring to the career services’ function of job placement.

graduates include (ADAPT, 2011):

- Welcome meetings and exploratory conversations;
- Counseling for the redaction of the professional plan;
- Formative activities (seminars, thematic workshops, laboratories);
- Support for writing or editing the Curriculum Vitae;
- Information about tools for job search;
- On-line publication of internships and job offers;
- Internships' activation;
- Data base of students and graduates' CVs;
- Meeting events with employers (presentations, recruiting events).

At the same time, the most common services and activities offered to companies are:

- On-line publication of Internships and job offers;
- Support on internships' activation;
- Survey of companies professionalisms and skills' requirements;
- CVs release and profiles recommendation;
- Organization of companies' presentations at campus;
- Organization of recruiting events;
- Organization of visits to companies' sites.

The mission of universities career services is facilitating graduates' transition into the labor market; for this reason their primary responsibility is to create a strong network with companies in order to provide a link between the academic and the corporate worlds. Their activities and services are divided and differentiated according to two different types of customer, students/graduates and companies, but are all intended to increase the coherence of the knowledge and skills acquired by students during their academic path, and the application of the same expertise into the job context. This means that the ultimate objective is to enhance the matching between human capital and productive requirements (ADAPT, 2011).

### **2.1.1. Historical overview: the American and European scenario**

There is very few literature talking about the issue of career services' origins and development, and most of it regards American and English universities' career services.

In America the evolution of career services in higher education is connected with the most important historical changes in the economic, social and political scenarios of the country, and it is composed by

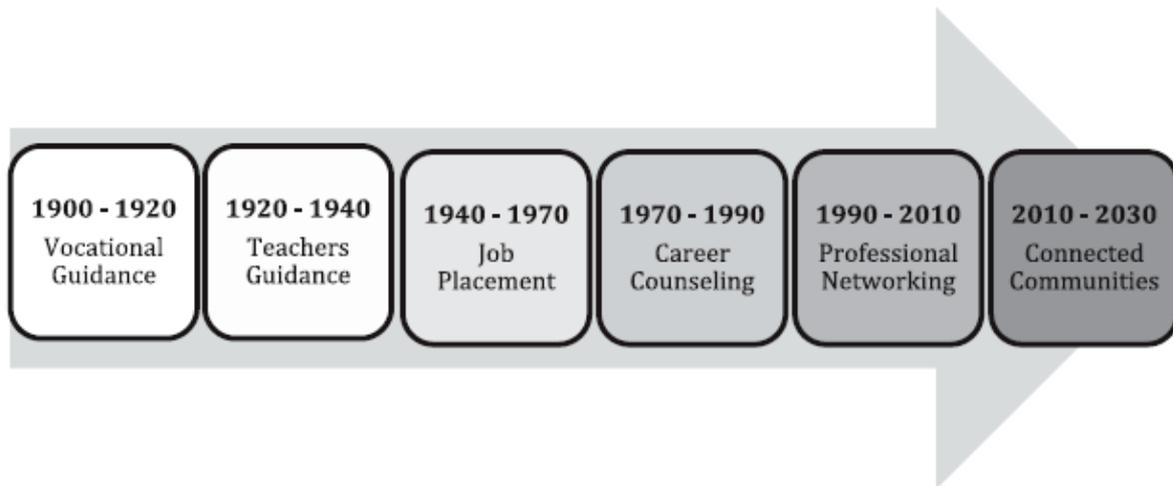
continuous models that build upon the previous ones, maintaining their integrity.

Before the introduction of career services at universities, faculties were responsible for preparing their students for employment; then, starting from the early 1900s, there have been six career services models that followed in the evolution (Cruzvergara & Dey, 2014):

1. **Vocational Guidance:** career guidance in higher education started in the early 1900s with the creation of the Vocational Guidance Bureau, coinciding with the introduction of the first public career services for immigrants in Boston.
2. **Teachers Guidance:** between 1920s and 1930s industrialization and the post World War I have increased the number of students, therefore the need to have more teachers have created the Vocational Guidance for graduating teachers. However, at that time Vocational Guidance still remained absent in the majority of Universities.
3. **Job Placement:** During post World War II in the 1940s and 1950s, the booming economy increased employers' demand for candidates and, consequently, brought to the transformation of Vocational Guidance offices into Placement Centers and to their relative expansion in HEIs. These centers were responsible for matching graduates' profiles, namely skills and knowledge, with job criteria, playing the role of job fillers and measuring their success in terms of placement numbers.
4. **Career Counseling:** in the 1970s and 1980s the increasing competition of graduated candidates and the slowing economic growth made graduates accountable for the job search and employers accountable for managing their own recruitment and "matching" processes, allowing the job placement offices to focus again on the guidance sphere, turning themselves into career counseling centers. In this phase their success was measured in terms of appointments or activities count.
5. **Professional Networking:** In the 1990s and 2000s the dot-com boom and, in general, the advancement in information technology allowed the transformation of career counseling centers into complete career centers offering a wide range of activities and in particular an easier connection between students and employers. The focus shifted from counseling to professional networking and employers relations.
6. **Connected Communities:** after the economic crisis of 2008 the idea of universities' accountability for students' employability arose, pushing career centers to offer customized career development support to students since their first year of enrollment, in addition to offer connections with the labor market and other meaningful communities. In fact the idea of the responsibility for students' employability started extending beyond the boarder of the career center, toward an ecosystem that includes the entire university, the students themselves, employers, alumni and families.

The following figure illustrates the historical evolution of career services just described.

**Figure 2.1: Evolution of career services in higher education**



*Source: Cruzvergara & Dey, 2014*

In an interview (Hinds, 1985) Victoria Ball, former director of Career Planning at Brown University in Providence, explained that until 1972, career services inside American universities were not innovative and considered important; then in 1972 America experienced the first recession in a long time and one of the currently most popular book for job seekers, “What Color Is Your Parachute?” by Richard Bolles, was publicized, paving the way for career counseling and arising the expectation that universities had to do more to help students and graduates with the decision making about their work life. Thus, comprehensive career services in America are relatively new creatures brought into existence by some economic and social changes.

In order to analyze a real case of this evolution path, Stanford’s Career Education is an excellent example to use, given that Stanford is at the first position in many global ranking of the universities with the best career service, as we will see later in the third chapter.

Career services have been an integral part of Stanford’s supply of services since its founding, along with research and innovation in this same field. Stanford University’s career center has nearly 120 years of history starting from 1898, year in which the Teacher’s Bureau of Information was founded with the aim of helping graduates finding open professional and educational positions. The era of vocational guidance and individual training started in 1900: a specialized Committee studied the issue of training needs of graduates for filling different job positions, and the University started offering specific vocational training and activities and published also a book on vocational guidance. In 1916 the Student Appointment Office was established, acquiring the responsibility for graduates’ placement. In line with the general trends of career services’ development, from 1920 to 1940 the focus shifted toward the vocational guidance for graduating teachers. In the 1940s the job placement

era took place and in 1948 the University combined the two separate efforts into one department, the Vocational Guidance and Placement Service, that in 1965 changed its name into Career Planning and Placement Center. The career counseling era in the 70s and 80s, the professional networking era in the 90s and the first ten years of the new millennium have shaped the services offered by Stanford's career center shifting the focus to career decision making and planning and employer relations and engagement on campus; the emergence of this latter paradigm has been driven also by new technologies and social media. Currently, the Career Education, renamed like this in 2015, is an integrated model of connections between various communities, and it is better known with the acronym "BEAM", "Bridging Education, Ambition and Meaningful Work", which highlights the importance assigned to the function of connecting the academic and the corporate worlds.

An article (Pietsch, 2011) published in the English journal "The Guardian" explains well the development of career services in UK universities, providing a European version of career centers' historical evolution. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century UK universities were no more the home of an elite of reach people, and a higher number of excellent people started to enroll. Simultaneously, the technological change of that period increased the power of the industry and trade sector, but employers seemed skeptical to hire graduates instead of young man coming out from school and considered more suited to be shaped through practical training. It was to overcome this issue that universities began to set up the so called "Appointments Committees", the predecessors of today's careers services. Cambridge and Oxford were the first, but in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century similar entities were set up in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and Birmingham. Their role was to inform students about different career's opportunities, advertise vacancies, conduce interviews and solicited references before making recommendations to firms.

Critics to career centers' function regarded the fact that universities were not supposed to be responsible for the issue of graduates' employment and for funding this kind of activity. But universities needed to convince the corporate world of their value and in particular of the value of the high skilled labor of the intellectual world, so the best way to achieve this goal was to be constantly connected with the national economic activity. For this reason the Appointments Committees were an essential tool in order to reach this goal.

The University of Cambridge, in addition to be the first at having introduced the career service paradigm, is also ranked at the first place among European universities in the matter of the best academic career services. The Cambridge University Careers Service has its origins in the closing year of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Universities in that era had the problem that their graduates faced difficulties in gaining employment without recommendation, so in 1899 the Cambridge University Appointments Association was founded with the aim of collecting and distributing information, through the Appointments Gazette, about appointments, namely job openings, and establishing means of communication between candidates and employers. The association was conceived to be a solid bridge between the labor market and the Cambridge graduates pool, and the permanent Board was established

in 1902. Since its foundation the Board has gradually expanded toward more geographic areas and a wider range of professions; its work was divided into three main areas:

- Working with employers: to find and recommend suitable graduates for filling employers' vacancies;
- Working with its associates: to assess their knowledge and skills, matching them to available opportunities;
- Working in partnership with others: for instance, providing information to families and schoolmasters about graduates opportunities and collaborating with governmental institutions.

The major development of the Board started in the 60s, a period in which the range of employers was growing and consequently the types of job position were changing; some of these developments were a bigger information room, weekly vacancies lists, career advisors' visits to employers and visit reports and briefing sessions on types of occupations.

Since the 90s the advances in technology and the pace of change have continuously shaped the way of delivering career services and the *Board* was definitely renamed Careers Service (Waters et al., 2002).

In the second paragraph of this chapter we will specifically analyze the Italian scenario and the case of the Cà Foscari University's Career Service. With respect to other countries, and in particular to the Asian continent, there is very few available literature about career services' origins and evolution and it will not be analyzed in this thesis.

From the analysis of the available literature in this field we can state that the first countries which have seen the birth of career services inside higher education are the US and the UK; moreover, according to some international rankings<sup>16</sup> about the best universities career services in the world, the top ranked ones come from these two countries, therefore only US and UK's career services (along with the best Italian counterparts) will be taken into consideration as effective benchmarks for the purpose of this thesis, also in order to restrict the range of examples to consider.

### **2.1.2. The technological development inside universities' career services**

An important element that has affected the most the historical evolution of career services is technology. In fact, the primary differences between past and contemporary's career services has been brought by the advances in technology, such as the advent of the Internet and the social media in the last two decades, which have significantly changed the way in which the career centers interact with students, graduates and employers, in addition to have shaped the way in which graduates look and apply for job opportunities and the employers' recruitment methods.

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<sup>16</sup> Rankings will be listed and described in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter.

Delivering online versions of career services allows a wider range of students and graduates to make use of them, reaching in particular those who have no possibility or time to access traditional career services. Today, information provisions and requests, contacts, job postings, job applications, and interview schedules are all managed online; asynchronous technologies such as websites, e-mail, video, podcasts and discussion boards allow career centers' staff to communicate with users in an environment that is not in real time, whereas synchronous technologies such as telephone, instant messages and virtual rooms allow people to communicate simultaneously.

Thus, advances in technologies, in particular the use of computers and Internet, are helping users with a huge number of career related needs.

There are a lot of advantages correlated with the on-line delivery of career services: services and information are available 24 hours every day of the week, they can be accessed easily and from any location, allowing all students and graduates, even if very busy, to access services and information by themselves whenever and wherever they want; career service' website can be updated in any moment and allows to save on paper and printing costs; an Internet-based system gives the possibility to direct users to other sites, thus providing more information; it allows to free up the staff for more important activities that need personalization or one-to-one interaction.

There are also some critical issues related to the use of these technologies in career services: not all types of services are appropriate for on-line provision and access; different individuals have different needs and consequently need different interventions, in some cases more personalized; differently from the traditional face-to-face delivering of career services, the on-line type does not incentivize users to go to the center for receiving assistance; there is the need for a financial support and a technical staff that constantly monitors, maintains and improves technologies, in addition to career professionals with technological knowledge and skills; the last concern is about the lesser interaction between career professionals and students or graduates; however some authors (Venable, 2010) have argued that technology, allowing individuals to access general information on their own, pushes them to discover all the range of services in the website and then request individual counseling.

To conclude, there is a trade-off between the quality of services offered, allowed by one-to-one interactions, and the quantity of students reached, allowed by on-line provision; it is up to each career center to adopt one of these two emphasis universally or, preferably, to use available technology to create a blended approach. The main goal for career services is to keep providing highly personalized services while also maintaining continuous online accessibility and this could happen by balancing in the right way high tech and "high touch", that means to create the right mix of technology and human interaction in the delivering of career services (Davidson, 2001; Venable, 2010).

An example of technological evolution inside career services is described in the Princeton Career Services' website: in 1971 the first computerized system was developed in order to help students and graduates find internships and jobs; during the 80s educational videotapes were available at the library; in 1995 the first website was launched; during the last half of the 90s the career management

system, the credential file management system and the recruitment system were available online. In the new millennium many resources have been added in the website till its design updating in 2013; since 2009 till now the Career Services office at Princeton has launched its presence in the main social media and YouTube, it has introduced the use of Skype for appointments and meetings with students/graduates and employers and the use of the QR code in flyers and posters. In 2011 it developed the online appointments scheduling system for students and career counselors.

### **2.1.3. Career services' imperatives and future trends**

In 1993 Jack R. Rayman, Director of Career Services at the Pennsylvania State University, wrote an issue titled "The Changing Role of Career Services", in which he listed ten imperatives for the 90s that career services had to follow to deliver effective services. In 1999 the author reaffirmed the imperatives updating them for the new millennium (Rayman, 1999):

1. **Acknowledge the lifelong nature of career development:** career development must not start from the graduation moment but must be a lifelong process, as the acquisition and the upgrading of skills are ongoing processes. This requires students to become lifelong learners, and career counselors to continuously reinvent the practice of counseling, allowing students to be proactive in and accountable for their career development.
2. **Use technology as an ally:** counselors must balance the students' needs for human contacts with the achievement of efficiency through the use of technology in some services which do not require human sensitivity, determining which portion of services must be performed by counselors (such as CV check and interview simulation) and which one by computers (such as meetings' scheduling), without duplicating those services or diminishing the quality.
3. **Strengthen the career services' identity:** career service's professionals must constantly connect with the academic and corporate world in order to publicize and explain their role to students and recruiters, focusing not only on the job placement service but on the whole range of activities offered.
4. **Maintain the centrality of individual career counseling:** job placement remains an important function, but career counseling, education and development are even more important for the new millennium. Individual counseling should be at the core of career centers' functions, considering also the fact that the increased technology use is making more compelling human interactions.
5. **Forge cooperative relationships with different groups:** partnering and collaborating with students' groups, university, employers and professionals coming from the field of graduates' career counseling and recruitment can enhance students' career development.

6. **Adapt to the changing career development needs:** there is an increasingly diverse students' body that requires the tailoring of career services on their needs (for instance international students or students with disabilities). Career services must improve the quality and differentiation of their services to meet the different types of needs.
7. **Be the link between the academic and the corporate world, maintaining the focus on students:** career services must maintain the focus on delivering high quality career services without being seduced by fundraising, driven by budget pressure, or focusing only on the placement function at the expense of the development one, that is the primary mission.
8. **Develop innovative recruitment means to facilitate students' transition to work:** on-campus recruitment is no longer sufficient to facilitate the transition from university to work, thus career services must include counseling and educational programs that could equip students with the employability skills necessary to enter the labor market.
9. **Consider alumni as a resource:** career centers should define the type of services to provide to their alumni during their lifelong careers, because alumni represent an enormous network that could provide support to career centers, if satisfied with the services, and a close connection with the corporate world.
10. **Advocate for resources and use them efficiently and innovatively:** if career services want to survive despite the increasing downsizing in the universities, they must actively solicit additional resources and become more efficient and innovative in using existing ones, embracing the tools of quality management.

These imperatives represent even today fundamental guidelines that academic career services all over the world should follow to be efficient, effective and innovative at the same time.

A couple of years ago Day and Cruzvergara (2014) wrote an article in which they presented the future trends of university career services, linked by the common emphasis on making students' employability central to all connected university communities. The trends confirm Rayman's predictions and add interesting starting points for career services' revolution such as the necessity to develop a career service brand to strengthen its identity, adding for instance the figure of the marketing manager; upgrading skills and knowledge of career professionals allowing them to shift from the role of counselors to the role of expert consultants, content experts, network catalysts and group facilitators, given the emphasis on communities and connections; the authors recognize also the importance of increasing the career service's influence and presence at the institutional level through the elevation of its leadership, even in order to acquire additional resources.

Contomanolis and Steinfeld (2014) talk about eight essential themes critical for career services success in the contemporary world and in the future, among which the most important is to partner and collaborate both with other academic departments and with employers to jointly ideate practices to better prepare students for the job market. The authors suggest also to career services' professionals to

be innovative, take initiatives and risks, and to become the academic center of “career wisdom”, in order to elevate their influence among the university. The use of data about results and their analysis are other important means to show the office’s value proposition and to elevate its importance. Even if the issue of students’ employability must remain a responsibility shared by the whole university’ entities and communities, career services should assume a predominant role in transforming the university’ program for embedding the employability paradigm, by creating a coordinated campus partnership.

### **2.1.3. How universities’ career services can actually increase graduates’ work readiness in order to satisfy employers’ requirements?**

From employers’ perspective, graduates’ employability refers to “work readiness”, that stands for the possession of a set of skills and knowledge that will enable fresh graduates to bring productive improvements inside organizations after employment. As said in the first chapter, soft skills are the main skills contributing to the enhancement of employability.

Universities must be aware that today’s employers are seeking fresh graduates already equipped with this set of skills so that the newly hired graduates will require a shorter learning curve at work.

The three common responses of universities to cope with this recruitment scenario include: first, the modification of the existing courses’ content or the addition of new courses intended to teach and develop employability skills; second, the involvement of employers in courses’ design and delivery; third, the higher provision of work experience opportunities for students.

In order to prove the effectiveness of these different approaches, a study conducted by three researchers among eight UK universities in 2001 found that both employers’ involvement and structured work experience had a positive effect on securing graduates’ employment; however, the teaching of employability skills inside courses designed by universities’ departments was not so strongly related to labor market outcomes (Mason et al., 2009). This means that the academic world needs fundamentally to create a strong connection with the corporate world in order to enhance their graduates’ employability and employment, and, consequently, career services, being the intermediary between these two worlds, have the primary role in providing and managing this connection.

At this purpose, according to Hammond (2001) the Needs Assessment is an essential tool that career services should use for gathering information from the employers’ population, in order to ideate or improve the activities and services offered.

In the current years, higher education’s career professionals have to reflect on the changing nature of their work and suggest innovative ways for improving graduates’ employability and, consequently, employment. According to Tom Davie, director of professional development at the Association of Graduates Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), career professionals at universities must be more flexible and proactive, and a strategic aim in the academic career services is paramount to their

success. He suggests also that career service's professionals should meet regularly with the academic staff to discuss about the theme of employability to strengthen the connection between the academic curriculum and the employability elements, included soft skills needed in today's workplaces .

Also Contomanolis & Steinfeld (2014) suggest to career services to partner and collaborate both with other academic departments and with employers to jointly ideate practices to better prepare students for the job market; in addition to create "communities of career learners" because students learn best when teamed with others.

As cited in the first Raynold's imperative, it is well known that students who engage actively with the career service office from the beginning of their academic path maximize their chances for reaching successful results both in employability and employment. At this purpose, it is essential that career services' offices would be visible to all students and offer activities and services that provides value to students throughout their academic path, since the first year of study.

In support of this argument, an interesting article titled "Marrying students and employers" (Hinds, 1985) reports the interview to Victoria Ball, former director of Career Planning at Brown University and committed supporter of innovative career counseling. Ball and her staff believed in the students' self-education process in terms of career, that started the first day of freshmen year, when the office's staff organized a meeting with new students to talk about its functions, in addition to an open house for parents. She thought that a good university career center should spend three years preparing students for plunging into recruitment after graduation.

An article publicized in the English journal "The Guardian" in 2012 describes some examples of initiatives implemented in some English Universities in order to increase graduates' employability. At the Birmingham City University a project named "Creating future-proof graduates" has been developed involving students' access to a game to learn some specific skills, such as networking. The "Job Shop" service at Bath University has been created to offer part time positions to students allowing students to gain work related skills; then career professionals at Bath University helped these students to identify and articulate the many skills they have gained. Another interesting initiative has been made by the New College of the Humanities in London, who has convened a meeting for "employability developers" who are all those people interested in embedding employability elements into the educational curriculum. Creating a network of employability developers and exploiting their knowledge and support should truly help career services in the development of students' employability (Anyangwe, 2012).

A role model highlighted in literature for the employability development is Graduate Advantage, an employment agency specialized in supporting and connecting graduates and SMEs in England. Raybould and Sheedy (2005) wrote that "*Graduate Advantage has placed emphasis upon professional development based around the requirement of graduates, their role within an organization and the employer needs*". The "Graduate Employment and Training program" set up by the agency involves a training-needs analysis for each graduate based on the employer and job position's requirements,

followed by the creation of a training plan in order to assist graduates with continued professional development. The important thing to consider is that training courses are not enough for enhancing required skills, but a combination of willingness and ability to learn and other development approaches are essential.

Another best practice used by Graduate Advantage is the provision of an online application form that allows employers to add their own competency-based questions, for instance: “*Give an example of when you have shown initiatives during your life*”, allowing the employer to collect important information from graduates’ answers regarding in particular their soft skills.

The previous examples and suggestions represents only few initiatives and ideas cited in the available literature about the graduates’ employability development, but a more accurate list of worldwide career services’ best practices will be given in the third chapter of this thesis in order to provide useful suggestion to all universities’ career services, and in particular to the Cà Foscari’s Career Service, for innovating their activities and services for improving students’ “work readiness” according to employers’ new requirements.

## **2.2. The Italian scenario and the case of the Cà Foscari Career Service**

In 2001 the White Paper of the Italian labor market reformed Italian universities toward an higher commitment in developing students’ employability and facilitating graduates’ transition into the labor market. To incentivize this process and to create a closer linkage with the corporate world, in 2003 the Biagi’s reform<sup>17</sup> gave to public and private Italian university the possibility of carrying out the mediation activity in the graduates recruitment market, in order to increase the number of intermediaries and, consequently, the chance and the quality of demand and supply’ matching, alleviating both young graduates’ unemployment and the perceived skills mismatch.

Already in the past, Italian universities conducted a sort of placement activity recommending the best talents to those companies that turned spontaneously to them for satisfying their recruiting needs, in addition to provide internships’ opportunities to students, an activity that presupposes the matching of students and employers and that precedes and incentivizes employment.

The Biagi’s reform has paved the way for today’s career centers, that are currently present in almost all Italian universities and show up with a structured organization and a specialized staff of career professionals. Thus, differently from the US and the UK counterparts, Italian universities’ career services are relatively new creatures, born for the major part at the beginning of the new millennium.

For instance, the first ranked Italian career service belonging to the Politecnico di Milano was founded in 2005. The Italian Fondazione Ceur- Centro Europeo Università e Ricerca attests that the first Italian academic career services were born in the 90s, inspired by English and American universities.

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<sup>17</sup> Legislative Decree No. 276/2003.

However, the mediation function allowed by the Biagi's reform is not the unique function that Italian career services undertake and it is not their primary mission. As in many other countries, such as the experience of the US and the UK shows, in Italy career services have been established in part to directly connect students with employers increasing their chance for employment, but also to be the actual mean for reinventing the curriculum provided by Italian universities according to the professionalism and skills' requirements of the corporate world, enhancing graduates' employability and therefore facilitating their transition into the labor market. In fact the intense network with the corporate world created by career services is the main channel through which finding out current and potential requirements of employers. Thus, it is of primary importance for Italian career services' effectiveness and success that their activity would begin with a survey of employers' requirements and their contribution to the ideation of an adequate academic curriculum, leading to an enhanced correspondence between future graduates' professional profiles and companies' requirements. The main issue that appears from an analysis of career services in Italy is a lack of dialogue and structured collaborations between the academic and the corporate world, despite some good practices that stand out in some excellent universities of the Milan Area. This shortcoming represents the main room for improvement among Italian universities' career services (ADAPT, 2011).

### **2.2.1. The Career Service at the Cà Foscari University of Venice**

The Cà Foscari's Career Service is composed by two different but strictly correlated and cooperating units: the "Placement" unit that includes the service of career counseling and the mediation service between demand and supply of labor, and the "Stage" unit which includes the promotion, organization and setting up of internships in Italy and abroad, in addition to counseling and information services related to internship. The Career service as currently turns up, that is qualified to act as intermediary in the labor market, was founded in 2006 and opened its doors to the public in the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2007. Previously, from the 1999, only the "Stage" unit was operating.

The Cà Foscari's Career Service has adopted a centralized model for delivering its services, meaning that there is a unique office that delivers the same career services for all students and graduates coming from all types of disciplinary field, and thus a unique interlocutor for companies.

Currently these two units offer a range of integrated services for students and graduates and for companies and organizations.

The services for students and graduates can be divided into these macro areas:

- Internships in Italy: promotion and setting-up of internships throughout Italy;
- Internships abroad: promotion and setting-up of internships all over the world;
- "Placement Desk": welcome and release of information;
- Career guidance: on-line tools, seminars and workshops for career guidance, individual

counseling for outlining a professional project in line with ambitions;

- Support for job search: seminars, workshops and individual support for writing or revising the CV and cover letter and getting ready for job interviews;
- Meetings with employers: organization of companies' presentations and visits, job meetings, career day or sector-based recruiting events with national and international companies;
- Job Placement (in Italy and abroad): insertion and publication of students and graduates' profiles in the university's website, publication of job offers in a dedicated board and mediation activity between labor's demand and supply.

The services dedicated to companies and organizations can be divided into:

- Companies' information desk and counseling;
- Internships: posting of internships' offers and setting-up of internships;
- Mediation: definition of professional profiles, posting of job offers and identification of adequate graduates' profiles (from the university's website) or pre-selection of CV;
- Events and employer branding: organization of companies presentation and visits, job meetings.

The mission indicated on the website is: *“The Ca' Foscari Career Service offers an integrated system of services intended both for graduating students/recent graduates and for Italian and international enterprises, in order to promote employability and provide adequate responses to corporate recruiting needs”*. Moreover, the Director of the Cà Foscari's Career Service, Arianna Cattarin, in the promotional video for celebrating “The 10 years of Placement”, talks also about a superior mission of “world development” brought by the job placement service.

Barbara Benedetti, Representative of the Placement sector, explains in an interview that her greater objective and satisfaction occurs when a Cà Foscari's recent graduate obtains employment thanks to the job placement service and he or she feels satisfied with the job because in line with his or her professional ambitions and, in addition, the employer considers that graduate as the ideal candidate.

### **2.2.2. Efforts for improving students' employability and creating the best match between recent graduates and employers**

Developing students' employability is surely a service focused on this type of customer but it is also an investment that higher education makes for the future of companies and the economy as a whole. In fact, employability increases the chance of these individuals for getting employed but also for being successful in the job place, increasing the company's productivity.

The Cà Foscari's Career Service has an active and direct role in the development of students and graduates' employability, namely preparing students for the world of work, in particular through the delivering of the career guidance service. This service comprises some collective activities such as laboratories for developing one's own professional project; thematic workshops for the creation of the CV, the correct management of the professional profile in the social media and the preparation for the job interview; seminars for giving information about specific career paths, including the entrepreneurial one, with special guests performing that specific job; but also individual and personalized counseling for understanding the desired professional path in line with one's own ambitions, and individual support for the redaction and revision of the CV or for preparing for the job interview.

The laboratories are conducted by some professionals such as recruiters, labor agencies' counselors or experts of personal branding. A collaboration with the Cà Foscari's Competency Centre, the research centre dedicated to the study of transversal competencies or soft skills, has been established for carrying out some laboratories dedicated to the development of a professional plan for the future in line with one's own passions, desires and aptitudes.

The career service's website is another important tool for the release of information to students and graduates but also for the enhancement of employability because it makes available documents, video and links that contains useful guidelines for the job search, the selection process and information about labor contracts and job positions.

At the end of an internship the Career Service always sends a survey to the business tutor containing an evaluation of students' technical skills, and by the end of this year (2017) the survey will include also a soft skills assessment. The results are then analyzed by a dedicated office inside the university in order to obtain useful insights for the improvement of the academic curriculum trying to overcome the observed skills gaps.

Some extra activities have been made by the career service, for instance sending some questionnaires to its connected company in order to understand their preferences and requirements in the field of graduates' recruitment and creating then the final reports for the publication, giving in this way useful suggestions to students and graduates for the improvement of their employability, and also allowing the other academic departments to take into consideration the results, in particular with respect to courses' design.

The practice of matching graduates with employers is a service that satisfies the needs of both customers, in fact it increases the graduate's chance of getting employed and, at the same time, the fulfillment of the employer's recruiting needs.

The Cà Foscari's Career Service offers the matching service both for internships and for job positions; the service is managed by career professionals and it could have different levels of "detail" depending on the requests of the companies. The process starts with the analysis of the company's professional requirements through a telephonic conversation, in which the professional asks the type of sought

professional profile and the related skills needed. Only technical skills are considered in the recruiting needs' analysis, whereas requested soft skills can be added by the company when filling the job offer form in the on-line application, choosing among a given list. At the end of the conversation, the career professional usually suggests to the company the more suited graduates' targets to whom address, because companies are often uninformed about the different courses of study. After having published the job opening on a dedicated on-line board, the company can decide if receiving voluntary candidacies from graduates or requesting to the career center the matching service, which could consist on the simple extrapolation of CVs that fit more with the job position from the virtual storage, or a complete pre-selection of candidates through the accurate reading of their CVs, a preliminary conversation with them, till the creation of the pool of candidates and the interviews' agenda.

Moreover, the company can ask to further promote its running selection process through sending a tailored email to a specific graduating students or graduates' target.

The career service makes also available on its website a dedicated space for promoting companies' talent recruitment programs.

The recruiting events represent another important type of service intended to foster the meeting between graduates and employers, offering the possibility for creating the right matches. They can involve the presentation of a unique company, followed by the delivery of the CVs and sometimes by informal conversations between graduates and recruiters during a coffee break, or collective recruiting events. The latter include the generalist and open doors Career Day and the sector-based and more selective recruiting events such as the Finance & Consulting, the Fashion & Luxury and the Food & Beverage days, during which graduates have the possibility to meet recruiters at their desks to deliver their CVs and conduct an interview. It is important to underline that the Cà Foscari's Career Service is increasingly going toward a more exclusive, customized and sector-based model of companies' services.

Obviously, each type of service is devised according to the type of company; in fact, SMEs do not have the same resources and requirements of bigger international companies, preferring to opt for more basic and fast matching services. Big companies such as multinationals, in addition to prefer long and accurate selection processes for hiring the best candidates, have also the necessity of participating at the best recruiting events in order to enhance their employer brand<sup>18</sup> for attracting talents.

### **2.2.3. Rooms for improvement**

The role of the Cà Foscari's Career Service in developing students and graduates' employability is

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<sup>18</sup> The employer branding can be defined as a marketing strategy intended to create a company's image coherent with its identity as employer (or the job place), that allows the company to differentiate from competitors' employer brands and be competitive in the talents' recruiting market (Amendola, 2008).

intrinsic in almost all its range of activities and services offered to them, but it is not sufficient for granting an effective job preparation in Cà Foscari's recent graduates, because a joint effort with the rest of the academic worlds is needed, in particular in the definition of the academic curriculum that should contain employability elements and soft skills teaching. In fact, the Cà Foscari's Career Service, as in almost all others Italian universities, has never been directly involved in the design of the academic curriculum, presenting the first room for improvement.

Another important issue concerns the visibility and the identity awareness of the career service for the students of the first year. According to Benedetti the objective is to explain to all freshmen the role of the career service and the activities offered, making students accountable for initiating the development of their professional future since their first academic year. Thus, the visibility of the career service must be potentiated in the near future through the installation of some desks or small offices inside each university's campus, in which some career services' professionals or tutors could directly promote the Career Service's activity.

For what concern soft skills, the career service should be more focused on ideating and offering innovative activities and tools for making students and graduates develop or acquire the most important soft skills for the workplace. Career service' professionals should also consider soft skills when analyzing companies' skills requirements and when selecting graduates' profiles during the matching activity.

#### **2.2.4. Conclusions**

This chapter has dealt with the fundamental role of universities' career services in preparing students and graduates for the world of work, helping recent graduates' transition into the labor market, since they are the actual intermediary between the academic and the corporate world. The mission of today's career services inside universities is therefore that of increasing graduates' employability in order to satisfy employers' new requirements, therefore enhancing graduates' employment as the ultimate objective. At this purpose, the primary function of career services is that of creating an active and productive connection with the corporate world.

The evolution of career services in higher education has begun between the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA and in the UK, countries in which the long history and development of universities' career services have increased the excellence of their practices.

Technological advances have been the primary responsible for the changes in the delivery of the career centers' services in the new millennium, and one of the current goal of today's career services is that of balancing quality, obtained thanks to one to one interactions, and quantity, obtained through the use of the on-line technology, creating the right blended approach.

For what concerns the Italian scenario, the first career services started to appear in the 90s and only after the Biagi's reform in 2003 they could act as intermediaries in the labor market. The case of the Cà Foscari's Career Service has been presented and analyzed, in particular with an emphasis on its efforts at developing students and graduates' employability and matching graduates' profiles with employers' recruiting needs, and some rooms of improvements in this two fields have been listed. The next chapter has the purpose of providing interesting insights and suggestions to the Cà Foscari's Career Service, but also to all universities around the world, through the analysis of the activities of the best career services worldwide according to some respected international rankings and national associations and the identification of their best practices for enhancing students and graduates' employability, in particular referring to soft skills development, and for creating the best match with recruiters' skills requirement.

## CHAPTER 3. Innovative practices adopted by the best universities' career services: an international benchmarking

### 3.1. The universities' sample

In order to provide useful suggestions to worldwide career services, and in particular to the Cà Foscari's Career Service, for improving their practices aimed at developing students and graduates' employability or work readiness according to employers' skills requirements, thus creating good matches between employers and recent graduates, this chapter will provide an international benchmarking of the best career services in the world according to some global and national rankings and the references provided by some national associations, focusing in particular on the USA, UK and Italian scenario.

Among the consulted rankings<sup>19</sup> there are:

- **The Princeton Review's Career Services ranking:** the ranking lists the top 20 career services in the USA on the basis of students and graduates' answers to the question "How do you rate your College or University's Career Service?";
- **Best College Career Services ranking:** a ranking of colleges in the USA based on the quality of their career services, developed by BestColleges.com and derived from surveys on students and graduates' satisfaction, statistics on job and internship placement and counselors' experiences at the centers.
- **QS' New Graduate Employability ranking:** a ranking of the best universities' career services in the world based on "new graduates employability", which has been created by the QS Intelligence Unit through assessing institutions' performance in five indicators: reputation among employers (30%), alumni outcomes (20%), partnerships with employers (25%), employers' presence on campus (15%) and graduates' employment rate (10%).
- **The Global University Employability Ranking:** the ranking, designed by the French HR consultancy Emerging and published exclusively by the Times Higher Education, lists the best universities for delivering work ready graduates, based on the results of an online survey completed by a panel of participants, composed by worldwide recruiters at managerial level and managing directors of international companies, that had to cast their vote for the universities in their countries or in the world "that produce the best graduates in terms of employability".

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<sup>19</sup> Rankings have been consulted during summer 2016 so they can refer to both 2015 and 2016. They are reported in the attached appendix.

Among the consulted associations there are: the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) for the USA, and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) for the UK, that will be presented in more detail in the next paragraphs.

The final sample, derived by the analysis of the rankings and the references provided by the two associations, is composed by 21 Universities' career services<sup>20</sup>, 15 in USA, 4 in UK and 2 in Italy, linked by the common theme of being excellent role models in the field of employability or work readiness skills development, employers' engagement and graduates' employment outputs. These career services belong to the following listed universities and colleges<sup>21</sup> divided by country:

- USA:
  1. Stanford University
  2. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
  3. Harvard University
  4. Yale University
  5. Princeton University
  6. University of California, Berkeley (UCB)
  7. Northeastern University
  8. Pennsylvania State University
  9. University of Florida
  10. Southwestern University
  11. Augustana College
  12. York College of Pennsylvania
  13. Mississippi State University
  14. Rutgers University
  15. Georgia College
  
- UK:
  16. University of Cambridge
  17. University of Oxford
  18. University of Kent
  19. University of Southampton
  
- ITALY:
  20. Politecnico di Milano
  21. Bocconi University

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<sup>20</sup> Both private and public colleges and universities are considered at the purpose of the analysis.

<sup>21</sup> They are not listed in order of importance.

All the 21 Career Services' websites<sup>22</sup> have been consulted in order to analyze all the information related to the services delivered to students, graduates, alumni and employers. After a deep analysis, some best practices have been identified because of their innovative character and importance in the fields previously described, and an e-mail has been sent to all the career services in order to request specific information about them, in addition to other general questions.

Five career services' representatives (from Harvard, Berkeley, Southwestern and Oxford universities, and Politecnico di Milano) have answered by email or through a Skype interview providing useful information.

The following paragraph describe the best practices in the field of students' employability development, soft skills development and employer services, selected through the websites' analysis, and report the answers of the Career Services' staff, where available.

### **3.2. Best practices of the top universities' career services in the USA**

As explained in the second chapter, the USA represent the first country where the Universities' career services were born and have developed till reaching the excellence.

In this paragraph, universities' career services are divided within those appearing in the top positions of the previously cited rankings and those honored by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) for their interesting practices in the field of career readiness and development. Established in 1965, NACE is an American association that connects almost 2000 universities and colleges' Career Services with at least 1000 employer companies around the USA and provides high quality information about the graduates' employment field.

#### **3.2.1. Top ranked career services in the USA**

At **Stanford University's Career Education** the word "center" has been substituted by the term "education" in order to give an higher emphasis to the educational process offered to students for the development of their career objectives and a personalized network for shaping their professional journey, instead of simply focusing on students' job placement. Moreover the lack of the word "center" is intended to emphasize a new culture of career education in which students, graduates and all other stakeholders can connect with career professionals everywhere inside the university and also outside, for instance in on-line dedicated spaces.

Stanford's Career education is also called with the acronym "BEAM" that stands for "Bridging Education, Ambition & Meaningful Work". The mission statement is "*We empower students to cultivate personalized networks that shape their professional journey*". In fact at BEAM, connections

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<sup>22</sup> Websites have been consulted on April and May 2017.

are the heart of the career education model, being the essential channel through which bringing graduates towards meaningful work, in the sense of a work tailored for the individual, in line with his or her interests and skills, and that bring value to him or her.

The office organizes 17 different career fairs, industry treks, it has launched an Alumni Mentoring program with more than 1200 alumni and an online platform to connect students with employers, events and opportunities. The career education must not be seen from students as a resource to use only when approaching graduation but as an integral part of their university's experience.

According to its mission, BEAM is currently reinventing its model for the future, moving away from the traditional model of career services and going toward the "New model of Career Connections": *"Stanford Career Education will continue to offer career counseling, résumé assistance, and career fairs, but will have a stronger emphasis on building connections through partnerships with employers from a variety of sectors, experiential learning, mentoring, and developing career communities of learners and networkers that will serve students and alumni for a lifetime."*

The main connections to develop are:

- **Connections with employers:** Career Coaches are the career education professionals equipped with different industry expertise, responsible for building partnerships with companies of various sectors, offering them a customized counseling service.
- **Connections with students and faculty communities:** Career Coaches are assigned to students communities according to the different academic majors and provide students information about different career paths in a specific industry sector, and assist them in developing readiness for employment or internship, providing individual counseling and specific career courses through collective meetings and online tools. BEAM's objective is that of providing to each student a career coach expert of a particular sector connected with the student's course of study, able to offer a personalized support.
- **Connections with mentors and experiences:** Career Treks are on site visits to companies during which students will learn more about the organizational structure and work environment. The Alumni Mentoring Program matches students with mentors, that are alumni volunteers, according to their field of study and career interest, through an on-line platform called Stanford Alumni Mentoring (SAM). Alumni will give useful advices to students who will acquire a more realistic perspective of the professional world in a specific sector and type of job; mentors can also answer to some anonymous question on the on-line discussion forum. Alumni can decide to be long term (12 weeks) or flash (just a single phone call or a coffee break with a student) mentors. The mentor will help the student in creating an own appropriate network, developing professional and communication skills and exploring career options and opportunities.

The new model will facilitate graduates' transition from university to labor market because of the connections, the professional experiences and the support of career coaches and mentors that the new career education's model will offer to Stanford's students and graduates. The two main tools, Career Coaches and the Alumni mentoring program, are innovative programs that help increasing students' employability or work readiness for a specific job sector and, at the same time, they facilitate connections with employers, thus increasing the chance of getting employment after graduation.

The Stanford Meaningful Work Certificate involves a 5 months program for students to acquire all the necessary resources for entering the path toward the meaningful work. The program involves the selection of a group of students that will take part in learning experiences, companies' sites visits and other career events and will be supported by a network of field-specific professionals to help them succeed in the labor market after graduation, among which career coaches, alumni mentors and employers. The program can be completed in just a few hours per week and allows students to participate in many additional programs. The requirements for a successful completion and the release of the relative certificate includes:

1. Meet with other peers 3 times over two quarters;
2. Choose 3 immersive experiences and 2 job search activities;
3. Do 2 informational interviews;
4. Submit reflections after activities.

The **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s Global Education and Career Development** offers to students approaching for the first time the career service an interesting tool that allows them to conduct a self-assessment of their interests, values and skills, followed by the matching of the results to potential career options, through an online career planning system called Myplan, exclusively for MIT students and graduates.

The CareerBridge is the career management system at MIT that represents a great place for students to read and apply for employers' job and internship postings, in addition to look at videos and reading information about working at their companies. Through this system, students can access to some MIT-only resources such as Myplan and Interview Stream, a webcam recorded job interview system to practice interviewing skills.

The career center incentivizes the use of informational interviewing, that is the process through which students can gather career information from people who are already working in certain occupations, companies, or geographic areas they are interested in. The information gained will help students to refine their career goals and clarify expectations and actions to undertake. At this purpose the career center makes available the MIT Alumni Directory to identify more than 3000 Alumni' contacts.

The **Harvard's Office of Career Services (OCS)** provides all his services also to alumni within

five years of graduation. Services are then tailored for different types of students: attending the College, the Graduate School of Arts and Science and the Extension School Degree Program. The OCS offers specialized advising for students regarding summer opportunities and winter-break opportunities. In fact, the OCS provides resources for planning summer activities such as study, internship, volunteer or research, in addition to provide funding resources in order to incentivize and support students to exploit their university breaks for developing their career awareness and readiness. During the winter-break the OCS organizes a series of activities such as site visits in collaboration with alumni, or unpaid domestic job shadowing experiences of a maximum of 15 days during which students can “shadow”, that is observe, an alumnus or employer in a typical workday.

The OCS organizes Alumni or Professionals in-residence programs, such as career chats or office hours divided for different disciplinary areas. The Campus interview program offers to all employers the opportunity of conducting interviews for internships or jobs vacancies at campus.

About these last two programs, Robin Mount, EdD, Director of Career, Research, and International Opportunities at the Harvard OCS, answered by email: *“Alumni in residence programs involve inviting an alumnus to campus for a day. Often a lunch Career Chat with pizza for 10-40 students followed by small group or one-on-one office hours. We try to feature alumni from many different sectors. The campus interview program is mainly utilized by fortune 500 companies because it is expensive to travel to campus and pay for a room to interview students. There are about 200 tech, finance, consumer product and consulting firms that participate each fall. We have 26 interview rooms and host about 6,000 interviews on campus a year. Employer are mostly looking to hire juniors for a summer internship or seniors for full-time employment when they graduate.”*

The **Office of Career Strategy (OCS) at Yale University** offers differentiated services for Yale College, GSAS, Postdoctoral students and Alumni. For what concerns the college’s students, there is also a tailored initiative called *Common Good & Creative Careers (CGCC)* ideated to support students interested in pursuing careers that make an impact in society and require creativity, covering the sectors of Nonprofit, Government, Education, Arts and Communication.

For students approaching for the first time the OCS, career professionals offer a number of career assessments that can supplement the on-line self-assessment process.

The Job Shadowing and Yale Career Trek Program is designed for supporting students in the career exploration phase providing them an opportunity to discover or learn more about jobs in a given career field. This program involves a “day-in-the-life” experience, giving students a practical understanding of a working day in a specific job and company, thanks to a site visit followed by the observation of an employee during work.

The Yale Career Network is a database of over 17.000 alumni who are available for networking with current students, which can discuss with them about career objectives and interests. Alumni can also decide to share their experience, skills, and expertise participating at the career panels. Alumni career

panel videos are then available in the OCS website, so that all students can see them. In the website there are also online workshops about skills development such as networking.

In the OCS online management system, the Yale Career Link, students/graduates can:

- Create a personal public profile uploading a picture, customizing information and including links to social media accounts and personal websites; students can share the link of their profiles on their social media accounts and see the number of visits to their profile;
- Schedule appointments with an OCS advisor;
- Research thousands of employers' contacts (by name, location or sector) through the Employer Directory;
- Make a reservation to attend workshops and employers' events and apply to recruiting events;
- Search for opportunities through the job posting database, which includes internship and full-time positions posted exclusively for Yale students and graduates; apply to positions and upload application material (such as the CV or cover letter);
- Keep track of job/internship applications, receive interview requests or offerings' notifications and manage them (accept/decline);
- Visit the Document Library that contains CV samples, interview guides, tips on salary negotiation, Yale current students' list and contacts of alumni willing to talk about their work experiences;
- Practice and record interactive mock interview: there are groups of interview questions created by the OCS or in alternative students can select the questions they prefer from a list of interview questions divided for different fields (for instance according to the career field or type of user). Each question has a maximum time to answer that is indicated near it; after having created the interview scheme, the student can start the mock interview with a virtual person selected by the system by default. The following image is copied from the OCS' guide to Yale Career Link for students and represents an example of display appearing when students create the mock interview.

**Figure 3.1: The mock interview building on Yale Career Link**

# Test Mock Interview

1 Setup

2 Build Interview

3 Save and Launch Interview

Search and select questions from the categories below.

Drag and drop row to reorder questions.

The screenshot displays the 'Test Mock Interview' interface. On the left, a search bar is at the top, followed by a list of question categories: Applicants-Experienced Grads, Applicants-International, Applicants-Interns, and Applicants-New Grads. Below these are several question cards, each with a text prompt and an 'ADD' button. An arrow points from the 'ADD' button of the first question to the right-hand panel. The right-hand panel, titled 'Test Mock Interview', shows a list of four selected questions, each with a number and a vertical double-headed arrow for reordering. The total duration is indicated as '12 min'. At the bottom, there are three buttons: 'CANCEL', 'PREVIOUS STEP', and 'SAVE AND CONTINUE'.

Source: *The Yale CareerLink guide* (<http://ocs.yale.edu/>)

**Princeton University's Career Services** have a special commitment in involving students since their freshman year through the provision of a self-exploration workshop called Career & Life Vision, designated to help students make decisions about next steps in their education and career paths, according to their interests. Introduced in 2014, the workshop is led by the Executive Director of Career Services and involves exercises and small group interactions. After the workshop attendance, the career service offers a personalized one-on-one guidance to each student along the way.

In general, the career service makes available specialized career advisers that follow students and graduates in their career development and employers in their recruitment process, according to their career specialization, in addition to offer counseling to parents and families of career seekers for supporting them in this lifelong process.

First of all career advisors offer a series of tools for self-assessing values, interests, personalities traits and skills (VIPS), such us Strong Interest Inventory and Clifton StrengthsFinder.

Then, the career service offers a number of career-education programs to provide students with the knowledge of different career fields, and professional development seminars to teach them the

essential skills for job search, such as business etiquette, personal branding and networking, sometimes in collaboration with alumni and employers.

HireTigers is the career service's online career-management system, inside which all students are provided with a profile since their enrollment, and once they complete it they can schedule appointments with career advisors, search for job or internships opportunities matching their interests and schedule interviews with employers, discover and register for career events, manage CVs, cover letters and other application materials, read news from Career Services and any employer they follow.

The Tiger Career Community is a community of alumni, parents, faculty and career counselors who volunteer to become mentors in order to support students with their career development and foster the creation of professional relationships that represent a great source of inspiration. In fact, at Princeton they like to say "*Career development is complicated. Community makes it simpler.*"

In particular, the TigerNet Directory is a searchable alumni directory of Princeton's graduate alumni who have pursued careers outside the academy and have volunteered to share their experiences with students. Alumni can be searched by performing a variety of targeted researches. The Directory includes some students' activities such as discussion groups and broader career information, and it is mobile friendly on all devices.

An innovative and useful service is represented by Peer Career Advisers (PCAs), who are students trained to help fellow students during their academic life providing information and guidance on Career Services' resources, benefiting from their experience. PCAs serve as a first point of contact with career service for students, they are assigned to each residential college and they offer study breaks and programs to help students learn for instance how to write a CV or look for an internship. PCAs are trained to offer the following services:

- Peer-to-peer career advising;
- CV review;
- LinkedIn critiques;
- Interview advising;
- Preparation for career fairs;
- How to use HireTiger system;
- Assistance finding job and internships' opportunities.

Princeternships are job shadowing experiences offered to students in order to allow them to visit the workplace of an alumnus host and observe him or her at work during an academic break for experiencing a typical working day in a particular workplace with an alumnus as a guide. Opportunities range between many geographic regions, industries and career fields, and could be essential for career development.

Among the various sector-based and general on-campus career fairs, there is also the Summer Internship Meetup, that will help students research a summer internship.

The service of On-campus Interviews is also offered to employers and students, in addition to the career fairs, that gives employers the possibility to conduct interviews in the career service's offices, and students can apply for them through the HireTigers system.

Finally, the Employer In Residence program consists in a half-day program in which students meet individually with alumni or employers for 20-30 minutes making career related questions and receiving useful advice in the form of an informational interview.

As the previous career service also the **Berkeley's Career Center** uses a password protected site, called Handshake, for students and alumni, that serves also as a recruiting platform for employers. Students can connect with employers, look for internship and job opportunities, be informed about and apply to career events and on-campus recruiting events, while employers can look for qualified candidates and manage the on-campus recruitment activities.

The @cal Career Network is a database of Berkeley's alumni, from recent graduates currently employed to senior professionals, who are available for sharing their career experiences with students through informational interviews in order to allow them to gather occupational or industry information prior to make career choices.

The Career Destination survey is a useful tool both for current students to know about career's outcomes of previous students, increasing their awareness of the world of work, and for the career service to better know about the results and thus the effectiveness of its activity: it consists of an annual survey of graduating students about their post-graduation plans and more specifically about their employment status.

A set of job-search tools, such as CV critiques, mock interviews and a series of online resources, are available to students and graduates.

In order to develop students' employability, the Externship Program makes students getting a realistic prospective of job positions by shadowing alumni in their working activities during Winter Break. It can last from one day to two weeks and can be structured with four approaches:

- **Traditional shadowing:** for some professions students can directly observe alumni in a typical day at work getting a lot of information and insights. Alumni have to meet with students at the beginning of the day to introduce themselves and their job, and at the end of the day for answering questions and providing commentary about the shadowing experience.
- **Observing Activities and Meeting with Colleagues:** in some job occupations, in particular those in which the alumnus have to write or do research for great part of the day, he or she has to develop an agenda of activities for the student, including for instance an initial meeting with him or her to gain an overview of the organization and the specific career field, a tour of the

facility, individual meetings with colleagues at different levels or performing different functions in the organization, and observing activities when possible.

- **Colleagues' shadowing:** if the experience involves to shadow other staff, the alumnus has to meet with the student at least one time during the day.
- **Hands-On Experience:** When possible, a small project or a small amount of hand-on job-related activity assigned to the student, combined with the observation of the alumnus at work, can be a valuable resource to the student for making him or her becoming more aware of the career field.

The Senior Associate Director of the Berkley's Career Center, Brian Guerriero, has been available to conduct a Skype interview for sharing the information about Berkeley's model of career education with the author of this thesis.

Guerriero said: *"At an high level, our model of career service is composed of three specific elements we think in terms of vision: career clarity that is about developing the ability of our students to articulate their interests and speak about their goals in a way that is meaningful for their life design; career competitiveness, that is different from competition and is about making students know how to market themselves to employers; at last career connections, that is about providing students connection between them and employers"*.

Then he underlined that their model is different from others because Berkeley is a research- focused university, thus the general model of career service of which is talking about is connected more to colleges and schools, with the exception of pre-health education, than Phd and Postdoc students that have dedicated services.

When talking about ways through which the career center try to develop students' employability and soft skills, he explained: *"In my opinion soft skills refer to a series of personal dynamics such as communication abilities. There are multiple ways through which the career service do this kind of work, always considering that we are a research focused university. An example are what we call "Lamp Courses", that are provided during the semester and are industry based, for instance we have Media and Entertainment lamp courses. These courses consist in problem solving exercises made in group about real life issues of the companies, in order to model students' problem solving, team work, communication and presentation skills. Then employers give students a feedback in those skills that will help them improve. Career service is involved in the ideation of these courses that are not intended for everyone. In fact, being application based, thus not compulsory, lamp courses are intended for those students who really want to understand where they want to go in their life, increasing their competitiveness and decision making skills."*

Guerriero specified that the Career Center is not involved in the definition of the academic curriculum but that academic partners, as in the example of lamp courses, try to involve it in the ideation of other activities, in particular requiring networking with companies, employers and other professionals.

At the question regarding the service of “skills matching” offered to employers, he answered: *“In general we use different approaches depending on employers’ requirement and types of students involved in the recruitment process. But we don’t conduct a real skills’ analysis and we are not involved in the decision making process of employers about candidates or in the evaluation of students’ skills. In fact, we don’t send CVs of individual students because we want to provide the same opportunities for everyone. The staff only gives support and advice to employers about how to be successful with on-campus recruitment, or, when an employer’s application numbers are very low, the staff can suggest employers how to better write a job posting more consistent with its needs and students’ real skills. So we are involved in the consultation of recruiting but not on the evaluation of skills”*.

However, he added that the Career Center offers some tools to employers that want to recruit Berkeley’s students or graduates, called “Resume Books” and “Resume Collections”, that represent ways to reach students and graduates who fit with employers’ hiring needs. Resume Books contains students and graduates’ CVs grouped for different types of positions, as the image below shows, that can be purchased by employers.

**Figure 3.2: CareerNet for employers - Resume Books**



## Selecting Candidate Resume Book

From your homepage, select which candidate resume book you’d like to view under **Resume Book Subscriptions** (left-hand side, center)

- **Academic Year – 2012-13 – In-Progress** for summer internship positions
- **Academic Year – 2012-13 – Graduating** for full-time post-graduation positions
- **Experienced-Hire Resume Book – Alumni & EW/BC MBA** for immediate-hire senior-level positions



Source: <http://www.haas.berkeley.edu/groups/careercenter/index.html>

Resume Collections are instead created expressly by the Career Center team under employers’ request and they are collection of CVs belonging to students or graduates who are actually interested in pursuing a career with a specific company and job position. Employers can choose to purchase this

service that includes the advertisement of the available job or internship position and the collection and delivery of CVs and cover letters by the Career Center. In this way all students or graduates get the same opportunities.

When talking about Berkeley graduates' employability, he said that these fresh graduates are already competitive in the labor market because of their strong academic background, but in particular because they undertake multiple experiences before graduation that make them highly competitive, for example volunteering initiatives, leadership experiences and internships. Thus, extra-curricular experiences promoted by the University, including the Career service, are the best ways to develop students' work readiness.

To conclude Guerriero said *"In the USA we have a new model of career service that is what we call "hyperactive communities"; it's no longer about "placement" for us because the placement model was in place 60 years ago and since then we passed a number of different models till the dotcom era in which we started rethinking the system. Our vision for the future is to think about career centers as places or spaces that bring career professionals, employers, faculties and students all together, and these communities will be more focused on performing career clarity rather than placement activities."*

**The Northeastern University's Career Development** offers to students a range of programs and tools to help them choosing the right career, starting from the VIPS' analysis.

Some interesting workshops focused on soft skills' development are delivered to students and include:

- **Delivering effective presentations:** ideated to develop oral communication skills and in particular presentation skills.
- **Mind Mapping, an organizational tool:** ideated to develop a personalized Mind Map suited to increase organizational skills.
- A series of **Networking** workshops.

If students are not able to attend workshops, all materials are uploaded on the online career service platform, called NUCareers.

The Employer in Residence program is a service dedicated to increase students' work readiness by giving them the possibility to encounter employers and receive career related information. The career center makes available to employers an office inside the center to hold 1 on 1 meetings with students; during these meetings employers can answer to students' questions about their work and company but also to more general questions regarding CV or interview tips. Employers can decide to offer a full day commitment or only a 2 hours a day commitment for more days during the academic year or in only one time. Virtual visits are an alternative way to offer the same service to employers that can't

meet students at campus but in a meaningful virtual way.

**Pennsylvania State University's Career Services** have developed The Nittany Lion Career Network (NLCN), an on-line space that connects students with employers.

Career fairs include also On-line fairs and the career service organizes students' preparation for career fairs through workshops, for instance the C.A.R.E. Fair Workshop, that is focused on developing the soft skills that employers want.

An interesting service offered to employers is the Leads/Prospects that is conceived for companies that offer entry level jobs but don't have current job openings; in fact when these jobs become available, the companies need to recruit recent graduates and thus would prefer to already have a list of available candidates. With the leads/prospect service students and recent graduates have the opportunity to "apply" for these "leads or prospects" through NLCN system, so that, when the job becomes available, they will automatically become applicants for the job positions.

The career service offers also a professional networking platform, Lion Link, in which students and graduates can connect with alumni volunteer Career Coaches, willing to provide valuable information and advice on jobs and career fields.

Students can practice job interviews through the service of in-person mock interview at the Career Service, followed by the career professional's feedback, or using an exclusive online tool for making a virtual mock interview. In this case Career Services' staff has to assist students with questions related to its use but it is not compelled to provide individual feedbacks.

The virtual interviewer will ask students some questions for which they have a limited time to answer. The interview will be recorded and students will receive the link to the video by email to review the answers or to email it to a mentor, professional or whoever to receive some feedbacks.

**University of Florida (UF)'s Career Resource Center** has made available its online portal for students and graduates, the Gator CareerLink (GCL), in the App version for mobile phones and tablets.

The portal gives access to internships and job opportunities and other programs such as job shadowing, online resource library, career events, and all the career resources provided by the Career Center. The UF Career Services App can be download from the App Store or the Google Play Store and give access to employer listings, career events, and all the on-line career resources.

**Figure 3.3: An available guide's menu in the UF Career Service App**



Source: <https://guidebook.com/browse/>

The Career Center’s website lists the top three soft skills employers look for (communication, critical thinking and teamwork) and focuses on promoting experiential education as the main way to develop them in order to have success after graduation. Experiential education involves applying knowledge to direct experience, such as attending skills workshops and making professional experiences during studies, like internships and volunteering.

In order to start building career related skills and most requested soft skills, the career service has developed for students the Gator Professional Series (GPS), a sequence of workshops that focus on discovering skills that employers seek more in a candidate and developing them putting into practice the academic expertise, in addition to other topics, such as personal branding and job-seeking strategies needed for becoming work ready.

The program involves two compulsory workshops to attend in order to gain the final GPS certificate: The former is “Mapping Professional You: Creating an Effective Resume, Cover Letters and Interview”; the latter is “Entering Your Coordinates: Establishing Your Brand Based on Your Mission and Values”. Then, it includes other two tracks within which students have to choose: the “Navigating Your Search” track that focuses on job/internship search topics, and the “Discovering Professional You” track that helps students understand their own skills. At last, workbook activities must be downloaded and completed by students. The workbook related to the track “Discovering professional

you” focuses particularly on soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, teamwork, sense of self and social responsibility, proposing students activities like reflecting on and writing down some experiential education activities (undertaken through the GPS program) in which they could have gained these skills, and writing their CV highlighting the transferrable skills developed thanks to the GPS’s activities.

The Career service’s website contains also a blog with many career tips, in particular various articles related to soft skills that employers want in many different sectors.

Career Connections is a professional mentoring program for students and graduates at UF. The program provides students with direct access to employers, alumni, and other professionals who are interested in becoming mentors.

Employers’ involvement in education is a main commitment of the career service because it helps university create work-ready students, for instance through professional development or industry education programs led and customized by employers themselves.

Even at UF, career fairs include the Summer job and internship fair, facilitating students’ search for curricular internships during the summer breaks, and the Just in time Virtual Career Fair, a useful tool for online students or campus students and graduates who can’t attend the fair physically.

Even The UF Career Center offers an online mock interview program, available inside the Gator CareerLink, that allows students to practice job interview in a private setting, searching for industry specific questions and recording the video.

**The Southwestern University’s Career Service** offers to students some workshops focused on soft skills development and career management, in order to develop or improve the skills necessary to be marketable for employment after graduation. The career service offers also an online self assessment tool for evaluating skills, the Skills Inventory, and an individual in-person service for self assess skills, the Card Sort Inventory.

Each year the career service undertakes and publishes the Annual Post-Graduate Survey to detect the satisfaction of graduating students with the career service and to ask them about their career goals, expectations and programs after graduation, in order to give current students the possibility to get ideas for possible career options.

Southwestern Career Service uses PirateLink, an online career management system for students and employers which is part of the NACElink Network, that serves as a job/internship search and CV database and submission system. It allows students to create, store and submit CVs and other application documents directly to employers, in addition to allow them to store up to 10 documents in the system, such as portfolios and cover letters. The Career Service uses the CV database even to screen candidates for on-campus recruiting events.

SU Pirate Apprentice Days is a job shadowing experience offered to students that want to have a look from inside at a particular job position, career field or company, gaining precious information from a

professional (an alumnus) and building a network of important contacts. Students can apply to this experience online through PirateLink by selecting specific companies they are interested in, and the Career Service supports them in finding the best alumni match according to their interests. Generally the experience can be scheduled at the end of a semester during break periods and lasts one day or, if the alumnus agrees, it could also last more days. Other tools and activities aimed at connecting students and graduates with alumni are an online Alumni Directory with alumni contacts, and the Career Connections BBQ event that consists in a lunchtime organized in collaboration with Alumni Relations during which students can enjoy lunch with Alumni and then have individual informational interview sessions with an alumnus who work in a particular area of interest.

Graduates who are selected for and accept an internship or job position are requested to tell their story, that will be displayed within the Success Stories on the career service's showcase and website. Southwestern University's Career Service offers students an experiential education program called Experience Externships, designed to provide up to 10 students with the possibility to visit a company to explore the work environment and career paths within its specific field. The program can be conducted with two different modalities: an half day visit that includes an initial company's presentation, a lunch with recent hires or interns, a tour of the facility with the presentation of the different departments and the time dedicated to closing questions by the participants; the second option represents a full day experience including all the activities described before and a job shadowing experience.

Alex Anderson, associate director of Career Services at Southwestern University, answered by email at all the questions sent to her. The interview is reported below:

- What is the main tool/practice/service used at your Career Service in order to increase students/graduates' employability or work readiness?

*“Research on our own students and elsewhere shows that participation in internships correlates most strongly with employability/positive employment outcomes. By promoting internships and helping students learn to search for them, market themselves to them and complete them successfully, we increase their employability.”*

- What is the main tool/practice/service used to create the “best match” between fresh graduates and employers' requirements?

*“As a liberal arts school, there are few specific criteria to search for "match." Academic course of study is not very predictive of career interest/choice. We use a very customized model of introducing students to contacts in the world of work, often our university alumni. We use LinkedIn as well as our online alumni directory to identify possible matches. When employers contact us, we post their*

*opportunity to all students and students self-select if they are interested in applying/meet the employers' criteria."*

- Do you provide some workshops about soft skills development?

*"A few, such as our annual Etiquette Dinner (no handouts available). We don't teach workshops about skills like communication, teamwork, leadership, etc., but we promote the development of these skills through career-management activities. For example, we help students learn to communicate their value in writing (on a resume) and orally (in an interview). We teach networking (and, consequently, communication: what to say when reaching out and when conducting an informational interview). We promote students obtaining internship experience, and in those experiences students exercise many soft skills and develop them."*

- Skills inventory: How does skills are assessed with this on line self-assessment tool? Are soft skills considered in the assessment?

*"The skills inventory built in to TypeFocus Careers, our main self-assessment tool, that is a virtual card sort, and the one we use for skills is called SkillScan card sort. Students sort the cards by skills they have (and then by level of proficiency) and skills they don't (and then by whether they want to develop them or not). Student click on the skill name on a virtual card and sort it into a category. Then a summary report is produced that highlights their top skills. Yes, "soft skills" (e.g. communication, teamwork, problem solving) are included.*

*Then the student and the advisor can talk through the result, and students can record those skills on paper."*

### **3.2.2. USA Career Services' best practices honored by NACE**

NACE has published in its website a list of articles describing the best practices in the field of career readiness and development undertaken by some colleges and universities' career services in the USA.

**The York College of Pennsylvania** has put in place an excellent system of embedment of career education into the academic curriculum; in fact, the Sport Management course works collaboratively and constantly with the **Career Development Center (CDC)** to analyze employers' requirements in order to improve the program and to integrate career management and career readiness skills into the program of study. This process begins categorically in the first semester with an online compulsory self assessment system to assess students' interests, skills, values, and personality. A CDC

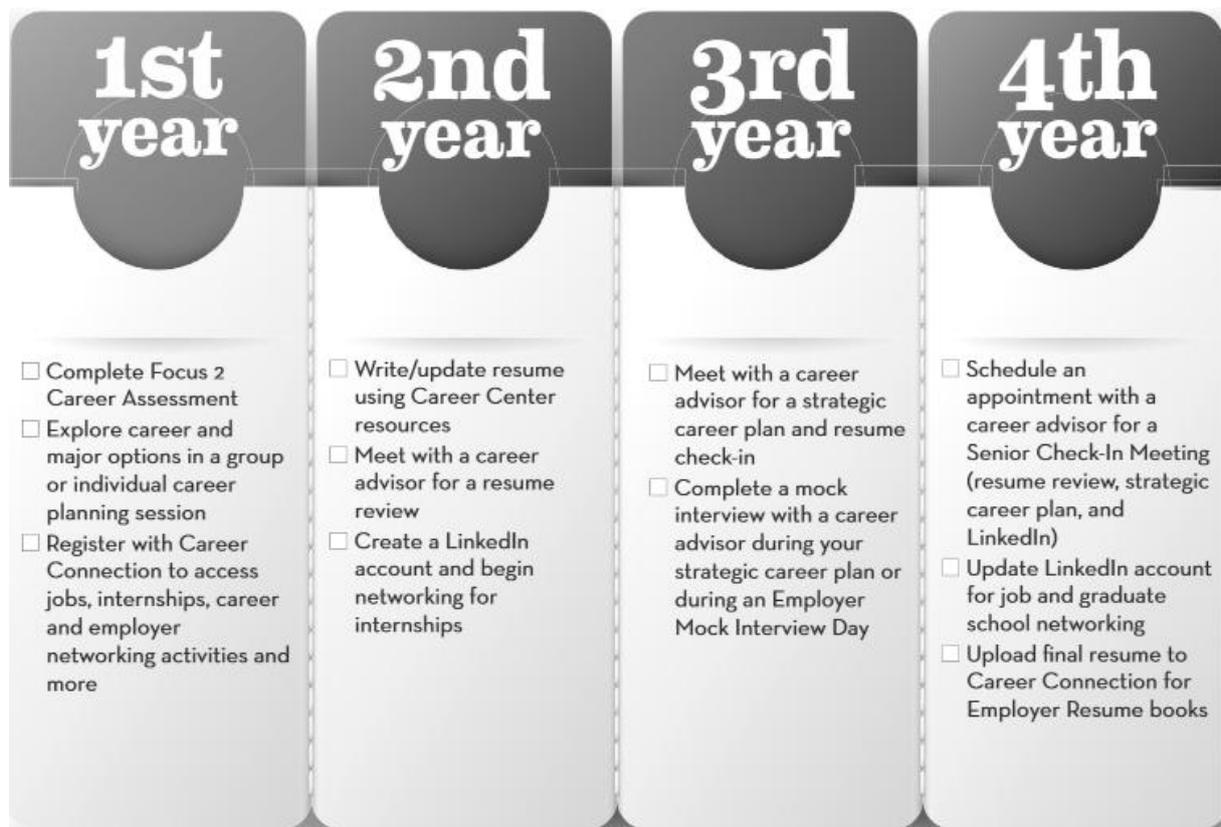
professional is then invited at class to help students process the results through interactive activities and support them with decision-making when exploring different career paths. Subsequently students must complete an assignment that consists in the identification and exploration of a particular career in the sport field, and their final work will be evaluated by a faculty member. In this initial phase, the purpose of the collaboration is that of making students aware, since the beginning of the program of study, about the importance of managing their career development and about the different career options they could undertake after graduation, making them more attractive to employers.

At the beginning of the second semester students receive instructions about writing a CV, that must be completed at the end of a series of practical experiences. These experiences must be attended during the sport management program and consists in four practicum courses, requiring 30 hours of practical experience and mentorship inside the institution's sport department, informational interviews and collaborations on real-life projects with sport professionals, in-class meetings with faculty members about their professional development, and discussions about career management topics such as networking and social media strategies. At the end of these courses students must create their CV draft that will be evaluated by the CDC staff.

Before starting the required internship experience in the final semester, students must develop a CV, a cover letter and practice a mock interview and all these elements will be evaluated and graded by the CDC and the faculty. The culminating activity for students occurs during the Sport Management Professional Day in which sport professionals come at campus to review students' CVs, make them practice mock interviews, share with students their expertise and give students a feedback about their career readiness. Feedbacks represent a precious resource for the CDC and the faculty in order to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration in creating work ready students and gain inputs for improving the program of study.

Similarly, in 2014 the **Career Center at Georgia College**, under the request of the school's President about expanding its services, has ideated the Career Planning Milestones Program. The President's objective was to ensure that each student interacted with the Career Center since the beginning of his or her academic path. Thus, without changing the curriculum, the Career Center has created a checklist of activities for students divided by the four years of study: career exploration, career preparation, career planning and career implementation.

**Figure 3.4: The Career Planning Milestones' guide**



Source: <http://www.gcsu.edu/career>

Moreover, the Career Center suggests students to go beyond these activities, for example participating at a career fair and Intern Ready or Career Transition meet ups.

Even if participation is discretionary and expected rather than required, the Career Center automatically signs up all students for the program and tracks all activities completed, thus students' career progress, through its system. Faculty can also decide to incorporate activities in the courses of study and collaborate with the Career Center to make students aware of the program and encourage their participation. In fact, according to Mary Roberts, the director of the career center, the partnership with faculty and other offices represents the key components of the program's success, because she has explained: *"Of course, by having faculty require some activities in classes, it may seem mandated to some students, but we know many say that without the class assignment, they wouldn't realize the importance of using the service."*

The 2016 has been the Career Planning Milestones Program's pilot year, focusing on the first milestone for freshmen. Data shows that 59 percent of total students had an interaction with the career center in 2016, 34 percent more than the previous year.

**The Career Development Office at Augustana College** in Rock Island, Illinois, has launched a program to track and score the professional development of students throughout their college careers, the Viking Score program. The score represents a valuable tool for the career service, and in general

for the college, to assess students’ career preparedness, but it is also a valuable tool for employers that want to recruit at Augustana College. Michael Edmondson, Augustana College’s associate Vice President of Career Development, explains that “*employers want students to have a certain skill set. Technical knowledge is important, but students also need to be savvy and have soft skills. This program tracks these areas.*”

Participation is open to all students and is voluntary. Students’ progress is tracked using a database developed by the college’s IT department; the database is managed and constantly updated by the staff members of the Career Development office after its interaction with students.

The Career Development office has ideated and suggests to students some specific activities for each class year, while other activities can be selected by students as they like, in order to customize their score. The following images show the Viking Score worksheet that includes suggested activities per year with the corresponding points, and the additional activities that can be added by the students according to their preferences, in order to customize the Viking Score.

**Figure 3.5: The Viking Score worksheet for students**

**LEVEL ONE — typical for first-year students**  
 Meet with a CORE Staff to Explore Majors (2 pts) .....  
 Create a resume, cover letter, or LinkedIn profile (2 pts each) .....  
 Log 5 hours of community service on your co-curricular transcript (2 pts).....  
 Attend a CORE Event (Workshop, Lunch & Learn, Information Session, CORE Fair) (2 pts).....  
 Choose experiences from the back to customize your Viking Score:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**LEVEL TWO — typical for sophomores**  
 Create an experiential (internship, job shadow, research) plan of action (6 pts).....  
 Attend a Fair or Retreat (ProFair, Graduate School, Study Away, Camp, Winter Exploration Retreat) (4 pts each)  
 Attend at least one full Celebration of Learning or Symposium Day Session (2 pts).....  
 Choose experiences from the back to customize your Viking Score:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**LEVEL THREE — typical for juniors**  
 Complete 40 hours of internship, research, or community service (6 pts).....  
 Participate in a study or internship off-campus program for academic credit (6 pts).....  
 Choose experiences from the back to customize your Viking Score:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**LEVEL FOUR — typical for seniors**  
 Create a post-graduation(job, gap year, graduate school) plan of action (8 pts).....  
 Create a portfolio of work or personal brand website (8 pts) .....  
 Choose experiences from the back to customize your Viking Score:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Source: <https://augustana.net/academics/core/career-development>

**Figure 3.6: The additional activities for students to customize their *Viking Score***

<b>2 POINT EXPERIENCES</b>
Meet with a CORE Ambassador for a Viking Score Appointment
Update your resume, cover letter, or LinkedIn profile
Meet with a CORE staff to discuss Vocational Exploration
Complete a career or professional development assessment
Complete a term as an on-campus student employee
Join a service organization on campus and add it to your co-curricular transcript
Volunteer in a community-based UMC interdisciplinary research project
Attend a Study Away Information Meeting for a specific program
Add your involvement in student organizations to your Co-curricular transcript
Talk to one professor about research/creative scholarship opportunities in their field
Publish academic works in Digital Commons
Visit the EDGE center to learn about opportunities for professional development

<b>4 POINT EXPERIENCES</b>
Complete a mock interview
Complete a minimum of 4 hours of job shadow
Obtain a leadership position within a student organization
Complete an informational interview with a professional in your field
Attend the EXPLORATION Winter Retreat
Meet with the EDGE center on professional portfolio strategy
Participate in an international athletic or ensemble travel program or tour
Attend an IOP skills or reentry workshop
Assist with a professor or other student's research/creative scholarship project
Serve as a program ambassador for a past study away program
Take a UMC Sustainable Working Landscapes Initiative course
Participate in Sustained Dialogues

6 POINT EXPERIENCES
Complete a personal statement
Complete 40 hours of community service with one organization
Complete the LSC250 Vocational Exploration Course
Participate in ADs National Student Advertising team for 1 year
Attend an off-campus conference related to your field(s) of study
Complete a part-time internship in EDGE, UMC, or CORE
Apply for research/creative scholarship Summer Fellowship, REU or similar

8 POINT EXPERIENCES
Serve as an AmeriCorps service member for a year
Complete 105 hours of internship or research
Complete the Non-Profit Leadership Development Certificate
Complete the Certificate in Entrepreneurial Studies
Complete a full-time summer internship in EDGE, UMC, or CORE
Complete a full-time summer research or other creative scholarship opportunity
Present at Celebration of Learning or other venue on your research, international experience, project, or internship

Source: <https://augustana.net/academics/core/career-development>

Between activities there are the following workshops proposed by the Career Development office:

- **Exploring your vocation and purpose;**
- **Planning your life and career;**
- **Your PATH (Personal assessment of traits and habits) to success:** this workshop tries to develop some personal and interpersonal skills, such as collaboration with colleagues, understanding others, dealing with change, self-discipline and goal orientation, that represent important soft skills for having success in the world of work.
- **Understanding the world of work:** this workshop focus on the development of the transferrable skills most requested by employers, such as professionalism and intercultural effectiveness, in order to impress employers and have a successful transition to the workplace.

These activities are designed to develop the skills employers seek in their internship and job candidates, and to help students understand the opportunities that are available to them for their career development. For example, first-year students have the task of meeting Career Development's staff to discuss CV format and career goals, completing one vocational or career assessment and attending one

career workshop, and for each completed task two points are assigned to the student. As students move on to the following years, the assignments are more in-depth, for instance seniors are charged with completing 105 hours of an internship, attending four career workshops, creating a portfolio of work and a personal brand website, and the points for each assignment increase to eight points per task.

The suggested minimum points per year are: 10 points in the first year, 30 accumulated total points in the second year and 60 in the third years, while the recommendation made by the Career Development Office is that students accumulate 100 Viking Points by the time they graduate.

A higher Viking Score indicates a higher level of career preparedness that will be appreciated by employers.

This is what a representative of the global consulting company HayGroup said about the program: *"Viking Score will give students a rigor around preparing to join the workforce that few others will have. Some of the outputs (professional and mistake-free resumes, updated LinkedIn profiles with professional head shots) will give them a presence many new grads don't have. A focus on soft skills will also give them a huge advantage: if I have two candidates with similar educational experience, the one with better soft skills will get the job every time."*

In order to collect data about students' performance during internships and in particular about the level of the most important soft skills owned by these students, for many years the **Mississippi State University (MSU)'s Career Center** has incorporated the university accreditation standards into its interns' evaluations. In this way employers provided a secondary source, in addition to accreditation agencies, to evaluate students' performances and thus the effectiveness of the academic curriculum and the career service in creating work ready graduates, by making employers evaluate the theory and skills learned in the classroom by students and assess if these knowledge and competencies have been applied in the work environment.

Scott Maynard, Director of the MSU career center, explained that students benefit from knowing what employers think about their skills in a particular area, and especially what are the skills considered more important, in order to improve for their next work experiences, meanwhile university benefits from receiving a guide that highlights the principal skills in various fields that students need to develop during the academic path.

The MSU Career Center surveys employers at the end of each work semester. The survey addresses soft skills such as communication skills, work ethic, problem solving, and other topics such as the student's ability to work in multidisciplinary teams and apply academic knowledge to solve problems.

The system is able to customize the survey by major, so that specific questions can be added to each major-related survey and results can be analyzed separately in order to identify the trends within each major and, if a particular competency problem is observed, the curriculum can be adjusted to address that specific problem.

Moreover, Scott Maynard said: *"That's been beneficial as we've put more emphasis on the evaluations."*

*The employers understand the goals of the work experience and prepare the students with projects on which they can be evaluated."*

Through interns' evaluations, the Career service can capture competencies' data that represent a valuable resource for university, thus a collaborative effort between the career service and faculties is required in order to develop an effective survey containing all the standards that must be captured. For what concern career service's benefits, the evaluation system provides another possibility for it to create value across the university.

In 2013 the **Career Services at Rutgers University**, New Brunswick, began implementing the strategic plan for the next three years (2013-2016) that included new positions and units. The main goal was to implement a career cluster model to move from a major-centric focus on programming and delivery of career services to one that was more industry-centric. The goal is reported in the top position in the strategic plan in this way: *"Develop a career cluster model organized around Industries while maintaining ongoing communication with Academic departments"*.

The main required actions were those of identifying the main cluster groups for each Career Development Specialist (CDS) changing their role from generalists to industry experts, and of better tailoring services for students and employers according to these clusters.

Each of the nine CDS has been assigned to a cluster, such as Business and Communication or Performing Arts, becoming a subject expert in their industry.

In addition to giving assistance to students interested in their cluster and maintaining a constant communication (at least one meeting per semester) with faculty members in the areas of study that correspond to their cluster, the CDS have to connect with almost 10 employers a year linked to their cluster in order to encourage deeper involvement and collaboration among these employers and the career services and to expand their recruiting activity on campus.

At that time, William Jones, director of Operations and Strategic Initiatives, explained: *"Career specialists when working with faculty and staff can use the industry expertise that they're gaining from their employer interactions, and when they're working with employers, they can bring the student side and the academic piece into the conversation as well."*

Jennifer Broyles, Director of Career Development and Experiential Education, added: *"We're focusing on skill development. It seems that a lot of employers are seeking students of all majors with certain skills. A lot of our focus on clusters and having subject matter experts is to help students define what skills they need and what kind of experiential opportunities they need to engage in beyond the classroom, and then refining those skills based on whatever cluster or industry they're interested in."* Moreover, according to Rick Hearin, the Executive Director of university's Career Services, the key advantage of a career cluster model is that it engages students more deeply and meaningfully in the career development process.

Thanks to this restructuring plan, various functions of the office are now based upon these clusters,

including counseling services to students and employers, online and face-to-face interactions with them, panel events and students' site visits to employers' locations; moreover the Career Services office has reformatted its online tools according to it. For example, students must select one or more clusters when completing their profile in the career online system, *CareerKnight*, and then they receive communications and view job and internship postings specific to their designated career interests and industries. Also Employers are required to select one or more career clusters when posting a job or internship position.

### **3.3. Best practices of the top universities' career services in the UK**

The UK represents, as the rankings show, the second most important country for universities' career services' excellence. Even in this section, career services are divided within those appearing in the top positions of the previously cited rankings, and those honored by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) for their excellent services offered to students and employers. Founded in 1967 AGCAS is the professional body for careers and employability professionals working with higher education students and graduates in the UK and Ireland. It includes almost 2600 individual members and 160 institutional members, and it is focused on promoting standards, providing training, events, support and opportunities to its members, in order to make them achieve excellence in career service delivery.

#### **3.3.1. Top ranked career services in the UK**

Among the top ranked Universities with the best career services in the world, for the UK we always find the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, the most ancient and prestigious universities of the UK.

**The University of Cambridge's Careers Service** in England makes available to students and graduates a library that consists in a comfortable and supportive space with a dedicated staff, the information team, that gives students information and guidance on available career resources. The library contains I-pads, internet-enabled PCs and free Wi-Fi for career-related researches, and a printer for printing CVs or other needed documents. Within the career-related material, feedbacks on interviews, assessment centers and graduates' jobs collected by the career center, are exclusively available in the library and not in the online platform. Students can reserve a place at the library through the online career service system.

Among the online resources, GradLink represents the link with the working world because it consists in a database of about 1600 Cambridge Alumni who have agreed to be contacted informally by

students to talk about their career. Students can read their career profiles in this accessible database and email them, through the career service online system, with career-related questions.

“Whats’ on” is an online diary with all the events organized and promoted by the careers services, visible inside the password-protected Career Service’s online system.

The Career Service organizes some employer-led skills sessions, that represent for students practical opportunities to learn how to succeed in the recruitment process and working environment, through the acquisition of important job-search skills and soft skills, such as sessions on CV and application documents’ writing for different sectors, competency-based interviews, assessment centre preparation, commercial awareness, business etiquette and negotiation skills development.

Also career service professionals lead some skills workshops, that consist in interactive experiences to help students identify their skills and learn some technical or soft skills such as numeracy and reasoning. Great part of these sessions are recorded and made available to download as podcasts in the students’ online platform.

As the American counterparts, the Cambridge Careers Service is not allowed to forward students and graduates’ CV to employers or preselect them for internships and job vacancies. The Careers Service only advertises vacancies and is also available to advertise those sent by recruitment agencies.

**The Careers Service at Oxford University** in England is strongly committed in improving its students’ employability skills. The staff answered in the following way to the email sent at the purpose of this research in order to acquire information about its best practices aimed at improving student’s employability and the skill match between graduates and employers: *“You recently asked about how we were trying to improve the “skills match” between new graduates and employers. We are aware that an Oxford degree alone will not secure our students a job on graduation. Experience and proof of professional skills are also necessary when making successful applications. We therefore offer a range of programs to help increase the employability of our students”*.

The main skills programs that allow students, in particular business students, develop work-relevant skills, as described in the email and in the website, are:

- **The student consultancy:** in this program students work in small groups over a period of seven or eight weeks in order to provide consultancy in strategic issues to or address a specific business problem for local businesses, communities and charity organizations in Oxfordshire. This program equips students with demonstrable soft skills such as team working, consulting skills, business awareness, customer orientation, communication, self-management and problem solving, all key employability skills.

For taking part to the program students must pass an assessment centre, then the selected ones will receive some training sessions during the first week in order to be ready for undertaking the project. These sessions include an introduction to consulting and key business issues, and

to conducting market researches, interviews, and making reports . Each team of students is assigned to a client organization, based on students' preferences when possible, and it must then organize its meetings with the client to discuss the project. The career service will always support students with any problem or question, but the main purpose of this program is to make students communicate directly and autonomously with the clients. When the teams conclude the project, they have to produce a final report for the client with their findings and suggestions. The Careers Service' staff explains in the email: *“The Student Consultancy is a program that supports teams to act as consultants. Participants work to provide a solution to a real business problem faced by an Oxford firm, social enterprise, or other organization. This gives students an opportunity to gain consultancy experience and develop more commercial awareness. The firms include retailer, service providers, charities and start-up organizations across a range of sectors and projects undertaken have included improving websites, and analyzing market share.”*

- **Entrepreneur in Residence:** it is a business mentoring program that helps students explore their work readiness starting from a review of the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in their career. Mentors teach students how to prepare a business plan, giving them the opportunity to develop important transferable skills such as strategic planning and problem solving as well as boost their commercial awareness. *“This program offers a great opportunity to develop transferable skills such as strategic planning and problem solving as well as boost your commercial awareness. The service is flexible and tailored to suit students and their needs. After 1:1 mentoring support we hope the student will have gained the confidence to take an idea forward; have developed a working business plan with a clear vision and strategy to achieve it; and be able to demonstrate leadership qualities and transferable skills, knowledge and experience to prospective employers.”*
  
- **Springboard Program** (for women): the program's aim is to enable female students to take more control over their lives by helping them setting clear goals for the future, making decisions and developing the skills and self-confidence needed to reach goals. The topics covered by the program are an initial self assessment of interests, values and skills, goals setting and career planning, how to deal with change and stressing situations, how to develop assertiveness, listening and making an impact, how to be positive, flexible and develop confidence. The structure of the program consists in:
  - Three one-day consecutive and related workshops;
  - A one-day stand alone workshop;
  - A personal activities' workbook;

- Meetings with inspirational female guest speakers;
- An opportunity to create a development community.

The staff explains that Springboard is *“an award-winning program for professional women, with separate programs tailored to our undergraduates and Masters students. ‘Ignite’ is a one-day workshop put on for female undergraduates and postgraduates which gives them an opportunity to explore values, create goals and build assertiveness and networking strategies.”*

- **“Insight into...” program:** this kind of program is delivered for a variety of different fields, including Business, Medicine and Teaching. Taking as an example the “Insight Into Business” program, its aim is to make students acquire and demonstrate “commercial awareness”. The program consists of three interactive workshops intended to help students gain the main business skills, as well as explain the key aspects of professional life. The staff adds: *“for students interested in teaching or medicine, for example, we provide work-shadowing opportunities with placements lasting from 1-3 days. Insight into Business covers business operation, strategy and finance principles and helps students demonstrate commercial awareness to employers.”*
- **Micro-internships:** they consist in short work experiences, from 2 to 5 days, which are available for students at the end of each term inside companies across Oxfordshire and London. A specific work project is assigned to students, which will help them develop their professional skills such as commercial awareness and a range of employability skills such as self-management, problem solving, communication skills. Moreover these project experiences can add a value to students’ CVs, in addition to make a possible impact on the host companies. Work projects can be research-based or professional, and host organizations can range from investment banks and consultancy companies to tech start-ups and heritage sites.

The email goes on: *“We have an Employer Relations team who liaise with all sorts of firms who are looking to employ our graduates, from multi-national corporations who are regular employers, to local start-up companies who might only be looking to recruit a single graduate at the start of their enterprise. The team help firms post job vacancies on our (password protected) website, set up careers fairs for them to attend and meet our students, organize mailshots, put them in touch with student societies, and offer rooms where they can make presentations or conduct interviews.”*

Employers’ involvement in career service’s activities is also considered important in order to help students develop their employability. The Careers Service organizes and delivers different programs and activities that involve employers’ support:

- Job search skills sessions led by recruiters, related to CV writing and interviews and assessment preparation;
- Mock interviews led by recruiters of different organizations;
- Recruiter in Residence sessions which consist in a half day of 15 minute one-to-one conversations with students. These sessions offer students the opportunity to meet recruiters at Oxford Careers Service in an informal environment. The content of these sessions is left entirely up to the recruiter, which may for example choose to review and provide advice on students' CVs or to undertake a generic session during which students can make some questions about some specific career paths, about working for the recruiter's organization or within its sector or industry.

CareerConnect is the password protected area of the career service's website, accessible by Oxford students, alumni, staff and employers. Students can look for current job and internship's opportunities, career fairs and events, they can book an appointment with a career advisors by filtering the advisers by area of interest if they have a specific question, book a mock interview with an employer, discover and register for Skills Programs and consult the Employer Directory. Students can use filters to refine their search and, clicking on a company name, they can read all the information about that organization including the opportunities it is currently offering in CareerConnect along with the events and fairs it is going to attend. Moreover, the system gives students the possibility to keep track of their activities, thanks to the section "My..." under each menu, such as My events, My opportunities, My appointments.

### **3.3.2. The UK Career Services' best practices honored by AGCAS**

AGCAS has sponsored the eighth "National Undergraduate Employability Awards" (NUE Awards) which took place on February 2017 in London and rewarded three categories of stakeholders in the graduate employability field: universities, employers and students. Among the university category winners are two AGCAS members: the University of Kent won the award for the best career services, and the University of Southampton' Employer Engagement Team won the award for the most improved commitment to students' employability.

Moreover, AGCAS Awards for Excellence is an initiative ideated by the association itself to reward each year good practices among its career services' members, and in 2016 the University of Southampton won two of the ten awards: the award for academic engagement and the award for partnership with professional services. The award for employability was won by the University of Greenwich's Employability and Careers Service, thanks to a project dedicated to increase the employability of minority students (black, Asian and minority ethnic) with a focus on tailoring services' delivery to the needs of these students, starting from the creation of *career clinics*, "pop-up"

careers centers in high footfall areas.

**The University of Kent Careers and Employability Service** organizes each year the *Employability Festival* that is a month-long event, during which academic departments and all the departments of professional services at Kent University collaborate to offer students a series of companies' presentations, skills workshops, meetings with guest speakers and industry experts and career fairs divided by specific job type (for instance part time or language jobs).

The following image shows the program for the first two days at the employability fair of October 2016.

**Figure 3.7: The Employability Festival's program at the University of Kent (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2016)**

Date	Time	Location	Event	EP Points
Mon 10 Oct	11.00-16.00	G0-06	<b>Individual appointments with Justin Penney from EmployAbility:</b> Justin Penney from EmployAbility ( <a href="http://www.employability.org.uk">www.employability.org.uk</a> ) will be offering individual appointments to students with disabilities. He can offer advice on gaining employment and getting any support needed in the recruitment process, as well as in the workplace.	10
	12.00-13.00	R2-09	<b>Starting your employment journey:</b> Enterprise Rent-A-Car will be offering industry advice about Employability Fair etiquette, recruitment, interview skills, networking, dress codes and more.	10
	13.00-14.00	R2-09	<b>Presentation skills:</b> Presentations can vary dependent on your audience. You could be presenting your ideas to your peers or at a job interview. At this session Teach First will provide you with top tips to master your presentation style.	10
Tue 11 Oct	11.00-12.00	SCL Group Learning Room *	<b>The Employability Points scheme:</b> What is it all about? This bitesize interactive session will give you the chance to find out further information about the University's unique Employability Points scheme. This will include information on how to earn points, log points and ultimately, get rewarded!	5
	12.00-13.00	SCL Group Learning Room *	<b>Employability through volunteering:</b> Gain an understanding of how volunteering whilst at university can enhance your employability and how GK Unions rewards volunteers.	5
	13.00-14.00	SCL Group Learning Room *	<b>Opportunities in risk management:</b> Looking for a career that is well-paid, globally portable and with a good work-life balance, in a people-focused profession? Put aside any preconceptions about insurance and learn about B2B risk management. Get insight from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic graduates and the Chartered Insurance Institute.	10

Source: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/ces/empfest/>

As the program's image shows, there is also a focus on soft skills teaching, such as the workshop on presentation or oral communication skills.

The *Employability Points* (EP) scheme, cited in the program, is an initiative ideated by the career service in order to reward students for their involvement in some extra-curricular activities during their academic path at the University of Kent. Students can obtain 'Employability Points' after having undertaken extra-curricular activities, such as volunteering, work experiences or events' attendance, which, under judgment of career service' staff, could contribute to develop valuable soft skills. Students who want to participate at the program have to create their "*EPS Journey*" on *MyFolio*, the online students' profile page that is intended to collect the activities students have completed and the related points and potential rewards gained, in addition to contain any document, picture, video or link students desire to publish for attracting employers. Students gain points on the basis of the activities' relevance and commitment demonstrated, and towards the end of each academic year they can also claim a reward. Rewards range from paid internships, work shadowing opportunities, training sessions, vouchers, and other activities offered by companies, that should be completed during the summer break. Last year (academic year 2015-2016) 617 rewards were offered to students. Among the training sessions a lot of skills workshops were offered, such as leadership, general business and customer service workshops, along with employability sessions tailored to different careers.

The Employability Points Scheme represents a bridge for moving from education to employment, because it encourages students to engage with extra-curricular activities which help them develop a set of work-relevant 'soft skills', becoming attractive to employers.

The Careers Employability Award is another interesting initiative in the field of student's employability ideated for students. The award is obtained by students who complete all the quizzes and assignments of the related program in the Moodle platform. Activities require just a few hours to be done and are designated in order to improve students' career planning and decision making and job-search skills. After the completion students will receive the University of Kent Careers Employability Award certificate that can be added to the CV and showed to employers, in addition to gaining 60 employability points. There are also some subject specific awards (for students of Science, Business, Art, English and Social Politics) that have some content adapted to each subject. The following table lists all the activities that constitute the general Careers Employability Award:

**Table 3.1: The Careers Employability Award' scheme**

**Quizzes (students must complete all of these)**

You need to get 75% to pass each quiz (except the special interest topics for which you only need 10%), but you are allowed unlimited attempts and there is no time limit.

Employability skills quiz

How can I develop the skills employers want?

Test your spelling and grammar!

What makes you happy at work?

How commercially aware are you?

Special interests topic lesson (you only need to get 10% to pass this)

Interview preparation

Practice interview

What are the most common interview questions?

Aptitude tests and assessment centres

CVs and covering letters - drag and drop quiz

CV quiz

Career planning drag and drop quiz

**Assignments: you must complete 3 of the following:**

**Analyse your skills and learn to make top quality applications**

**Do you want to live to work or work to live?**

**Researching careers** (if you prefer, this can be done as a **presentation, podcast** or **video** email bw@kent.ac.uk for details)

**Social media**

**Choosing a career**

**Submit a CV**

**Action Planning**

**Feedback form**

*Source: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/moodle.htm>*

KEW-NET (“Kent experiences of work network”) is the online platform exclusively for students and members of the University of Kent, that is intended as a professional networking and e-mentoring platform. Inside this system there is an E-Mentoring platform designed to help current students and fresh graduates connect with Alumni who have agreed to offer their support and advice in career related issues and questions. A directory lists all the names, job titles and industry types of Kent alumni, who can manage their own profile and decide what additional information share with others. An interesting tool available in this platform is a map that allows students and graduates see in which part of the country or the entire world other students and alumni work, having the possibility to ask for support and advice, for instance if they are relocating to another city or country for work.

Inside the **University of Southampton's Careers Destinations** there is an Employer Engagement Team specialized in engaging and supporting employers at on-campus events and careers activities for students, developing and advertising job and internships opportunities for students, organizing careers fairs, giving counseling service to employers and connect them with faculty and students communities. The team have developed a series of initiatives and tools that involve employers in career services' provision. Within the events and workshops the career service proposes some interactive employability skills workshops led by employers aimed at helping students develop and promote the skills essential to their companies, such as leadership, networking and communication skills.

The online platform allows businesses to publish, edit and remove vacancies and communicate directly with students.

The Excel Southampton Placement program offers financial support to local SMEs and third sector organizations that want to give students the possibility to experience an internships during vacation periods (from 4 to 12 weeks). Moreover an award is assigned to companies and students after the completion of the program for their contribution.

Through the Student Consultancy program, the career service offers the possibility to local SMEs and public or third sector organizations to receive a free consultancy service in a specific business issue or project from Southampton students. In this way both parts benefit from the program, students by developing highly valued hard and soft skills, such as commercial awareness, creativity, innovation and resilience, while organizations by receiving free consulting service by motivated and brilliant young students.

In addition, the career service involves employers in and connect them with students thorough work shadowing opportunities and the career mentoring program.

### **3.4. Best practices of the top ranked universities' career services in Italy**

According to the consulted global rankings, the two top ranked Italian universities with the best career services are the Politecnico di Milano and The Bocconi University in Milan.

The **Bocconi University** has been classified as first in 2016 among Italian universities by the Global University Employability Ranking thanks to the highest "employability" indicator. Its **Career Service** has adopted the American model of career service, offering a range of services similar to those previously listed.

For instance, the Bocconi's Career Service makes available for students a Placement Library equipped with all sorts of resources related to the world of work. In this space students can organize their job or internship search, finding useful information thanks to the available tools, documents and the support of a dedicated team. This team helps students write their CV, cover letter and find companies' contacts

in Italy and abroad, in addition to help them understand job descriptions and different career fields. The In-Company Training is an experience that offers students the possibility to spend a brief period of time inside a business reality, meeting with professionals from many different functions in order to acquire a better understanding of the world of work; students are grouped in teams of a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 25 people. The In-Company Training consists in a theoretical part made of presentations and discussions, and a second practical part that involves a business game and team projects. The program could be undertaken in Italian as well as foreign companies.

Drop-in sessions are ideated for giving students the possibility of meeting individually and in an informal environment some companies' representatives and employers. During meetings students can have an informal conversation with them asking questions about their companies, the work environment and the industry to which belong to, along with being informed about current job and internship's opportunities, career paths and the modality of the selection process at their companies. Moreover students can receive interesting tips from employers in order to succeed in the selection process and have the opportunity to give them their CV.

Employers are also involved in some career counseling initiatives such as the **Training Seminars**, that are intended to present to students the soft skills most requested in today's labor market, giving them a chance to develop these skills in order to have success after graduation.

The **Politecnico di Milano's Career Service** offers a series of traditional activities similar to those delivered by the Cà Foscari's Career Service, ranging from career talks, career fairs, companies' presentations and workshops led by professionals, to assessment center's simulations. Moreover, differently from the Cà Foscari's Career Service, it has a strong focus on the international scenario; in fact it organizes international career fairs for providing students with job opportunities outside Italy, and a series of activities for international students such as round tables, mock interviews and open desks. "*Internationalization is key: we work to expand our network with employers and other career centers on a global level*" is one of the Career Service's statements.

Thanks to its strong commitment on developing graduates' employability and connecting them with employers nationally and internationally, the Career Service is ranked at the first place in Italy in 2016 by the QS' Graduate Employability Ranking. "*We attempt to provide Polimi students with a sincere picture of the job market by creating a direct channel of communication between the university and the employers*".

([http://www.braude.ac.il/files/tempus\\_iris/Assts/WP4/Workshop2/Polimi\\_Career\\_Service.pdf](http://www.braude.ac.il/files/tempus_iris/Assts/WP4/Workshop2/Polimi_Career_Service.pdf))

Francesca Saracino, Head of Career Service, answered at the questions sent by email at the purpose of this research in the following way:

- What is the main tool/practice/service used at your Career Service in order to increase students/graduates' employability and soft skills?

*“The Career Service of Politecnico di Milano offers a wide variety of services and tools made to develop the employability skills of the students of our university. The most innovative and efficient one is a new space called “Career Service Assessment Center” which was inaugurated only a few months ago. It is a center where up to 80 students per month have the opportunity to go through assessment center simulations conducted by experienced HR assessors coming from the university’s partner employers. During the simulation, 10 students have to tackle a group task and an individual exercise, followed by plenary feedback and a moment of assisted self-evaluation of the soft skills put in practice during the session (effective communication, decision making, leadership, teamwork, problem solving).*

*The space is also open every day and is always supervised by a career advisor who offers to more than 200 students every month individual support and advice on CV writing, job and internship search and useful information related to the transition from university to the world of work (different industries and job positions, skills requested by companies, employment data, etc.)”.*

- What is the main tool/practice/service used to create the “best match” between fresh graduates and employers’ requirements? In what way do you find out soft skills requirements of companies?

*“The first preliminary practice needed before facing the “best match” issue is real customer care: a career center must be available and easy-to-find for the employer, able to listen actively to them/speak their language and understand their needs and provide consultancy on how to do graduate recruitment within the university.*

*This is why employers can speak to the our staff every day at all times by phone, email or in person. The job of 6 people in my office consists in establishing and maintaining relations with thousands of companies every year.*

*Secondly, a “good employer-candidate match” is possible only if the Career Service offers a partnership which entails consultancy to help the employers:*

- *Understand the university context (by asking questions such as: how many graduates are available? How easily do they find a job after graduation? Is my target for recruitment compatible with these numbers? How many companies compete with me for the same target? What is the perception of my employer brand?, etc.);*
- *Identify a clear target and long term goal for recruitment within the single university;*
- *Do employer branding proactively on campus.*

*Depending on the target and goal, the solution to the “best match” issue is for the career center to deliver a plan of actions which includes a dedicated digital and campus communication plan (banners, social media posts, emails, flyers, etc.) followed by:*

- *Job postings online;*

- *Job fairs;*
  - *Interviews or assessments on campus;*
  - *Special events such as workshops, round tables, speed interviews, competitions, etc.”*
- Do you conduct the “matching” service, in the sense of preselecting students’ CVs on the basis of companies’ requirements (if requested by them)?

*“Pre-selecting CVs is difficult if not impossible (when you receive many requests from employers) and useless if the university has good employment data (such as the case of Politecnico di Milano). And in general today’s students prefer to choose instead of being chosen. We offer access to CVs as a service but in very few cases and only because provided for by law, but I agree with our American counterparts: it is an outdated service since university career services have moved from the “placement” paradigm to that of “employability” and “career development”.”*

This interview shows that also in Italy we are going toward a new model of academic career service, aimed at developing students’ career clarity and employability and creating connections with the corporate world, in order to give students all the necessary tools for making a successful transition into the world of work. In other word this means that the success of the graduate-employer match will be a spontaneous outcome of this new focus among career service’s activities.

### **3.4.1. Conclusions**

This chapter has introduced the most excellent universities’ career services on the basis of their outcomes in terms of graduates’ employability and employment rate of success after graduation, according to some national and international rankings, and on the basis of some awards or recognitions for their best practices assigned by two considerable national associations, NACE in the USA and AGCAS in the UK.

According to these rankings the most recurrent top listed career services belong to the USA and UK universities; this is a reason way only these two countries (along with Italy) have been considered as a benchmark at the purpose of this analysis, in addition to be the first countries in which academic career services have started developing.

Best practices in the field of employability and soft skills’ development range from the embedment of career education inside the curriculum with the involvement of career professionals in class, to employers’ surveys about interns’ performance in order to better tailoring career services according to employers’ skills requirements and consequently improving students’ work readiness, and the ideation of score-based programs with a set of employability development activities in order to track students’ work readiness and assign them some points and a final certificate that could represent an

attractive element for employers.

In addition to these innovative practices intended to increase future graduates' employability, the main element resulting from the analysis is that extra-curricular experiences undertaken during the academic path, such as summer internships, job shadowing or volunteering experiences, are the main activities that career services of the sample try to offer to their students in order to make them develop the main soft skills sought out by employers and, as a result, their work readiness. Moreover, connections with employers and alumni are created and highly promoted by career services as the first mean through which students and graduates can access the world of work.

As the examples of the Bocconi University and Politecnico of Milano show, also the other Italian universities should start reinventing their career services' practices taking into example the American and English model, in order to offer to their students an higher range of employment's possibilities after graduation.

## **CHAPTER 4. Best practices derived from the international benchmarking, and their feasibility in the Cà Foscari's Career Service**

### **4.1. The general trend among the best career services in U.S.A, U.K and Italy**

The international benchmarking conducted at the purpose of this thesis and described in the third chapter has been intended to provide a list of the best practices put in place by the most excellent colleges and universities' career services in the world, in particular in USA, UK and Italy.

Among the best practices observed more frequently or that provide great benefits to students or employers, we find:

- **Career Coaches:** they are career professionals who are qualified in a specific sector or industry, representing an effective link between students coming from different majors and companies belonging to a wide range of sectors, each one connected with a major. In this way they are able to offer a more tailored and valuable service, addressing the specific needs of both students and employers.
- **Career Peers:** they are senior students trained by career service's professionals to support fellow students with career-related information and guidance on career service's resources. They serve as a first point of contact with career service for students; in general they are assigned to each campus and during study breaks they help students learn for instance how to write the CV, look for an internship or use the online career management system.
- **Alumni Mentoring program:** This program is intended to connect students with mentors, who are alumni volunteers, through an Alumni Directory provided in the private area of the career service's website. Thanks to this directory students can choose the alumnus to contact according to their fields of study and career interests, and can invite the alumnus for a conversation in the form of an informational interview. Alumni can choose the number of times and the way to get in contact with students (Phone call, Skype Call or in person) and are expected to give useful advices regarding the job search process or provide information about their specific job profession, career field or company. In this way students will acquire a more realistic perspective of the world of work. An innovative and useful tool connected with the Alumni Directory is the interactive virtual map that allows students see in which part of the country or the entire world alumni work, having the possibility to ask for support and advice if they desire to work or study abroad.
- **Job shadowing:** this is a short unpaid "work" experience that can last from 1 to a maximum of 15 days during summer or winter breaks, in which students can "shadow", that is observe,

an alumnus or employer in a typical workday, gaining a practical understanding of a specific job, career field and company. The program typically involves a company's tour, some meetings with colleagues from various functions, followed by the observation of an alumnus or colleague during work and sometimes it can include also the collaboration in a specific project.

- **Employers/Alumni In-Residence program:** this program involves inviting an alumnus or an employer to campus for a day and consists in an informal moment with students, such as a lunch, followed by individual or small groups office hours lasting about 15 minutes, during which students can make questions related to the alumnus/employer's company, such as the selection process and the open positions, or more general questions about his or her job profession and career field. This program is intended to invite on-campus alumni and employers from many different sectors.
- **Summer internship fair and virtual fair:** the former is an on-campus career fair intended to help students find curricular internships for the summer break; the latter is an on-line career fair useful for online students or campus students who have not the possibility to attend the fair physically, and in particular for incentivizing international mobility giving also to foreign companies the possibility to recruit students from a foreign university.
- **Embedment of career activities into the curriculum:** Career-related activities embedded in the curriculum are compulsory activities divided for the different years of the course of study and can include for instance an initial skills assessment followed by career planning activities and the development of job search skills, such as writing a good CV and practice a mock interview, in the following years, up to including more specific career activities according to the different majors. These activities are developed and carry out by the career service in collaboration with the faculties and a great part of them involves the presence of career professionals in class.
- **Students Consultancy:** this program is intended to support students to act as a team of consultants. Participants are selected through an assessment and, after a specific training, they are then divided in teams to solve a real business problem faced by a local private, public or nonprofit company. In this way, students undertake a consultancy experience developing demonstrable soft skills.
- **Score program with a final certificate:** this type of program consists in the development of a list of career-related activities divided per year of study, each one with a specific score. Students are free to decide if participating at the program and what activities undertaking during their academic path. Activities' completion and the accumulated score is tracked in the students' profile inside the career service's online system and can be visible to employers. At the end of the last year, if a minimum score has been reached, students will receive a certificate attesting their employability or work readiness' level.

- **Employability points:** this program gives students more freedom in the choice of activities to undertake, in fact students can obtain these points after having completed any type of extra-curricular activity, such as volunteering, work experiences or events' attendance, which, under judgment of career service' staff, could contribute to develop their employability. After having accumulated a certain number of points, students are also eligible for some rewards in order to incentivize the participation at the program, thus an higher engagement on this type of activities.
- **Assessment Center simulation:** this simulation is conducted by experienced HR assessors coming from the university's employer partners in a dedicated space of the career service one time per month. During the simulation, a group of students has to tackle a group task and an individual exercise, followed by plenary feedbacks and a moment of assisted self-evaluation of the soft skills put in practice during the session. It represents an innovative tool ideated to develop students' employability skills, helping them succeeding in a real selection processes after graduation.
- **Employers' survey about interns:** this survey is created and sent by the career service to all employers that have hired a student for an internship at the end of the experience, in order to ask them to evaluate students' performance in terms of technical and soft skills and ability to apply academic knowledge in a practical context. The analysis of the results will enable the career service to give precious suggestions to faculties for the improvement of the academic curriculum in order to fill the observed skills gaps.
- **Online system and resources:** the common feature of all the career services in the sample is the presence of a well-structured website containing all the information about the services and the podcasts of some career sessions, and a full of resources online management system. Among the innovative online resources offered to students and employers we find more frequently the virtual mock interview and the skills self assessment tools, in addition to the possibility for students to upload many application documents such as CVs, cover letters and portfolios, and apply for leads/prospects that are job or internship positions still not opened.

The results of the international benchmarking show that all the common practices used by the best career services are primarily intended to increase students' employability or work readiness rather than to simply provide them with employment after graduation. As the example of Berkeley University shows, career services should focus more on career clarity rather than placement activities, in order to increase students' awareness about their interests and professional objectives; then they should provide students with career connections that will reinforce their career clarity and will facilitate their transition from university to the labor market; and finally increase students' career competitiveness through the provision of a variety of practical experiences that allow them to develop their work-related skills.

On the basis of the research's results, **career clarity**, that is the ability to articulate one's own professional objectives, results to be initially developed thanks to the on-line self assessment tools intended to assess interests and skills, followed by an individual meeting with a career counselor who provides a feedback about the results in order to start developing a career plan according to each student's interests and skills. Career clarity is then increased for example through the delivering of the Alumni Mentoring program and the Alumni/Employer in-Residence program, thanks to which students can receive realistic information about a particular job position, career field, company or industry from people actually connected with them; but also thanks to a job shadowing experience and, above all, an internship, during which students can really understand how activities related to a particular job position are performed.

The career professional from Southwestern University Career Service said: *“Research on our own students and elsewhere shows that participation in internships correlates most strongly with employability/positive employment outcomes. By promoting internships and helping students learn to search for them, market themselves to them and complete them successfully, we increase their employability.”*

At the same time internships and all the other practical experiences, also shorter, are the primary tools for increasing technical and soft skills, thus employability and career competitiveness.

**Career connections** are principally created by career coaches that are career professionals responsible for connecting students and the whole academic world with companies. Career coaches, thanks to their industry expertise, are able to create a solid connection with companies coming from different sectors that will offer to students a lot of job and internship opportunities, in addition to other experiences, such as job shadowing, mentorship, workshops, seminars and other on-campus activities useful for increasing both students' career clarity and competitiveness. Career coaches are then responsible for organizing all that recruiting events that put students in direct contact with companies such as career fairs, both on-campus and virtual, specific for each industry or employer/alumni in residence programs.

**Career competitiveness** can also be intended as career readiness and the ability to market ourselves in the labor market, and this is mainly achieved through all that practical activities designated to increase employability and soft skills, such as score programs with a final certificate that involve workshops, group-works such as the “Students Consultancy”, job shadowing, volunteering and similar, but also through the embedment of these career-related activities inside the academic curriculum. In both cases the activities are divided for each year of study inside a coherent path. At last, career competitiveness is reinforced through an accurate preparation on job search through some theoretical and practical activities delivered by career service's professionals or HR specialists coming from partner companies, such as workshops regarding CV writing and assessment centre simulations, or through some online tools such as the virtual mock interviews.

In light of this practices' analysis and the feedbacks received by some American, English and

Italian companies, we can state that the matching service in his traditional form of selection of candidates' CVs is no longer needed to create successful graduates-employers "matches" and increase employment's chances for fresh graduates. Instead, this will be a spontaneous outcome of a series of activities aimed at developing work-ready fresh graduates, represented by the practices just described.

#### **4.1.1. An evidence from a collaborative project of some HEIs in the USA**

In the crowdsourced paper "A Roadmap for Transforming the College-To-Career Experience" (Chan A., Derry T., Wake Forest University, 2013) the editors propose as opening argument the fact that the primary measure of value of today's colleges and universities is often still considered to be the rate of post-graduate employment; however first destination results cannot be considered the unique measure of an HEI's ability to create work ready graduates, instead it is better to consider the ability of an institution to teach the skills required for lifelong employability in an ever changing world. The second argument is that the majority of today's career services looks like twenty years ago, despite the dramatic change in the world of work requires a renewal of methods used to prepare students for their life after graduation.

On average, the quality of education provided by today's colleges and universities is very high but the quality of students' preparation for life after graduation still seems lower.

In order to address this problem, in 2012 Wake Forest University hosted the "Rethinking Success" conference in which 74 HEIs, employers and other professionals in the field of students' career education grouped together to discuss these themes with the purpose of finding innovative solutions.

All the participants agreed on one point: there should be more commitment and collaboration between faculties, career services and other offices such as Alumni Relations, creating a "college-to-career" community focused on career development, in order to help future graduates successfully enter the world of work.

At this purpose each participant was invited to contribute in the next period to a crowdsourced paper for sharing the new practices implemented after the conference, ideas and suggestions.

The insights obtained through the paper have been then transformed into a roadmap useful for the renewal of career services' practices:

- Career services should no longer be considered "Placement Offices" and their mission should evolve toward students' education about themselves (interests and skills) and the various career options, that is making students understand where they fit better in the world of work. Career services' professionals should provide **lifetime employability** rather than job search training and first destination placement; the paper says: "*The traditional concept of career service must die. Also eliminate the use of placement or matchmaking*". Thus the name "career service" should be changed to reflect its higher mission, that is preparing students to be

employable for life;

- It is necessary to start cultivating a **“College-to-Career” community** that includes the entire university ecosystem, such as staff, faculty, parents, alumni and employers;
- New career services will need more **monetary, human and technological resources**. New offices’ leaders should find partners, raise funds and hire necessary staff for key management roles, such as career education and coaching, professional skill development and office operations, in particular IT and website management because the use of technology will be essential;
- Career professionals should connect with and **engage students of the first year communicating them a clear roadmap of activities** to undertake during the four years of study;
- Require to and collaborate with faculties to **add career development courses in the curriculum** or at least offering credits’ admission if considered as extra-curricular activities. Moreover career professionals should try to track students status and progress during the academic path also providing them support and feedbacks;
- It is fundamental to give students access to an **alumni network**, for instance through the creation and management of LinkedIn groups or an alumni directory in the private area of the website, in order to incentivize career exploration and job connections.

These results, dating back to 2013, confirm that in the USA this reinvention process of career services has started some years ago, and at the same time reinforce great part of the conclusions derived from the international benchmarking. In fact, the concept of “lifetime employability” represents exactly the new mission pursued by the career services of the sample, in the sense of creating employable students, aware of where they could fit in the world of work, that will easily find a job after graduation without the need of “matchmaking” conducted by career professionals. However, this mission cannot be achieved without the combined efforts of the career service, the entire university ecosystem and employers, that should join together for creating a “College-to-career community”, which represents exactly what Berkeley’s Career Service defines with the term “Hyperactive community”.

Connections with employers are really important in this process because they serve as a bridge from the academic to the corporate world, for both adjusting the curriculum and the career development process according to companies’ real needs and for giving students an high number of job and internship opportunities, along with other experiences such as mentorship. At this purpose alumni represent the easiest connections to make in order to provide students with a network of mentors.

Moreover, it is important to engage students since their first year at college or university, in order to make them know all the possibilities offered by the career service and start their career development path guided by a roadmap of activities, which represents a practice commonly used among the career

services in the sample.

The embedment of these activities inside the curriculum or at least the possibility to acquire credits are surely more effective in order to engage an higher number of students.

Technology is then a fundamental ally for delivering all the on line resources such as the alumni directory and map, the discussion forums, the self assessment tools and the virtual mock interview.

To give a boost to this project the career service will need more staff, also for implementing the figures of career coaches and career peers, and consequently funds.

## **4.2. The feasibility of the best practices in the Cà Foscari's Career Service**

In order to evaluate the feasibility of a potential implementation of the practices found with the international benchmark inside the Cà Foscari's Career Service, the Director and the Representative of the Career Service have been separately interviewed in order to obtain their opinion.

### **4.2.1. Interviews to the Representative of the Cà Foscari's Career Service**

Some of the practices discovered through the international benchmarking result to be very interesting according to the Representative of the Placement Office, Barbara Benedetti, who said:

*“The figure of career coaches is surely a brilliant solution but feasible only for those career services with higher dimensions in terms of number of personnel and monetary resources. Here, in order to follow all the Cà Foscari's majors we should have at least 10 career coaches in addition to the other essential figures inside our office, but unfortunately we don't have the possibilities of reaching these numbers. Instead, the implementation of the “career peer” or “tutor” figure and its presence on campuses is more viable and is already contemplated in our plans about career service's communication for the future. The goal is that of making these career services' tutors, after an accurate training, go to campuses for presenting and informing students about the services offered by our Stage and Placement offices. Our idea is that one time per week a tutor would be present in each campus in a designated area with a desk to give information about our services, answer students' questions and help them with job search. Clearly this service could be implemented only through the acquisition of an higher budget.*

*The fact of inviting career professionals in-class during the first days of each course of study is the ideal in order to present all the services to new students, making them aware since the beginning about the variety of opportunities offered to them. We should absolutely do it, also supported by the activity of future career peers or tutors.*

*For what concerns the Alumni Mentoring program we have already started thinking about implementing a directory of mentors that will include all the female entrepreneurs who have participated at the series of seminars “Women & Enterprise” and would have agreed to be mentors*

*for our students. But we need to be more focused on the design and development of this program, enlarging the network of mentors for instance through a tight collaboration with the Cà Foscari Alumni association, in particular expanding the network in foreign countries for incentivizing and supporting students' international mobility.*

*Job shadowing is a practice that already exists in Cà Foscari but is not really evolved because of the low companies' availability for this kind of activities in our country. In fact in Italy the majority of companies want to maximize their time's efforts to have in turn a real benefit. For instance our job shadowing experience "Live three days as a manager" is considered by some companies as a sort of selection process, thus they agree to host only those graduates who have a real prospective in staying inside the company, rather than all that students who want to have an opportunity to increase their employability during studies. However, this practice is actually viable and beneficial for students' employability, thus we will surely work on incentivizing companies' participation and promoting it to students.*

*The certificate awarded to students after the completion of a series of career-related activities divided per years, ideated and suggested by the career service, is a practice that can't completely be done here because of the low attendance of students at this type of activities. Our workshops range from career exploration and personal branding such as "ThinkFuture" to job search skills' development such as "Tell me about yourself"; all of them last from 3 to 4 days and include a final certificate but only a few students attend them because they don't really understand their importance and principally because they don't gain credits, except for the courses and workshops led by the Competency Center that are curricular or can assign extra credits. Moreover the majority of Italian companies don't highly value this type of certificates.*

*I think it would be better to ideate more practical programs, above all credit-based in order to attract students, such as the Active Learning Lab that is a program that select a number of students that will be divided in teams working for 6 weeks in a real project proposed by some companies, and actually helps students develop a lot of professional and soft skills. The problem is that, currently, only economics students attend this program whereas it is really important that all types of students take these opportunities because "contamination" of knowledge and skills and multidisciplinary activities are the best thrusters toward employability.*

*The Employability Points program is better than the previous program in terms of viability because students will feel more free to choose the activities they prefer, and the completion of these activities will benefit students in terms of more visibility towards employers. Similarly, inside our online platform "Your CV for Placement" students can already add the information about the completion of extra-curricular activities concerning soft skills, such as the Competency Lab, in their personal page, visible to employers when they request the CVs' consultation to the Career Service.*

*Career fairs for summer internships are interesting but the main obstacle might be the unavailability of Italian companies to activate internships during the summer period, because in August the majority*

*of these companies are closed so they don't want to host interns. It is a good initiative but not really suitable for the Italian context. Rather, the idea of creating a dedicated on-line board for the advertisement of summer internships could be more viable and really effective in order to incentivize companies promoting this kind of offerings and facilitating students in the research of a summer curricular internship.*

*Instead virtual fairs has already been experimented in collaboration with the Emblema Foundation, but Italian companies were not satisfied also because of the technical problems occurred during virtual interviews. I don't believe in the effectiveness of this kind of fair for managing the recruiting needs of Italian companies; here personal contacts are highly valued for selection processes. I would opt for virtual fairs only for managing foreign companies' recruiting activities, exclusively with the support of an adequate IT system.*

*The most interesting practice that I noticed is the "Employers/Alumni in-residence program"; this is a beautiful and innovative initiative that I really would like to develop in the near future, despite the usual issue of companies' unavailability because of their inclination to time saving. However it is surely feasible even because it represents a way for companies to promote and reinforce their employer brand."*

Far what concerns the career service's online system and the wide range of online resources offered, Benedetti said: *"Here skills self-assessment and relative feedbacks are only developed and provided by the Cà Foscari Competency Center with professionals well prepared on this science. Inside our office unfortunately we haven't the figures suited to conduct this type of activity or give feedbacks about an on-line self-assessment. In Cà Foscari, as in many other Italian public universities, the main problem is exactly the fragmentation of services; for instance our Placement office is separated from the Stage office, the Competency Centre and the Alumni office. In this ways companies don't have a unique interlocutor to turn to inside the university, that should be us, the Career Service; this problem creates a scattering of information and disorganization. Sometimes it happens that professors contact by themselves companies' representatives in order to ask for a collaboration for an in-class project work, but in this way the communication with the company, the advertisement and the organization of the event are very disorganized and not at the top of the service. All companies should pass for the career service in order to always offer them a certain level of service, tailored to their needs, in order to avoid companies' complaints and negative effects for the future such as the end of a collaboration.*

*All the resources provided in the online platform are viable only thanks to a good IT platform that here we don't have. For this reason mock interviews are not actually feasible, such as the possibility to upload a huge number of application documents or providing an interactive map for searching and contacting alumni mentors in the world. The possibility to apply for Leads/Prospects directly through our online system is not present, but in our website we have a dedicated board for advertising companies' talent programs, that readdress to companies' careers' area in their websites. Then, we*

*are already working on uploading videos about career events in our website.*

*For what concerns the survey sent to employers for the evaluation of interns' performances, a survey like that is already in place, including mostly technical skills' evaluation, and a new one will be sent to employers by the end of the year, including also an evaluation of a list of 14 principal soft skills. The office Evaluation and Planning is in charge of analyzing the results in order to give inputs for the definition or improvement of the academic curriculum."*

At the end of the interview, Benedetti talked about the objectives for the near future of the Cà Foscari's Career Service:

*"About the argument of overcoming the placement concept and the matching service I don't feel to agree with it, or better I don't feel It could fit for us in the near future because companies are currently asking for it; it is a service very requested from the market. Here companies want to receive selected students and graduates' CVs in order to save on time; only some of them don't ask for a pre-selection of candidates and prefer to look at all the CVs. I can say that for us the matching service is our added value, because we are able to conduct this activity and provide outputs to companies by 48 hours. Surely, we want to offer more job and internships possibilities to students but not eliminating the matching in the brief period, maybe in the future following the model of American and English career services.*

*We have multiple objectives, such as an higher presence on-campus through, as we said before, Career Service's in-class presentations and the role of the career tutors, mentorship development, even more sector-based career fairs and we would like to go toward a sector-based recruiting in general. We would like also to receive students' suggestions about what companies they want to meet at campus for a presentation or during a career fair, establish an award for companies depending on the quality of the internships offered, develop and offer to students informal meetings with companies such as a lunchtime and increase the number of companies' visits. We hope that employers could collaborate more in activities of job orientation for a specific sector such as Career Talks and "Career Alumni", that should also be increased and proposed for all types of career fields and job professions. Principally the All active learning labs should be reinforced and strongly promoted to students; I think that this type of course should be compulsory in each course of study or at least should be considered as a curricular internship because it is strategic for increasing employability and for developing the main soft skills; in addition to creating a series of benefits such as connections with employers and mentorships possibilities. Us, we recruit companies and communicate with them for these labs, we advertise them but we don't manage the activities and we aren't involved on their development, instead, as Career Service, our main challenge at present and for the near future is to make students aware of the importance of these courses for their life after graduation. In fact, multidisciplinary activities and contamination of different things make the difference on students' employability."*

#### **4.2.2. The interview to the Director of the Cà Foscari's Career Service**

Lastly, Arianna Cattarin, the director of the Career Service at Cà Foscari, has been interviewed in order to report her essential opinion about the feasibility of these practices. She said: *“With respect to the two professional figures of career coaches and career peers, while senior students in the role of tutors could be certainly trained to offer an informative support about career services along with a counseling service with regard to job search, the role of the career coach should not be covered by career professionals simply informed about an industry, instead the career coach should be someone more connected to a specific professional sector. Thus it could be a good idea to think about the career coach as a sort of mentor belonging to an excellent company in a specific industry, available to offer a constant support from a distance to students that want to better know that industry. These career coaches or mentors could be alumni, thus implementing the Alumni Mentoring program best practice, but also other companies' representative. Unfortunately, in our university there is a lack between the Alumni Office and the Career Service but this project could represent for sure a collaboration's ground.*

*In my opinion the alumni or employers in residence program could be considered part of a unique project that could involve two different mentoring modalities, a virtual one connected with the previous figure of the career coach and an on-campus modality connected with this second program. Moreover it is important to realize something that is effective; organizing meetings between students and mentors that last about 10 minutes could not bring benefits, it's more effective a constant e-mail correspondence. Thus as regard to the on-campus meeting with mentors, it would be better to conceive an informal moment in group such as a lunch.*

*I think that this overall project could be an interesting initiative to test in 2018, taking into account the amount of monetary resources needed for implementing the on-campus part of the activity. It could also be useful to exploit our E-Orienta platform for creating a space for conversation between mentors and students such as discussion forums. Job shadowing is really interesting and could be inserted in the previous project.*

*With regard to summer internships fairs, it is commonly known that the Italian corporate world is organized in this way, with a “break” during summer that limits the activation of internships in that period; thus the organization of a summer internship fair could not be a successful initiative; I think rather that creating a dedicated online board is a good idea, reinforced by soliciting a high number of local companies through alternative channels such as trade unions and other associations, in order to reach new companies.*

*The creation of a program of activities for employability's development connected to a final certificate would be interesting if tailored to each course of study, but the problem here is the number of majors that is too high to manage for a centralized career service. Maybe we could create a pilot project, for instance related to the new course of study in Digital Management starting from September 2017,*

*whose costs could be covered with the higher fee paid by students, or to a course with lower possibilities of employment such as liberal arts majors. The “free employability points” program is more viable because it make students more autonomous on choosing the activities actually interesting for them. With regard to the embedment of career activities in the majors and the involvement of career professionals in class, it is more easier to collaborate with masters rather than traditional majors because they are limited by some rules. In fact, I hope that in the future we will collaborate more with post-lauream courses.*

*With respect to the possibility of offering other activities such as skills assessment and development, as university we already are an excellent example thanks to the soft skills self-assessment courses developed and lead by the Cà Foscari Competency Center and the Active Learning Labs, that are practical courses which can be inserted within curricular credits and are intended to develop the main technical and transversal skills needed in today’s workplaces. With these two courses Cà Foscari is also competing for the certificate of “Contamination Lab”, a national project financed by the board of education”.*

To answer the question about the goals for the near future, Cattarin said: *“We should push more on career counseling rather than on the matching activity because we are already good at it. Often students want to immediately reach the result of obtaining a job after graduation, but we must make them understand that successful “matches” depend on the previous phase of career exploration, thus on the knowledge of the various career fields. I agree with the results of the research which tells that we should overcome the placement concept. There are many online tools for matching, such as companies’ career sections on their websites and LinkedIn, in addition to recruitment agencies, thus our success should not simply depend on matching students with companies, rather on developing students in terms of employability or career readiness in order to prepare them for obtaining the desired match. I think that Resume Books and Collections used by Berkeley are not so effective if we consider that a fresh graduate could be interested in different job positions and companies without restricting his or her horizons, and that today there aren’t rigid boarders between some sectors; for instance, to what extent Food & Wine and Fashion & Luxury are separated? It is better to maintain a sort of fluidity. Now we are focusing on transversal education, thus also career service’s activities must be transversal.*

*Thus, as our American and English counterparts have already done, we are moving from a model of career service linked mainly to “job placement”, toward one more focused on career counseling and employability, but we will keep doing the “matching” activity because, even if there are many other channels through which conducting it, not all our students exploit all of them so we want to guarantee to each one a possibility in this sense. In particular I imagine the future of this activity even more linked to big multinational companies with important employer brands, not easy to access by the individual.*

*Moreover it is important to remember that the Career Service has two souls that involve two distinct but correlated objectives: one is developing students' employability to increase their chance for employment, thus our first objective is graduates' employment; the other is creating a link between the university and the corporate world in order to gain important insights for other projects such as research or educational projects like new academic courses or masters. This second objective represents the "third mission" of the career service and the university in general, that involves a focus not primarily on graduates' employment but rather on creating constructive connections with the real world of work. In this way graduates' work readiness and employment will come as a result. Now we create this constructive connection through the direct relation with the company during the recruiting events. The direct dialogue with managers and recruiters allows us to understand companies' specificities and needs, more than a quantitative research. And finally, since this year the career service is involved by the office that defines the curriculum for what concerns the delivering of information concerning job professions requested by the labor market.*

*Our main project for the next future is to create a new centre by 2018, coordinated by us in the role of management committee, that will promote the research and development of female leadership, building upon our current program of seminars "Women & Enterprise". The activities conducted by the center will include a mentorship program and an activity of scientific research in collaboration with some professors, covering both excellent examples of female leadership and tools for developing it."*

To recap, on the basis of these two interviews the best practices that could be concretely implemented in the Career Service of the Cà Foscari University of Venice, but also in all the other Italian public universities, in order to obtain a real benefit for increasing fresh graduates' employability and employment, could be in particular:

- **Career Peers** or career service's tutors with an on-campus presence for presenting career service's activities to freshmen in class, and informing and supporting students with career-related activities in a designated space in each campus, at least one day per week.
- **Virtual Mentoring program** will involve alumni and other partner companies' representatives that will be both mentors and Career Coaches with a specific industry expertise. The program will give students the opportunity to access a directory of contacts in order to obtain an individual virtual correspondence with a mentor, and a collective discussion forum with other students and mentors in an online platform.
- **Mentors In Residence program** will involve inviting a mentor to an informal collective moment in campus with a group of interested students, such as a lunch followed by office hours during which students, individually or in small groups, can ask questions about the job profession, company and industry of the mentor.

- **Online board** dedicated exclusively to **summer internship’ offerings** in order to incentivize the internship experience during study breaks, that is the best tool for developing employability, facilitating students research for it.
- **Credit-based or curricular practical experiences** tailored to different majors and intended to make students work in team for undertaking a project or solving a problem of a real company, such as “Lamp Courses” and “Students Consultancy”, developing the main hard and soft skills requested by companies.

#### 4.2.3. Suggestions from the Cà Foscari Career Service’s corporate network

Part of the survey sent during April 2017 by the Cà Foscari’s Career Service to its network of companies<sup>23</sup>, both SMEs and big multinational companies, has been intended to obtain useful suggestions from the corporate world about how to improve the academic world, including career service’s practices, in order to increase fresh graduates’ work readiness. At this purpose the main question was: “Which suggestion would you like to give to the university in order to better prepare students for the world of work?”. 644 companies were surveyed and 90 of them answered. These are the most recurrent suggestions given by the companies’ representatives:

- Promote more the use of the career service “tool” among students;
- Expand contacts with the corporate world, in particular with local SMEs, and increase their involvement in the definition of the academic curriculum;
- Invite HR managers of companies coming from different sectors for leading seminars about what type of skills and profiles they look for in candidates for entry level-positions;
- Propose more case-studies during lessons based on companies’ real situations, both successful and unsuccessful, in order to train students in putting theory into practice and make them understand the real world of work;
- Increase the participation of companies’ representatives during lessons in order to provide students with direct testimonials about case-studies or specific topics addressed during lessons;
- Make students work in team during courses to conduct real projects for companies, business games or project simulations;
- Increase curricular internships’ hours and make the internship experience compulsory for each major;

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<sup>23</sup> The Survey, as explained in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, was jointly created by the author of this thesis and the Cà Foscari’s Career Service’s staff both to support this project and to provide useful and interesting information to the Career Service in the view of the next Career Day.

- Increase English language course's hours in each major and promote international mobility such as Erasmus and Overseas programs or internships abroad;
- Increase students' preparation on current global events;
- Organize some workshops in collaboration with companies, aimed at developing the main soft skills such as communication and teamwork;
- Organize more companies' visits;
- Collaborate with local companies, in particular SMEs, in order to activate since the first year the "alternation" between lessons and work;
- Reduce prices for services offered to employers, such as recruiting events and other on-campus activities, in order to allow also smaller companies to participate, increasing the number of encounters between companies and students;
- Create mentoring programs;
- Prepare students for the selection process through assessment centre simulations and mock interviews, giving them a clear feedback;
- Add some practical courses at the curriculum, intended to increase the technical skills required by companies, such as the use of management information systems;
- Require all the thesis to concern a real company project.

These answers show that Italian companies, national and international, coming from different sectors and having different dimensions, agrees on the fact of increasing the connection between the academic and the corporate world and are available on collaborating with the university. In particular they highly value all the work and practical experiences made during studies, first of all internship but also project works for real companies.

Specific and limited to the Italian context is the suggestion of developing practices intended to increase English skills and incentivize international mobility of Italian students.

### **4.2.3. Conclusions**

This final chapter has been primarily intended to recap the best practices put in place by the 21 career services of the sample and evaluate their feasibility in the Cà Foscari's Career service.

The chapter begins with a synthesis of the best practices derived from the international benchmarking and described with greater detail in the third chapter. These practices result to be primarily intended to increase students' employability or work readiness rather than simply provide them with employment after graduation. In particular, some of the practices aim at developing students' career clarity or awareness that is the first step toward a successful career development path; then other practices are intended to offer students career connections, that represent the main resource for supporting them in the career development process and for facilitating their transition from university to the labor market.

Lastly, great part of the practices are directly intended to create career competitive fresh graduates, that means attractive to employers.

The main result of the research is that the matching service conducted by traditional career services, consisting in the selection and delivery of candidates' CVs, is no longer considered the only tool through which creating successful graduates-employers "matches" and is no longer needed to increase employment's chances for fresh graduates. Instead, this will be a spontaneous outcome of a series of activities, represented by the best practices at issue, aimed at developing work-ready fresh graduates.

The crowdsourced paper "A Roadmap for Transforming the College-To-Career Experience" has then been cited for reinforcing the results of the research. In fact the roadmap, created in 2013 by a collective effort of many American Colleges and Universities, includes great part of the best practices listed at the beginning of the chapter and describes as the primary mission of new career services the creation of graduates employable for life.

The interviews made to the Director and the Representative of the Cà Foscari Career Service have been reported in order to list the practices more interesting and feasible in the Italian public academic context. Among them there are the Career Peers, the Mentoring program, the Alumni/Employers In-Residence program, the development of credit-based or curricular practical activities intended to increase employability, and the greater support to students for the research of summer internships. However, the matching process seems to be still effective and requested by companies in the Italian context, but both the Director of the Cà Foscari's Career Service and that of the Politecnico of Milano's Career Service agree with the American counterparts on the possibility of its elimination in the future, focusing more on employability' development.

Companies' suggestions for improving the academic world have been collected through a dedicated survey and then listed at the end of this chapter, proving that also the Italian corporate world agree on increasing the connection between university and companies in order to improve the development of work-ready fresh graduates, in particular through the provision of more internships and practical activities connected to real companies' situations during studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has explained the predominant role of the university's career service in developing work-ready or employable fresh graduates, with the purposes of increasing their chances for employment and, at the same time, satisfying the new skills requirements of the current corporate world, that is principally looking for talented fresh graduates equipped with a solid set of soft skills.

Soft skills can be defined as those skills that are transferable across different types of jobs enhancing the employability of individuals, thus their chance to gain employment and succeed in the job career, and helping companies staying competitive. In particular, young graduates result to be more suited to learn and develop this kind of skills.

According to the international literature in this field, communication, teamwork and a series of interpersonal skills result to be the most requested soft skills by employers around the world as regards the selection process of young graduates for internship or entry-level job positions.

However, the same literature acknowledges the presence of a "skills gap" in this population according to employers all over the world, that derives in great part by a failure of the academic system in developing this new set of skills in students.

Universities' career services have the predominant role of connecting the academic world with the corporate world and thus giving useful inputs to the university for the improvement of the curriculum and supporting students in their employability's development according to skills requirements of employers. For this reason career services have to move with the times acknowledging the changing requests coming from the graduates recruiting market.

At this purpose, an international benchmarking has been conducted in order to give career services all over the world, and primarily to the Cà Foscari University's Career Service, useful inputs for reinventing their practices in the field of employability.

The benchmarking has been conducted among a sample of 21 excellent career services in USA, UK and Italy, selected on the basis of global and national rankings and references provided by some national associations of career services. These three countries have been chosen as a benchmark because, according to the literature about career services' historical evolution, the USA and the UK represent the first countries where the universities' career services have born and reached the excellence (in addition to be the two countries with the best career services according to the consulted rankings), and Italy is the country of the main addressee of this research, the Cà Foscari University's Career service.

The research has been conducted through a deep analyses of each career service's website and an interview made to the available representatives.

The main result of the research is that in these advanced career services the "matching" service, offered by the traditional university's career service called "Placement", has been overcome and substituted by a series of innovative services and tools, such as virtual and on-campus mentoring

programs, new career professionals' figures, curricular or credit-based practical courses in collaboration with companies, work experiences like job shadowing, and a series of online resources such as skills self-assessment and mock interviews, focused more on increasing graduates' career awareness, career connections and employability rather than simply providing them with employment after graduation. In this way, successful graduates-employers "matches" will be a spontaneous result of a series of practices aimed at developing work-ready fresh graduates.

The Cà Foscari's Career Service should take into consideration the insights offered by this research in order to reinvent its practices, in the limits of the available resources, for developing career competitive students in the global scenario, keeping up with the best American, English and Italian counterparts.

## APPENDIX

### Rankings of HEIs' Career Services<sup>24</sup>

- **The Princeton Review's "Best Career Services" Ranking:** each year The Princeton Review compiles a list of the top 20 colleges and universities with the best Career Services in the USA, on the basis of students and graduates' answers to the question "How do you rate your College or University's Career Service?". The news website Poets and Quants has published the list of the most recurring Career Services in this ranking from 2010 to 2015.

**Table A.1. The Best Career Services Ranking from 2010 to 2015 (top 10)<sup>25</sup>**

College/University	2015 Rank	2014 Rank	2013 Rank	2012 Rank	2011 Rank	2010 Rank
Northeastern University	1	2	1	2	1	4
Pennsylvania State University – University Park	2	1	2	3	2	6
Claremont McKenna College	3	4	3	6	7	7
Bentley University	4	3	16	8	6	12
Clemson University	5	11	5	9	NR	3
University of Richmond	6	13	4	10	NR	NR
Wabash College	7	6	NR	NR	11	NR
Southwestern University	8	7	NR	NR	NR	NR
Washington University in St. Louis	9	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
University of Florida	10	5	6	1	4	1

*Source: <http://poetsandquantsforundergrads.com/2014/09/09/universities-with-the-best-career-services/>*

- **"Best College Career Services" Ranking:** Best Colleges.com is a directory of the best colleges and universities in the USA, that each year publishes a national ranking of colleges based on the

<sup>24</sup> All websites have been visited on August and September 2016

<sup>25</sup> NR stands for "not ranked".

quality of their Career Services, derived from surveys on students and graduates' satisfaction, statistics on job and internship placement and counselors' experiences at the centers.

**Table A.2. Best College Career Services 2016 (top 10)**

<b>College/University</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Southwestern University	1
Clark University	2
Wake Forest University	3
Sweet Briar University	4
Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology	5
University of Florida	6
Northeastern University	7
Pennsylvania State University	8
University of Texas at Austin	9
Barnard College	10

Source: <http://www.bestcolleges.com/features/best-college-career-services/>

- **QS' "New Graduates Employability" Ranking:** in 2016 QS Intelligence Unit, which provides analyses in the higher education world, has developed a ranking of the best universities' Career Services in the world on the basis of "new graduates employability", which has been created by assessing institutions' performance in five indicators: reputation among employers (30%), alumni outcomes (20%), partnerships with employers (25%), employers' presence on campus (15%) and graduates employment rate (10%).

**Table A.3. QS' Employer Reputation Ranking 2016 (top 10)<sup>26</sup>**

<b>University</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Stanford University	1
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	2
Harvard University	3
University of Cambridge	4
Yale University	5

<sup>26</sup> Polytechnic University of Milan has been ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in Italy and 41<sup>st</sup> in the world.

University of Oxford	6
Princeton University	7
University of California, Berkeley (UCB)	8
Tsinghua University	9
Ecole Polytechnique	10

Source: <http://www.iu.qs.com/qs-graduate-employability-rankings-year-2016-pilot/#tab-id-1>

- **The Global University Employability Ranking:** The ranking has been designed by a French HR consultancy, Emerging, and published exclusively by the Times Higher Education in 2016. It lists the best universities for delivering work-ready graduates, on the basis of the results of an online survey completed by a panel of participants, composed by worldwide recruiters at managerial level and managing directors of international companies, that had to cast their vote for those universities in their own countries or in the world “that produce the best graduates in terms of employability”.

**Table A.4. Global University Employability Ranking 2016 (top 10)<sup>27</sup>**

University	Rank
California Institute of Technology	1
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	2
Harvard University	3
University of Cambridge	4
Stanford University	5
Yale University	6
University of Oxford	7
Technical University of Munich	8
Princeton University	9
University of Tokyo	10

Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/global-university-employability-ranking-2016>

<sup>27</sup> Bocconi University has been ranked 1st in Italy and 78th in the world.

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