

## Chapter #13

### DISPARITIES IN CAREER ATTITUDES AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

**Senad Karavdic, Angela Odero, Chrysoula Karathanasi, & Michèle Baumann**

*Institute Health & Behaviour, Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE), University of Luxembourg, Walferdange, Luxembourg*

#### ABSTRACT

The preparation of students' future career trajectories is a dynamic process in relation to social and educational determinants. Our objective is to analyze the associations between generic employment capabilities, career attitudes and related factors among postgraduate students. All masters' students registered at the Centre for Documentation and Information on Higher Education (CEDIES) database in Luxembourg were contacted by post, to participate in an online questionnaire. The five point scale questionnaire was scored as follows: 1) Dynamic Career Attitudes (DCA); 2) Employability Soft-Skills (ESS); 3) Search for Work Self-Efficacy (SWSES); 4) Quality of Life domain Autonomy (QLA); and 5) Socio-demographic characteristics. The data were analyzed using bivariate tests, correlations and multiple linear regression models. 481 of the volunteers (26.4 years; SD=5.5) were predominantly women, Luxembourgish, unemployed or had less than or equal to six months of job experience. The higher the ESS, SWSES and QLA scores, the higher the DCA score was. Nationality, being unemployed, having less than six months job experience and being in the first year of a Master's degree programme were associated with a lower dynamic career attitude score. The Dynamic Career Attitudes scale seems to be an appropriate instrument to evaluate the efficacy of the university career services programme.

*Keywords:* career attitudes, postgraduates, employability soft-skills, job search.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Acting on the recommendation of European governments to direct more investments towards human capital, the Bologna Process in Lisbon was established in order to develop comparable and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. The process valorized higher education as a major factor contributing to enhanced sustainable employability of university graduates (Bologna working group of European Higher Education in a Global Setting, 2009). Further, in accordance with the objective to render training and education accessible to a wider world as concluded in the 2001 Stockholm summit, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg reformed its higher education financial aid system, making it accessible to more persons. As such, since 2010, all university students registered at the Centre for Documentation and Information on Higher Education (CEDIES); obtain financial aid from the government of Luxembourg, independent of their socio-economic status. Adequate financial support not only ensures that students are able to pursue higher education, but also enables them to choose studies in fields of interest not currently taught at the University of Luxembourg. This initiative was intended to ensure that all students had sufficient finances to comfortably pursue and complete their studies and to consequently level the playing field for graduates at the outset of their careers (Mémorial Journal Officiel du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg, 2014).

A research project entitled “*Capital Employability of Students*” (CAPJOB) was launched in 2013 by the research team “*Health and Behaviour*” at University of Luxembourg. The aim of the team is to analyze factors that may influence and improve career outcome of Master’s degree students.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In order to increase their employment opportunities, the current challenge of university students is to accept that as prospective employees, they have to become more actively engaged in their own careers (De Bruin & Buchner, 2010). Indeed, since most employers regard a university degree as a minimal guarantee for employment, the possession of a predetermined and static set of generic skills through academic preparation may only be sufficient to gain a first job. Further abilities and initiatives of individuals in deploying their curriculum by embracing an active career approach (Briscoe, Hall, & Demuth, 2006) may be a guarantee for their sustainable employability and future professional lives. In line with this, career behaviors have been observed as factors that influence an individual’s choice to prepare for his/her future professional trajectory and so career success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Since career success remains characterized by personal accomplishment of previous career objectives and goals (Hall & Heras, 2012) the development of specific career attitudes has become a crucial factor toward its achievement.

Dynamic career attitudes (DCA), i.e. adaptability, optimism, related knowledge and planning have been identified as responsible for positive career outcomes (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005; Kaplan, Bradley, Luchman, & Haynes, 2009; Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000). In the same vein, higher career adaptability enables people to successfully cope with changes in the work environment (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005) and enhances their chances for career success (Grote & Reeder, 2009). Optimistic individuals are more at ease with their career-related plans and feel more secure in their chosen career paths (McIlveen, Beccaria, & Burton, 2013). In addition, better knowledge of how to develop a career conducted to more career advancement opportunities and career options, and have been linked to career success (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Finally, higher career planning has been extensively associated with career self-management orientation (Direnzo, Greenhaus, & Weer, 2015) and has therefore been related to both objective and subjective career success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005).

Still, empirical evidence indicates that many students opt not to pursue an active career during their studies (James & Holeden, 2000; Stewart & Knowles, 2000; Rae, 2007): In addition, they do not utilize abilities acquired during their studies until after the completion of their university studies (Savickas, 2005).

Focusing on the generic capabilities for employment, a study among undergraduates has shown that employability soft-skills are closely related to dynamic career attitudes (DCA). Other findings indicate that a DCA positively impacts job search process such as employment status and the acquisition of techniques suitable in a job application. Additionally, a DCA indirectly increases the perception of search for work self-efficacy (Karavdic, Karathanasi, Le Bihan, & Baumann, 2014).

One key element of employment capabilities may be related to educational level (Bachelor vs. Master). Indeed even if Masters students' have the same chances of finding employment as Bachelor students', the employment activities of the former, may be more focused on both their educational level and field (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011). In line with our previous findings among bachelor students, the objective of this study was to analyse the associations of generic capabilities for employment, quality of life autonomy and other confounding socio-demographic factors on dynamic career attitude levels among Master's students.

### 3. METHODS

#### 3.1. Participants & Data Collection

A survey was conducted in the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg among 644 participants (Master students and graduates) registered at the Centre for Documentation and Information on Higher Education (CEDIES). Data collection was realized via an information flyer that was sent to the home addresses of the students and that contained instructions about the aims of the study and a link to the survey. The participants could directly access the anonymous online questionnaire in either French or English.

#### 3.2. Measurement Instrument

– *Dynamic Career Attitudes* (Dependent Variable) composed of 13 scored items (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) (Karavdic, Karathanasi, Le Bihan, & Baumann, 2014) (Cronbach's alpha 0.802).

– *Employability Soft-Skills-short scale (ESS-short -14 items)* (1=not capable at all; 5=perfectly capable), an adapted version of the ESS – 32 items (Karavdic, Karathanasi, Le Bihan, & Baumann, 2014) ( $\alpha = 0.870$ ).

– *Search for Work Self-Efficacy Scale (SWSES - 12 items;  $\alpha = 0.847$ ; 1=not well at all; 5=very well)* assesses students' perceptions of their capability to develop employment strategies (Pepe, Farnese, Avalone, & Vecchione, 2010).

– *Quality of Life of Autonomy - one Whoqol-Bref domain (QLA- 4 items;  $\alpha = 0.670$ ; 1=strongly disagree at 5=strongly agree)*, assesses the ability to live and to make necessary decisions independently (Leplège et al. 2012)

– *Socio-demographic characteristics* Age, gender, parents' level of education, (higher/lower than bachelor), type of lodging, year of master (1st, 2nd year), employment status (yes in educational field / yes in non-educational field/unemployed), employment contract type (permanent / fixed / internship), working hours (up to 20h/w vs. up to 40h/w) and job experience before master (less vs. more than 6 months).

#### 3.3. Statistical Analysis

Scores were calculated for each scale, so that a higher score represented a better/higher level. Bivariate tests and correlations were used for association analyses between the variables. Only significant relationships ( $p < 0.05$ ) were used in the linear multiple model.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Socio-Economic Profile

A total of 481 volunteers students (26.4 years; SD=5.5) completed the self-assessment questionnaire online. Majority of the participants were women, Luxembourgish, unemployed and had less than or equal to six months of job experience. Most studied in the field of Social Sciences & Humanities or Law, Economics and Finance and were in their second year of Master's degree. Of those who had a job, approximately two thirds had either a permanent or fixed-term employment contract and worked more than 20h the week (Table 1).

*Table 1. Socio-demographic profile: mean (standard deviation) or %*

		<b>Students Mean (SD) or %</b>
<b>Age: mean (SD)</b>		26.4 (5.5)
<b>[min; max]</b>		[20 ; 59]
<b>Gender</b>	Female	58.9
<b>Nationality</b>	Luxembourgish	65.7
	Other	34.2
<b>Parents education level (&gt;Bachelor)</b>	Father	49.4
	Mother	40.8
<b>Year of study</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	42.8
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	57.2
<b>Education Field</b>	Social and Humanity	30.8
	Law, Economics and Finance	32.6
	Life and Health	14.9
	Technology and Communication	21.8
<b>Employment Status</b>	Unemployed	63.8
	Yes in No- Educational Field	9.1
	Yes in Educational Field	27.1
<b>Job contract Type</b>	Permanent	36.1
	Fixed term	38.0
	Internship	25.9
<b>Professional Experience (Before Master)</b>	Less/ equal to 6 months	65.5
<b>Working Hours</b>	Less /equal to 20h	44.2
	Up to 40h	55.8
<b>Dynamic Career Attitudes [1-5]</b>	Dynamic Career Attitudes – DCA	3.78 (0.52)
<b>Generic Employment Capabilities [1-5]</b>	Employability soft skills scale – ESS -short	4.03 (0.48)
	Search for Work Self-Efficacy scale (SWSES)	4.12 (0.53)
<b>Quality of Life scale [1-5]</b>	Domain of Autonomy -QoLA	3.76 (0.64)

### 4.2. Relationship between dynamic career attitudes and other factors

Luxembourgish nationals had significantly lower DCA mean scores compared to those of other nationalities (3.72 vs. 3.87). Likewise, students in the first year of Masters also scored lower than those in the second year (3.67 vs. 3.80). Unemployed students scored significantly lower in comparison to those were employed (3.73 vs. 3.84 & 3.92) and those with professional experience of less than or equal to six months before enrolling for the Master's degree had a lower mean DCA score compared to those who had worked for more than six months (3.72 vs. 40.7) before they started their Master's degree.

Quality of life-autonomy, employability soft skills and the search for work self-efficacy scores were all significantly, positively correlated to the DCA score (Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship between dynamic career attitudes and other factors (Bivariate tests) - Correlation coefficients (Pearson's correlation) and Standard Error.

Dynamic Career Attitudes – DCA [1 - 5]			
		Mean (SE) <sup>1</sup>	p- value <sup>2</sup>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	3.77 (0.04)	0.498
	Male	3.74 (0.03)	
<b>Nationality</b>	Luxembourgish	3.72 (0.03)	<b>0.003**</b>
	Other	3.87 (0.04)	
<b>Type of lodging<sup>4</sup></b>	with a partner / other adults	3.76 (0.05)	0.100
	with a partner and / or a child	3.94 (0.08)	
	with my parents	3.65 (0.04)	
<b>Father's educational level<sup>3</sup></b>	alone	3.76 (0.04)	0.436
	Lower Bachelor	3.73 (0.03)	
<b>Mother's educational level<sup>3</sup></b>	Higher or Equal Bachelor	3.77 (0.04)	0.553
	Lower Bachelor	3.76 (0.03)	
<b>Year of study</b>	Higher or Equal Bachelor	3.73 (0.04)	<b>0.014*</b>
	1 <sup>st</sup>	3.67 (0.04)	
<b>Education Field<sup>4</sup></b>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3.80 (0.03)	0.664
	Social and Humanity	3.70 (0.05)	
	Law, Economics and Finance	3.78 (0.05)	
	Life and Health	3.72 (0.07)	
	Technology and Communication	3.86 (0.05)	
<b>Employment Status<sup>4</sup></b>	Unemployed	3.73 (0.03)	<b>0.014**</b>
	Yes in No- Educational Field	3.84 (0.07)	
	Yes in Educational Field	3.92 (0.06)	
<b>Employment contract type<sup>4</sup></b>	Permanent	3.87 (0.07)	0.818
	Fixed term	3.82 (0.08)	
	Internship	3.89 (0.08)	
<b>Professional Experience (Before Master)</b>	Less/ equal 6 months	3.72 (0.06)	<b>0.000***</b>
	More than 6 months	4.07 (0.06)	
<b>Working time</b>	Less /equal to 20h/w	3.85 (0.08)	0.442
	Up to 40h	3.93 (0.06)	
		<b>r-coeff<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>p- value<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>Age</b>		0.114	<b>0.024*</b>
<b>Quality of life [ 1- 5]</b> <b>Generic Employment Capabilities [1-5]</b>	Domain of Autonomy -QoLA	0.628***	<b>0.000***</b>
	Employability soft skills – ESS-short	0.691***	<b>0.000***</b>
	Search for Work Self-Efficacy - SWSES	0.581***	<b>0.000***</b>

<sup>1</sup>Standard Error; <sup>2</sup>Significant p-value: \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001; <sup>4</sup>Fisher's T-Test; <sup>5</sup>Pearson's correlation;

### 4.3. Impact of other confounding factors on dynamic career attitudes

A multiple regression model analysis could explain 66% of the variance (adjusted R-Square) in the Dynamic career attitudes of the students. The greater the generic capabilities for employment and quality of life-autonomy reported, the higher the DCA score was. Contrastingly, being Luxembourgish, or unemployed, or having less than six months of job experience or being in the first year of masters were all associated with a lower DCA score (Table 3).

Table. 3 Impact of other confounding factors on dynamic career attitudes by students.

		Dynamic Career Attitudes DCA [1-5]				
		Regression coefficient	SE <sup>1</sup>	L95 <sup>2</sup>	U95 <sup>2</sup>	p-value <sup>3</sup>
<b>Age</b>		-0.005	0.005	-0.014	0.004	0.288
<b>Nationality</b>	Luxembourger	-0.140	0.057	-0.252	-0.028	<b>0.015*</b>
	Other	0				
<b>Year of study</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	-0.118	0.054	-0.225	-0.011	<b>0.031*</b>
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	0				
<b>Employment Status</b>	Unemployed	-0.253	0.086	-0.423	-0.083	<b>0.004**</b>
	Yes in No-Educational Field	0.043	0.087	-0.128	0.215	
	Yes in Educational Field	0				
<b>Professional Experience ( Before Master)</b>	Less/ equal 6 months	-0.130	0.061	-0.252	-0.007	<b>0.038*</b>
	More than 6 months	0				
<b>Generic Employment Capabilities [1-5]</b>	ESS-short	0.301	0.072	0.159	0.443	<b>0.000***</b>
	SWSES	0.321	0.072	0.178	0.465	<b>0.000***</b>
<b>Quality of Life [1- 5]</b>	Domain of Autonomy	0.262	0.051	0.161	0.363	<b>0.000***</b>

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup>=66%; F (9, 127) =28.111; <sup>1</sup>Std.Error; <sup>2</sup>Confidence Intervals; <sup>3</sup>Significant p-value: \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001;

## 5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Since the development of dynamic career attitudes (DCA) may be considered an important factor towards employment situation of future graduates, further research should be more sensitive to the specific aspects of its conceptual development, as relates to proactive career orientation and specific career goals setting. In line with this, the acquisition of self-report information on DCA from a comparable population at different stages (from career goals aspirations and the process toward career goal accomplishments), could be rendered more straightforward for future research. Finally, it could be interesting to assess the DCA of university graduates during and after their Master's degrees; before they start work and in the early years of their careers.

## 6. CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

Students with high capabilities tend to present a higher dynamic career approach which may enable them to identify future job opportunities more easily, by adapting their competences to the post-university transition (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). Tertiaries who are confident in their employability competences are likely to perceive job seeking as less threatening, which could enhance their career abilities and employment prospects. Although employability forecasts an individual's likelihood of getting and maintaining employment, we postulated that generic capabilities for employment may be especially relevant in gaining and maintaining the first job; this is in line with our previous findings realized among university undergraduates who scored lower in DCA (3.66 vs. 3.78/5) than their postgraduate colleagues (Karavdic, Karathanasi, Le Bihan, & Baumann, 2014).

These findings were not particularly revelatory, since more extensive academic preparation and professional experiences (i.e. internships, seminars etc.) are likely to influence students ambitions causing them to aim for higher career expectations and higher a social status.

In addition, higher quality of life autonomy positively affecting DCA could be explained by the fact that student's perception of autonomy may be seen as a career driver, (i.e. an intrinsic motivator) in the process of career planning and development of internal capacities and attitudes towards managing of their own career paths. According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), perceived autonomy implies that individuals exercise choice in the initiation, maintenance and regulation of their behaviors. As such, high pressure and control from family and university environments could predict low efficacy and low autonomy in career decision making activities (Guay, Senécal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003). This could in turn negatively affect students' wellbeing (Karavdic & Baumann, 2014) and consequently, their quality of life. Thus, promotion of autonomy-supportive environments such as considering individual perspectives, acknowledging the validity of feelings and perceptions, could free individuals to experience independence and enhance their capability to make a series of appropriate transitions, fostering self-directed approaches and the perception of competences (Guay, Ratelle, Senécal, Larose, & Deschênes, 2006).

Our findings also revealed that Luxemburgish nationals, students with less than or equal to 6 months of professional experience, unemployed students as well as those in the first year of their Master's degree (as opposed to those in their second year), all obtained lower DCA scores. It is likely that Luxembourgish students may feel more secure in obtaining job opportunities than their non-citizen peers. As a result, they could be less preoccupied with their career approaches. General unemployment statistics in Luxembourg for the year 2013 (Adem, 2014) showed that 72.9% of persons registered at National Employment Administration were not Luxemburgish nationals. Although career disparities such as positional differences between graduates in their career outcome could be observed on the basis of social categorization, gender and ethnicity (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), we suggest that our results may be due to the fact that nationals have easier access to the relatively restricted civil servants job sector. Indeed, in 2010, the fact that more than 42% of the employed citizens were working in the public sector, could prompt Luxemburgish students be to less proactive in their career orientation. In addition, challenges related to language competence skills (Luxembourgish labor market requires several languages: Luxemburgish, French, German and English) may oblige foreigners to rely more on their DCA as a central strategy in their pursuit for a job. Our previous study conducted on the same population of students revealed that socio-demographic determinants such as being a citizen of Luxembourg, coincides with a lower worries/anxiety score, which was in turn related to the lower career adaptability and career optimism dimensions of DCA (for review see Karavdic & Baumann, 2015).

Socio-educational disparities between the students may predispose them to different outcomes in their career paths and development process. Our findings support the fact that individuals with prior work experience, employed individuals and those in their final year of Masters Study obtain higher DCA scores. Career driven interventions should be based on students' specific needs and implemented during tertiary education, at an early stage in each individual's career development (Van Zyl & Rothmann 2012).

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## AUTHOR(S) INFORMATION

**Full name:** Senad Karavdic

**Institutional affiliation:** Institute Health & Behaviour - Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE) - University of Luxembourg

**Institutional address:** Campus Walferdange, 2, route de Diekirch, BP2 L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

**E-mail address:** senad.karavdic@uni.lu

**Short biographical sketch:** Senad Karavdic, is a doctoral candidate in Social Sciences at the University of Luxembourg - Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE), Research Group "Health Inequalities". Under the supervision of Prof. Michèle Baumann, his thesis analyses the "Dynamic Career Attitudes, Quality of Life and Socioeconomic Status among master's degree students and their evolution related to their career capability orientation for the graduate cohort". He benefits financial support from the University of Luxembourg and technical help from the Centre for Documentation and Information on Higher Education (CEDIES) which is a department of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research in Grand- Duchy of Luxembourg.

**Full name:** Prof. Michèle Baumann

**Institutional affiliation:** Institute Health & Behaviour - Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE) - University of Luxembourg

**Institutional address:** Campus Walferdange, 2, route de Diekirch, BP2 L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

**Short biographical sketch:** Prof. Dr. Michèle Baumann is a scientific director of the Research Group "Health Inequalities". Her multidisciplinary team has strong experience and skills in techniques of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, in areas such as: The diagnosis of lifestyle factors, which contribute to public health problems, and the social cumulative process contributing to social disparities between groups; The monitoring and evaluation of prevention programmes with methods that promote a participatory dynamic, and the development and validation of measuring instruments.

**Full name:** Angela Odera

**Institutional affiliation:** Institute Health & Behaviour - Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE) - University of Luxembourg

**Institutional address:** Campus Walferdange, 2, route de Diekirch, BP2 L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

**Short biographical sketch:** A research associate, Angela has experience in Experimental Psychology within a multidisciplinary research team, as well as Social Psychology. She conducts interviews, facilitates focus group discussions, conducts qualitative and quantitative analyses. Currently, she is working on the CAPJOB project under the supervision of Prof. Baumann.

**Full name:** Chrysoula Karathanasi

**Institutional affiliation:** Institute Health & Behaviour - Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE) - University of Luxembourg

**Institutional address:** Campus Walferdange, 2, route de Diekirch, BP2 L-7220 Walferdange, Luxembourg

**Short biographical sketch:** She joined the research team of "Health Inequalities" in June 2013 with an internship followed concerning the «CAPJOB» project. She conducts quantitative and qualitative analyses and animates focus groups. Currently, she is working on the CAPJOB project under the supervision of Prof. Baumann.