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Title: University lifelong learning programmes and perceived employability: the case of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

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University lifelong learning programmes and perceived employability: the case of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Abstract

This qualitative research explores the impact of university lifelong learning programmes on the participants' perceived employability by examining six training programmes implemented by the Lifelong Learning Centre of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The grounded theory approach was used throughout the research. After a set of data was gathered through face-to-face interviews with the programmes' directors, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who attended the programmes. Through a process of data coding and analysis, a theoretical model was developed. The findings indicated that the programmes examined enhanced the three dimensions of the participants' perceived employability (career identity, personal adaptability, and human and social capital). Moreover, the interviewees emphasised that universities should strengthen their links with the labour market and the local society, to meet the needs of a larger number of citizens.

Keywords: lifelong learning, university, perceived employability, Greece

Lifelong learning in European Union policy

According to the Commission of the European Communities, by general consensus, the main objectives of lifelong learning are: "personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability" (CEC, 2001: 9). In the current research we focused on the last objective, and more specifically on the relationship between lifelong learning and perceived employability.

Although ‘lifelong education’ (also mentioned as ‘continuing’, ‘recurrent’ or ‘permanent’) was a subject of international debates in the 1970s (e.g. Council of Europe, 1970; OECD, 1973; UNESCO, 1972), the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ started gaining momentum in the 1990s, by being promoted in a number of policy documents (CEC, 1995; OECD, 1996, 1998; UNESCO, 1996), and was publicly highlighted when the Commission declared 1996 as ‘European year of lifelong learning’. The terminological shift from ‘education’ to ‘learning’ reflects an alteration of perspective at policy level: whereas ‘education’ implies that the state is responsible for the provision and distribution of educational resources, ‘learning’ focuses on the individuals, who are expected to shoulder the responsibility of constantly upgrading their skills within a changing labour market (Biesta, 2006; Fejes, 2014). Furthermore, in the same decade, the introduction of the concept of ‘employability’ in policy discourse (CEC, 1993, 1999; OECD, 1998) signifies a transfer of responsibility, as both readiness for employment and the problem of unemployment have been individualised (Brine, 2006; Rose, 1999).

In the next decade, the launch of the Lisbon Strategy (CEC, 2000, 2001, 2002), marked a decisive turning point in establishing lifelong learning as the guiding principle of EU education and training policies within the framework of the knowledge economy and/or society. The concept of lifelong learning (henceforth LL) started to appear ubiquitously in policy documents and relevant literature, serving as an ‘umbrella term’ which, due to its two dimensions (lifelong and lifewide), encompassed all learning activities occurring across the lifespan in different learning settings (formal, non-formal and informal). One of the five benchmarks, set for monitoring the progress made, was to increase the EU average level of participation in LL of the 25-64 age group to at least 12.5%.

Consequently, the new EU ten-year strategy ‘Education and Training 2020’ (Official Journal of the EU, 2009), highlighted the importance of lifelong learning and the necessity for

further development of education and training systems, to ensure sustainable economic growth and employability. The new benchmark adopted was that adult participation in LL should reach at least a rate of 15% by 2020, a percentage higher than the previous one in the Lisbon strategy.

The significant role of Higher Education in providing LL opportunities and enhancing employability has been emphasised by many reports and studies (e.g. European Commission, 2013; Knapper & Cropley, 2000; OECD, 2011). The issue of LL as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area was introduced in the Prague Communiqué (2001) and reiterated in succeeding Communiqués and policy documents. Among the commitments that the universities should meet are to establish flexible learning paths in order to attract returning adult learners, to develop partnerships with a range of stakeholders for a better provision of LL programmes, and to place high priority on meeting the needs of a more diverse population (EUA, 2011; Bologna Follow-Up Group, 2015). A challenge that the modern university faces is to successfully fulfil its so-called ‘third role’, which complements the other two (education and research) and is related to a more strategically organised contribution to society and a more effective interaction with the labour market and local actors (Jongbloed et al., 2008; OECD, 2007). The development of flexible LL structures aligned with the changing demands for new skills in the labour market could make a significant contribution towards achieving these goals (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000).

The Greek legislative framework on lifelong learning

Greece, as a member state, had to adjust its legal framework to the Lisbon objectives. The introduction of Law 3369/2005 was a significant attempt to establish a coherent framework for LL. However, it was with the enactment of Law 3879/2010¹ that, for the first time, a national strategy for LL was formulated and the National Network of LL was

¹ Available in English at: <http://www.gsae.edu.gr/images/nomothesia/nomoi/Law-3879-LifeLongLearning.pdf>

established, encompassing all LL governing bodies and service providers. Law 3879/2010 - as amended by Laws 3966/2011 and 4093/2012, and supplemented with Law 4115/2013 - is currently in force as the main legislative framework for the implementation of the national LL strategy.

The comprehensive legal framework in place set a solid basis for further development of an integrated approach to LL. Yet in practice, despite considerable efforts, limited progress has been made in respect of the sustainability and effectiveness of the strategy implemented. This can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the prolonged recession in Greece, the unstable political situation, the frequent administrative reforms, and the lack of clarity and consistency regarding governance arrangements (European Commission, 2017; Karalis, 2017; Zarifis, 2016). Although much more needs to be done, data demonstrate that tangible results have already been achieved. According to Eurostat², the participation rate of adults aged 25-64 in LL has decreased in Greece during the last years from a peak of 4.5% in 2017-2018 to 3.9% in 2019, well below the EU-28 average rate of 11.3%.

Pursuant to Law 3879/2010, Higher Education Institutes, though part of the formal educational system, were encompassed in the National Network for LL, only as regards the implementation of LL programmes in institutions established within their framework (as stipulated in Laws 3369/2005 and 4009/2011). After the enactment of Law 4485/2017, the ‘Training and LL Centres’ (KE.DI.VI.M.) were established in all Higher Education Institutes in Greece, as units responsible for the development of training, continuing education, and LL programmes.

Research on lifelong learning programmes in Greece

² Eurostat *Participation rate in education and training by sex and labour status*
http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=TRNG_LFSE_02&lang=en

Several surveys carried out in Greece, regarding LL and adult education, indicate that a great number of respondents attended LL programmes to achieve professional objectives. More specifically, the survey conducted by the Ministry of Education (2010) suggests that 35% of the respondents participated in LL programmes to improve their job efficiency and 19% aimed at career progression/job promotion. The survey of the Hellenic Statistical Authority (HAS, 2016) indicates that the largest proportion of the respondents (81.5%) attended training activities for reasons related to their job or their career prospects. Moreover, a two-phase comparative study (Karalis, 2017) records that enhancing job efficiency, maintaining a job position or getting a better one were regarded as top priorities for participating in adult education programmes. Panitsides (2013), in a large-scale survey, reported among others that participants in general adult education courses had enriched their professional qualifications, set new personal goals, and expanded their networks.

However, in order to improve the planning and delivery of educational programmes, it is essential to take into account the extent to which the expectations of the trainees have been met, a research topic which has not been adequately covered in literature. The present study examines the impact of selected programmes implemented by the LL Centre of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (henceforth AUTH) on the participants' perceived employability. As very few data are available on this topic, our research opts to contribute towards addressing this gap.

Perceived employability

The establishment of a causal link between the LL programmes' outcomes and the enhancement of employability is a rather elusive endeavour, for two main reasons. Firstly, there is no straightforward relationship between educational outcomes and employability, as it could be mediated by various personal or social factors, especially in a country like Greece where major changes have occurred in the labour market as a result of the recession.

Secondly, the reliability of measuring outcomes related to employability has been questioned, due to the complexity of the concept (Cranmer, 2006; Harvey, 2001). Therefore, we deemed that focusing on the participants' perception of their own employability was a more appropriate aim for this study.

Perceived employability is generally defined as a person's understanding of his/her ability to obtain or maintain employment, and is the resultant of the interaction between individual's characteristics and external factors (Vanhercke, et al., 2014). In our research, perceived employability was conceptualised in accordance with the theoretical model proposed by Fugate et al. (2004), as a multidimensional psycho-social structure consisting of three distinct but interdependent dimensions: a) career identity, which means how individuals identify themselves within the working environment; b) personal adaptability, that is the ability to manage changing situations, predisposing proactive action; and c) human and social capital, which include personal knowledge, skills, competencies, and formal and informal networks.

Fugate et al. (2004) refer only to the particular aspects of human and social capital which have a relevance to the concept of employability. According to them, human capital encompasses a number of personal factors that have an impact on the career advancement and the employability of an individual, such as age, education, work experience, training, job performance, cognitive ability, emotional intelligence etc. Social capital is related to interpersonal relationships developed within formal and informal networks, through which one gains influence, information and access to career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004).

Methodology

To examine the participants' perceptions we adopted a qualitative approach, as it focuses on the individuals' interpretation of facts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

The six programmes selected for the research

The LL Centre of AUTH offers a variety of courses regarding LL and continuing education and training, both on a face-to-face and on an e-learning basis, addressed to people of all educational levels. The sample for the current research was derived from six LL programmes (three exclusively for graduates, and three open to the general public), which were offered by different faculties/departments of AUTH through the LL Centre. The duration of the each of the six programmes selected was 50-120 hours (over a period of up to 5 months) and the participation fees varied from €100 to €750 (except of one programme which was free of charge because it was funded by the EU within the Horizon 2014-2020 framework). As the delivery of LL programmes differs considerably between LL providers and universities, both the research parameters and the findings are not representative of all LL programmes provided in Greece.

Participants

Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Males	12	57
	Females	9	43
Age groups	18-30	5	24
	31-40	4	19
	41-50	9	43
	51+	3	14
Highest educational level completed	Lower secondary	3	14
	Higher secondary/post-secondary	3	14
	Higher education	11	53
	Master's degree/PhD holders	4	19
Current occupational status	Freelancers	11	53
	Private sector employees	4	19
	Public sector employees	4	19
	Inactive	2	9
Place of residence	Thessaloniki	14	67
	Other urban centres	3	14
	Small towns or villages	4	19

Table 1. Sample of the research

Initially, snowball sampling was used, as the programmes' directors suggested a list of available participants. Subsequently, through theoretical sampling, 3-4 persons from each programme were chosen, in order to formulate a sample as balanced as possible in terms of demographic characteristics (Table 1). As can be observed, all participants were employed at the time the research was conducted, apart from two who were inactive (a student and a pensioner). Unemployed people were out of the scope of the research topic.

Data collection

For gathering the empirical data, semi-structured interview was selected, because it facilitates in-depth analysis (Cohen & Manion, 2007). During the preliminary phase, 6 face-to-face interviews with the programmes' directors were held. After analysing the data gathered during the preliminary phase, two research questions were constructed:

- (1) Did the programmes selected enhance the participants' perceived employability?
- (2) Which factors fostered and which hampered the relationship between LL programmes and perceived employability?

During the main phase of the research, 21 semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted (with an average duration of 40 minutes each) via telephone, because some participants were residing in different regional units of Northern Greece. All interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed. For each of them, an interview code was used as follows: IP (*Interview Participant*) 1-21 (*number of the interview*). Excerpts from the interviews, which were conducted in Greek, were translated in English and are presented in the Results section of the paper.

Data analysis

Grounded theory was deemed a suitable method for our study, because although it is a systematic method of analysis, it allows issues to emerge rather than forcing them into preconceived notions, and therefore affords the researcher the opportunity to obtain a

thorough understanding of the empirical phenomena (Charmaz, 1995). In their original work, Glaser and Strauss (1967) made a bold counter-proposal, as an alternative to the prevalent at that time hypothetico-deductive approach, and suggested the method of Grounded Theory (GT), the main features of which are theoretical sampling, coding, categorising, constant comparison of emerging data through memo-writing, and generation of a theory.

Both the original GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the Glasserian GT (indicatively: Glasser, 1992) have been strongly criticised over the issue of pure inductivism applied by researchers without any theoretical preconceptions, the emergence of theoretical categories exclusively from empirical data, as well as the degree to which the validity of such theoretical propositions could be ascertained (Bryant, 2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2000; Dey, 2007). Instead of this ‘naive empiricism’ (Kelle, 2007a: 135), later grounded theorists highlighted the importance of abductive reasoning in GT methodology, stating that in reality GT moves between induction and abduction (Bryant, 2009; Kelle, 2007b; Reichertz, 2010; Richardson & Kramer, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), as “abductive reasoning lies at the heart of grounded theorizing” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 155).

For our research we adopted the Straussian version of GT, because it takes a more liberal stance on the use of literature in the research process (Kelle, 2007a) and allows more freedom to the researcher to move beyond the rigid concept of pure induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Apart from the inductive method, we also employed abductive reasoning, using ideas from relevant literature as heuristic tools for the coding process (Kelle, 1995, 2007b). As Thornberg and Charmaz (2014) point out “researchers explore their knowledge base of theoretical codes and compare them with their data and their own constructed codes and categories.” (p. 161).

During the interpretive process of open coding, the data selected were broken down analytically (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After line-by-line coding of the interviews, conceptual

labels were assigned and similar concepts were clustered together to progressively form categories and subcategories (see an example in Table 2). In order to sort out and organise the emerging codes, memo-writing and constant comparative method were used until the categories were saturated as regards their dimensions and properties. The coding procedure was followed independently by each author. The coding results were compared and reached an agreement level of 88%, while all unrelated codes were discarded. Subsequently, through the axial coding procedure, the categories and the subcategories developed during open coding were interconnected (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Subcategory: Acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies	
Codes	Relevant excerpts selected from interview data
Broadening knowledge	<i>I gained more knowledge on the subject I've studied.</i>
	<i>I saw things I knew from experience being scientifically substantiated.</i>
Gaining new knowledge	<i>I've learned things that I didn't know before.</i>
	<i>I had no idea about the subject until I took the course.</i>
Equipment and tool handling	<i>I saw in practice how to use some machines.</i>
	<i>I learned how the measuring instrument works.</i>

Table 2. Part of open coding: example of grouping similar concepts

Results

Through the implementation of the GT methodology, a theoretical model was developed (which is presented in Figure 1). This overarching theoretical structure was formed in accordance with the 'coding paradigm' introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

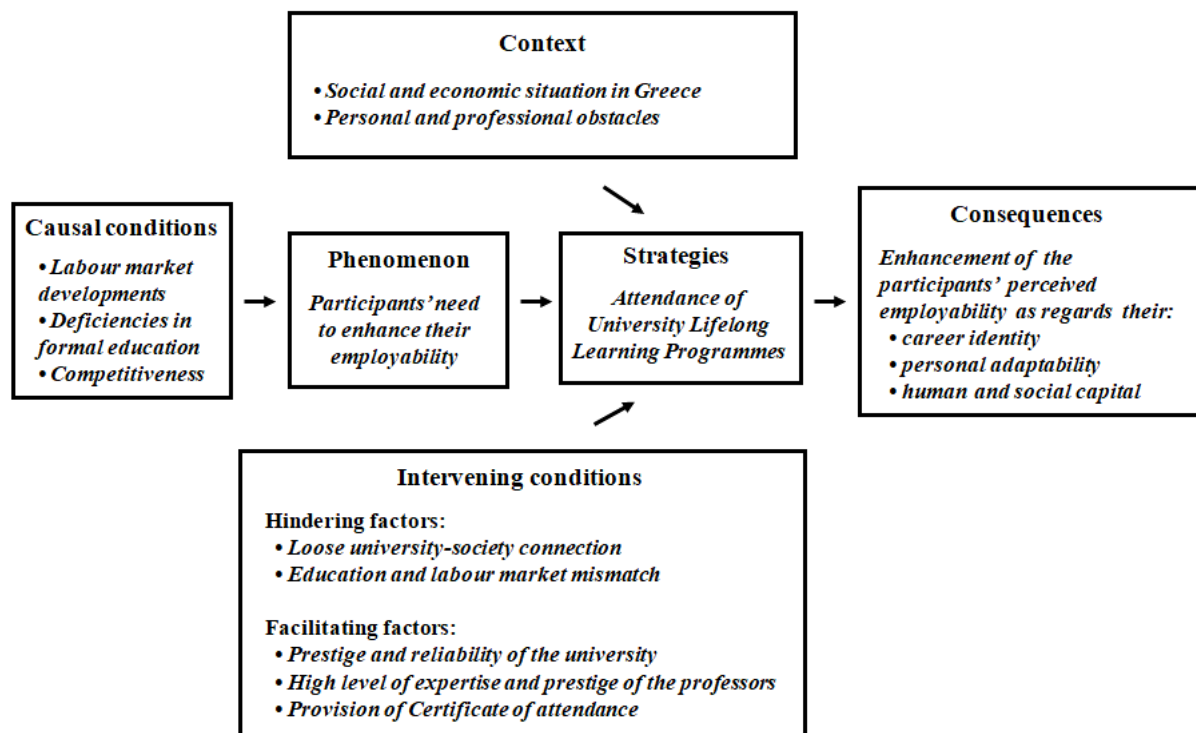


Figure 1. Theoretical model developed from the research findings

Causal conditions, phenomenon and strategies

Graduates mentioned that they felt they were lagging behind regarding specialised knowledge or more practice, while non-graduates viewed their experience as their main strength and identified the lack of scientific knowledge as their major weakness: “As a student, I had not acquired knowledge on some issues. For example, some machines didn’t exist then. How would I learn if not through seminars?” (IP20).

All participants underlined the significance of LL and most of them expressed their willingness to continue attending programmes that could enhance their career development: “I try to attend seminars, workshops or other events... I want to be up-to-date. Knowledge is never enough. As professionals we need to adjust ourselves to the constantly occurring changes” (IP14). Perhaps the most important element which indicates that the programme

reinforced their propensity for learning, is that many respondents (67%) expressed their intention to participate in other LL programmes of AUTH in the future. Some, also referred to the high competition in the labour market and the importance of demonstrating flexibility: “Competitiveness prevails in our field as well as lack of knowledge and you have to do something about that, to update your skills” (IP3).

Context in which strategies were developed

Many respondents mentioned the difficulties they experienced as a result of the economic recession in Greece: “I don’t know what will happen in the professional field, because the circumstances are difficult and we cannot determine what the future holds for us” (IP1) and “Because of the crisis, since 2010 our profession has suffered a major blow; I had to do something; I decided that I should attend various seminars, and start doing another job” (IP5).

Moreover, the majority of them expressed their deep concern about the probability of achieving their objectives in the context of the Greek financial crisis: “It’s a difficult time for Greece right now. Although we learn all these things, there is neither the will nor the financial capacity to implement them” (IP11) and “Unfortunately I won’t be able to take advantage of this knowledge right now because of the economic conditions. I just hope it will pay off in the coming years” (IP14).

Intervening conditions influencing the implementation of strategies

Facilitating factors. Most participants reported that one of the main reasons for attending these programmes was that they were implemented by AUTH, which they regarded as an institution with prestige and credibility: “I trusted more the university as a LL provider than a private institution” (IP10). The level of expertise of the instructors, who are faculty members or external collaborators was another factor appreciated by a large percentage of the interviewees: “There was a great deal of professionalism from all the trainers. They were

focused on the points that should be highlighted” (IP12). Upon successful completion of the LL programmes, participants are issued with a certificate of attendance or a certificate of learning. According to the responses given, obtaining this certificate was important mainly for the graduates, as they considered that it would enrich their CV, and enhance their employability and career prospects: e.g. “I make efforts to receive training on my scientific subject and upgrade my resume. Therefore, I’m interested in a certificate under the seal of AUTH” (IP20).

Hindering factors. In general, most of them expressed the view that universities should strengthen their links with the labour market and the local society, reaching out to a wider range of people, and to this end LL programmes should be supported and expanded: “What is missing from the Greek universities is the extroversion that exists abroad” (IP11) and “This effort must continue and should be implemented on a larger scale” (IP5).

Another important issue pointed out was the forging of a closer link between universities and the labour market. This was associated with the development of partnerships between the two areas: “These clusters should be expanded ... a collaboration between science and entrepreneurs” (IP6). Moreover, it was considered necessary that universities should take greater account of the current labour market needs and develop more specialised programmes aimed at the enhancement of the participants’ employability: “It’s good for universities to implement LL programmes as long as they are designed to meet real needs... that is to be tailor-made for the people involved. Otherwise they are a big failure” (IP12).

Consequences that arise from the implementation of strategies

The category ‘Consequences’ is the outcome of all the aforementioned factors (conditions, context and strategies). Therefore it was identified as the core category of the study and was further analysed in three dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 2. The theoretical notions used for this analysis were derived from the heuristic model proposed by Fugate et al.

(2004), and were employed to conceptualise the rather elusive notion of employability and to accurately capture its properties as they were implicitly or explicitly reported by the participants.

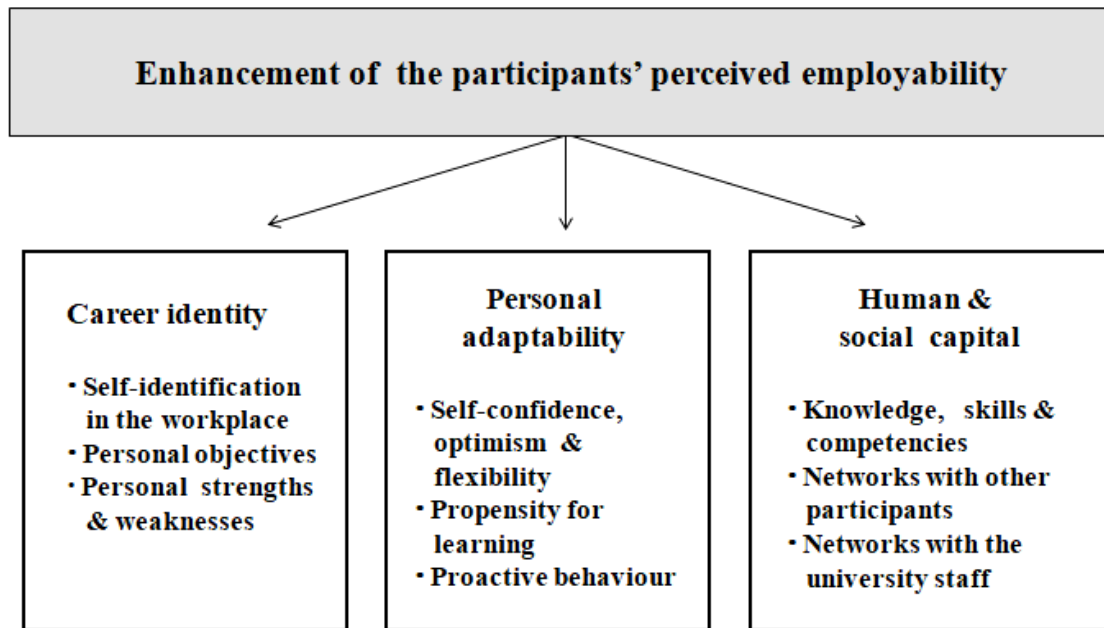


Figure 2. Enhancement of the participants' perceived employability: subcategories and dimensions

Career identity. The impact of the examined LL programmes on self-identification appears to be greater for graduates, as they expected that by updating their knowledge and skills they would keep up with the latest scientific developments and they might increase the chances of finding a job on the subject they studied. Indicatively, two respondents mentioned: “I attended it because I want to be knowledgeable about my scientific subject. To know what’s new in my field” (IP18) and “I work in the computer field. This is not exactly what I studied, and the seminar might help me find something closer to it” (IP13). It is also notable that, after the completion of the LL programmes, two non-graduate participants changed their

career path, seeking to work in a new field for which they had neither theoretical nor practical knowledge before the programmes.

The completion of the specific programmes assisted the participants to establish new goals or to pursue more actively the existing ones: “I’m planning to set up a workshop. I was thinking about it before, that’s the reason I attended the course, but now I am thinking about it more seriously” (IP10).

Regarding the third dimension of career identity, most of the respondents claimed that the LL programmes helped them to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses they had but could not realise due to inadequate information on the developments and opportunities in their field: “The course helped me become even more competitive, to understand what I should do to succeed” (IP3).

Personal adaptability. Many reported that the programmes made them feel more self-assured as professionals. “After the course I’ve gained prestige, I feel more secure and confident... I see things more positively” (IP2). Some referred to the high competition in the labour market and the importance of demonstrating flexibility: “The seminar has helped me become even more flexible and competitive” (IP3). Others expressed their willingness to learn: “I try to attend seminars, workshops or various other events that are organised because I want to be informed... Knowledge is never enough” (IP14). In general, attending the specific programmes was regarded by the participants as an effective way to address a number of challenges in their field and to engage in proactive behaviour in order to meet upcoming demands and tap into emerging opportunities: “I acted proactively for what might happen in the foreseeable future. I need to be informed... because an early bird gets a larger share of customers and becomes more established” (IP12).

Human and social capital. A decisive factor for the enhancement of employability is the constant updating of the individual’s knowledge, skills and competencies, which are key

dimensions of human capital. The LL programmes appeared to have a positive effect on these dimensions. All interviewees stated that their knowledge and skills were extended and/or their specialisation was increased (pertinent responses for this issue are included in Table 2). The six programmes selected also included practical training sessions (laboratory activities, operating machinery, computer applications, cultivation at AUTH farm, and project implementation). Although the majority of the respondents acknowledged the effectiveness of these sessions, which greatly contributed to skills' development, some of them indicated that practice need to be expanded.

Regarding social capital and networking with other participants, many reported that they formed interpersonal relationships within the framework of the programme attended, while others mentioned that these acquaintances had already been professionally useful, pertaining to gathering information, exchanging ideas, or forging plans for building future relationships in their work field: "I came closer to people, and we saw the areas on which we could help each other" (IP14) and "I am already in touch with two people from the course and we are discussing some future partnerships" (IP4).

An issue emphasised by all participants was the networking with the university staff. For non-graduates, the fact that they obtained access to the university was considered particularly important: "It gives us a sense of safety, that there is a door open to the university for us who do not have a degree. There is no doubt about it" (IP10). Graduates expressed their need for a continuing connection with the academic community: "The fact that I was back on campus was an incredible experience. Because now you see things differently than when you were an undergraduate student, you have a different zest for life, and a different maturity" (IP16). Almost all participants attached importance to the issue of scientific support by the programmes' teaching staff. Some mentioned that they had already taken advantage of this opportunity and were pleased with the outcome: "I think we are welcome at the university if

we need anything... And they have proved it, we worked together afterwards. And that satisfies us” (IP7).

Discussion

As evidenced in their narratives, the participants seemed to have accepted the idea that they are responsible for maintaining their employability in a constantly changing labour market, a prevailing trend, widely discussed nowadays (Bernstrøm et al., 2019; Clarke, 2007; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005; Peeters et al. 2019). The opinions expressed by them substantiate the well-known viewpoint of Gasier (2003) that the aim is no longer to secure employment but to ensure employability. However, as they reported, the wider socio-economic situation in Greece hampered them from achieving their professional goals. This approach reflects the emphasis given to the impact of external factors on a person’s employability (Brown et al., 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

The specific LL programmes also affected the enhancement of their personal adaptability. On the whole, they considered that the knowledge and skills gained from the programmes would help them to act more flexibly and proactively, to identify challenges and opportunities and adjust their actions accordingly, even if this requires a switch in their career trajectories. This stance brings to mind the term ‘protean career’ which was proposed by Hall (1996) to stress the significance of continuous adaptability for maintaining employability. This trend is nowadays observed repeatedly as more and more employees are required to change their career plans (Baruch, 2004; Clarke & Patterson, 2008).

To enable these adjustments or radical changes, propensity to learn is of great importance. According to Clarke (2007), the traditional view of education as a preparatory phase for a specific occupation is already obsolete, and has been replaced by the concept of lifelong learning, not merely as an optional aspect, but as ‘a potent survival tool’ (O’Donoghue & Maguire, 2005, p. 439). The respondents appeared to perceive education as an

ongoing process, and reported that the LL programmes encouraged them to continue updating and upgrading their knowledge and skills.

A frequently encountered topic in EU policy-making documents is the enhancement of the individual's employability through the expansion of human capital. The great majority of the participants appeared to acknowledge this issue, as they expressed the expectation that the knowledge and skills acquired from the specific programmes would increase their employability status and the chances of securing their positions, getting a sought-after job, or coping with the developments in their professional field. A number of studies, regarding factors influencing human capital accumulation, indicate that education and experience are among the strongest predictors of career progress (Judge et al., 1995; Kirchmeyer, 1998; Tharenou et al., 1994, as referred in Fugate et al., 2004).

Social capital relates to the formation of effective networks from which individuals could gain benefits (Sobel, 2002). The interviewees identified benefits on two levels. Firstly, they had formed networks with other participants through which interactions and exchange of information took place and in some cases collaborations between them had resulted or were planned. Additionally, almost all appreciated the opportunity for interpersonal communication afforded to them by the professors, in case they need scientific support in the future. As discussed in pertinent literature, through network connections the flowing and accessibility of information about opportunities in the labour market are facilitated, and human capital can be enriched (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Burt, 1992). Moreover, according to Bourdieu (1985), owing to its convertibility, social capital can be utilised for economic or other purposes.

Human and social capital are distinct yet interrelated concepts, and each one promotes the development of the other (Keeley, 2007). The respondents in this research, by participating in the LL programmes enhanced both their human and social capital. Subsequently, the networks with other participants and the academic staff became a new

source of information for further development of their human capital, by acquiring new knowledge and skills through other LL programmes or by broadening their professional experience through emerging collaborations.

One of the main reasons that they chose the specific LL programmes over similar programmes provided by private institutions was the considerable prestige that, in their view, AUTH carries. They also had high regard for the expertise and the professional stature of the faculty members and the external partners teaching in the programmes. Some other characteristics of the trainers positively highlighted were: knowledge about the learning process, proper mindset and attitude, skills that enabled fruitful communication encouraging participation and interaction, and ability to help trainees to take responsibility for their own learning. All the aforementioned are included among the features of an effective adult educator, as highlighted by prominent scholars of adult education (Rogers, 1995; Jarvis, 1995) as well as in important EU policy documents (CEC, 2000; European Commission, 2015). However, two issues stressed by the respondents were the necessity for establishing a stronger connection between the university and both society and the labour market, and the implementation of more specialised programmes, tailored to their professional needs.

Regarding the factors that need to be improved, it is noteworthy that the cost of attending the programmes was not considered to be a deterrent, despite the continuing recession in Greece. Some even mentioned that the cost of the programme they attended was rather reasonable compared to similar programmes offered by private institutions. This result differentiates from the findings of another study carried out in Greece (Karalis, 2013), in which the cost was reported as the most important obstacle to participation in LL programmes.

Conclusions

The issues of the economic recession in Greece and the increase in unemployment rates (especially among young people), have been widely discussed and surveyed. However, the recession has also a huge impact on employed people who are forced to change their professional trajectories, in order to deal with this precarious situation. Lifelong learning can play a significant role towards enhancing their employability. The aim of this paper was to contribute to the limited body of research on the topic of the relationship between Greek universities as LL providers and the enhancement of the participant's employability. Extending this discussion, we present the findings of a qualitative research conducted in the Lifelong Learning Unit of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which is among the largest and highly ranked universities in Greece.

According to the data emerged, the selected LL programmes had a positive impact on all dimensions of the participants' perceived employability. Although most people expressed their interest in continuing to attend LL programmes implemented by the university, they emphasised that more specialised programmes should be developed, according to the real needs of the participants and the changing demands of their profession.

Moreover, they considered the implementation of LL programmes by the universities to be a very important dimension of their social role, especially within the context of the contemporary knowledge-driven society. In their view, universities, being privileged places for knowledge production, can foster social and economic development. Therefore, they should be more accessible to people that want to upgrade and update their knowledge, acting as hubs for the local community and enhancing their relationship with the labour market.

The fact that the research findings reflect the participants' opinions makes them particularly significant, if utilised properly, for the development of more effective LL programmes provided by universities. Moreover, the theoretical model developed through the GT methodology as an overarching framework of the factors affecting the relationship

between participation in LL programmes and the participants' perceived employability, can be used in other relevant studies, provided that it will be adapted to their particular requirements.

Limitations of the research

As this study was focused on selected programmes implemented by the LL Centre of a specific university (AUTH), the findings should not be considered representative of the whole spectrum of LL programmes provided in Greece. Moreover, the opinions expressed by the participants regarding employability and available employment opportunities reflect the labour market conditions in Thessaloniki and Northern Greece.

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