

## Self-Employment Experiences of Young Graduates: New Forms of Professional (in)Dependence

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### Abstract

In recent decades, self-employment has been considered a central issue regarding labour market opportunities and individual choices. However, self-employment experiences of young graduates reveal increasing insecurity that characterises the precariousness of current labour relations. In this paper, we intend to reflect critically on the concepts of self-employment, entrepreneurship/creation of businesses, taking into account the main arguments arising from the crisis of employment regulations. This paper aims to support in some research evidence based on an extensive survey applied in two public universities in Portugal (N 1004). Our focus will be on personal profiles of self-employed graduates, as well as the "oppositions" which structure their professional relations of independence/dependence. In this regard, it is suggested that we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the professional patterns of transition from higher education into the labour market which integrate traits of individualisation and autonomy as well as uncertainty and vulnerability. However, for a comprehensive approach to the self-employment thematic, additional research is still needed in order to shed further light on the understanding of the labour market as one of the main facets of social and socio-economic insecurity and risks in contemporary European societies.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Graduates; Self-employment; (In)dependence and Insecurity

### Introduction

Since the oil crisis of the 1970s which coincides with the end of the "Thirty Glorious Years", most Western countries are now facing events that contribute to a growing erosion of labour relations. From the vast literature on this subject, the following may be listed: i) transformation of conventional business structures (e.g., productive restructuring, relocation, downsizing); ii) outsourcing and privatisation of services (and, more recently, resourcing); iii) expansion of flexible arrangements/non-standard employment relationship; iv) change in social protection schemes and state protection; v) employment crisis and structural unemployment; vi) expansion of the informal sector and undeclared (overexploitation); vii) fostering autonomy and responsibility at work in parallel with increasing flexibility, individualisation and positional competition in different ways. These "new" morphologies of the working world (Antunes, 2013) express mostly constraining factors that contribute to the intensification of processes of differentiation and social inequality, visible in the increasing vulnerability, insecurity and experience of unemployment or inactivity for longer and recurrent periods in the life cycles (Marques, 2013).

Research on the field points to issues related to the so-called phenomena: "major trends", such as, "globalization", "flexibility", "precariousness", and "unemployment", among others. While considering the complexity associated with these phenomena and the need to target a specific reflection for each of those major trends, in this text we will highlight the importance of the recent changes in the labour market that particularly affect the segment of qualified young people.

In this sense, transition processes into the labour market face a range of challenges presented by socio-economic environments, and the vulnerability of the young graduates and their professional experiences has been highlighted in recent international studies (eg, Humburg, Van der Velden & Verhagen, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013, 2012; Teichler, 2009, 2007; Archer & Davidson, 2008; Muller & Gangl, 2003; Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen & Smithson, 2002) and national ones (e.g., Vieira & Marques, 2014; Alves, Alves & Chaves 2012; Alves & Marques, 2010; Gonçalves, 2009).

Far from a linear, sequential and finished transition into a job/profession, nowadays the professional integration implies uncertain, complex and segmented transitions and experiences. Young graduates have difficulties in obtaining their first jobs; their credentials seem to be insufficient to function as legitimate signifiers to the employer, and so many of them face precarious employment, or unemployment. Indeed, these young people are more vulnerable to current restrictive economical and financial policies, falling into "dynamics of precariousness" (Barbier, Brygoo & Viguier, 2002), in the sense of subjecting themselves to temporary or limited duration employments, usually underpaid, insecure and with poor labour conditions. Therefore, many present fragmented social and professional statuses (e.g., employee, entrepreneur, self-employed worker, scholarship holder, trainee, inactive, student, unemployed), and conditions of individualised, subjective and uncertain professional progression (Esping-Andersen & Righini, 2000; Beck, 2000, 1992; Paugam, 2000).

Indeed, one of the most important transformations in recent decades resulted from the economic and technical flexibility requirements (Boyer, 1996) expressed in the deregulation of labour relationships (Auer & Gazier, 2006; Kovács, 2005; Felstead & Jewson, 1999). Some of these practices include: fixed-term employment contracts (limited duration), temporary employment contracts, part-time contracts and independent or self-employed work and, more recently, entrepreneurship. These non-permanent employment relationships can be described as precarious (EU, 2013; Auer, 2005, Esping-Anderson & Righini, 2000; Auer & Cazes, 2000; Burchell, Deakin & Honey, 1999), due to the fact that they are poorly paid and accompanied by a reduction in social rights and labour protection. Moreover, in many professional contexts, young graduates strive to develop knowledge and a career, and many of them also face the (risk) of unemployment (Kretsos, 2010). This happens not only to a less qualified workforce, but is generalised to all social groups, including workers with high levels of employability skills.

Taking into account these more flexible forms of employment, we will focus on self-employment experiences in order to highlight a composite and opaque relationship between autonomy and contractual independence. As we will report further in this essay, the distinctive feature of this economic participation in the labour market is the contractual "independence" between employee and employer, namely no organisational constraints or a hierarchical subordination. However, this dimension of employability can hide other "opaque" subordinate dimensions such as: hierarchical dependence, lower legal protection, low wages, minimal or no union protection, and vulnerability to economic fluctuations. This is visible in the case of qualified young people that hold a status of "false self-employed ("green receipts") or a "self-employed dependent", and occurs when an activity is exercised within a fixed timetable and at the workplace, in one or more institutions. It may also happen when these workers perform tasks with reduced autonomy and mobilisation of limited knowledge/ skills. It is therefore important to have some analytical caution when referencing a relationship of autonomy or professional independence.

To provide a more in-depth analysis of this subject, we would like to begin by discussing the growing insecurity that characterises labour relations beyond the standard of typical dominant employment relationships in contemporary society. Secondly, the project "Pathways of integration of graduates: objective and subjective relations with work" (Percurso de inserção dos licenciados: relações objetivas e subjectivas com o trabalho) (PTDC/CS-SOC/098 459/2008), will be briefly presented together with empirical design. In the third section of this paper, we aim to further contribute to the analysis of the main features of the experiences of graduates' self-employment, from a sample of candidates coming from the Universities of Lisbon and the New University of Lisbon (NOVA). Regarding this aspect, it is suggested that we are witnessing a profound restructuring of professional linking models in the segment of graduates, by integrating uncertainty dimensions, flexibility and reversibility in their trajectories (Marques & Alves, 2010; Gonçalves, 2009; Marques, 2007; Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2004), which are part of a broader movement of "identity crisis" (Dubar, 2000) and civilizational changes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Sennett, 1998; Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994).

## 1. Beyond the *standard employment* - the exposure to precarious working conditions

The starting point for discussion and critical analysis of the current "non-standard", "atypical", "peripheral" or precarious employment arrangements, including self-employment, and the entrepreneurship/creation of businesses leads us to the identification of the main features which configure a stable employment relationship on a contractual basis, and which underlay the collective agreement work. Both the durability of the employment relationship, the uniqueness of the employer, and belonging to an organised service and, finally, the existence of a full-time schedule with an equivalent salary, define the profile of what is social and legally conventionally designated as "typical" employment, setting the *standard* for employment (permanent, full-time and with social protection).

In this context, the regulation of the labour market was perceptible through "typical" forms of employment which characterised the dependent workforce and corresponds to a social norm inherited from the *Fordist* years (Marques, 2010, Navarro, 2004; Freyssinet, 1991). According to the International Labor Office (ILO, 2006), the contractual notion of permanent or standard employment refers to the relationship between an employee and an employer, based on reciprocal rights and obligations. Therefore, this legal and standard form of employment defines the terms of exchange of time and/or services for money between an employer and an employee. This is deeply embedded in the national politics and deeply influenced by what may be named "normative systems", i.e., the combination of formal regulations, labour laws, customary practices, forms of legitimisation (Navarro, 2004).

In this regard, the situations considered "atypical" are all those resulting from the absence of one or another, or all of those specified criteria. In general, these atypical forms of work activities can range from simply "not declared" to forms of temporary, full-time or part-time contracts (Célestin, 2000). Thus, by consensus, one generally associates the idea of precariousness to the multiplication of employments outside the norm, to more vulnerability in labour relations due to more instability and to the risk of unemployment.

Despite further research, what seems plausible to sustain at the moment is that "atypical" employments tend to be accompanied by "precarious" conditions of work and employment. Although these two attributes that are usually combined, are not equivalent terms. In some circumstances, it could be assumed that these new forms of work constitute a choice for some employees and therefore are devoid of an imposing character and constraint, inherent to the concept of precariousness. In turn, it should be noted that currently, also forms of "typical" employment face new developments regarding the typical employment contract. Such as the individualisation of salaries, the management of performance and careers by projects and objectives, among others, contributing to feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about the future of the worker in the company as well. So, the idea of "stability" should be viewed with caution when reduced to a "typical" type of employment.

On the other hand, the notion of precariousness has been dominantly represented and analysed as employment insecurity, referring essentially to the existence of uncertain employments, short duration employment contracts (or at least certain) and an effective or potential restriction of social rights. In this context, the type of work contract tends to be the determinant factor to define precariousness.

Furthermore, a broader definition of the precariousness challenges us to seek other dimensions and/ or indicators related to this issue. According to Barbier, Brygoo & Viguier (2002: 30), it is possible to define four dimensions related with precariousness, namely (i) the living conditions of lower class households and families, (ii) the social and legal status of individuals as related to employment, (iii) employment precariousness in terms of pay, types of contracts and career prospects, and finally, (iv) precariousness of society as a whole.

What seems important in this theoretical debate is to take into consideration other dimensions related with the contents, knowledge, skills and conditions of the professional activity in addition to the set of representations and expectations produced in the work context. It is therefore important in future research to consider other work and employment features, such as: rhythms and intensity of working time, predictability of timetables, degree of autonomy and responsibility in performing the tasks, relational networks, level of satisfaction with the job, representations of work, the professional and personal projects, and the impact of employment in the public/private life of social actors.

Thus, the basis for the concept of insecurity lays on the economic and social insecurity, as well as in the nature of work and material and symbolic compensation of social relations (Castel, 1995). We also include the structural dimension of socialisation and socio-professional integration arising from the relationship to work. As Paugam (2000: 15) points out "Today (...) we make the relationship with employment the determinant dimension of integration and tend to forget the relationship to work, as it had been studied, on the one hand, by Durkheim and, second, by the work of the sociologists of the 60s."

Consequently, the "experience" of precariousness from the point of view of economic and social uncertainty affects many of today's workers in different ways. Regarding this, the growing heterogeneity manifested in the positions or situations of workers depending on their relationship with employment norm has occurred over last decades, as Paugam identified in his empirical work: i) holders of a stable employment who do not run the risk of losing it in the coming years (stable employment not threatened); ii) holders of an employment/profession for more than a year, but that may lose it in the coming years (threatened stable employment); iii) those who have changed jobs or experienced a period of unemployment over the previous year that currently have a precarious employment and could lose it in the near future (unstable employment); iv) the unemployed for less than two years; v) unemployed for over two years (long-term unemployed) (2000: 14).

## 2. Project and empirical design

This article arises from our participation in a research project entitled "Pathways of insertion of graduates: objective and subjective relations with work" (Percurso de inserção dos licenciados: relações objetivas e subjectivas com o trabalho) (PTDC/CS-SOC/098459/2008)<sup>1</sup>, centred on reflection about the recent changes in the transition into the labour market of higher education graduates.

As a general goal, this project aimed to analyse the trajectories of young graduates' employability from two public universities in Lisbon – the University of Lisbon and the New University of Lisbon - following the employment status of the cohort 2005/06, in four distinct stages: first month afterwards, 18 and 36 months later and finally, a last moment common to all respondents, titled "reference week" (which corresponds to the seven days before the start of the questionnaire). By providing the choice of four stages we intended to ensure that the sample was composed of graduates who were included in a five year period after the completion of their respective degree.

Among the more specific objectives established, were aimed to characterise these pathways in order to obtain information regarding: a) the situation over time considering the conventional insertion indicators (e.g., waiting time to obtain the first employment, type of employment, time work, earnings, business sector); b) the mobilisation of objective resources (academic and non-academic); c) and the assessment of the subjective relationship that graduates have with the work (importance and appreciation of the work in relation to other social values).

The methodological design involved as a first step, the application of an extensive survey (which was administered by phone, and secondly, the implementation of a series of in-depth interviews with graduates of illustrative professional situations typologies that resulted from a cluster analysis. It should also be noted that the research was applied to a sample of 1004 graduates from all courses in the New University of Lisbon (40.5%) and the University of Lisbon (59.5%). Our reflection is based on this sample and specifically, we only considered the information on the respondents who said they

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinated by Miguel Chaves (FCSH-UNL), this research project presents results beyond the purpose of this article (PTDC / CS-SOC / 098 459/2008). In addition to the coordinator, the team consists of several members from different higher education institutions (Ana Paula Marques, Cristina Parente, Hugo Mendes, Jesuína Varela, João Sedas Nunes, Luís António Baptista, Maria Manuela Gonçalves, Natalia Alves, Mariana Gaio Alves e Rui Santos).

are in self-employment<sup>1</sup>. From a total of 87.4% who were employed, 10.4% did so as self-employed<sup>2</sup>. Although this is a relatively low number of respondents, it is important to realise that its value is close to the one obtained from the self-employed owners of higher education in the national context for 2012 (11.3%) (PORDATA, 2013)<sup>3</sup> and other studies we conducted (Marques & Moreira, 2011a, 2011b<sup>4</sup>, Marques, 2007<sup>5</sup>). Also, this article does not take into account a number of other professional or training situations, such as “unemployed”(2.4%), “inactive” (3.7%), “fellow” (5.5%) and “trainee” (1.1%), as those would lead us to a reflection along other lines of analysis which, notwithstanding its relevance, would require reference to diverse theoretical frameworks<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. *Workers on their own: profiles and statutes assumed*

Data gathered from our research allows for the definition of the dominant profile of the self-employed (detailed quantitative data will be reported elsewhere). It consists of a majority of female graduates (70.3%) whose average age is about thirty and have residential autonomy. They are part of a household, regardless of whether or not they have children (57.1%), although it is significant that the relative weight of those who said they live alone (16.2%) or with parents / in-laws (12.1%).

These respondents belong to three main higher education area groups: “social sciences, business and law” (42.9%); “arts and humanities” 24.2%) and “sciences, mathematics and computer science” (18.7%). Few holders of a diploma in engineering, health and education are “working on their own” which is explained in a large part by the greater supply of jobs so far, by private and public companies. Although recently this endogenous capacity to absorb graduates has been registering limits in recent years (Gonçalves et al., 2009), which explains the greater visibility of highly qualified registered labour migration flows from Portugal. In face of these first results, we brought more consistency to the trend already observed in other studies (Marques, 2007; Marques & Moreira, 2011a, 2011b) of a higher incidence of these “new” independent ways of working among graduates of the social sciences and humanities, also including in this group the graduates from law, economics and management. In turn, taking into consideration the social class of family as a composite variable for the understanding of career paths based on self-employment is paramount. Thus, we highlight the respondents whose parents, in terms of social classes, may be grouped among the “Entrepreneurs, Managers and Liberal professionals” (44%), followed by “Technicians and environment professionals” (27.5%) and “Operative employees” (12.5%). The thesis of social reproduction and the role family of origin when deciding to embark on an autonomous and independent professional career seems to have some explanatory power considering these results. The generation of individual provisions structured around values and beliefs (for example, having confidence, optimism, not having risk aversion) for learning and socialization in the family is a cognitive dimension that may be favourable to the emergence of fostering attitudes of autonomous and entrepreneurial experiences. Studies conducted by us have already pointed out the importance of the social capital in the decision to embark on a career, creating self-employment / business (Marques & Moreira, 2011b).

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<sup>1</sup> We used the definition of self-employed worker, as one who exercises an independent activity and who is directly dependent upon the profits (accomplished or potential) from produced goods or services. The employees may be members of the household or not. A self-employed can be classified as self-employed, as isolated, or as an employer (with or without employees).

<sup>2</sup> Respondents in self-employment situation only correspond to 91 cases in our sample.

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of graduates in the population pursuing an activity on their own as self-employment has increased significantly in the decade and years: in 1998, 4.3% and in 2015, 15.9%. Comparison with the European Union, Portugal has a value below the average for those who hold higher levels of qualification (ISCED 5-8): 18.1% versus 32.7% respectively. On the other hand, Portugal has higher relative proportions of workers in the context of traditional self-employment forms with low levels of education (ISCED 0-2) compared to the EU (88.1% versus 10.2%, respectively) (Eurostat, National Institutes of Statistics – INE and PORDATA, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The Entrepreneurship Potential project records 12.4% of own-account workers (self-employed/ entrepreneur).

<sup>5</sup> In the study conducted between 2006-07, under the MeIntegra project, we were able to note that 12% of all graduates interviewed by the University of Minho declared they had a ‘worker on their own’ situation (self-employed / entrepreneur) (Marques, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For example, by analysing all kinds of unemployment, and various other forms of work that integrate informal dimensions of work and/or are considered “invisible” (Dornelas, Veloso & Guerreiro, 2011).

In conclusion, the main features that characterise these self-employed<sup>1</sup> are as follows: strongly feminine, relatively young, holders of diplomas in social sciences, business and law, as well as arts and humanities and mainly from families of origin with higher economic, educational and symbolic capital.

Next, we argue that the social category of "worker on its own" represents a heterogeneity of autonomy and professional independence situations which should be examined. To this end, we base our considerations on the main analytical axes generally used by the authors referenced above (Assunção, 2008; Supiot, 2001; Burchell, Deakin & Honey, 1999; Freire, 1995): i) subordination / hierarchical dependence; ii) traditional and modern versions of self-employment; iii) differentiation between the ones who have employees and the ones who don't.

The first axe, subordination/hierarchical dependence, which gives us an indication of the statutory "opposition" of the worker, regards the assessment of the relationship of contractual independence or the subordination facing the authority of an employer. This is possible based on the information regarding the existence or absence of a written employment contract and its nature. In this case, we assume the contractual independence from the observance of the following: the employee does not submit to a hierarchy within the company; he/she does not comply with a work schedule set by the company; he/she does not exercise his/her activity on company premises and does not use the working tools provided by it. As we do not hold information on all items included in this definition, the contractual independence will be measured only by the type and nature of the contract. Thus, we observed that one of the consequences of flexible labour strategies adopted by most companies nowadays is individual subcontracting through a contract for services. In this sense, we can conclude that among the total of respondents who reported working on their own, 68.1% belong to the professional group of experts and associate professions, only 17.6% belong to the professional group of senior level civil servants and, to a lesser extent, to the group of technicians and associate professionals (11%). In our sample of respondents, situations of professional unsuitability are residual. With top-level qualifications, these "young professionals" perform their activity on the basis of a legal and probably real subordination, by reference to the existence of a written employment contract (31.9%). These split between the contract figure that provides services (41.1%), permanent employment (34.5%) and fixed-term employment (24.1%). Therefore, assuming the necessary conceptual, methodological and technical reserves (it is important to remember that it only refer to 91 respondents from a sample of 1004)<sup>2</sup>, it is conceivable that these results point out some situations of "false", "dependent", "involuntary" self-employed, among others, as we have already mentioned.

Then, we should consider the second "opposition" which refers to the fact that the self-employed are the unique and sole responsible for their professional activity, approaching to the entrepreneur concept (also including information on the type of business or organization). In this case, and according to our results, it appears that 74.4% of self-employed do it in a situation of being the only ones/ responsible for their professional activity. Only 25.6% reported having workers under their supervision and responsibility which can, in most cases, rise/ to 3 workers (78.2%), which means that those are micro-private companies in general (51.1%) - or as micro-entrepreneurs. Here too, we can assume that these graduates take the risk of economic self-sufficiency (business risk) and responsibility of running a sole private company (37.5%).

Finally, we consider the activity sectors that can point to modern records of professions associated with innovation/creation of goods and services, moving away from activities that configure traditional references for example, small merchants, independent technicians (e.g., electricians, mechanics) and professionals. The economic structure has been transformed by the introduction of new technologies that allow, among many other things, to rationalize part of the production of goods/ services (in terms of physical space, for example), relativise economies of scale and gives rise to new entrants and small businesses with greater flexibility in dealing with radical changes. The literature found on innovations that generate new and smaller companies, which promote new professions and competency profiles, is vast. Thus, when analysing the business sector in which respondents are included, it appears that the activities related to justice (26.7%), business

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<sup>1</sup> These traits are different from those that had been identified in other studies, such as the analysis performed by Freire (1995), or analyses conducted abroad, for example, in England (Böheim & Muehlberger, 2006). In this case, the recurrent traits had been organized around a certain "masculinisation" of the profile and "maturity" in terms of age and seniority of independent workers (Freire, 1994: 142-143). The only difference between the English and the Portuguese situation was that in England, workers were more "empowered" with a college degree (Böheim & Muehlberger, 2006: 13) whereas in Portugal the participants held the basic skills required at the time.

<sup>2</sup> We must beware when interpreting the figures collected by the questionnaire survey instrument, given the social pressure, professional refuge or refusal to reveal the form of contract by the respondent.

services (21.1%), artistic and cultural services (13.3%), education and health, and finally, social protection (12.2%) contribute the most to characterise these independent but dependent workers. Simultaneously, they are far from the traditional small farmer image, farmer, artisan, trader, and the "handyman", manly attached to low-skilled economic sectors.

### Concluding remarks

Undoubtedly, the discontinuities of the labour market brought about by the financial and economic crisis changed the conditions of access to an occupation and, in particular, the trajectories of young graduates. Also, the re-configuration underway in patterns and cultural models, social relationships in terms of family, educational and professional background of the current generation (and its relationship to other generations) are unquestionable.

Throughout this article we claimed that we are facing a set of professional changes which are framing new forms of employment relationships. These tend to be defined by a hybrid and opaque relationship with autonomy and professional independence by young graduates who declared to "work on their own". From the main results obtained, it is possible to identify a relatively consistent trend of feminisation of assembly workers whose employment is based on a relationship of professional (in)dependence and a trend by scientific area of academic training segmentation. Furthermore, it appears that in the last five years after graduation, the self-employed status which may take settings close to "dependent self-employed" or "involuntary self-employed", thus introduced "grey areas" and constraints of various kinds.

If these young people are now scattered among various professional paths there are, however, common denominators that tend to characterise them. They seem to share situations of precarious working conditions, in the sense that part of these young professionals have a real and formal subordination. Also, they tend to assume the risks of an independent activity such as lower (or no) employment protection, coverage provided by the social security system through the active life cycle and retirement (e.g., unemployment benefits, sick leave, parental leave and other allowances related to reconciling work and family, disability benefits), collective bargaining and representation by the unions. Thus, there are numerous actual/real and potential risks which, however, are not easy to typify and that require new developments, further in-depth study and more research on this subject.

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