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Employment outcomes and satisfaction levels in graduates of the gerontology master's programs in Spain

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increase in the aging population in developed countries. This has led to a need for trained people in the gerontological field. The most common academic way of specializing in this field in Spain is via a master's program. It is well known that investing in human capital increases knowledge, productivity, and the probability of getting a job. The question is if these kinds of educational programs are useful to provide real preparation for students and if the programs are useful for getting into the job market. We asked graduates to supply the answers. A survey was completed by 144 graduates from the Universities of Salamanca and Seville. Most graduates selected these master's programs to increase their probability of getting a job. A total of 64.6% reported that they had got a job, 38.8% of which got one in the first 2 years after graduating. A total of 55.6% felt that they had got a job thanks to having done the master's program. The usefulness of the acquired knowledge (47.9%) and social networks (28.8%) was seemingly high when getting a job. A high percentage of students (67%) found a job in this field after completing the master's program, and they got their first experience in a relatively short period after graduating. Investment in human capital is considered useful by graduates. The labor market is interested in highly qualified specialists. To have a postgraduate degree is still an advantage in getting a job, even after the 2008 economic crisis.

Introduction

With the continuous increase of an aging population, there is a parallel necessity for professionals to address the new demands placed on services that will be affected by this group. There will be a strain on existing systems (Estrada & Licenciada, 2004). In the medical field, a speciality in geriatrics was created, but there is no similar formal professional path in other areas.

The education of physicians is structured by the MIR (Médicos Internos Residentes—Medical Internship and Residency) program in Spain. On the social side, however there is a lack of formal accreditation. The way in which social professionals achieve the necessary qualification to work in geriatric affairs is via a master's in gerontology. The field of gerontology has accumulated knowledge over the past several decades, and there has been an increasing number of academic programs and papers (Lowenstein, 2004). In any case, the history of gerontology as an academic discipline is quite recent, and that could be the reason why the role of a gerontologist is not very well known. Pianosi and Payne (2014) have proved in Canada that even administrators of social services show low rates of hiring gerontologists and low knowledge of gerontological competencies.

In the United States, the first master's degree programs in gerontology began in 1967, and the doctoral programs in 1989 (Haley & Zelinski, 2007). In Spain, one of the first master's program was at the University of Salamanca in 1989. Now, there are 20 educational programs in gerontology. To

paraphrase Meyer (2003), the training situation in Europe is very heterogeneous and portrays a definitely colorful picture. A few years ago, Hirschfield and Peterson (1982) proposed the idea of considering and focusing on gerontology as a profession. They defined models of occupational groups as needing to (a) share a common name or title, (b) have an agreed upon purpose, and (c) encompass particular mechanisms for specialization. But nowadays, there is still a great variety of study programs due to the different study systems at different universities and the legal frameworks of higher education within Europe. To reduce this huge diversity of educational programs, a European Master's Gerontology (EUMAG) program has been proposed. EUMAG is a flexible modular study framework with a total of 90 credits that is based on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Neoclassical models in economics are centered on the concept of the accumulation of physical capital. Current thinking is not satisfied with this point of view (Santín et al., 2015), and it focuses on human capital (HK). We understand HK as the quality and the amount of education that people receive during their training period, or through their experience. HK is classically recognized (Beker, 1964) as one of the main factors securing a privileged position on the job market.

Earning money and getting a job are strong motivations for education, but these are not the only ones. Being up to date (Giménez, López-pueyo, & Sanaú, 2015; Murillo, 2011) is one motivation. Pursuing education because it is a vocation is also something that some students refer to as their motivation, especially when they have had exposure to the discipline in their undergraduate years (Ní Chróinín et al., 2013). Previous intergenerational experience (Wesley, 2008) also acts, in part, as a motivation to engage in gerontological activities—students have overcome some negative stereotypes about old people through these experiences. This is most common among degrees achieved without gerontological training (Adler, 2008; Sanhueza Chamorro, 2014).

Other motivations that guide students' decisions are usually related to the eventual outcome (Molinari & Ellis, 2013) of a professional career. In this case, students value the possibilities of getting, in a short period of time, adequate income while they also develop a rewarding job helping others (Eshbaugh, Gross, Hillebrand, Davie, & Henninger, 2013). This is a common motivation among those who choose sociohealth studies. There are not many studies of this type of motivation. Haley and Zelinski (2007) conducted a study of doctoral graduate job placement. They used data from the two schools with which they were affiliated: the University of Southern California (USC) and the University of South Florida (USF). They found that all of their graduates were employed, and most had research-related positions or were faculty members in academic institutions.

The success or failure of a program rests on whether it prepares individuals to meet the demands of the job market within a given field (Ewen, Carr, & Reynolds, 2012). Too little has been done about employment and gerontology training in Spain. A nonsystematic bibliographic search was conducted in Scopus and in Medline using the keywords: employment, job market, human capital, gerontology and Spain. Only one paper was found about Spain: Askham, Gilhooly, Parkatti, & Vega, 2007. This is an opinion article written by well recognized specialists, but it is not a research article, and it does not focus on employment.

The aim of this study is to describe the academic profile of applicants of master's programs in gerontology (MPG) in Spain, to discover what their main motivations are, to determine their labor outcomes, and, finally, to see how participants would evaluate the MPG according to their expectations.

Methods

Procedures

Participants were mailed a letter explaining the purpose of the study by each university: 170 at the University of Seville and 292 at the University of Salamanca. The participants were anonymous; and researchers were completely blind to the personal data of participants, who voluntarily submitted an online survey comprised of 22 items designed specifically for that purpose.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents to the survey ($n = 144$, except in certain cases that are indicated in the table).

Variable	Category	%
Sex	Male	24.3%
	Female	75.7%
University of graduation	Salamanca	56.9%
	Seville	43.1%
Studies	Psychology	56.3%
	Social Work	17.4%
	Medicine	05.6%
	Nursing	04.9%
	Others	16.0%
Previous training in gerontology	Yes	73.6%
	No	24.4%
Motivation to do the master's program	To improve the possibilities to get a job	44.4%
	To increase previous knowledge	26.4%
	To acquire new knowledge	16.7%
	To be promoted from their current positions	05.6%
	Vocation	04.2%
Working situation at the beginning of the master's program	Others	02.8%
	Without a job, but looking for one	38.9%
	Occupied, but looking for promotion in their job	27.1%
	Without a job, but not looking for one	23.6%
	Occupied, but looking for other job	10.4%
Expectation of obtaining a job after finishing the master's program	Yes	97.2%
	No	02.8%
Got a job in gerontological field after finishing the master's program	Yes	64.6%
	No	35.4%
Years to get a job after the end of the master's program in the gerontological field ($n = 93$)	1 year or less	35.5%
	Up to 2 years	13.2%
	Up to 3 years	06.3%
	More than 3 years	55.0%
Consider that the master's program was useful for getting a job ($n = 93$)	Yes	55.6%
	No	44.4%
Months of labor contract of their first experience in the gerontological field ($n = 93$)	More than 12	29.2%
	Between 3 and 6	13.9%
	Between 6 and 12	09.7%
	Between 1 and 3	06.3%
	As freelance	03.5%

Participants

The sample consisted of 144 graduates of gerontology master's programs from both universities (see Table 1). The University of Seville is actually the only university that offers this course in the south of Spain. The MPG at the University of Salamanca is the one with more experience in this area. The study was conducted between December 2014 and March 2015.

Measures

Graduates were asked about their educational and employment history, their motivation for being trained in gerontology, how satisfied they were with the training acquired, and if they considered that training useful in getting into the job market in this field.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using the SPSS-21 statistics software. First, a descriptive analysis was undertaken to characterize the sample participants. Contingency tables were built to look for correlations using the chi-square test between qualitative variables under the usual parameters.

Results

The vast majority of the respondents to the survey were female (75.7%), with an average age of 27.92 years old (*SD*: 5.72) at the moment of graduation, and they would now be about 35.62 years old (*SD*: 9.79). Results confirm that the gerontology MPG is mainly selected by psychology and social work students (73.7%) over other graduates such as those of Medicine where the MIR program in geriatrics exists. These students frequently choose to read the MPG if they had some previous academic background, but the overall main motivation to do it is for professional reasons (to get a job or to be promoted from their current positions—50%). Most people who apply for this MPG are looking to change their working situation, and they put extremely high expectations on the possibilities of the educational program (97% consider they could obtain a job in the field after finishing the MPG). The frequency of responses to all the questions is shown in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#).

The reality of getting a job after finishing the program is not as high as the expectations, but the results are not bad. A total of 64.6% reported they had got a job, 38.8% of which got one in the first 2 years. The evaluation of the investment in HK is also high. A total of 55.6% consider that they got a job thanks to having done the MPG.

We also asked about the influence of the economic crisis in 2008 and divided the data between those who had finished their training before the end of 2008 and those who did it from 2009 onward.

Table 2. Evaluation of the master's program for the graduates.

Variable	Category	%
General evaluation of the master's program	5 (Best)	18.1%
	4	43.1%
	3	32.6%
	2	05.6%
	1 (Worst)	00.7%
General evaluation of the multidisciplinary of the training	5 (Best)	41.0%
	4	38.9%
	3	11.8%
	2	07.6%
	1 (Worst)	00.7%
Applicability of the knowledge	5 (Best)	19.4%
	4	43.8%
	3	24.3%
	2	09.0%
	1 (Worst)	03.5%
Main important knowledge	Social	46.5%
	Sanitary	37.5%
	All areas	09.7%
	Labor orientation	02.8%
	Legal	02.1%
	Psychological	00.7%
	Psychosocial	00.7%
	5 (Best)	16.0%
Evaluation of the training acquired for getting a job	4	36.8%
	3	35.4%
	2	09.7%
	1 (Worst)	01.4%
	Yes	68.8%
Do you maintain contacts with fellows?	No	31.2%
	Thanks to the acquired training	47.9%
Way of getting a job in the gerontological field	Personal contacts	14.6%
	Contacts from classmates	02.8%
	Others	02.8%
	I was previously working in this field	02.1%
	Contacts from teachers	01.4%
	Entrepreneurship	01.4%
	I am still studying	01.4%
	I have never found a job in the gerontological field	25.7%

We found that finishing before the crisis made it easier to find a job in the field: 60.2% of those who did the degree previous to 2008 (p -value: .000) got one. But there are no differences in the difficulty of finding a job if we do not distinguish by field (p -value: .613).

There are also differences in the previous educational experience period of the graduates. After 2008, there are more people (83.8%) who have background training in gerontology (p -value: .004). The other important differences linked with the 2008 crisis are the levels of income. There is a significant (p -value: .041) difference between those who finished before and after 2008. Those who finished after that year have lower incomes. However, there are no differences in the amount of time it took to get their first job (p -value: .546) or in the months they were employed for their first experience in the gerontological field (p -value: .105).

The general evaluation of the contents and the organization of these MPG programs show that they are very well regarded by the graduates, as shown on Table 2. The usefulness of the acquired knowledge (47.9%) and social networks (28.8%) was seemingly high with regard to getting a job.

There is a relationship between the kind of studies graduates had previous to finishing the MPG and the motivation for doing it when we compare them with physicians, where there is a MIR program, and the rest (p -value: .006). The main reason for doing the MPG among nonphysicians was to improve their opportunities to get a job; among physicians, the main reason was to increase previous knowledge. No significant differences were found between people employed at the beginning of the MPG and people who were not employed at the beginning of the MPG (p -value: .060). And when participants completed the general evaluation of the MPG, there were also no differences between people who got a job after finishing the MPG (p -value: .086) and those who did not finish it. We did not find any significant differences among variables that define the graduate profiles (see Table 1) and getting a job in the gerontological field after finishing the MPG.

Discussion

The rapid increase of an aging population in all developed countries highlights the need for trained experts in all gerontological areas, from those of health orientation to those focused on social aspects (Cummings & Adler, 2007). Thus, the main interest for those who enrolled in MPG, from the data analyzed, seems to be oriented towards the job market. High expectations are put on the MPG to achieve these goals.

It is well known in many fields that increasing HK also enhances employability and job placements (Ewen et al., 2012; Murillo, 2011). According to our data, this idea is corroborated; but we have to admit that on that subject there are some controversial findings. In a recent report (Agència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2015), contrary results were found: having a master's degree was only relevant for 34% of employers. Other authors, such as Danuta Piróg (2014) have recently proposed that investment in HK comes with an ever-increasing risk. The risk is that education has become a mass commodity. There are a greater number of people who have acquired similar competencies, so education does not ensure access to the job market.

In our sample, a high percentage of students, (67%) found a job in the gerontology field after completing the MPG, and they got their first experience within a relatively short period. This may explain why the MPG is considered useful by graduates. These results coincide with the findings in previous papers such as those of Guggenberger, Keplinger, and Unger (2011).

Some things seem to have changed in recent decades regarding the jobs found by graduates in their specific field after educational programs. Our results, in general, differ from those found by the first studies on this topic cited such as those of Peterson (1985, 1987), who affirmed that gerontology degree holders were finding appropriate employment but frequently not in the area of their preparation. And these results are closer to the ones of this same classical author (Peterson & Wendt, 1990), in 1990 (or more recently by Adler, 2008), where he found that graduates perceived that they had good career opportunities in this field. Our data led us to think that the labor market is

interested in highly qualified specialists, such as those who complete an MPG, and not graduates with only general knowledge of the field.

Obviously, the context of an economic crisis affects the labor market in all fields. In academia, new graduates that apply for the MPG have a better background. Most of them have some kind of previous training. These circumstances led us to think that those who choose to work in this field have a more marked vocational sensibility.

Our results also confirm that after 2008 there has been an increase in the difficulty of getting a job in the the gerontological field; nevertheless, having a higher academic degree is still an advantage when getting a job. However, there are other differences such as lower wages. In short, graduates have more difficulties getting a job in this field, and they earn less.

On the other hand, the job market seems not to have changed because of the crisis in other ways such as offers of work. The period of time it takes to get a job is the same as before and after the crisis, and the duration of employment is no different.

Finally, we have proved that motivations to do the MPG are different when there is a specific program such as in the case of the students of Medicine. In this case, the reasons are academic instead of having employment as a goal.

The motivations that led graduates to choose a master's program are similar in most of the studies that we have reviewed and mentioned earlier. Most of those who take the MPG program decide to do it for employment reasons, and the labor market in all developed countries seems to reward investment in human capital. We realize that our results are considered general to readers in other cultural/geographic regions. Having a higher academic degree puts candidates in a more favorable position for getting a job.

In summary, investment in HK is important for two reasons: First, investment in HK increases the knowledge needed to differentiate candidates struggling for a job position in a difficult market—like the Spanish job market, which is characterised by very high unemployment rates. Second, investment in HK is a way to open a social network. A social network that is useful for maintaining continuous training in a field, to open doors to professional collaborations, or even to be considered as a candidate for a position.

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