

The Learning City as a context for developing university employability

La città dell'apprendimento come contesto per lo sviluppo dell'occupabilità universitaria

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Abstract

This study investigates how Learning Cities can enhance university students' employability, focusing on career adaptability. Using a mixed-method, quasi-experimental design, it compares Economics students engaged in urban learning experiences—such as internships, service learning, project work and local workshops supported by reflective tools—with peers following mainly curricular pathways. Results show higher career adaptability among participating students, particularly in Curiosity and Confidence. Qualitative findings reveal stronger agency, improved understanding of urban professional contexts and greater awareness of transferable skills. The study suggests that employability develops through the intentional integration of experiential, reflective and evaluative practices within Learning Cities.

Keywords: Learning Cities; employability; university students; urban learning; career adaptability.

Sintesi

Questo studio analizza il contributo delle Learning Cities allo sviluppo dell'occupabilità degli studenti universitari, con particolare attenzione alla career adaptability. Attraverso un disegno quasi-sperimentale a metodo misto, vengono confrontati studenti di Economia coinvolti in esperienze di apprendimento urbano - tra cui tirocini, service learning, project work e laboratori territoriali supportati da strumenti riflessivi - con studenti che seguono percorsi prevalentemente curriculari. I risultati evidenziano livelli più elevati di career adaptability, soprattutto nelle dimensioni della Curiosità e della Fiducia. Le evidenze qualitative mostrano maggiore agency, migliore comprensione dei contesti professionali urbani e maggiore consapevolezza delle competenze trasferibili. Lo studio suggerisce che l'occupabilità si sviluppi attraverso l'integrazione intenzionale di pratiche esperienziali, riflessive e valutative all'interno delle Learning Cities.

Parole chiave: città dell'apprendimento; studenti universitari; apprendimento urbano; adattabilità professionale.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of the Learning City has emerged as a key framework for interpreting educational change within complex, globalised urban environments. In a historical phase characterised by rapid technological, economic and social transformations — accentuated by digitalisation, labour market reconfiguration and growing territorial inequalities — cities are increasingly called upon to assume an active role in promoting lifelong learning and in fostering the development of skills necessary for citizens' social, civic and labour inclusion. From this perspective, Learning Cities can be understood as urban contexts in which educational policies, economic development and social cohesion are interconnected, and where lifelong learning is recognised as a strategic lever for employability, competitiveness and sustainable development (Longworth, 2006; OECD, 2018; UIL, 2013; 2025).

Within Learning Cities, learning is no longer confined to formal educational institutions, but unfolds across urban spaces and is embedded in the social, economic and professional practices that shape everyday life. Libraries, enterprises, public administrations, third sector organisations, innovation hubs and employment services become integral components of a distributed learning ecosystem, in which educational experiences are closely intertwined with local development trajectories and labour market inclusion processes (Longworth, 2006; OECD, 2018). This systemic and situated understanding of learning highlights the need to consider not only educational provision, but also the conditions through which urban contexts enable or constrain learning opportunities.

In this study, urban learning is defined as a set of structured and intentional educational experiences that take place within the urban context and involve direct engagement with local actors, organisations and professional environments. These experiences include internships, project work with territorial stakeholders, service-learning activities and local workshops, and are designed to connect academic learning with real-world contexts.

Urban learning is therefore understood not merely as exposure to the city, but as a pedagogically mediated process in which experience is supported by reflection and aimed at fostering transferable skills, career adaptability and professional identity development.

In this framework, universities occupy a strategic position as both educational institutions and key urban stakeholders, embedded within multi-level territorial networks connecting academic knowledge, innovation, public policy and the world of work. Rather than acting solely as providers of formal education, universities increasingly function as mediators between students and the urban learning ecosystem, shaping opportunities for experiential learning, professional socialisation and capability development. This role is particularly salient in relation to employability, especially within three-year Economics degree programmes, where both policy agendas and students' expectations increasingly emphasise the development of market-relevant skills and the capacity to navigate complex, non-linear career transitions (Holmes, 2001; Tomlinson, 2017).

Recent research consistently underscores that employability cannot be reduced to employment outcomes or the acquisition of technical competences alone. Instead, it is conceptualised as a multidimensional and dynamic construct encompassing transferable skills, adaptability, self-efficacy, the ability to build professional networks, and the capacity to critically interpret work contexts (Clarke, 2018; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Yorke, 2006). From this standpoint, urban and territorial contexts play a crucial role in shaping employability trajectories, as they influence access to resources, the quality and diversity of learning experiences, and opportunities to engage meaningfully with professional

environments.

Despite the increasing diffusion of university-based initiatives connected to urban contexts — such as internships with local organisations, project work with territorial stakeholders, service learning activities, entrepreneurship workshops and collaborations with public bodies and enterprises — the evaluation of their impact on employability often remains limited to output-oriented indicators, including placement rates or short-term employment outcomes. While these indicators provide useful information, they offer only a partial picture and fail to capture the processes through which urban learning experiences contribute to the development of skills, professional identities and transition capabilities, particularly at the early stages of higher education (Bachelor's level) (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

More broadly, there is a persistent lack of integrated analytical approaches capable of conceptualising employability as a situated and relational process, emerging from the interaction between students, universities and the urban context. Such approaches should account for both measurable dimensions and the subjective meanings that learners attribute to their experiences within the city. In this regard, the Learning Cities paradigm provides a promising theoretical lens for rethinking the relationship between higher education, territory and employability. However, its potential can only be fully realised through evaluation models that are sensitive to lived experience and capable of integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives, thus enabling a more nuanced understanding of how urban learning ecosystems contribute to capability development and social inclusion (OECD, 2001).

2. Aims of the research

This study aims to analyse the contribution of urban learning experiences, framed within the Learning City paradigm, to the development of university students' employability in three-year degree programmes in Economics. Consistent with perspectives that conceptualise employability as a multidimensional, dynamic and situated construct — shaped by the interaction between individuals, educational institutions and socio-territorial contexts (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2001; Yorke, 2006) — the research adopts an approach that goes beyond the assessment of immediate employment outcomes. Instead, it focuses on the formative, interpretative and experiential processes through which students develop the capacity to navigate complex and non-linear professional transitions.

From this standpoint, the study does not aim to evaluate employability as a static individual attribute, but rather to explore how specific configurations of urban learning experiences contribute to the construction of employability-related capabilities. In this sense, students' experiences are analysed as situated indicators of the educational potential of the Learning City, allowing insight into how urban contexts function as enabling or constraining environments for learning relevant to work.

More specifically, the research pursues the following objectives:

- to analyse levels of perceived employability, career adaptability and professional self-efficacy among students involved in urban learning experiences — such as local internships, project work with territorial stakeholders and situated learning activities — compared with students following predominantly curricular learning paths, contributing to the debate on the relationship between experiential learning, urban contexts and the development of transferable skills (Akkermans et al., 2018;

Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017);

- to explore students' representations and interpretations of the relationship between cities, universities and professional skill development, examining how the urban context is perceived as a resource, a constraint or a space of opportunity for building employability, in line with research highlighting the role of place and territory in study-to-work transitions (Holmes, 2013; OECD, 2001);
- to understand how urban learning experiences contribute to the construction of subjective meanings related to employability, professional planning and the management of work-study transitions, with particular attention to the narrative, identity-related and reflective dimensions of employability that are increasingly recognised as central in contemporary literature (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2001; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021);
- to investigate the educational potential of the Learning City as a context for the development of university employability, assessing the extent to which integration between universities and local environments supports forms of work-relevant learning, without reducing employability to job placement indicators, but instead conceptualising it as the capacity to learn, adapt and actively participate in labour markets and local economic life (OECD, 2018).

Taken together, these objectives aim to contribute to the development of employability evaluation models that are more sensitive to the urban and territorial dimension of learning. By integrating quantitative measures with qualitative analyses of students' experiences and attributed meanings, the study seeks to generate evidence that can inform both the design of university curricula and the development of Learning City policies, strengthening the evaluative understanding of how urban learning ecosystems support capability development.

3. Tools

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), combining quantitative and qualitative data to investigate employability as a multidimensional construct. Quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by a qualitative phase aimed at explaining and contextualising the results. Integration occurred during interpretation and discussion, enabling a comprehensive understanding of both measurable dimensions of employability and students' subjective experiences within the Learning City (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The quantitative component employed the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS), a widely validated instrument grounded in the career construction paradigm (Savickas, 2005; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The CAAS assesses career adaptability through four dimensions: Concern (future orientation and career planning) (Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009), Control (autonomy and responsibility in career decisions) (Hirschi, 2012; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), Curiosity (exploration of opportunities and professional contexts) (Lent & Brown, 2013; Savickas, 2005), and Confidence (belief in one's ability to manage career-related challenges) (Akkermans et al., 2018; Savickas et al., 2009). The scale consists of 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability within the present sample was high ($\alpha = .91$), with satisfactory coefficients for all subscales (Concern $\alpha = .85$; Control $\alpha = .83$; Curiosity $\alpha = .87$; Confidence $\alpha = .88$). The CAAS was administered at

the end of the intervention (post-test only design).

A structured online questionnaire was also administered to collect socio-demographic information and data on students' academic pathways and participation in urban learning experiences, including internships, project work, service-learning activities and local workshops. Additional items explored interaction with local stakeholders and the perceived contribution of these experiences to professional development. These data supported comparisons between students engaged primarily in curricular activities and those more actively involved in Learning City initiatives (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected subgroup of students differing in gender, year of study and level of participation in urban learning experiences. This method was chosen for its suitability in exploring employability, professional identity development and the perceived relationship between higher education and the urban context (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews examined perceptions of the university's role within the Learning City, meanings attributed to urban learning experiences, their perceived influence on employability and career planning, and the relationship between acquired competences and local opportunities. This approach reflects conceptualisations of employability as both a measurable resource and an identity-related, discursive construct (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

Together, the quantitative and qualitative tools provided an integrated framework for analysing employability development within the Learning City, combining standardised assessment with an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and interpretations.

4. Sample selection

The research sample consisted of students enrolled in three-year degree programmes in Economics at a university located in an urban area characterised by a consolidated network of territorial learning initiatives. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to include students exposed to urban learning opportunities relevant to employability development, while maintaining sufficient homogeneity in terms of disciplinary background.

The overall sample consisted of 124 students, enrolled in three-year degree programmes in Economics at a university located in an urban area characterised by a consolidated network of territorial learning initiatives.

The sample was composed of 58% female students ($n = 72$) and 42% male students ($n = 52$).

The experimental and control groups were comparable in terms of age ($M = 21.4$ years, $SD = 1.3$), gender distribution (experimental group: 60% female; control group: 56% female), and year of enrolment, ensuring baseline homogeneity between groups.

No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of age and gender distribution ($p > .05$), confirming baseline equivalence.

Within the overall sample, participants were divided into two groups:

- an experimental group, composed of students who had participated in a structured

and sustained manner in urban learning experiences integrated into their university pathway (such as local internships, project work with territorial stakeholders, service-learning activities or workshops developed in collaboration with local organisations);

- a control group, consisting of students who had mainly followed a traditional academic curriculum, with limited or no involvement in urban learning experiences during the period under investigation.

Although the study did not adopt a fully randomised design, the distinction between experimental and control groups made it possible to compare students sharing the same field of study while differing in their degree of integration within the urban learning context (Shadish et al., 2002).

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were:

- voluntary participation with informed consent;
- active enrolment in a three-year Economics degree programme at the time of data collection;
- attendance of at least 50% of the planned activities related to the educational experiences considered (both curricular and urban), in order to ensure meaningful exposure to the learning contexts under analysis.

Voluntary participation and informed consent were ensured in accordance with ethical guidelines for university-based research. The minimum attendance criterion was introduced to reduce the risk of evaluations being influenced by marginal or episodic experiences and to strengthen the internal validity of the study, as recommended in the literature on educational interventions and employability assessment (Shadish et al., 2002).

Overall, these methodological choices enabled the construction of a sample consistent with the research aims and suitable for comparing students with different levels of integration in the Learning City, as well as for exploring the specific contribution of urban learning experiences to the development of university employability.

5. Activities

The educational intervention consisted of a structured set of urban learning experiences integrated into the university curriculum. The primary aim was to examine how different levels of exposure to local and professional contexts within a Learning City framework could influence the development of employability among third-year Economics students.

The intervention was organised into two distinct pathways, differentiated by the degree of integration between urban experiences and guided reflective activities. One pathway was implemented for the experimental group, while the other corresponded to the learning conditions of the control group. Both groups followed the standard academic curriculum; however, only the experimental group participated in an additional structured module explicitly designed to support the consolidation and interpretation of employability-related learning.

- Control group: *predominantly curricular pathway*

Students in the control group followed a mainly traditional academic pathway consisting of standard teaching activities provided within the three-year Economics degree

programme. Their engagement with the urban context was limited, episodic, and not supported by systematic tools for reflection or employability development, as is still common in university models primarily oriented towards disciplinary knowledge transmission (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

Specifically, their educational experience included:

- lectures and seminars covering core disciplinary areas (political economy, management, accounting, statistics, economic law), with occasional contributions from external professionals. These contributions were not embedded within a structured experiential learning framework or assessed training programme, reflecting typical practices in first-cycle higher education (Holmes, 2013; OECD, 2018);
- classroom-based exercises and case studies, generally derived from teaching materials, simulations or generic examples, without a continuous connection to real urban stakeholders. Although these activities supported the development of analytical skills, they were largely decontextualised and therefore limited in their contribution to employability understood as a situated and relational process (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021);
- optional career guidance initiatives, such as workshops on CV writing, interview preparation, internship information sessions and company presentations. These activities were attended voluntarily and remained peripheral to the formal curriculum. The literature suggests that such interventions, when not integrated with experiential and reflective learning, have a limited impact on the development of career resources and adaptability (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2017);
- internships, only when individually included in students' study plans or undertaken independently, without a shared educational design, explicit employability-oriented learning objectives or structured feedback mechanisms. In the absence of such conditions, internships risk remaining fragmented experiences that are difficult to translate into transferable learning outcomes (Clarke, 2018; Jackson, 2017).

Overall, the learning experience of the control group remained predominantly centred on formal academic instruction, with a clear separation between university learning and the world of work. Exposure to the local context was not accompanied by intentional strategies to connect experience, skill development and professional planning. Consequently, employability development was implicitly delegated to individual student initiative, a pattern frequently highlighted in critical analyses of employability in higher education (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

- Experimental group: *integrated urban learning pathway*

In contrast, the experimental group participated in a structured urban learning pathway developed in collaboration with local stakeholders and complemented by a guided reflection module on employability. This design is consistent with research demonstrating that experiential learning has a significant impact on employability when accompanied by structured opportunities for reflection and explicit connections between experience, skill development and career planning (Clarke, 2018; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

The programme comprised two interconnected components:

- (a) urban experiential learning experiences;

- (b) a guided training–reflection module focused on career resource development, with particular attention to career adaptability.

(a) Urban learning experiences

Students engaged in one or more activities designed and implemented in collaboration with local stakeholders, consistent with models of situated learning and work-based learning in higher education (Billett, 2015; OECD, 2018):

- curricular or extracurricular internships at public bodies (e.g. economic development offices, territorial planning units), local enterprises (SMEs and service providers), third-sector organisations and trade associations. Activities aligned with the Economics curriculum and included data analysis, project support, reporting, financial communication, customer analysis and benchmarking, promoting authentic and context-based learning (Jackson, 2017);
- project work with businesses or local authorities, in which small groups of students addressed real-world problems proposed by stakeholders (e.g. sustainability assessments of services, feasibility studies, mapping of territorial needs, evaluation of local initiatives). These activities reflect problem-based and project-based learning approaches recognised for their effectiveness in fostering transferable skills and employability (Bell, 2010; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021);
- service-learning activities with economic and social orientation, focusing on inclusion, sustainability and local development (e.g. support for social cooperatives in economic planning, micro-projects in financial education, assistance to associations in fundraising and management). When structured and reflective, service learning is documented as an effective means of connecting academic learning, civic engagement and professional skill development (Eyler & Giles, 1999);
- local entrepreneurship workshops, aimed at designing business ideas related to urban needs (social innovation, sustainable tourism, digital local services). Activities included stakeholder mapping, market analysis, business modelling and pitching, aligning with evidence linking entrepreneurial education to employability, initiative and career adaptability (OECD, 2001).

Collectively, these experiences exposed students to authentic collaborative and professional contexts, fostering the development of transferable competences such as problem-solving, teamwork, professional communication and project management, while also enhancing their understanding of urban economic dynamics. This design reflects a situated conception of employability (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2013).

(b) Guided reflection module on employability

Alongside experiential learning, the experimental group participated in a structured training module consisting of group workshops and individual reflective activities. The purpose of this module was to make learning processes explicit and to connect experience with the development of career resources. Guided reflection plays a crucial role in transforming experience into transferable learning and employability development (Kolb, 1984; Jackson, 2017; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

The module included:

- introductory meeting, dedicated to presenting employability as a dynamic construct integrating skills, adaptability, professional identity and networks, in line

with contemporary models (Akkermans et al., 2018; Clarke, 2018; Yorke, 2006). An initial mapping of students' expectations and perceptions of the local labour market was conducted;

- career resource self-assessment workshop, in which students completed structured self-observation sheets and reflected on the four dimensions of career adaptability (Concern, Control, Curiosity, Confidence), linking them to their concrete experiences. This activity aligns with the career construction paradigm and with educational applications of the CAAS framework (Akkermans et al., 2018; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012);
- reflective diary and evidence log, through which students produced short reflective narratives on significant learning episodes and documented evidence of competence development (problems addressed, contributions made, tools used, feedback received). Reflective diaries are widely recognised as effective tools for supporting deep learning and professional awareness (Kember et al., 2008; Moon, 2004);
- peer feedback and discussion sessions, involving small-group dialogue on learning experiences, challenges encountered and adaptation strategies, as well as on the role of the urban context in shaping professional opportunities. This dialogic dimension aligns with socioconstructivist approaches to reflective learning in transitional contexts (Boud et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2017);
- final output: an employability portfolio, in which each student synthesised developed competences, activated adaptability resources, connections with the local territory and future professional steps. Portfolios are supported in the literature as a key tool for integrating experience, reflection and employability narratives (Clarke, 2018; Hooley et al., 2017; Jackson, 2017).

Overall, the pathway undertaken by the experimental group constituted a model of integrated and reflective urban learning, in which the Learning City functioned not merely as an operational backdrop but as an active educational environment for employability development. Employability is here conceptualised as the capacity to learn from experience, adapt to changing contexts and construct meaningful professional trajectories.

6. Results

6.1. Quantitative data analysis

A quantitative analysis was conducted to compare the experimental and control groups on their scores on the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS). Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Independent samples t-tests were performed to compare the experimental and control groups on overall CAAS scores and on each of the four subscales (Concern, Control, Curiosity and Confidence). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d*. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Both the overall career adaptability score and the four constituent dimensions (Concern, Control, Curiosity and Confidence) were analysed separately. In addition, the distribution of responses in the higher score ranges (values 4-5 on the Likert scale) was examined. This combined focus on mean differences and score distributions allowed not only average group differences to be identified, but also variations in the consolidation of career resources among students, which is particularly relevant when employability is conceptualised as a developmental process rather than a binary outcome.

Overall, students in the experimental group showed higher average levels of career adaptability than those in the control group, with differences ranging approximately between +12% and +18% across dimensions. Independent samples t-tests indicated that differences between groups were statistically significant for Curiosity ($t = 2.87$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.52$) and Confidence ($t = 2.65$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.48$), indicating moderate effect sizes. Differences in Concern and Control were smaller and did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$), suggesting a more limited impact of the intervention on these dimensions.

While these differences should be interpreted cautiously given the quasi-experimental design, they suggest that participation in structured urban learning experiences, when accompanied by guided reflection, is associated with a more robust set of psychosocial resources for managing transitions and uncertainty in career development.

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The largest differences emerged in the dimensions of Curiosity and Confidence, which appear particularly sensitive to authentic experience and reflective processing. Curiosity showed an advantage for the experimental group of approximately +16-18%, indicating a greater tendency to explore professional roles, opportunities and alternative trajectories. This pattern is consistent with students' exposure to real stakeholders (institutions, enterprises and third-sector organisations) and to situated tasks requiring openness to multiple solutions and career possibilities, rather than adherence to linear or predefined professional pathways.

Similarly, Confidence was higher in the experimental group (approximately +15-17%), suggesting greater perceived ability to address complex tasks, manage difficulties and overcome obstacles. This difference can be interpreted as the combined effect of engagement in authentic work-related activities (such as internships, project work and service learning) and the presence of mechanisms that make learning processes visible and explicit (evidence logs, feedback and portfolio construction), thereby reinforcing perceptions of competence and effectiveness.

Differences in Concern and Control were more moderate, though still consistent (approximately +10-12% for Concern and +8-11% for Control). Concern, which relates to future orientation and planning, appears to be influenced not only by experiential learning but also by broader contextual factors such as labour market uncertainty, access to information and social expectations. Control, reflecting perceived autonomy and responsibility in career decision-making, may similarly be shaped by individual characteristics and structural constraints (e.g. economic pressures or the need to work during studies). These patterns suggest that the urban and reflective pathway may exert a stronger influence on the more action-oriented and situational components of adaptability, while effects on long-term planning and perceived agency may develop more gradually.

An analysis of the higher response bands (scores 4-5) further supports these findings. The experimental group included a higher proportion of students with well-consolidated adaptability resources, with differences of approximately 12-20 percentage points compared to the control group. This result is particularly relevant, as it indicates not only an overall shift in mean scores but also a greater concentration of students reaching higher levels of adaptability. The contrast is especially evident for items related to exploring opportunities (Curiosity) and managing demanding tasks (Confidence). In the control

group, responses were more frequently clustered around intermediate values (score 3), suggesting a less stable or more uncertain perception of career resources, consistent with pathways characterised by episodic contact with the world of work and limited reflective processing.

Taken together, these quantitative results suggest that the integration of authentic urban learning experiences with structured reflective tools is associated with higher levels of career adaptability, particularly in dimensions linked to exploration and operational confidence. Rather than indicating direct causal effects, the findings point to a pattern in which students who are supported in interpreting and narrating their experiences are more likely to develop usable career resources and a more proactive orientation towards professional transitions.

6.2. Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative analysis aimed to explore how students interpret the relationship between university education, the urban context and employability, and how different forms of engagement with urban learning experiences shape their representations of future careers. Semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis through a hybrid coding strategy. An initial deductive phase identified themes aligned with the theoretical framework (employability as a process, career adaptability, transferable skills, networks and professional identity), followed by inductive coding to capture emergent elements (e.g. sense of legitimacy, fear of the local labour market, informal networks, and perceived misalignment between theory and practice). Themes were then compared across the experimental and control groups to identify convergences and divergences in students' narratives.

Overall, marked differences emerged in how employability was articulated. Students in the control group tended to describe employability in instrumental and threshold terms, associating it primarily with CV enhancement, access to internships and understanding employers' expectations. In these narratives, the city often appeared as a neutral backdrop or a logistical constraint (in terms of time, distance or costs), rather than as an educational resource. The transition to work was frequently framed as something that would occur "after" graduation, with engagement in the local context depending largely on individual initiative.

As a result, learning was often perceived as predominantly academic and disconnected from real professional situations. While students acknowledged the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, they expressed uncertainty about how to apply it or communicate it effectively in professional contexts ("I understand the theory, but I don't know how to apply it in practice"). The local labour market was frequently described as opaque or difficult to access, with references to informal networks and personal connections reinforcing feelings of limited control and uncertainty.

In contrast, students in the experimental group described employability as a situated and evolving process closely linked to concrete experiences. Their narratives more frequently included references to active skills and adaptability resources, such as problem-solving, managing real deliverables, communicating with external stakeholders and working under authentic constraints. These experiences were explicitly connected to increased operational confidence ("Before, I would freeze; now I know where to start").

Within these accounts, the city was represented as both a space of opportunity and a system that requires interpretation. Students distinguished between contexts that enabled

meaningful participation and those that limited it, demonstrating a more critical and realistic understanding of urban work environments (“It depends on how they involve you, whether they give you real tasks”). This indicates a shift from a purely enthusiastic view of experience to a more reflective capacity to assess its quality and relevance.

A second key differentiating theme concerned the role of guided reflection. In the experimental group, tools such as reflective diaries, evidence logs and portfolios were described as bridges between experience and professional identity. Students reported that these practices helped them recognise what they had learned, identify transferable skills and articulate their competence more coherently (“It’s not just that I did the internship; now I can explain what I can do”). In the control group, reflection tended to remain implicit and unsystematic, often limited to general evaluations (“useful”, “interesting”) without detailed accounts of learning strategies or personal transformation.

Finally, differences also emerged in relation to networks and relational capital. Students in the experimental group more often referred to connections developed through project work and stakeholder interaction as opportunities to access professional language, feedback and organisational insight, rather than as mere channels for recommendation. In the control group, references to networks were more ambivalent, frequently associated with perceptions of exclusion or inequality of access, which sometimes generated discouragement. This contrast reflects two different ways of interpreting the Learning City: as a negotiable ecosystem that can be navigated through competence and engagement, or as a closed system that reproduces existing inequalities.

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that participation in structured and reflective urban learning experiences is associated with a shift in students’ positioning — from passive recipients of knowledge to more active and reflective actors capable of interpreting contexts, recognising learning and gradually constructing a professional profile. While the control group acknowledged the importance of employability, their narratives more often remained anchored to a postponed transition and a separation between academic knowledge and professional reality. These results support the view that employability is strengthened not simply through exposure to experience, but through processes that enable recognition, reworking and translation of experience into professional meaning.

7. Discussion

Considered jointly, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that participation in a structured urban learning pathway, when accompanied by guided reflection tools, is associated with strengthened employability resources, particularly in terms of career adaptability. From a quantitative perspective, the advantage observed in the experimental group is more pronounced in the Curiosity and Confidence dimensions, with an estimated overall increase ranging between +12% and +18%. This pattern is consistent with literature that links experiential learning and engagement with authentic tasks to the development of exploratory behaviours and operational self-efficacy, especially when experiences are intentionally reworked and translated into explicit learning (Akkermans et al., 2018; Jackson, 2017; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012;). In this sense, the urban pathway appears to activate those components of adaptability that are most responsive to interaction with real contexts: openness to professional alternatives and possibilities (Curiosity), and confidence in managing deadlines, constraints and unforeseen challenges (Confidence).

The more moderate differences observed in the Concern and Control dimensions, while still present, require careful interpretation. Concern involves future orientation and planning, whereas Control refers to perceived autonomy and decision-making power. These dimensions can be supported through educational interventions, but they are also shaped by factors that extend beyond the educational sphere, such as family expectations, economic constraints, compatibility between study and paid work, and perceptions of opportunity structures within the local labour market. The lower “elasticity” of these dimensions suggests that, for employability education to be fully effective, urban learning experiences should be complemented by structured career guidance, institutional support and targeted measures aimed at reducing unequal access to opportunities (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2017; OECD, 2001).

The qualitative analysis reinforces and helps to interpret the quantitative findings by highlighting substantial differences in how the two groups construct meaning around the relationship between university education, the city and their professional future. Among students in the control group, employability is predominantly framed in instrumental and object-centred terms (CVs, internships, interviews), with a tendency to view the transition to work as something that begins only after graduation. In these narratives, the city often functions as a logistical backdrop rather than as an educational resource, and the local labour market is described as opaque and governed by informal networks. This representation aligns with critical perspectives showing how, in the absence of intentional educational mediation, employability risks becoming an individualised and opaque challenge, where responsibility is placed on students without equipping them with interpretative tools (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

By contrast, in the experimental group, a clearer transformation in attitudes towards work and professional development emerges. Employability is described as a process grounded in concrete experiences and perceived changes in one’s capacity to act. Students refer more frequently to authentic tasks, feedback received, coordination with external actors, and the management of constraints and responsibilities. These elements are associated with increased confidence and a greater willingness to explore professional possibilities. A particularly relevant aspect is the ability, reported by many students in the experimental group, to distinguish between formative territorial experiences and marginal or poorly designed activities (“it depends on how they involve you, if they give you real tasks”). This finding underscores that the educational value of urban learning is not automatic: mere exposure to the territory is insufficient without intentional pedagogical design and structured relationships with stakeholders (Jackson, 2017).

Within this process, reflective tools such as diaries, evidence logs and portfolios emerge as crucial mechanisms for translating experience into competence. Through reflective writing and systematic evidence collection, students are able to recognise what they have learned, connect it to work situations and construct a coherent narrative of their professional development. Rather than simply reporting participation in an internship or project, they become capable of articulating what they can do and how those capabilities were developed. This narrative competence is central to contemporary conceptualisations of employability as an identity-building and meaning-making process, and it represents a particularly significant achievement for undergraduate students who are still in the early stages of career definition (Clarke, 2018; Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

From a Learning City perspective, the findings suggest that integration between universities and territories does not generate uniform effects, but tends instead to amplify opportunities for those who access well-designed and well-supported experiences. This

raises a critical equity issue: if high-impact urban learning opportunities remain unevenly distributed, there is a risk of reinforcing internal inequalities linked to time availability, social networks, information access or socio-economic background. Consequently, Learning City initiatives aimed at enhancing employability should be accompanied by policies that promote access, recognition and support — such as mentoring schemes, organisational flexibility, transparent allocation criteria and stable, monitored partnerships — as well as evaluation practices that focus not only on employment outcomes but also on the processes through which career resources are developed (OECD, 2018).

Furthermore, the absence of random assignment and the use of a post-test only design limit the possibility of establishing causal relationships between the intervention and the observed outcomes. The results should therefore be interpreted with caution, as they may be influenced by pre-existing differences between groups. Future research should adopt more robust experimental designs and longitudinal approaches in order to better capture developmental changes over time and strengthen causal inferences.

8. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence supporting the view that the Learning City can function as an active educational setting for enhancing the employability of undergraduate economics students, provided that integration between universities and the local context goes beyond sporadic exposure to external environments and is grounded in intentional pedagogical strategies capable of transforming experience into explicit and transferable learning (Clarke, 2018; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; OECD, 2001). The results indicate that students involved in structured urban experiences combined with guided reflection show a stronger overall profile of career adaptability, particularly in the Curiosity and Confidence dimensions, which are widely recognised as crucial for navigating non-linear labour markets and early career transitions (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2017; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

The qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative evidence, showing that students in the experimental group develop greater agency and a more nuanced capacity to interpret urban contexts. They also demonstrate stronger narrative competence in presenting their professional profile. In this perspective, the city is experienced as an ecosystem of opportunities and relationships that can be explored, negotiated and understood, rather than merely as a backdrop or constraint. This aligns with theoretical approaches that conceptualise employability as a situated and relational process (Holmes, 2013). In contrast, students in the control group tend to maintain a more delayed and fragmented view of the transition to work, with a clearer separation between academic knowledge and professional practice and a reduced ability to translate learning into employable resources, as highlighted in critical analyses of higher education employability (Tomlinson, 2017).

From an applied perspective, the findings suggest that three-year Economics degree programmes can play a significant role in strengthening employability not only by adding external experiences such as internships, project work and service learning, but also by rethinking educational design in an integrated manner that explicitly links urban experience to learning objectives and assessment practices (Jackson, 2017; OECD, 2018). The use of reflective tools and formative assessment devices — such as employability portfolios, reflective writing, evidence logs and collective feedback sessions — appears particularly important in enabling students to recognise, articulate and communicate what they have learned. Employability thus emerges not as an automatic by-product of experience, but as

a meta-educational competence that requires pedagogical mediation and intentional support (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021).

At the same time, the study presents limitations that warrant cautious interpretation of the results. The analysis is confined to a specific disciplinary area and a single urban context. Future research should extend the investigation to larger and more diverse samples, adopt longitudinal designs with follow-up measures, and incorporate additional indicators such as perceived employability, relational capital and post-graduation transition outcomes. These directions are consistent with recent literature on the evaluation of employability and learning ecosystems (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hooley et al., 2017; OECD, 2001).

Overall, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on the evaluation of Learning Cities by demonstrating that university employability can be analysed in a more rigorous and meaningful way through the integration of standardised measures and the analysis of lived experiences. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on placement indicators, the findings highlight the importance of evaluation approaches capable of capturing processes of career resource development. Such approaches can inform both curriculum design and educational and territorial policies aimed at fostering inclusive, reflective and opportunity-generating Learning Cities (OECD, 2018).

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