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Managing Graduate Unemployment: The Case of Education Students in Cyprus

Abstract

Purpose - The paper investigates the problems faced by unemployed and underemployed graduate students in a small European country. It focuses on the way young people adjust to unemployment and underemployment and on the specific strategies they use to enhance their employability. Various aspects of these strategies as they relate to student decision making and analysis are discussed. The role of new skills and competencies in managing graduate unemployment is examined.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative research was conducted with 15 graduate students of the Education Department of the University of Cyprus. In-depth interviews and focus-group interviews were used to collect data.

Findings - The results indicate that the main strategy used by respondents in order to enhance their prospects of employment is the acquisition of additional skills and competencies. A secondary strategy is the pursuit of employment opportunities abroad. Student decisions and perspectives appear to be optimistic, partially rational, placed within a short-term horizon and influenced by the belief in the investment value of education.

Research limitations/implications - The findings are qualitative and cannot be considered to be representative of the population. However, they allow an in-depth analysis of the way a group of students experiences and manages unemployment and underemployment.

Originality/value – The way young people deal with unemployment and underemployment has not been investigated in many studies, especially in relation to the degree to which graduates formulate specific strategies in order to manage the transition from the university to the world of work. Students' and graduates' perceptions regarding the association between skills and employment can provide the basis for more informed planning and policy making in higher education.

Keywords: Unemployment; Graduates; Strategies; Skills and Competencies

Type of paper: Empirical paper

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Introduction

Student decision making in higher education has been the subject of many investigations in different contexts. Relevant studies commonly focus on student decisions before university enrolment such as the choice between higher education and employment and the choice of a specific university and/or a field of study. There is evidence to suggest that (prospective) students approach decisions in a rational manner, taking into account the costs and benefits associated with different courses of action. For instance, several studies have provided corroborating evidence for human capital theory in that they indicate that students take into account the expected returns to educational investment before deciding