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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Education and Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjew20>

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Version of record first published: 28 Sep 2011.

To cite this article: Nicolas Roulin & Adrian Bangerter (2013): Students' use of extra-curricular activities for positional advantage in competitive job markets, Journal of Education and Work, 26:1, 21-47

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2011.623122>

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Students' use of extra-curricular activities for positional advantage in competitive job markets

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(Received 22 July 2010; final version received 2 September 2011)

With the rise of mass higher education, competition between graduates in the labour market is increasing. Students are aware that their degree will not guarantee them a job and realise they should add value and distinction to their credentials to achieve a positional advantage. Participation in extra-curricular activities (ECAs) is one such strategy, as it allows students to demonstrate competencies not otherwise visible in their résumés due to limited job experience. This article presents data from interviews with 66 students about their use of ECAs in relation to the labour market. It describes the reasons students got involved in ECAs, how they integrate them in their résumés, their perceptions of their peers' behaviour and their beliefs about how employers will interpret their activities. Our data show that especially students involved in associations use ECAs to distinguish themselves from competition. Implications for employers, students and further research are discussed.

Keywords: extra-curricular activities; employability; labour market competition; positional advantage

Introduction

Today graduates are entering a labour market where competition is intensified, mainly due to the rise of mass higher education (HE) (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003), the development of knowledge-based economies and the abandon of traditional long-term employment relationships (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Transition from elite to mass HE happened through the growth of non-elite institutions and technical or vocational education, partly due to middle class attempts to access graduate credentials (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003). This has been reflected in the important transformation of many countries' HE systems (Trow 2006). Also, the new employment relationships imply that workers have to manage their own career and regularly change jobs. As a result, each year, many potential workers with

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similar degrees and practical experience enter the market and compete for a small number of positions. The intensification of this competition has been observed in Europe (Ball 2003; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003) and North America (Brown 2001; Davies and Hammack 2005), but also more recently in countries like China or India (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). To adapt to this situation, graduates have to develop strategies to distinguish themselves from their peers both during and after their studies. The purpose of this article is to explore one such strategy: using extra-curricular activities (ECAs) to build a distinctive profile as a potential employee.

We present data collected with business students from Swiss universities. The Swiss HE system is composed of 10 ‘historical’ (cantonal) universities and two Federal institutes of technology, as well as seven recently created universities of applied sciences (i.e. vocational teaching and applied research institutions, Perellon 2003). The universities of applied sciences were created to promote vocational education at the same level as traditional scientific education and to add differentiation to the Swiss HE. Such a dual HE system is also found in other European countries, such as Germany or Finland (Lepori 2007). In transforming its HE system, Switzerland followed the path many European countries have taken towards mass HE. Accordingly, the number of students in the Swiss HE system has grown from less than 100,000 in 1997 to more than 200,000 in 2010 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office [SFSO] 2010). In Switzerland, prestige is not a distinguishing feature of educational institutions. There is very little selection of students based on prior grades or ability tests to enter different universities and differences in prestige between universities are small. Switzerland is therefore different from France and its *Grandes Ecoles* or the UK with Oxbridge (Ball 2003). It is also different from the US, where HE institutions are increasingly investing resources in a competition for excellence to attract the best students (Winston 2004). The transformation of the Swiss HE system also put pressure on ‘historical’ universities to develop more vocationally oriented research and courses. As a result, Swiss employers are now facing a larger pool of young graduates with similar credentials, at least in business studies (Perellon 2003).

Employability, job market competition and the need for distinctiveness

The discourse of employability has long been the centre of attention of individuals, organisations and governments (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Employability is considered as a source of national economic growth by governments, as a source of workforce productivity by companies and as a source of employment and career opportunities by individuals. Employability has been defined as ‘a psycho-social construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect, and

enhance the individual-work interface' (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004, 15). In the past years the burden of employability has increasingly been transferred to individuals, who are now responsible for acquiring the skills or competencies valued by employers (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004; Van Der Heijde and Van Der Heijden 2006). The latitude graduates once had to adapt to a new job has now disappeared, and they are expected to be productive as soon as they enter a job (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Governments also have made clear that providing individuals with these skills and competencies should become the main role of HE, even if there is no clear evidence that universities or vocational schools successfully make graduates employable. For instance, employers are not always satisfied with the actual competencies graduates possess (Hesketh 2000) and employees themselves perceive that the skills they developed during their studies do not completely correspond to what is required in subsequent employment, especially in business and management (Wilton 2008).

Graduates therefore face a difficult task: ensuring their employability in an increasingly competitive labour market. They are pressured by employers' changing demands. In addition to demonstrating that they are talented people who can 'get the job done', they now need to demonstrate their business awareness, their proactivity and their capacity to get accepted by customers and colleagues (Brown and Hesketh 2004). They need to possess both *hard* (e.g. education credentials, practical experience, achievements) and *soft* (e.g. interpersonal skills, teamwork abilities, emotional resilience) currencies of employability. Furthermore, even if they possess the required qualifications for a position, they may face other applicants who are even more qualified or experienced, and not get the job (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003). The labour market has therefore become the site of a *positional competition* among graduates for a limited number of jobs at the national and, to some extent, at the international level (Brown 2000; Tomlinson 2007). This has led to the emergence of the *relative* and the *subjective* dimensions of employability (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Tomlinson 2007, 2008). The *relative* dimension of employability implies that each graduate is in competition with other graduates with similar qualifications and education and therefore that employability depends on the relative value of credentials. The *subjective* dimension of employability implies that graduates' attitudes, beliefs and orientations towards the labour market may influence the way they perceive the issue of employability, respond to the increasing positional competition and thus manage their own employability. Graduates perceive employability as a problem they should solve themselves, based on individual dispositions or motivation (Tomlinson 2007). Therefore the way graduates position themselves in the labour market, the strategies they use and their chances to get employment depend on both the *relative* and the *subjective* dimensions of employability.

Furthermore, the value of formal credentials (e.g. university degrees) is decreasing in the labour market, because if all applicants for a job possess such credentials, it is more difficult for employers to use this information to choose among them. The rise of mass HE is therefore a sign of the decline of the education credentialing system (Collins 1981). Originating in Max Weber's sociology of education, credentialing theory considers educational credentials as 'a historical legitimization of advantages that empower degree holders in occupational and organizational recruitment' (Brown 2001, 20). Therefore degree holders were more powerful than non-degree holders because graduates' credentials were seen by employers as a guarantee of competence that has been validated through education (Brown 2001; Buon and Compton 1990; Spence 1973). Yet, educational credential inflation (Collins 2002) indicates the decline of the education credentialing system. As explained by Brown and Hesketh (2004, 30) 'if in the future everyone had a Ph.D., law degree, MBA, or the like, then these advanced degrees would be worth no more than a job in a fast food restaurant'.

In response to intensification of competition in the labour market, graduates and students realise that they have to manage their own employability and expect to face a more difficult career progression. They know that hard currencies are not a guarantee of future employability anymore (Tomlinson 2007). Bourdieu (1984) developed the notion of distinction to explain the bourgeoisie's consumption of leisure activities or goods. Similarly, graduates now believe they need to add value and distinction to their credentials, and use this distinction to place themselves at an advantage over their competitors (Tomlinson 2008). This can be achieved through strategies used to manage employability, especially through the development of *personal capital* (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003) in addition to the traditional *cultural* and *social* forms of capital (Ball 2003; Bourdieu 1986). The notion of personal capital implies that graduates are able to package their hard and soft currencies together with their *self* (e.g. their personality and values) into a narrative of employability (Brown and Hesketh 2004). They need to demonstrate how their education, experiences, accomplishments, interpersonal skills and character match job requirements. But graduates can use different strategies to succeed in the competitive labour market.

Strategies to appear distinctive

Brown and Hesketh (2004) suggested that applicants can use either a *player* or a *purist* strategy (or a mix of the two) in navigating the employment process. The player strategy treats employability as a 'positional game' (126) in which the quality of applicants depends on the relative value of their credentials compared to those of others. Players therefore accept the relative dimension of employability and use every possible

tactic to discover employers' requirements and match them while differentiating themselves from other candidates. They develop a narrative of employability based on their personal capital and do not hesitate to be 'economical with the truth' if such behaviour is required to win the competition (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 131). They consider every failure as a valuable experience, helping them to learn and to improve the way they package themselves for the next round of applications. The player strategy resembles Tomlinson's (2007) *careerism*, or employment behaviour that is active and market-oriented. Careerist individuals are sensitive to the challenge of employability and respond by acquiring knowledge about the labour market from both formal and informal sources. In contrast, the purist strategy is based on employability as a more traditional 'meritocratic race' (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 137) in which being employable depends only on the individual's achievements, capabilities or ambition. Purists are aware that the competition in the labour market is increasing, but do not consider their employability in relative terms and do not compare their credentials to those of their competitors. They believe that the labour market is fair and that employers are looking for the right person for the right job. They are thus convinced that they will get the job if they are qualified for it. Purists also gather information about employers, but not to develop a narrative of employability. Rather they do it to find the best fit with the currencies they actually possess. They do not use adaptive or deceptive strategies to appear more competent than they really are. A failure is then considered as an indication that their currencies did not fit the organisation's requirements, and lead them to reconsider alternative career paths (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

To discover what employers are looking for, players exploit sources of career information, use their social contacts, attend workshops to prepare for assessment centres and read books to prepare for interviews. For instance, they provide responses that employers 'want to hear' by tailoring their experiences to employers' requirements in assessment centres or interviews (Brown and Hesketh 2004, 128). Furthermore, in order to adequately position themselves relative to the competition, they try to gather as much information as possible about what their competitors do. For instance, a study with German students showed that internships were regarded by students as a way to appear distinctive, mainly by trying to work for the most prestigious companies, and that competitive students were aware of the kind of internships their peers were engaged in Bloch (2007). Players look for ways to add value to their credentials already before graduation. Brown and Hesketh (2004) suggested that one solution involves capitalising on ECAs. ECAs are part of the *economy of experience*, that is, graduates can build on such activities to develop their employability narrative, and obtain a positional advantage over their competitors. In the next section, we focus on this specific tactic.

ECAs as a strategy to appear distinctive

ECAs seem to be increasingly instrumentalised by graduates to distinguish themselves. Participating in ECAs is part of the life of many students during their education. For instance, US high school students are active in sports, church activities and school clubs (Marsh 1992). Similarly, university students are involved in clubs or organisations, fraternities or sororities and sport teams (Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin 2002). Many studies have investigated the effects of participation in ECAs. A positive relationship between ECA participation and academic and post-academic outcomes has been observed for students of various ages (Deros and Ryan 2008; Kaufman and Gabler 2004; Mahoney, Cairns, and Farmer 2003; Marsh 1992).

Participation in ECAs affects individuals' labour market outcomes. Economic analyses suggest that participation in ECAs can have both positive and negative effects for graduates (Sattinger 1998). On the one hand, employers may believe ECAs demonstrate qualities of applicants. On the other hand, they may believe too much involvement in ECAs leads to lower professional commitment and higher turnover. Previous research in social or educational sciences generally supports the first interpretation. New graduates benefit from ECA participation because it demonstrates qualities (e.g. interpersonal skills) that are not otherwise visible on their résumés due to their typically limited work experience (Brown and Campion 1994; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Nemanick and Clark 2002). ECAs can be good indicators of individuals' competencies. For instance, members of clubs or organisations and fraternities/sororities possess more interpersonal skills than their non-participating counterparts (Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin 2002). Moreover, employers can infer competencies from ECAs in graduates' résumés, e.g. inferring leadership competencies from an applicant's experience as the vice-president of an association. But employers expect graduates to deploy narratives of employability to effectively demonstrate how ECAs helped them to develop competencies that are actually valued for a specific job. For instance, in their analysis of assessment centres, Brown and Hesketh (2004, 155) stated that 'where it was once enough to simply state that one had canoed up the Khyber backwards, one now has to demonstrate the individual competences, which have been acquired and developed through undertaking such an exercise'. Participation in ECAs is also interpreted as a signal of the applicant's personality (Cole, Feild, and Giles 2003; Cole et al. 2009). For instance, volunteering for community activities can be perceived as a signal of openness, while being member of a fraternity can be perceived as a signal of extraversion, two personality traits employers particularly value because they are predictors of employee job or training performance (Hurtz and Donovan 2000).

Résumés of applicants with more ECAs and leadership positions in these activities got better evaluations and received more invitations for an

interview (Cole et al. 2007; Nemanick and Clark 2002). In interviews, students participating in ECAs received more job offers (Chia 2005). Organisations, especially larger ones, apparently attach importance to ECAs when screening applicants (Barber et al. 1999; Feldman Barr and McNeilly 2002). Overall, university graduates who participated in ECAs found jobs corresponding to their qualifications more easily than their colleagues who did not participate in such activities (Merino 2007). Those who exercised responsibilities in their ECAs or participated in community work had access to larger firms and more managerial positions after graduation (Tchibozo 2008).

Given these positive effects, students may be especially motivated to get involved in various ECAs not only out of intrinsic interest, but because they realise that it can add to their résumés. Instrumental reasons leading students to getting involved in ECAs have been documented, for instance the possibility of getting credit (see Merino 2007), but few studies have investigated instrumentalisation in direct relation with the labour market. Exceptions can be found in Tomlinson (2007), who found that some careerist students instrumentalise ECAs to add value to their credentials, and in Brown and Hesketh (2004), who found that some players deliberately undertook ECAs to demonstrate competencies employers were looking for. But ECAs were not at the centre of these studies. In addition, a recent study found that volunteering was instrumentalised by applicants in countries where such activities are valued by employers (Hustinx et al. 2010). We note also from media anecdotes that students seem to increasingly instrumentalise ECAs. For instance, MBA students in the UK and France got involved in original and spectacular activities (e.g. running a marathon, climbing Mount Everest, making documentary films for prestigious festivals, brewing a specialty ale) to demonstrate their competencies (Morris 2007).

This study

Despite the apparent increasing interest of students towards ECAs, very few studies have undertaken a comprehensive and systematic study of the above issues, especially precisely what activities students are active in, why they get involved in these activities in the first place, or whether they believe ECAs will give them an advantage over other job seekers in the labour market. Thus, our goal is to better understand the relationship students have with ECAs. Furthermore, we will try to evaluate the prevalence of Brown and Hesketh's (2004) player and purist strategies in the context of ECAs. That is, we ask to what extent students use these activities as an instrument to distinguish themselves from competitors in the labour market (i.e. a player strategy).

To better understand how students use ECAs to gain a positional advantage in the job market, we first need a clearer picture of students'

involvement in such activities. This means learning what activities students are involved in, how much of their time they spend in these activities or what responsibilities they assume. Moreover, some students seem to spend more time participating in ECAs than in classrooms (Feldman Barr and McNeilly 2002). Therefore, it is worth knowing how students perceive the relationship between their involvement in ECAs and their academic results. Therefore our first general research question (RQ) is:

RQ1: What is the degree of students' involvement in ECAs?

According to Brown and Hesketh (2004), because of the increasing competition in the labour market and the decreasing distinctiveness of educational credentials, some students tend to develop more player strategies. Applying this to ECAs, player students should have an instrumentalist view of ECAs. They should know that participating in ECAs could give them an advantage over their competitors. They may get involved in some activities because they believe they will look good on their résumés or because they can allow them to develop competencies or a business network. However, some students may prefer to get involved in ECAs for more intrinsic reasons (e.g. for their own pleasure). Based on the above, our second RQ is:

RQ2: Why do students get involved in the ECAs?

Moreover, depending on their strategy, students will exploit ECAs differently. On the one hand, those using a player strategy should know how to use ECAs to position themselves in the labour market. They may allocate a substantial portion of their résumés to these activities, demonstrate how participating in such activities helped them developing specific competencies or, more generally, hard and soft currencies of employability (Brown and Hesketh 2004). They may also adapt the way they present their activities to the position they will apply for. Moreover, they may consider ECAs as an efficient solution to distinguish themselves from the competition. On the other hand, students using a purist strategy may believe their chances to get hired will mainly depend on their education and/or experiences and could thus attribute less importance to ECAs in their résumés. In short, our third RQ is:

RQ3: How do students use ECAs in relation to the labour market?

As presented above, in order to develop the best positioning strategy when entering the labour market, players need to know what their competitors do. They should thus be aware of other students' behaviour in relation to ECAs (e.g. what activities they are involved in, why they get involved, how they integrate them in their résumés). Because they believe their own

qualifications will be sufficient to get them the position they want, purists will be less interested in knowing what others do. They may have a less precise idea about their peers' involvement in ECAs or may have a more critical view of those following a player strategy. This leads to our fourth RQ:

RQ4: What are students' beliefs regarding their peers' use of ECAs?

Finally, players need to identify what employers are looking for in order to better position themselves. They may believe employers will use ECAs in their decision to hire a new employee and should have precise ideas about how employers will interpret these activities. For instance, they may have a clear picture of what unobservable characteristics employers will infer from these activities. Purists may think ECAs will only play a minor role in employers' decisions. Moreover they may have a less precise idea about the interpretations employers could make when reading ECAs in a résumé. Overall our last RQ asks:

RQ5: What are students' beliefs regarding employers' interpretations of ECAs?

Method

Sample

The sample was composed of 66 students from French-speaking Swiss universities. Average students' age was 24 years, 34 students were women, one-third were Bachelor students and two-thirds were Masters students. Forty-nine students were studying business and economics, nine law, five social sciences and three other fields of study. We purposely chose to recruit business students, because the market for business graduates is considered, at least in Switzerland, as being especially competitive and may therefore exert more pressure on such students to elaborate discourses of employability.

Data collection and measurement

Students were recruited on the business campuses of French-speaking universities in Switzerland. They agreed to participate in a short (20–30 min) semi-structured audio-taped interview about their ECAs. The interview included 12 open-ended questions related to three main topics: (a) their involvement in ECAs; (b) perceptions of other students' involvement in ECAs; and (c) perceptions of employers' evaluations of ECAs and the impact on their chances to get a job. Demographic information was subsequently collected by means of a short questionnaire. We also asked students to estimate their average grade and the time they spent working part-time

jobs. Regarding their involvement, they were invited to talk about what activities they are involved in, how much time they allocate to these activities per week, the responsibilities they have, the impact of such activities on their studies, the reason why they got involved in them in the first place, how these activities were included in their résumés and if they viewed these activities as evidence of competencies. Then they were asked about their impressions regarding their peers' activities. More precisely, we asked them about what activities they thought other students in their field of study were involved in, why they thought other students get involved in these activities and how they thought other students include these activities in their résumés. They were asked how they believed students can distinguish themselves from each other on the job market and if ECAs can help doing so. We also asked them how employers may interpret such activities. Finally, we asked them whether they had already used their ECAs to market themselves during a job interview.

Data preparation

Audiotapes were transcribed, leading to nearly 300 pages of transcriptions. These transcriptions were read several times in order to iteratively build a coding system for each question. For many of our analyses, participants produced long discourses. We coded the topics in several categories, some of them being non-exclusive. For instance, we coded ECAs in four categories (sports, artistic, associative and community) and each participant could be included in more than one category (e.g. sports and associative). This coding system is presented in Table 1, which displays the coded variables, the coding categories and descriptive results (percentages). This table also provides Cohen's Kappa scores, a measure of interrater agreement that takes chance agreement into account. Kappa scores above .60 are considered as sufficient and above .70 as good (Fleiss, Levin, and Cho Paik 2003). These scores were computed based on the coding of 12 transcripts by a second coder and showed sufficient to excellent agreement.

Results and discussion

To investigate RQs 1 and 2, we first describe students' involvement in ECAs. Then we examine our third RQ about how students perceive ECAs in relation to the job market. We then discuss different attributions in the way students regard their peers' use of such activities (RQ4), how they believe employers will interpret these activities (RQ5), and how they use ECAs during the recruitment process. We finally look at one specific activity, student associations, and compare the motives and beliefs of members of such associations and non-members. For all RQs we present descriptive statistical results for our coding categories (see Table 1), provide inferential

Table 1. RQs, variables, coding categories, proportion of students' responses and students' beliefs about their peers and interrater agreement (Cohen's kappa).

RQ	Variables	Coding categories	Proportion		Cohen's kappa			
			Student	Peers	Students	Peers		
RQ 1/4	Participating in ECA (Yes/No) Type of ECAs	Yes	93.9	95.5	–	–		
		Sports (e.g. football, tennis, fitness)	68.2	86.4				
		Artistic (e.g. music, dance, acting, painting)	42.4	25.8				
		Associative (e.g. associations, committees)	25.8	47.0				
		Community (e.g. charity, NGO volunteer)	15.2	16.7				
		Yes	49.2	–	1.0	–		
		No impact	27.1	–	.63	–		
		Positive only	37.3					
		Positive and negative	23.7					
		Negative only	11.9					
		RQ 2/4	Reason for getting involved in ECAs	Interest/passion	54.2	42.4	1.0	.67
				Well-being	33.9	47.0	1.0	.60
				Continue something started as a child	44.1	9.1	.78	1.0
				Meet other people	15.3	30.3	.62	1.0
Help other people	10.2			1.5	1.0	1.0		
Acquire practical experience	23.7			30.3	1.0	.83		
It will look good on the résumé	13.6			31.8	1.0	.68		

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

RQ	Variables	Coding categories	Proportion		Cohen's kappa	
			Student	Peers	Students	Peers
RQ 3/4	ECAs included in résumé	Always	88.1	86.0	1.0	1.0
		Sometimes	11.9	12.1		
		Never	0	1.5		
	If included, importance	Important/not important	47.4	43.9	.66	–
	If included, adapted to job (Yes/No)	Yes	10.5	13.6	1.0	
	Included under hobbies/activities (Yes/No)	Yes	59.6	–	.82	
	Included under experiences (Yes/No)	Yes	26.3	–	.75	
	ECAs associated with competencies in the résumé	Yes	29.8	–	.61	
		No, because it is implicit	5.3			
		No, but in the cover letter or during interviews	12.3			
		Not at all	52.6			
	Need to distinguish from each other (Yes/No)	Yes	90.1		1.0	
	Solutions to distinguish from competition	Education (e.g. advanced degrees, specialised training)	16.7		.75	
		Job experience (e.g. internships, part-time jobs)	40.9		.80	
		Languages (e.g. going abroad to learn other languages)	19.7		.75	
		Originality (e.g. in their résumés or cover letters)	10.6		.63	
		ECA	66.7		.83	
	ECA can help getting a job (Yes/No)	Yes	74.2		.78	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

RQ	Variables	Coding categories	Proportion		Cohen's kappa	
			Student	Peers	Students	Peers
RQ5	Importance for employers	Appreciate ECAs and consider them as important	68.2		.63	
		Consider them but not as the most important decision factor	30.3			
Employers' interpret ECAs as...		Do not take them into account at all	1.5			
		A way to choose when two applicants have similar qualifications	42.4		1.0	
		A way to find similarities between them and the applicant	16.7		.63	
		Signals of job related competencies or experiences	54.5		.67	
		Signals of personality traits	45.5		.66	
		Signals of ability to manage time effectively	25.8		.75	

Note: “-” indicates that there was no question regarding perception of peers for the coding category.

statistical analyses when required and illustrate some patterns of responses with examples taken from transcripts.

Students' involvement in ECAs

ECAs are part of the life of participants. Overall, 94% were active in ECAs and 62% participated in two or more activities. No difference in participation was observed between men and women (both 94%). These activities took students considerable time every week, which was equal to the time they spent working on part-time jobs ($M=8.20$, $SD=6.30$ for ECAs vs. $M=8.34$, $SD=6.36$ for jobs; the difference between the two is not significant, $t(57)=.283$, ns). Participating in ECAs thus did not prevent students from working in part-time jobs. Seventy-one percent of students active in ECAs were also working. Sixty-four percent of students believed their involvement in ECAs to have a positive impact or no impact on their academic performance. Only a small proportion of them believed it had a negative impact or observed both positive and negative effects. There was a weak and non-significant positive correlation between time spent in ECAs and self-reported average grade, $r=.26$, $n=58$, ns. Half of students involved in ECAs exercised responsibility, like being a student association president or a team captain. Sports and artistic activities were the most popular. Less students were active in associative or community activities. Overall, these results confirm that ECAs represent an important part of students' time use outside their studies.

The main reasons students offered to explain their participation were interest and passion, continuing something started as a child or stress reduction and maintaining well-being. Many students thus seemed to get involved in ECAs mainly out of personal reasons. They did not think of the impact of such ECAs in relation to the labour market *a priori* and therefore adopted a purist vision when it comes to choosing what activities to get involved in:

Man, 24, graduate student in law: The [music events] association is a passion since I was a child. You see it's a passion and music is my thing ... I love that since I was 15 ... That's clear.

Woman, 22, undergraduate student in business: ... to do something else than studying I think, because you can be concentrated on your studies but you need to be open to other things ... to do other things, either to reduce your stress or for other personal reasons.

Woman, 25, graduate student in business: ... there were some people I know who created this [cultural] association and also at some point the motivation to get involved in something new. I wanted to participate in creating something with the many ideas I had in mind at this point. It also was the personal affinities I had with some people in the association.

Only a minority of students (about 25%) openly cited opportunistic or instrumental reasons (corresponding to a player strategy). For instance they explained that an ECA would look good on their résumés or that it allowed them to gain practical experience or create business networks that could be useful for their future career:

Man, 24, graduate student in business: ... and then one thing, one of the reasons to join a student association is also the possibility to mention it in my résumé.

Woman, 25, graduate student in business: ... and then the student association it's mainly to gain experience. I mean learning to work in the business world ... working with companies. But it was also clearly for my résumé.

Woman, 26, graduate student in business: Mountain bike ... well there are a lot of executives in this field who are working in management or things like that. That's a network [...] So it's a way to build a network of contacts for a future job.

These are representative examples of a player vision of participation in ECAs. The first two students thought about the positive impact such activities could have in their résumés when they chose to get involved. The second student also thought about the practical experience she could accumulate during her participation in the association, therefore seeing her involvement as a way to improve her employability. Finally the third student was aware of the kind of people who will participate in the activity and thought of the opportunities it could provide her when she would look for a position.

Students' use of ECAs in relation to the labour market

Most students (88%) who participated in ECAs included them in their résumés. Yet, even for those who did so, ECAs did not always seem to be key elements. Less than half of them regarded ECAs as an important part of their résumés. In most of the cases ECAs were included under a 'hobbies', 'activities' or 'interests' section, which was often the last and least developed section. These students did not seem to know exactly how to present ECAs and thus how to exploit their full potential in regard to their employability. Therefore, even though many students include ECAs in their résumés, many can be considered as purists in how they use them in relation to the labour market. They do not try to promote these activities to impress employers, but simply considered them as part of the information they provide about themselves. Some of them even chose deliberately not to include them, because they did not want employers to know about the activities they were involved in, as it was their *private* life:

Woman, 21, graduate student in business: I just note like under a *interest* section or I don't remember exactly how I noted it ... but generally that I like sports, that's all.

Man, 20, undergraduate student in business: I heard that when you get hired for a job it is important to be active in an association. I never understood why, but I don't really know if it should be in a *résumé* ... apparently it is important for those who hire, but I don't see how it should be included.

Woman, 22, undergraduate student in business: It [helping others] is something I do voluntarily. It is for people I like ... to help them. It is not something I want to show in my *résumé*.

On the other hand, a smaller proportion of students believed ECAs to be an important asset in their *résumés*. They assumed that presenting such activities could help them to demonstrate specific skills or competencies they possess. For instance, one-fourth of students who included ECAs in their *résumés* did it under a 'practical experiences' section and a similar proportion described competencies related to these activities. These students followed a player strategy by using ECAs as an instrument to distinguish their *résumés* from those of their competitors and gain a positional advantage:

Man, 24, graduate student in business: Oh yes [I integrate my ECAs in my *résumé*!] My associative activity I think it is really an advantage over other students. I got the opportunity to apply my knowledge in practice. And football I also include it because I was the team captain several times. It is simple, but it is always a signal that shows that I can have responsibilities in a group.

Woman, 24, undergraduate student in service management: Sports ... I will include them in my leisure activities ... and I will indicate that because of these sports I developed an important team spirit.

The above students had a clear vision of which aspects of their activities will be described in their *résumés* and how it will help them to demonstrate soft currencies of employability (e.g. *have responsibilities in a group* or *team spirit*).

Some students also deliberately adapted the way they present activities in their *résumés*. Again they followed a player strategy and used ECAs as instruments to fine-tune their profile to better match employers' expectancies:

Woman, 26, graduate student in business: It depends a lot on the position or the company [...] If I'm going for a position in a Non-Governmental Organization or things like that, of course I would say that I'm doing volunteer work. It is a positive point. So I am talking about competencies such as negotiation, a little bit about listening skills [...] and mountain bike normally I use it when I want to do something like a trainee program or something, because they are looking for someone who is very pushy, who likes doing different things, or goes beyond her limits.

Woman, 25, graduate student in business: If I apply for a position in sports then I would highlight my experiences in sports. In my résumé I would put forward my experiences related to the specific domain I apply for.

Their responses suggest that they first try to gather information about employers' requirements, realise that not all employers or positions require the same soft currencies and finally adapt their narrative of employability in their résumés (e.g. *in a Non-Governmental Organization or things like that, of course I would say that I'm doing volunteer work*).

When asked about competition on the job market and the need to distinguish themselves from each other because of it, students reported an increasing competition. Most assumed their degree would not guarantee getting a job and agreed they needed to distinguish themselves from competitors. Students cited practical experiences, languages, and additional education as solutions to appear distinctive, that are additional hard currencies of employability. Yet ECAs were the most frequently mentioned way to distinguish oneself (see Table 1). Two-thirds of students cited ECAs as a solution, which demonstrates the potential of these activities as a way to appear distinctive, even if this result was possibly influenced by the fact that previous questions were related to ECAs. These activities were seen as adding value to the hard currencies in graduates' packaging of themselves:

Man, 22, undergraduate student in business: You see we all graduate with the same degree. Employers will never look at your grades at exam A or exam B, they don't care. They see that you have your degree, you have a bachelor degree, and you are an economist. Now they simply want to know what you can bring ... You absolutely need to find a plus and I do think that with the help of all the activities I do I packaged myself to really get there with something to bring ... and to say 'well I have all that in addition to my degree'.

Man, 20, undergraduate student in business: Yes we have to distinguish ourselves, because we are in a world of sharks! [...] Well distinguish ... I would not say distinguish ... I would say we have to do more. Distinguishing is doing things not like the others, but actually we are all with the same perspective and we still want to do more than others in order to get a job. So we do all these activities exactly for that.

Students' attributions about their peers

In addition to being active in ECAs themselves, students believed this was also the case for their peers. Most assumed that other students were participating in ECAs. They were aware of the kind of activities they were active in, even if they did not appear to be very preoccupied by their peers' involvement. Sports and student associations were believed to be the most popular activities.

We compared why participants thought other students were participating in ECAs with their own reasons for participating. We observed both

similarities and differences. We then tested if the differences were statistically significant using Chi-square tests. On the one hand, the two main reasons they cited were well-being and interest or passion, which were also two of the most often cited reasons for themselves. On the other hand, instrumentalised or player-oriented motives were more frequently cited by students when they talked about the reasons attributed to their peers' than when they talked about their own motives. For instance, 32% of students believed their peers participated in ECAs for the résumé, while only 14% declared participating for the résumé themselves, $\chi^2(1, N=125)=5.83$; $p<.05$. Similarly they believed their peers were participating to make new friends more often than themselves (30.3 vs. 15.3%), $\chi^2(1, N=125)=3.96$; $p<.05$, but less often to continue something started as a child (9.1 vs. 44.1%), $\chi^2(1, N=125)=20.01$; $p<.01$ or to help others (1.5 vs. 10.2%), $\chi^2(1, N=125)=4.33$; $p<.05$.

We further looked at students' interpretations of their peers' motives. Some clearly considered doing ECAs for the résumé as being part of the competitive game among students. They were aware of the importance of the relative dimension of employability to gain positional advantages. They had a somehow negative view of their peers using player strategies, but they accepted them as a reasonable response to the increasing pressure on graduates entering the job market:

Man, 21, undergraduate student in business: I'd say that not long ago it was more because of personal motives. But today it's more for the résumé I think. It's maybe sad, but let's say that's normal too because we don't want to get overtaken by someone else.

Others noticed instrumentalised behaviours from their peers, but did not really understand nor support it. They had trouble believing students could get involved in activities just to add something to their résumés:

Man, 24, undergraduate student in law: ... that's why so many people get involved in [students'] associations even if most of them are just morons ... because well they know it will look good on the résumé.

Woman, 26, graduate student in business: it's true there are others who are doing it because well it looks good to have an activity in the résumé ... in community work there are a lot of people doing it who just hate it! It's incredible ... I can't even understand how they can do community work ... it's really to look good on the résumé.

Man, 32, graduate student in business: I think it's not instrumental ... I mean I hope so. I don't know if I'm naïve but if people are doing that in an instrumental way ... well I feel sad for them ... Doing something for later ... I mean we already have enough to worry about every day without anticipating that and thinking *I have to do that for four years from now*.

Students' beliefs about employers' interpretation of ECAs

When asked about how ECAs could be interpreted by employers, a majority of students believed that they were positively interpreted and taken into account by employers, and that being active in ECAs could increase chances to get a job. Overall most students had a precise idea of how ECAs would be interpreted by employers, which is consistent with a player-oriented strategy. Furthermore, students had various beliefs about employers' reasoning for interpreting these activities. A first type of interpretation that applicants made was to associate specific activities with specific competencies or personality traits. Such interpretation was made by a large majority of students. These activities were therefore seen as information allowing employers to know more about applicants. For instance, they assumed that collective activities (e.g. team sports, associations) would be seen as signals associated with competencies like collaboration or teamwork. Therefore, students mainly believed that employers would infer soft currencies, such as the ability to deal with stress or conflicts, teamwork and interpersonal skills from their ECAs. But they also saw such activities as a way for employers to know more about their *self*. These beliefs thus constitute evidence of students' awareness of the importance of personal capital in today's labour market:

Woman, 23, graduate student in business: Well I know that ... if you're playing tennis ... well they say *oh you're pretty individualistic* ... if you're in team sports they say *oh you're more a team player*.

Woman, 26, undergraduate student in law: They see your character ... if you're more selfish if you're more collectivistic ... they see if you're able to join a group or if you're more individualistic ... things like that.

Man, 27, undergraduate student in business: The high-level tennis player will demonstrate ability to deal with stress, pressure ... they already know that. And the guy who is involved in an association will be brought to manage conflicts in a group or things like that.

A second type of interpretation was to consider participating in ECA as a signal of time management abilities. Getting involved in ECA takes time, which cannot be spent studying. Therefore employers were assumed to judge students who spend time doing such activities while succeeding in their studies as being able to manage their time effectively, ECAs being a way for employers to infer additional soft currencies. Below are two illustrative examples:

Woman, 21, graduate student in business: It shows that we were able to manage several things in parallel without jeopardizing our studies.

Woman, 22, graduate student in business: If someone has I don't know how much ECAs they will think that this person is very good at organizing things

... to be able to manage his studies in addition to all these activities ... He certainly must be good at what he does ... So it's an asset I think.

A third type of interpretation was related to competition in the labour market. Students following this line of reasoning assumed that employers often have to select among applicants with similar qualifications and that ECAs could be used in a second step to distinguish them. Those students were clearly aware of the competition existing in the labour market and considered ECAs as one way to stand out from the crowd and influence employers' decisions:

Woman, 25, graduate student in business: [...] because in the end when one presents a university degree ... well the degrees are the same as 25 other applicants, I don't know. So apart from that, with similar competencies, I believe the employer will look at what has been done outside [of studies].

Men, 23, undergraduate students in business: [...] people will all get the same résumé overall. It is not with studies that one can differentiate, it's with what one does besides that one can differentiate ... it is there that one must influence people to make them interested in calling us for an interview.

Men, 24, graduate student in business: I think that when choosing among two equivalent résumés, someone who has just only his studies and then maybe an internship ... someone who has done other activities, will have other responsibilities aside from that ... he will have a lot more chances to get hired.

Finally, some students believed that employers may interpret ECAs in relation to their own activities or interests. ECAs are therefore a potential source of similarity with a recruiter. Such students considered that shared interests can create a first bond between a recruiter and an applicant and maybe affect hiring chances later on. Such beliefs are related to the notion of *social fit* (Brown and Hesketh 2004), because recruiters have a tendency to look for applicants that correspond to their own image to reduce uncertainty related to the hiring decision (i.e. a similarity bias, see for instance Baskett 1973). The following excerpts exemplify this belief:

Man, 24, graduate student in business: Well when I had an interview with [accounting company] the person who interviewed me was the legal and tax director and he was in a rock band and when he saw that I was into music it was an additional plus. And the other person who was interviewing me was in the same ski club as me so it's clear it created kind of a special bond.

Man, 26, undergraduate student in business: Employers can be sensitive to them [ECAs]. For instance, if the employer likes tennis I think he will appreciate to see my résumé because I'm playing. Unconsciously that could maybe help.

Students' use of ECAs in the recruitment process

Above we described what importance students allocate to ECAs in their résumés. Additionally, we asked them about the use of ECAs in a later step of the selection process: the job interview. Some students had never experienced a job interview in their life. Yet, a majority of students (55%) told us that they already had been questioned about ECAs by a recruiter or talked about them during a job interview. These students went a step further in applying a player strategy and used ECAs in face-to-face interactions with employers' representatives. As with their perceptions of employers' interpretations, students vary in the way they presented their activities. The examples below illustrate how students included ECAs as examples of competencies or practical experiences in their narratives of employability:

Man, 22, undergraduate student in business: I explained precisely what was my role in these associations [...] because I organized parties, for instance for a friend's association which is a charity association. So I had to organize everything from the beginning to the end, so programming, preparing flyers, booking the room, that kind of stuff. So those are pretty big responsibilities and it's also something cool to put up front.

Woman, 29, graduate student in business: I talked about sports, it was team sports at the time [...] Then I said that it helped me develop my endurance and my concentration, to overcome my limits you see, to show discipline.

Woman, 23, undergraduate student in business: They [the recruiters] asked me to describe a situation I experienced when I was able to change things and reach an objective with a team. So typically here, during the three 1 h-interviews, every time I used the association, because it was the only experience I had that could work. [...] For me, without the association and the scouts I would never have had that internship. And I would never have had the aptitudes now to work there.

Others talked about ECAs to demonstrate their character or personality, so that employers can have a clearer picture of who they really are. They use ECAs as an instrument to present the *self* aspect of personal capital:

Man, 24, graduate student in social sciences: [...] it allowed me show a little bit my personality and maybe to make them know me as the person who was doing this extracurricular activity.

Man, 24, graduate student in law: From time to time I kind of talked about the fact that I was an athlete and that it marked my character, in the sense of combativeness and that kind of thing.

Man, 24, graduate student in business: Once a recruiter asked me about an accomplishment I was particularly proud of in my life, something like that. So I could take an example of something I did when organizing events [...]

So in that sense it was more to say that we did that thing aside of our studies, that it was organizing a big event and that we are proud of it! Why? Because it was a challenge.

Students' associations: the way to play the game?

The results related to our five RQs presented above showed that both purist and player strategies were represented in our sample. Most students used a mix of player and purist strategies. For instance, some students had a very player perspective regarding one aspect (e.g. having a precise idea of the interpretations of ECAs by employers) and a more purist perspective regarding another (e.g. not prioritising ECAs in their résumés). Therefore our results suggest that students are aware of increasing competition in the labour market and realise that ECAs could be a source of positional advantage and a way to build their narrative of employability. But many of them did not exploit the full potential of ECAs.

However, behaviours related to a player strategy appeared to be related to the type of activity rather than individual differences (e.g. age, gender, area of studies). For instance, students explained their peers' participation in associations by opportunistic motives:

Man, 27, undergraduate student in business: For those who are in association I think it is pretty important as they told me ... I think it's an important point to put in the résumé. That's the reason that made them do that ... why they got involved.

Man, 23, graduate student in business: ... and associations, it's mainly to distinguish themselves a little bit, to add lines on résumés, especially for students who don't have other things to put there.

Therefore, for each type of activity, we checked if students active in this particular activity had different motives for participating in ECAs or had different beliefs regarding the impact of ECAs on their chances to get a job as compared to students not participating in this activity, using Chi-square tests. Results showed no difference for sports, artistic activities or community activities. But students participating in associative activities were the ones using their ECAs in a more instrumental way. For instance, 41% of students who were members of associations got involved in their activities 'for the résumé', as compared to only 2% of non-members, $\chi^2(1, N=59)=15.54$, $p<.01$. Similarly, 53% of members got involved for 'gaining experience and creating networks', as compared to 12% of non-members, $\chi^2(1, N=59)=11.26$, $p<.01$. Moreover, 94% of members had responsibilities in their ECAs as compared to only 31% of non members, $\chi^2(1, N=59)=19.32$; $p<.01$. Also, 94% of members were convinced that participation in ECAs could help them getting a job, as compared to only 67% of non-members, $\chi^2(1, N=59)=4.73$, $p<.05$.

Conclusions

We investigated students' use of ECAs as a potential solution to distinguish themselves from competition and gain a positional advantage in the labour market. Results suggest that students are aware of the increasing competition in the labour market. As shown in previous research (e.g. Tomlinson 2008), most students believe that their degree is not sufficient to ensure them a job after graduation and recognised the need for distinction. Even if other alternatives were suggested (e.g. internships, learning foreign languages), students often cited participating in ECAs as an appropriate way to achieve such distinction. They believed ECAs could be a way to inform employers about soft currencies they possess (e.g. soft skills, teamwork) in addition to hard currencies (e.g. education credentials), but also about their self (e.g. their personality or their values), that is, the full package of personal capital (Brown and Hesketh 2004). They also realised that employability requires a mix of hard and soft currencies and that ECAs can help demonstrate them.

Moreover, we found that that most students use a mix of both player and purist strategies (Brown and Hesketh 2004) in relation to ECAs. Consistent with a purist strategy, most of them got involved in ECAs out of personal reasons (e.g. interest or passion, continuing something started as a child), without having in mind that these activities could add value and distinction to their credentials. Moreover they did not instrumentalise their ECAs, which were only presented in a small portion of their résumés under a 'hobbies' section. Only a few students, mainly those involved in associative activities, got involved in ECAs because of the potential value such activities could have on their résumés. Nevertheless, consistent with a player strategy, most students were aware of their competitors' use of such activities and often had a precise idea about how employers may interpret them. Therefore in the specific domain of ECAs, the distribution of player and purist strategies is less clear than in Brown and Hesketh's (2004) research, where they were able to classify one-third of applicants as using a player strategy, one-third as using a purist strategy and one-third as using a mixed strategy. Here most students could be seen as using a mixed strategy because they generally had a player perspective regarding some aspects of ECAs but a purist perspective regarding others. Also, most students did not openly declare doing ECAs for the résumé, citing less instrumental motives, but were aware that that their activities could help them demonstrate soft currencies. Such conclusions correspond to Brown and Hesketh's (2004, 130) findings, who explained that they were 'not suggesting that the players undertook ECAs purely because it would look good on their CVs. Many social activities involve mixed motives'. Player strategies have important implications for employers. Employers evaluate participation in ECAs positively, as suggested by previous research (e.g. Barber et al. 1999; Feldman

Barr and McNeilly 2002), because they believe ECAs are signals of individuals' competencies or personality (e.g. Cole et al. 2009). If students start participating only for their résumés, then the informational value of such signals may decrease because participation in ECAs would not be related to individual characteristics anymore.

Our results are based on a sample mainly composed of business students. They may therefore not be generalisable to other fields of study, especially those where competition in the labour market is less intense. Furthermore, we have little evidence about how students' use of ECAs may evolve in the years to come, but our data suggest that students apparently recognise the need to add distinctions to their credentials and see ECAs as a way to do this. Thus, students may increasingly use ECAs to develop individualised narratives demonstrating their employability (see Tomlinson 2007). They may choose to allocate more time and effort to such activities and give them more importance in their résumés. Future research could investigate this phenomenon, for instance by developing longitudinal studies about student's involvement in ECAs or inclusion of ECAs in résumés. As an alternative to ECAs, students may also use waged work to demonstrate their employability. Other studies may thus investigate how students use waged work in relation to the labour market. The value of getting involved in ECAs is inversely proportional to the number of students doing it. Adapting Brown and Hesketh's (2004) citation presented above, we could say that if all students are active in sports, associations or community work, then these activities have less distinctive value. Therefore future research may also study how employers' perceptions of applicants' ECAs evolve over time and how they react to the instrumentalisation of such activities. Furthermore if more students become active in the traditional ECAs presented above, it increases the pressure on player-oriented students who have to counteradapt to stay ahead of competitors (Bangerter, Roulin, and König in press), an adaptive behaviour well-known in economics (Frank 2006). Students may thus engage in a competition for more original or exotic activities (see, for instance, the examples in Morris 2007). Such a situation would ultimately give students no additional distinctiveness as compared to their competitors and decrease usefulness of ECAs as a signal for employers.

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