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Social Sciences and Humanities' Employability Culture and Public Policy Challenges: International and Greek Contexts

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Abstract

This article seeks to emphasize the key aspects of the relationship between social and humanities sciences and employability culture by (a) examining global trends, shifts, practices, and challenges; (b) emphasizing the Greek context; and (c) assessing pertinent factors at the University of Crete. The objective is to pinpoint effective approaches, as well as the prevalent global difficulties and obstacles, while also evaluating the present state of play, concerning the employability culture of recent graduates (both Greek and international graduates) in the social and humanities sciences and the possible effects on their future perspectives. Employability culture is compared and analyzed in contrast with employment to show the differences between the two terms and their outcomes in society. The employment landscape of these graduates and their employability profile are analyzed through empirical data and relevant public policies. Based on international experiences, valuable insights and policy recommendations are provided to ease the integration of graduates into the labor market and address societal issues, such as unemployment, employment insecurity, and vulnerability. These insights are developed by examining the various facets of social sciences and humanities graduate employability culture and the relevant public policies designed to enhance it.

Keywords

austerity; comparative perspective; higher education; integration; political cultures; public policy; social policy

1. Introduction

This article examines how social sciences and humanities (SSH) connect to labor-market dynamics by analyzing global trends and the Greek reality, and by reviewing data from the University of Crete. It identifies both good practices and structural challenges—exclusion, precarity, and skills mismatch—and draws policy-relevant conclusions to improve SSH graduates' labor-market integration. The analysis unfolds in four parts: (a) a theoretical framing of employability; (b) international developments; (c) the Greek case; and (d) the University of Crete's data, culminating in policy proposals for facilitating transitions to decent and relevant employment. The starting premise is that SSH are essential for citizenship, social cohesion, and critical thinking, particularly amid overlapping crises, yet their graduates were disproportionately affected by the 2008 financial crisis and Covid-19, which intensified unemployment, underemployment, and gendered vulnerability (United Nations, 2020a, 2020b; Wenham, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). The study also investigates the shift from work as a social right (Rosanvallon, 1981) to employability as individual responsibility, linked to neoliberal labor-market governance and welfare retrenchment (Beck & Grande, 2007). Within this framework, risks such as unemployment are individualized, and the state's role shifts toward market facilitation. Employability becomes a normative policy paradigm emphasizing adaptability and lifelong upskilling while downplaying structural constraints (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007; Peck, 2010; Rizza et al., 2022).

2. Labor Market and Employability Culture of Recent Graduates

Over recent decades, labor markets have been reshaped by structural transformations intensified by the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic (Papadakis et al., 2020), alongside digitalization, automation, artificial intelligence, the platform/gig economy, flexible work models, and demographic change (CEDEFOP, 2024; McKinsey Global Institute, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020). These developments have altered employment relations, skill requirements, and career trajectories, making labor-market integration increasingly dependent on adaptability and continuous reskilling and upskilling rather than stable employment pathways. Employability thus reflects not only individual attributes but also structural conditions. Although perspectives differ in emphasis (Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2014), there is a broad consensus that gender, age, experience, parental background, skills, labor-market structure, regulation, innovation intensity, and career opportunities jointly shape outcomes (Allen et al., 2011; Froehlich et al., 2015; García-Aracil et al., 2018; Monteiro et al., 2016, 2020; O'Leary, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Digitalization, the platform economy, and pandemic-driven telework further generate new skill demands, particularly for women, older adults, socially vulnerable groups with digital deficits (European Commission & Iclaves, 2018; OECD, 2018), and graduates in the SSH. Beyond digital literacy, required competencies include systems thinking, social analysis, ethical judgement, stakeholder engagement, and reflexive problem-solving (CEDEFOP, 2025). The SSH are critical in fostering these capacities, enabling understanding of socio-institutional dynamics and supporting inclusive, adaptive governance (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023).

Graduate employability constitutes a central analytical and policy framework, reflecting national and supranational strategies that shape labor-market entry and retention (ILO, 2000). Although conceptually debated (Gazier, 1998; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), its contemporary articulation emerged in the late 1990s in response to the knowledge economy, referring to the knowledge, skills, and experiences that enhance access to, and sustainability of, stable employment (Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2014).

SSH undergraduates typically develop analytical, interpretative, and communication competencies, methodological awareness, and ethical sensitivity, while master's graduates are expected to demonstrate advanced analysis, independent research capacity, and applied problem-solving aligned with employer demands for autonomy and responsibility—contributing to stronger labor-market outcomes.

Governments and EU institutions have promoted employability due to its relevance for post-education outcomes (Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2014). Yet this agenda signals a shift from employment as a social right to employability as individual responsibility, embedded in a broader neoliberal restructuring of labor-market governance. Education is reframed as private human-capital investment rather than a collective good (Marginson, 2019), redirecting attention from structural constraints to individual attributes (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Increasingly operationalized through performance metrics that often conflict with employment outcomes (Bennett, 2019), employability positions universities and students as drivers of economic development (Baron & McCormack, 2024), while potentially obscuring persistent inequalities related to gender, socio-economic background, and field of study.

Low employability is linked to higher unemployment at career entry, whereas higher employability expands opportunities (Panagiotakopoulos, 2012; Yorke, 2006), enhances well-being (Gowan, 2012), and supports long-term stability (Brockmann et al., 2008). Early exclusion produces scarring effects—poorer future integration, weaker career development, and lower wages (Gartell, 2009; Mroz & Savage, 2006; Oreopoulos et al., 2008; Schmelzer, 2011). It reflects both structural labor-market dysfunctions and skill obsolescence, leading graduates to accept atypical or overqualified employment, reinforcing brain loss and precarity (Li, 2008). Vertical and horizontal skills mismatches further undermine income and prospects (Robert, 2014; Robst, 2007).

Beyond a narrow skills-based view, employability also depends on socio-economic context and individual characteristics (Monteiro et al., 2020), including intergenerational disadvantage (Papadakis et al., 2017). Following McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), it encompasses formal and non-formal competencies, demographic and health factors, and personal and external conditions such as labor demand and macroeconomic context. Because these dimensions interact, policy should promote long-term, multidimensional skills development. Employability is therefore closely tied to education and training systems, including program breadth and applied skill value (Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2014), as well as digital, time-management, and teamwork competencies that facilitate smoother labor-market transitions (Allen et al., 2011; Quintana et al., 2014).

Graduate employability in the EU rose over the previous decade, reaching 85% in 2019 (European Commission, 2020, pp. 65, 140), surpassing the EU2020 benchmark (Papadakis, 2022). Recent data confirm an international upward trend in terms of employability (World Economic Forum, 2020). However, Greece lags: In 2022, it ranked second-to-last among member states (Eurostat, 2023). EU-27 employability for recent graduates increased from 79.6% (2021) to 82.4% (men: 83.5%, women: 81.3%), while Greece rose from 60.1% to 66.1% (men: 65.8%, women: 66.5%; Eurostat, 2023). Employment of recent tertiary graduates (20–34) in Greece reached 70.1%—the lowest in the EU (EU: 86.7%)—despite a 22.4 percentage-point increase over the last decade (European Commission, 2023, p. 13).

Employability intersects with expanding precarious employment. In countries such as Greece, Italy, and Spain, involuntary flexible work has grown, especially among youth (Papadakis et al., 2021, pp. 28, 36). In Greece,

part-time, rotating, temporary, and undeclared work are widespread, particularly among youth and women (Eurofound, 2018; ILO, 2011; McKay et al., 2012; Papadakis et al., 2020; Papageorgiou & Petousi, 2018). In 2019, 30% of 15–24-year-olds worked part-time, over triple the 25–64 rate and gender gaps are persistent (Eurostat, 2020, as cited in Papadakis et al., 2020, p. 486). Precarity correlates with poverty risk (Eurostat, 2020c; 2020e, as cited in Papadakis et al., 2020) and contributes to the normalization of insecurity, feeding a new precariat (Papadakis et al., 2021, 2022; Rubery et al., 2018; Standing, 2014; Spyridakis, 2018).

In sum, the employability of young graduates is not merely an analytical construct but a policy lever for addressing pressing youth challenges as well as a labor market culture, which creates trends and behaviors. As a framework for designing policies that foster effective and comprehensive labor-market integration, it can promote the inclusion of the most vulnerable, reduce long-term unemployment (Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024), precarity, and inactivity, and support adaptation to ongoing labor-market transformations. In an era of back-to-back crises, employability is both at stake and a determinant of young people's integration prospects, and of the social risks that emerge when adaptation fails.

3. The International Context of Young Graduates' Employability

Rising labor-market skills demands create specific challenges for the SSH, making cross-country analysis of SSH graduates' outcomes essential for identifying broader policy needs. In the EU, graduate employability declined during the 2008 financial crisis, though unevenly across member states (EU Skills Panorama, 2014), with Southern Europe being the most affected (Papadakis et al., 2017). Nonetheless, even at the crisis peak, tertiary graduates maintained higher employment rates than upper-secondary and low-skilled youth (European Commission, 2020, p. 140; Eurydice, 2012; Garrouste & Rodrigues, 2012, 2014), confirming the relative protection of higher education. Despite crisis pressures, tertiary attainment increased markedly compared to the 2000s (Eurostat, 2014) and women led graduation rates in almost all EU countries (EU-27 average = 53.75%), except Cyprus (46.6%), Germany (46.7%), and Greece (47.4%; Eurostat, n.d.). Concurrently, the share of high-skilled jobs expanded (Eurostat, 2014), reflecting the structural shift of EU labor markets toward knowledge and skill-intensive economies (EU Skills Panorama, 2014).

According to the recently revised CEDEFOP forecasts, during 2025–2035, it is expected that, annually (CEDEFOP, 2024):

- The high-skilled workforce will increase by 1.7% in the EU-27 and 1.4% in Greece;
- The medium-skilled workforce will slightly decline in the EU (−0.1%) but will grow in Greece (+1.0%);
- The low-skilled workforce will decline by 3.7% in the EU and by 9.2% in Greece.

Although graduate employment in the EU appeared moderately resilient during and after the economic crisis, structural weaknesses became more visible during Covid-19. Significant disparities persist across member states: Greece and other peripheral eurozone countries (e.g., Italy, Spain) continue to face slower transitions from education to work and lower graduate absorption rates than the EU average (EU Skills Panorama, 2014). The field of study also shapes outcomes. SSH graduates consistently exhibit lower employability than STEM graduates (Office for National Statistics, 2013). During the pandemic, while tertiary graduates overall benefited from teleworking and faced lower employment risk, SSH graduates were comparatively more vulnerable (CEDEFOP, 2020; see Figure 1), especially in peripheral eurozone states (CEDEFOP, 2020).

Focusing on SSH graduates is analytically and socially important, as they underpin social cohesion, democratic participation, and institutional trust. However, in policy contexts dominated by employability metrics, SSH fields are often undervalued. Their weaker labor-market outcomes are frequently attributed to low relevance rather than to structural mismatches between labor-market demand and socially necessary knowledge production, highlighting tensions between societal value and market valuation.

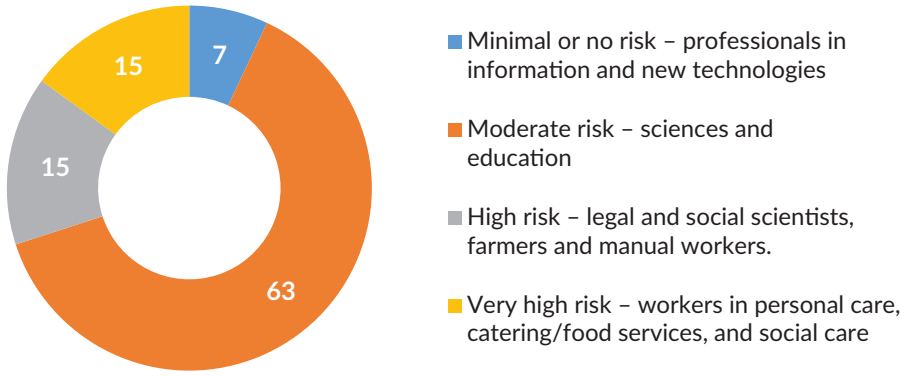

Figure 1. Percentage of risk of (reduced) employment and social distancing in the EU. Source: CEDEFOP (2020).

Labor-market transformations are accelerating, with Covid-19 intensifying digitalization and automation. Policymakers must design targeted employment, education, and training responses. A dual shift is underway: growth in tech and AI-related roles, alongside a decline in clerical and low-skilled occupations (World Economic Forum, 2020).

While analytical thinking, adaptability, leadership, and innovation are cultivated across disciplines, SSH develops these competencies within analyses of social complexity, institutional dynamics, and ethical reasoning. Through reflexive and contextual approaches, they enhance capacities essential for addressing governance, inequality, and social change (Nussbaum, 2016; OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020).

The key challenge now lies not in basic ICT skills but in combining advanced digital expertise with soft skills, such as problem-solving. Economies that invest in this mix and in targeted reskilling can harness innovation, whereas others risk stagnation and weakened social cohesion. Future-of-work studies confirm that competencies linked to the SSH—analytical thinking, adaptability, leadership, and innovation—will remain central (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021; OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020), as it uniquely embeds these skills within governance and democratic practice (Nussbaum, 2016).

4. The Greek Case: National Data on Graduate Employability and Labor-Market Outcomes

Despite graduates' specialization, the lack of a long-term strategy to link the education system with the labor market (though not in a determinist way), combined with the broader socio-economic deterioration caused by the economic crisis, led to rising in-work poverty, barriers to employment, and labor exploitation in Greece (IOBE, 2018; Papaderaki, 2020; Papadakis et al., 2021). These factors triggered both brain loss and brain drain across the whole spectrum of graduates, including SSH graduates (Marinakou et al., 2016). And, although quantitative employment data have improved—for example, youth unemployment (15–24) in the EU-27 was

14.8% (men: 15.4%, women: 14.2%) in February 2024, while the corresponding rate in Greece was almost double at 25% (men: 25.5%, women: 24.5%), though clearly down compared to previous years (see Eurostat, 2024)—the major issues of job quality for young people, especially given severe underemployment, remain.

This subsection places particular emphasis on data from the National Institute of Labor and Human Resources and from the National Mechanism for Diagnosing Labor-Market Needs (EIEAD) concerning the employment of SSH graduates from 2016 to 2019 (latest data: 2019). Occupations were classified using the ISCO_08 international standard applied by the Hellenic Statistical Authority. Analysis of this data (Figure 2) shows that 37% of SSH graduates in 2019 were employed as professionals. The second largest absorption category, at 21%, was office clerks, mainly of general skills. Next, with the same share (17%), came those employed in services/sales and those classified as technicians and associate professionals. In these two categories, which together account for 34% of all graduates, the actual job content is largely unrelated to their original SSH studies, underscoring the labor market's limited capacity to absorb a significant share of graduates in jobs matching their field of study and, consequently, the persistent problem of skills mismatch as well as the structural weaknesses of the labor market. Finally, only 6% of graduates hold senior managerial or administrative positions.

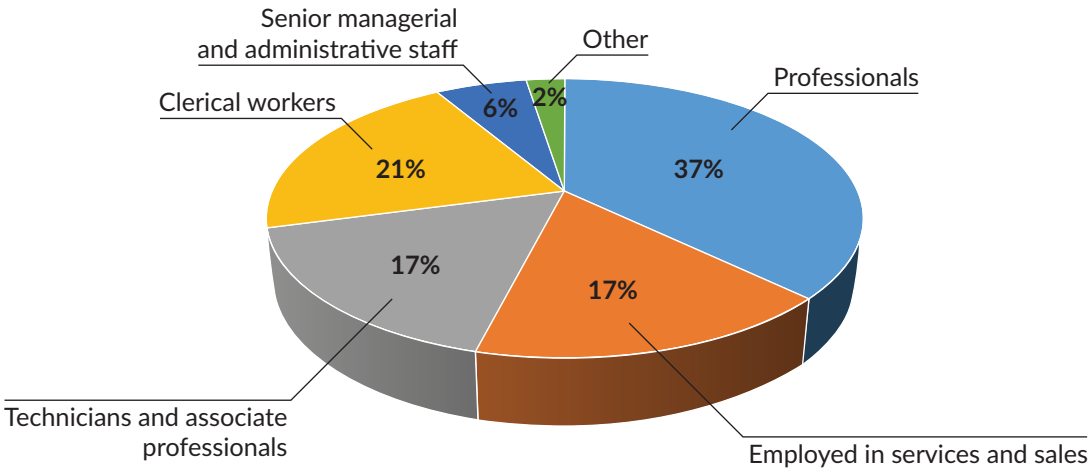

Figure 2. Employment of SSH graduates, 2019 (EIEAD's unpublished data from 2021processed by the authors).

Looking at changes in the employment of SSH graduates from 2016 to 2019 (Figure 3), no striking year-on-year differences emerge in the main categories shown in Figure 2. One could note a slight increase in clerical jobs and a parallel sharp decline in jobs in other sectors, which usually involve low-skilled, unrelated employment. This could be read as a positive development, but it is not yet conclusive and will need to be confirmed by subsequent time series.

To draw more robust conclusions, separate analyses were carried out for social-science graduates versus humanities graduates, and for holders of bachelor's versus master's degrees. The results are particularly interesting: Significant differences appear, especially between master's holders and bachelor's holders, both in the sectors of absorption and in employability levels, confirming the thesis that knowledge and skills upgrading is crucial for strengthening graduates' employability.

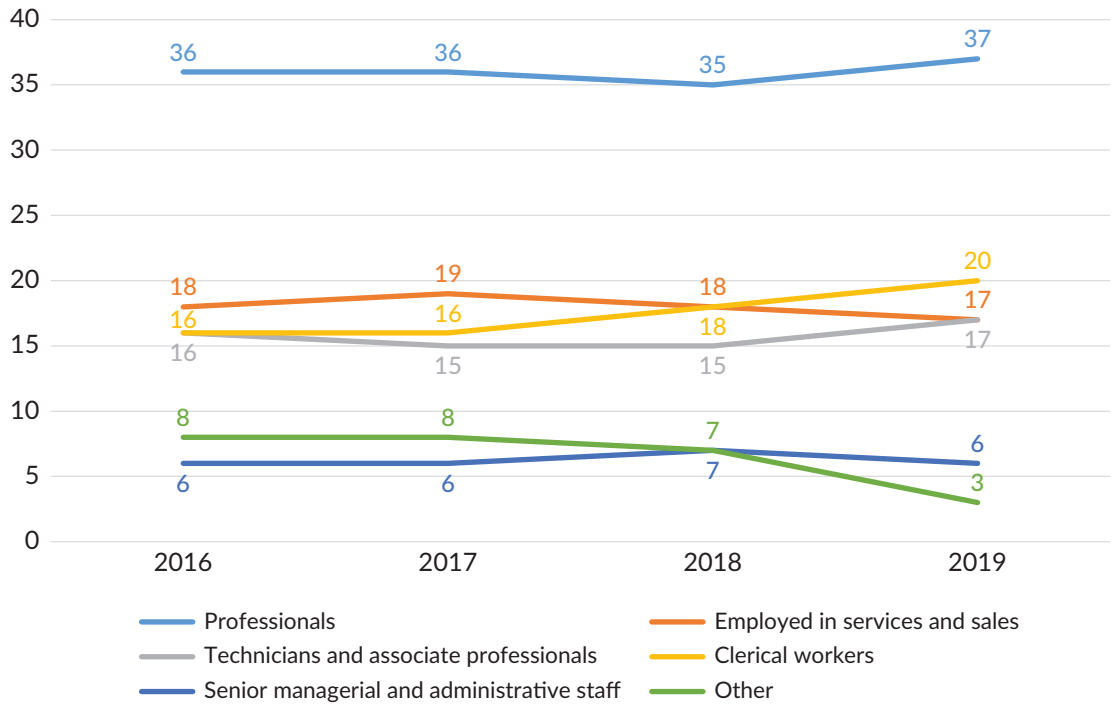

Figure 3. Evolution of SSH graduates' employment, 2016–2019 (EIEAD's unpublished data from 2021 processed by the authors).

The relatively low proportion of graduates with senior managerial or administrative positions (6%) should be interpreted considering typical early career trajectories. As most graduates initially enter the labor market through entry-level or junior roles, limited representation in senior positions at this stage is not unexpected. Rather than indicating weak employability, this finding reflects the early positioning of graduates within organizational hierarchies and highlights the gradual nature of career progression, particularly in fields where advancement is linked to accumulated experience and tenure. While expected, this finding provides a useful base for assessing longer-term career advancement and for comparing differences across fields of study and cohorts.

Figures 4, 5, and 6, which focus exclusively on social-science graduates (bachelor's and master's), make it clear that those with a master's degree are more likely to work in the profession for which they specialized. The competitiveness of the labor market and the need for skills is also evident from the fact that master's holders are much less likely than bachelor's holders to be absorbed into low-skilled, non-related jobs. It should be stressed, however, that in absolute numbers, bachelor's holders are far more numerous than master's holders, and over 50% of them end up in low-skilled, non-study-related jobs (brain loss). Thus, the central problem of skills mismatch—and of employment precarity—remains. These problems are visible in Figure 6, which shows that holding only a social-science bachelor's degree is not sufficient to secure employment directly related to one's studies.

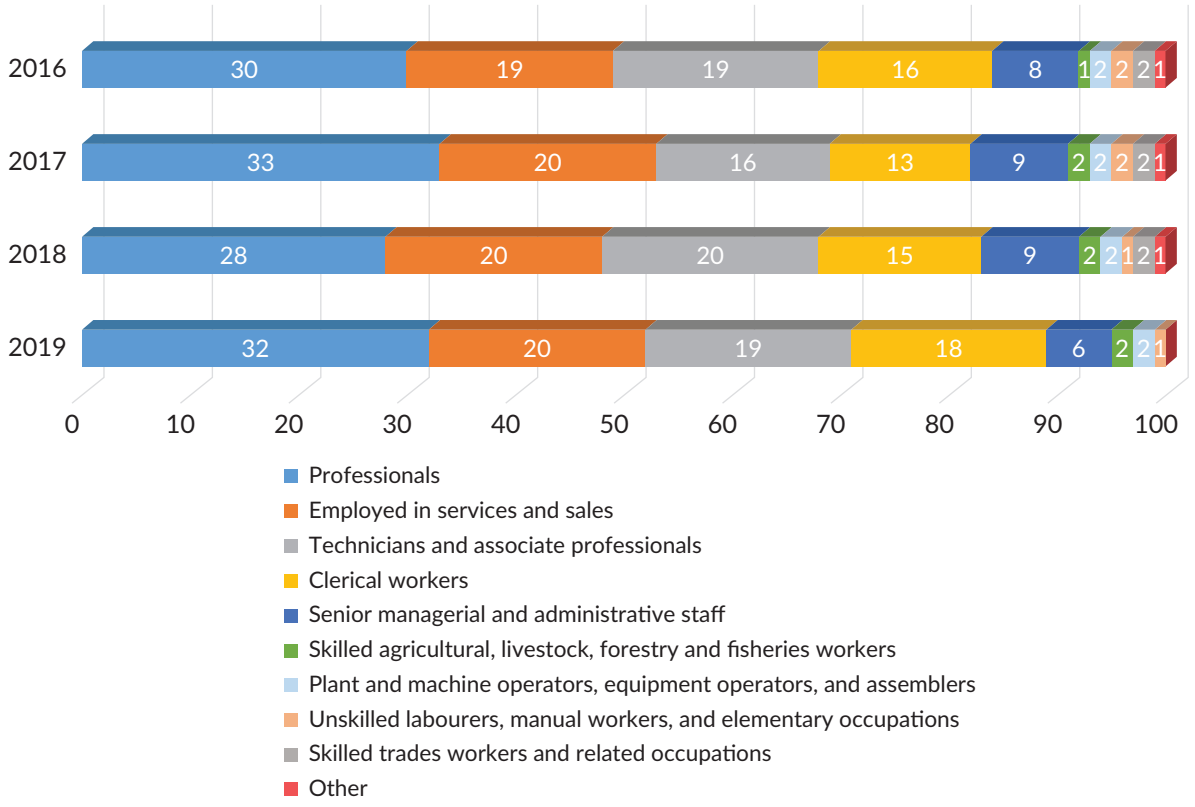

Figure 4. Employment of social-science graduates (bachelor's; EIEAD's unpublished data from 2021 processed by the authors).

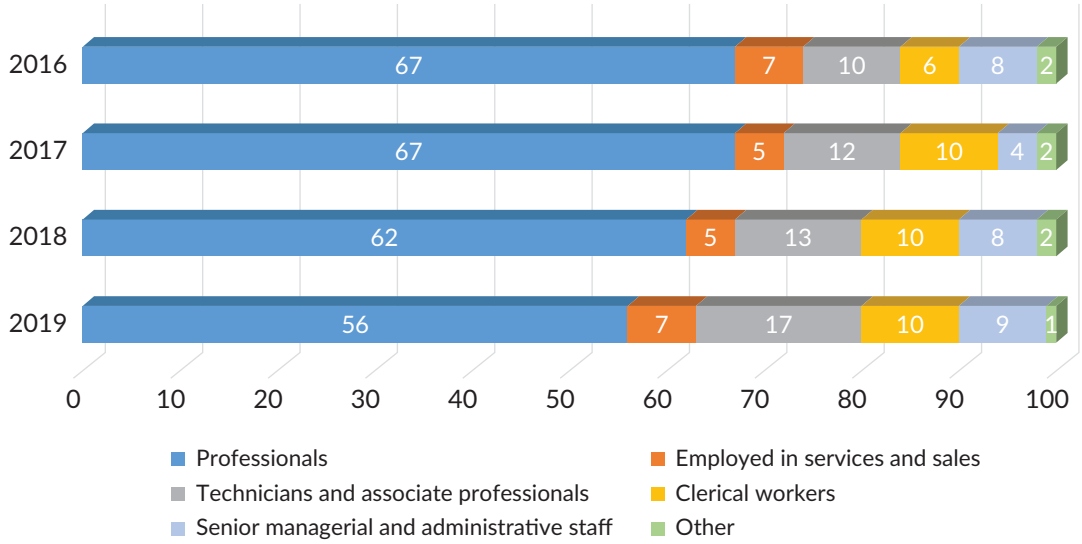

Figure 5. Employment of social-science graduates (master's). Source: EIEAD (2021; data processed by the authors).

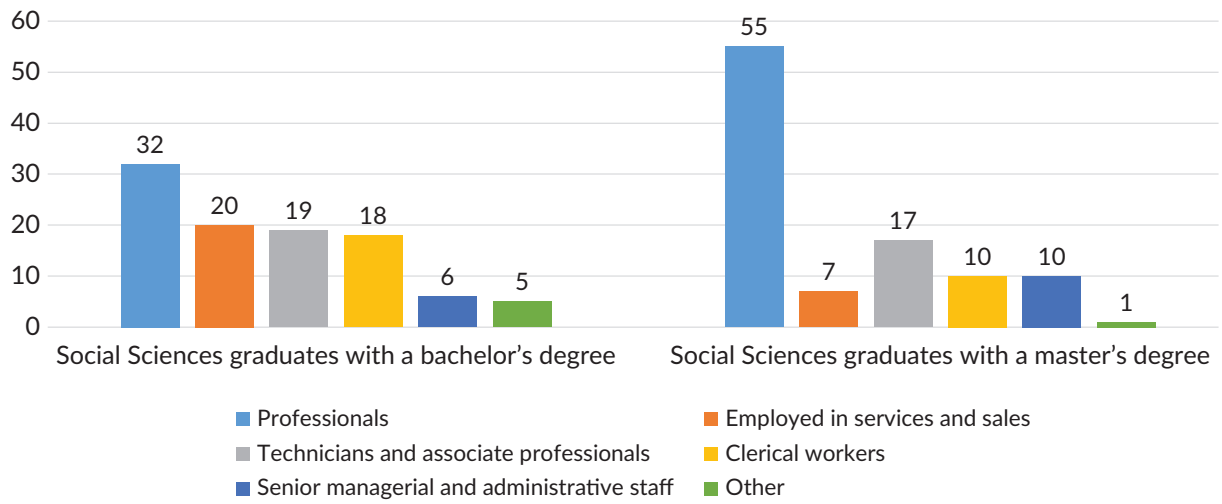

Figure 6. Employment of social-science graduates in 2019 (EIEAD's unpublished data from 2021 processed by the authors).

Processing the data only for humanities graduates confirmed these observations. As shown in Figures 7, 8, and 9, unlike social-science graduates, humanities graduates find it even harder to work in their field (apart from those entering public education as teachers—usually on temporary contracts) and are absorbed more in sales/customer service and general office support. A similar distinction to that of social-science graduates is observed between bachelor's and master's holders: those with a master's degree display higher employability and better chances of finding work aligned with their studies. Taken together, the national-level findings presented in figures 1–6 illustrate several of the broader employability challenges discussed in the earlier sections of this article. The concentration on graduates in entry-level positions, the limited transition into roles aligned with advanced qualifications, and the uneven labor-market outcomes across fields of study reflect a wider shift towards individualized employability pathways and increased exposure to labor-market risks, as Beck (1992) underlines, in a risk society. Therefore, the Greek case does not constitute an exception, but rather exemplifies how structural constraints, skills mismatches, and demand-side limitations shape graduate trajectories in contemporary labor markets. Importantly, these patterns underscore the tension between policy narratives that emphasize individual adaptability and skills acquisition, and the empirical realities revealed by national data. Data from Greece highlights how employability outcomes are influenced not only by graduates' capabilities, but also by institutional, economic, and sectoral conditions that remain largely beyond individual control. Thus, the national data provide empirical grounding for the broader argument advanced in this article regarding the limits of employability-centered approaches when detached from structural labor-market considerations.

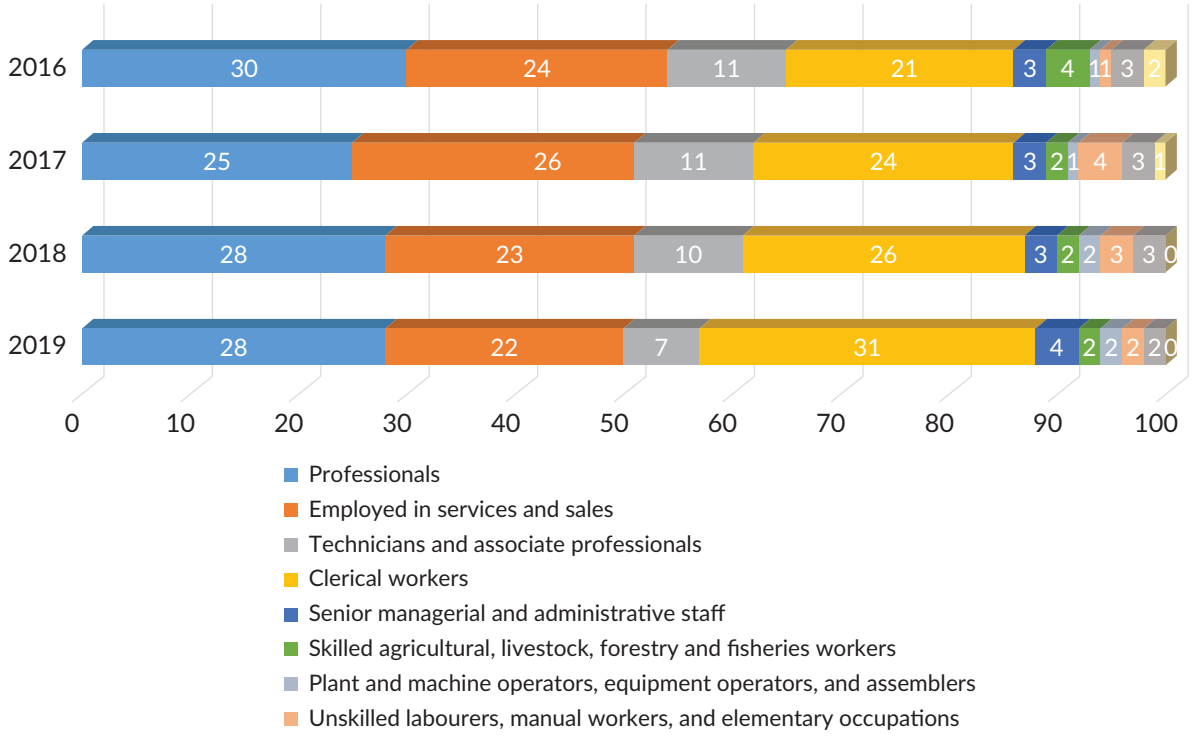

Figure 7. Employment of humanities graduates (bachelor's). Source: EIEAD (2021; data processed by the authors).

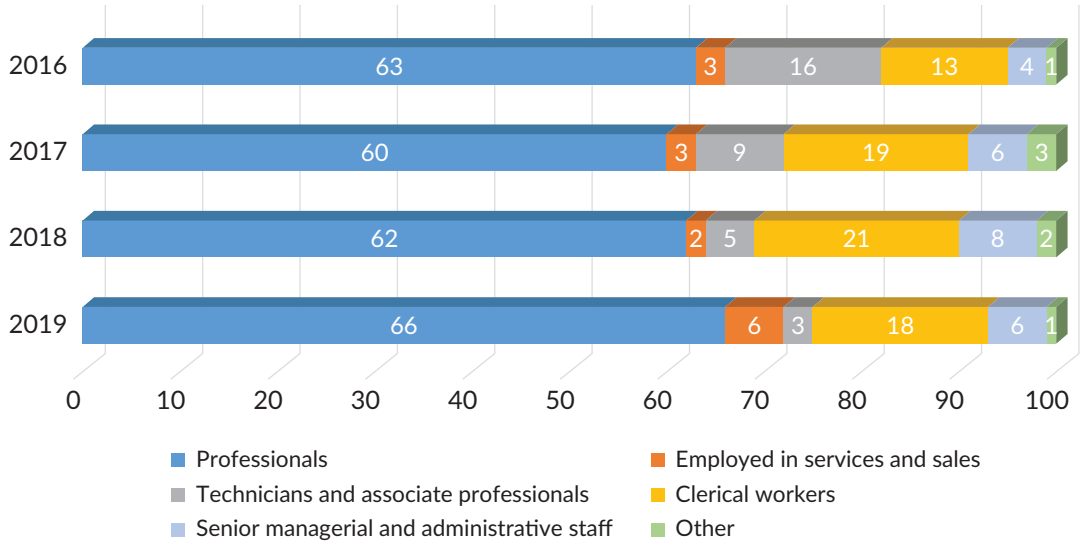

Figure 8. Employment of humanities graduates (master's). Source: EIEAD (2021; data processed by the authors).

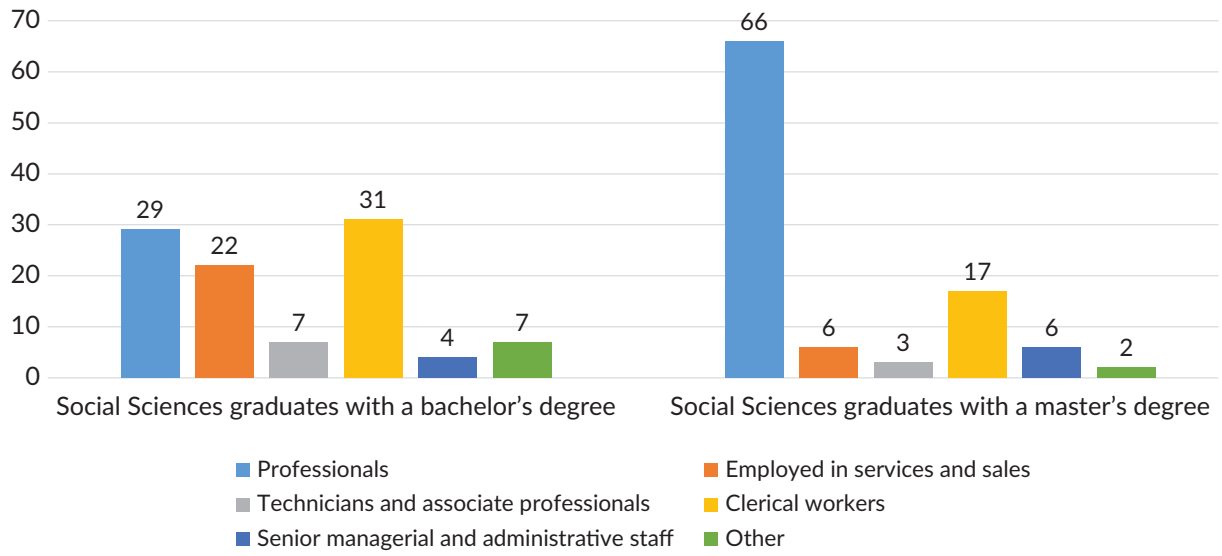

Figure 9. Employment of humanities graduates, 2019. Source: EIEAD (2021; data processed by the authors).

Overall, these findings confirm the existing literature on SSH graduates' employment, which stresses the importance of continuous knowledge and skills expansion. Although obtaining a master's degree is not in itself a "passport" to the labor market—or to employment strictly related to one's field—it does increase the chances of avoiding precarity and of practicing the profession for which one studied. These data also confirm international experience—outlined in the previous section—showing increasing difficulties in labor-market access for SSH graduates and their frequent absorption into low-skilled, precarious jobs. They provide an initial picture of the context in which policy interventions must be made so that graduates can reap the benefits of their studies, rather than being added to the new "precariat" (Standing, 2014) that has been forming since the recent economic crisis.

5. The State of Play at the University of Crete

This subsection seeks to outline, in broad terms, some of the characteristics linked to the educational profile of students enrolled in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Crete. Where useful, comparisons are made with students in other Schools of the same University and with the overall student population. The use of data from a single regional institution in Greece (University of Crete), requires consideration of its representativeness within the Greek higher education system. As a public university operating within a nationally standardized and centrally regulated framework, the University of Crete shares key institutional characteristics with other Greek universities, including governance structures, degree organization, and admission processes. The departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities reflect disciplinary configurations commonly found across Greek institutions, where such fields are typically embedded within broader faculties rather than organized as stand-alone professional schools. Accordingly, while the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution, the University of Crete provides a meaningful and analytically relevant case for examining graduate employability patterns within the SSH in Greece.

The data presented here derive from the Planning and Programming Directorate of the University of Crete for the academic years 2006–2007 to 2019–2020. According to the University's structure, the field of social sciences includes the Departments of Sociology, Economics, Psychology, and Political Science, which form

the School of Social Sciences. The field of humanities includes the Departments of Philology, History and Archaeology, and Philosophy and Social Studies, which form the School of Philosophy, as well as the Departments of Primary Education and Preschool Education, which form the School of Education.

The student population of the University of Crete almost doubled between 2006–2007 (14,627 in total, of whom 11,627 undergraduates) and 2019–2020 (23,549 in total, of whom 20,294 undergraduates). At the undergraduate level, about 60% of all students study in the SSH (School of Philosophy 20.77%, School of Social Sciences 25.86%, School of Education 13.10%), 35.16% in the School of Sciences and Engineering (ΣΘΕΤΕ), and 5.10% in the Medical School (see Figure 10).

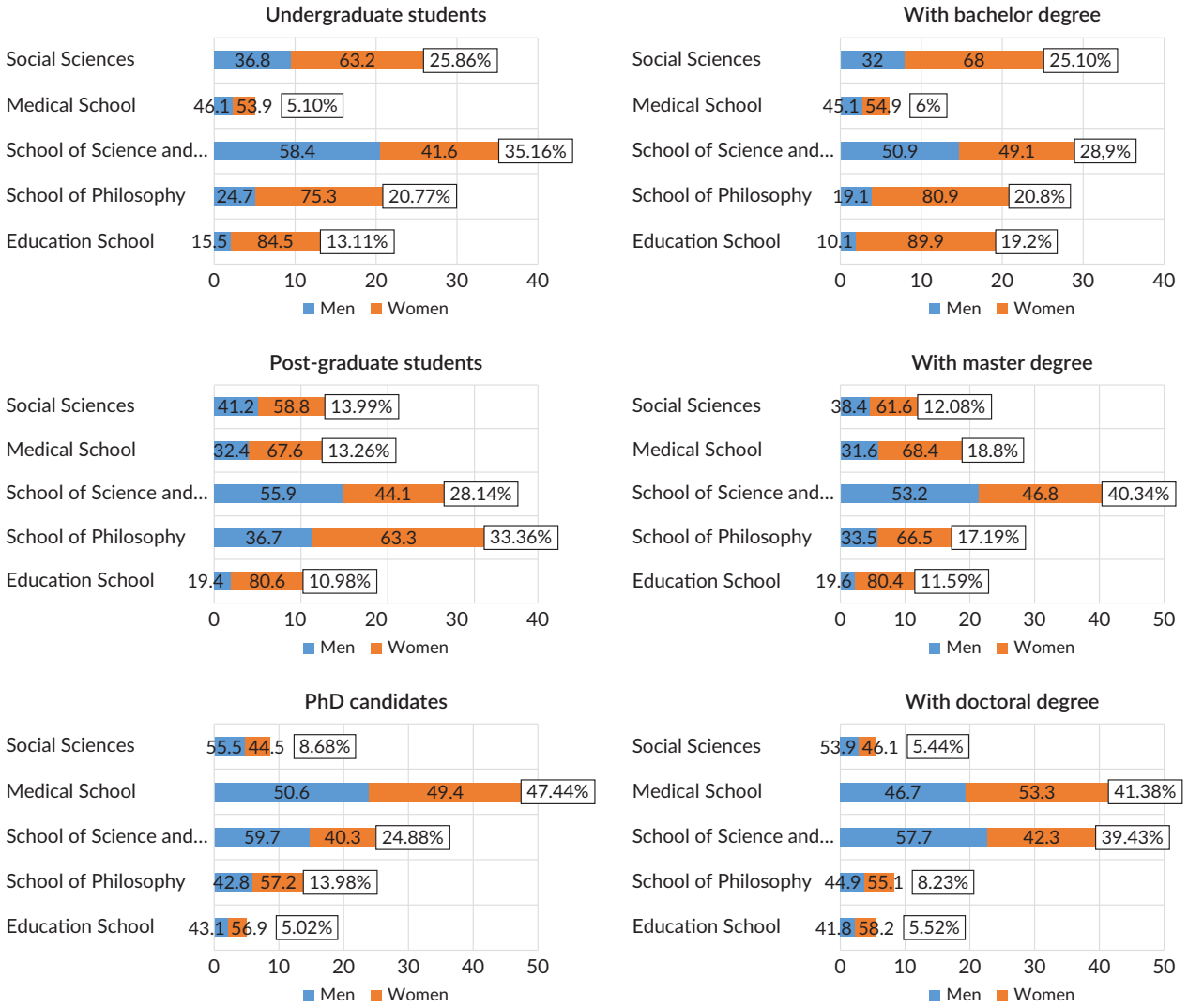

Figure 10. Distribution of the University of Crete's student population by level of study, field of study (school), and gender (2006–2007 to 2019–2020). Source: University of Crete, Planning and Programming Directorate (unpublished data processed by the authors). Note: The percentages displayed in the white boxes indicate the proportion of students in each school, as a share of the total student population of the University of Crete.

In line with European trends (Eurostat, n.d.), the gender composition of the University of Crete's student population, both overall and by school, shows a clear female majority. As in Europe more broadly (Eurostat, n.d.), women make up the majority of students—more than both the European and national

average (University of Crete average = 60.44%, EU-27 = 53.14%, and Greece = 47.81%). In the humanities, on average from 2006–2007 to 2019–2020, women account for about 79% of students, compared to around 60% in the EU (Eurostat, n.d.), though their share fell slightly from 80.24% in 2007–2008 to 77.61% in 2019–2020. Among students in the School of Education, the share of women is particularly high (84.53%) and increased by almost 2 points between 2006–2007 and 2019–2020. In the School of Social Sciences, women represent on average 63.22% of students—slightly below the EU average (66%)—with a small decline from 64.02% to 62.03% between 2006–2007 and 2019–2020. In the Medical School, 53.89% are women (a decrease of about 2.5 points between 2016–2017 and 2019–2020), while in the School of Sciences and Engineering, the share of women is 41.58%, up by 8.5 points compared to 2006–2007. This is significant given the EU and global emphasis on attracting women to STEM (see Fatourou et al., 2019).

The share of SSH graduates in the total number of graduates of the University of Crete is about 5 percentage points higher than their share in the total undergraduate population. For 2006–2007 to 2019–2020, the School's of Social Sciences graduates represent 25.10% of all University of Crete's graduates, while humanities graduates account for 40% (School of Philosophy 20.8% and School of Education 19.2%). It is worth noting that, while the graduation share of the School of Social Sciences and the School of Philosophy mirrors their undergraduate share, the graduation share of the School of Education is about 6 points higher than its undergraduate share. The graduation rate of the School of Education is by far the highest among all schools (see Figure 10).

Overall, women represent 68.65% of all University of Crete's graduates. Among humanities graduates, the female share reaches 85.28% (around 90% in the School of Education and 81% in the School of Philosophy), and among social sciences graduates, about 68%. This pattern—though with different magnitudes—is visible across all schools. It departs from the national average (47.4% of graduates nationwide are women) but is consistent with, and numerically higher than, the EU average, where women account for 53.75% of graduates in the 27 member states (European Commission, 2019, p. 13; Eurostat, n.d.).

Postgraduate programs are attended by 7.69% of all the University of Crete's students. This is lower than the national average (10.18%) and much lower than the EU average (29.45%; Eurostat, n.d.). About 44% of these students are in postgraduate programs in the humanities (School of Education 10.98% and School of Philosophy 33.36%), and 14% in postgraduate programs of the School of Social Sciences (Figure 10). Comparing the share of postgraduate students with that of total students shows that participation in postgraduate programs in the humanities (44.34%) is higher than their share at the undergraduate level (33.88%). However, within postgraduate studies, the share of students in the School of Philosophy (33.36%) is much higher than that of the School of Education (10.98%) and is, in fact, the highest among all schools. It is also interesting that the proportion of postgraduate students in the School of Philosophy increases by about 13 points compared to the undergraduate level and is second only to the Medical School, where the increase is 20 points. Conversely, the share of postgraduate students in the School of Social Sciences (13.99%) is about 12 points lower than its undergraduate share (25.86%; see Figure 10).

The picture changes further when we look at degree-holders (postgraduate diplomas). Degree-holders in the humanities represent about 29% of all University of Crete's postgraduate diploma-holders, a figure much lower (by about 15.5 points) than their share among postgraduate students (44.34%). By contrast, the share of postgraduate diploma-holders in the social sciences (12.08%) is similar to their share among postgraduate students (13.99%).

In postgraduate studies too, women outnumber men (about 60% overall at the University of Crete, about 68% in humanities—63.32% in the School of Philosophy, and 80.63% in the School of Education—and about 59% in the social sciences). Similarly, women represent a higher share among postgraduate diploma-holders (the University of Crete totals 60%, humanities 72.09%, and social sciences 66.5%). A small difference is seen in the School of Sciences and Engineering, where women account for about 47% on average (Figure 10).

Doctoral studies at the University of Crete are pursued by 6.78% of the total student population—almost double the national (3.8%) and EU (3.77%) averages. Doctoral candidates in the social sciences account for 8.68% of all the University of Crete's doctoral candidates, about 2 points down on the previous four years; 45% of them are women. Doctoral candidates in the humanities account for about 19% of the total, around 7 points down on the previous two years; around 57% of them are women. A large difference appears between the School of Philosophy and the School of Education, since doctoral candidates in the latter represent only 5% of all the University of Crete's doctoral candidates. The vast majority of doctoral candidates come from the Medical School (47.44% of which 50% are women) and the School of Sciences and Engineering (about 25% of which 40% are women; see Figure 10).

Between 2006–2007 and 2019–2020, the University of Crete awarded 1,433 doctorates (average 102 per year). This number represents 0.54% of all the University of Crete's students, a rate well below both the national (3.8%) and EU (3.77%) averages (Eurostat, n.d.). Male doctors slightly outnumber women (51.01%). The vast majority (80.81%) of the University of Crete's doctorates come from the Medical School (41.38% of which 53.3% are women) and the School of Sciences and Engineering (39.43% of which 42.3% are women). Only 13.75% (of which 56.35% are women) of doctorates come from the humanities, and 5.44% (of which 46.15% are women) from the social sciences. It is clear, therefore, that the share of humanities and social sciences doctorates in the total number of the University of Crete's doctorates is low compared to their share at all other levels of study, and that completion rates in these fields lag both their own enrolment rates and those of other fields (see Figure 10).

Based on these data, several observations can be made about the educational profile of those studying humanities and social sciences at the University of Crete (see Figure 10). At the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, SSH students (i.e., Social Sciences, School of Philosophy, and School of Education) jointly account for a very large share of the student body (about 60% at the undergraduate level and about 58% at the postgraduate level). At the doctoral level, however, their share falls to below half (27.68%), with an even steeper decline for the humanities. In terms of graduation, SSH graduates make up about 65.1% of all the University of Crete's graduates—higher than their undergraduate share—probably because of the relatively high graduation rate in the School of Education (see Figure 10). Yet significant differences appear both compared to other fields and between the humanities and social sciences when it comes to completing postgraduate and doctoral studies: both fields lag behind the other University of Crete's fields, and the lag is much greater for the humanities. While SSH students represent around 59% of all postgraduate students, they account for only 40.86% of postgraduate diploma holders. In the social sciences, the gap is relatively small (13.99% as the share of postgraduate students among all University of Crete students compared with 12.8% as the share of master's degree holders among all University of Crete students). In the humanities, however, the gap is around 16 percentage points (44.34% as the share of all University of Crete postgraduate students are in the School of Philosophy and Education compared with 29% as the share of master's graduates among all University of Crete graduates). This decline is mainly driven by the School of

Philosophy (33.36% as the share of students enrolled in master's programmes compared with 17.19% as the share of master's graduates among all University of Crete graduates), whereas the School of Education shows no similar drop (10.98% as the share of students enrolled in master's programmes compared with 11.59% as the share of master's graduates among all University of Crete graduates). By contrast, the School of Sciences and Engineering (28.41% as the share of students enrolled in master's programmes compared with 40.34% as the share of master's graduates among all University of Crete graduates) and the Medical School (13.2% compared with 18.8%, respectively) display the opposite pattern. A similar picture emerges at the doctoral level. This lag is significant in light of the findings on the advantages associated with holding a master's degree for improved labour-market integration.

The available data do not allow further analysis of the reasons behind the apparent contraction of SSH at doctoral level at the University of Crete or the notable lag in the completion of postgraduate (and, to a lesser extent, doctoral) studies in the humanities, nor of the related differences within the humanities (between the School of Philosophy and the School of Education) and between humanities and social sciences from the postgraduate level upwards. Empirical research on these differences is clearly needed.

Recent, detailed data on the employability of all SSH graduates of the University of Crete are not available. There are, however, relevant reports based on data collected in 2005 for the University of Crete's graduates and in 2006, 2007, and 2018 for graduates of the Department of Sociology. The 2005 data show that a large share of the University of Crete's graduates surveyed were already employed: for example, 88.5% of graduates from Education Sciences, 85.6% from Philology/Philosophy, and 67.6% from History/Archaeology had found work. Likewise, 86.4% of Psychology graduates, 97% of Economics graduates, and 79.1% of Sociology graduates were employed. Of particular interest are the reasons given for being inactive in the labor market: 50% of inactive Philology/Philosophy graduates, 100% of inactive Psychology graduates, 28.6% of Education Sciences graduates, 26.7% of inactive History/Archaeology graduates, and 25% of inactive Sociology graduates cited family obligations. Military service was the reason for 33.3% of History graduates, 25% of Sociology graduates, and 14.3% of Education Sciences graduates. This is important in view of the gender composition of many departments. Most employed graduates worked as salaried employees in the private or public sector (with shares varying by department), and the extent of job mismatch—measured as the match between studies and work—ranged from 36.5% for sociologists to 93.5% for education graduates (overall average 74.6%).

For sociology graduates specifically, for whom more years of data are available, employment fell markedly. In 2007, 79.1% of respondents were employed and 15% unemployed, whereas in 2018, 54.3% were employed and 34.7% unemployed. Among the employees, 70.8% worked full-time, 8.3% part-time, and 20.8% seasonally. Men were more likely to be employed, while unemployed women outnumbered unemployed men. In 2018, 63% worked in the private sector (vs. 54.7% in 2007), 31% in the public sector (vs. 41.5% in 2007), and self-employment rose to 6% (from 3.8% in 2007). Finally, 56% reported a complete job mismatch, 16.5% a partial mismatch, and only 28% a full match between the job and their studies' background.

Overall, it appears that, at the University of Crete as well, SSH display patterns similar to those found at European and international level: female overrepresentation at almost all stages, but with declining shares at higher levels; shrinking proportions of SSH students relative to other fields as the level of study rises; and lower completion rates—especially in the humanities—at postgraduate level. As for labor-market outcomes,

the limited data resemble the national picture: rising unemployment and relatively high levels of job mismatch. It is reasonable to assume that successive crises (financial and recessionary, followed by the Covid-19 economic crisis) have further worsened employment conditions for the University of Crete's SSH graduates, as they have at the national level. All this underlines the need for systematic graduate surveys and for the continuous updating of relevant data.

6. Conclusions

This analysis provides a research-based foundation for a policy framework aimed at improving the labor-market integration of SSH graduates in Greece, considering international trends. The goal is to enhance effective employment outcomes while reducing wage downgrading, precariousness, irregular labor practices, and poverty. Although based on a single institutional case, the University of Crete offers empirically grounded insights into broader structural challenges within Greek higher education. Rather than supporting direct generalization, it highlights systemic tensions relevant to policy discussions and underscores the need for comparative evidence to inform system-wide interventions.

From a policy perspective, the findings reveal the limits of employability-centered approaches that prioritize individual responsibility while overlooking structural labor-market inequalities. While lifelong learning and skills development remain important, they must be complemented by demand-side measures, public investment in quality jobs, and regulatory frameworks ensuring fair wages and decent working conditions. Rebalancing responsibility among individuals, institutions, and the state is essential for inclusive and sustainable labor-market outcomes.

International evidence indicates rising labor demand in technology-, AI-, digitalization-, and automation-related occupations, alongside a decline in traditional clerical, administrative, and low-skilled jobs (World Economic Forum, 2020). Future priorities include analytical and critical thinking, innovation, leadership, creativity, and flexibility; skills closely linked to the SSH, combined with digital competencies, such as programming, design, and digital marketing (World Economic Forum, 2020). Pandemic-driven digitalization is expected to leave 25% of jobs in hybrid form (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021), while the expansion of e-commerce shifts employment from retail and tourism toward logistics and delivery roles (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Robotization and AI further accelerate specialization while potentially reducing available jobs (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021).

Within this landscape, SSH should adapt to strengthen graduates' competitiveness. Internationally, as well as in Greece, SSH graduates, especially without postgraduate specialization, face higher risks of mismatch and precarity, often entering low-skilled or unrelated sectors. By contrast, master's and PhD holders display stronger alignment with specialized roles. Given the larger number of undergraduate SSH graduates, targeted interventions are crucial to prevent brain loss and sustained precarity. National and University of Crete data confirm these patterns, with women, quite overrepresented in SSH, particularly exposed to unemployment, mismatch, and vulnerability.

Strengthening graduate employability, particularly within the SSH, requires policy interventions that extend beyond individual skill acquisition and consider institutional and structural dimensions. Across Europe, a range of policy approaches has emerged that seek to better align higher education with labor-market and

societal needs, while, at the same time, preserving the broader social mission of universities. These include the systematic embedding of employability-related capabilities within curricula, the use of competence-based learning outcomes, and the expansion of work-integrated learning models that connect academic study with real-world contexts.

Universities have a critical role in shaping employability outcomes through curriculum design and pedagogical practices. Effective approaches include the explicit integration and assessment of transversal capabilities, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, within degree programmes, structured collaboration with industry, public-sector, and community partners to co-design learning activities, and the expansion of internships, project-based courses, and other forms of work-integrated learning. Such activities have proven particularly relevant for SSH programs, where employability is closely linked to graduates' ability to apply analytical and interpretative skills in diverse organizational and social settings. Therefore, adapting these emerging trends to the Greek context would not require a fundamental restructuring of the higher education system but rather targeted institutional interventions supported by national policy frameworks and in a context of political consensus. By strengthening the connection between SSH education, societal needs, and labor-market opportunities, policy and institutional actors could better develop graduate employability while safeguarding the broader democratic and social contributions of these disciplines.

The analysis shows that the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic have had negative effects on the employment prospects and employment situation of SSH graduates in Greece, broadly following international trends. Specialization and lifelong learning may assist, but they do not automatically ensure labour-market integration or prevent brain drain. These findings underscore the need for targeted policies to strengthen SSH and enhance graduate employability given their broader societal value.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Martin Neumann (Alpen Adria University of Klagenfurt).

Data Availability

The European research data associated with this article are extracted from the Eurostat and CEDEFOP websites. The primary, specialized research data (unpublished) for Greece are extracted from the EIEAD. Finally, the data for the University of Crete are extracted from the Planning and Programming Directorate of the University of Crete.

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