

# Networks of “Weak” Ties of Padua University Graduates Searching for Employment<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary.** In this paper, we apply a model for the analysis of job search effectiveness through the so-called “weak ties”, i.e. the personal links through which the attainment of a work position may be favoured. We analyse weak ties with reference to the first job research by the University of Padua graduates through family, friendship and university links. To obtain a work position more coherent with a graduate’s educational investment, we analyse, too, the information about job opportunities that colleagues communicate to employed graduates. By hypothesising that graduates use their personal links in different portions, we segment, by means of a multivariate method, the sample of graduates according to the faculty and, within faculty, according to the curricular and social characteristics of graduates.

**Keywords:** Weak ties; Job Search; Parental links; Educational links; Professional links; Graduates; Padua University.

## 1. “Weak” tie networks

To return to the felicitous formula coined by Granovetter (1973), “weak ties” are those informal or extra-institutional ties that an individual is able to make use to get a job. The term covers both the acquaintances to which the individual knows he or she can turn and those effectively called upon to get a job regardless of the outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> The four authors designed and realised jointly this research work. However, A. Boaretto wrote Sections 3 and 4 of the paper, whereas G. Rota wrote Section 2, I. Silvestri Section 5, and L. Fabbris the other sections.

That an individual's social network of acquaintance is a vehicle of opportunities towards the world of work is certainly not a recent discovery, nor is the phenomenon isolated to one part of the world (Katz, 1958; Lin *et al.*, 1981; Smelser & Swedberg, 1994). Such ties have been elevated to the status of respectable job-hunting channel since labour economists and economic sociologists have highlighted their relevance as alternatives or complements to the traditional pathways of job-hunting (Flap & De Graaf, 1986; Fevre, 1989; Watanabe, 1994; Bian & Ang, 1997). It is now commonplace to find that informal ties can generate or support opportunities, and that they are "weak" only insofar as they are less apparent (or less openly admitted to) than formal or institutional ties.

Graduates who apply for a job appear to the prospective employer - or selector acting on the employer's behalf - as a set of knowledge-driven, malleable abilities and willingness to work in the context for which they are applying. If graduates also manifest their range of personal ties, these ties become part of how they present themselves. A recommendation from a person, of consequence, is perceived as a node in the network of relationships the person or institution evokes. Thus, when employing a graduate, not only do employers know that they are linking their network of acquaintance to the candidate's, they are also aware of gaining credit in the eyes of the person who made the recommendation.

Weak ties are not considered as socially negative; rather they are perceived as providing opportunities for the individual and results for the system of production as a whole. Of course, recommendations, which aim to place those candidates who benefit from them at the top of any shortlist regardless of their abilities, are exposed to individual moral considerations.

In the following, ties are evaluated in relation to the potential of obtaining their first job for new graduates from Padua University, and to the potential of changing jobs for those already in work who want to improve their position. What we seek to know is:

- i) if there are groups of graduates looking for work who rely heavily upon these ties and whether the use of weak ties is exclusive, that is, the only job-hunting channel used, or if such ties are used to complement, perhaps in the wake of failed attempts, searches which followed traditional channels;
- ii) if such ties are more effective in job-finding than formal or institutional channels, or whether they are effective only when used to defend positions obtained with other means, or, again, whether they facilitate low-level jobs, or high-profile positions (Granovetter, 1974). In other words, we want to understand the very nature of ties because it is quite different if they help to gain a low-level job, which present no substantial risk for the employer, instead of a high-profile position, which require total empathy between the new hire and the company.

In Section 2, we examine a number of hypotheses concerning individuals who make use of informal ties in their job-hunting. We analyse the acquaint-

ances of and with friends and relatives (Section 3), as well as of any faculty members the graduates may be in contact with for research or teaching reasons, and in particular with their dissertation supervisor (Section 4), and with co-workers (Section 5). The hypotheses under examination are:

- *whether social status is linked to knowledge of and acquaintances in the labour market.* We hypothesise that the more the social background is elevated, the more likely it is that networks of the capitalist system of production, intellectual bourgeoisie and professional politics are aware of the possibilities available in the market for prestigious professions, and are able to dangle in front of their potential employers the possibility of “linking up with” the graduates’ network;
- *whether female graduates, traditional less sure of themselves when applying for work, are more inclined to rely on their network of informal ties in job-finding.* The hypothesis that women make more frequent use of weak ties is controversial (Granovetter & Follis, 1998), such as it is also moot whether they do so because of entrenched cultural stances, because of objective weakness in the humanistic and social science disciplines that women traditionally tend to choose, or simply because of cultural inertia;
- *whether the academic qualification in question leads to differences in behaviour.* First, we can distinguish between the behaviour of university graduates. There is ample proof in the literature that the frequency of suggestions is linked to the level of academic achievement (Corcoran *et al.*, 1980; Lin *et al.*, 1981; Flap & De Graaf, 1986; Marsden & Hulbert, 1988; ISTAT, 1997), although a number of researchers have stated that the relationship is U-shaped. A second distinction can be made between the different faculties or academic schools, humanities or science, from which the individuals graduate, in that employment expectations may differentiate the feeling of prior acceptance from the market;
- *whether the individual’s academic progress and achievement influence the use of weak ties.* The graduates’ university curriculum is represented by age at graduation and final mark. All other things being equal, the younger the age at graduation the more efficient university progress has been, just as the final graduation mark indicates overall commitment to academic achievement.

The data under examination concern 2,057 graduates and diploma-holders from Padua University who look for work six months after gaining their qualification (Fabbris, 2003).

## 2. Effectiveness of weak ties for job finding purposes

When hiring a worker, a company seeks to identify the most appropriate candidate among a reasonably sized pool. For the same reason, job-hunters want

**Table 1.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders without jobs upon gaining their qualification, by use of weak ties in the search for work six months after graduation, by qualification, and by faculty

Type of degree	In searching for employment			No action	Total
	Weak ties	Weak ties and others	Other ties		
Master	9.5	30.3	32.8	27.3	100.0
Bachelor	8.2	27.4	48.1	16.3	100.0
Univ. of Padua	9.4	30.0	34.4	26.2	100.0

an idea of the vacancies available in the kind of job they are looking for in order to choose the best one. Suggestions from relatives, acquaintances and teachers tend to fulfil the needs of both new graduates and companies, and typically yield more information than the graduates would obtain simply by sending their CV directly to companies.

Around 40% of graduates make use of informal channels in job-hunting, that is, at least 53% of those who have made at least one attempt to find work<sup>2</sup> (Table 1). Among those graduates who made use of at least one informal channel, around a quarter used only this means, while the others used suggestions to back up other search options.

Those graduates who were in work at graduation and who make use of informal channels in job-hunting come mainly from the school of Education Studies, while those who were entering the world of work for the first time graduated mainly from Agriculture, Letters and Philosophy, Education, Psychology, Law, Political Science, and Economics. Graduates in Statistical Studies, Medicine and Surgery, and Engineering tend to use, almost exclusively, formal search channels (Table 2).

Thus, graduates from the humanities and social sciences as well as from Agriculture use informal channels more frequently. The latter present a number of differences compared with the former group, because of the nature of the profession: in the absence of a suitable heading, those agronomists who have found work with the family firm reported having made use of family ties. Thus, with the probable exception of Agriculture graduates, graduates who consider themselves in a weak position in the job market tend to make use of suggestions from friends and relatives.

Considering the graduate set as a whole, informal channels tend to be used in almost equal measure by both male and female graduates (Table 2). The tendency to do so among female graduates in the hard sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Engineering, and Statistics is slightly higher than male graduates

<sup>2</sup> The following did not engage in job-hunting after graduation: those who continued with their studies, those who fulfilled their military service obligations, and those who started a family.

**Table 2.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders not in work upon graduation, by use of weak ties in their job hunting<sup>3</sup> at six months from gaining their qualification, by gender and by faculty

		Actions in searching for employment			No action	Total
		Weak ties	Weak ties and else	Other ties		
Agriculture	M	11.8	38.8	29.4	20.0	100.0
	F	12.8	43.6	28.2	15.4	100.0
Economy	M	6.8	34.1	45.5	13.6	100.0
	F	6.7	42.2	31.1	20.0	100.0
Pharmacy	M	6.5	29.0	41.9	22.6	100.0
	F	10.2	16.7	45.4	27.8	100.0
Law	M	5.9	13.2	26.5	54.4	100.0
	F	7.1	24.4	22.8	45.7	100.0
Engineering	M	13.9	32.7	37.2	16.2	100.0
	F	20.5	38.5	35.9	5.1	100.0
Humanities	M	5.9	35.3	26.5	32.3	100.0
	F	4.4	38.2	42.6	14.8	100.0
Medicine	M	18.2	9.1	54.6	18.2	100.0
	F	10.6	27.7	53.2	8.5	100.0
Veterinary	M	9.1	18.2	27.3	45.5	100.0
	F	27.3	4.6	22.7	45.5	100.0
Psychology	M	6.9	17.2	10.3	65.5	100.0
	F	9.3	15.0	23.6	52.1	100.0
Pedagogy	M	25	50.0	0.0	25.0	100.0
	F	7.3	47.7	36.7	8.3	100.0
Political Science	M	9.7	26.6	28.6	35.1	100.0
	F	2.4	43.2	33.1	21.3	100.0
Science.	M	10.3	29.3	39.7	20.7	100.0
	F	3.4	39.0	44.1	13.6	100.0
Statistics statistiche	M	4.7	25.6	55.8	14.0	100.0
	F	9.1	47.3	34.6	9.1	100.0
University of Padua	M	11.2	29.2	34.5	25.1	100.0
	F	8.0	30.7	34.3	27.1	100.0

from the same faculties (around 10%). As these are scientific disciplines, it means that, although the world of work is certainly more open to women today than in the past, female graduates continue to feel more at risk than their male counterparts when applying for jobs, and reinforce their chances through recommendations.

<sup>3</sup> Weak ties in the first six months from graduation were used overall by 174 individuals; informal ties in association with another channel, 623; other channels by 623; no channel by 407, for a total of 1980 graduates and diploma-holders.

**Table 3.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders not in work upon graduation, by use of weak ties in job-hunting at six months from graduation, by qualification and degree result

	Degree	n	Actions in searching for employment			No action	Total
			Weak ties	Weak ties and else	Other ties		
Master	Up to 89	132	12.1	28.9	41.6	17.4	100.0
	90-99	550	10.7	33.3	32.6	23.4	100.0
	100-110	866	8.8	29.0	31.4	30.8	100.0
	110 laude	244	7.6	28.7	32.5	31.2	100.0
	Total	1792	9.5	30.3	32.8	27.3	100.0
Bachelor	Up to 89	16	0.0	27.9	50.4	21.7	100.0
	90-99	75	6.9	29.1	46.4	17.5	100.0
	100-110	79	12.8	27.8	46.9	12.5	100.0
	110 laude	11	0.0	39.5	41.9	18.6	100.0
	Total	181	8.2	27.4	48.1	16.3	100.0

**Table 4** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders not in work at graduation, by use of weak ties in their job search at six months from graduation, by qualification and age at graduation

	Age degree	n	In searching for employment				Total
			Weak ties	Weak ties and else	Other ties	No action	
Master	< 24	57	4.6	30.8	40.2	24.5	100.0
	24-26	776	9.0	28.7	32.0	30.4	100.0
	26-28	950	9.7	29.7	31.2	29.3	100.0
	28-30	407	14.0	30.5	30.4	25.1	100.0
	> 30	312	7.2	28.8	32.5	31.6	100.0
Bachelor	< 24	146	11.9	22.4	42.3	23.4	100.0
	24-26	96	7.8	19.4	57.2	15.7	100.0
	26-28	36	1.9	41.2	41.3	15.5	100.0
	28-30	21	13.0	33.9	33.6	19.4	100.0
	> 30	12	26.1	11.7	38.4	23.7	100.0

It is an unquestionable fact that graduates who feel weaker when it comes to the job market make use of informal ties. A higher proportion of individuals who graduate after the age of 26 or who graduate with a low final degree result make use of weak ties (Tables 3 and 4).

Separate consideration needs to be given to suggestions from university teachers. The category that benefits most from this kind of recommendation is that of new graduates from the scientific faculties who graduate at a young age with a good result.

These reasons for this state of affairs are easily identifiable: teachers in scientific disciplines have more contact with the business community and gov-

ernment agencies than their counterparts in the humanities and these teachers tend to mention the names of their more brilliant students, those who will reflect well on the teachers themselves. Suggestions from faculty members stand apart, because companies perceive them as rigorous declarations of the quality of the graduates in question.

In any case, the use of these channels is usually a winning move, regardless of the faculty or degree course. It is slightly more effective for bachelor degree-holders who apply for jobs with lower expectations in terms of salary and position in the company (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders in work at graduation, by use of weak ties in their job search at six months from graduation, by qualification and work status at graduation

	Degree	In searching for employment			No action	Total
		Weak ties	Weak ties and else	Other ties		
Employed	Master	88.5	81.3	76.8	75.1	81.0
	Bachelor	100.0	94.0	93.5	81.2	91.3
	Total	90.7	82.7	86.1	75.8	82.6
Unemployed	Master	69.4	62.5	58.8	11.3	48.1
	Bachelor	95.9	70.3	92.7	25.5	75.8
	Total	71.7	63.3	63.7	12.2	50.9

**Table 6.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders who found employment working for others or under an “atypical” contract at six months from graduation, by use of weak ties in their job search, and by relevance of job to qualification

Coherent?	Weak ties	Weak ties & else	Other ties
Not at all	6.0	9.6	9.3
Little	12.3	12.9	15.9
Enough	50.8	50.0	48.2
A lot	30.8	27.5	26.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 7.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders who found employment working for others or under an “atypical” contract at six months from graduation, by use of weak ties in their job search, and by whether the job they do could be performed by a high school graduate or by someone less academically-qualified

It could be done by	Weak ties	Weak ties and else	Other ties
a non-graduate	44.3	45.4	49.5
a high school graduate	14.9	17.3	16.8
only university graduate	40.8	37.3	33.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Individuals who make use of informal ties not only find it easier to obtain work, they also tend to find positions that are in line with their qualification (Table 6). A proportion of 40% of graduates who used only their acquaintances (compared with 33% who used only formal channels) declared that their work required an academic qualification and fully 82% (compared with 75% who used only formal channels) have jobs that reflect their academic qualification (Table 7).

Because of finding a job in line with their qualifications, graduates are more optimistic with respect to professional growth and salary progression, compared with co-workers who, having obtained their position on their own strengths, start out from slightly less advantageous positions (Table 8).

Graduates usually follow more than one direction in their search; very few of them adopt only one channel in their job search. However, it is misguided to think that more attempts will lead to a higher probability of success.

Indeed the figures show that graduates, who look for work using either their own means and strengths, or informal networking, find work more easily than graduates who use both methods. Individuals who use both traditional and underground channels do so because they feel at a disadvantage and usually obtain less satisfactory results in employment terms than graduates who select just one approach (Table 4).

It can be deduced, then, that the fact of having a wide acquaintance, of being in contact with a large number of people rather than isolated in closed “networks”, however intense they may be, is a winning condition in the hunt for work. We can infer that social background does influence, in the first instance, the choice of degree or qualification, and then the entry into work.

**Table 8.** Percent distribution of Padua University graduates and diploma-holders who found employment working for others or under an “atypical” contract at six months from graduation, by whether they used weak ties in their job search and by their expectations for professional progression in two years’ time

Professional expectations	Weak ties	Weak ties and others	Other ties
Few or no changes	4.6	11.2	8.5
Economic improvements	14.2	6.8	5.2
Career progression	13.3	21.0	28.9
Increase of the operating within	21.4	6.6	15.8
Professional institutionalization	5.1	1.4	3.9
Social acknowledgment	2.2	0.0	4.0
Other	39.2	52.9	33.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

### 3. Parental ties

To obtain a more precise picture of graduates who use informal search channels, we processed the sample with binary segmentation analysis (Fabbris, 1997), taking as the criterion variable the *logit* of the conditional probability that graduates would make use of the knowledge of friends and relatives.

The analysis was carried out using the LAID-OUT package (Schievano, 2002), following the variant proposed by Fabbris & Martini (2002) which, at each step in the analysis, maximises the difference in the logits of the proportions in the sub-samples that are formed by the dichotomous split in the sample:

$$[\text{logit}(\hat{\pi}(Y | X_1)) - \text{logit}(\hat{\pi}(Y | X_0))],$$

where  $\pi(Y|X)$  denotes the value of dependent variable  $Y$  conditioned by the dichotomized predictor vector  $X$  and  $\text{logit}(\cdot)$  indicates the natural logarithm of the term in brackets related to one on completion.

The predictors considered in the segmentation are faculty attended, qualification (Bachelor/Master), gender, age at graduation (6 classes), degree result (above/below average), previous employment status (was/was not in work at graduation).

For the segmentation analysis, we decided

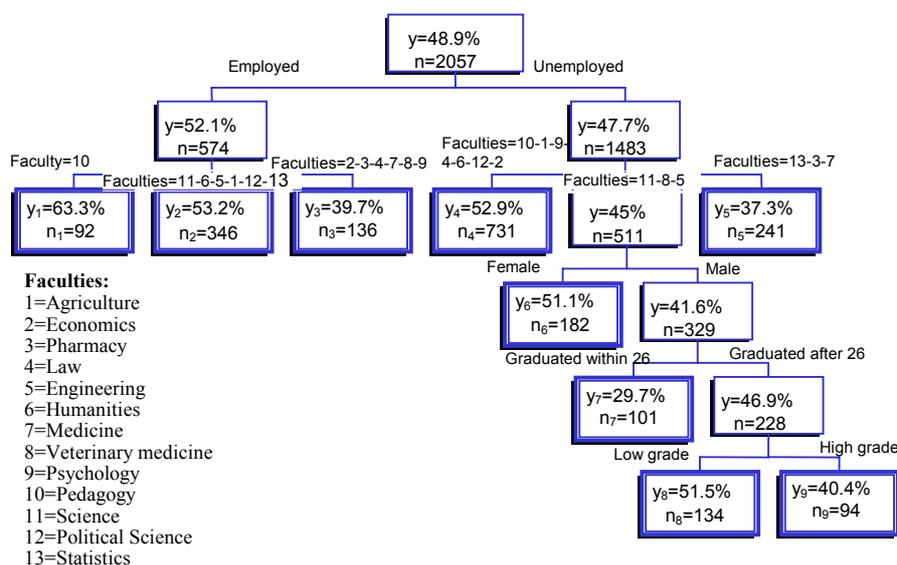
- a) To force the variable “in work at time of graduation” as the first predictor;
- b) To select ternary segmentation analysis where it is clearly better than a couple of binary segmentations;
- c) To limit the minimum group number to 50.

It emerges that, employment status being equal prior to graduation, the factors which influence the choice to use personal and family acquaintances are the faculty attended, gender, age at graduation, and final degree result.

Among those in work at graduation, students who graduated from the Faculty of Education were more inclined (63.3%) to use personal connections compared with graduates from other faculties. In all likelihood, this is due to teachers/educators who use the relationships consolidated during their own working life to improve their position within private companies/bodies, such as nurseries, playschools, or health centres.

Among those graduates not in work who looked for work, the majority who made use of weak ties came from the Faculty of Education (52.9%), followed by Agriculture, Psychology, Law, Classics, Political Science and Economics, which presented average levels of employment slightly lower than the others (Fabbris *et al.*, 2002).

Gender is a significant factor in the breakdown of graduates from Engineering, Veterinary medicine, Mathematics, Physics, and the Natural Sciences. Female graduates look for jobs by means of weak ties in 51.1% of cases, as opposed to 41.6% for their male counterparts. In faculties that are considered



**Figure 1:** Segmentation tree for the “looks for work using personal and family acquaintances” variable

**Table 9.** Percentage in work, average level of satisfaction and percentage of interviewees who state that their job is in line with what they studied, by group derived from the segmentation analysis

Group	n	% employed	Mean satisfaction	% very coherent with studies
1	92	90.2	7.1	38.3
2	346	83.6	7.0	17.1
3	136	87.4	7.3	41.0
4	731	54.0	7.1	19.7
5	241	80.5	7.4	34.3
6	182	68.7	7.3	41.1
7	101	74.4	7.5	39.6
8	134	76.8	7.4	43.7
9	94	66.6	7.6	37.2
Total	2817	60.7	7.3	28.4

“strong” in employment terms, female graduates seek further guarantees. This may depend on the persistent masculine overtones attached to the professional qualities female graduates may believe they possess, and thus on the reduced chances they believe they have when it comes to applying for jobs, because of the fact that they have studied in faculties with male student prevalence.

Male graduates approach job-hunting in ways that are influenced by their final degree result and their age at graduation. Graduates who took longer to complete their degree and achieved lower results are more inclined to use personal and family connections (51.5%) compared with those who graduated in less time (17% fewer graduates in this category make use of weak ties) or with a high final result (11% fewer).

In such cases, weak ties bolster academic records that are less than brilliant. Nevertheless, the employment rate in this apparently less-gifted category stands at 76% and the percentage of graduates who declare that their jobs are in line with what they studied is 43.7%, among the highest percentage returned in the segmentation analysis (Table 9).

#### 4. University ties

Among graduates who sought work within six months of graduating, 12.6% made use of contacts with teachers met during their studies at Padua University.

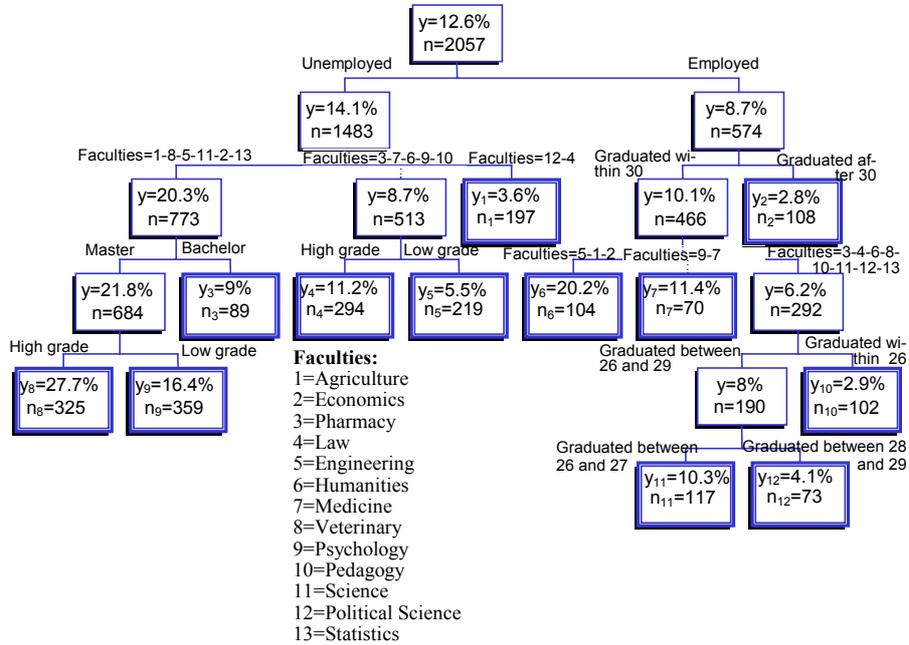
Data from the segmentation analysis (Figure 2 and Table 10) show that those students who had worked during their degree course tended less to make use of connections with teachers, and usually graduated at 30 years of age or later (2.8%), regardless of which faculty they had attended.

It is not surprising that graduates over 30 already in work have little familiarity with teaching staff, given that their aim is usually to use their new qualification to progress at work, but that, as they attended courses less often, they did not have the opportunity to build up a network of university contacts. Among graduates, this category declares the lowest satisfaction level (6.7%) and the lowest level of congruity between their jobs and the degree studied (15.7% compared with an average of 28.4%).

Among students already in work, those who used most their connections with teaching staff were early graduates from the faculties of Agriculture, Economics, and Engineering (20.2%).

Among those not in work at graduation, students from Political Science or Law were the least likely to make use of connections with their teachers (3.6%), whereas graduates with a high final graduation mark from Agriculture, Economics, Engineering, Veterinary medicine, the hard and natural sciences were more likely to make use of those connections (27.7%). For this last group, the congruity index between jobs and degree courses was particularly high (41.1%) and satisfaction in the job was above average (7.5%).

The factors, singly or in combination, which may lead students in scientific disciplines to cultivate a privileged relationship with their teachers are the following:



**Figure 2.** Segmentation tree for the “looks for work using professors’ acquaintances” dependent variable

**Table 10.** Percentage of those in work, average satisfaction level and percentage of interviewees who declare a high degree of congruity between their job and their degree course based on groups derived from segmentation analysis

Group	n	% employed	Average satisfaction rate	% very coherent with studies
1	197	43.6	7.5	19.8
2	108	88.3	6.7	15.7
3	89	78.8	7.4	30.7
4	294	60.0	7.2	25.7
5	219	69.6	6.9	21.3
6	104	89.5	7.4	27.5
7	70	89.7	7.5	45.7
8	325	69.1	7.5	41.1
9	359	71.3	7.4	26.7
10	102	82.9	7.1	33.4
11	117	79.8	6.8	24.6
12	73	90.3	7.2	21.1
Total	2817	60.7	7.3	28.4

- a high ratio of students to teachers effectively influences the possibility of establishing relationships of trust between the two groups;
- the experimental nature of most dissertations produced on scientific degree courses compared with the dissertations in the humanities which are more frequently reviews or compilations; an experimental dissertation, more often than not involving issues and methods close to the teacher’s research interests, usually involve close collaboration between the student and future supervisor;
- the greater openness of scientific faculty members towards the world outside academe and in particular to the business community.

## 5. Professional ties

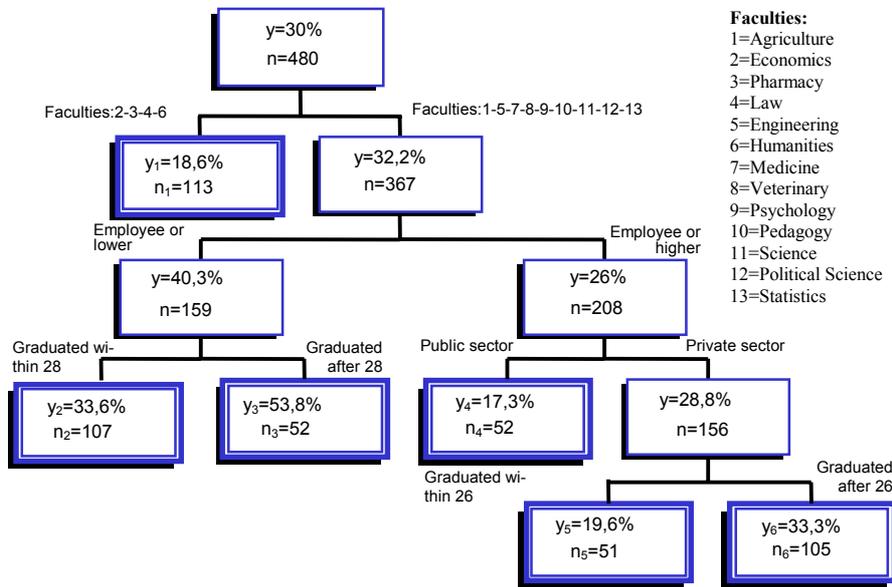
The tendency on the part of the 480 new graduates who were in work to turn to other co-workers and colleagues as part of their job search strategy was evaluated in proportion to the number of contacts obtained to which the graduates could send their CV.

In the segmentation analysis, the following possible predictor variables were added to the variables used in the previous two analyses: “position at work” (above or below the rank of salaried office employee); “the company’s business area” (private or state); “the size of the company” (number of workers greater or lesser than twenty).

A summary of the results of this analysis is shown in Figure 3 and Table 11. The category which made greater use of contacts with co-workers (53.8%) was made up of graduates from almost all faculties (except Economics, Pharmaceutical Studies, Law and Classics) who had a “fall-back” job, on a lower level than salaried office worker (teacher, factory worker, shopkeeper, craftsman or woman, “atypical” contract) and who graduated quite late, after the age of 28. Members of this category typically declare that they feel weak in professional terms and express lower than average job satisfaction (6.8%).

Graduates who have a position equivalent to salaried office worker, manager or executive in the state sector, tend to make less use of such contacts, and usually occupy a role which is congruous with what they studied (33.4% compared with an average of 28.4%) and which gives them a high level of job satisfaction (7.6%).

Age at graduation is also directly proportional to the tendency to make use of ties established in the private sector; individuals who graduate later have had the time to establish their own network of contacts at work.



**Figure 3.** Segmentation tree for the dependent variable “made use of help from co-workers or acquaintances to send CVs”

**Table 11.** Average satisfaction and percentage of interviewees who state that their job is congruent with what they studied based on groups identified during the segmentation analysis

Group	n	Mean satisfaction	% very coherent with studies
1	113	7.0	17.4
2	107	7.2	35.8
3	52	6.8	33.5
4	52	7.6	33.4
5	51	7.3	41.4
6	105	6.8	8.8
Total	2817	7.3	28.4

## 6. Final considerations

Individual networks of acquaintance are used by one in two of all Padua University graduates looking for work. It is possible that in areas with a less effer-

vescent job market than the Veneto region, the proportion will be even higher.

It is worth making a distinction between suggestions/recommendations from university teachers and those from family and friends. The former are opportunities offered to the new graduate directly by a teacher, often as compensation for particularly good dissertation performance. Faced with such a proposition, a graduate can only say yes or no. If he or she does not accept, the opportunity will go to someone else, as the tie is strictly a function of the teacher’s discretion.

The opportunities that arise in an academic context are thus particularly concrete, and may be “spent” just once for one position; such opportunities are short-lived and are asymmetric in their configuration, from the teacher towards to the student-graduate.

The second category is multiple opportunities, beneficial for those who can make use of them. They are, in this sense, acquisitions which belong entirely to the graduate, shared with the family or social group, but which the individual can “spend” whenever he or she perceives the usefulness in doing so. In other words, out of five recommendations exercised during the hunt for work, four come from the family and social group and one from the academics.

We must underline the extent to which our analyses involve a homogeneous group of people, characterized by the fact that all members possess a superior academic qualification and are of similar age.

In order to make use of one’s connections, one needs to have some. Recommendations from teachers usually favour almost exclusively those students who have produced a convincing experimental dissertation. Consequently, this category of ties is narrowly limited to those students who make good academic progress, who do not work and dedicate almost all the time to studies, and who have followed courses strongly geared towards their profession.

The extent of acquaintance through family and friends varies considerably in relation to the new graduates’ social background. The higher social classes have at their disposal a greater range of contacts in searching for work.

Nevertheless, those who feel they have greater need use such contacts more frequently and more intensely. Thus, they are used mostly by graduates from the humanities and social sciences, by individuals who gain their qualification at the end of difficult academic or personal experiences, and those who feel they are at a disadvantage.

Among those who that feel they are at a disadvantage, we find numerous graduates who make systematic use of recommendations, to a much greater extent than their counterparts with similar degree qualifications, but to a lesser extent than the student-dissertation supervisor axis. What is interesting is that these contacts are also used by graduates who have perfectly acceptable degrees for job hunting, such as a degree in engineering or other scientific discipline.

It is thus evident that weak ties are called upon to act as shields when graduates or diploma-holders feel exposed, or when they want to use an “external” force to even out their chances of successfully finding a job which, in

their view, birth, the life they have lived, and their academic achievement have rendered unequal.

If this statement were true, the use of a network of informal contacts to obtain a job one thought was lost to one rather disqualifies the applicant on moral grounds. Regardless of how we analyse these data, it is clear that those who make use of the network of acquaintance, because they feel weak, run an explicit risk of bearing the brunt of moral judgement; whereas those graduates whose curricula testify to a certain degree of accomplishment and professionalism, play the recommendation card to enhance further their own position.

From this moral judgment, we can exclude those individuals who use contacts in their working environment for no other reason than to learn before possible rivals what opportunities are available in the job market that could improve their own professional position.

Nevertheless, companies and selectors do not perceive the use of informal channels as harmful. First, as the selector gains more information on the candidate from the recommendation itself, it narrows the margin of uncertainty attached to choosing candidate. Second, from the implicit complicity that underpins a recommendation, the selector draws a certain guarantee regarding the behaviour of the new employee, in that the later must 'answer' not only to his or her employer, but also to the person who made the recommendation. Moral judgments on the recommendation as an institution are thus relative.

In conclusion, it would be very interesting, but with our data it is not possible to do so, to examine if and to what extent ethical and cultural factors influence the use of informal ties to find work. Given a social status and an academic qualification, some graduates make use of the social network while others do not. An understanding of the extent to which an individual's values act as a hindrance to his or her using those ties would help us formulate a more precise assessment of this social practice.

It would also be instructive to assess if and for whom in the mid to long term these contacts are useful, including in career progression.

For those already in works who are seeking a better position, we would need to examine either if length of service is connected with the use of ties in order to gain a new job, or whether, with the passing of time in a job, ambitions and contacts lose their importance.

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