

# Differences in self-perceived employability between university and VET students: an analysis of emerging adults in Spain

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The present study analyzes differences in self-perceived employability (SPE) among Spanish university and vocational education and training (VET) students. It also aims to determine whether factors such as gender, work experience and perceptions of the precariousness of the job market have a differential effect on SPE in accordance with the training pathway chosen by emerging adults.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of 1,715 university students (64.7% women) and 488 VET students (37.1% women) aged between 18 and 29 years completed a self-administered questionnaire that included measures of perceived employability and precarious employment.

**Findings** – The results indicate higher SPE among VET students than among their university counterparts. Female university students scored lower also than their male colleagues, an effect that was not observed among VET students. Prior work experience improved internal SPE among students on both training pathways. However, among university students, work experience and precarious employment reduced external SPE, an effect that was not observed among VET students.

**Practical implications** – The analysis of differences in SPE between university and VET students highlights the importance of an educational curriculum that includes practical competences for enhancing employability. The results also reflect the negative consequences of precarious employment on feelings of employability during this life stage, particularly among those studying at university.

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**Originality/value** – This is one of the first studies to analyze the perceived employability of emerging adults on two different training pathways in Spain.

**Keywords** Self-perceived employability, University studies, VET studies, Precarious work, Emerging adulthood

**Paper type** Research paper

The financial crisis of 2008 and the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 virus increased unemployment rates to 7.6% in the European Union and to 14% in Spain, with that country having the highest rate in the EU (Eurostat, 2022). In particular, emerging adults (people aged between 18 and 29 years) have been affected most by both crises, with 46.2% of Spaniards under the age of 25 years being either unemployed or looking for a job (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2021). Indeed, the youth unemployment rate in Spain is one of the highest in Europe (European Commission, 2017). Precariousness is another characteristic of the youth labor market in Spain (García, 2021), with the level being even higher among women, who are more often forced to accept temporary and part-time contracts than their male counterparts (García, 2021; Instituto de la Juventud de España [INJUVE], 2020). Many studies have argued that training prevents both unemployment and precarious employment (Olsthoorn, 2014), and post-compulsory training has clearly increased in Spain over recent years, with the number of university and vocational and educational training (VET) graduates growing steadily. Together, high unemployment and precarious employment may affect young students' perception of their own employability, with differences being observed also between men and women, due to the persistence of a gender gap in the labor market. As a measure associated with self-efficacy (Tentama and Nur, 2021), self-perceived employability (SPE) clearly affects young people's real ability to find a job. In light of the above, the present study aims to analyze factors associated with emerging adults' perceived employability in Spain. These factors include gender, studying a university degree or VET course, previous experience on the labor market and precarious employment.

Although, as described above, the high youth unemployment rate has been further exacerbated by both crises, it has nevertheless been an endemic and systemic problem in the Spanish labor market for many years. The elevated school dropout rate is considered one of the key causes of high youth unemployment (García, 2011), however, over recent decades, the number of people completing compulsory secondary education and continuing their studies afterward has risen steadily, and the number of those with post-compulsory qualifications has doubled over the past decade (Eurostat, 2022).

In Spain, in the case of university qualifications, there has been a sharp increase recently in the number of graduates (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Moreover, the number of university students has risen by 12% since 2009 (Ministerio de Educación, 2021a). However, as in the rest of the OECD countries, the number of qualified jobs available has not kept pace with this rise in demand (Herbert *et al.*, 2020). This imbalance between the demand for and the availability of qualified employment has oriented the debate towards higher education, highlighting the importance of ensuring an education system that helps young people develop the skills they need to perform a job and increase their employability (Ayala and Manzano, 2021; Dearing, 1997). Higher education should prepare students for their future professional careers, continue to train them and make sure they are equipped to satisfy the demands of today's labor market (Lees, 2002; Ayala and Manzano, 2021). Since the nineteen-eighties, employability has become a priority in the context of higher education, as evident in the promotion of practical training (Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017) and the establishment of the Bologna Process, which, among other things, encouraged universities to include employability in their syllabi and ensure a learning context conducive to the development of transferable competences (Oria, 2012).

VET is also increasing in Spain, rising at a much faster rate than other post-compulsory study pathways (Gamboa *et al.*, 2021), as evident in the 77% increase in VET students since 2019 (Ministerio de Educación, 2021a). However, VET is still a less popular pathway in Spain than in other neighboring countries (18.7% of students aged 17 years, as opposed to 31% in OECD countries in general; OECD, 2019). To understand the reason for this, we must analyze VET from a historical perspective. In Spain, vocational training initially fulfilled a compensatory or social function rather than a training-oriented one (Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2019). Unlike *Bachillerato* (one option in Spain for the first two years of post-compulsory education, equivalent to A-levels in the UK and the final two years of high school in the US), there were no access requirements for VET courses, causing families, companies and employers to view this option as a dead end for weak students who were unable to continue with their academic studies (Martínez-Morales and Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020). In 1990, VET was rendered equivalent to the academic training offered through the *Bachillerato* and university pathway, but with a training pathway that was much more technical in nature and designed to prepare students for the labor market (López-Fogués, 2014). Nevertheless, it remains the less popular choice, mainly for two reasons: firstly, the prejudice generated by its being a non-competitive, less prestigious type of training (Martínez-Morales and Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2020) and secondly, because the real likelihood of finding a well-paid, non-precarious job increases the higher the training level acquired (OECD, 2015). Despite this, VET has a higher job placement rate (CEDEFOP, 2012; Golsteyn and Stenberg, 2017) and is considered a true alternative for combating the recession and concerning rate of youth unemployment in Spain.

Neither the updates carried out in the university field to foster employability nor the more practice-centered training provided by VET have succeeded in adapting the supply of available jobs to the number of trained youths looking for employment, with this situation resulting in an excess of qualified people who end up working in unqualified (García, 2021; Herbert *et al.*, 2020) and, all too often, precarious jobs. By way of example, it should be noted that 40% of young Spanish graduates work in occupations that do not require a university degree, whereas the European mean is just 21% (Eurostat, 2021). Despite this, precarious employment affects less-qualified youths more severely and increased among young people from Southern European countries following the financial crisis and subsequent recession of 2008 and the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Papadakis *et al.*, 2022).

Precarious employment refers to forms of work involving limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity and low wages (Vosko, 2006). Precariousness affects all of Western society and is the result of late modern capitalism in which a decrease in stable, standard and long-lasting Fordist jobs is accompanied by an increase in non-permanent, “flexible” employment (MacDonald, 2017). The most severely affected segment of the population, however, is young people, who perceive a lack of options and control, low empowerment, alienation, low salaries and downgraded working conditions (MacDonald and Giazitzoglou, 2019). Precarious employment is also higher among women, who in Spain earn less than their male counterparts in the majority of sectors and at all education levels, regardless of the type of contract or working day in question (UGT, 2022). Job precariousness has also been associated with poor mental health (Llosa *et al.*, 2018; Vosko, 2006), and without doubt affects the self-perceived agency of young people for finding a job on a par with their training, a concept also known as employability (Delva *et al.*, 2021).

References to the concept *Employability* first appeared in the field of higher education (Robbins, 1963). It is a concept that is difficult to define and about which much has been written and many complex and multidimensional theories have been developed (Lees, 2002; Vargas *et al.*, 2018). Of the different approaches from which employability can be studied (see Rothwell, 2015), the individual perspective is becoming increasingly popular. Despite its name, this perspective analyzes not only individual aspects, but contextual ones also. According to this approach, employability is defined as a psychosocial construct that indicates the likelihood of

someone obtaining or maintaining an attractive job in a specific social-labor context (Fugate *et al.*, 2004). It is therefore a dynamic construct that depends on the context and evolves with society and people over time (Williams *et al.*, 2016). The concept of *Self-Perceived Employability (SPE)* also includes personal and contextual factors, but with the added nuance of the fact that these factors are not objective but rather linked to the individual's perception of their own capacities and skills for finding employment, and the job opportunities offered by the context (Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017; Vargas *et al.*, 2018). This perspective has potential for the fields of psychology and career counseling (Rothwell, 2015) and has given rise to the development of certain instruments for studying employability among university students (i.e. Hernández *et al.*, 2011; Rothwell *et al.*, 2008) who, on many occasions, have yet to access the labor market. Consistently with official employment statistics, the studies cited above have shown, among other things, that men usually have a higher SPE than women (Pitan and Muller, 2019; Vargas *et al.*, 2018).

The study of SPE in the university environment has produced a large body of literature (see, for example, Clarke, 2018; Pitan and Muller, 2020; and Rätty *et al.*, 2018). However, few studies have focused on the impact of VET on this variable and the transition of young people who chose this training pathway from the academic world to the labor market (Bולי *et al.*, 2018; Choi *et al.*, 2019), even though this type of education has been identified as being vital to the economic and social development of any country (Choi *et al.*, 2019).

## Aims

The aim of the present study is to analyze, in Spain, possible differences between university students and VET students in terms of their SPE, in order to determine whether the training pathway chosen influences students' perception of their employability. It also aims to determine whether factors such as gender, work experience and perception of the precariousness of the job market have a differential effect on SPE in accordance with the training pathway chosen by emerging adults.

## Method

### Participants

The sample comprised 2,203 participants (Table 1). Of these, 1715 were students from the Universities of (blinded), with 65.1% being women and 34.9% men, aged between 18 and 29 years ( $M = 20.60$ ;  $SD = 2.49$ ). The remaining 488 participants (37.1% women and 62.9% men) were not university students, but were engaged in intermediate and higher level VET and were aged between 18 and 29 years ( $M = 20.19$ ;  $SD = 2.49$ ).

### Instruments

*Sociodemographic Variables:* All participants were asked to state their age and gender and to say whether or not they had any previous work experience.

*SPE – Self-perceived employability:* To measure SPE, we used the Spanish adaptation (Vargas *et al.*, 2018) of the original SPE Scale (Rothwell *et al.*, 2008). The two first items referring to educational context were eliminated to make the scale more comparable when used with both university and VET students.

	Total ( <i>n</i> )	Men	Women	Work experience	No work experience
University students	1715	599 (34.9%)	1,116 (65.1%)	759 (44.3%)	956 (55.7%)
VET Students	488	307 (62.9%)	181 (37.1%)	299 (61.3%)	189 (38.7%)

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive variables pertaining to the sample

The final scale is a 10-item measure from which 2 subscales are obtained measuring students' perceptions about their employability. The first subscale, which focuses on internal employability, measures participants' self-belief regarding their own capacities (e.g. "The skills and abilities that I possess are what employers are looking for"). The second subscale, which focuses on external employability, measures participants' beliefs about their field of study (e.g. "My chosen subject(s) rank(s) highly in terms of social status") and the state of the external labor market (e.g. "I can easily find out about opportunities in my chosen field"). Participants respond on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The scale was found to have good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.71/0.80/0.82$  for VET students, for Internal, External and Total SPE, respectively and  $\alpha = 0.77/0.86/0.89$  for university students, for Internal, External and Total SPE, respectively).

*Precarious employment:* We designed a 4-item scale based on [Olsthoorn's \(2014\)](#) indicators for measuring precarious employment. The scale was as follows: "If you are working or have ever worked ...": (1) The salary is or was low compared to the average salary of the professional field of that job, (2) You have or had the right to unemployment benefit after finishing the job, (3) If you work or worked night hours or overtime and the like, you are or were paid extra for them, (4) You spend or have spent long periods without employment (looking for a job). Participants responded Yes or No to each question. Precariousness was coded as 2 and non-precariousness as 1, and a sum score was calculated.

### *Procedure*

We contacted faculty at the Universities of Sevilla and Pais Vasco//Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea and VET centers in the same regions of the universities cited above to ask them to permit our team to have access to their student body. All participants were informed of the study aims, as well as data protection, confidentiality and anonymity issues and were then asked to complete the battery of questionnaires (a process that lasted around 30 minutes). The inclusion criteria were to be between 18 and 29 years of age. All participated voluntarily. The study was approved by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee of (blinded).

### *Analysis*

To fulfill the aims of the study, a means comparison (ANOVA) was conducted to identify any differences between university and VET students in terms of their SPE scores. Next, we divided the sample into two training pathways (university students and VET students) and conducted an ANOVA to explore possible differences in their SPE in terms of gender or previous work experience. Since differences were observed, we then explored them further using a general linear model, plotting the results on a graph to detect possible interaction effects.

Finally, we carried out bivariate correlations to determine the relationship between precarious employment and SPE. Once this relationship had been confirmed, a linear regression analysis was performed to determine whether precariousness influenced SPE scores in accordance with training pathway. For the regression analyses, first, training pathway was entered as the IV, followed by gender.

## **Results**

As shown in [Table 2](#), VET students scored higher for SPE (Internal, External and Total) than their university counterparts, with a medium effect size.

Differences in SPE were then analyzed separately for university students and VET students, in accordance with gender and whether or not participants had previous work experience ([Table 3](#)). In terms of gender, male university students scored significantly higher than their female counterparts in all dimensions of SPE, although the same difference was not

observed in relation to male and female VET students. As regards previous work experience, both university and VET students with work experience had a higher Internal SPE than those who had no work experience. However, among university students with work experience, External SPE was significantly lower than among those who had never worked before, whereas it was higher among VET students with work experience, although the difference in this case was not statistically significant. We therefore decided to conduct an interaction analysis by means of a general linear model, which returned significant results for both External ( $F = 6.96; p = 0.008$ ) and Total SPE ( $F = 3.91; p = 0.048$ ). Figure 1 presents the results for External SPE.

*Regression analysis and interactive model*

To determine the relationship between precarious employment and employability, we performed a correlation analysis between all participants' SPE and precariousness in previous jobs. The results revealed that Precarious employment was negatively and significantly associated with Internal SPE ( $r = -0.111; p < 0.001$ ), External SPE ( $r = -0.133; p < 0.001$ ) and Total SPE ( $r = -0.137; p < 0.001$ ).

Next, we performed a regression analysis, including precarious employment and training pathway as independent variables. We also analyzed the interaction between these two variables (see Table 4). The results revealed that both precarious employment and training pathway helped explain Internal, External and Total SPE. The interaction between the two variables was also found to contribute to explaining External and Total SPE.

To explore the interaction effect observed in the regression analysis in more detail, we carried out a moderation analysis to determine whether training pathway moderated the relationship between precarious employment and External and Total SPE. The moderating role of training pathway in the interaction between precarious employment and External SPE in our sample can be observed in Figure 2. Similar results were observed for Total SPE. The graph indicated that having had an experience of precarious employment was more harmful for university students' SPE than it was for VET students' SPE. In other words, emerging adults with higher levels of precarious employment had lower levels of External and Total SPE, but only if they were university students.

We performed the same interaction analysis with gender instead of training pathway, although no significant interaction was observed (Internal SPE  $\beta = -0.001, p = 0.993$ ; External SPE  $\beta = -0.041, p = 0.387$ ; Total SPE  $\beta = -0.044, p = 0.358$ ). Gender was therefore not found to moderate the relationship between precarious employment and SPE.

**Discussion**

The present study contributes to the extant literature on students' SPE by exploring the relationship between university and VET students' perceptions of their current employability. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to analyze the relationship between students' training pathway and their SPE. The results obtained indicate that SPE does indeed differ in accordance with training pathway, and differences were also observed in the Spanish context in terms of gender, work experience and precarious employment.

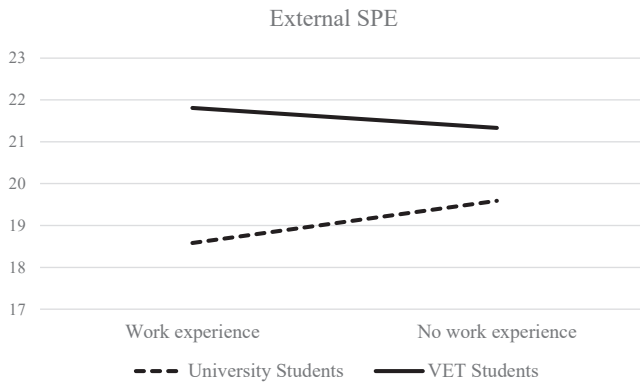
	University students M (SD)	VET students M (SD)	F	d	Total M (SD)
Internal SPE	10.04 (2.65)	11.48 (2.29)	113.20**	-0.6	10.35 (2.64)
External SPE	19.14 (5.56)	21.62 (4.21)	79.30**	-0.5	19.67 (5.39)
Total SPE	32.62 (7.13)	36.78 (5.95)	126.2**	-0.6	33.48 (7.11)

**Table 2.** Levels of internal, external and total self-perceived employability by training pathway

**Table 3.**  
SPE scores in  
accordance with  
training pathway, by  
gender and work  
experience

	Men		Women	<i>F</i>	<i>d</i>	Work experience		No work experience		<i>F</i>	<i>d</i>
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
University students											
Internal SPE	10.53 (2.69)	9.78 (2.59)	9.78 (2.59)	31.28**	0.28	10.55 (2.73)	10.55 (2.73)	9.63 (2.51)	9.63 (2.51)	51.89**	0.35
External SPE	20.32 (5.38)	18.51 (5.55)	18.51 (5.55)	42.25**	0.33	18.58 (5.71)	18.58 (5.71)	19.59 (5.39)	19.59 (5.39)	13.96**	-0.18
Total SPE	34.17 (6.96)	31.79 (7.09)	31.79 (7.09)	44.00**	0.33	32.53 (7.20)	32.53 (7.20)	32.70 (7.08)	32.70 (7.08)	0.229	-0.02
<i>VET Students</i>											
Internal SPE	11.56 (2.41)	11.35 (2.08)	11.35 (2.08)	0.97	0.09	11.75 (2.31)	11.75 (2.31)	11.05 (2.19)	11.05 (2.19)	10.59**	0.31
External SPE	21.89 (3.97)	21.16 (4.57)	21.16 (4.57)	3.2	0.17	21.81 (4.40)	21.81 (4.40)	21.33 (3.90)	21.33 (3.90)	1.45	0.11
Total SPE	37.00 (5.82)	36.39 (6.17)	36.39 (6.17)	1.1	0.10	37.29 (6.14)	37.29 (6.14)	35.96 (5.55)	35.96 (5.55)	5.25*	0.22

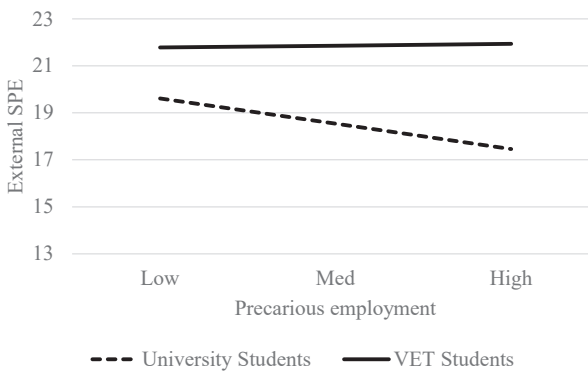
**Note(s):** \**p* ≤ 0.05 \*\**p* ≤ 0.001



**Figure 1.** Interaction between External SPE and work experience

	Internal SPE Beta ( $\beta$ )	External SPE Beta ( $\beta$ )	Total SPE Beta ( $\beta$ )
<i>Additive Model</i>			
Precarious employment	-0.11 (<0.001)	-0.13 (<0.001)	-0.14 (<0.001)
University Student or VET Student	-0.19 (<0.001)	-0.26 (<0.001)	-0.29 (<0.001)
<i>Interactive Model</i>			
Precarious Employment	-0.029 (0.604)	0.014 (0.807)	-0.01 (0.849)
University Student or VET Student	-0.195 (<0.001)	-0.26 (<0.001)	-0.29 (<0.001)
Interaction effect	-0.097 (0.078)	-0.17 (0.002)	-0.15 (0.005)
$R^2$	0.050	0.091	0.109

**Table 4.** Regression analysis



**Figure 2.** Moderation of the Effect of Precarious employment on External SPE by Training Pathway

The findings suggest that VET students score higher for SPE than their university counterparts. Although very few studies to date have analyzed the association between training pathway and SPE in Spain, we have a few theories as to what may be occurring. Firstly, the consequences of both the financial crisis and the subsequent recession that began in 2008, as well as the health crisis triggered by the spread of the COVID-19 virus in 2020 have negatively affected the employment options of emerging adults (INE, 2021), resulting in more graduates than available jobs. Spain has one of the largest percentages of overqualified

young people in Europe, coupled with one of the highest youth unemployment rates (CEDEFOP, 2022; González and Miles, 2021; Instituto de la Juventud, INJUVE, 2020). During 2020, 15.4% of youth contracts were awarded to young people with a vocational training qualification (either intermediate or higher), whereas only 9.89% were awarded to university graduates (Servicio Estatal Público de Empleo [SEPE], 2021). This lack of opportunities may result in university students' expectations failing to be met and may engender feelings of guilt over not being able to find a job, thereby reducing SPE (Rothwell and Rothwell, 2017).

Although a concerted effort has been made over recent decades to foster employability in the university environment, traditionally, universities have offered eminently theoretical training, more based on content than on developing competences (Fallows and Steven, 2000; Oria, 2012) or providing students with the aptitudes and attitudes they need to participate effectively in the labor market (Padilla-Carmona *et al.*, 2014; Tymon, 2013). Even internships at university, which are oriented towards developing professional competences, are limited, since they tend to last only a short time and perhaps pay insufficient attention to the very same professional competences they are designed to foster (Espósito and González-Monteaugudo, 2016; Muñoz-García and González-Monteaugudo, 2020; Papadakis *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, VET training, which is based on curricula designed to facilitate the transition to the labor market, helps students develop competences that are less academic and more directly applicable to the workplace (Golsteyn and Stenberg, 2017; Choi *et al.*, 2019). VET students feel more satisfied with the competences developed during their modules than their university counterparts (Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez, 2014), and those who have experienced both pathways claim that VET is more adapted to the labor market (Muñoz-García and González-Monteaugudo, 2020). This lack of adjustment between university competences and employability may have a negative impact on university students' perception of their employability and may explain the differences observed in the present study.

Consistently with that reported by Pitan and Muller (2019), in terms of gender, men scored higher for SPE than women, although in our study, this difference was only significant among university students. According to reports analyzing the Spanish context (INJUVE, 2020; UGT, 2022), labor market conditions are much worse for women, and particularly young women, although the differences between training pathways are striking. One possible explanation may be that women at university are distributed much more widely across different professional areas. In VET, most female students are concentrated in highly feminized pathways linked to health and care professions (Ray and Zarestky, 2022), which have a high rate of job placement (Aguado i Hernández *et al.*, 2020; Gonzáles and Miles, 2021; MEFP, 2021a, b). This in turn may mean that young women in VET perceive their capacities and job market opportunities in a more positive light than their counterparts at university, who may face lower job placement rates in the future, something which may negatively impact their opinions and perceptions. Nevertheless, we believe that this aspect should be studied in more detail in order to determine which variables may differentially affect women and men in both groups.

Work experience was found to improve Internal SPE. Both university and VET students had a better perception of their skills and ability to find and maintain a job when they had already had one. Nevertheless, in terms of external employability, the association between prior work experience and SPE was only observed among University students. Indeed, it is striking that, among university studies, having prior work experience was in fact associated with lower levels of external employability. A similar result was found in relation to precarious employment. Whereas among VET students this variable was not found to affect external employability, among university students, having had a precarious job in the past was associated with lower levels of external SPE.

This becomes easier to understand when the situation of the Spanish labor market is taken into account, along with the history and reputation of VET in that country. The emerging

adults in our sample on both training pathways had a mean age of 20 years. At this age, VET students may have already completed an intermediate level module, whereas most university students will not yet have had the chance to access jobs in keeping with the qualification they hope to obtain upon graduation. This means that those who had prior work experience would probably have only had access to what are colloquially referred to as *McJobs*, i.e. basic and poorly qualified service jobs that are often poorly paid and highly precarious (Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004). This is particularly true in Spain, which is characterized by high unemployment and job precariousness among young people. This circumstance may not affect VET students so much, since they already have to put up with the stereotype of having only a “second-class” education, but is likely to have an impact on their university counterparts, who have placed their faith in the social contract that holds that a greater effort invested in a more prestigious training pathway will lead to employment of equal prestige. When these expectations are not met, their perception of their employability may be affected more strongly than that of those who opted for VET.

### Limitations

Some of the limitations of the present study are linked to the sample. First, there were many more university students than VET students. Future studies should try to recruit an equal number of participants from both pathways. Second, there was an uneven number of men and women in the two pathways. These differences reflect the reality of education institutions in Spain, since at university there are more women than men, whereas in VET, there are more men than women (INE, 2021; MEFP, 2021b). Nevertheless, future studies should try to recruit more gender-balanced samples.

### Conclusions and practical implications

This is one of the first studies to analyze the perceived employability of emerging adults on two different training pathways in Spain. The results reveal that students on more practical and applied courses (VET) have a higher SPE than their university counterparts. Moreover, female university students scored lower for SPE than their male classmates, something that did not occur among VET students. These findings highlight the need for universities to develop specific strategies and plans to promote employability among their students. As proposed by Muñoz-García and González-Monteagudo (2020), we must review the university education curriculum and make the changes required to foster greater alignment between university training, the demands of the job market and careers guidance processes, such as, for example, increasing the practical work experience or internship period. This process of reviewing the curriculum and developing strategies for fostering employability should focus mainly on female university students who, despite having enormous potential, feel less capable than their male counterparts of finding and maintaining a job. Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, achieving gender equality, requires that girls (including female university students) be empowered and their employability promoted.

Work experience, either prior to or during education, was found to increase students' perceptions of their internal competences in both training pathways. However, among university students, work experience resulted in a more negative perception of external employability, and moreover, if the experience entailed precarious employment, the negative effect on employability was more intense among this group than among their VET counterparts. These results highlight the importance of providing high-quality work experience to young people. In addition to helping them develop the specific skills they will later need on the job market, these experiences also increase their confidence in their own ability to find and maintain a job, which in turn has a beneficial effect on their development.

Precarious employment is devastating at many levels (Arrazola *et al.*, 2018; Wiengarten *et al.*, 2021), and the present study highlights yet another negative effect, namely the harmful consequences of this type of employment for young people's perceptions of their employability, especially in the case of those who choose to study at university.

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**Further reading**

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