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## **Young people's educational and employment profile in vocational initial programmes**

## **Perfil educativo y de empleo de los jóvenes en programas de formación profesional inicial**

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**Young people's educational and employment profile in vocational initial programmes**

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**Abstract.**

The transition to adulthood is a complex process especially for unskilled young people who do not have the personal resources to function effectively in the educational contexts or in the workplace. Vocational initial programmes become a second chance for them, who are looking for new opportunities to access education in order to obtain a decent job in the future. This paper shows a qualitative study focuses on describing the educational and employment profile of young people in Catalan Vocational Initial programmes from the perspective of 16 tutors, nine entrepreneurs and 228 youths enrolled in 17 vocational initial programmes in seven municipalities of Barcelona, in order to learn more about their profile and their educational and job expectations, and thus try to contribute to their understanding. The results of data analysis from interviews carried out with the participants describe a young people's initial under qualified educational and employment profile that influences their entry into these programmes and show how those also influence on these group of young people. Within the framework of these programmes, young people start it changing and find a support for returning to formal education and re-considering their choice of education and employment as well as their prospects.

**Resumen**

La transición a la edad adulta es un proceso complejo especialmente para aquellos jóvenes no cualificados que no disponen de recursos personales para funcionar eficazmente en contextos educativos o en el lugar de trabajo. Los programas de formación profesional inicial devienen una segunda oportunidad para ellos que buscan nuevas oportunidades de acceso a la educación con el fin de desarrollar un buen trabajo en el futuro. Este trabajo muestra un estudio de carácter cualitativo centrado en la descripción del perfil educativo y de empleo de jóvenes en programas de formación inicial catalanes desde la perspectiva de 16 tutores, nueve empresas y 228 jóvenes participantes en 17 programas en siete municipios de Barcelona, con el objetivo de aprender más sobre su perfil y sus expectativas educativas y laborales y tratar de contribuir así a su mejor comprensión. Los resultados del análisis de datos obtenidos de las entrevistas aplicada a los participantes describen un perfil educativo y laboral de jóvenes inicialmente poco cualificado que influye en su acceso a estos programas y muestran como los programas también influyen en este grupo de jóvenes. En el marco de estos programas, los jóvenes empiezan a cambiar y encuentran un apoyo para retornar a la educación formal y reconsiderar sus oportunidades educativas y laborales, así como sus expectativas.

**Keywords**

Vocational education and training (VET); Transition; Unskilled young people; Education return; Learning in life; Vocational initial programmes (VIP).

**Palabras clave**

Formación profesional; Transición; Jóvenes no cualificados; Retorno educativo; Aprendizaje en la vida; Formación profesional inicial

## 1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood is a complex process where young people have to take decisions that will affect the course of their lives during this transitional process, internal –e.g. physical, psychological, emotional, learning or behavioural– and external –e.g. social, economic or demographic– factors are involved and inter-related in order to reach adulthood. In other words, social variables are involved in individual choices (Casal, García, Merino & Quesada, 2004; Côté, 2005; Morris, Rutt, Kendall, Lesley & Mehta, 2007; Parrilla, Gallego & Moríña, 2010; Tagliabue, Crocetti & Lanz, 2016).

In addition, the current social and economic contexts make this transitional process more difficult. The continuous and fast social and economic changes increase the difficulties in reaching adulthood. The current job markets of the knowledge-based economy demand ever higher skill levels from an increasingly smaller workforce (Consejo de la Unión Europea, 2008). New abilities and skills, high levels of qualification, and new mediating concepts are required to cope with the demands of working effectively in different organisational settings (Cheetham & Chivers, 1998; Guile & Griffiths, 2001).

These changes in job markets demand more training and longer educational periods from young people, making unskilled young people, who drop out of school early, at risk of being excluded and of becoming a growing challenge for society (CINTERFOR/OIT, 2001; Consejo de la Unión Europea, 2008).

Unskilled young people have higher difficulties for fulfilling not only labour and social requirements but also for being and developing an adult role in the current society. The lack of personal resources prevents these young people from gaining access to social networks that can allow them to create new identities (Weller, 2009), resulting in persistent patterns of social exclusion. Some studies reveal the relationship between individual resources and social environments in forming this adult identity (Daniels & Cole, 2010; Diener & Larsen, 1993; Dooley & Prause, 1997; González-Pienda *et al.*, 2000; Hair, Moore, Ling, Mcphee-Baker & Brown, 2009; Hartas, 2016; Mcwhirter & Mcwhirter, 2008; Smith, 2009; Van Houten & Jacobs, 2005).

As we can see, at present the transitional process has become increasingly prolonged and difficult for unskilled young people, especially those who do not have the personal resources to function effectively in the educational contexts or in the workplace (Schwartz, Côté & Jensen, 2005). In this event, training is a key factor because it makes it possible to get a job that can provide young people with the natural, physical, and financial capital in order to become autonomous, independent and a full member of society (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002; Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2007, 2008). In this way, training and employment are considered examples of the barriers and obstacles for unskilled young people in their transitional processes –their employment profile is characterised by previous work experiences that are insufficient in terms of quality and quantity (Hair *et al.*, 2009) as a consequence of their under qualified educational profile–.

In the Spanish and Catalan context –the referent context of the study presented here which is part of wider research–, the economic recession has had a negative impact on many young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who dropped out of school without achieving a minimum educational qualification that would allow their social, employment and educational participation.

At present, the Spanish employment market is open from the age of 16 and, after the economic crisis, one of the requirements of this job market is to have achieved a minimal educational certification –Compulsory Secondary Educational Certificate–. Before the economic recession, employment contexts had long led to young people dropping out early without these studies. Young people between 16 and 25 years took on low qualification jobs in response to the high demand for unskilled workers but then, the economic recession left them without work and qualifications, increasing their risk of being excluded from participating in educational, social and employment contexts (Bolívar & López, 2009; Salvà-Mut, Tomás-Vanrell & Quintana-

Murci, 2016; Vega & Aramendi, 2010). Statistics show that between 2011 (when the study was developed) and 2016 Spanish educational and employment data have evolved inversely: towards less unemployment and more dropouts –MECD (2010, 2015) listed the percentage of early dropout rate ranged between 28.4% and 21.9% and INE, of October 28, 2011 and October 22, 2015, listed on its website the percentage of unemployment rate of young people aged less than 25 ranged between 21% and 46.2% approximately–.

As the data show, a high percentage of young people are unemployed. Their low qualifications and lack of a minimum educational certificate aggravate not only their opportunities to access the employment market but also the possibility of their return to formal education.

Early school leavers need to return to formal education (Alegre, Casado, Sanz & Todeschini, 2015). It is important that these young people are aware of training and work-related learning that can provide them with resources for their educational, social and employment integration, thereby contributing positively to their transitional process towards an active and participatory adulthood.

Vocational Initial Programmes (VIP) are a second chance for these unskilled young people (Acar, 2011; CINTERFOR/OIT, 2001; Olmos & Mas, 2013; Prieto, 2015; Turcotte, Lamonde & Beaudoin, 2009). The aim of these programmes is to facilitate and to improve young people's opportunities to access education and employment for a second time so, although these training programmes are non-formal learning in VET –i.e. they are not directly affiliated to official formal qualifications (Cantero & Sancha, 2014)–, these are conceived as mechanisms for transition and educational, social and employment inclusion.

In the Spanish and Catalan context, the Vocational Initial Programmes –named Basic Training Programmes for the Spanish context and Initial Training Programmes for the Catalan context– are an example of this second educational chance. The target group of these programmes are young people aged 16-21 years old who lack a minimum formal educational certificate because they left their studies early, and are looking for new opportunities to access education in order to obtain a decent job in the future. As CINTERFOR/OIT (2001) states, having a decent job implies having a satisfactory job, of an acceptable standard, with decent wages, at least sufficient in quality and quantity. In other word, a job that is different from those they may have had thus far, characterised by being unstable jobs, with low wages, insufficient in quality and quantity; that is, jobs without training that make young people move into and out of work constantly, and require young people to be in full-time work and not in receipt of training that could lead to a higher qualification (Lawy, Quinn & Diment, 2010; Maguire & Hudlestonn, 2009; Verd & López-Andreu, 2016).

Because of these young people's lack of formal educational certificate (remember, Compulsory Secondary Educational Certificate), they cannot continue their studies in formal educational contexts. These training programmes are the only chance they have to improve their professional educational profile, and to return to formal educational contexts for continuing their professional training. For one year, young people who access to these training programmes are trained in basic skills for lifelong learning, and in specific skills for working according to different professional families. Likewise, these training programmes give young people the opportunity to develop part of their professional training in real job contexts. When they finish these programmes, they can access to the job market or they can to return to formal educational context for continuing their professional training within formal Vocational and Educational Training (VET) programmes.

For the purpose to know more about young people's educational and job expectations in Catalan Vocational Initial programmes, this paper aims to describe their educational and employment profile from the perspective of youths, tutors and employers, who are involved in these programmes, and thus try to contribute to their understanding.

## 2. Research method

This qualitative and descriptive research seeks to provide a description of unskilled young people's training and employment profile from different agents' perspective and obtains its results by interviewing a variety of data sources –young people, tutors and entrepreneurs– involved in Catalan VIP (in Initial Professional Qualification Programmes to be precise).

## 3. Participants

The participants of this study were chosen in accordance with an intentional sample technique applied according to the following criteria:

- Territorial scope. Six municipalities from the metropolitan area of Barcelona and accessible for the researcher.
- Type of training programme. Vocational Initial programmes.
- Young people. Criterion responds to predefined features within these VIP; that is, young people aged from 16 to 21 years, early school leavers and unemployed.
- Tutors and entrepreneurs. All those who are involved in these training programmes working with these group of youth. Tutors are who train young people in basic skills and they are their educational referents. Entrepreneurs are who contribute to young people's training in professional skills in the workplace.

Access to the selected VET centres required the authorisation of the management teams in order to be carried out. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Board at each VET centre. The participants participated voluntarily.

The final sample was 16 academic tutors, 9 entrepreneurs and a target group of 228 young people aged from 16 to 21 years enrolled in 17 VIP in 7 municipalities of Barcelona –Hospitalet de Llobregat, Granollers, Montcada i Reixach, Pineda de Mar, Vilanova i la Geltrú, Sant Feliu de Llobregat and Sabadell–. It is highlighting one of the young people's requirements for enrolling in these programmes: only those aged 16 to 21 years who do not have a formal educational certificate and are unemployed.

## 4. Instruments, procedure and data analysis

Data in this paper were collected by structured interviews carried out with young people and non-structured interviews carried out with tutors and entrepreneurs.

The questions of these interviews were related to young people's educational and employment backgrounds, and expectations of study and work.

Table 1 shows the example of questions addressed to young people.

Tutors and entrepreneurs responded, among other questions that are not the concern of this paper, to one question related to both dimensions the young people's education and employment profile. The questions were *"how do you describe these young people's education and employment profile?"* and *"That is, how do you describe their educational level, academic life, education and employment prospects, and so on?"*

As we can see, the young people, tutors and entrepreneurs responded questions related to both dimensions education and employment, and lead the analysis of the results that are based on the descriptive and qualitative analysis of data.

Results were grouped in two categories in accordance with these dimensions of analysis: 1) young people's education profile, and 2) young people's employment profile.

For each one of these categories, three sub-categories were identified. For the education profile as category were identified the sub-categories “*young people’s educational level*”, “*academic life*”, and “*education interest*”. For the employment profile as category were identified the sub-categories “*young people’s job prospects*”, “*knowledge of current jobs market*”, and “*work experience*” (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Dimensions, categories and sub-categories of analysis and related questions addressed to young people

Dimension/Category	Sub-category	Questions
Education dimension/category	Young people’s educational level	What was your last year before dropping out of school?
	Young people’s academic life	
	Education interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you want to have a formal educational certificate? Why?</li> <li>- Do you want to continue studying after this training? Why?</li> <li>- What kind of studies would you like to do?</li> <li>- In which kind of vocational education would you like to be specialised?</li> </ul>
Employment dimension/category	Young people’s job prospects’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What kind of job would you like to do really?</li> <li>- What kind of job do you think you will get?</li> </ul>
	knowledge of current jobs market’	- Do you agree with sentences like “ <i>the current jobs market is stable</i> ” and “ <i>it is easy to change jobs</i> ”? Why?”
	Work experience	- Have you ever worked? If you answer is “yes”, Can you describe the jobs you have done?

## 5. Results

The results are organised by taking into consideration the participants. Firstly, the young people’s perspective about their education and employment profile –background and expectations are described from their perspective–. Secondly, the point of view of tutors and entrepreneurs are described and are contrasted with the young people’s perspective.

## 5.1. Young people's perspective

**Table 2.**

Main results of young people's perspective by dimensions, categories and sub-categories

Category	Sub-category	Results
Education dimension	Young people's educational level	100% do not have secondary compulsory education certificate
	Young people's academic life	Last year before dropping out is third or Fourth of compulsory secondary education for 78.9% of young people of the sample
	Education interest	93.4% wanted to get a formal educational certificate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 46% argue employment reasons</li> <li>- 22% argue educational reasons</li> </ul> 95.2% want to improve their training and return to formal education to undertake any formal VET programme 51.4% would like to do professional training related to the job specialisation they are taking 12.3% are interested in studies on building professional sector 18.9% are interested in studies on mechanics professional sector 43% are interested in studies on services professional sector
Employment dimension	Young people's job prospects'	Building professional sectors (12.3%) Mechanics professional sectors (18.9%) Services professional sectors (43%)
	knowledge of current jobs market'	54.9% agree with the current jobs market is too demanding with the workforce 83.4% would like to get a job related to the professional specialisation they are taking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 56% believe they will be able to get it</li> </ul>
	Work experience	56% worked before undertaking the training programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 76% temporal labour contract</li> <li>- 66.7% without labour contract</li> </ul> Construction and service industries are the most representative work experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 23% in construction</li> <li>- 32.6% in service industries</li> </ul>

The descriptive data analysis shows that 74.6% of the sample of young people are males aged between 16 and 18. In these VIP the number of males is higher than females and this is due to the fact of the job specialisation that these programmes supply and not by the number of males and females early school leavers (Cedefop, 2016).

No young people in the sample have a formal educational certificate –it was a requirement for being enrolled in these programmes– and 78.9% left their studies when they were 14-16 years old.

It is worth noting that 93.4% wanted to get a formal educational certificate. The reasons of 68% are related to either education or employment –46% are employment reasons and 22% are educational ones–. Examples of their main reasons were that having a formal educational certificate is mandatory for getting a decent job or further education, and that any job would demand this minimum certification.

Similarly, 95.2% of these young people would like to continue studying when they finish the current VIP. Getting a job is important for these young people, but they are aware that they



need to improve their training profile, so they would like to return to formal education to undertake any formal VET programme. Regarding professional specialisation, 51.4% would like to do professional training related to the job specialisation they are taking.

As regards the young people's employment backgrounds and expectations for working, 56% of them say to work before undertaking the training programme –although the majority without a labour contract–. It is worth noting the age, because the most representative group of young people who have work experience is made up of those older than 18 years (70.8% of young people aged 18-21 year-old and 51.1% of young people aged 16-18 year-old). This result agrees with the characteristics of the jobs market that gives priority to young people who have reached the age of majority.

In the main, these young people worked in the construction and service industries (23% and 32.6% respectively). The main jobs they had were cleaners, kitchen staff, waiters, hairdressing staff, shop assistants and building labourers. These jobs were characterised by being unstable and temporary (76% of the jobs were less than one year and 66.7% of young people worked without a labour contract).

The results focusing on the young people's work prospects show that hotels and restaurants, electricity, plumbing, metalwork, welding, mechanics, administration or trade sector are the most common specialties. In other words, building (12.3%), mechanics (18.9%) and services (43%) are the professional sectors of interest to young people. The interest in these professional sectors is in accordance with two variables: gender and age. The results show that the demand from women for the service sector prevails over men (72.4% as against 32.9% respectively) and demand from men for the building and mechanical sectors prevails over women (18% as against 3% respectively). Likewise, older young people ( $\geq 18$  years old) demand more jobs in the service and mechanical sectors than younger ones ( $< 18$  years old), who are interested in the building sector –before the economic crisis the building sector was one of the most demanded and provide workers with high wages–. Data show 52.1% older young people are interested in the service sector as against 40.6% of younger ones; 31.3% older young people are interested in the mechanisms sector as against 40.6% of younger ones; 8.3% older young people are interested in the building sector as against 14.4% of younger ones.

Getting a job is important for these young people, but they say that the current jobs market is unstable (57.7%) and it is not easy to change jobs (80.6%). In other words, they recognise that the current jobs market is too demanding with the workforce (54.9% agree with this). These results also identify differences between the young people's job prospects (*What kind of job would you like to do?*) and their work possibilities (*What kind of job do you think you will get?*). Although young people said they would like to get a job related to the professional specialisation they are taking (83.4%), only 56% believe that they will be able to get it. They are aware of their difficulties as young unskilled workers.

## 5.2. Perspective of tutors and entrepreneurs

As regards the *educational profile*, tutors and entrepreneurs perceive a low educational level for young people on these training programmes. Therefore, they describe the *academic life* of young people as a negative period for them, and emphasise the fact that most of them seem to be destined to fail. They consider that the difficulties that young people have in pursuing a successful academic itinerary determines their attitudes of rejection towards studies, their high absenteeism and their low motivation and interest. Nevertheless, tutors and entrepreneurs think that these VIP are positive and viable for them. For example, tutors state that these programmes improve young people's self-perception about their educational capacities and capabilities, and raise young people's *interest in continuing their formal educational process*. Specifically, these young people want to continue their training in the same occupational field they are taking. Entrepreneurs state that young people learn and develop professional skills that they did not learn and develop in compulsory schooling.

Regarding the *employment profile*, the results from tutors and entrepreneurs are quite similar to the results from the young people. It is mainly tutors who describe these *young people's work experiences*. They identify older young people ( $\geq 18$  year olds) as those who have more work experience. The kind of jobs they did were jobs in the service sector for women and in the building sector for men. Likewise, tutors confirm that most of these young people worked without an employment contract in unstable jobs and as unskilled workers.

The perspective from tutors and entrepreneurs about the *young people's job prospects* is also quite similar to the young people's perspective. They identify as men's preferred jobs those that are related to the professional sectors of mechanics and construction, and as women's preferred jobs those related to the professional service sector. They agree that these young people's job prospects are determined by their experience in the workplace within the educational practices that the young people are developing in these VIP.

Lastly, tutors and entrepreneurs agree with the *young people's perception* that the *current jobs market* is too demanding for the workforce, but they also say that these young people are not aware of how demanding it is. Therefore, they reiterate that although these basic VET programmes are a good option for unskilled young people, these training programmes are insufficient in terms of their training and education. They have to continue their educational process and these training programmes are only the first step in their training and professional career.

## 6. Discussion

This work is concerned with unskilled young people who drop out of school early, becoming young people at risk of social, educational and employment exclusion. Focussing on a specific group of unskilled young people –those who are enrolled in Catalan Vocational Initial Programmes– and from different perspectives –youths, tutors and entrepreneurs– this paper aims to contribute to the learning and understanding of both young people's profiles and their educational and job expectations.

The results suggest that the young people in this study are facing difficult transitional processes. Their condition of exclusion has kept them apart from meaningful contexts of education, training and work, having a negative bearing on their transition to adulthood which is characterised by a lack of possibilities for participating in formal education and in the jobs market (Maguire & Huddleston, 2009; Salvà-Mut *et al.*, 2016; Tagliabue *et al.*, 2016; Thompson, Russell & Simmons, 2014). Training, learning and social networks –such as the tutors or entrepreneurs in this study– become key processes for supporting young people's transitions and providing them with the personal resources, skills and capacities to fulfil employment and educational requirements, whilst participating actively in educational and employment contexts (Colley *et al.*, 2002; Côté, 2002, 2005; Helve & Bynner, 2007; Iglesias, Sánchez-Romero & Castillo, 2017; Jochum, 2003; Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2011; Schwartz *et al.*, 2005; Van Houtte & Demanet, 2015; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987).

As regards these young people's educational profile, we should remember that it is characterised by failures in formal educational contexts as a consequence of negative learning processes. These young people, who are undertaking programmes like those in this paper, change their training and learning perceptions and educational prospects. In this case, these training programmes have an influence on the young people's educational profile, and most of them feel they can learn and therefore want to continue their learning process in order to gain access to qualified employment and impact on their future employability (Lucena, Álvarez & Rodríguez, 2011). These programmes are these young people's means of entry into formal VET programmes (Alegre *et al.*, 2015; Olmos, 2014; Olmos & Mas, 2013).

As regards these young people's employment profiles, we should also remember that these are characterised by being young unskilled workers as a consequence of their under qualified educational profile –their previous work experiences are insufficient in quality and quantity–.

However, these previous work experiences determine the young people's choice of professional specialisation and their job prospects (Horcas, Bernad & Martínez, 2015). As the results show, their goal is to get a job in the same professional field that they are taking. However, they are aware that the current jobs market is too demanding for workers in terms of competencies. Although they show a proactive attitude towards getting a job, they are not ready to succeed in responding to this demanding situation and getting a job because of their long periods of disconnection from education and work. They need assistance that goes well beyond finding a job, and these programmes make that possible (González-Rivera, 2014; Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2011; Di Blasi, Tosto, Marfia, Cavani & Giordano, 2016; Olmos-Rueda & Mas-Torelló, 2017).

The active participation of these youths in educational and employment contexts requires starting out with their return to educational contexts. These young people have to explore their educational and job experiences, and their educational and employment options, in order to be aware of what they lack and need to improve (Alegre, Casado, Sanz & Todeschini, 2015; Lawy *et al.*, 2010). This is possible within the framework of these VIP, as this paper shows. These programmes are the context where these young people find a support for returning in formal education and improving their process of life-project planning and transition.

It is true that young people's educational and employment profiles influence their entry into these programmes –their educational backgrounds make these young people the intended beneficiaries of these training programmes, while these are, at the same time, their second chance to return to formal education (Marhuenda-Fluixá, Salvà, Navas Saurin & Abiétar López, 2015; Olmos & Mas, 2013) and their employment backgrounds, influenced by their profile and variables like gender, as the results show, influence their choice of professional vocation in these training programmes and their expectations for work– but these programmes also influence on these group of young people because it can be shown that their experience in these VIP makes most of them re-consider their choice of education and employment as well as their prospects.

## 7. Limitations and future prospects

The main limitations of this study come from the selection of the sample. This study analyses the perspective of young people, tutors and entrepreneurs who are involved in Catalan Vocational Initial Programmes and are sensitive to those, but other important perspectives, such as the Administration one, are not considered. It would be interesting to incorporate the analysis of this perspective into this study because it would explain, in words of Marhuenda and colleagues (2015, 148), “*the lack of stability and permanent funding for these programmes and the tendency to consider them a side issue*” in our Spanish and Catalan context. The political perspective of these programmes is concerned with the Spanish and Catalan context. As Marhuenda and colleagues (2015) claim, the dignity in these programmes is not simply academic, it is also political, therefore the lack of policies that promote positive transitions is a cause for concern (Salvà-Mut *et al.*, 2016) and the incorporation of this political analysis from the Administration perspective in this study could contribute positively to focusing on this cause for concern. Here this line of study is opened.

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