

The Shades of Employability: A Capability Study of VET Students' Freedoms and Oppressions in Spain¹

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1 Introduction

Spain is in crisis. Almost three million jobs were lost between 2008 and 2012 (Eurostat, 2012). How did it happen and how should this crisis be tackled and specifically, what is the role of education? This paper focuses on Vocational Education and Training (VET) as an educational pathway to the labour market. The aim is to explore what is left out of the prevailing discourses of employability, lifelong learning and knowledge economy that articulate the national and international strategies fostering VET.

Starting by unwrapping the ‘blanket of nice words’ (Fernández Rodríguez, 2009, p. 155) masquerades as employability discourse, the paper then describes a case study. The term of ‘employability’ is defined as a matter of individual skills to be acquired for work and reveals a discursive shift from employment as a social matter to employment as an individual one (Bonvin & Galster, 2010; Gazier, 1998). Part of a bigger project, the results reported here suggest that competence or skills based education matches neither the job expectations of the students, nor the demands of employers, nor contributes to building a better society. Additionally, fostering employment through increasing youth skills does not consider, and in some cases even exacerbates, the oppressive relations embedded in the Spanish context. Consequently, the paper argues that whilst a strategy is needed to tackle rising youth unemployment and VET can probably be one tool, wider dialogue and action is needed than that offered by the employability argument. A strategy is required that assesses youth unemployment not just as a total number but as symptomatic of the lack of genuine opportunities, understood as capabilities, and hence the well-being of young people. From a human development perspective, well-being encompasses not only the economic dimension, but also the individual and societal values which the third part of the paper examines; the students’ transition from VET to working and the daily barriers presented in the educational context and also at the work place. Two theorists - the economist Amartya Sen, and the philosopher, Iris Marion Young - are concerned with providing a level playing field as the basis of well-being and a prosperous society. The paper draws on Sen’s (2009, 1992, 2000) concept of capability at an individual dimension and on two of the *five faces of oppression*, as group barriers developed by Young (1990, 2006). The combination of the two theorists permitted an understanding of the collective freedoms of the subjects under scope in contemporary Spain, and how these are constrained by structural factors.

In fact, the analysis under this framework illustrates the significant difference between the formal options and the students’ capabilities, understood as not only formal opportunities but

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genuine ones. At the same time, the assessment of oppression reveals the barriers students face in making the transition to jobs in a Spain hit by recession and involved in continuous change led by austerity measures.

The conclusions in the final section reveal how the discourse of employability co-exists with a reality of precarious conditions and constant instability which impede the building and securing of the well-being of those interviewed, and, by extension, other Spanish young people. Whilst the focus on a specific group - the young people enrolled in VET - cannot make the case for all Spanish youth as if they were a homogenous group (Serrano, 1995; Martín Criado, 1998), the heterogeneity of the group and their enrolment in a middle level of education means the final aim of identifying the commonalities that obstruct their well-being are likely to be relevant to many.

2 The gaps in the employability discourse.

Until 2008, Spain was seen as an example of growth and development (Etxezarreta et al., 2012). The relationship between these two words seemed to be taken for granted until the global economic recession. Whilst this analysis is not about the crisis, it is important to point out some unstable structures that led to the current unemployment levels. Put simply, one could say that Spain crashed when the banking crisis started, and cheap and unguaranteed loans ended and the construction sector, which had been attracting and employing workers from all over the world, broke down. At first, the consequences only affected those employed directly in the construction sector - the young, temporary and low qualified workers. However, as Spanish economic growth relied on an alliance between the financial market and real estate, the crash had a domino effect on all the other sectors, ultimately resulting in a severe increase in unemployment, which rose to 26,02 per cent of the total active population and almost 55 per cent of youth at the end of 2012 (INE, 2012).² Additionally, young people were most affected because during the period of expansion, low level jobs featuring short term contracts and precarious conditions were mainly undertaken by the young. According to the National Institute of Statistics, it was also a gender segregated labour market expansion, with the construction sector mainly for men (41 per cent of lost jobs) and retail sales and manufacturing (INE, 2013) for women. In 2008, 59 per cent of the 16 to 24 age group and 41,8 per cent of the 25 to 29 age group were employed in temporary jobs (INE, 2012). In addition, the precarious conditions of the Spanish labour market, including unpaid work, false self-employed workers and undeclared work were all common practice.³

Whilst the Spanish scenario is one of the most dramatic in the EU (El País, 2013a), the worldwide financial crisis has exposed how little impact the years of economic prosperity had on the overall society in terms of well-being. In fact, unemployment is only a part of the current Spanish problem. The real issue the country faces is that the growth in the construction sector was accompanied neither by improved social conditions nor sustainably long term investment in other sectors of the economy (industry or services) nor by improvement in the quality of education. Add to those figures the already embedded problems such as the high level of corruption, the fourth worst in Western European countries in 2012 according to Transparency International (2013), to understand why the collapse of the

² To explore further what specific causes make the employment situation of young people more volatile in Spain than in other EU countries see the analysis carried by Rocha Sánchez (2012).

³ For further analysis about the Spanish labour market and the gender differences see (Arrazola Vacas et al., 2010).

construction sector ended the prosperous image of Spain. Consequently, today Spain has, for the first time in two decades, a negative migration balance, additionally 22 per cent of households live in poverty and the inequality between the 20 per cent of the wealthiest and the 20 per cent of the poorest is five times higher than the EU average (FOESSA, 2012). Consequently, this is a real social crisis of which unemployment is only a part.

Whilst the paper acknowledges the relationship between what prevents individuals from having their desired and decent life and their difficulties in obtaining employment, the interest is on access to jobs which are decent and meaningful, in particular for the young, who have been the most exposed and vulnerable during the recession. Planners hope to encourage those who left education to enter the productive labour market to come back and develop their skills. As it is noted in the Spanish new educational reform, the 8/2013 Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) which modifies the access to VET 'for promoting the economy and prosperity of the country' (LOMCE, 2013, sec. 1).

The result is that parallel to the dramatic rise in youth unemployment, the 2000s have seen the return of VET on the national agenda under the prism of the traditional human capital discourse. According to King and Palmer, referring to the development of VET around the globe (2010), VET is perceived as a strategic component of neoliberal policies for providing answers to societies' current major challenges: to increase competitiveness, combat unemployment, facilitate young people's transition from education to work, and reduce poverty.

By 2000, in the Lisbon Conference, the main goal was for 'the European Union (...) to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' by 2010 (European Council, 2000, p. 2). This goal, despite being far from reachable, was reinforced by the Council in May 2009 with the new strategic framework for Europe 2020 (ET 2020), which envisaged a series of seven flagship benchmark policy initiatives, two of which relate strongly to education and training, namely 'Youth on the Move' and 'An Agenda for New Skills and New Jobs' (European Council, 2009, p. 8). Crucially, taking this line of reasoning, the European Commission has developed several strategies 'to support employment, productivity and social cohesion in Europe' in what has been termed the *knowledge society* (European Commission, 2010). Accordingly, these stated that 'efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs' (European Council 2009, p. 1).

Similarly, the 'homo competens' (Fernández Rodríguez, 2009, p. 158) goes along with the neoliberal economic order that encompasses strategies for education whereby the individual is motivated by the acquisition of competences through lifelong learning in order to respond to the changing demands of the knowledge economy. Within all these discourses, the role of the individual as an agent that can define and build society is ignored. By contrast, society is portrayed as a fixed idea whereby the individual acts as a follower who adapts and transforms herself to fit. This educational value establishes an order based on the 'pedagogy of the self' (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2010), where individuals are supposed to learn endlessly. This misses the point of the need for and critical use of knowledge beyond work and productivity objectives.

In Spain, the Education Ministry has also been rethinking VET policies and has produced a series of major reviews that point towards greater emphasis on demand-led education, a dual system, and the recognition of informal skills and competences (El País, 2013b; Muñoz,

2013).⁴ These reforms aim to have a direct (and rapid) impact on reducing youth unemployment. This strategy contrasts with some of the data from the European Central Bank, which points out that skills mismatch is not among the main reasons employers gave as critical in 2013, and hence is not an issue demanding immediate change⁵ (European Central Bank, 2013; Garzón Espinosa, 2013).

The values underpinning the different lines of action suggest that the current society is ruled by a fixed knowledge set which presumes that individuals need to acquire a set of technological skills in order to be employable, productive and hence not excluded from society. Consequently, the guidelines around VET provisions perpetuate the work on human capital economics developed by Gary Becker (1994). Under this paradigm VET falls into the classical instrumental approach widely discussed in the literature (Benavot, 1983; Clarke & Winch, 2007) in the discourse of education as a tool to develop better workers and promote economic growth, VET is deemed to be the fastest and cheapest educational path to provide these results. By embracing this discourse, Spain, as a society, puts at risk the democratic social contract by forging new individualistic moral standards (Crespo & Serrano, 2001; Marhuenda Fluixá & Bernad i Garcia, 2007). The individual is conceived as tool for other economic strategies, losing the idea of education as a way to enlarge real individual choices and consequently societal freedom. Paraphrasing Sen (2009), human development as an approach, is concerned with understanding development as advancing the richness of human life as its main objective, rather than focussing on the richness of the economy, which is only one part of development.

The reasoning for this skills employability equation is weak on three levels. First, it assumes that individuals must serve the knowledge society instead of the other way round. Secondly, and because of this first assumption, it sets the competences and skills that students and later workers need for the future. Thirdly, and most importantly in terms of moral values, positing the relationship between skills and outcomes makes individuals responsible for their later positions in society, which is a consequence of their skills in-competence (Serrano & Crespo, 2002; Sennett, 1999). It is worth noting the moral implications regarding individual responsibility in a discourse focused on being employable versus a discourse centred on being employed. The strategies underpinning VET are based on the assumption that individuals have their own total locus of control and therefore can control their own destinies. This conveniently places, at a time of recession and austerity measures, the feeling of individual responsibility and hence the sense of self-blame for the inability to carry out their desired plans - educational, professional or even social.

Regarding its ideological basis, the discourse of employability as defined earlier (McGrath, 2012) asks individuals to make themselves employable, bypassing State responsibility to guarantee individual development and, at the same time, assumes that the job has inherent qualities that increase personal and societal well-being. The term 'responsibilisation' (Crespo & Serrano, 2001; Kelly, 2001), understood as the individual's obligation to self-manage the risks in society, represents the essence of the human capital paradigm, in which economic principles are prioritised over social welfare and collaborative ways to address social problems are hence marginalised. Garret (2010, p. 280) argues that current European systems expect individuals to manage their own risks in a way that responsibility for 'security' and

⁴ For some critics about the impact of these changes on the general labour market (Comisiones Obreras, 2013).

⁵ The main reason is the lack of credit and the difficulties to find potential clients (Garzón Espinosa, 2013).

'prevention' are both placed on the individual. Similarly, Brown and Hesketh (2004) emphasise that employability constructs a framework of employment within which the employee is the only actor. In fact, it leads to seeing only individual solutions such as an increase of individual training, rather than to social action plans for reverting unemployment and structural inequalities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). With a focus on the activation policies and work strategies, Bonvin and Galster (2010), reflect on the implications of the employability discourse and its effects on social policy to conclude that social policy is mobilised to improve the ability to integrate into the labour market, rather than to protect individuals from the market.

Consequently, the optimistic take that an increase in years of VET will translate into job creation and well-being needs to be reassessed on two levels in order to respond to the three points made above. First, because it ignores the structural drivers of youth unemployment that are embedded in the Spanish system and act as impediments for *de facto* equal access to education and later, work. Second, because the strategies deliberately seem to ignore or not require any guarantee for decent and satisfying jobs. In other words, the employability discourse is focused on getting people any job, rather than on securing a suitable job with guarantees.

People in Spain's immediate concern is to solve their urgent lack of income, hence strategies that are deficient in social guarantees are being accepted on the promise of reducing unemployment (Navarro, 2012). This makes for the deregulation of the labour market and the appearance of mini-jobs or temporary contracts. This situation is being experienced in several EU countries, leading to the rise of what is called *the precariat*, a new social class characterised by anxiety and lack of security which is positioned below the traditional working class (Standing, 2011). As observed in the Spanish case, the financial sector rules over all other areas (i.e. education, health and even national sovereignty) and extreme deregulation transcends (and even bypasses) the financial actors, affecting all individuals and social spheres. From education to the labour market, adaptation to an implicit market demand constitutes a threat to the basic structures that build an individual's security within society.

A key question, therefore, is whether the rise in the interest in VET is something to celebrate or be cautious about.⁶ The following sections contrast the economic language of the VET strategies discussed above with the social barriers that young people face when aiming to develop valuable and meaningful activities. So, although the revival of VET can be celebrated, this paper argues that its direction and significance - from the current discourse - needs to go beyond the economic sphere in order to avoid repeating the story of economic growth which leaves aside human development and well-being.

3 The research study

The case study selected institution is a highly academically rated college in Valencia, Spain. The participants were drawn from the Intermediate level of VET and from the following paths: Marketing and Trade, Technology and Electronics, Business and Management and Social Services. The total number of participants selected from volunteers was 15, eight women and seven men aged between 19 and 24 years old.

⁶ A call for reviewing the economic foundations of VET can be found in the work presented by the collective NORRAG (King et al., 2013).

Prior to the semi-structured interviews conducted with the students, each was asked to fill in the chronology of their life on a life grid, which gives a snapshot of a participant's life represented by a chart with temporal dimensions and thematic columns that cover specific areas and events (Abbas et. al , 2013; Berney & Blane, 2003,).

4 Educational and labour differences - capabilities and oppressions

The increasing difficulties in the labour market make a strong case for reforming VET provision. However, the concern is first about whom, under what conditions and what determines an individual's freedom to take part in the profession learned. The aim of this section is to examine: the value given by the students to the education received in terms of allowing them to do and become what is valuable and meaningful for them and for others. This question lies at the heart of what is understood as human development education in this paper. The analysis is based on values and real opportunities rather than only skills and productivity, and taking Robeyns (2006) proposition of the three models of education, suggests that current VET under a human capital account is fragmented and exclusively instrumentalistic and should be reconsidered in a capabilities perspective which takes into consideration the instrumental role of education but also its intrinsic and collective importance.

A useful way of assessing VET strategies accounting for students' values as well as caring for social well-being is through the capability approach (CA), drawing on the work of Amartya Sen (2000, 1992, 2009). When Sen theorised the pillar of his approach, two concepts were key. First, what people could actually be and do. The concept of capability is understood not as formal opportunities but as genuine, practical ones. That is, the relationship between capability and functioning is not necessarily one to one. A capability can enable a range of possible functions (Sen, 2000) but without capability, the individual cannot exercise her beings or doings. Hence, the concept of capability includes a normative and empowering dimension within which education is seen as a key element not related to employment but for enlarging students' capability sets which could include employment opportunities. In this scenario, the individual is an agent able to critically decide how to exercise her functions. To understand the differences the capability discourse brings, I present a short case summarizing the situation of the majority of student interviewees. A VET student has acquired the necessary skills for work (the doings) and has become a professional in her field (her beings); however, the capability to exercise these are restricted due to the lack of employment in her sector and she ends up performing a job (her doings) that is neither a free choice nor a valuable one.

Whilst the majority of student interviewees valued the skills acquired during VET, their capabilities were restricted and hence their final functioning. The writings of Iris Marion Young (1990, 2006) and specifically her account of oppression is used here as a complement to the theoretical framework. By emphasizing the collective values of education as well as the relation between the individual and society and the representation of youth as a group, the faces of oppression serve as a theoretical complement to the focus of the CA in the intrinsic value of education for individual well-being. This paper concentrates illustratively on two of her five faces of oppression: powerlessness and exploitation, while acknowledging that all five faces are integrated. By investigating what the structures that impede the development of students' capabilities are, the analysis goes beyond employment outcomes.

4.1 Powerlessness –silenced voices

From a Marxist perspective, where class and work go hand-in-hand and taking an activist approach, power relations are central to Young's work. Powerlessness is of special importance when referring to young people in general (Giroux, 2011), more so considering the current absence of capabilities for a young person living in Spain. Young's definition of the powerless refers to 'those who do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions' (Young, 1990, p. 56).

One form of powerlessness is lack of individual autonomy. Lucia, a bright student eager to pursue further studies after her course, is one young person that cannot plan her future because her capability set is uncertain and determined by external factors:

I: And then, where do you see yourself?

Lucia: [studying] Advertising.

I: Yes?

Lucia: Yes, but Advertising is [a] private diploma and my father is getting a subsidy, because they (the company) owe him and he worked for them a long time, but I see how things are, in the country you know, and they have not yet paid him everything they owe him, he depends on the Fogasa (Wage Guarantee Fund)...mhh, and my sister, so I see that I cannot [ask], I cannot [ask] my parents, I don't know, for 100 [Euros] a month. So, if they cannot pay for the advertising course...I will do another thing, I don't want to remain only at VET level. (Lucia, 18, Spain, Marketing, 09/05/12)

Lucia's situation illustrates how the dependency of the young increases in a recession and is aggravated by the austerity measures taken by the government and life-plans need to be adjusted to it. The choices that she can make are not genuine, hence are not capabilities, and are rather oppressed by other factors that are out of Lucias' control.

As shown in the general budget for 2013, the payment of interests of the governmental debt is one of the few areas that has increased and represents a 34 per cent. Meanwhile, education has decreased by 14.4 per cent, which corresponds, in comparison to 2008, to a cut of 82 per cent (El País, 2012). A reduction that contrasts with the rhetoric noted earlier on the need of promoting VET and increasing the skills of the youth. VET suffered immediately from these policies, with the subsidies in place to make VET accessible to everyone being abolished and the introduction, in 2009, of a registration tax ranging from 200 to 400 euros; a 3.8 per cent reduction in the number of scholarships; to 20 per cent increase in student/teacher ratios in the classrooms; and the closure of some of disciplines without enough students (Navas, 2012). Parallel to the cuts, the privatization of VET was fostered by an increase in public money to finance private colleges, up by 30 per cent from 2004 to 2010 (Navas, 2012, p. 5). This situation makes Lucia's capabilities and autonomy not only restricted but continuously out of her control.

The next interviewee is also part of the 67.4 per cent aged between 20 and 29 years old that still live with parents. The number of young people living at home has dramatically increased, fostered by soaring unemployment and short term contracts. By comparison, in 2005, only 40.7 per cent of people aged between 16 and 34 lived in the parental household (López Peláez & Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2012). This living arrangement, according to some authors (Lasheras et al., 2012; Standing, 2011), is one aspect aggravating the powerless situation of

young people; on the other hand, it contributes to social anxiety and young people's anger. In addition to the parental home as an imposed living condition, and education no longer being the right to an option, another student, Concepcion, explains how the economic downturn has affected conditions and lack of prospects within the work place. She intertwines her powerless situation with another face of oppression: exploitation. Reflecting on the fact that if she had have enrolled in the in-company training abroad, she would have had some kind of monetary benefit, Concepcion explains:

Concepcion: I wanted to go, it would have been better, really, but I could not [...] no, not now, I am afraid of [going] alone and don't have the money. My parents would not be happy. Some people have gone; I know some are in England. [Now] I don't have the money, they [the shop] don't pay me and I take the bus every day. The shop is fine but there was no need to study for that. I am a shop clerk. I don't speak English and here I have nothing, but I have my house, I am fine. Yes.

I: So, what is next?

Concepcion: Nothing. Home. They told me they like me but they don't have any money for me. Yep. (Concepcion, 18, Spain, Marketing, 24/02/12)

Her testimony covers motivational, monetary and family issues. Concepcion's fear is built upon the lack of institutional support in terms of information and, most importantly, in terms of a guaranteed income to cover her living expenses during a period abroad. The opportunity of going abroad never became for her a capability in the sense of being genuine and now, the placement at the company is also an outcome but not a valuable functioning. Concepcion is in Spain working from morning to afternoon in a shop as part of her in-company training without getting any kind of compensation. The reduction in social welfare means the family is the primary institution for providing young people with a safety net (Lasheras et al., 2012). The combination of unemployment and the reduction in welfare benefits works against disadvantaged young people who cannot acquire autonomy due to their forced attachment to their family situation. As the case of Lucia reveals, rather than a safety net, the family can be a precarious net which cannot guarantee capability development because it is also attached to structural forces. The two cases illustrate how outcomes are insufficient basis for analyzing individual performance and that the CA in line with the faces of oppression provide a good basis to illustrate how individuals navigate and modify their life-plans based on skills as the human capital proposes (as the case of Concepcion and her level of English), but also on individual values (Lucia's care for further studying regardless of being able to access to her desired diploma), perceptions of others (Concepcion's concern about her family not supporting her decision), and economic support (in both cases restricted by the non-paid training, raise of fees, and in Lucias' case aggravated by her family situation).

4.2 Exploitation – precarious and unguaranteed labour relations

Exploitation in Young's terms has to do with the unequal division of labour and wealth (1990); in other words, the difference between what workers create through their labour and the actual wages they get paid. Concepcion represents how exploitation is being built into education through the market economy. A period of in-company training is highly in demand to get skills but, in an economic recession, employers want to increase profits by taking on free labour under the pretence of providing suitable professional experience. The result is that unequal forces determine and worsen the powerless situation of the young, their conditions and terms for navigating in the labour market but also their social situation.

In this scenario, it is necessary to review basic assumptions. There is a fundamental acknowledgment that employment is the main route out of poverty (ILO, 2003). Additionally, VET is the branch of education closest to the labour market and it should, as the Director of the Spanish National Institute of Qualifications for VET asserts, 'respond to the productive systems needs (...) for the success of qualified young people, workers and unemployed' (MEC 2008, p. 2). Whilst these sentiments hold some truth, features of this discourse need to transcend the economic issues and focus on the human side of relationships. Work is the main source of security in most people's lives, and work instability, lack of guaranteed employment has a direct impact on the stability of young people's personal lives. As one young man graphically describes it:

“With a good education you can express correctly and you can then maybe be respected. The way that you express yourself can lead you to do productive activities well remunerated. With that remuneration you can have a family that is a support, and with that support one can say, I think, that one has a life” (Gonzalo, 19, Chile, Social Care, 05/05/11).

It is an understandable fact that instability in the labour market translates into personal insecurity, and hence into a lack of well-being. For most of the young people interviewed at the end of their VET studies, instability is the norm that starts with their in-company training, training linked with long working hours, disengagement with the tasks performed and lack of income. This situation not only relates to the trainees but is an important feature of the Spanish labour market, as Manuel, a 24 year old student remarked:

I: Are you working?

Manuel: I do not work professionally, not right now. However, I recently started [working], I work in a pub at night, as a waiter, but there is no money [because] I cannot be there for a long time. If they offer me something I cannot say 'yes'. Then I work also moving furniture, and one week, and two weeks ago, I went picking oranges. That's it.

I: Why do you work?

Manuel: I need [an] income. (Manuel, 21, Peru, IT, 02/06/11)

In 2011, 18.6 per cent of students aged between 20 and 24 years old were studying and working (Ministerio de Educación, 2011, p. 26). VET students often combine work with study, though it is difficult to find reliable statistics because the majority of work is undeclared, as in the case of Manuel. Josefa, a Social Care student who works as an au-pair and elderly care assistant during the weekends, refers to this as 'mutually profitable' (Josefa, 20, Spain, Social care, 02/02/11) in relation to tax evasion, for both the employer and employee. Though this view is common in popular knowledge, it hides the structural domination of some social groups over others, with the consequent exploitation of those in a more disadvantaged or powerless situation.

The injustice of exploitation reflects the relationship of inequality between employers and workers that in times of job shortage, becomes aggravated. According to the College administrator responsible for finding suitable training places for students:

“It is numerically impossible; they (companies) cannot employ anyone. Companies close and there are more graduates every year. It is already a problem getting people

placed for the in-company training module. They can get University students” (Placement coordinator, 25/02/12).

Labour market tensions increase the power of employers over their trainees. Marcos’ testimony (below) expresses how employability is not always related to an increase in valuable skills or even capabilities. At the same time, it illustrates the struggle due to the precariousness of training and non-paid work.

“I liked the studies but now, I am just depressed. I was looking forward to the training and when I started and they told me to clean, I could not believe it. I talked with the tutor and he changed my placement. I am in a hotel now, and I do everything, but nothing related to IT, so I don’t learn, and in my country, letters after your name is not enough; people want you to know how to work. As for me, I am bored. I don’t get paid, I go every day, even when I am not supposed to go, they call me, I say ‘yes’ always, but is not right. I do it because my colleagues do it, and the expenses get higher every time. I want to go back to my country. I cannot take care of myself and cannot take care of others [partner and child]. At home, I have people” (Javier, 22, Equatorial Guinea, IT, 24/2/12).

The stories here illustrated show that individuals’ education cannot be summed up as an instrument for increasing individual employability. Javier, alongside the previous interviewees, shares his frustration on being unable to do valuable actions in terms of work and the anxiety that being unable to communicate it and change this situation provokes.

Whilst VET may increase students’ employability, the stories above reflect the absence of any automatic increase in their capabilities. In fact, by ignoring the embedded oppression from within Spanish society, VET fails in many ways to act as freedom education. Freedom as a process understood in Sen’s terms (2000) refers to fair processes which involve not only equal access to rights, but also equality of opportunity to carry out and make effective those rights. Although VET is education with an occupational focus, the low quality of many existing jobs, the inability to listen and provide spaces for voicing students’ concerns, and the disassociation between work and values, makes it also pertinent to put forward the claim—which, paradoxically, comes from an institution with a long liberal tradition—that jobs are more than what people earn, or what they do at work; they should also be part of who they are (WB, 2012).

5 Conclusions

Every story collected through the interviews illustrated constraint and dependency around material endowments, but also social and personal issues. This paper used testimonies to share the precarious and oppressive situation of young VET students’ ability to modify or negotiate what is happening around them and what they want for their future. The quotations intertwine aspects of powerlessness in their daily lives and exploitation in their labour conditions. Embedded social oppression combined with policies that leave aside individual well-being are what puts at risk life-plans and constrains capabilities. The brevity of the extracts give a glimpse into how the young, regardless of personal effort and interest in education, have their capabilities for participating meaningfully in the events and processes that shape their lives reduced (Sen, 2009).

The idea that more VET will translate into employment or the higher productivity of a country, calls for reassessment. Attention needs to be paid to the pillars and values sustaining the educational system and hence the focus on which skills are developed and for what

purposes. A CA to education represents the students and their values as ends in themselves, not as means for economic growth.

The enhancement of work per se is totally detached from any impact it may have on building a better and more equal society where individuals are agents of change. The references to undeclared work or un-remunerated training contracts are part of the daily landscape of young people in Spain and their powerless situation. Job insecurity, abusive working conditions together with the lack of any government strategy going beyond economics explain the continuous flow of young people out of the country that in 2012 accounted for 302.623 between 15 and 29 years old and this represented a 22 per cent more than in 2008 (INE, 2012). In addition to exploitation, the theoretical framework helped to illustrate powerlessness as primordial to understanding the constantly reduced set of options and spaces where young people can negotiate the conditions necessary for building their own paths, showing the causal relation between capabilities and oppressions. The support of VET as enhancing the employability of its graduates lacks a moral and holistic vision framed in the question of what we want from future Spanish society. Obviously, employment is an immediate answer, but not under any circumstances. Rather, the conditions of employment need to be incorporated into a VET pedagogy based on emotional and social values in the interests of individuals and society as a whole.

To conclude, the challenge is vast when the immediate lack of income causes daily struggles. However, it is necessary to reassess the layers of employability discourse before embracing it in its totality. As the ILO indicates, the difference between the youth employment challenge and the general employment challenge is that helping young people get the right start helps to ensure they follow a pathway to decent work (ILO, 2003). This start should begin at the classroom level, with interventions that diversify curricula, adjust their itineraries to young people's functioning and finally, foster students' capabilities by centring on the values of decent and secure jobs from the moment of enrolment to the transition to the labour market.

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