Freedoms and Oppressions in Vocational Education and Training

A human development analysis of experiences and life-plans of young people in Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis

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July 2014
Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signed:

Aurora López Fugués
July, 2014
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Abstract

This thesis examines the opportunities for young people in Spain enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the role of education in the formation of these opportunities. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, VET has returned to the list of educational policy priorities in European and International agendas under the banner of employment and growth.

Situated within an overarching commitment to fair education and work, and an understanding of both as intrinsic and necessary for human development, the study focused on a College in Spain; specifically, on the experiences of students, practitioners and employers viewed through the lens of the Capability Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The CA provided a framework for understanding young people’s heterogeneous life-plans in order to move beyond measurable statistics and employability targets to a more nuanced understanding of well-being and agency that includes, but is not restricted to, the economic dimension.

The notion of the students as diverse agents is complemented by the concept of social justice and the politics of difference provided by Iris Marion Young, which permitted an understanding of the collective freedoms of the subjects under scope in contemporary Spain, and how these are constrained by structural factors. Placing the study in social justice literature, vulnerability is acknowledged in Martha Fineman’s terms as universal and embodied, which positions individuals as inevitably dependent upon others and hence profoundly affected by social institutions. Taking vulnerability as humanly inherent and the well-being of the students understood as the freedom to live their own lives as the main starting points, the framework constructed under the CA and the faces of oppression asks what the final goal of VET should be. This framework argues that enlarging the space of capabilities of young people is not limited to the area of skills and learning, but requires a VET that transforms current oppressive labour structures.

To operationalise these ideas, the study employed semi-structured interviews as the main method. The starting assumption was that in order to thoroughly understand the values within VET and the factors relating to the well-being and agency decisions of the students, it was necessary to interview the students in both
their first and last years, whilst they were undertaking the mandatory placement in a company as part of their diploma. The sample was formed by 15 students, 8 practitioners (7 teachers and the Inspector of the College), and 6 employers. Alongside this sample, documentary and statistical data was assembled from Spanish Ministerial declarations, European bodies and international organisations in relation to education, labour and, specifically, VET strategies.

The study revealed a difference between the educational directives and the perspectives and values attached to VET by each of the groups that formed the study. Although the main weight of the research was given to the students’ life-plans and experiences, the analysis of practitioners’ experiences revealed that further work on emotions and on students’ agency was a constant demand from the practitioners. Regarding the employers, contrary to the employability discourse, the interviews illuminated that their shared concern focused on the structural inequalities that limited students’ labour opportunities rather than on a lack of skills or the quality of VET. Consequently, the study concludes that students’ work experiences and transitions are subject to the precarious labour conditions, cultural environment, structural inequalities, limited economic resources and fragile welfare policies, which dominate the current Spanish panorama.

The lessons learned from the interviews with various VET stakeholders concern the limitations of the production model of VET at a time of economic recession. Taken together with the social justice literature this generates a human-based theoretical framework for transforming VET, which can develop, support and even guarantee individual freedoms and societal well-being. The thesis ends by considering how the College could act differently in order to enhance the capabilities of current students.

Key terms:
Vocational Education and Training; vulnerability, human development, oppressions, social justice, Capability Approach
Contents

Declaration .......................................................................................................................... i
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................... v
Contents ........................................................................................................................... vii
Acronyms and abbreviations ........................................................................................... ix
List of tables ...................................................................................................................... x
List of figures .................................................................................................................... xi

Chapter One – Introduction .......................................................................................... 1
  1. Research problem ...................................................................................................... 1
  2. The rationale ............................................................................................................ 3
  3. Outline of the chapters ............................................................................................ 6
  4. Personal positioning ................................................................................................. 10

Chapter Two – Setting the scene .................................................................................. 13
  1. Overview .................................................................................................................. 13
  2. Spanish context ......................................................................................................... 17
  2.1. Geopolitical framework ......................................................................................... 19
  3. VET in Spain: a snapshot ......................................................................................... 32
  4. VET challenges through a human development prism ............................................ 37

Chapter Three – Review of the literatures ................................................................... 41
  1. Overview .................................................................................................................. 41
  2. VET for the economy: an instrumental view of education ......................................... 42
  2.1. Productivity at the centre: economic growth ......................................................... 43
  2.2. Employability: training and skills for growth ....................................................... 50
  2.3. Social inclusion: other benefits .......................................................................... 55
  2.4. Place for optimism ............................................................................................... 58
  3. VET for the individual: different voices, different perspectives .............................. 60
  3.1. Inside the College: students and practitioners ..................................................... 60
  3.2. VET for the individual: some unchallenged conclusions ..................................... 65
  4. VET for well-being: a human development vision of education .............................. 67

Chapter Four – Theoretical framework: capability, oppression and vulnerability .... 73
  1. Overview .................................................................................................................. 73
  2. The Capability Approach: capabilities, functionings, agency and conversion factors .................................................................................................................. 75
  3. Iris Marion Young: Faces of Oppression ................................................................ 80
  3.1. Exploitation .......................................................................................................... 83
  3.2. Marginalisation .................................................................................................... 84
  3.3. Powerlessness ...................................................................................................... 85
  3.4. Cultural Imperialism ............................................................................................ 86
  3.5. Violence ................................................................................................................. 87
  4. The vulnerable subject: the theoretical framework ................................................ 88
Chapter Five – Methodology, research design, methods and data analysis ...........97
1. Overview .............................................................................................................97
Part I – Research design and methods: rationale and planning .............................99
1. Case study: selection of the College .................................................................101
2. The sample, preliminary selection of methods and access ...............................102
Part II – In the field: from theory to practice ......................................................107
1. The sampling process and the sample ..............................................................108
2. Cross-cutting issues: ethical procedures .........................................................113
Part III – Working with the data: analytical processes ......................................114
1. Issues of validity and reliability ......................................................................114
2. The data: students, employers and practitioners ..............................................115
   2.1. VET students ...............................................................................................116
   2.2. Employers: in-company training tutors .....................................................122
   2.3. VET practitioners .......................................................................................124
3. Conclusion: moving towards the analysis .......................................................126

Chapter Six – Being a practitioner: the experience of VET professionals ...........129
1. Overview .............................................................................................................129
2. VET as the passport to the world of work ..........................................................130
3. VET as an experience: the practitioners’ experiences .......................................136
4. VET as flourishing ............................................................................................145
5. Conclusion .........................................................................................................153

Chapter Seven – Students’ life-plans and employers’ demands .........................161
1. Overview .............................................................................................................161
2. Beyond being a volunteer for an interview: enlarging the capability set ..........162
3. Employers’ demands and students’ agency and capabilities ............................168
4. Oppressions: visible and invisible .....................................................................175
   4.1. Powerlessness and exploitation: the silenced voices ..................................175
   4.1.1. Mobility: a limited opportunity ...............................................................177
   4.1.2. Placements: students without classes and workers without income .......185
   4.1.3. Work: a grey area ..................................................................................193
   4.2. Cultural imperialism: the endless bureaucracy ..........................................198
   4.3. Marginalisation: constrained capabilities ..................................................203
   4.4. Violence: a systematic oppression ...............................................................208
5. Conclusion .........................................................................................................209

Chapter Eight – Reflections, conclusions and way forward ...............................215
1. Rationale for the research ..................................................................................215
2. Answers to the research questions and reflections ...........................................219
3. Concluding remarks and policy implications ..................................................227

References .............................................................................................................231
Appendices ............................................................................................................259
# Acronyms and abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CA</th>
<th>Capability Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEDEFOP</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCOO</td>
<td>Comisiones Obreras (Spanish Trade Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECB</td>
<td>European Central Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ET2020</td>
<td>Education and Training 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETF</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESO</td>
<td>Educacion Secundaria Obligatoria (Compulsory Secondary Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Further Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FP</td>
<td>Formacion Profesional (Vocational Education and Training)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INE</td>
<td>Instituto Nacional de Estadistica (National Statistic Institute)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDCA</td>
<td>Human Development Capability Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IVET</td>
<td>Initial Vocational Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISCED</td>
<td>International Standard Classification of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>The International Labour Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOMCE</td>
<td>Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLP</td>
<td>Lifelong Learning Partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RD</td>
<td>Real Decreto / Royal Decree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNEVOC</td>
<td>UNESCO's Centre for technical and vocational education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of tables

Table 1. Brief snapshot of Spain................................................................. 21

Table 2. Income distribution. Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (2003-2012) .................................................................................. 28

Table 3. Risk of poverty or social exclusion (% of population) ................. 29

Table 4. Over-qualification rate by country of citizenship, age and gender, 2011 .. 35

Table 5. Students’ information ........................................................................ 118

Table 6. Students’ frequencies - barriers ....................................................... 121

Table 7. Students’ frequencies - influences ................................................... 121

Table 8. Students’ frequencies - values .......................................................... 121

Table 9. Employers’ data ................................................................................ 123

Table 10. Practitioners’ data .......................................................................... 125
List of figures

Figure 1. Spanish budget (Millions of Euros) ................................................................. 24
Figure 2. Expenses in education in the national budget (2008-2013) ................................. 25
Figure 3. GDP per capita, Spain and EU-17 (2000-2012) .................................................... 26
Figure 4. GDP per capita, Valencian Community and Spain in relation to the EU-17 .... 27
Figure 5. A stylised non-dynamic representation of a person’s capability set and her social and personal context ................................................................. 80
Figure 6. Theoretical framework ...................................................................................... 91
Figure 7. Students’ map ..................................................................................................... 118
Figure 8. Employers’ map ............................................................................................... 123
Figure 9. Practitioners’ map ............................................................................................. 125
Figure 10. Frequency of the use of words - Practitioners’ interviews ............................... 155
1. Research problem

In 2008, the closing down of Lehman’s Brothers symbolised the beginning of a series of financial effects which shook every national system, either directly, due to having funds linked to mortgage-backed securities; or indirectly, as a consequence of the global economic recession. This global economic effect also brought social consequences, generating a global popular reaction in city squares, in front of stock markets and city halls, where people demanded the recognition that the neoliberal paradigm had become exhausted. As Sandel (2012) notes “we live at a time when almost everything can be bought and sold. Over the past three decades, markets—and market values—have come to govern our lives as never before” (p. 1). The year 2008 is, therefore, the catalysing year when the world realised that commodities had conquered all spheres of life and had become the sole purpose of official policies.

In the case of Spain, this double financial and social effect was felt especially strongly. The end of easy credit meant the collapse of the construction sector, which had been supporting the economy since 2000, with a consequent rise in unemployment, particularly for young people, widespread bankruptcy of companies, and the long-term mortgages of individuals and families increased as the value of their property vanished. The government’s long denial of the effects of the global financial crisis in Spain and the relevance of its own actions—in subsidies on real estate, the easing of controls on financial transactions and the channelling of public money into private financial entities—led to daily social demonstrations which forced an early national election. On 21 November 2011, the Socialist Party (PSOE) lost 4.4 million votes and Spain’s centre-right Popular Party (PP) won the parliamentary elections with the promise of putting the economy back on track (El País, 2011).

With this economic recovery in mind, the Spanish government is undertaking neoliberal reforms that ignore social pleas for a new paradigm. One of the most pressing questions that Spain faces is how to motivate young people to stay in education and enable those leaving it to be able to find a place to put their studies
into practice. In this regard, Spain sees Vocational Education and Training (VET) as particularly significant. However, as this research notes, in a context of structural inequalities the access to and promotion of VET is not a permanent solution to address high youth unemployment. McGrath (2012b) takes this argument further and alerts us that the international revival of VET remains based on economic paradigms which see employability as the answer to the skill requirements of the economy and growing unemployment but ignore the intrinsic role of education.

The contribution of this research is threefold: firstly, it gathers the voices of one of the most affected collectives, the youth, alongside those of VET practitioners and employers; secondly, it presents a human-centred approach that views income, employment and commodities as important, but not exclusively so; and thirdly, it brings the role of education in student’s lives to the forefront, in particular VET. It is the aim of this research to acknowledge the importance of work and economic measures and also to insist that more holistic approaches are needed than those provided by the sole concept of employability. As the first Human Development Report from 1990 states:

> The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth, but it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth. (UNDP, 1990, p. 9)

This has been an ambitious project from the outset. It stems not only from a professional concern, but also from a personal one, as I believe that education is the reflection of the present and future of a country. I chose to centre the research on VET as it is an area that concerns the sphere of education and also that of work.

The Spanish Government’s approach to education is based on the assumption that it is an instrument for economic growth and increasing the country’s competitiveness (EC, 2010). Following this assumption, VET has become the flagship of European reforms, which aim to increase the skills of individuals to lead to an increase in their employability, improving national competitiveness and hence bringing about a reduction in poverty (Bonvin & Galster, 2010). In my
initial research proposal, submitted at the start of my PhD in 2010, what guided my interest was an analysis of the grounds for perceptions of VET as a second-class education. However, in developing this thesis from 2010 until now, I have come to see that what started as a financial crisis ended up affecting the life-plans and the daily possibilities of individuals to be and do. The following sections expand on the rationale for the research, its outline and my personal positioning.

2. The rationale
The opportunities available to young people in Spain is a topic that too often gets reduced to the issues of lack of employment and the need for further skills. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, with the continuous rise of youth unemployment, interest in VET has grown, as it is a link between education and work. Situated within an understanding of (and commitment to) education and training for human development, I critically discuss the theoretical underpinnings that promote VET on behalf of raising national growth and competitiveness. My analysis of the crisis is understood in terms of the decline in opportunities it presents.

The distinction between pure training in terms of skills and VET as education is as relevant as the distinction between economic growth and human development. The thesis is built upon a social justice framework in which skills are only a part of VET, and economics is only a part of well-being. Hence, the differentiation and broadening of the definition of VET brings the focus back to the liberal, transformative and civic elements inherent to any area of education.

Based on this comprehensive idea of education, I looked for a framework in which social justice was the driver of the research. Attracted by the premise of putting individuals at the centre of analysis and understanding economics as only one dimension of life, I drew on the Capability Approach (henceforth CA), as developed by Amartya Sen (1985, 1999, 2009, 1992) and Martha Nussbaum (1998, 2000, 2010).

The CA has been the core theoretical pillar of this research and I have used it as a tool to frame conversations with the students, practitioners and employers interviewed and to evaluate VET in terms of the freedoms it creates. The CA provides a framework to understand what the life-plans of young people entering
VET are, and what are limits their beings and doings (Sen, 1992). As such, an analysis made through the capability lenses places young people and their values at the centre of my research and uses the voices of the three groups interviewed as an informational basis of social justice. The research featured two other theoretical pillars, “vulnerability” and “the faces of oppression”. Vulnerability was the central term used in the FP7 European project EDUWEL, “Education as welfare: enhancing the opportunities of vulnerable young people in Europe” that my research forms part of. Vulnerability is a term frequently used to label people who belong to a certain group or population who are economically and/or physically in need. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, and in view of the hardships and difficulties that people in Spain were going through, I reconsidered its meaning. Spain was a vulnerable country, the Spanish State was vulnerable to the pleas of the Troika demands, the banks and financial institutions were vulnerable to the global financial crisis and, ultimately, the people living in Spain were vulnerable to the Spanish State’s cuts in social welfare. Therefore, who was then to be stigmatised and punished by being labelled as “vulnerable”? Interestingly, the commonality was that no one could be “invulnerable”.

The image of the human being as a liberal subject—autonomous, self-sufficient, isolated and free to choose—which is adhered to in the ideology of individual responsibility, is challenged by the theory of the vulnerable subject developed by Martha Fineman (2005, 2008). The author replaces the liberal subject with the “vulnerable subject” that is “the embodiment of the realisation that vulnerability is a universal and constant aspect of the human condition” (Fineman & Grear, 2013, p. 17). By including the concept of vulnerability within the CA, I embraced a more complex reality by acknowledging that the individual who is at the centre of my analysis is a vulnerable and dependent one. A vulnerability analysis requires, in fact, constant awareness of human interrelations and demands a responsive State. This progression from individual opportunities to State responsiveness aligned with two political philosophers that I was already considering, in view of their discussion on distributive and recognition State model interventions: Nancy Fraser (1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) and Iris Marion Young (1990, 2001a, 2006).
Although injustices are deeply rooted in the Spanish system and the proposal of a parity of participation—understood as “social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (Fraser, 1995, p. 30)—attracted me as a way of theorising the lack of redistribution in the years of Spanish economic growth (2000–2008), I finally opted for the theories of Iris Marion Young (1990, 2001a, 2006). It is not the main purpose of this thesis to discuss resources and distributive solutions, but rather to focus on the aspects that enhance or diminish the opportunities of young people enrolled in VET.

Seeking to avoid falling into a narrow, resourcist analysis of opportunities linked to the lack of economic prospects, the CA keeps the analysis focused on the conditions that form genuine opportunities and allow individuals “to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one’s own way” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 79).

Although poverty linked to increasing unemployment is an increasing phenomenon in Spain, it is the phenomenon of restricted agency that has been a constant in the Spanish context. Young (1990), in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, acknowledges that resources are key for individual development but at the same time asserts that social justice is not about the distribution and allocation of goods, but rather the recognition of individual and group differences. Her argument that “instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 15) merged with the idea of the CA that understands freedom of agency as the explanation of forces that limit one’s capabilities and actions. I found Young’s (1990) understanding of structural injustices as inequalities produced through social processes could be aligned with the concept of the vulnerable subject and the demand for a responsive State. Injustice was, according to Young (1990), embedded in every society and could present itself in five different forms. The “five Faces of Oppression” to which she referred were: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. I used these as the grounds for theorising the results of my research.

In the end, the concepts of vulnerability and the faces of oppression merged with the CA in a complementary way. From the standpoint of structural injustices, supported by the CA, agency became a core concept of my research in all three frameworks. As described by Sen (1999) “an agent is someone who acts and
brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives [...]” (p. 19). Returning to the area of the study, my research seeks—through the theoretical frameworks of the CA, the vulnerable subject and the faces of oppression—to evaluate the conditions in which young people’s opportunities are being constructed or restrained.

Based on a comprehensive idea of education, as noted earlier, and aiming to provide the basis for re-imagining VET under the premises of a social justice framework, I formulated three research questions to guide the study:

1. What are the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET according to the students, practitioners, and employers?
2. How is VET perceived in relation to the genuine opportunities of young people enrolled in this education in Spain?
3. How can the operationalisation of the CA inform the research and findings?

Answering these questions required empirical research in the form of semi-structured interviews with every group and life-grids of the students. For the students, the interviews took place in two stages: during their time in College (2011) and whilst they were placed in a company, undertaking the in-company training module required to complete the diploma (2012). The students in the study were volunteers who felt they had greater difficulties accessing, remaining in or finishing college than others; whereas the practitioners, who were composed of seven teachers and the Inspector of the College, were chosen by the students for being good VET professionals, and the employers were recommended by the College. It is relevant to note that even though the student sample was recruited on a volunteer basis, the final sample of fifteen students included a representation of a range of socioeconomic contexts and countries of origin, from both genders.

3. Outline of the chapters

This section presents a brief overview of the contents of each of the eight chapters that form the thesis. Much of the context and literature review work is presented throughout the research; however, I have also integrated a context chapter following this introductory one, and a subsequent chapter on a review of the literature. The two chapters of analysis merge the results with the theorisation, as I
found it more appealing to establish the links of the empirical research with the literature and framework as they arose.

Chapter 1: Introduction
This chapter sets out the rationale for the study and briefly discusses the theoretical selections as well as the contents of each chapter. It ends with a reflection on my personal positioning as a researcher.

Chapter 2: Setting the scene
Chapter 2 sets out to provide an overview of the Spanish context and of the field of VET. As the period of the research was a turbulent year, its character has influenced the direction and weight of some structural issues that might otherwise have remained hidden. Even though past economic prosperity did not redress structural inequalities in the Spanish social, educational and labour arenas, the tensions were not so visible, nor openly debated, in the years of Spanish economic growth (2000-2008), hence they would probably not have been so evident in the interviews, or in my research, had the study occurred earlier. Parallel to this, the increasing relevance of VET itself is linked to, and in part thanks to, the economic recession and the focus on trying to increase youth employment. Having presented the Spanish context and the meaning of VET within Spanish education, the chapter ends by reflecting on the challenges for the current VET and how can those be approached from the viewpoint of human development.

Chapter 3: Review of the literatures
This study is firmly positioned in a social justice perspective. Consequently, the review of the literatures is critical of the discourses underpinning VET. The first section is dedicated to the documents, articles and research that promote VET as an instrument for economic growth. It challenges the dominant concept of employability, the accompanying moral implications in relation to individual responsibility, and poses the argument that VET involves far more than meeting the supposed demands of the market. The first part finishes by noting that this group of literature, grounded in the human capital approach, has evolved and there are signs of a nuanced inclusion of social justice terminology.

The second section is dedicated to the body of literature that centres on the experiences inside college. This literature incorporates the voices of practitioners,
students and also, to a very limited extent, future employers. Although its concern goes beyond the economy, this body of literature lacks a theoretical ground and common foundation and its diversity of focus, methodology and even the scope of research, is too wide to reconcile the bases on which VET should be built.

The review evolves from a purely human capital approach, to a more nuanced concept of this, to a section focused on research centred on individual experiences. I conclude with the developmental vision of education promoted by a body of literature that focuses specifically on education and social justice, placing a special emphasis on the literature that applies the capabilities approach to education. The division of the review of literatures in these three sections helped me to identify, acknowledge and learn from the previous work on the area of education and VET and to work on a little explored area—research into VET from a social justice perspective—.

Chapter 4: Theoretical framework: capabilities, oppression and vulnerability.

Following the two previous chapters, in which I make a case for why social justice matters for education, and especially for VET, I turn to the theoretical framework that proved useful for understanding the complexity of education and its relation to young people’s opportunities. I present a review of the CA as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and a definition of the terms “capabilities”, “functionings” and “agency”, being core to my research. After introducing the concept of “conversion factors”, a critical concept for my study, I advocate that the CA provides the best theoretical ground for social justice for my study, but that it needs further clarification in this area. The five faces of oppression, by Iris Marion Young, add conceptual clarity as they specify the causes that limit individuals’ freedoms by naming the various visible and invisible forms that oppression can take in every society. Finally, the concept of the “vulnerable subject”, as advocated by Martha Fineman, complements the framework and guides the reader through the central concepts on which my research framework is built, namely: capabilities, agency, oppression and vulnerability. After setting out the basis for my normative framework, a graphic representation illustrates the forces involved on the formation of opportunities and how the individual who is positioned at the centre interacts with them.
Chapter 5: Methodology, research design, methods and data analysis
This chapter deals with my research and methodology, which is primarily qualitative. I explain the value of qualitative methods to my research and I explain the procedures and reasons for selecting the College and the sample. The research process is discussed in the second part of the chapter, where I detail the methods used and the decisions taken throughout the fieldwork. Following a reflection on the ethical considerations of the study, including anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, the chapter moves on to its final section; a description of how I managed the qualitative data. In this last section, I detail the characteristics of each of the interviewees and elaborate analytical tables based on the initial data collected.

Chapter 6: Being a practitioner: the experiences of VET professionals
This analysis chapter focuses on presenting the results of the interviews held with the seven teachers and the Inspector of the College that I referred to as practitioners. I combine the primary data of the interviews with the account of the experiences of being a VET practitioner and individual perceptions of their role in the classroom. With the aim of questioning the role of VET, the research divides the conversations into three categories: VET as a passport to the world of work, VET as an experience, and VET as flourishing, and shows how practitioners’ voices are located within more than one of these discourses. The chapter ends by showing how the weight of arguments and viewpoints of the seven practitioners and the Inspector of the College favour a greater emphasis on education beyond economic principles than was evinced by the review of literatures.

Chapter 7: Students’ life-plans and employers’ demands
The focus of Chapter 7 is to theorise the value of VET in relation to young people’s opportunities by using a capabilities-based social justice framework. I return to the previous chapters to analyse the empirical data in terms of freedoms and oppressions. The students’ voices are complemented by the employers’ responses, allowing me to link the sphere of the College to the labour market and analyse the value of work under the conditions in which it currently takes place. This analysis chapter is a critical discussion in which the dominant discourse of the human capital approach, presented in the literature review, is once again contested. The theoretical framework developed for my research is what shapes
the structure of the chapter. Thus, the perceptions of the students are grouped into two main sections: one dedicated to capabilities and agency; and the second focused on the five faces of oppression. Vulnerability, as a concept, is present throughout both sections. The chapter ends with a reflection on the college strategies and the structural factors that have an impact on the creation of young people’s capabilities. The analysis is cumulative and therefore the conclusion serves as an overall conclusion of the two analysis chapters and establishes a bridge with the final chapter.

Chapter 8: Reflections, conclusions and way forward

This final chapter returns to the research questions and summarises the logic of the research. With a focus on the added value of the social justice framework developed to re-examine the foundations of VET, the research reflects on what needs to be done and what has already been done. It turns back to the review of literatures and acknowledges that within the critique there is an incipient move towards social justice that needs to be taken further, this study being another small step in that direction. Similarly, the chapter reflects on the findings of the fieldwork and notes that there is little synergy between VET strategies and practitioner demands, causing tensions and discontent among VET practitioners, employers and students. Furthermore, although the sample of this research is limited, the quotations from the sample of employers that I interviewed reveal that there is also a gap between VET practices and policy understandings of market demands, such as in the area of gender and sex-role stereotyped professions. The chapter concludes that the use of the language of capabilities and oppression provides a useful tool for thinking and talking about the role of VET, as well as the meaning of education in general and, consequently, for designing VET strategies and college practices.

4. Personal positioning

Being in the fortunate position of conducting doctoral research under the Marie Curie Scholarship has proved a major intellectual support, in addition to economic security, for which I am truly grateful. It has been a privilege to be able to listen to some of the authors I reference in person and even interact with them. It is from their continuous work to move education out of the pedagogical closet to the
human development and equity arena, where I found the inspiration in the days that this research seemed too broad to be handled by a human mind.

From both a personal and professional perspective, I am deeply grateful for the years of research that have allowed me to move from being a VET practitioner to being a VET researcher and hence, to read about and reflect upon previous beliefs and actively converse with students, employers and practitioners; not only on the values of VET but also about their daily practice and life-plans. Although I have shared only some of their voices in this research, their conversations enriched me and motivated me to keep questioning the foundations and values on which society should be built. My analysis of the conversations with the interviewees was enriched by the first coos of my daughter. I believe that this inspired me to tackle the complexity of this topic and strive to find workable solutions. Listening to, understanding and presenting VET from a perspective in pursuit of social justice is part of my responsibility as a previous VET practitioner, as a current researcher and as an indeterminate member of this world.
Chapter Two – Setting the scene

1. Overview

The central objective of this thesis is an original exploration of the opportunities available to young people enrolled in VET in Spain through the use of the CA as the main theoretical framework. The CA aims to move beyond economics and centres on the well-being of individuals and, by so doing, that of society. The use of capabilities (understood as the states of being and doings that an individual has the opportunity to become or do) implies a shift away from understanding education as a means of creating revenue towards identifying it as a freedom.

The evaluation of the space of capabilities is the common link and critical line of thought that organises this chapter, which includes a brief introduction to Spain and to its VET system. The analysis of the freedoms of youths enrolled in VET in Spain provides an interesting case study for three reasons: to challenge the current human capital approach in VET, to focus on youth as one of the most vulnerable groups in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and to take the case of Spain for highlighting how economic growth strategies do not necessarily represent an increase on people’s well-being. A further exploration of the three reasons is below presented.

Firstly, VET is acknowledged as a form of job-focused education designed to serve the labour market (McGrath, 2012b; Winch, 2000). The thesis, as will be explained, is built upon a conceptual framework created on the basis of the CA, signalling a conceptual shift away from the instrumental role of VET towards a focus on its intrinsic value. This implies a change from the current human capital theory paradigm that shapes educational policies and college strategies. Frank & Bernanke (2007), whose book is widely used in economic lectures, define human capital as:

An amalgam of factors such as education, experience, training, intelligence, energy, work habits, trustworthiness, initiative, and others that affect the value of a worker’s marginal product. (Frank & Bernanke, 2007, sec. 3)

Following Becker (1967), human capital refers to the set of skills that increase the productivity and therefore the value of the individual in the marketplace. More recently, it has been reconceptualised by various labour economists and different
human capital models\(^1\) incorporate a more nuanced approach to economics and include social justice vocabulary, as is discussed in the last part of the chapter. In this thesis, I use the general definition that human capital is what makes the individual valuable for the market in terms of increasing the competitiveness of the company/organisation she works for (CES, 2009).

The main trade-off when investing in education to pursue higher returns was developed with Mincer’s (1972) seminal contribution, which divided the economic advantages of education into two main kinds: higher pay levels (higher salary) and higher employment rates (greater propensity to obtain employment and less risk of unemployment). At the same time, Mincer understood the opportunity costs of education (the loss while in education) as foregone earnings. In the context of Spain during the period of economic growth, this straightforward view of education seems to explain the high ratio of students leaving education at a relatively early age (Aparicio, 2010; Petrongolo & San Segundo, 2002). The benefits of staying at college for one more year were not commensurate with the foregone earnings. With numbers almost double the average for early school leavers in the EU and OECD (European Commission, 2013), there is a wealth of research portraying this and establishing a statistical link with students’ social backgrounds (CES, 2009; Colectivo Ioé et al., 2002). However, there is less of a dynamic analysis combining individual reasons for not continuing in education and the social implications of this (Fernández Enguita et al., 2010; Salas, 2004). The Valencian Community, where the research is based, is specifically referred to in the study by Fernandez Enguita et al., (2010):

> What makes the Valencian Community or the Balearic Islands the most frequent scenarios for school failure and early school leaving is not that they have a worse educational system, but the better, or perceived as better, opportunities outside of it. (Fernández Enguita et al., 2010, p. 195)

These perceived better opportunities, in terms of the easy work and higher earnings that the quote above refers to, reveals the discontinuity and risks of linking education to the economy. Although, during the time of economic growth and high employment availability, leaving college meant having a well-paid job in the construction sector, these jobs were always temporary and subject to unstable

\(^1\) For a review of complementary economic ways of thinking about human capital in education, see Acemoglu (2001) and Heckman (1999).
working conditions. In the aftermath of the crisis, the construction sector in Spain (which boosted the economic growth) has decreased more than 83% on the volume of 2007, leaving those who left education in favour of gaining a job in this expanding and highly economically rewarding sector, without a job and, mostly, without transferable skills and knowledge (Europa Press, 2013). Under the human capital logic, individuals are economically driven fast-reward seekers and, this as noted above, leaves education in a position that is good only insofar as it provides future revenue.

Secondly, and having stated my desire to challenge the instrumental view of VET based on the stories of young people in Spain as the first reason for my research, the second reason for considering my study pertinent is the targeted age group. My focus on the youth stems from the transformative power that this group represents for shaping the economy and, most importantly, the society of tomorrow. The age of youth is mostly highlighted as a time of transition to work. According to the UNESCO definition, young is “a person between the age where he/she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment” (UNESCO - UNEVOC, 2013). The problem with this economic definition is that the definition of youth relates to labour market outcomes. In this thesis, I remove the concept of youth from the concept of work and link it to an age-frame. The reasons are because, in Spain, where higher levels of unemployment put young people in longer periods of economic dependency, this definition of youth linked to work places puts those who do not advance into the labour market as adult failures. Thus, by re-contextualising youth, not as a matter of individual labour achievements but as determined by an age range, this thesis focuses on institutional and societal problems rather than on individual achievement². The age group in this research is from 16 to 24 years old. 16 is the minimum age for entering VET in Spain and 24 is commonly used in European statistical reports (Eurostat, 2009). Establishing that, I depart from the principle that VET is a type of education at the crossroads between education and work and is responsible for guiding individuals not only in the transition to work, but also

²The issue of individual achievements as a limited evaluation tool of individuals is extensively explored in Sen’s book “Commodities and Capabilities” (1985), where the author extends on the advantages of focusing on a person’s capability to function, that is, what the person can do or can be, versus the more standard concentration on outcome, opulence (person’s income), or utility (as in traditional welfare economics).
the transition to becoming active participants in political and social life. As research from this perspective suggests VET should:

Equip learners for life in its broadest sense. Learning should aim to help people to develop the intellectual, personal and social resources that will enable them to participate as active citizens and workers and to flourish as individuals in a diverse and changing society. (Nash et al., 2008, p. 4)

Thirdly, in addition to the need to offer an alternative to the main discourse in VET and to change the perception of youth, the choice of Spain is the third reason for considering my research relevant. The country case study provides a good scenario to reveal the deficiencies of economics-based approaches as well as the social relevance of human-based ones. On the period of this research (from 2010 to 2014), Spain has experienced how the management of the financial crisis, which had endured the economic concern rather than the social one, has had a direct impact on social and individual well-being (Navarro, 2012, 2014).3

This thesis takes as its basis the idea that in order to increase national competitiveness; governments undertake policies that place market needs before individual well-being, with the consequent detriment to social welfare. Neoliberalism, with reference to the work of the Chicago School and particularly to the line of thought developed by Hayek ([1944] 2007) and Friedman ([1962] 2002), argues that markets are the best place to determine the production and pricing of goods. In general, the neoliberals claim that a reduction in government control increases the freedom of the individual to choose (Barnett, 2010; Spring, 2010). Whilst freedom is at the core of this research, the understanding of freedom according to the CA differs widely from the neoliberal concept of freedom, as will be developed at length in the theoretical chapter (Chapter 4). This does not refer to the number of choices but rather the real character of choices.

Choice and the idea of living in a time of opportunities are part of discourses and neoliberal strategies that privilege the individual, strengthen the individual’s decision-making capacity, promote specific labour skills to manage one’s own success and design one’s own life, thus rendering the social subservient to the market (Colley, 2005; Colectivo Ioé et al., 2002). By focusing on the individual at

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3Navarro (2012, 2014) provides an in-depth analysis of how the European and Spanish austerity measures have led to rising unemployment, dismantled the labour market and, finally, threatened the Spanish Welfare State.
the expense of the social, neoliberalism gives short shrift to social justice, which is subjected within an economic sphere (McGrath, 2012b), and places individuals in a permanent state of responsibility for their own success (Sultana, 2014; Serrano Pascual & Crespo, 2002; Kelly, 2001). Within the neoliberal logic, citizens are “reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248). This logic structures the reconfiguration of VET systems in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial meltdown, by focusing on implementing fast remedies to alleviate the rise in unemployment (Pilz, 2012), eschewing the human side and reinforcing the false dichotomy between technical and liberal education whilst forgetting the moral aspects of preparation for work (Hyland, 2014; Bloomer & James, 2003; Bloomer, 1998). Indeed, the claim of this thesis is that, in the current historical conjuncture, VET risks becoming entrapped within the supposedly free value discourse of human capital theory and neoliberalism and, consequently, urges recognition of the voices excluded from this approach and proposes alternative ways of re-imagining what a socially-just VET could, and should, be like.

The organisation of the rest of this chapter is as follows. Section 2 describes the context, particularly the period from 2005 to 2012, in order to include a snapshot of pre- and post-growth Spain. In this section, the argument is constructed through capability lenses and social justice. Economically focused strategies, as displayed by the Spanish practices during the period of economic growth and also during this period of austerity, do not necessarily imply a growth in societal well-being. This argument, which reveals the shortcomings of the human capital theory, is followed by Section 3, which outlines the Spanish education model and VET’s place within it. Finally, Section 4 summarises the challenges presented above and argues for a change in the theoretical framework that forms the basis of current educational policies.

2. Spanish context
This section is dedicated to describing the Spanish context in order to establish the basis for the study. The research started in 2010 and coincided with one of the worst economic and social crises for European and world economies in decades. The perspectives on the crisis were, however, perceived differently by
organisations. For example, the President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Mario Sepi described the crisis as follows:

Europe is facing the worst financial crisis since the European Union came into existence, and it will culminate in the worst economic crisis unless we step up our efforts to revitalise the economy. (EESC, 2009, p. 3)

The Red Cross, in their report on the Economic Crisis in Europe, collected reports from 42 different National Societies and showed that the economic implications had a human face. The secretary of the International Federation of the Red Cross stated that:

Today, as the economic crisis has planted its roots, millions of Europeans live with insecurity, uncertain about what the future holds. This is one of the worst psychological states of mind for human beings and we now see a quiet desperation spreading among Europeans, resulting in depression, resignation and loss of hope for their future. (IFRC, 2013, p. 2)

These two different descriptions highlight both the economic and the social implications. In terms of my own research, the implication is, firstly, that the crisis will have a clear impact on the findings and character of the research, as it focuses on one of the most affected countries and on one of the most affected age ranges in the population. Secondly, the same study with a different choice of literature and researcher would tell a different story. Even though assessing the impact of the crisis and the discourses within it is beyond the scope of this study, the disproportionate effect of the crisis in Spain, particularly amongst young people, needs to be critically examined to understand that the current policies are reducing their opportunities. The educational and small-scale approach aims to move beyond economic solutions in favour of social solutions that put humans first. Consequently, this research acknowledges the urgency of finding economic solutions for individual well-being and intends to demonstrate that this is not sufficient for encompassing and ensuring social well-being tomorrow. In fact, the period of Spanish growth that dates from 2010 to 2013 is understood, not as an exceptional time, but rather as the consequence of a decade of unsustainable growth and neoliberal policies that built the basis for today's shortages. Having established the bases of the research, the principal objectives of this chapter are to present a comprehensive view of the following themes:
- Socioeconomic fluctuations in Spain and their relationship to the labour market and education.
- The diversity and regional disparity between the regions in Spain and the decentralisation of the State.
- The management of the crisis and its social implications.

2.1. Geopolitical framework
With 505,990 km² of territory, Spain is a unitary but highly decentralised country. The Spanish Constitution of 27 December 1978 marked the end of the era of dictatorship under Franco and the building of a pluralist, parliamentary monarchy based on social values, democracy and the rule of law. The country was organised into seventeen Autonomous Communities plus the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which have, to a limited extent, self-governing powers. Although Spanish is the official language of the country, Catalan, Galician and Basque are jointly official languages in their corresponding regions. Since 1978, Spain has featured in the international media in a succession of events. Taking the BBC news as a reference (2014), the key timeline events provides a first glance of how the international media sees Spain:

- Spain joins NATO (1982) and the European Economic Commission (1986),
- Olympic Games (1992),
- Natural catastrophes caused by companies’ negligence (1998, 2002),
- The end of the national currency (2002),
- Islamic terrorist attack on rush-hour trains in Madrid (2004),
- Legalisation of Gay marriage (2005), Migration policies (2005),
- ETA ceasefire and prisoners freed (from 2006 to now),
- Unemployment (1993, 2000 and from 2007 to now)⁴.

Looking at this “key events section” two things can be said. Firstly, it is intriguing that there is no reference to the expansion and growth period that Spain had

⁴This list does not pretend to be exhaustive and, to highlight my argument, the selection of events is arguable and, as the reader will notice, all the sports news (besides that of the Olympic Games) has been deliberately removed as not being relevant to the research.
during 2000, although this was widely featured in its news, to the point of being labelled ‘the Spanish economic miracle\(^5\)’ (Etxezarreta et al., 2012). Secondly, in the international media, Spain is a country mainly portrayed in crisis or in a vulnerable situation (i.e. terrorism, natural catastrophes or unemployment).

Focusing on the period of rapid economic growth, it was encouraged by a boom in property values, fostered by easily available financial credit. According to Pettinger (2012) in 2006, Spain started building 800,000 new homes (more than Germany, Italy, France and the UK combined). In 2008, when the global credit crisis hit all the western economies, the Spanish construction market collapsed leading to a deep crisis. Stephen King, chief economist of the HSBC bank stated in reference to the period of economic recession and the effects to the society “The recession is so deep that when you take one step forward on austerity, it takes you two steps back” (BBC, 2012a). It is this image of Spain—economically in debt and with unfinished apartment blocks initially fostered by easy credit and economic interest rather than real demand—that is the current reality. The doctoral thesis of Leiva (2011), who analysed references to Spain in the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal since 2007, offers an analysis of the evolution of the image of Spain and provides an explanation: “the image of Spain generated and shared by the International Press has suffered a progressive decline over the last years” (Leiva, 2011, p. 3)

Alongside Ireland, Spain grew rapidly by 3.7% per year on average from 1999 to 2007 and unemployment in 2007 was at its lowest since democracy began, even after absorbing more than 4 million immigrants in less than ten years (BBC, 2012b). An example, coming at the height of the prosperity the country was experiencing, was when the socialist president felt so confident that he pushed hard for Spain to be recognised as an economic power and to join the G8 (Etxezarreta et al., 2012). However, those years of growth need to be understood as growth without development because the increase in the economy did not trickle down to reduce regional, population and sectorial inequalities. The

\(^5\)This is a reference to the so-called “Spanish miracle” in the period between 1959 and 1974 which coincided with the opening up of Spain to the rest of the world, promotion of tourism and the development of its industry plans during the wave of industrialisation. For further reference see Prados de la Escosura (2003).
following table represents selected data from the period of expansion, of incipient crisis and the present.

**Table 1. Brief snapshot of Spain**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>46,116,779</td>
<td>45,593,385</td>
<td>43,038,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish population aged 16–24</td>
<td>1658.8 (female)</td>
<td>1816.3</td>
<td>2044.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thousands)</td>
<td>1771.7 (male)</td>
<td>1949.6</td>
<td>2172.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign population aged 16–24</td>
<td>337.6 (female)</td>
<td>402.5</td>
<td>271.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thousands)</td>
<td>300.1 (male)</td>
<td>374.7</td>
<td>264.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Census of Absent</td>
<td>1,609,809</td>
<td>1,210,000</td>
<td>1,128,958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents (Spanish people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resident elsewhere)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual GDP (thousands of Euros)</td>
<td>1,029,002</td>
<td>1,087,788</td>
<td>909,298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDI</td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>0.865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini(^6)</td>
<td>35 (30.6 EU17)</td>
<td>31.9 (30.2)</td>
<td>32.2 (29.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate (of the total</td>
<td>25.03%</td>
<td>11.34%</td>
<td>9.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>active population (16–64)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed under 24 years old</td>
<td>57.8% (47.6%</td>
<td>23.01% (20.81%)</td>
<td>20.09% (20.37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed with VET as level of</td>
<td>9.4% (50%</td>
<td>7.6% (55%)</td>
<td>8.3% (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education attained</td>
<td>female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed with tertiary</td>
<td>21% (56%</td>
<td>18% (59%)</td>
<td>23% (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author using Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, 2014)

A useful way to understand the fluctuations in the Spanish economy and its impact on social structures is by looking at the demographic numbers. In 2000, the population of Spain went beyond 40 million inhabitants for the first time, and from then grew consistently at an annual rate of 2% (INE, 2013a). This increase was linked to the prolonged period of impressive employment growth which had successfully absorbed a large, continuous inflow of immigrants since the 1990s until 2007 (OECD, 2012a). As a result, the unemployment rate was cut from 25% in the early 1990s to 8% (the EU-average) in 2007, its lowest level since 1980 (OECD, 2012a). In 2010, 12.49% of the resident population of Spain were foreigners, a large part composed of young people (INE, 2013a). These demographic changes required fast changes in Spanish society. Migration has been a debated subject amongst Spanish academia (García et al., 2008; Blanco, 2006; Colectivo Ioé et al., 2002), a general consensus being that the demographic

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\(^6\)The Gini is the coefficient of the equivalent disposable income index. It measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution, 0 being perfect equality (WB, 2013)
changes had a sociological effect on Spanish society, which changed from an emigrant country to a society receiving immigrants\(^7\), without being ready for it—neither its society nor its institutions—. Some scholars have described the social changes, relationships and political measures necessary for Spain to embrace these changes and the shortfalls in fully assimilating the heterogeneity and diversity of the new Spain (Reher et al., 2011; Izquierdo Escribano, 2007; Lopez Sala, 2007).

However, with the collapse of the construction sector, the economic recession brought a consequent rapid decrease in population. This demographic slowdown had two sides. One was the drop in the foreign population who, up to the present, have been embracing the government’s schemes (launched in 2008) to return to their country of origin (Secretaría General de Inmigración y Emigración, 2013). The other was the increased number of nationals moving abroad. Despite having no knowledge of the total number of people who left Spain, it can be assumed from the electoral census of absent residents shown in Table 1, that the number of people over 18 who have left the country has increased by 22% since 2008 (Europa Press, 2011). To that percentage, two other groups should be added: the number of people who left but did not change where they registered to vote, and those who left but are under 18 or not eligible to register to vote. In addition to these high numbers, according to the annual census, 90,639 foreign people left Spain in 2012 alone. The situation is that Spain has once again become an emigrant country. This emigration from Spain cannot be linked solely to economics because it affects both low- and high-skilled sections of the populations; therefore, it needs to be understood as a shortage of opportunities in general. Consequently the percentage of 22% (representing people who have left Spain) falls short of reflecting the reality of the demographic movement of those leaving Spain and the flow of people moving out appears to be a continuous and growing process linked to the shortage of opportunities.

Regarding education, the impact of migration in the context of education has been labelled one of the “educational challenges of Spain” (Aja et al., 1999, p. 4),

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\(^7\)Due to cultural proximity and political arrangements, the majority of immigrants originate from South America (36.21%), followed by Western Europe (21.06%), Eastern Europe (17.75%) and North Africa (14.83%). Based on nationalities, the most prevalent are: Morocco, Rumania, Ecuador, UK, and Colombia. (INE, 2013)
which over a short period of time has generated a vast literature focusing on the educational challenges of immigration (Calero et al., 2009; Alegre Canosa & Subirats, 2007; Fernández Batanero, 2005; Carrasco i Pons & Ballestín, 2004). Nevertheless, as dealt with more extensively in the literature review, these efforts have not helped to reduce the gap between educational achievement and background. In 2007, the number of foreign students was 10 times higher than in 1998, which corresponded to 9.7% of the total numbers taking non-university courses. However, of these students, 38% of the female and 49% of the male students left education before finishing secondary education, and only 11% enrolled in tertiary education (Alegre Canosa & Subirats, 2007). In conclusion, this reflects a gap between the educational achievement of national and non-national students. Although it is methodologically difficult to determine which students have a foreign background due to the nationalisation campaigns8 to improve the working situation of immigrants in Spain, these figures are nevertheless alarming. Looking at the non-Spanish, the likelihood of them leaving education early is 10% higher than for nationals (INE, 2014). Additionally, if background is combined with gender, for a female from an immigrant background, the probability of going on to tertiary education is 25% less than for a national (Perez-Amat, 2010). These differences are evidence of Spain’s failure, during the years of economic growth, to create the expansion of genuine opportunities to all members of its society.

From the budgetary viewpoint, the management of the financial crisis has had a negative impact on the social sector and, by extension, on education, as noted in Figures 1 and 2. From 2008 to 2013, the annual budget had several fluctuations. 2012 in particular, saw a budgetary decrease triggered by European pressure to implement austerity measures and reduce expenditure. The 2012 budget was referred to by the press as receiving “acceptance in Europe, rejection in Spain”. (EFE, 2012)

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8 It is estimated that since 2000 almost 500,000 foreigners have become Spanish nationals (Europa Press, 2011).
In 2012, 12% of the budget (and 90.5% of the GDP\textsuperscript{9}) was devoted to managing the public debt. This amount has progressively increased since 2008 and reduced the money normally destined to other sectors. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the national budget across the various sectors. Public Services refer to justice, defence, security and foreign affairs. Social Expenses include education as well as pensions, social services, job creation, unemployment subsidies, culture, health and living. Economic interventions include agriculture, food and alimentation, industry and energy, infrastructures, communications, and military and scientific innovation. The final grey area represents the general administrative accounts such as management, taxes, the public debt, services and transfers to Spanish communities. The public debt, together with the amount of transfer funds from the government to the communities accounts for the majority of general management expenses. Although social spending increased by 1.9% between 2012 and 2013, due to increases in pensions, in 2013, there was a decrease of almost 20% of public money spent in the social sectors in comparison with the amount spent in 2008. Represented by the blue area, the biggest decrease from 2008 to 2013 was in health expenditure, which was drastically reduced by 22.6%.

Education accounts for the second-to-last blue stripe and was also one of the most affected sectors. The following figure provides greater insight into the cuts undertaken in this sector. Currently, it receives only 0.6% of the general budget and, in absolute numbers, the money assigned was reduced from €3,000M in 2008.

\textsuperscript{9} The GDP is the Gross Domestic Product and refers to “the monetary value of all the finished goods and services produced within a country’s borders in a specific time period” (Investopedia, 2014)
to €1,945M in 2012, despite the fact that the general budget increased by almost €19M (INE, 2013b).

As the following figure illustrates (Figure 2) the biggest decrease took place in 2011 and, in 2013, the money education received was almost insignificant.

Figure 2. Expenses in education in the national budget (2008-2013)

Source: author, based on the information provided by the newspaper El País (2013a) regarding the National General Budget.

The small amount of the national budget destined to education, and the continuous budgetary cuts to education, forces us to question to what extent the revival of interest in VET is from a genuine interest in increasing the opportunities of young people to enrol and participate in this education. Whilst it is difficult to find comparative statistics about public expenses on VET in Spain in relation to other countries, looking at the general OECD report on Education at a Glance (2013), it notes that, in 2010, Spain invested 0.5% less of its GDP in education than in 1995, even though the GDP in 1995 was €456,495M and in 2010 was €1,045,620M.

The description of Spain based on demographic movements and austerity measures would not be complete without a reference to unemployment. The money for this area represented almost 10% of the general budget in 2012 (INE, 2013b), but job losses have been increasing continuously. From an economic point of view, Spain is one of the most affected OECD countries, with an alarming rate of loss of employment, especially amongst the young (Reher et al.,
The significant loss of employment needs to be explained as a consequence of unequal and unsustainable growth that the continuous increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) cannot reflect. Until 2008, Spanish GDP was growing at a rate above the EU-27 average (OECD, 2012a). As noted earlier, from 2000 the GDP grew, theoretically turning Spain—a country traditionally of poor people and emigrants—into a prosperous country with immigrants. This growth in GDP was based on a production model of low-skilled and temporary contracts in the services and construction sector and it was assumed that this was able to absorb the demographic boom. Indeed, GDP per capita (see Figure 3) reflected an important increase in spending power for most of the population although it remained below the European average.

Figure 3. GDP per capita, Spain and EU-17 (2000-2012)

Despite the governmental enthusiasm for the Spanish economic period; the above graph illustrates that even using economic terms the GDP per capita always remained significantly lower than the EU average. Additionally, growth was regionally and socially uneven, and this disparity was never resolved. Autonomous Communities like Extremadura had (since 2007) a GDP per capita around 30% less than the Spanish average, whereas others (like the Basque Country) had a growth rate above the 33.9% Spanish average GDP per capita (INE, 2013b). The Valencian Community, where my study took place, had a GDP similar to the Spanish average, as Figure 4 below illustrates. Figure 4, shows the relationship between the GDP in this Community—with a high proportion of
work in social services and the construction sector—and the overall Spanish GDP per capita. Both GDPs per capita are represented as a percentage of the EU-17, shown as 100%.

**Figure 4. GDP per capita, Valencian Community and Spain in relation to the EU-17 (2000-2012)**

Source: author based on INE (2013b)

From 2005 to 2008, the GDP of the Valencian Community and Spain saw an almost parallel increase of 84%, followed by a decline almost to the levels seen prior to the economic and demographic boom. These figures illustrate the point above that refers to the difference between regions. The Valencian Community is one of the regions hit hardest by the decrease in the construction industry, due to its coastal location, which attracted high levels of construction aimed at increasing revenue from tourism. In fact, the gap between the overall Spanish GDP per capita and that of the Valencian Community has more than doubled since 2007 (INE, 2013b).

However, the growth did not bring human development, in the sense of an increase in well-being and reduced vulnerability as reflected by the Gini coefficient. In terms of the distribution of income, the GDP does not provide a good measurement because it only accounts for absolute numbers, not for the distribution of this wealth. As Sen (1985) notes, the GDP is an inadequate measure of well-being because economic growth is only one dimension, albeit an important one, of well-being.
The Gini coefficient—which measures the extent to which the distribution of income deviates from a perfectly equal distribution, 0 being perfect equality—is arguably a better indicator to explain the growth in inequality that Spain experienced during its expansion period (Etxezarreta et al., 2012). According to Caritas (2013), poverty rates decreased by a mere 1% between 2000 and 2007, and the income of those at the top of society went from being five times to six times that of those on low incomes, further increasing the income gap. The increase registered in employment and absolute GDP numbers did not lead to a reduction in inequality, as the increase in unregulated jobs and the failure of distribution policies brought about a proliferation of low-skilled jobs with low wages, mostly based in the black economy10.

The difficulties in knowing how the GDP affects the general well-being of the population makes it necessary to seek indices that measure the aspect of equality, such as the Gini coefficient. This measurement of income distribution reveals that Spain has a higher inequality rate than the rest of the EU. Its distribution remains far from being 0 (which would be perfect equality), being closer to 100 (perfect inequality) than the EU average, and has not been affected despite years of GDP growth.

Table 2. Income distribution. Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (2003-2012)

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU-27</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU-15</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat (2013a)

Inequality is the key to understanding the embedded problems in Spain. Looking at wage distribution, women’s wages in 2007 were 70% lower than men’s, the

10Unregistered economic activity, referred to as the black or informal economy, is one of the main features of the Spanish economy. It is estimated that 4 million people are working in the black economy. This not only means that these workers are fiscally invisible, but also that they have no social protection and, consequently, have no guarantees and live under very precarious conditions. It is estimated that up to 28% of GDP in 2013 came from the black economy, which helps explain how the country and families survived, even though 2013 registered over 30% unemployment (INE, 2013b; Etxezarreta et al., 2012).
young could aspire to a mere 47% of the average wage of Spanish nationals, and foreigners to only 57% (Cachón Rodríguez, 2009). Indeed, it can be observed that the risk of poverty or social exclusion as a percentage has remained highly stable during the expansion period, due to a persistent gap in social distribution.

Table 3. Risk of poverty or social exclusion (% of population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU-17 Female</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU-17 Total</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain Female</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain Total</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat (2013b)

Having noted budgetary changes, demographic changes, GDP divergences, regional disparities and social inequalities in terms of opportunities based on gender or background, I conclude this section by referring to internal migration and the features of unemployment.

Before the crisis, Spain had the lowest internal migration rates of the OECD area, suggesting that family and cultural bonding are more important and that people preferred to remain in their home region rather than move to another in pursuit of higher paid jobs. This phenomenon, which can be observed in other Mediterranean countries, goes against human capital logic and leads to a situation where there is a structural divergence between qualified workers and jobs (OECD, 2012a). This mismatch implies greater disparities in the employment figures across regions in Spain compared to most other OECD countries (OECD, 2012a).

Just as employment was not evenly distributed, the quality of jobs per se was also dubious, with an accompanying increase in labour insecurity that made people more vulnerable to external circumstances. Growth was based on low-value-added activities and many labour-intensive occupations, which relied almost entirely on the construction sector and on credit-fuelled domestic demand for housing. Thus, when the global financial crisis erupted and credit was no longer available, the construction sector came to a halt and this led Spain’s highly segmented and low-skilled workforce into unemployment. The vulnerability of an economy that relied mainly on the construction sector helps to explain the great increase in youth
unemployment, especially for men with a low level of education and people from immigrant backgrounds. The overrepresentation of young people and immigrants in construction, the retail trade, hotels and restaurants brought about the consequent pressure to lower real wages and to decrease the security in labour contracts. The unemployment rate of 57.22% for people under 24 (in April 2013), 59.21% of whom were men, reflects part of the social drama (Público, 2013). High male unemployment, in a country still marked by a higher proportion of men in the working population, greatly affects the income of entire households. This phenomenon has encouraged women to join the labour market, albeit under temporary contracts and in unskilled and precarious jobs (Amestoy, 2009).

Moving towards the conclusion of the context, it is important to note that (at the time of writing) the inclusion of economic policies within educational policies makes it impossible to research the situation of young people without taking the labour market into consideration and the social movements. The latest educational reforms are an example of the instrumentalisation of education to serve economic purposes, a feature of neoliberal policies.

On 20 April 2012, the government established a reform of the education system: RDL 14/2012, featuring urgent measures to rationalise the education budget in the public sphere. On 8 October 2013, Congress approved this measure without the support of any of the other political parties. The text for the 8/2013 Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) aimed to rationalise public expenditure in education and was also “for promoting the economy and prosperity of the country” (LOMCE, 2013, sec. 1). The LOMCE was received with popular discontent and led to continual demonstrations from educational and parental collectives. The most controversial issues of this new educational law are: the suspension of the prohibition of gender segregation in educational institutions; the return of religion to the curriculum, with the implicit understanding of it being Christian; allowing private companies within the educational sphere; increases in the teacher–student ratio; changes in the linguistic model, favouring the dominance of Spanish in the bilingual regions; and the inclusion of external exams at different levels in order to filter students. Although the relevance of these topics to my study on the opportunities of young people in
VET is not directly obvious, they are an example of the current lack of ideological neutrality.

Demonstrations have been numerous, leading to the closure of all public educational centres for almost a month in the Balearic Islands (El País, 2013b). Despite this, the law has been established, challenging democratic legitimacy in the name of adapting the Spanish educational system to market demands. However, the social climate has been so tense since the beginning of the crisis that one can observe a decrease in the energy invested in it. Starting in 2011, alongside other grassroots movements (i.e. the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street), The Indignados (Indignants) movement along with the Movement for Mortgage Victims (PAH) were established as organised forms of social discontent. Their support was intense and, although it is hard to come by exact numbers, it is estimated that 20% of the population (7 million) participated in some way, and it had an approval rating of over 80% (Barnett, 2011). This demand for another type of society, where people are listened to, became the umbrella for other types of organised protest and movement. In the area of education, the Marea Verde (Green Tide, so named after the colour of their T-shirts), refers to professionals (and also parents) involved in the education system, who showed their discontent with the reforms and budgetary cuts in education (El País, 2013c)\textsuperscript{11}.

Returning to the content of the LOMCE and its implications for VET, the new law will create a “basic VET” for students between 15 and 17 with “progress difficulties” (LOMCE, 2013, sec. 30) as part of mandatory secondary education. This perpetuates the stigma that VET is for low-level students only (Green, 1990). However, it is in line with the Lisbon Agenda and European guidelines for 2020, which place VET as central to Europe’s aim “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000, sec. 5). Since 2008, the number of enrolments in VET in Spain has increased by 6.3% (EcoAula, 2013). The revival of VET in Spain is not an isolated occurrence. It corresponds to a global trend where public agencies are also promoting education policies within strategic plans that view the labour market as the final goal. Thus

\textsuperscript{11}Originating in the Community of Madrid, there are now several committees in various communities. Its grassroots nature (it is not linked to the main teachers’ unions) makes it difficult to estimate the number of people attending or participating in it.
VET is perceived as a strategic component for providing answers to the current major challenges in society: the need to increase competitiveness; to combat unemployment; and to facilitate young people’s transition from education to work. However, at the same time, social spending is being cut and labour conditions and structural inequalities remain overlooked.

3. VET in Spain: a snapshot

Having criticised the shortcomings of the economic-based model in which the Spanish context is immersed, this section continues by narrowing the scope to the field of VET. Specifically, it looks at:

- VET structures.
- The purpose of VET under its current design.
- Impediments and challenges for designing a socially constructive VET.

As stated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education and “technical and professional education shall be made generally available” (UN, 1948, sec. 26). In Spain this is covered by three different types of vocational education: college-based vocational training, continuous training in the workplace and training for jobseekers. The level looked at in this study corresponds to the middle level of specific Vocational Training (Formación Profesional Específica de Grado Medio), which is the post-sixteen professional track of education and lasts 2 years.

Compulsory education in Spain finishes at age 16 and students who have obtained the required grades and are willing to continue studying have two options: (a) four general programmes leading towards upper secondary academic education and the Bachillerato; or (b) vocational studies, leading to an advanced vocational programme. These correspond to levels 3 and 4 in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). For further details and a graph on the Spanish Educational system and the structure of VET, see Appendix 1. Alternative terms used internationally include "technical and vocational education and training" (TVET), "intermediate vocational education and training" (IVET), "technical and vocational education" (TVE), "further education and training" (FET), "vocational and technical education and training" (VTET), "vocational and technical education" (VTE). In Spain, VET is structured under
different headings and classified into 26 vocational sectors (Appendix 1), each consisting of modules with both a theoretical and practical content. A placement in a company is required for the final six to three months of any vocational programme.

Spain does not escape the international debate on whether secondary education should be merged with, or segregated from, other educational paths; nor what the relationship with the labour market should be and the consequent educational reforms (Colectivo Ioé et al., 2002; Serrano Pascual, 2000). In relation to the first question, it is useful to use the typology established by Green, Wolf and Leney (1999) in order to understand the Spanish system in relation to others. The classification is as follows:

- ‘Tracked system’ (Germanic countries), where secondary education is segregated into general and vocational tracks which are only loosely connected;
- ‘Unified system’ (Nordic countries), where secondary education is integrated and there is very little differentiation between specific pathways;
- ‘Linked system’ (France, Spain since the General Law on Education 1970), where secondary education is separated into different tracks but with bridges or contact points between the different tracks.

When approaching the topic of VET in Spain and its relationship with the State and the labour market, it is helpful to explore the models and understand how institutions evolve in relation to the politics of the country (Thelen, 2004). The first one is the market-led system where the labour market, characterised by substantial mobility, provides much of the vocational training (e.g. in the UK). The second is the college model, where most of the VET takes place in colleges (i.e. France and Spain). And the third model is the ‘dual’ model with a strong apprenticeship system (i.e. Germany).

Although Spain has linked system with an established college model, the State aims, through educational reforms, to move towards the dual system (i.e. RD 1529/2012 from 8 November 2012), with a strong emphasis on company placement and apprenticeship contracts providing the basis of dual training. This
approach is successful in countries like Germany and Austria; however, it is yet to be tested in Spain, a country with a weak industrial landscape, mainly featuring small and family run businesses. In 2013, Spain had 3,195,210 businesses, of which 3,191,416 were considered small or medium (99.88%). Of these, 95.5% were micro-small, which means with less than 10 employees (Pyme, 2013). Only 3,794 companies had more than 250 employees, posing a challenge to find enough enterprises able to assist and train VET students. In 2010, 55% of SMEs did not have a budget or planning for training: 28% did not provide any vocational training throughout the year; and, 21% never assessed their future skill needs (Souto-Otero & Ure, 2011). Consequently, the dual system is at the moment not a feasible proposition, in so far as the current industrial sector presents challenges in coping with the regular training plans, as it will be analysed in Chapter 7.

When VET was put into a theoretical framework, as was noted earlier, the structure and current direction of the educational reforms followed the traditional view of education, conceived simply as a provider of workers for the labour market. Sustained by a strong human capital paradigm, education is perceived as revenue-based investment whereby individuals acquire skills and knowledge through education (which this research is concerned with), or experience (Davies & Bansel, 2007). The economic advantages of education are mainly of two kinds: higher pay levels (higher salary) and a higher employment rate (greater likelihood of obtaining employment and less risk of unemployment). The principles underpinning the human capital theory present a double challenge for the research. On the one hand, the emphasis of the State in seeking to reduce youth unemployment provides a timeframe where educational policies are open to VET; on the other hand, this situation should be viewed as an opportunity to seek alternative educational and labour models beyond the initial purpose of “education for skills” and “education for employment”. This research is built upon the premise that there is a desire to exchange the instrumental and growth oriented model for a human-based one, where individuals in every society are not just objects of the market but rather the subjects and drivers. It explores, through a social justice framework, a country in a vulnerable situation, with vulnerable institutions and vulnerable people, and seeks to propose an alternative model, centred on the well-being of individuals.
Although VET is presented as the response to a question that only addresses the aspect of work, training per se is not able to guarantee a job to everyone. However, it is true that VET provides a faster track to employment. For example, according to the Spanish Institute of Youth, young people with an intermediate level vocational qualification required the least amount of time to find their first job (4.8 months) (INJUVE, 2103). However, this fact little says about the quality of their contracts, which since the start of the crisis has been favouring the use of temporary ones (Aparicio, 2010). In fact, Spain counts as one of the highest users of the temporary employment of young people (OECD, 2012a). Aware of the limitations, the ILO (2014) and the OECD (2012a) economic study highlighted the risk of trapping young people in jobs with limited opportunities for career advancement.

Additionally to the quality of contracts, the scarcity of highly skilled jobs in Spain reinforces the already established trend of employers demanding high-level qualifications for low-level skilled work (at the corresponding low-level salary). Graduates with tertiary degrees exert supply-side pressure on people with a post-secondary (VET) qualification, leading to significant displacement in the labour market. In 2010, this mismatch resulted in an unemployment rate of 30% amongst those with a tertiary education, which is almost double the EU average (16.3%) (Eurostat, 2012). Additionally, the risk of unemployment and low income in Spain was up to 21% higher for women (ILO, 2012; Aragon Medina & Rocha Sánchez, 2012).

**Table 4. Over-qualification rate (%) by country of citizenship, age and gender, 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population at age</th>
<th>Total population 20-64</th>
<th>Foreigners 20-64</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU-27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU-27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat (2012)
The over-qualification of employees shakes the basic principle of the human capital theory, whereby education increases one’s value in the market and the competitiveness of the country. This paradoxical situation is aggravated if we consider the case of women enrolled in VET. VET is an interesting educational path to analyse the gender differences in subject choices, where the resulting jobs have strong salary gaps due to the work being seen as a traditionally male or female occupation (Miller & Hayward, 2006).

Though the gap between men’s and women’s presence in the labour market is practically non-existent; it is in the quality and conditions of the work\textsuperscript{12}, rather than absolute numbers, where the differences are found. From the moment of enrolment in VET the occupational distribution is unfavourable for women. Women seem restricted to particular sectors (health, care work, beauty and management), therefore, their participation in the labour market is weaker (part-time jobs), lower-skilled and—even when in equal positions—lower-paid (Cebrián & Moreno, 2008). There are also differences which are aggravated due to geographical location, as noted when referring to regional inequalities. Consequently, due to the unequal Spanish employment structures, a VET diploma is not a guarantee of higher pay levels or higher employment rates; rather it is subjected to location and context. This again challenges the straightforward human capital assumption about revenue and also poses questions on the uncertain economic future of the VET students.

Parallel to this reality, the European Commission has launched several initiatives that reinforce VET’s link with the labour market and, at the same time, its attractiveness. Examples of this are the plans "new skills for new jobs" (European Commission, 2012), an agenda for new skills and jobs, a European contribution towards full employment and a new impetus for European cooperation in vocational education and training to support the ET2020 or Europe 2020 strategy (CEDEFOP, 2012; European Council, 2000).

This research holds firmly to the principle that VET is beneficial, in spite of the suppressed labour market context. However, in order to be a good education, there

\footnote{The quality of jobs has remained a rather neglected field up to this day. In conceiving ‘good jobs’, it is primarily the UK experts who, over the past 10 to 15 years, have been working hard on the concept of ‘good work’, and suggesting authentic theoretical approaches and policy solutions. For further references see Boeri et. al. (2006).}
is a substantial need to reframe it on the basis that education is about people and goes beyond being an instrument of the market. The assumption that VET students need only a limited set of technical skills and training narrows the concept of professionalism (Spenceley, 2006) as well as the concept of education. Under this view, a professional is perceived as one who matches the skills required by the market, rather than an agent who can shape and lead the market with new skills. Education, as noted earlier, is only one aspect of VET: the labour aspect. However, this does not leave room for perceiving VET as an education where professionals, in the holistic sense of being agents, are nurtured and fostered. In Chapter 3, the review of literatures, a more in-depth account of the different views on education is provided, with a special focus on the concepts of employability, the responsibility discourse attached to it, the role of education for human development and the wider sense of professionalism.

4. VET challenges through a human development prism
The conclusion to this first chapter is framed by the words of Nick Burnett, Assistant Director-General, Education, UNESCO: “We should not simply agree that a country should promote VET, but should clarify the global debate about the role of vocational skills, indeed their very definition” (King, 2009, p. 4).

In light of the extremely high rate of youth unemployment, the Spanish strategists hope VET will lead to a decrease in the number of unemployed young people. Whilst the focus remains on jobs for tomorrow (regardless of their quality), the issues referred to in the previous sections, such as regional discrepancies, the (mis)matching of skills, the quality of jobs, or even the social and gender gaps, become secondary to the pursuit of reducing unemployment.

Although this is not surprising and unemployment is indeed a real issue, this chapter hoped to expose the consequences of promoting employment regardless of the quality and values attached to it and, at the same time, to demonstrate that VET promotion is not accompanied by an increase in the budget assigned to it. Furthermore, the lack of discussion about the intrinsic value of VET denotes an absence of discussion about the reasons for the crisis, in addition to a lack of will to change directions and seek long term solutions that recognise human
interrelation, the vulnerability of individuals and, hence, the responsibility of institutions to provide and safeguard individual well-being.

The impoverishment and lack of genuine opportunities, particularly for the youth of Spain, is due not to the global economic and financial crisis *per se*, but because the country’s growth was maintained by a particularly unequal, and hence vulnerable, structure. From this perspective, this research does not consider unemployment as a “natural” or homogenous consequence of the crisis. Rather, unemployment is the result (amongst others) of ignoring structural issues during the period of prosperity, the lack of reactions at the beginning of the financial crisis, the erratic actions taken later on and, ultimately, the establishment of the neoliberal targeting of social expenditure.

As noted earlier, these lines of action have ultimately resulted in prolonged job losses that affect those groups that are already most vulnerable. The new budgetary plans and laws affirm that the deep reforms and policies being undertaken are more focused on not losing numbers (i.e. jobs, demography, GDP, enrolments in education) than on creating an equal playing field and assuring its quality and permanence. This context chapter has provided data from three periods of time to show how numbers focused solely on economic growth do not indicate the gravity of the situation. The precarious working conditions are not reflected in employment figures that are already bad *per se*. The real number of people flying out of Spain is not reflected in the number of migrants with plans to return home or the number of Spaniards registered to vote through consular arrangements. The gender gaps in VET are not reflected in the increase of students enrolled in VET. The decrease in GDP is lower than in the Gini coefficient. This means, that the inequality gap has increased much more than the decline in economic growth and, henceforth, policies for growth should take this into account. And finally, the slowing down of increases in the 2013 budget, do not reflect the drastic reductions in the social and educational expenditure.

The crisis, which at first could have remained only an economic crisis, has become a social one (Navarro, 2014); thus, solutions that look beyond economics are required. For all the above discussions, this research considers that continuing to define strategies within the same theoretical framework that put Spain on the
path to an unequal growth and an unequal crisis, only serves to strain the welfare structures to the point of putting them in threat of being dismantled.

Spain is creating educational policies that are focused on combating massive youth unemployment (Hyland, 2008) whilst basing them on an ideology which gives a dearth of attention to the intrinsic values and social-collective role of VET. The revolution implied by the amount of policy initiatives surrounding VET (Keep, 2006) is a timely call to seize this as an opportunity to analyse education as an integrated aspect of a society. This research takes up that challenge, knowing that it is great, under the conviction that VET is in need of being reframed based on a more holistic approach, such as that provided by the human development approach.

The research aims to offer a comprehensive study and approach VET within its Spanish context starting from a critical analysis of its paradigms. I believe that there is a need for an inclusive strategy that goes beyond the quantifiable outputs of current education policies, and centres on the concept of human development. The argument is that a change of lenses, from economic outputs to human values, allows an evaluation of the appropriateness of strategies and policies in terms of their ability to increase the genuine opportunities of all individuals to live a life valuable for them and for others (Sen, 1992). By placing students’ freedoms and the need for a transformative education at the core, the research questions the value of VET from the point of view of students and strategists. Chapter 3, the review of the literatures, gives a comprehensive classification of different approaches to education and the existing gaps seen in them. In the hope of building upon these, the final section in the literature review is dedicated to the work of some educationalists that took up the challenge by including human development in their writings on education.

It builds on the argument that, although unemployment is of critical concern in the Spanish context, the concern should not be blindly focused on the creation of jobs, but rather on their developmental aspect. The World Bank Development Report 2012 is an example of the nuanced human capital approach and a recognition that years of strategies based solely on growth have not been sufficient to increase societal well-being. The report is an important contribution to the collective
understanding of the role of jobs in human development, a role that can be equally extended to education. It notes that a developmental job, which could be carried over to my research argument as a developmental VET, “should include acquiring skills but also empowering individuals […] [to] contribute to these broader goals is valuable not only for those who hold them but for society as a whole” (WB, 2012, p. viii).
Chapter Three – Review of the literatures

1. Overview

I start this chapter by creating a map of the main arguments around VET in Spain as well as identifying the range of approaches used to refer to this form of education. To this end, I visited numerous databases, conducted web engine searches, searched in institutional websites, read European and international official documents about VET, and set alerts for conferences, newspaper articles, academic journals and forum entries that contained the words "education" and “training”. The result was a few national studies, mostly reports on EU countries, or recommendations by EU institutions, whose contributors were mainly scholars based in the United Kingdom. Since I started my research, the body of literature referring to VET has increased dramatically. Soaring youth unemployment and the increasing inequalities gap has brought a general consensus that policy should turn its focus towards the area of skills and training.

Looking at the research literature, the response to this call remains mainly centred on the Anglophone world. Nevertheless, I hope to make a twofold contribution with this chapter; firstly, by mapping the nature and evolution of the discourses and the responses of the Spanish VET system to them; and secondly, a transformative contribution, providing a humanity-based vision of VET by building a bridge with literatures that transcend educational areas. This last contribution is later expanded upon in subsequent chapters. Therefore, by mapping and making proposals I hope to enrich the incipient debate on the future of VET.

The discussion is organised around the argument that VET can be conceived and presented in three different positions and, at the same time, ontologies. Consequently the review of literatures is divided into three parts. The first is the instrumental vision of education with the title “VET for the economy: an instrumental view of education” (2). This contains three subdivisions. One corresponds to the analysis of the human capital theory, which is the framework that underpins current policy discourse. This is followed by a closer look at the
meaning of employability and a compilation of some criticisms of it. The final subsection comes back to the policy documents and analyses the current trends in the policy discourse that seem to embrace areas beyond productivity and employability.

The second part is a sociological vision of power relations gathered under the title “VET for the individual: different voices, different perspectives” (3). This is composed of a subsection about voices inside colleges, and another subsection concerning the unsettled theoretical issues of this group of literature.

The third and final part is the conclusive “VET for well-being: a human development vision of education” (4). This is established by the incipient vision of education where the CA plays a role, upon which I build. This last part serves as a conclusion and a call to shift the instrumental focus of education towards one that places individuals not only as the objects, but also as the heterogeneous subjects of research. Writing the literature review through the lenses of social justice illuminates the shortcomings of economist approaches and also the complexity of alternatives put forward on the academic debate, as presented in this chapter. Although the framework that I later developed serves only as a guidance, and the criticism raised against the narrow vision of VET has been noted by other authors (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Coffield, 2008), it aims to bring unity to that body of research by giving it the language of capabilities and hence add strength to the analysis of the relationship between individual agency and social structure.

A last remark is that, despite the divisional categories used in the review, the authors here mentioned are dynamic and, consequently, their ideas should not be restrained to one fixed category. Therefore, the divisions must be understood as artificially static; the authors are placed in isolated compartments with the sole intention of helping the reader (and myself) to follow the argument.

2. VET for the economy: an instrumental view of education

The first part of the review comprises “grey literature”, comprised of policy documents, institutional websites and reports. This literature serves as a compass for national policies, with economic perspectives at their core. Terminology such
as employability, productivity, and competitiveness are frequently used when referring to college and classroom strategies\textsuperscript{13}. The literature that defines the direction for other educational policies in other countries is composed of reports which are underpinned by the human capital theory (Mincer, 1972; Becker, 1967). This paradigm is the foundation for productivistic and economic growth logic—understood as strategies where the needs of the market have taken precedence over all others—and work as paid employment has displaced alternative human values and vocations (Giddens, 1994)\textsuperscript{14}. As a consequence, the VET policy and practice in this body of literature is constrained by the notion of individuals as investment seekers, who enrol in education seeking only to increase their future labour value. Colleges are thus conceived as production centres, which provide the certifications needed to enter the market. It is under this vision that the area of skills and training has come to attention at the policy level.

Human capital theory stems from the claim that capital (understood as economic growth or the human skills to contribute to it) is the ultimate goal. Hence, colleges and individuals are driven (they are not drivers) by the economy and the market. VET becomes relevant insofar as it develops skills and helps individuals to become workers. The title of this section is, therefore, a reference to this logic.

### 2.1. Productivity at the centre: economic growth

A key way of understanding the role given to VET within policy discourses is by looking at the two agencies researching this area of education. At the European institutional level the two main institutions in charge of assembling, designing and analysing information relevant to VET are the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Training Foundation (ETF). I will discuss the pronouncements of each in turn.

\textsuperscript{13} Intriguingly, the ReferNet 2011 report on VET in Spain, which lays out the EU recommendations that Spain should undertake, used economist terms 181 times (18 economy, 35 economic, 20 finance, 6 investment, 3 productivity, 5 employability, 6 competition, 62 market and 26 demand) versus educational/social terms 159 times (124 students, 99 college, 5 pedagogy, 9 society, 8 values, 4 options and 0 well-being). It means that, based on the selection made, economist terms had a 12% higher rate of occurrence than their counterparts (ReferNet Spain & National Public Employment Service, 2012).

\textsuperscript{14} For a further definition of productivism, see Giddens (1994). For its links with VET, and the implications of this, see this reference (Anderson, 2008; McGrath, 2012b).
Established in 1975, CEDEFOP is the European Union’s institution for VET and provides the largest number of resources and analyses in relation to policies, systems, research and practice. At its origin, CEDEFOP had a twofold mission: 

[...] to collect and process documentation and disseminate existing information, and to launch studies on subjects such as youth unemployment, especially in relation to the transition from education to work. (CEDEFOP, 1976, p. 4)

From this pragmatic task, in 2012 the mission had evolved to:

Strengthen European cooperation and support the European Commission, Member States and social partners in designing and implementing policies for an attractive VET that promotes excellence and social inclusion. (CEDEFOP, 2012, online)

In comparing the missions, one can perceive two differences. Although both quotations mention the coordinative role of the CEDEFOP, in the second quotation the main purpose of the institution has expanded to the point of becoming a core element in the formation of European strategies. The second difference lies in the consideration of VET and its range of impact. In 1976, the emphasis was on the labour market (youth unemployment and the transition to work) and the term VET is not used. In comparison, in 2012 the world of work is not directly addressed and the main emphasis is in on improving VET. This indicates that education and training—VET itself—is the focus of policy strategists. The discursive change has been addressed by VET institutions in campaigns, and the consequent development of documents, focused on “increasing the attractiveness of VET” (Lasonen & Gordon, 2008). These efforts directed at renewing the image of VET need to be understood as an attempt to end the historical stigma of VET as a second-class education (McGrath & King, 2002).

To ascertain whether the removal of the labour references in CEDEFOP’s 2012 mission, in favour of the “attractiveness” of this education, corresponds to a true enlargement of VET objectives, it is worth looking at some of the titles from the CEDEFOP. “The economic benefits of VET for the individual” (CEDEFOP, 2011), is a report constituted under the premise that “VET systems have to endow workers with the right mix of skills and competences, as preventing skill shortages will enable Europe to achieve its full growth potential” (CEDEFOP, 2011, p. 1). In this report the effects of VET are quantified in relation to future
individual earnings (wages) and level of occupation attained (employment status), which are two indicators that fall under the human capital assumption that work understood as salary is the sole variable, “a standard bearer of moral meaning, it defines whether or not individuals feel worthwhile or socially valued” (Giddens, 1994, p. 175).

Therefore, looking at this body of literature one can assume that the language has been renewed but the discursive logic of VET at policy level remains attached to market demands and national growth. Policy documents continue the instrumental vision of VET as training for the market rather than a vocational education for the individual first, and society second. The grey literature constructed under the human capital principle uses research in order to find the point at which an individual’s commitment to resources in education equals a foreseeable gain in the labour market, which remains their primary focus. In the name of the economics of education, this human capital principle, based on studies by Schultz (1960), can be widely found in educational research. (López-Bazo & Moreno, 2008; Mas et al., 2002; Psacharopoulos, 1985, 1994).

The purpose of this line of work is founded on offering quantitative proof to policy makers on the economic benefits of VET. One of the reports can be taken as an example of this:

[…] in developed countries, the returns on investment in VET beyond secondary level could be of the same order of magnitude as in general tertiary education. This reinforces the message that VET is a crucial pillar in Europe’s education systems. (CEDEFOP, 2011, p. 74)

The message to extract from this is relevant for countries seeking economic reasons to maintain or foster education. In fact, it reads as if a student finishing compulsory education in Europe should not be afraid of enrolling in VET because it is an asset with which one can have the opportunity to earn as much in the future as through tertiary education. Whilst the subsequent bodies of literature here reviewed include work by authors that challenge the assumption that students are rationally economic agents, it is worrying how assertively human capital studies state their position. At the same time, the focus on economics made by the instrumental body of literature presents the value of VET based on its ability to achieve a future income, once again neglecting the value of education in a more
holistic sense, as is specially argued by the last group of authors reviewed in this chapter.

The second important EU agency in the field of VET is the European Training Foundation (ETF). This EU institution is concerned with VET policies outside the EU. Despite being a more recent agency (1994) and with a wider geographical scope, its research follows the same focus on productivity or growth principles as that of the CEDEFOP. Their website states:

[ETF] is an EU agency that helps transition and developing countries to harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems in the context of the EU’s external relations policy. (ETF, 2012)

These strategies are sustained by the assumption that there is a positive relationship between education and training and labour outcomes. Although I do not deny the evidence that the ETF along with the CEDEFOP use to support this assumption, I claim (and later provide references throughout the review) that it overlooks structural inequalities in terms of access to education and to the labour market. Furthermore, the emphasis on measurable outputs represents an obstacle to the acknowledgement of a non-market-based value of VET.

A critical voice against the homogeneity of ideas in European agencies comes from McNeely (1995). Her work alerts us to the role of international organisations as intellectual actors whose ideas dominate national strategies as well as shape the future work of academics and experts. This is complemented by the work of Ertl (2002), who criticises the role of European agencies and talks about them having a double role, with the hidden financial one being predominant. Consequently, the EU educational policy is an important tool for achieving “hidden goals” (Ertl, 2002, p. 12), such as economic agreements on the free movement of goods, capital and services that have been made in advance and are covered by educational strategies or, as in this case, training and skills initiatives.

The presence of economics at the centre of VET strategies gives rise to the general concern that the grey and dominant body of literature responds to a vision of individuals as “homo economicus”15, as someone seeking education and

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15 The term homo economics is, according to Sen (1977, p. 321), a long established assumption which provides motivation for many recent exercises in economic theory today. Sen shows the irrationality of considering that, through their actions, humans seek only to increase their utility.
training only as a way to increase their individual utility in the labour market (Walker & Nixon, 2004; Sen, 1977). Relegating education in terms of being “good for” something else reveals that, in the human capital discourse, education has a dispensable value. In this sense, VET is good insofar as it can prove itself good for other purposes. This assessment leaves no room for non-immediate and not directly measurable spheres, such as social returns or individual enhancement.

Economic austerity has put VET in the spotlight and has urged this education to pursue an immediate response to youth unemployment. Therefore, it seems more important now than ever to be reminded that, although education can enhance human capital, “people benefit from education and work in ways that exceed its role in human capital for commodity production” (Walker, 2012b, p. 389). As Stevenson (1993) argued two decades ago:

It needs to be debated whether the secret to our success as a nation lies in our continued exploitation of scarce resources, adding economic value before export, in competition with other countries, all trying to do the same thing. … We need to decide if, rather, … the key to economic success (resides) in solutions which value conservation, sensitivity, cooperation, sharing, valuing leisure and activities which add quality to our lives, supporting small scale enterprise, and pursuing interests unable to be defined or taught as competencies. Then we need to relate such aspirations to the goals of vocational education. (Stevenson, 1993, p. 91)

The design of reports for analytical proven positive sums often leads to worrying conclusions as the following example proves. In a paper prepared as part of the analytical phase of a policy analysis, Hoeckel (2008) reviewed the costs of providing VET and contrasted those with the associated benefits to a company that provides VET training on its premises. The survey used to account for these benefits included, *inter alia*, social and economic aspects such as: personal development, efficiency on the job, networking and better earnings. The conclusions stated that overall it was difficult to establish a causal connection between VET and changes in sales, productivity and other profit measures because there were many factors besides training which could have influenced them and this uncertainty was extended to the benefits of VET on the individual in terms of future earnings. Therefore, it concluded with: “Is it worthwhile to invest in VET? This question remains open at this stage” (Hoeckel, 2008, p. 4).
The question about emphasising the measurable returns in education is always relevant but more so in a national context with a highly subsidised education. Such is the case of Spanish VET, which is co-financed (up to 60%) by the European Social Fund (ESF), and is therefore highly dependent on and influenced by external policy. Evidence of this dependence are the continuous educational changes, seven in 35 years\textsuperscript{16}, and their links with higher European strategies (El País, 2013e).

Following the path set by the Lisbon Agenda, in 2002 the Spanish Organic Law 5/2002, “Ley de las Cualificaciones y de la Formación Profesional” was approved. The law allowed individuals to obtain a VET diploma by demonstrating experience, without the need to undertake formal or regulated training. The impact of this law, human capital logic pertained, would be that an increase in the number of certified skilled workers would automatically translate into competitiveness and also a reduction in unemployment\textsuperscript{17}. In this law, the intrinsic value of having a college education, the impact of it on the autonomy of the individual, and even the wider social impact (i.e. increase in her or his political participation) were aspects that were not considered. However, little has improved since then and, in 2012, new reforms are underway at the European and Spanish level. Europe 2020 is the new vehicle for European growth and competitiveness (EC, 2010). Based on the recommendations listed on the official website, Spain has nine areas to work on, one of which relates to education:

> Structural weaknesses in the education and training systems have contributed to the high youth unemployment rate and are still largely unresolved. Spain needs to implement all the planned reforms in the area of education. (European Commission, 2010)

The above comment reflects that not only is VET in the spotlight, but it is also portrayed as being responsible for the soaring numbers in youth unemployment. Within this logic, reforms that emphasise the relation between education and the

\textsuperscript{16} The subject of religion, the relation between public and private education and the access to different educational paths, have been central to the debates. For further references on the reforms and the relation with governmental changes see El País (2013e).

\textsuperscript{17} To read some of the criticisms to the reform for making college-based VET redundant, see the special in El Mundo (2001) or a later reference written by a Spanish Trade Union (CCOO, 2013).
labour market are the planned solutions. As the working European Commission documents state, in reference to the strategies for better skills, growth and jobs (2012):

Member States and other stakeholders (have to) put into practice the reforms needed to exploit the potential of VET for growth [...] Skills are a key driver for growth, employment and competitiveness: they lay the foundation for productivity and innovation. (European Commission, 2012, pp. 1 - 4)

The new Spanish educational reform, the 8/2013 Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE), is Spain’s response to EC demands for skills for growth stated above. The law, developed by the ruling conservative party, calls for “free ideological debate”, but at the same time relies solely on the European documents because they consider them “objective studies”.

The review of literature up to now has focused attention on the weight and political direction of the human capital theory, which underpins what are here referred to as “objective studies”. The Spanish educational reform follows, therefore, the instrumental view of education provided by the human capital paradigm:

The objectivity of international comparative studies, leads to a reform of the education system free from the ideological debates that have impeded progress in recent years [...] international studies show that the countries that have improved the quality of their education systems relatively quickly have implemented measures aiming to simplify the curriculum and reinforce instrumental knowledge in education. (LOMCE, 2013, sec. V)

Consequently, the LOMCE, far from being ideologically free, builds upon the human capital paradigm of economic growth as the ultimate goal and, accordingly, calls for a reinforcement of the instrumental character of education. It is under this mind-set of instrumental and training for growth, that VET becomes relevant under LOMCE. As the law states:

The main difference of the Spanish educational system with others lies in the particularly low number of students in VET. This inevitably affects the employability and competitiveness of our economy, limiting the life choices of many young people. (LOMCE, 2013, sec. XIII)
Therefore, according to European and Spanish educational strategies, revitalising the VET option is the way to boost economies and, at the same time, provide young people with choices.

It is relevant to conclude by remembering the previous references to Ertl (2002) and McNeely (1995), who alerted us to the influence and the hidden economic goals of this discourse. The grey literature reviewed here shows that VET is in the spotlight thanks to the human capital logic, which assumes that training leads to growth and hence to competitiveness. This view narrows the concept of education to merely serving market needs, and the concept of the students as being economically driven actors. With analytically proven results and country comparison reports, this body of literature portrays the lack of skills as the reason for the national recession, and VET as the remedy for unemployment.

2.2. Employability: training and skills for growth

The previous section addressed the main paradigm of the human capital model: economic growth. This section on employability, addresses the second paradigm: the acquisition of skills and training for obtaining remunerated work.

The origins of the term “employability” are disputed; there were already references to it in the 60s (Gazier, 1998). However, there seems to be a consensus that the big discursive shift from speaking about “employment” to speaking about “employability” dates from the end of the 90s (Bonvin & Galster, 2010; McGrath, 2009). Generally, employability is defined as a matter of individual skills to be acquired for work and it can be subdivided into various typologies according to different authors (Bonvin & Galster, 2010; McGrath, 2009; Gazier, 1998). As Yorke suggests, (2004) employability is:

[a] set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (Yorke, 2004, p. 7)

As noted in the previous section, in the light of the idea of training for economic growth, there is extensive literature indicating the benefits of education in terms of future revenues in the labour market.
Focusing specifically on VET transitions in Spain, Lassibille et al. (2001) study the transitions from college to work, finding that those with a VET qualification were more likely to find a job earlier than University students. Contrarily, Albert et al. (2008) conclude that higher educational investment in terms of years of education increases the chances of obtaining a job in Spain. Finally, the study by Caparrós et al. (2010) draws attention to the benefits of training insofar as it allows individuals to increase their chances of both finding work and obtaining higher salaries throughout their lives. For the Spanish case, the early paper by Petrongolo and San Segundo (2002) explores the determinants of labour market conditions on the demand for post-compulsory education (ages 16 to 18) using cross-sectional data. This paper was later complemented by Aparicio (2010), who concluded that the employment opportunities and sharp increase in wages in the construction sector in Spain were directly relevant in inducing more youngsters to drop out of the educational system, as was noted in the context chapter.

A critical view of this tendency to measure education in terms of the time taken to find employment or the amount of future income is given in the book edited by Keune and Serrano (2014). This volume provides a discussion on the use of language in labour strategies, the ethical theories upon which it is built, and the ideas that it transmits about work and unemployment. Accordingly, the chapters by Salais (2014) and Zimmerman (2014) are especially relevant for their emphasis on the implications for social justice and the use of the CA as an alternative framework.

Whilst the direct link between years of education, increase of skills, and individual employability is rooted in the international literature (Brown et al., 2004; CES, 2009), few studies consider the existence of barriers outside students’ control that might determine their employability beforehand. The employability discourse is based on the perception that labour market chances among young people is “positively determined by their educational attainments” (Reeskens & Oorschot, 2012, p. 381). Like productivism and other economist terms, employability is embedded in an individualistic and human capital logic that includes an economic orientation to life, understood in this case as remunerated work. The focus pursued by employability, based on the normative assumption that increasing people’s skills leads to furthering a country’s growth, leaves no
room to discuss the reasons why women are persistently disadvantaged in labour market positions (Arulampalam et al., 2007) or the reasons for structural discrimination for non-majority groups in the labour market (Heath et al., 2008; Hirschman, 2001) or the unemployment of highly-skilled workers, as noted in the previous chapter when referring to emigration rates.

The Anglophone literature on VET has widely criticised the focus on employability in VET curricula both in terms of its theoretical power and its practical efficacy (Brockmann, 2011; Brockmann et al., 2009; Unwin et al., 2004; Colley et al., 2003). Nonetheless, McGrath’s (2012b) review of the main limitations is worth quoting at length as a summary of the deficiencies noted by the literature at large:

> It is too individualistic in its assumptions regarding its chief goal of employability. It is too short-term in its focus on immediate employability rather than lifelong processes. It is too focused on a particular model of work as paid employment, with very serious gender implications […] It is too uninterested in wider questions of preparation for the good life, ignoring the capabilities of a particular individual. It is unsustainable in the face of major global challenges regarding environmental degradation and climate change, which it domesticates as skills for green jobs. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence that the reforms have had significant positive impacts on either economic competitiveness or social inclusion. (McGrath, 2012b, p. 3)

Employability, understood as the growth of skills and hence the growth of individual productivity, is constructed under the flawed human capital assumption of the market as efficient. The context of Spain reveals these employability assumptions to be fraudulent in two senses. Firstly, by assuming that it places people in socially and individually remunerating jobs, even though there is job scarcity. Secondly, by providing the illusion of equal opportunities, ignoring gender, regional and background differences. Although the literature concerning the inefficiency of the market in ensuring equal opportunities is noted throughout the review, it will be analysed further in a later section (Section 3). Consequently, I now address the literature concerning the first issue of the individual in relation to the labour market, or more generally, to society.

Hinchcliffe (2013) provides an interesting critique of the employability discourse, which is relevant as it is expanded on in this research. He points out how
employers’ values are rather different from the stereotypical policy messages defined by market needs, skills specialisation and productivity growth. Hinchcliffe (2013) claims that employers consider that the employability values should include attributes such as diversity and environmental and global awareness. Research focused on the transition from higher education to the labour market has raised similar questions over what employers expect and demand from graduates, and their overall effectiveness in gathering and making use of students’ skills in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2012; Morley & Aynsley, 2007; Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

Having said that, my research aims, under a social justice framework, to contribute to this incipient discussion in the literature on the values of education and training, the practices of teachers and the demands of future employers (Hollywood et al., 2012; Bonvin & Galster, 2010; Tomlinson, 2005). A discussion where the considered market demands are contested by qualitative research and scrutinised through the social justice lenses. In my research, with a sample of six employers, I seek to redress the marginalisation of employers’ voices in the literature and challenge mainstream economistic and individualised understandings of employability and making people ready for work.

Another aspect that a social justice framework brings to the analysis of work is the moral relation individuals have with it. Regarding its ideological basis, employability 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 (Fineman & Grear, 2013; WB, 2012). The term “responsibilisation” (Gray, 2005; Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 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 “prevention” are both placed on the individual. 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 of effect, Bonvin (2006), together with 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. Taking that into consideration, vulnerability is not an intrinsic human condition that States need to make provision for (Fineman, 2013) but rather the result of a series of bad individual choices. Contrary to this, the capability theory maintains that this individualistic view ignores a core group of entitlements in which security to be and to become is central, and which must be fulfilled for each individual to be able to exercise their humanity (Nussbaum, 1998). This means that institutions, and society in general, have a duty to acknowledge human vulnerability and provide the space and capabilities for individuals to be fully realised.

In Spain, the work of Crespo and Serrano (2002) offers a comprehensive criticism of the European discourses and specifically notes that employability, “turns social problems into personal problems” (p.193). In this way social problems are reduced to economic problems (unemployment), and the solution to them is presented as being in the hands of the individual. Responsibilisation for success becomes convenient in a scenario of job scarcity (Giroux, 2001). By focusing on the success of the individual at the expense of the social, the rhetoric makes institutions invisible, their roles and the power of the structures, and ends up abetting a “politics of responsibilisation” (Sultana, 2011).

In fact, in an increasingly jobless society in which educational budgets are under threat, the promotion of VET as skills for growth, within a discourse of individual responsibility, is timely. However, it reflects an ideology of work and an image of the labour market as a transparent place that is not the reality for the vast majority of people living in Spain. As Standing (2011, 2012) observes, referring to the world of work, the eagerness for economist arrangements has led to the rise of a new social class:
It consists of millions and millions—and many more who are joining its ranks in the wake of the global financial crisis—who live precariously. The model type consists of those who move between temporary ‘jobs’, labour part-time, do sub-contracted labour, are recipients of outsourced jobs and so on. They are ‘jobholders’ at best, flitting between activities that offer them no coherence or human development. Their labour is instrumental. […] Their situation reminds one of an insight of John Stuart Mill in the mid–19th century, when he said that “under capitalism socially dominated workers would be reduced to want what society wanted them to want. A worker in such circumstances is perpetually a child ... the approved condition of the working class.” This is the precariat. (Standing, 2012, pp. 72–73)

The relegation of education and skills to the supposed needs of the market in conjunction with the responsibilisation of the individual to acquire both, leads to a pervasive logic in which individual training is the panacea for solving the Spanish crisis (Martín Criado, 2000; Serrano Pascual, 2000). Under this instrumental logic, human capital theory advocates the idea that VET is needed because individuals must increase their employability in order to trigger national competitiveness and growth. Additionally, as Wringe (1991) observed, it confuses work as an ultimate goal, whereas some kinds of work “are not constitutive of the good life and are at best a necessary evil” (p. 37). The argument supports Dale’s (1985) criticism of what he referred to as “new vocationalism” and implies that the new VET revival comes attached with a concept of individual responsibility in which structures and qualities are left behind and numbers prioritised.

The last section of the instrumental view of VET responds to the current trend in literature whereby human capital has acknowledged the implications of education beyond the space of growth or employment.

**2.3. Social inclusion: other benefits**

The first work to be addressed in the review of the literatures concerned the relationship between VET and economic growth; the second addressed the relationship between VET and the labour market and now, this third and final section is dedicated to literature which, although still framed around growth, transcends the economic sphere and points to the social benefits of VET. This section represents the nuanced approach to the human capital theory in which the language of social cohesion, well-being and equality goes together with the
fostering of economic growth. The logic is set out by McGrath (2012b) as follows:

The assumption in productivist approaches is that training leads to productivity, [which] leads to economic growth (training-for-growth) and also that skills lead to employability [which] leads to jobs (skills-for-work) and thereby reduces poverty and unemployment. (McGrath, 2012b, p. 624)

In 2000 with the beginning of the Lisbon European Council, VET became the flagship for ensuring not only the EU’s competitiveness understood in economic terms (as seen in the previous two sections) but also social cohesion. The Copenhagen Declaration, launched in 2002, announced that VET:

[...] is an instrument for strengthening Europe's competitive power worldwide and as a guarantee for ensuring the cohesion of our societies and the full development of its citizens. (EC, 2002, p. 1)

The revision about the benefits of VET made by what is known in this thesis as the instrumental body of literature, have been here argued to correspond to an economic focus where individual values and societal well-being is a consequence of growth, rather than to a transformative one in which these goals are placed in the centre. By including the area of social cohesion in a second sphere after competitiveness, the EU turns social problems into a technical linguistic debate. However, as Nieuwenhuis & Shapiro (2004, p. 58) warn us, VET needs a complete revision, but this revision should “not be merely a technical debate; societal and political issues are at stake”. Human capital theorists now recognise the criticism that an exclusive focus on growth and employment is too reductive to be able to assess the growth of countries (King, 2011). However, as Walker notes (2012a) “it remains philosophically and normatively wedded to seeing people first and foremost as the means to an end of economic productivity” (192).

Reviewing the 2002 Copenhagen declaration presented above, the first part builds on the vision of education for economic growth already noted. However, the discursive turn comes in the words “cohesion” and “full development”. Following the Lisbon and Nice summits in 2000 and 2001, the European Commission ordered each member to produce plans to facilitate participation in employment and access to resources, rights, goods and services; prevent the risks of exclusion; help the most vulnerable and mobilise all relevant bodies to overcome exclusion
(EC, 2002). Education, and specifically VET, then entered the spotlight as a means of increasing employment and became viewed as a vehicle for preventing social exclusion.

The impacts of the discursive changes of the policy literature of the Spanish national legislation can be detected because, as mentioned before, the EU is the compass for national strategies. In 2008, with the launch of the new Route of VET (in Spanish, Hoja de Ruta), the Ministry of Education stated that the aim was to provide a VET that “fosters quality jobs and creates growth and well-being in society” (MEC, 2008). The inclusion of the word “quality” in reference to jobs is noteworthy as a step beyond the discourse of mere employability. A similar tone was used in 2009 when the Spanish Ministry of Education designed a national Spanish Plan for Inclusion in order to make VET an: “[...] instrument that permits the generation of a beneficial circle between growth, employment and equality in our society” (MSSSI, 2009, p. 10).

The language and the position of the words reveal a human capital understanding of VET as a tool that prioritises growth before employment and before equality. However, it has moved the policy debate to the issue of equality. This inclusion of equality in the national agenda reached the Spanish Ministry, which subsequently launched a Spanish campaign addressing VET gender divergences in the classrooms (MSSSI, 2010). Although it is important to recognise these initiatives as a response to growth-based and productivity-oriented criticisms, one needs to bear in mind that the theoretical underpinnings that continue to position capital at the centre, constrain and limit the policy documents and the future educational actions. In fact, when the data of female enrolment in VET during the academic year 2011-2012 is compared, a clear division of female/male occupations is still present. Out of total enrolments in VET, 46% are women. Inside the classroom, the gender divisions are highly marked. Occupations traditionally seen as “female”, such as Community Services (90.9%), Textile (87.3%) or Health (85.3%) are still mainly attended by women, and their presence is reduced in those occupations seen as “male”, such as Auto maintenance (1.8%), Production and Service Maintenance (2.2%), Information and Technology (2.2%) or Electronics and Electricity (2.5%) (MEC, 2012). The divisions reflect that formal education does not react against the stereotyping culture of female gender
occupations, emotional labour, low status and poor pay and hence these are transmitted and learned by the students (Colley et al., 2003).

Returning to the role of international organisations in this debate, there are also signs of an acknowledgement that education, and VET in particular, is not merely technical and for the markets but also educational and for society. The establishment, in 2000, of the UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training can be seen to represent institutional will to widen the impact of VET further than economic growth. A UNESCO branch exclusively dedicated to VET is a step towards recognising that VET is part of a general education and is, therefore, a contributor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and part of the Education for All (EFA) agenda, which was adopted in Dakar in 2000. As the UNEVOC states, it was necessary to develop VET in relation to the MDGs because:

> Technical and vocational education and training has fuelled extraordinary economic growth in some countries but has fallen short of expectations in others. Phenomena such as globalisation and major problems associated with youth unemployment have prompted governments to take a renewed interest in TVET policy and practice as an important part of the development agenda. (UNESCO - UNEVOC, 2008, p. 1)

Similarly, in 2012 the EFA Global Monitoring Report directly recognised the need for: “Vocational programmes across OECD countries […] being redesigned to achieve the right mix of specific skills and broad problem-solving capabilities” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 63). To conclude the argument, there is a revival of VET which is accompanied by a nuanced approach towards human capital discourse, the World Bank (in their World Development Reports) reviewed the relevance of jobs and the education linked to them not only in terms of productivity, but also in terms of individual living standards and social cohesion (WB, 2012). The next section builds up on this area in which VET’s role and purpose goes beyond the economic sphere.

### 2.4. Place for optimism

After having reviewed some institutions, reports and strategies, I conclude that even though the Spanish strategies seem focused on applying a narrow vision of VET with the sole target of employment, there is a small space for optimism by looking at the evolution in the strategies’ discourses. This hope comes from an
increased awareness of the limits of growth and in a broader perception of the purposes of VET beyond economic returns. The “instrumental” body of literature admits that VET is too often linked to productivism (Hyland, 2014; King, 2011), but the discussions are still framed within an instrumental mind-set where growth—renamed competitiveness, training, or employability—remains the national priority whilst, at the same time, it is the responsibility of the individual to acquire it.

Consequently, from this first part I extract a mixture of impressions but with a certainty that, at the policy level, there remains a lot to be debated. On the one hand, one needs to acknowledge that the work of institutions has overcome past difficulties such as the difficulty of compiling national VET strategies under the European framework and consequently of incorporating VET into the educational discussion. On the other hand, the language in which attention to VET is framed (i.e. impact, growth, benefit, employability, productivity, etc.) is evidence that, rather than being seen as having value in itself, VET is fostered because of its contribution to the economy.

All societies must invest in their most valuable assets: their people. Education plays a critical role in enhancing economic competitiveness and growth, facilitating personal development and building strong and healthy societies. (OECD, 2006, p. 5)

Under the human capital discourse, the relationship between education and economy is linear. Education provides economic strength, which leads to personal improvement, and this trickles down to create healthy, working societies. This linear equation fails to explain situations like the one in Spain, a country that has a constant increase in educational enrolments, but in terms of inequality the distance between the richest 20% of the population and the poorest 20% has noticeably worsened. Since 2001, this distance has been acknowledged to be the highest in the EU-27 countries. Regarding the last report of Exclusion and Social Development by Caritas (2012), inequality in Spain is double that of France, triple that of Germany, and five times the EU-15 average. Notions of education, and specifically VET, as a miracle cure for all young people who are unemployed, 18

An example of this is the launching, in February 2012, of the World Education Congress in Mumbai. This world congress engages a wide community of scholars and analysts around the theme “Evolving trends in Education”, with the main goal of establishing the relationship between education and well-being.
under the promise of access to “good jobs” and the later social cohesion that this is supposed to open up and lead to, is simply not automatic nor a given. The work of a number of researchers into VET, which the second body of literature gives a brief introduction to, suggests that, despite the promises the path is rather difficult and far more complex for students as well as for practitioners (Bathmaker & Avis, 2007).

The next section comprises the second body of literature, which gives a voice to those who form VET.

3. VET for the individual: different voices, different perspectives

This strand of literature contrasts with the previous one, not only in the subject of research but also in terms of actors, methodology and geographical scope. The first account was built by institutional bodies using quantitative methods in pursuit of evidence of economic and social return. The so-called “VET for the individual” body of literature is composed by academics and practitioners and relies mainly on qualitative methodology and sociology theories to portray VET experiences. The individualised and localised character of this literature leaves little room for comparative studies, which has raised criticism amongst VET scholars (Souto-Otero, 2010; Ertl, 2002; Winch, 2000). This section is divided into two parts: one dedicated to literature about what happens in colleges and the practices within it; and a second, which serves as a conclusion about the gaps in this literature and the need for further research.

3.1. Inside the College: students and practitioners

On one hand, this section relies on research provided by The Teaching and Learning Research Program (TLRP)19; on the other, a diverse range of Spanish academics whose research (although not specifically about VET) includes references to education and training. The literature presented here reveals a debate about the meaning of vocational education for individuals: their aspirations; the reasons for dropping out; or the “ducking and diving” between courses that typify much student participation in VET (Salisbury, 2001; Bloomer & Hodkinson,

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19 The Teaching and Learning Research Programme was an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project that started in the UK in 1999 and provided research up to 2012. It had six distinct aims related to performing and promoting excellent educational research and ensuring that it was used to enhance learning. The TLRP studied a broad range of learning outcomes and supported research on many ages of stages in education, training and lifelong learning. VET research was, in fact, a part of TLRP’s area of work. Further information at TLRP (1999)
This body of the literature moves from VET as an institution to offer a vision of the horizons of learning (Hodkinson, 1998) that VET provides. Students are, hence, not passive and secondary to the market elements, but rather individual agents with their own values and opportunities.

In the previous section, I dealt with a body of literature centred on policy documents and literature generally based on quantitative methods and which aimed to show the economic benefits of VET. Here I discuss literature that, by using mostly qualitative research, contests the conceptualisation of a student taking decisions based on future revenues (human capital theory) to replace it with a conceptualisation where student decisions are affected by numerous variables beyond the economic sphere (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Individual agency becomes an important object of research. Drawing on theories of social learning, Bloomer (1998) uses case studies of VET students to observe the relationship between teachers and students, and establishes that places of learning are not only determined by formal spaces and formal relations. Although VET is portrayed as an additional experience to be included among learning lives, learning trajectories and learning careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Gorard et al., 1999), the research highlights the role of VET in expanding the individual and overcoming structural (personal, familiar, and societal) inequalities, in addition to the social structures that position students’ identity in the College as well as in the labour market (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Willott & Stevenson, 2006).

Although the Spanish literature dealing with VET students’ perceptions in the classroom is, to my knowledge, very limited, there are some relevant studies that shed light on which factors influence students’ transitions to post-compulsory education and reveal how equality and individual values are ignored in the purely instrumental vision. The Spanish strand relies on quantitative studies to highlight that factors such as background, gender or socio-economic status are at stake in students’ decisions about their chosen academic or vocational path in post-compulsory education (Mena Martínez et al., 2010). Discussion of inequalities in terms of social class (Escudero, 2009; García, 2007) or ethnicity (Cachón Rodríguez, 2009; Calero et al., 2009; Figuera Gazo, 2006) enrich the debate about the factors affecting post-secondary educational progress and offer grounds for contesting the human capital assumption of homogeneity amongst individuals.
Calero (2006, 2008) in his research about inequality in educational transitions in Spain, concludes that structural factors external to the individual and related to the labour practices, such as being a male or living in a coastal area, are highly determinant factors in enrolment in VET. His research gives weight to the data presented in the context chapter about structural divergences in terms of opportunities according to location and origin.

Regarding VET students’ transition to the labour market, Calero and Waisgrais (2008) analyse data about Spain from the European Union Households Panel (ECHP) to assess the relationship between the level of education and professional status and income. From a document and policy analysis, Cruz-Castro (2000) provides a comparative analysis on the UK and Spain about how VET transitions to the labour market differ.

However, the Spanish literature falls short on qualitative research and none of the Spanish studies seem to provide a space for student’s voices. For example, Wölfl (2013) refers to the 2012 OECD Economic Survey of Spain to identify the weaknesses in the Spanish youth labour market but relies entirely on a quantitative methodology to analyse it.

The research undertaken by García-Pérez and Muñoz Bullón (2007) is relevant as far as it points out the drawbacks of a pure focus on jobs by being critical of the quality of jobs being performed after finishing VET college. In the words of their authors:

> Temporary jobs do not constitute stepping stones towards permanent employment, since the probability of obtaining a permanent job decreases with repeated temporary jobs, especially when the number of accumulated temporary contracts is large. (Garcia-Perez & Bullon, 2007, p. 15)

With a specific gender focus, Lopez-Mayan and Nicodemo (2013) researched the beginning of VET students’ labour careers in Spain. Although their conclusions lack information regarding the quality and value young workers attribute to their jobs, the results show the persistence of gender disparities for VET students in the Spanish labour market. Their conclusion is that two of the main variables negatively affecting the chances for employment after finishing VET are “being a female or finishing vocational education older” (2013, p. 14). Lacking follow-on research to investigate how inequalities and barriers affect the daily-life decisions
of young people, the review of this literature shows that there is a need for Spanish VET policy to include discourse on the existence of structural inequalities in terms of students’ educational decisions and transitions to the labour market.

The body of literature about college life, which centres on students, is also interlinked with the research about teachers and the concept and of professionalism. Bathmaker and Avis (2007) and Finlay et al. (1998, 2007) provide an insight into the daily identity tensions dealt with by VET practitioners. Being a VET practitioner is seen as an on-going project (Colley, 2002) in which their role as student-carer (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004a) must be balanced with an identity formed by former professional experiences, often outside education (Spenceley, 2006; Gleeson et al., 2005; Clow, 2001). Additionally, the literature notes that VET teachers are confronted by the need to balance policy and practice in such a way that teachers end up being “strategic operators, seeking to contest the spaces and contradictions of market, managerial and audit cultures” (Gleeson & Knights, 2006, p. 277). Alongside these tensions, Robson et al. (2004), in their qualitative study about professionalism in vocational colleges, found that practitioners had a shared voice in their demand to go beyond the syllabus in favour of embracing emotional aspects. I seek to further contribute to this area with interviews of VET practitioners and the values they attach to VET and, by so doing, make a contribution to the Spanish VET literature.

Whilst the aspect of VET practitioners’ emotional labour and its vital role in the colleges has a solid body of research in the Anglophone literature (Jephcote et al., 2008; Colley, 2006; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Clow, 2001), there is little evidence of specific research about the daily decisions and challenges of VET practitioners in Spain. The literature about the topic seems primarily focused on a pedagogical debate about competences and classroom approaches, which do not correspond with the realities of diversity in college (Gimeno Sacristán, 2010; Marcelo, 2002; García, 1992). The research that has been found on search engines and Spanish journals is not up-to-date and corresponds more to a legislative analysis rather than to practitioners’ demands and experiences. Examples of this are found in the work of Franci i Carrete (1997) and Climent López (1997) which reflects theoretically on educational changes linked to the continuous educational reforms and their implications for VET practitioners.
The last strand of literature to consider in assessing the VET experience is the mandatory placement in a company that VET students in Spain have to undertake. The placement module consists of a mandatory period of in-company training that VET students perform during the last semester of their education. This mandatory part of the studies occurs outside the College and for a period that lasts from three to six months. It is during that time that I carried out the second round of interviews with the students.

Although the placement in a company is a feature of the Spanish VET, it is common to find that research undertaken about students’ placements is largely based on comparisons (on a theoretical level) with other European VET apprentice models, in discussions on how Spain might adopt the German dual system of VET (CCOO, 2013; Acero Sáez, 1994). Regardless of its national or international focus, the Spanish literature is overwhelmingly concerned with the legislative or the formal procedures of the placement module rather than with the educational experiences occurring within it (González Veiga, et al., 2006; Usarralde, 2000; Alemany, 1990). According to my knowledge, only a handful of research studies have been undertaken which incorporate case studies. Of these, Gonzalez et al. (2006), investigate the role of training in workplaces in the labour market and carry out field work to assess the opinion of students about their placement. Larger scale research is reported in the doctoral thesis of Gil Rodriguez (2005), who analysed students’ experiences during the placement period, and Zurita Morales (2006) who, in a quantitative approach, researched the value and impact of this module on 400 pupils, 100 teachers and 300 in-company tutors. Marhuenda Fluixá (2002) builds on a historical approach to the in-company training and features two case studies to analyse the different interests put into the design of placements in a company as a mandatory module. In relation to the general assumption that the placements are a module for the students, Marhuenda Fluixá (2002) remarks that:

[The placement] is a white lie: placements are not designed by taking into account the students, and their needs. They are planned and reformed under basic labour arguments (transition to work, human resource). They are based on utilitarian considerations which, generally, ignore educational factors. (Marhuenda Fluixá, 2002, p. 49)
The next section offers a review about the literature centred on student placements, their transition to work and the experiences of practitioners in the classroom.

3.2. VET for the individual: some unchallenged conclusions

The literature reviewed in the previous section has revealed concern with the experiences of students and practitioners and also their struggles to remain in the College and access the labour market. The authors recognise that inequalities in terms of gender, background or social-class are determinants in educational and also individual labour opportunities. Furthermore experiences inside colleges are seen as relevant to understanding what, beyond economics, influences students. Whilst the section above touched on all these topics, it also showed that there is a lack of synergy between the different strands. This section uses the lenses of social justice in an attempt to categorise the authors reviewed and to conclude the paradoxical situation that this literature leads us to. On the one hand, the work reviewed reveals the existence of inequalities embedded in VET as well as in the labour market; on the other, there is no common agreement amongst these authors to challenge the theoretical foundations of growth that underpin current VET strategies.

The commonality and wide concern among the authors is that the perception and design of VET as a second-class classification may be reproducing social inequalities (Fernández Enguita et al., 2010; Hyland, 2008). Policy reports showed an increasing concern about the perception of VET as second class, by adding the area of “social cohesion”. In fact, as noted when referring to the Lisbon Strategy and the institutional discursive changes, attractiveness was at the forefront of the VET campaign. The concept of “attractiveness” is defined in the CEDEFOP reports as:

VET attractiveness means that VET is of interest to people, i.e. people [...] have some knowledge of it, consider its existence legitimate in the educational landscape, and have a good opinion of it and of VET qualification holders. (Pascaline & Tchilbozo, 2009, p. 76)

According to the response above, perceptions about how VET is perceived, rather than a real re-direction of VET is what is being targeted. However, the body of literature reviewed in Section 3 “VET for the individual: different voices,
different perspectives” suggests that the changes needed in VET are not only a matter of perceptions, but also need to be foundational. The opportunities that VET students have are, in fact, not only a matter of the individual and her level of education but also are subjected to class, ethnic and gender structures, which VET has a responsibility to take into account. (Colley et al., 2003, p. 491). Consequently, a greater affirmative action needs to be implemented.

Previously, I referred to the twofold deficiencies in the human capital theory. The first being the false assumption that jobs exist and that people have full control of, and responsibility for, their own future; the second is the false idea of the market as a regulator that ensures equal opportunities. The debate about transitions, college experiences and even access to VET presented by this group of authors indicates that the concept of fairness and transparency is far from being a reality for many students.

This journey into the literature has seen a progression from the understanding of VET as an education for fostering the well-being of the economy, to it being an education that carries the weight of pre-ordered societal arrangements. In a nutshell, the three main cores of research that I have identified within Section 2 and Section 3 are:

- The power of VET for economic growth, employment and even social cohesion
- The complexity of VET teaching and learning cultures
- Educational and labour inequalities that go beyond an individuals’ realm of achievement.

It is within these three points where the real challenge for VET lies today. If VET is to respond to society, to the students and also to the economy, strategies should go beyond students’ labour positioning, experiences or “attractiveness”. The solution comes from understanding the close relationship between the divisional categories that I have created for encompassing the bodies of literature. I depart from the assumption that all these demands are closely intertwined and one needs to concentrate on the commonalities they share. Therefore, in order to provide the experience of a good practitioner, an educated and motivated student and a fruitful employer, VET needs to be reshaped in a way that helps every individual
accomplish a self-valued productive and remunerated activity. With that idea, I move on to the final part of the analysis, which draws on theories of social justice and human development.

4. VET for well-being: a human development vision of education

From a more philosophical perspective there is also a small, but increasing, amount of work that endeavours to consider the relationships between work, policies, the economy, and social patterns (Winch & Hyland, 2007; Varsori, 2004; Green, 1990). The originality of this body of literature is in challenging the foundations of educational policies so that the design of VET “cannot be a simple matter of a technical recipe to aid economic growth, but touches on the heart of what any society is about” (Winch, 2000, p. 121). The epistemological turn from economic to human development implies an evaluation of VET as a long-term project, upon which society is built. It implies a radical change of perception in which VET becomes a place not for reproducing modern society, but for creating the society we want to live in. From this human development perspective this body of literature understands VET students as: “[…] far more than empty slates enrolling in VET colleges in the anxious hope that they will be filled with the skills needed to become productive future workers” (Powell & McGrath, 2013, p. 6).

The first steps are, in fact, to break the stigma against VET, as agreed by the authors that compose the two previous bodies of literatures reviews. However, this last body of literature proposes accomplishing this by building upon the criticisms raised in the second body, namely that VET classrooms are a representation of social-class divisions, and to challenge the so-called academic vocational divide which views liberal education as a superior and intrinsically more valuable and VET as instrumental and limited to practical pursuits (Lewis, 1991). Within this divided and reductionist conceptualisation of VET as a practical and employable education, the structural, funding or curriculum reforms that are put forward on VET can hardly succeed in enhancing students’ opportunities in a full sense. Therefore, the change needs to address the value that VET has—not just for the economy—but specifically for the individual, in order
to break the division between academic and vocational education (Hyland, 2014; Winch & Hyland, 2007; Best, 1998).

An example of this approach is the book “Education for All” (Pring et al., 2009), where the author provides a list of suggestions for VET educational stakeholders in England and Wales. Although the book presents itself as a set of recommendations it is, in my opinion, a step forward. It takes the questions raised by the “VET for the individual” body of literature (Section 3) and uses them to challenge the foundations of the “VET for the economy” body of literature (Section 2). Following liberal traditions, the authors establish that education goes beyond skills:

> A skilled person might be disposed to use those skills for bad ends. In reviewing the aims of 14-19 education and training, we need to address the question about what it means to be a person and to be one more fully. (Pring et al., 2009, pp. 12–13)

The work encompassed by this section represents a discursive and theoretical shift in VET. The language stops being about the value of VET in terms of results, resources or employment to being centred on its role and response to the future by producing professionals who can lead and change people’s lives and help them flourish (Walker & McLean, 2013). In so doing, VET strategy moves from a VET system that is narrowly utilitarian and instrumentalist to the development of human and economically relevant abilities (Winch, 2000; Brockmann et al., 2009). Education is thus understood and valued on the basis of individual and collective development that transcends the individualistic character presented under the human capital theory. A student, becomes someone who participates in the construction of her life in a way that is significant for society as a whole (Nussbaum, 1998). One pillar of the literature encompassed by this category is the attention to the diversity of individuals and the diversity of circumstances. The focus on agency as well as on the structure helps (as will be further analysed in Chapters 6 and 7) to connect and enlighten the construction of individual opportunities and, paraphrasing Bathmaker and Harnett (2010), to raise questions about what trouble us, how things could be different, and how this will require the engagement of all to enact change.
The acknowledgment of human beings as heterogeneous is crucial in the assessment of equality and social justice (Sen, 1992). In terms of education, it is key to understand that people differ through their real opportunities to transform resources into valuable outcomes. In fact, people differ through a personal axis (e.g. age, gender, class, etc.); an intersecting external or environmental axis; and an inter-individual or social axis (Walker, 2005). Recognising diversity in education allows us to scrutinise differences in individual and group agencies, not as a matter of personal will, but as a consequence of the interaction of one group with others (Young, 2006; Unterhalter, 2003).

Applying a human development approach to VET implies making social justice the framework. Paraphrasing Griffiths (2003), social justice turns into a verb, an action-oriented theory; and is therefore not just an end, but rather a way of functioning. Creating social justice becomes an exercise in finding a common ground where economic policy discourses can meet liberal humanitarian ones without neglecting the current context where gender, class or race remain variables closely linked to individual labour and societal activities. Creating social justice in VET entails not just measuring success in terms of school access or notions of reading and writing up to a certain level, but by using more complex ideas of well-being which yield a substantive conception of rights and also a normative exploration of humanness (Unterhalter, 2005). Hence, an education founded on social justice principles is an education whose mission is to offer the necessary tools and provide the spaces in which students can forge opportunities.

Other authors, and not just educationalists, have joined the call to broaden the concept of education and students’ opportunities beyond the realm of work and wages. The philosopher, Brighouse (2000, 2004, 2006), is a reference for a social justice critique of the human capital model. Also from the philosophical side, but focusing on higher education, Nussbaum (1998, 2010) makes a case for the value of arts and humanities in education for safeguarding a free and democratic society. With the concept of human flourishing borrowed from classical thinkers, Nussbaum (1998) establishes a list of necessary core values to be embodied in every higher educational curriculum to ensure responsible citizens.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} The list of three core values is: critical self-examination, the ideal of the world citizen, and the development of the narrative imagination. The first is about one’s own culture and traditions; the second refers to our condition as a human
Although Nussbaum does not directly address VET, the strengths of applying her contributions to a VET literature review are, in my opinion, twofold. Firstly, the way in which she perceives humans as a part of an organic whole forces us to rethink individualistic approaches to education. Secondly, and more relevant to VET, her reference to the classics alerts us of the importance of humanities in every curriculum.

Alongside the concern for creating a society that allows every individual to guide their own development, Unterhalter (2009, 2014) notes that are areas which are beyond the students’ control and provides alternatives for improving an education that ensures present and future opportunities. According to Unterhalter (2003) the reduction or elimination of inequality can be approached from two opposing ways. Firstly, as an equality of outcome which aims to evaluate individuals in terms of their level of achievements; and secondly, as an equality of opportunity, which levels the playing field so that all have a chance to achieve the same results. Even though the work referred in the previous section “VET for the individual” was concerned about equality of opportunities, the absence of a common framework and the shortage on qualitative studies, impeded an assessment of the objects of the research (i.e. students, teachers or employers) as individual subjects with individual paths, values and aspirations. Contrarily, equality of opportunity allows us to escape from the economist mind-set of the employability discourse and leaves room for the individual to define her own idea of well-being. Baptiste (2001), in his analysis of the foundations of human capital theory and its pedagogical implications, notices the flaws and risks of the human capital proponents as far as:

> They assume that these desires are fundamentally the same for all people across space and time (stable preferences), and they believe that each individual will at all times attempt to maximally fulfil those hedonistic desires (maximising behaviour). (Baptiste, 2001, p. 195.)

It is in this diversity of the conception of well-being and equality of genuine opportunities that the CA as a framework becomes of interest for my study. Although this approach will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, it is
relevant to quote its originator, Sen (2003), to understand the capabilities approach as one that:

[...] is by its very nature, a pluralist approach. Indeed, it points to the necessity of seeing development as a combination of distinct processes, rather than as the expansion of some apparently homogeneous magnitude such as real income or utility. [...] The challenge of human development demands attention being paid to a variety of sectoral interests and a combination of social and economic processes. (Sen, 2003, p. 54)

This work blends the ideas of individual as well as social contribution and highlights the power of the setting in providing and limiting the real possibilities for quality-of-life options. Due to its analytical but also transformative character, educationalists from various areas of research, such as higher education (Boni & Walker, 2013; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Boni & Lozano, 2007) and disability studies (Terzi, 2008; Burchardt & Vizard, 2009) are taking up the CA as the framework that allows them to looking at the process and not just at the outputs. By linking justice to education, this body of authors enables a wider and human-centred theory. Although the CA offers a productive and interesting platform for evaluating and constructing the key aspects touched on in this study, the use of this framework by VET researchers is still limited (King, 2009; Tikly, 2013; Powell, 2012; McGrath, 2012b; López-Fogués, 2012).

A capability-enhancing perspective for considering employability was mentioned earlier when I referred to Hinchcliffe (2013) and his inclusion of employers’ values for the understanding of employability, and Salais (2014), for the critical discussion of the ethical foundations upon which labour policies are built. Stepping beyond the concept of employability and focusing further on the attributes for considering someone a good professional, Walker and McLean (2010, 2013) have developed the attributes and characteristics of professionalism in South Africa by using the CA as a main theoretical framework. Also, in search of the meaning of professional development, Zimmermann (2014) puts forward a conception of professional development in which attention is also paid to the human development dimension resulting from the combined exercise of different capabilities. Their work, alongside the doctoral research undertaken by Powell (2012) in colleges in South Africa, examines the aspect of skills and the values transmitted in education and training.
The significance of a human-centred approach in education implies that VET can be defined beyond its technical aspect and requires corresponding pedagogic and curricula changes. The application of the CA in Spanish vocational education is almost non-existent. A single reference was found as part of a project researching career development capabilities in which work-related issues were approached from a capability perspective (Lambert et al., 2012; Subramanian et al., 2013; Salais, 2014). Understood as the successive states (jobs, functions, occupational categories and associated pay) that individuals reach throughout their careers, Lopez-Andreu and Miquel Verd (2013) analyse the policies and strategies of two Spanish companies to determine how they increase, or fail to increase, employees’ career development. Adopting a wider perspective and moving again out of Spain to focus on the Anglophone world, James (2010) developed a list of educational principles to be taught in VET for developing moral values in workplace settings in Australia.

My research follows the incipient steps of this group of authors and proposes a change of framework that acknowledges the economic role of VET presented by the first body of authors, but also provides a space in which the inequalities raised by the second body of literature can be approached. As McGrath (2012a) notes, work is beginning to appear that looks at how VET can link to notions of human development, well-being and human flourishing and this needs to be built upon. By putting individuals first—rather than the economy—I believe that the CA provides a normative framework that acknowledges the heterogeneous concepts of well-being and allows the shortfalls listed in the previous sections to be overcome. The following chapter develops the theoretical framework upon which I take up that challenge in depth.

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21 This research combines qualitative and quantitative analysis and is part of the FP6 CAPRIGHT project (2007-2011) “Resources, rights and capabilities; in search of social foundations for Europe”. For further information see European Commission (2007)
Chapter Four – Theoretical framework: capability, oppression and vulnerability

1. Overview

This section is dedicated to establishing the basis of a VET analysis. It builds on the work mentioned in the literature review and concentrates on the social justice perspective. Arguing that a better understanding of the role of VET from an individual perspective is essential if progress is to be made in education and, more broadly, societal well-being, I distance myself from the instrumental educational research field to move on to more philosophical ground, in which education is conceived as an intrinsic good. In a time of economic recession, when the world of work is inadequate and of dubious quality, it is relevant to shift our attention to evaluating the pillars that ground VET, and the future for all those involved in this form of education. Although the need to assess the relationship between education, labour and society has a long history, critical research on VET remains, as noted in previous chapters, limited to a handful of scholars mainly based in the Anglophone world (i.e. Pring, 1995; Finlay et al., 1998; Winch, 2000; Bathmaker, 2006; Brockmann, 2011; McGrath 2012).

In this context, I aim to develop a framework that departs from education theory in favour of human development and political philosophy, based on two core aspects: freedom and oppression. The reason for centring on the field of human development is because it is a way of positioning education, and more concretely VET, within a broader framework where it is one more instrument for addressing people’s concerns about their own lives, and not an isolated issue. Similarly, including discussions around social justice in the framework, with the components of capabilities, agency, vulnerability and oppression as central issues, enables VET to be examined within a more egalitarian framework where individual freedom is constrained by oppressive structural factors.

The approach of integrating individual freedom within structural oppression highlights the vulnerability of the people involved and the limited, but still
strategic, role that VET plays in building students’ agency and hence, individual security. The concept of agency combined with the faces of oppression, as outlined later, is relevant because it denotes that individual or group actions are not a problem of individual agency and that outcomes are not only a question of will. It is the aim of this chapter to argue that, instead of rejecting—and thus silently acknowledging—VET as an education entirely dependent on and constrained by market fluctuations, we should construct a VET agenda to deal with these complexities.

In this context, I propose using the CA developed by Amartya Sen (1985, 1992, 1999, 2009) and later extended by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2003, 2006, 2010) and the writings of the philosopher Iris Marion Young (1990, 2002, 2001a, 2006), as it challenges the current VET status quo and analyses the opportunities of young people enrolled in VET programs in a more comprehensive and focused way. The combination of human development theory and philosophy offers an alternative framework to design and evaluate VET on the basis of the two core concepts: individual freedom and social oppression. The conceptual shift is also enhanced by the acknowledgement of human vulnerability, as developed by Martha Fineman (2008; Fineman & Grear, 2013), in which vulnerability is an intrinsic condition and henceforth security is a common and constant need. The change from the liberal subject to the vulnerable subject comes linked with a demand for State responsibility and institutional protection. The chapter argues for a multidimensional framework that will later be used in a social justice analysis, by bringing together individual capabilities and, at the same time, identifying the forces that limit students’ freedom of action.

The division of the chapter is as follows. The first section is devoted to outlining the core principles of the CA. It discusses the shortfalls of egalitarian discourses focused on commodities or outcomes and offers the concept of capability, understood as genuine opportunity, as a measure to ensure individual freedom whilst acknowledging individual endowments, values and situations. The next section uses the five faces of oppression developed by Young (1990) to look closely at the societal structures that are rooted in the individual’s sense of the world, as well as the abilities to pursue agency. Although the general discussion is still centred on the capabilities of the individual, Young provides a systematic
account of the hidden forces of oppression that co-exist in current democratic societies and diminish the effect of any egalitarian solutions.

Finally, I present the theoretical framework that emerges from the union of those two theories. Vulnerability, a key concept in my research, is added to the two concepts of capability and oppression already presented. I argue that although vulnerability is a term with negative associations, the recognition of human dependency and the need for security and protection is necessary to assign a comprehensive role to VET in a framework in which each society has the responsibility to provide to all its inhabitants the conditions for living a meaningful life. The theoretical framework developed is a response to the argument of the previous chapters that today, in the context of austerity in public expenditure and the consequent widespread distress with the dismantling of the welfare system, it is necessary to reframe VET within a human development framework. The CA, the faces of oppression and the concept of vulnerability forces us to place individuals at the centre and reconsider their roles as well as their limitations. The argument is that a social justice framework helps to challenge pre-existing structures and offers a critical understanding of students’ opportunities in the current socioeconomic conditions.

2. The Capability Approach: capabilities, functionings, agency and conversion factors

Sen defines a capability as “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being” (Sen, 1992, p. 30). The notion of capability is central to broadening the analysis as it represents not only the aspect of choice, but also “the freedom to achieve actual livings that one can have a reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 73). Capability is thus a “substantive freedom” (Sen, 1999, p. 74), a valuable and genuine opportunity. Capability as a measure of equality, offers a method for evaluating a policy (in this case VET), or a society (in this case Spain) on the basis of the freedom that it gives individuals to reflectively develop plans and choose how to act to achieve them. Within this broad normative framework the individual becomes uncoupled from instrumental purposes (e.g. to increase the labour force of a country) and becomes an end in herself. This is an alternative to the economist view of the individual presented in the human capital discourse and
also to the long-established ethical perspectives of utilitarianism, which argue that justice implies acting in a manner that benefits the greatest number, even if some must be disadvantaged in the process (Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010; Alkire, 2005).

The first striking aspect of the CA is that its advocates see it as an approach rather than a well-defined theory (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009; Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2003; Alkire, 2002). Robeyns (2003, p. 8) offers three ways of using this framework, as outlined:

- As a framework of thought for the evaluation of individual opportunities and recommendations for social arrangements.
- As a critique of other approaches (mainly commodities, primary goods, or basic needs) as appropriate to the evaluation of well-being and justice.
- As a formula to make interpersonal comparisons of welfare or wellbeing into a well-defined theory.

For the aims of this work, I conceive the CA as a framework for thought. Thus it is not a complete theory of justice; it deals with core ethical and egalitarian questions that underlie every field, political structure, and even individual acts. As Robeyns (2005) notes:

Note that the capability approach is not a theory that can explain poverty, inequality or well-being; instead, it rather provides a tool and a framework within which to conceptualise and evaluate these phenomena. Applying the capability approach to issues of policy and social change will therefore often require the addition of explanatory theories. (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94)

The CA is not “a theory of justice”, like that presented by Rawls (1999), but rather an approach to social justice. Sen, alongside other authors, has examined the risk of falling into a concrete definition of justice and the potential of this to exclude minority and heterogenous views of the world (Anderson, 2010, p. 200; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Clark, 2005). Sen (1999, 2009), and work developed under this framework on the field of education, calls for a focus on individual values and current societal injustice, which I found to be relevant to my research. In a field of education that offers a vision from the college but also from the labour market, as is the case of VET, and in a demographically changing society, such as that of Spain, the CA commitment to human diversity was core to my research on analysing participants’ values. Sen (1992) states that:
Investigations of equality—theoretical as well as practical—that proceed with the assumption of antecedent uniformity (including the presumption that ‘all men are created equal’) thus miss out on a major aspect of the problem. Human diversity is no secondary complication (to be ignored, or to be introduced “later on”); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality. (Sen, 1992, p. xi)

The focus on the space of capabilities for equalising a society, and the understanding of individual values as heterogenous, puts the equality of opportunities into a dimension that goes beyond formal choices, towards analysing genuine opportunities. A capability is thus a substantive freedom, a valuable and genuine opportunity, and the aspect of choice is transformed into “the freedom to achieve actual livings that one can have a reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 73). The concept of human freedom, as stressed by Gasper (2002), is not simply defined by what a person does or could do, as approaches prioritising economics and productivity claim, but also by how much of what she does is consistent with what she believes is right and worth doing.

The conception that a choice requires that an individual give it a value in order for it to be real, moves the argument forward to another relevant term of the CA: functionings. Functionings, in the CA, are “the various things a person may value being or doing” (Sen, 1985, pp. 197–198). Whereas capabilities constitute a set of substantive freedoms, functionings are achieved valuable outcomes. Functionings, for a VET student undertaking social care studies, may include working in a geriatric unit, being literate in web design or being part of a tennis team. The understanding of functionings represents a step beyond the focus on outcomes because they are not only outcomes, but also valuable achievements (Sen, 1985). Indeed, it provides a tool for analysis within a social justice framework because it requires understanding that every student aims to achieve different functionings given the same opportunities and freedoms by the college. The difference between a capability and a functioning is explained in the distinction made by Walker and Unterhalter (2007) in their research about educational experiences using the CA. The former is the opportunity to achieve, and the latter the actual achievement of it, the difference between potential and outcome.

The operationalisation of the CA is capable of informing the individual freedom to achieve whilst respecting individual values. In addition, the commitment to
social justice found in the approach incorporates a transformative aspect: the concept of agency. In terms of a framework that analyses the underpinning discourses of VET and its consequences on young people’s opportunities, the concept of the student as agent as “someone who acts and brings about change” (Sen, 1999, p. 19) is also highly relevant. Agency, within the CA, corresponds to the understanding of people as moral beings who are active participants in the development of society. An agent, as defined by Sen (1999), is:

[…] someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well. (Sen, 1999, p. 19)

The set of actions carried out by a person do not necessarily have to make an individual happier; nevertheless, they represent acts performed following reasoned reflection. The connection between agency and direct well-being deserves closer attention. For Sen (2009) and Crocker (2009), the act of being actively involved, not only in one’s own development but also that of society, is a reflection of individual freedom and also of collective action and commitment. In fact, agency in the CA refers to the realisation of goals and values a person has reason to pursue, whether or not they are directly connected with her own well-being (Galliott & Graham, 2014; Boni & Walker, 2013; Burchardt, 2009).

A person’s well-being, by contrast, as Crocker argues (2009) concerns wellness and personal advantage; it takes a utilitarian and individualistic approach to personal welfare. Consequently, agency can operate as a separate concept from well-being, as this hypothetical, but common, example illustrates. A person who combines work and college may reduce the amount sleep she gets, with consequences for her health and general well-being. Nevertheless, the value of her work and not asking others to pay for her education, has made her take a reflective decision and continue her agency by pursuing both activities to the detriment of her well-being but caring for the well-being of others—those from whom she would otherwise need to borrow money—.

Having noted the relevance of agency, capabilities and functionings, all three elements share the quality of putting the individual at the centre and also have a social relevance, which has an impact on educational research. First, it pushes
educational researchers to investigate beyond students’ level of skills and beyond the descriptive inequality of outcomes analysis, to consider the role of the college in the creation of capabilities and development of students’ agencies. By centring on agency as a social and transformative concept, the educational role of practitioners transcends technical curricula such as education for employment, and takes on the role of educating for society. The student is understood as an interdependent and co-operative being with a retrospective role and responsibility for others. The teachers become, then, transformative educators for human flourishing.

Finally, the concepts developed above challenge educational policy assumptions based on the liberal discourse of choice, and outcomes as a matter of individual will. Galliot and Graham (2014), in their study about student career choice capability, conclude that the CA places a clear distinction between capability and functionings and put the discourse of choice in perspective. Someone’s actual beings and doings do not provide enough information on their own. A person’s outcome does not reveal very much about how well-off that person is (Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010; Unterhalter, 2009). A student might have a job after finishing VET, but this alone says very little about the conditions of this job and the value that the student gives to it. Therefore, agency, versus choice, “encompasses not only ‘decision making’ and other forms of observable action but also the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14). Having advanced the arguments for using the CA as a framework, the question that arises is what limits individuals’ forms of agency, or what can limit an individuals’ space of capabilities. The CA recognises external factors as a source of limitation:

[W]hen we try to apply contemporary theories of justice to the actual reality of our chaotic and often messy world, there are all sorts of complications that need to be taken into account, such as trade-offs between different values, power imbalances between different social groups, unintended consequences of justice-enhancing interventions and policies, or interests of individuals and groups that may conflict with concerns for justice. (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009, p. 105)

Consequently, one’s freedoms, capabilities and agency are defined according to the degree to which individual differences, social norms and environmental features are taken into account. Therefore personal, social and environmental
factors affect the individual’s abilities to transform resources into valuable opportunities (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005) The following figure from Robeyns (2005, p. 98) illustrates the core relationships.

**Figure 5. A stylised non-dynamic representation of a person’s capability set and her social and personal context.**

![Diagram of capability set and social context]

Source: Robeyns (2005, p. 98).

Whilst this figure provides a relevant insight into individual diversity and the factors influencing one’s abilities, I turn to the work of Young (1990, 2001a, 2006) to argue that a deeper analysis on power structures is relevant to understanding individual and collective struggles and the variations in the ability of different groups to challenge their lot in society.

3. **Iris Marion Young: Faces of Oppression**

The freedom of each individual to pursue their values or agency is, as Sen states, “inevitably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us” (Sen, 1999, pp. xi–xii). In attempting to rethink what constrains individual social, political and economic opportunities I turn to the work of Young (1990, 2001a, 2006) partly due to its complementariness with the CA, but also for her deeper contribution on group freedoms and her concern with labour power relations. In a similar way to the capability theorists, the author points out the limitations of distributive theories and, through other critiques, argues that the distribution of commodities and goods is still too broad a measure, with little information about the individual to
assure and guarantee a harmonious and equal relationship between individuals or a remedy for different forms of oppression (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Young, 1990).

Young, a philosopher but above all, as she says, an activist who poses challenges to the limits of deliberative democracy (Young, 2001b), sought in her work to make issues of power, rather than those of distribution or recognition, central to the question of building justice in society (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Fraser, 1995). Her account of the oppression that defends the existence of both visible and invisible arrangements and that privileges some groups over others is most relevant to my study because it provides a group vision whilst maintaining the individual values put forward by the CA. Having said that, one needs to acknowledge that the CA, despite its primary emphasis on individuals, also stresses the importance of the community.

In discussing this aspect of individual ethical obligations towards the group, Walker (2010) explains, “capability is a kind of power which confers obligation” (p. 166). In a similar tone, Nussbaum (2010) reminds us that the CA is not a theory for explaining and forming human nature, but is “evaluative and ethical from the start”, by posing the question: “among the many things human beings might develop the capacity to do, which ones are the valuable ones, which are the ones that a minimally just society will endeavour to nurture and support?” (p. 28). Whilst this encapsulates the community view of the CA, it leaves open the issue of how different groups within the same community fail to benefit from the same range of capabilities or freedoms as other groups. If the CA centres on freedom the writings of Young centre on oppression, naturally complementing the CA. Broadly speaking, if capabilities theorists deal with the “freedom to” expand capabilities, Young (1990, 2001a) asks what are the constricting forces that limit the range of options available to a group, and hence an individual.

Whilst acknowledging the power of discussion and the inclusion of different voices, the author cautions against the power struggles and voice suppression that occur during this process (Young, 2006). The inclusion of her writings in the analysis serves to warn against the limits of every democracy and of the idea of common good, concepts that conceal systematic exclusions and powerlessness.
Her main contribution to the research is to expand the concept of oppression through the classification of five interlinked categories or faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The existence of at least one of these determines human social arrangements. This vision challenges, like the CA, the neoliberal statements which rely on the perfect functioning of free-exchange relationships established solely on economic terms, as well as challenging the vision of the student as the *homo economicus* that sees its personal revenue as the sole reason for pursuing any given activity.

In the following account, oppression is understood as a constant in human interactions in society and is fundamentally constituted, not just motivated, by a complex set of political, cultural and economic features (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Young, 1990). Basic social structures that Young (2001a) perceives as “relatively permanent” (p. 2) configure social positions and the place and capabilities that each individual has. These social positions condition group opportunities and life chances and are constituted through social organisation, the reproduction of labour, and the institutionalised rules of authority and subordination (Anderson, 2010; Young, 2001a).

Oppression is a concept that goes beyond discrimination because it is not necessarily overtly acknowledged (Young, 1990, 2002). Oppression can take on one of the five different forms interchangeably. It is a visible—although often invisible—injustice that prevents individuals from exercising their life-plans and individual agency. It serves, then, to emphasise the link between individual capabilities and societal conditions. The concept of oppression challenges the discourse of individual responsibility (Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2001; Kelly, 2001) as far as it reminds us of the interconnectivity of our societies and the enclosing structures present in every social arrangement that immobilise or reduce a group or an individual limiting their human development.

Before I turn to each of the five faces, it is relevant to note that the categorisation of the five faces of oppression needs to be understood, not as a form of reduction,
as some of her critics have noted (Fraser, 1995), but as a continuum in which many instances of oppression need to be described using several of these categories.

3.1. Exploitation

Taking a distinctly Marxist tone, Young (1990) uses the term *exploitation* to represent “a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labour of one social group to benefit another” (p. 49). In short, this face of oppression illustrates how, although in modern societies there are laws guaranteeing equal access to citizenship or bargaining power in work relations, these rights are restricted to certain groups or individuals.

The use of exploitation in the educational context is relevant to researching the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom. Additionally, awareness of unequal access to power sheds light upon issues of the working conditions of VET students after finishing college. Under this view of power, labour is evaluated beyond its outcome, and provides a closer look at the context within which contracts between workers and employers take place. Within neoclassical economics, labour-capital relationships occur in a power-neutral context. By arguing that justice is determined not on the basis of resources or outcomes, but on the space and conditions in which capability space is generated, the analysis sheds light on the quality of the context in which labour takes place. The quality of work, as noted in the contextual chapter, is largely bypassed by neoliberal policies and government procedures. Hence, there is a substantive added value for including the concept of oppression within the research.

Discrimination in access and barriers to skills development, or lack of security to retain a labour niche, are some of the phenomena that determine the conditions of labour, much more so than the mere wage contract between worker and employer. The prospects and conditions of a particular job are mostly determined by the exposure to risk and sense of insecurity of an individual in society. Exploitation occurs in societies undergoing a crisis of social protection.

22 The Faces of Oppression have been contested by Fraser (1995), who suggested that, instead of five, these could be reordered into two: political economic injustice and cultural injustice of misrecognition. Young (1997) responded to the criticisms by noting that the category of Powerlessness will be in both (economic and cultural) and the dichotomy obscures aspects of social reality, practices of law, citizenship and political participation, amongst others.
Part-time employment, internships, mini-jobs, or even volunteer activities are considered a natural first step for students after college. However, for many, once they find a job on a lower rung of the ladder, their employer does not see the need to upgrade them to a higher income and more secure status. In fact, taking a temporary job, which many policy makers stress is better than unemployment, can result in lower earnings in the years ahead (Keune & Serrano, 2014; Standing, 2012; Autor & Houseman, 2010). Therefore, the concept of an individual being employed does not guarantee the abolition of class differences in society if it does not also guarantee the possibility of her being upgraded. To sum up, in current times, despite the economic crisis, there are clear signs of exploitation. As Young argues (2001b), one form of evidence that exploitation still occurs in a free market and democratic societies is that the wage and wealth gap between the owners and managers of the means of production and the masses of working people still remains, in the best cases, and is getting wider in the worst. For instance, in the Spanish case, whilst the average salary of managers increased 7% in 2013, the average salary of workers decreased 8.17%. Concretely, the average annual gross salary for managers was 68,705 Euros in 2007 and 80,330 Euros in 2013. In the case of workers, the average annual gross salary was 21,307 Euros in 2007 and 19,588 Euros in 2013 (EADA & ICSA, 2014).

### 3.2. Marginalisation

The association with the adjective *marginal* is with the division of the political space into an inside and an outside made by Goodin (1985). Young (2002) takes this reference about social arrangements and elaborates on the will of a powerful group to stigmatise another group as “Others”. Young (1990) uses marginal to refer to "those persons whom the work system cannot or will not use” (p. 53). A person is marginal when her functionings are outside of what is understood as the common good. A common good, according to Young (1990, 2002) is defined as a normative and exclusive character made on the basis of the beliefs of the dominant group.

Using the capability lens, being marginal is seen as a result of circumstance, and therefore does not carry any judgmental evaluation about whether it is bad or good. The label provides no information in itself and needs further investigation of the capability space that the individual has had access to. Therefore, life-plans
and personal, social and environmental conditions need to be known before making a value judgment.

I will provide a simplified example of how marginalisation can restrict choice—remembering the personal, social and environmental factors that affect the ability of someone to transform a resource into a capability and hence a functioning (Robeyns, 2005)—and therefore be an influencing factor on an individual’s decisions. After finishing a VET diploma in IT (Information Technology) a student has three options: carry on studying, work or be unemployed. A particular student who is also a single mother has a life-plan to open her own shop. However, she does not have enough money to begin that activity. If she works for others, due to her lack of experience and the country’s regulations, her salary will be just enough to cover the cost of a babysitter. In Spain there is little State support money for raising a child. Therefore the woman starts to help care for elderly people without any type of contract. Working without legal guarantees allows her to take the baby with her, to be flexible regarding her schedule, and meanwhile save for her dream business. In conclusion, due to personal and social factors she becomes “marginal” to the system in order to pursue the concept of agency in terms of the CA.

This definition of “marginal” rejects the common belief that work is good in itself and also a straightforward decision for everyone. In the Spanish context (amongst many others) employment has become a complex matter in which a person has limited options of choice. The above example, despite its simplicity, illustrates how the exercise of individual agency depends on the nature of the work itself (i.e. conditions, salary or relations), the personal conditions of the individual and the institutional forms and social welfare, and how the latter can strongly influence well-being and freedom.

### 3.3. Powerlessness

This face of oppression, connected with exploitation and the idea of how some people or groups have power whilst others do not, is a dichotomy that is usually linked to a division of class and gender. Specifically, it refers to the situation non-

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23 Since 2010 the child support that a person receives is granted by the Social Security. It is 100 Euros a month during the first three years of life of the child, and the person in charge of the child needs to be an active worker that covers more than 50% of the regular working time. See Seguridad Social (2014).
professionals’ experience because of their inability to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The powerless are those who lack authority or power [...] those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. (Young, 1990, p. 56)

For Young (1990), so-called non-professionals who do the material work and are poorly paid are silenced because they feel at risk. A structural silence allows the continuation of the division of labour up to the point of creating what Freire (2007) called a “culture of silence”. According to this culture of powerlessness, oppression acts in the way that those in lower positions allow the free professionals to take care of business, and engage in intellectual and managerial activities, at the same time, they do not question this social order (Freire, 2007; Young, 1990).

The example given above about the student who wants to open a shop reflects a powerless situation. If she had been a man, not a woman, the probability of being a single parent would have been low and henceforth the lack of State care about family conditions would have probably not applied to the capability set of the person when carrying out his entrepreneurial plan. The capability set of the person, to carry out his agency, is wider in this case, so working within legal conditions becomes a genuine opportunity. This example based on a general assumption about family structures and gender, serves to illustrate that the degree of power individuals have for developing their own life-plans within their society requires understanding the real nature of choices that VET students face both inside and outside the college.

3.4. Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism is at the centre of the protests of feminists and theorists of black liberation and relates to the face of marginalisation. Cultural imperialism refers to how society favours a particular group and simultaneously builds stereotypes of “The Others” to the point of making them invisible.

Examples of cultural imperialism are easy to find in territories where two languages are legally spoken, but one is favoured at the administrative level. In this case, legal equality does not translate into genuine equality because not all
members of that society have the same capabilities to express themselves or to be heard. Cultural differences, seen here in the matter of languages, are not restricted to the use of a different language, but also include speaking style, dialectics, gesture or body comportment. To the degree that it forms a difference between the individual (or the group who share that specific trait) and others, a difference that needs to be treated with differences, because “equal treatment in many issues of social policy is unjust because it denies these cultural differences or makes them a liability” (Young, 1989, p. 271).

3.5. Violence

In this thesis, the final face of oppression overlaps constantly with the previous ones. Although the level of research did not target finding specific physical violence, the everyday social struggles, labour relations and austerity measures which people in Spain are experiencing are full of examples of where indirect violence is used to keep a group from participating. Violence, according to Young (1990), is an oppression that is systematic; it is directed at members of a group because they belong to that group. “The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimisation, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are liable to violation, solely on account of their group identity” (Young, 1990, p. 62).

In the analysis, differences between groups were visible, with a greater degree of violence towards students from an immigrant background. However, as noted in the context, the high degree of youth unemployment, continuous cuts in social expenditure, educational reforms approved without consensus and the general instability of the country places all the interviewees in a situation of powerlessness that tends to render them invisible and, as a group, victims of State violence.

The next section turns to the benefits of combining the two approaches in the analysis. Both analyse individual freedoms as well as structural oppression, revealing the complex range of conditions facing a person who pursues individual and collective action. To understand that injustice is part of the structural failure of every society is crucial in terms of outlining individual responsibility, as well as the role of education within it. Education, as a capability that creates the
foundations for the development of other capabilities, plays a guiding role. In other words, in order for people to be able to resist existing practices, there must be different social practices and models with which they can identify (Young, 2002). Young (1997) suggests that, on a smaller scale, the college, and on a larger scale, the society of a specific country can be evaluated according “to their division of labour, the way they organise decision-making power, and whether their cultural meanings enhance the self-respect and self-expression of all society’s members” (p. 153). This forms the theoretical framework that brings together the two approaches, allowing us to put forward the argument that VET needs to be analysed and re-structured by taking educational, societal and labour relations into account.

4. The vulnerable subject: the theoretical framework

This section sets out a critical framework by combining the two approaches outlined above to conceptualise the relationship between the educational experience within VET in Spain and the concept of social justice. The combination of the CA and the faces of oppression creates a dialectical interaction between them, due to their overlapping critiques of the dominant resource-driven conceptualisations and their common emphasis on human development based on securing individual agency.

Applying these two concepts to the analysis of VET means, on the one hand, focusing on capabilities as the space for justice and the vision of the individual as an agent that brings change; and on the other, acknowledging that oppression is structural to any system and some groups experience a higher degree of negation than others. In both cases, social justice is understood beyond economic and distributive aspects and involves deprivation of “cultural, practical, and institutionalised conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction” (Young, 1990, p. 55). Both the CA (with the conversion factors) and the faces of oppression (with the analysis of structural forces) evaluate a society on the basis of its ability to enhance heterogeneous freedoms to ensure individual and group identity (Boni & Walker, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003).

Understanding the social aspect and the impact of context and culture on an individual’s capabilities is important in the debate about the impact of education
and also in recognising the limits of the individual to configure her own life-plans. The discourse of employability to which I referred in the previous chapters, posits the idea of liberal subject in control of her own destiny. Central to this endeavour, VET is a priority because it is understood as an education that provides the qualities that are needed by the labour market (Keune & Serrano, 2014; Vero, 2012; Bonvin, 2006).

Whilst the CA and the faces of oppression give a more complex vision of VET and of the influences on the formation of capabilities in general, the writings of Fineman (2008) serve to change the discourse of employability of the liberal subject to one that is about the vulnerable subject, where each individual is in “a web of economic and institutional relationships” (p. 10). The concept of vulnerability challenges the promotion of the human capital model noted in earlier chapters, in which individuals are held responsible for participating in education and employment, by reminding us that, as in the CA, the only ethical reference point is the individual; specifically, the situation of the individual in regard to the amount of real freedom she possesses to choose and conduct the life that she wishes to lead (Salais, 2014; Vero, 2012).

Complementary to this view, Fineman (2013; 2008) argues that vulnerability is inherent to the human condition and that no one is born invulnerable; however, it varies by individual experience. Variations within a universal concept reveal that “vulnerability must be simultaneously understood as particular, valued and unique on the individual level” (Fineman & Grear, 2013, p. 21). According to the author, there are two forms of individual difference: one that is physical and related to variations in human embodiment; and a second (on which I based my research) that is defined by the authors as “[…] social and constructed, resulting from the fact that individuals are situated within overlapping and complex webs of economic and institutional relationships” (Fineman & Grear, 2013, p. 21).

Educational policy and educational research in VET is often focused on counting how many students access education, or on what their background is (Anderson, 2008; Climent López, 1997). Because of the emphasis on techniques of making measurements, little of this work looks critically at how students are regarded and treated, or what their values and expectations are. The concept of vulnerability is
often used to signal aspects of exclusion linked to gender or background, but it tends to be under-theorised and, in so doing, used as an umbrella to including all those with less economic perspectives. Unterhalter et al. (2012b), in their study about marginalisation, argue that the general orientation from the human capital theory is “about failure to acquire a sufficient amount of education, generally on the grounds of some aspect of poverty” (p. 215). Using this perspective to refer to vulnerability in general is also the most widespread in the literature, as seen in the review. An implication of this is what Kelly (2001), or Sultana (2014) referred to as the responsibilisation of the individual, which is characteristic of neoliberal approaches, as I explained in the review of the literatures (Chapter 3, Section 2). A conceptualisation of the world that, as Unterhalter et al. (2012) note, implies “that misfortunes of birth rather than social relations of discrimination might explain how marginalisation works” (p. 212).

Contrary to the liberal view of the individual as being responsible for her own destiny, the CA refers to the individual, not as an isolated agent, but as part of a community and society, which influence the space of freedom and choices (Crocker, 2009; Alkire, 2002). From the community perspective, Young (1990) associates the structures of discrimination and inequality in a particular society formed by particular groups with particular norms and rules that build power structures, which need to be examined. In this sense, the college as an institution is not, by definition, a space to enhance human capital for everyone, but rather a space in which the voice and opportunities offered are not fully available for all the groups (Walker, 2010). The boundaries of a theoretical framework, such as the one I present here, are not associated with the college but rather with the social structures and the ideas forming and sustaining VET practices.

The operationalisation of a framework that combines the CA and the faces of oppression suggests boundaries that go beyond the individual, the college and the workplace, to focus on the space of capabilities. Vulnerability then becomes a wider and institutionally dislocated concept that relates the individual with the environment asks for State responsiveness and helps to rethink and restructure policies, college practices and norms in a way that can attend to diverse life-plans.
The following illustration represents this framework. It is constructed by merging the concepts explained above and places the individual at the centre. Although only one person is represented here, the reader must imagine a flexible and dynamic figure and that each of the interviewees carries her own circle. Therefore, a societal illustration would consist of numerous dynamic circles all being influenced and, at the same time, themselves influencing the structure. The vulnerability is at the centre together with the perception of risk and security, which determine the level of freedom to carry out individual agency. Additionally, the capabilities and functionings of the person are linked, and subjected, to the structure (which is the sharp figure on the right).

**Figure 6. Theoretical framework**

An integrated scheme of both approaches illustrates the process of capability formation. The persons, in this case the students but also the VET practitioners and employers, are at the centre of the study, surrounded by personal endowments and are influenced (second figure) by social and environmental ones. The development of capabilities is shown by concentric circles and the fading of some lines, as well the asymmetry of the width between them, aims to represent the movement between one aspect and another. Additionally, the overlapping shape of the figure called structure is an account of some of the social and structural
processes that happen in every society, which may harm people as a result of structural social injustice (Young, 2002).

Both figures need to be understood as dynamic and elastic. Mobility and irregularities in the size of each can be found, as a person can live in a more oppressive structure (the structure figure would be bigger), with less State protection, a smaller network or fewer resources and, hence, her vulnerability would be unprotected. In a time of both economic crisis and social cuts, the opportunities of young people in Spain are limited. The limitation of their real choices (capabilities) “limit individual ability to exercise autonomy or liberty, thus defining the scope and nature of (their) agency” (Fineman & Grear, 2013, p. 22). This agency limitation would be represented in the figure with a reduction in the concentric circle of capabilities. The dynamism and conceptual weight of the figure illustrates the theoretical and methodological challenges that the application of the CA in conjunction with other approaches poses to my study.

The benefits of merging the concept of vulnerability with the CA and the faces of oppression is to relativise the weight of responsibility that the human capital theory puts on the learner and to view the individual as part of a wider and more complex system, as is society. The obligation of having institutions to ensure distributive fairness and equal respect according to each individual’s needs and attainment depends on each system and it is part of the moral obligation that humans have to one another to reinforce them (Fineman & Grear, 2013; Sen, 1999). Particularly illuminating is the account offered by Young (2004) of responsibility and global justice:

In contrast, a model of responsibility derived from understanding the mediated connection that agents have to structural injustices […] often brings into question precisely the background conditions that ascriptions of blame or fault assume as normal. When we judge that structural injustice exists, we mean that at least some of the normal and accepted background conditions of action are not morally acceptable. Most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act. (Young, 2004, p. 383)

A reduction in the concentric circle of individual agency implies not only a reduction in individual capabilities but, at worst, a loss of that person’s ability to
challenge the established structure. Similar accounts can be found with the CA where both Sen and Nussbaum, amongst others, have emphasised the role of social norms and traditions in forming women’s preferences and effective choices (Nussbaum, 2003; Sen, 1990). An analysis of VET through my framework not only requires an evaluation of learners’ academic progress, but also an evaluation of the structural setting in which the learner carries or plans to carry out her activities. At the present moment, a student graduating from VET in Spain faces a scenario in which the capability set is constrained because economic activities are such that they risk offering unjust and precarious circumstances.

Drawing on the discourse of responsibility, and inherent to the concept of vulnerability, is the concept of risk that is noted in Figure 6. Although the concept of risk is closely linked to the writings of Beck (1992) and Giddens (2002) and their awareness of modernity and the dangers associated with globalisation reshaping our lives, making individuals more vulnerable to every kind of global phenomena, the framework understands risk (and henceforth security) not only as a modern concept but as a permanent one, linked to the incapacity to develop agency, create resilience and protect the inherent human vulnerability.

The general use of the concept of vulnerability is prolific. Although its uses and meaning are disputed, there seems to be a general agreement amongst researchers that its popularity can be traced to 1990 and related to awareness of the growing economic polarisation in the Western world and lack of vision for the future (Misztal, 2011; Kirby, 2005; Wallerstein, 2004; Giddens, 2002). Briefly acknowledging the debates, there are three dominant groups, and an incipient fourth one, within which I locate my research. Firstly, vulnerability in international relations is used to characterise aspects of globalisations that have an impact on a range of individual and social conditions of well-being (Kirby, 2005; Wallerstein, 2004). Secondly, the use of vulnerability in the context of environmental policy is recognised as a priority in the UN Report on the “World Social Situation” exemplified in the creations of national observatories for “measuring social vulnerability to build resilience to environmental hazards” (Manila Observatory, 2005, p. 1). Thirdly, vulnerability is used in social policy and research as an umbrella under which to gather economic and social disadvantage. Within this concept, in 2000, the first Economic Vulnerability
Index (EVI) was created with five components closely linked to individual livelihoods, jobs and financial status. This definition is used by the media and policy-oriented research to specify social groups or minorities who are susceptible to disadvantage. Vulnerability works as a common language—almost as a euphemism—to refer to individuals and groups that are in need of attention for being (or to prevent them from becoming) marginal, unfit and hence the Others in every well-intended society (Young, 1989).

Although this normative approach expresses an understanding of the future difficulties for those who are outside the dominant social group, the lack of criticism of its underpinning conceptualisation continuously stigmatises individuals with physical limitations (in addition to making them solely responsible for their fate) as well as individuals in a restrictive social and economic sphere. It is the commitment of my research to social justice that advocates a fourth way of comprehending vulnerability where it is understood, not as an isolated stigma, but rather as intrinsic to every human being (Fineman & Grear, 2013; Fineman, 2008). In this line of reasoning, Misztal (2011) opens up an inquiry into the term from a three-dimensional perspective, where vulnerability should be constructed in terms of complex interactions that reflect:

[… the individual’s experience of different aspects of disadvantage connected with human dependence on others, the unpredictability of action and the irreversibility of human experiences. (Misztal, 2011, p. 7)]

I understand vulnerability as the relationship of the individual with her surroundings and the implications of these on her life. Although this describes a process that every person is conscious of, the results differ in the advantages or disadvantages of individual positions based on a complex set of arrangements.

The concept of the individual as social, interrelated and dependent on others brings back the classic conception of the state of *eudaimonia* and the human person, not as an economic entity but as a human being (Fineman & Grear, 2013; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Viewing vulnerability as a human concept makes us rethink where the emphasis should be placed. Although vulnerability cannot be

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24 Eudaimonia is a term borrowed from the Greek that translates as the full happiness of the “good life” or the “perfect life”, and that in the CA literature is referred as “human flourishing” (Nussbaum, 1998).
detached from humanity, the aspiration should be shifted towards building the conditions that provide individual and social security between us, regardless of individual features.

With the focus on the individual and the concern of ensuring an equal space for capabilities, I return to my research. In the case of analysing VET and the opportunities of young people in Spain the framework questions the individual and society and their interactions in the present moment, but also those in the past. A wider concept of vulnerability, in which individuals are posited as equals and then determined in relation to the structure, implies, as Sandel (2010) reminds us that “[T]he way things are does not determine the way they ought to be” (p. 65). Vulnerability is not a matter of the current economic crisis or linked to social traits, but rather a universal feature. The acceptance of the vulnerable subject is to accept that individual and group disadvantages are determined and, hence, the responsibility of a wider net of social, economic and political interactions. The creation of a framework under the CA, the faces of oppression and the concept of the vulnerable subject helps us to focus on the space of freedoms, constraints and, ultimately social responsibility for human well-being and development.

Turning to the next chapter, methodologically, the framework enabled me to extend the scope of the research to all the students enrolled in VET, not just to a specific group, and to look for methods that would create space for reflective discussion regarding the interviewees’ values. As the next chapter explains in more detail, the sample was formed by volunteers who joined on the basis of feeling or thinking they were at risk of not being able to pursue their goals and values, and the use of qualitative methods created room to compile their stories in a flexible way.
Chapter Five – Methodology, research design, methods and data analysis

1. Overview

This chapter presents the procedures and reasoning that grounded the design and data selection I undertook. Far from being a clean, seamless process, the decisions regarding how to empirically address my questions, whilst also maintaining a strong theoretical base focused on freedoms and oppressions, were complex and changed throughout the research. Additionally, the educational and social issues affecting young people in Spain are compounded by cyclical, somehow messy, choices and compromises that have been made throughout the journey. Fontana and Frey (2005) reflect that interviewing is inextricably and unavoidably contextually bound and is a tool of political involvement. On the basis of their work, I conclude that, although the research was bound to a historical and political moment of crisis, the choice of methods, my figure as a researcher and the analysis of the data were affected both by the particularity of the moment, and by a genuine commitment to social justice.

The chapter is divided into three sections, each one corresponding to a temporal but also conceptual event. Firstly, under the title “Research design and methods: rationale and planning”, I present what I planned to do in my study and the selection of methods. The second part addresses the adjustments made during the process, such as abandoning some methods previously envisaged, and is titled “In the field: from theory to practice”. The last section is dedicated to the coding and classification of the data obtained through steps one and two and has the title “Working with the data: analytical processes”, it serves as a transition to the subsequent chapters on analysis.

Although I do not explicitly address two out of the three “-ologies” (epistemology, ontology and methodology) that are usually referred to in doctoral studies; I reveal the framework of my decisions and final selection of methods, in terms of my philosophical stance about what knowledge is and the nature of
reality and existence. Regarding methods, I use a qualitative methodology but my selection of methods includes numerical as well as non-numerical techniques. Regarding the debate about quality in social research known as the “science wars” (St. Clair, 2009; Lather, 2004) which focuses on the distinctions made between qualitative and quantitative research, I side with those who are not willing to “cede the term science to quantitative, variable oriented approaches” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 282).

Qualitative and quantitative methods are portrayed within academia as different traditions and perspectives, as two options that occur in an isolated space and where the existence of one results in the non-existence of the other (Denzin, 1994, 2008). However, I do not think that the rigid division between quantitative and qualitative is sustainable or productive within research or scholarship. A qualitative approach using some quantitative methods such as graphs and word frequency is used throughout the research as an in-between step. Consequently, the traditional dichotomous either/or options (quantitative approaches or qualitative approaches) of issue for my research, are replaced by a flow of choices in favour of philosophical options, or “what works” empirically (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). For this reason, following the principle of the CA on seeking individual values as well as experiences within VET and the system, qualitative methods were given preference.

Qualitative applications of the CA have often been used, as noted in the literature review, particularly in research on education. Centring on the world of education, but also that of work, Zimmermann (2006, 2014), Lopez-Andreu and Verd (2013) and Hollywood et al. (2012) agree in their respective studies on youth and labour policies that (when examining the complexity of social issues related to youth) the CA is the best approach for uncovering individual assumptions and expectations, and that a qualitative method in conjunction with the CA could help realise the full analytical potential of the framework. The work of these authors was encompassed within a similar European project to the one that I have been part of. The meetings and research carried out within the FP7 project “WORKABLE: making capabilities work”, served as an inspiration in the design of this research, in the use of case studies and semi-structured interviews.  

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25 For further information, WORKABLE (2009).
Throughout the CA, a philosophical and unbiased account of the individual suggests qualitative methods and the openness needed to redefine the concept of vulnerability outside of economic terms. As Beetham & Demetriades (2007) suggest in their study about gender and empowerment, by using qualitative methods in the research process I consider power relations in the everyday lives of each of the interviewees in order to understand their freedoms and other sensitive issues, such as gender-based marginalisation.

Even though I worked mainly with methods classified as qualitative, I also presented statistics in the contextual chapter in order to gain a greater understanding of the issues analysed. Providing numerical data in my research allows me to contribute to what Maxwell (1992, 2010) calls the internal generalisability of qualitative researchers’ claims, and lets me put into context and lessen the limitations involved in a single case study. The following chapter, with the division between planned methods and actual methods used in the field, reiterates my commitment to explore VET through the social justice lenses and the necessity of being flexible in order to appreciate its complexity. To prioritise qualitative methods was, in fact, a decision made on the basis of their intrinsic power to “include attention to dynamic processes rather than (or in addition to) static categories” (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 199)

**Part I – Research design and methods: rationale and planning**

Being able to make a contribution to the knowledge and literature about VET, whilst also addressing a challenging topic such as the opportunities for young people, was a constant challenge when thinking through the design of the research. Rather than having straightforward answers, the solution lay in the exercise of questioning. Encouraged by the position of Punch (1986) and his “get out and do it” perspective as a response to the restrictive model of research, I commenced the methodological journey with the energy to explore VET and the complex Spanish social reality.

Delving deeper into the research design literature and attending seminars and courses about methods, delivered by the University of Nottingham and within the Marie Curie EDUWEL program, gave me several suggestions for the research process, using various forms ranging from those presented in diagrammatic
format to lists of steps to follow (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Blaxter et al., 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). However, it was Maxwell’s proposition (2005) that I took as key to the design the research, the fieldwork and the data analysis. The tiles used throughout this chapter are borrowed from that proposition.

The conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 4 was a cornerstone of the research design and influenced the goals as well as the research questions and methods. The table attached in Appendix 4 shows how the aims, research questions and methods relate to each other.

The research questions evolved during the process; finally there were three:
- What are the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET according to the three groups of stakeholders interviewed?
- How is VET perceived in relation to the opportunities of young people enrolled in this education in Spain?
- How can the operationalisation of the CA inform the research and findings?

And targeted the three groups interviewed:
- Group 1: VET practitioners. Formed by six teachers, plus the Head of the College (who is a teacher annually elected), and the Inspector of the College (this group is referred to as VET practitioners or VET professionals),
- Group 2: 15 students interviewed in two rounds (once at the College and again during the placement in a company to which I refer as placement);
- Group 3: 6 employers recommended by the College.

In the process of designing and choosing the methods, I was confronted by other factors besides the theoretical framework and the research questions that influenced the decisions taken. These included variables such as the doctoral time frame of three years; my one-year parental leave that extended the project to four years; the limited resources in terms of being a lone researcher; limited research on VET; physical distance from the area to be studied; and also dealing with a very volatile socio-economic situation in the country of study, which affected both the participants and my optimism for the future. Whilst those components were
not part of the plan when designing the study, the environment in which the study was conducted had an impact on the type of decisions made and also their results.

In the following sections I detail the design of my research, the methods that I planned to use and the procedures for selecting the College and the participants to take part in the study.

1. Case study: selection of the College

I chose to perform a case study for reasons that were both pragmatic and strategic. Whilst case study research has had its critics, for its inability to generalise up from the particular (Simons, 2009; Macdonald & Walker, 1975), it fitted my objectives of investigating how different VET stakeholders within one particular group experienced education. As suggested by Merriam (2009), the case study is an “in-depth description and an analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40); my case study was configured by an analysis of the role of VET and the in-depth description of a particular College. Additionally, the selection of a single case study was to give me the opportunity to establish a close relationship with the interviewees in order to grasp the multidimensionality of their lives. It is within this multidimensionality that options for freedom, and also of oppression, become highly polarised. Nevertheless, the first decision was to select a College.

The selection of the College was made based on personal contacts and links that already existed due to my previous work in the same place. However, another factor that also affected the decision was the particular circumstances of the College. It is considered a national reference centre for VET teaching and learning. Its uniqueness makes it representative of VET at its best, which I considered a twofold advantage. Firstly, in practical terms, the employees involved in the College were most eager to participate, as were the students, who were accustomed to annual surveys and visits from people outside the College. Secondly, the fact of the College being considered a good one provided a greater challenge, in terms of exploring the students’ oppressions. Although, as Part III of this chapter reveals, the range of backgrounds (socio-economic scales) of the participants was broader than I had supposed, which provided a good account of students’ daily barriers. Consequently, access and activity patterns were, as
suggested by Stake (1983, 1995), chosen as useful concepts for specifying the case study.

2. The sample, preliminary selection of methods and access

My study aimed to focus on three groups of interviewees: practitioners, students and employers, in order to, as suggested by Stake (1995) and Silverman (2001), enhance the meaning of the case study by identifying the different ways the case was being viewed. I considered the three groups as VET stakeholders, having previously identified in the review of the literature (Chapter 3) that there was a lack of studies that gathered these voices together. Additionally, according to my theoretical framework, I planned the sample with the aim of creating research in which heterogeneous views and values were possible. It was within these principles of diversity and inclusion that the procedure for obtaining the sample was made.

The student sample was formed of young people attending the first year of VET, regardless of their discipline, in a selected college in Spain, who volunteered to talk about their difficulties in accessing, remaining in, and possibly completing their course at the College. Therefore the requirements were very broad and I could not determine the total number or characteristics of my student sample until the final interview had taken place and the data had been coded. Accordingly to the framework presented in Chapter 4, it was based on volunteers and did not incorporate a definition of vulnerability that was linked to economic or personal ability.

The criteria for participation were:

- Age: in order to be categorised as young, age was fixed at a maximum of 24 years old, according to, as referred in the previous chapters, the age defined as youth in European statistical analysis. This allowed me to disassociate the term youth from economic factors.

- Level: the students should be first-year VET students from any discipline taught at the College in order to make a second round of interviews possible.

- Time frame: the time frame for the first round of interviews should be from March to July 2011, and a second interview should be scheduled
once the students have satisfactorily completed the theoretical part of their course and have been placed in a company, between January and June 2012.

Targeting the first-year students of a two-year course meant gaining access to the same students at a second point in time. The second interview was planned following the classroom theory-based education, once they were on the required training. The time and place for the encounters with the student volunteers was planned to take place at the College after classes (either in a classroom or outside depending on the wishes of each participant), in order to provide a safe environment and facilitate meeting the participants. I did not have a specific number planned for the initial recruitment of volunteers, but I aimed to have around 20 students. The time for this initial contact was agreed with the tutor of the group via phone, email or a previous meeting. The initial conversations started in November 2010, in order to be able to have access to the classrooms in March 2011.

I planned to create the group of VET practitioners by including six teachers, plus the Head of the College (who is also a teacher) and the Inspector of the College. Although I aimed to involve the students in the selection of the practitioners, I planned to interview the other two practitioner figures at the same time as the students. This allowed me to form a sample of VET practitioners mostly based on students’ personal evaluations of who was a good practitioner. The reasoning behind this was to emphasise the role of the students and their values in my research. Additionally, the fact of making the students’ active participants in the selection of the practitioners aimed to empower this group. Whilst, as I mentioned, I did not plan the number of students a priori (as their selection was based on them volunteering), from the outset I had planned on restricting the group of VET practitioners to eight (seven teachers and the Inspector of the College), and the number of employers interviewed to six. The reasons for this were mainly based on being able to anticipate the length of the research study and the time necessary to contact, meet, transcribe and then examine all the material. For theoretical reasons, I chose six based on research by Guest (2006), which concluded that “saturation” occurs at twelve interviews, but that basic elements for meta-themes can be present in as few as six interviews.
The selection of the group of employers followed the same logic. The College provided me with a list of companies with good references (based on ex-alumni ratings and number and length of links with the College). From that list, I aimed to interview six of the tutors at their work places, targeting different industrial sectors. This meant conducting six interviews with employers who are responsible for students during their mandatory placement.

Having established that I was going to have a single case study, and having organised the sample, I started to prepare myself for the interviews. The final aim of the design of the sample was to establish a relationship with the participants of my study to research the relationship of the individual and visualise the freedoms and oppressions to which she was subjected. However, when interviewing the VET practitioners, I planned to highlight my identity as an ex-teacher in the same College where the research took place. I also tried to give priority to my identity as a freelance consultant during the interviews with employers. These identity changes aimed to create greater intimacy and understanding. In all cases, I prepared a booklet (Appendix 3) with a brief explanation of my previous studies, work experiences and current position as a student at the University of Nottingham. Additionally, the booklet contained the aims of the research as well as contact details, an explanation of the confidentiality and voluntary basis of participation in the research, and its procedures. To establish a relationship with the students, my plan was to first contact the tutor of each group, and then give a ten-minute presentation at the start of each session in different classrooms.

Before moving on to the description of my fieldwork (Part II), I conclude Part I of this chapter by describing the four methods that I planned to use: life-grids, interviews, participant observation and secondary data.

2.1. Life-grids: constructing a story

In broad terms, a life-grid is a snapshot of a participant’s life represented by a chart with temporal dimensions and thematic columns covering specific areas and events. It is a method of obtaining a structured story whereby the interviewer sets the themes and the participant creates a chronology of their life. Use of this technique has been incorporated into medical research as a tool for facilitating the understanding of quantitative data collected from participants (Berney & Blane,
Based on the research of Ashwin et al. (2010) and Abbas et. al (2013), where they used life-grids as a method, I was inspired to develop my own life-grid to be used with the student group (Appendix 6).

The divisions according to educational age and specific area themes were piloted with three student volunteers from the College, recruited by one of the practitioners for this purpose. In December 2010, whilst the methods were still being determined, I went to the College and had three one-to-one interviews with students who gave me useful feedback and further suggestions (these were used as pilot interviews). Thanks to their contributions, a final column, “other”, was included to allow the participants to comment or include significant events. The main purpose was to establish contact but also to build up a picture of each student’s background, living situation and parental level of education; whilst also being aware of the partiality and incompleteness of this information for such a purpose (Skeggs et al., 2008).

I planned to begin each student interview with a life-grid to fill in with the interviewee. In addition, I hoped to be able to make an audio recording of the process to identify issues for further exploration in the follow-up interviews.

2.2. Semi-structured interviews

After the life-grid discussion, I planned to have an in-depth open-ended (with biographical notes) interview with the students and a semi-structured interview with the other participating groups. Because “an interview study involves a series of discrete but demanding forays into the lives of strangers” (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 209) and, as many have argued convincingly (Hertz, 1997; Atkinson, 2002; Flick, 2009), interviewing is not the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers, I wanted to establish a positive relationship between myself and the interviewees and time was a key factor in helping me familiarise myself with the context. Although I was based in the UK and the research was in Spain, before starting the fieldwork I made use of email correspondence and phone conversations.

Consequently, I started to work on the process of building that relationship from the moment that I first started the research with an initial phone conversation to the Head of the College, who expressed enthusiasm and put me in contact with the
administrative part of the College in order to obtain further contacts (tutors, and data from the College). These initial conversations came prior to the research being fully established, but allowed me to build trust on both sides and establish the issue of access. At a later stage in the research, even though I already had permission from the College, I contacted the tutors of each of the classrooms where I would later perform my study, in order to personally ask for their permission, present myself and explain the aims of my research.

The semi-structured interviews were planned to be one-to-one with each member of each group: students, VET practitioners, and employers. The final aim was to enable, in the best case, a natural dialogue with the interviewees (Stroh, 2000). The extent to which interviews can be free of power relations and provide natural dialogues is widely contested in the literature (McDowell, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and, as I will note in Part II of this chapter, there were times when the fieldwork did not go as planned.

Although the design of the interview agenda was similar in all the cases (i.e. a 40 minute interview with some guided questions, see Appendix 5 for the interview guidelines), the student interviews had the particularity of occurring twice in the space of one year and of taking place at the College. This time frame proved (as I explain in Part II of this chapter) to be very useful and helped me to analyse the first material in depth and prepare for the second round. All the interviews were to be audio-recorded and also accompanied by a diary for personal use (notes, appointments, and data) to be used during the interview to help clarify issues or provide some notes on the participants.

2.3. Participant observation

Educational environments, and case studies in particular, have stimulated ethnographic work in relation to the hidden curriculum and classroom cultures in some of the works referenced in the literature review (see Chapter 3, Section 3.1). These accounts emphasise critical reality in relation to the target group.

Although pedagogic practices or relationships are not the main focus of my research, I consider them relevant in order to gain a better understanding of the social arrangements of the classroom. Consequently, I planned to carry out participatory observation in the classrooms of the practitioners’ selected by the
students. To familiarise myself with the settings and to understand the context (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995) I hoped to access some of the classrooms during the second step of the research. Additionally, the College organises an open door event for professionals every year, where different potential employers of graduates from all the disciplines taught in the College are invited to give two-hour presentations about their work, with special emphasis on their expectations of employees. Once I knew the dates, I made a note in my diary to attend the event and noted the subjects to be addressed, the organisations, practitioners’ involvement and the reactions of the participants at the talks.

2.4. Secondary data: documents and statistics

The idea, and subsequent use, of secondary data during my research was to broaden and contextualise the findings obtained through the use of qualitative primary data methods. The data that I planned to collect and analyse, or even use the analysis previously produced by others, was partly numerical (i.e. statistics) but also non-numerical (i.e. reports). The main sources of information for secondary data were:

- Administrative data: the College, as an official formal institution, collects and also produces data on every student who enrols as well as a list of current and possible future employers. Additionally, the tutors produce and handle student information. Through visits and interviews with the practitioners, I investigated the content of the information.

- National and international survey data and reports, such as those discussed in the literature review.

The main advantage of secondary data is access to information outside my budget, time and statistical and mathematical expertise as raw or primary data, for example, large data sets with pre-existing commentaries and analysis. Hence, while secondary data analysis has the down side of applying non-tailored statistics to specific research and this is a limitation of the research, I considered it a method for using high quality data sets to compare with my small-scale study.

Part II – In the field: from theory to practice

Whereas Part I focused on the first stage of planning the research, Part II is about the changes that I had to make once I was on the field. As a researcher, I made all
kinds of plans according to timelines; from getting into the field and obtaining data, to plans about deadlines for analysing this data. However, once I moved from the plan to the fieldwork and the first phone call was made to arrange a meeting, the entire time frame started to stretch and some methods had to be adjusted or abandoned. This section, from theory to practice, is dedicated to share my experiences of what is already well known: how events in the field change our best-laid plans.

1. The sampling process and the sample

The access process for my fieldwork started two months after I began my PhD with the first decision of researching a single college, which carried the limitations that a small sample has but also was a time strategic decision. Once I had decided on the College, I telephoned the Head to share my initial proposal and idea. Having been given consent I contacted the administrative body to ask for a list of disciplines, and other details such as information regarding tutors or student data stored in the College. Although the response was positive, it was not until my first visit to the College in December 2010 that I received all this information. I then emailed or phoned to arrange a date with the tutors to present my project in each classroom and ask for volunteers. At the practitioner level, the response was low and I had to go back to the administrative staff to help me to spread the word and deliver the message to each tutor. In the majority of cases, the first contact occurred in March 2011 when I made a second visit to the College and waited outside each classroom to speak to the tutor personally.

The response from the student body was better than I had expected. Even though, in some classes, I entered, presented myself and the research, asked for volunteers and left with none; in other cases, the students actively asked all types of questions on a wide variety of topics, from what a PhD was about, where Nottingham was, how many colleges were involved, to general questions about myself, such as if I were married. The total number after one month of recruiting came to 19 volunteers, some of whom did not attend the meeting arranged, so finally, I was left with 15 (a descriptive information about the participants is provided in Part III, Section 2).
Although the first round of interview meetings with the students always occurred in the College after classes, unexpected challenges were faced when arranging the second round. Since the initial purpose of having a second round was in order to grasp their attitudes and expectations once they were placed in a company for their placement training, due to the political changes in Spain, the second round acquired extra relevance once the fieldwork had started. As the participants had promised to attend the second interview during the training period, I sent monthly emails to each to keep the communication channel open. Apart from the three students who asked me to join them on Facebook, none of the others replied to my email correspondence. Consequently, when the date for the planned interview approached I contacted them by telephone. Four out of the 15 telephone numbers were no longer active and the College administration informed me that those four students had dropped out of their studies. Through their class colleagues, I only managed to obtain a new number for one of them.

After several phone conversations and time spent arranging and re-arranging meetings, I managed to conduct one-to-one meetings with eight students at different times and locations. This time, the meetings took place in the College in only two cases. Most preferred to meet at their homes or in the neighbouring area to save on transport costs; a situation that is linked to the management of the Spanish crisis and the cuts in social spending noted in the following analysis chapters. In relation to the methods, their application was not always possible. A review of these follows:

1.1. Life-grids subjected to participants’ reactions

Although the use of the life-grid offers a chronological and biographical window into the participants’ life, my experience suggested that their stories did not necessarily have to be told this way. Each conversation with a student started with a brief explanation of the project and the layout of the life-grid was used as a tool to start the interview.

As Parry et al. (1999) state, the life-grid helped, in most cases, to break the ice and to give the participants the confidence to feel that they were in control of the structure and content and, most importantly, the details of the issues and experiences from their biographies. Nevertheless, in some cases (three out of the
fifteen) the life-grid acted in the opposite way. The participants, seeing an empty chart with years and life areas to recall and build their lives, felt that too much was required. In these cases, in order to minimise the disruption, I removed the life-grid and moved on to a general interview programme where the participants talked freely about the past without emphasising the chronology of events or covering all the areas.

Even though cross-referencing happened during the whole interview, the reconstruction of these biographies was harder, as was the process of getting a general concept of the students’ values and experiences. In fact, in most cases where the life grid was not explicitly used, one event, such as health or change of country, marked the participants’ stories in such a way that all the other areas were influenced by it, making it difficult to construct a temporal order or linear story. In conclusion, regardless of the fact that when doing the fieldwork I could not always use this technique, the use of life-grids enabled me to identify disruptive moments or themes that had a strong impact on participants’ capabilities to experience a valuable life.

1.2. Semi-structured interviews: broadening the themes

This method was the main one used in all the research. However, the drastic worsening of events in Spain explained in the context chapter ensured that the interviews held during the pilot interviews in 2010 differed in tone from those held during 2011 and even more so from those of 2012. For the student group, increasing youth unemployment became a practical worry once they had started their training period. In fact, as later explained in the analysis, most of them, due to the closures or reduction in personnel in private industry, had work placements that did not match their professional education. I had prepared a new set of questions based on issues arising from the study of the first round of interviews. I changed the VET orientation to something broader and re-arranged the set of priorities according to the issues of work, placement and social participation that emerged in the first round of interviews, the possibility of keeping it as a conversation being one of the advantages of semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996; Burgess, 1993).
The second round of interviews incorporated wider socio-economic issues in order to represent the situation the students were living through and the factors that diminished their capabilities. In the transition between the first and second round of interviews, the theoretical framework widened to include faces of oppression (Young, 1990, 2001a), and the concept of intrinsic vulnerability became more relevant.

Another difference between the first round of interviews and the second round (beside the time lapse and social changes) was the flow of the conversations, in my role as a researcher and my ability to respect the silences and let the narrative and the narrator present her story to go beyond the story itself (Trahar, 2009; Chase, 2005). Boosted by the confidence gained during the first interviews and, I also believe, because the setting was outside the College, the second student interviews were longer conversations that lasted around one hour each and incorporated more personal elements. These interviews created a comfortable and trusting space in which the interviewee could present herself, reflect on her daily life and share her future plans and the fears linked to them.

Regarding the other groups of interviewees, the conversations and encounters happened as planned. Although those had been programmed only once, I feared I was missing an opportunity to observe a change in the practitioners’ perceptions now that the crisis was worsening and the austerity measures had been put into practice. Therefore, I nurtured the relationship established with them during their interviews and tried to maintain conversations in an informal manner both in and outside the College via personal encounters, emails or phone calls. These conversations took the form of diary notes that have helped me to shape the analysis, but are not so detailed as if a second round of interviews would have taken place.

During my research, there were a couple of times, mostly during the first interviews, where I unintentionally shifted the mood of the conversation and my personal opinions had an impact on the interview. This I attribute to the fact that I was not an experienced researcher. In 2011, a particular interview with a student (Jose) went badly—and I was fully aware of this—due to my not being sufficiently prepared, or mentally fit, for the interview because I was concerned
about a personal issue at the time. This particular interview was only used as information for the analysis, and no quotes were taken from it.

1.3. Participant observation: reduced from the original plans
My plan to install myself in the classroom as an observer, in order to pay attention to the everyday background and the social organisation and interaction therein, did not occur. Consequently, and using Wagner’s (1997) typology, what could have been a co-learning agreement between me and the researchers, turned into a data-extraction agreement limited to a controlled setting that, in this case, were personal interviews arranged in advance. Although I had no problem arranging and maintaining conversations with the student-selected practitioners, the situation changed in the following academic year. Due to the cuts in public services and a drive for efficiency, five out of the six practitioners were not located in the same College. Having kept their email addresses and personal phone numbers I contacted them in order to grasp their reactions to the changes and enrich my contextual analysis but classroom visits were not possible.

Additionally, the one practitioner that remained at the College was reluctant to be the only one observed. Regarding the observation of the annual event that the College holds for professionals to share their experience with students, it did take place and I attended it on two consecutive days. During the event, I took notes and was alerted to the importance of the research diary as a method.

1.4. Research diary: from a support to a method
The research diary, which I had planned to use only as support for the interviews, became another fieldwork method. Inspired by the detailed and rich descriptive account of the re-published “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” by Geertz (1973), and inspired by the practicality of the recommendations given by Burgess (1981, 1993), I kept my diary dated and entries were made under: “When? Where? What? Who?” It mostly took the form of pages in a notebook, but in the second round of interviews it was complemented by an electronic diary recording, as I was able to type faster once the meeting was over, about all the impressions and interview themes that emerged. The diary was a tool that allowed me to maintain the flow of the interview and at the same time review and
complement the weight of the argument and enrich the data obtained in the life-
grids and recordings.

2. Cross-cutting issues: ethical procedures

This last part of the research design refers specifically to issues that cut across the research. I tried to address ethical concerns: from the design stage of the research, to the selection of the research questions, the selection of methods, critical assessment and dissemination of the results.

Prior to beginning the fieldwork and starting one-to-one contact with the tutors of the student groups, the Head of the College or the pilot interviews with students, the ethical approach to the research was discussed at length with my supervisors. Since the topic raises sensitive issues, such as the vulnerability of young people, it was necessary to reformulate the project in order to avoid any stigmatisation, or assumptions based on health or socio-economic circumstances. Asking for volunteers on the basis of their own feelings about their difficulties in having a life that is valuable for them made it possible to approach volunteers in line with the theoretical framework developed beforehand, without imposing any assumptions about who was vulnerable.

In terms of anonymity, informed consent, the right of the interviewees to withdraw at any point, and transparency regarding my aims and myself, the research was carried out in accordance with the guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). The highly personal nature of the information demanded privacy and confidentiality both during and after the study. In accordance with the BERA guidelines, pseudonyms are used throughout the study and, in cases where details of their lives might serve to identify them; these have been altered to protect the study participant. The participants were provided with an information sheet and a letter of consent to participate in the study (Appendix 2). Furthermore, in the introductory classroom visit, I stressed that if they felt that they no longer wished to participate that they should feel free to leave the research at any point. Finally, a limitation of the research implied by the use of distinct languages is that the interviews were held in Catalan and Spanish and the research is in English. The use of two source languages and the translation
of their quotes, has forced me to re-interpret idiomatic expressions and local and regional sayings.

**Part III – Working with the data: analytical processes**

The previous descriptions of the methodology provide a glimpse at the back-and-forth dynamic of my research, and this section is no different. Rather than moving directly forward, it is a reflection in terms of re-thinking the methodology based on Maxwell’s (2005) five steps outlined above (goals, research questions, theoretical framework, methods and validity). However, it also describes the process of coding, which is a step before the analysis process. Divided into three parts, one for each group of interviewees, Part III “Working with the data”, tells the story of the construction of a systematic and rigorous basis for the analysis of the responses from the students, practitioners and employers.

**1. Issues of validity and reliability**

Although validity and reliability are usually associated with a quantitative research paradigm, any type of research should aim for validity (Silverman, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; O’Leary, 2004). From the beginning of the research, I envisioned the data analysis as a simultaneous process that I would perform after each encounter. This cyclical process made me think that the way to set up and manage the collection of data was a matter of common sense; which I naturally possessed. However, in retrospect and comparing the first visits to the College or the first interviews conducted with students with the last ones, I have to acknowledge that my “common-sense”, also called the nature of knowledge (epistemology) of the reality (ontology) very much benefited from the high level of supervision, courses, seminars and even conversations with colleagues that took place both inside and outside the University of Nottingham. This continuous learning process helped me to enlarge my perception of common sense and, even more importantly, to focus on social justice and critical assessment based on personal future opportunities.

During the fieldwork, I was also emotionally involved in the economic fluctuations of the country, the way they were managed, and the increasing uncertainty for young people. Therefore, even when I tried to position myself outside, my personal story, emotions and background stepped into the research.
This was mirrored in the analysis, where greater concern was given to the experiences of the students (as a current student), followed by those of the VET practitioners (as a VET practitioner myself), than those of the employers.

As I read through the transcripts I realised, that I did not always encouraged the interviewee to talk freely (McDowell, 1992), and that there were occasions when my excitement about the political situation suffocated the voice of the interviewee or made some assumptions. This was the case with Lucia (see Table 5) who was so energetic when referring to the situation of young people that I directly assumed that she had participated in one of the on-going social demonstrations held under the name of the Indignados (Indignants), and she had to correct me.

Although I consider these limitations have been taken into consideration, I still do not deem them to be unique or exclusive to qualitative analysis or my own research. By contrast, I think that the force and validity of qualitative research lies in recognising that research is a human act pursuing human explanations of human concerns; therefore, emotions are always intertwined throughout every stage of the research. Having set the basis for analysis, I move on to consider the data or, as Merriam (1988) referred to them, “ordinary bits of information found in the environment” (p. 69).

2. The data: students, employers and practitioners

The data analysis is divided into three groups defined by their position in relation to VET: the students, employers and practitioners. In order to handle the different types of data, I define four steps by taking into consideration the suggestions made in several manuals of research methods, methodology, or data analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Atkinson, 2002; Silverman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000)

- Handling “raw” or first level data: every interview, as well as the organisation of records. The first three interviews were fully translated into English and analysed. This allowed my supervisors to guide me on the process of analysis.
- Explore who formed the data: I explored those who were my sample by using general statistics to put my interviews into perspective (national and
international data) and by establishing profiles (Smith, 2008; Collins et al., 2007).

- Linking themes: I categorised, coded and engaged with the data and identified the patterns to explore systematically what the data were saying (Silverman, 2001).


The data was approached following a thematic content analysis to analyse the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I recognise that, due to having an initial theoretical framework, the relevant topics for the analysis and the heading and organisation of the chapters were influenced and defined with the concepts of social justice and vulnerability in mind, as is evidenced by the structure of the analysis (Chapters 6 and 7).

The rest of this chapter follows the pattern of the four data analysis steps above. Therefore, the work performed with the data collected from the students, the employers and the practitioners is explained in four respective subheadings: handling “raw” or first level data; exploring who formed the data; linking themes; and, theorising the results.

2.1. VET students

2.1.1. Handling “raw” or first level data

My original idea prior to the fieldwork was that the handling of first level data was only a technical issue. Nevertheless, I realised it was of extreme importance to handle it correctly in order to be an ethical researcher and be respectful of the value, time and importance of the stories shared by the interviewees. Due to the features of my research, I had to manage the research in one place (Spain) while being based in another (UK). The use of electronic storage (i.e. Dropbox) or even simple email attachments helped me to have access to the material created and developed in both places.

The data for the student sample was taken from the life-grids and semi-structured interviews. These had first been tested in three pilot studies, which informed the fifteen subsequent interviews held between March and June 2011, and the eight
interviews held between February and May 2012. In total, I ended up with 543 minutes of conversation in the first round and a similar amount in the second round, despite there being fewer students. Apart from the pilot interviews, I transcribed (with the help of a professional) all the interviews recorded during the first (15) and second (8) rounds, and took exhaustive notes both during and after each of them.

The use of two languages (Spanish and Catalan), the linguistic differences in vocabulary and the cultural traces in the use of language influenced the final decision of performing a “manual” analysis rather than a computer-based one. The relatively small sample and its heterogeneity based on the interviewee’s country of birth were also factors that influenced my final decision to code using manual methods.

2.1.2. Exploring who formed the students’ data

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest two methods for establishing codes: after the interview as a grounded-theory system, or to create a provisional “start list” of codes prior to the fieldwork. In my case, the original codes were established a priori by the areas covered on the life-grid: education, family, housing, friends and significant relationship, leisure, parental employment, students’ employment, health and other relevant aspects (see Appendix 6 for an example). Nonetheless, these codes were reviewed after the semi-structured interview and during the analysis in order to adjust them to the conceptual framework of social justice. The revision included the aspects of work, placement, social participation, expectations and the role of VET in their life-plans.

The question of who formed my sample was quite limited, as stated in Part II. Whilst the starting point was based on volunteers, the decision to finish was the most challenging. I had to decide whether my sample was “good enough” and think “about research decisions in terms of what is lost and what is gained, rather than what might be ideal” (Luttrell, 1997, p. 1). The decision was taken based on the diversity of backgrounds and stories that were recalled in each interview. The decision of who forms the data was strategically planned, by carrying out a second round of interviews to gain a greater knowledge of the interviewees. The following table provides some information on the student sample.
Table 5. Students’ information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>2011, 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elvira</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonzalo</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>2011, 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepcion</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2011, 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javier</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2011, 2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2011, 2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Armenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalina</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercedes</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking age, housing, highest parental education, work and birth as variables extracted from the life-grid and background information, I created a road map of the general first round of interviewees. Each of these variables features a relevant part of understanding past and/or present opportunities. The number inside each of the blue boxes in the corner of each rectangle represents the number of interviewees that took that path.

Figure 7. Students’ map
At first glance, it can be seen that some influential variables such as gender (8 women, 7 men), religion (1 not raised in a Catholic family) or health (1 directly affected by it) are not represented here, but they are considered in the analysis. Furthermore, while I recognised these as important regarding individual vulnerability and therefore capabilities, I also considered that there is value in approaching vulnerability from outside the classical cluster of health, economics or gender.

The students’ map is constructed in a binary way of positive and negative sentences based on a selection of educational variables influencing educational attainment. I aimed to illustrate and identify the different paths and the barriers to accessing VET inherent to the interviewees. Parental education is presented as an indicator for students’ schooling which is defined in relative terms, based on the socioeconomic position of their parents (Eurostat, 2009) and also by some literature as an indicator of schooling ambitions to determine an academic or vocational track (Breen et al., 2014). The high numbers of respondents with no-easy paths or the “have-not” (Young, 1990, p. 50), understood as students that gave a greater number of no-sentences, made me quite confident of stating that, in spite of being a small sample, the conversations held with these 8 woman and 7 men could already inform the case for evaluating vulnerability and, specifically, VET, from a social justice perspective. The figure is a representation of the students’ barriers and expanded the idea of vulnerability beyond socio-economic terms (i.e. lack of resources) or medical diagnosis (i.e. disability) to encompass aspects and situations that undermine the bargaining power of the individual. The result is that my data serves as a representation of the diverse situation of VET students. In a simple way, this representation and data show that despite recognising that vulnerability is constant and inherent to the human condition (Fineman, 2008) some people are a priori more restricted in their life options than others.

2.1.3. Linking themes

Figure 7, above, allowed me to picture the students and hence their opportunities in a multidirectional way, rather than only linearly. The intertwining of personal (i.e. family) but also external aspects (i.e. work) outlined each of the transcripts as an agglomeration of previous and present states. Although the interview was
always based around the same areas, each had a different path and even a different approach to each of the variables.

My manual approach was to mark, using a different colour, each part of the conversations (complemented with notes taking during the visits) that informed the value and feelings of the interviewees towards their current position as well as their ability to carry out their life-plans. The result was that the themes of “education, relations, values, work, autonomy, and other”, substituted the eight open themes of the life-grid (see Appendix 6). Having done that, the next step was to use these, plus one more to contain open comments, as columns, each including pieces of data about each student. This procedure reduced the bulk of the transcripts to fifteen electronically neat A4 tables (see Appendix 7 for an example) but most importantly, it was beneficial to read it along with the interview in preparation for the second round of interviews. A process of data analysis involved the identification of key themes that were used by the respondents to support the discourse (Merriam, 2009; Silverman, 2001) of experiences and values attached to VET. The data enabled me to acquire a deeper understanding of individual stories, values and life-plans.

Having done that, it helped me to start to tighten the interviews with a theoretical framework and identify four aspects:

- Barriers, or constrained capabilities in terms of past, present or potential constraints or barriers towards achieving these functions.
- Autonomy, in the form of whom or what influenced their decisions.
- Functioning, in terms of present and future valuable beings and doings and the idea of the good, in the form of which values are the most reiterated/repeated during the conversations.

Even though the third theme (functioning) resulted in a wide range of different answers, the other three gave a limited number of possibilities to categorise. I tried to use their own words as well as disaggregate the information as much as possible, but I still aimed for a category in order to be able to show the comparative weight of some of the aspects. The numbers represent the number of students who mentioned the theme.
Table 6. Students’ frequencies - barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Myself</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Distance Migration</th>
<th>Bureaucracy</th>
<th>Disinformation</th>
<th>Education School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Students’ frequencies - influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My decisions are influenced by</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Practitioners</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Bureaucracy</th>
<th>None/Myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified which member</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Students’ frequencies - values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Respect</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Justice/Ethics/Moral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process of linking themes, elaborating the tables and narrowing them down to these four aspects outlined students’ expectations, fears and also their desires. At this stage, the data started to provide a picture capable of being used to assess VET in terms of its capacity for human and societal development.

2.1.4. Theorising the results

The dialogue between data and theory started from the moment I stepped into the field. Along with the different steps outlined above, I tried to describe how pages of transcripts became transformed into a story with many voices that ended up forming a single story of young people enrolled in VET in Spain. However, due to the inherent features of VET and the ages of the respondents, the purpose of my story is not to limit it to College issues. Each interviewee reflected on their childhood, their current situation, the future and how they saw themselves in relation to it. The role of the researcher, as Biesta et al. (2005) indicate, transcends the collection of information and requires engaging in broader social debates.

The more I worked with the College transcripts the more they acquired the form of a reflective story about the human condition and its daily struggles and

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20This tag was created based on the students’ experiences about lack of transparency, the number of forms to complete, unintentionally missing deadlines, or other aspects that some also referred to as “misinformation”.

121
disengagement from society. However, this story also included another aspect inherent to humans: the force, motion or will to find one’s place within this system; therefore, there was an open vote of confidence in VET for providing at least part of this opportunity. In the chapters of analysis that follow, what stands out clearly is that VET has the social potential, as an institution and as an experience, to enhance the capabilities of the students. The analysis hopes to provide a useful account by using the themes outlined above, the table of frequencies, the secondary data, the literature review and the theoretical framework.

2.2. **Employers: in-company training tutors**

2.2.1. **Handling “raw” or first level data**

The employers were six in-company training tutors recommended by the College that were not linked to the students who were interviewed. The reason for making this division was in order to have a conversation about hypothetical students and not about specific cases that I might relate to. The fact of not having a direct link between employee and employer aimed to guarantee confidentiality and increase the sense of security during the interviews. This was made possible by interviewing the employers in 2011, the year that the students were still at the College.

The procedures for handling the data were similar to that of the student group. The core theme of each interview was the expectations the company had about students. In order to reinforce the experiences in the transition from education to work, the analyses for the group of students and employers are discussed together in Chapter 7.

2.2.2. **Exploring who formed the employers’ data**

The selection of interviewees was made by College recommendations and also limited by the employers’ availability. Although the intention was to cover a range of economic sectors as vocational areas and courses taught in my VET College, the response from the sectors was unequal. The table with the employers reveals the gender division in the sector. The fourth employer, Rodrigo, is not quoted directly in the research because the recording had an intense background.
noise. Therefore, I made the decision of using his views to elaborate the argument, but to not include his direct statements in the analysis.

Table 9. Employers’ data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Area of work</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mireia</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reme</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pau</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergio</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilar</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following illustration represents the inequality in terms of sectors, but the diversity regarding gender and age group. As in the previous table, the numbers in the small boxes represent the number of respondents that match that particular path.

Figure 8. Employers’ map

All the interviews were held during 2011. Informal conversations during 2012 informed me that the relationships between the College and these companies were, even in the best cases, reduced due to economic pressures that had forced internal reductions of workers in the companies.

2.2.3. Linking themes

The central themes in the employers’ interviews were:

- Technical description of the responsibilities and work to be performed by students and general employees in that particular company.
- General difficulties that the company, or more generally the sector, was undergoing as a consequence of the crisis and increasing global competition, and the effect this had on future employment opportunities for young people.
- Negative and positive experiences with students and expectations and requirements for evaluating a student as performing well as trainee.
- Evaluation of the level of VET students and future recommendations based on their experiences as a trainee tutor for students.

These interviews were mainly based on a general description of the challenges for the sector and, on an individual level, the relationship with VET and the students.

2.2.4. Theorising the results
The four themes presented above were used during the analysis to complete the picture given by students about VET, as well as the factors that affect their capabilities. The first, third and fourth theme (job requirements, student profile and experiences with VET trainees) complement the evaluative picture given by the students (and later practitioners) about the quality of VET. However, as noted earlier, this evaluation was not sufficient to understand the capabilities of young VET students once they have finished their education. The second theme (general difficulties), identified in the socio-economic analysis, is a cornerstone for framing the current Spanish context and hence to understand better the limited range of choices and freedom of decision by students and also of employers.

2.3. VET practitioners

2.3.1. Handling “raw” or first level data
The group of VET practitioners focused their talk on the daily challenges for designing and delivering their own idea of a good VET course. The selection was made based on students’ recommendations, therefore the level of disparity of opinions and approaches to VET was not as broad as one might hope expect in a purposive sample. However, the fact that the practitioners had been recommended increased their predisposition to be part of the research.
The length of the interviews with the Inspector of the College and the Head of the College was more than the average (40-minute) interview. This was perhaps because, as public figures, they were more used to answering questions.

### 2.3.2. Exploring who formed the practitioners’ data

The profile of each of the interviewees in this sample was quite diverse. I attribute this to the intrinsic diversity of the subject areas that they taught in VET.

**Table 10. Practitioners’ data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Previous Studies</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Years as VET professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carlota</td>
<td>Social Care</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariadna</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerea</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>+15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanca</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatriz</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernesto</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnau</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again, further information is provided visually through this conceptual map in which the blue boxes indicate the number of interviewees in each category.

**Figure 9. Practitioners’ map**

The disciplines are based on the degrees studied. In Spain, a VET practitioner is a civil servant and, in order to become one, candidates have to pass an exam (with a written and oral part) organised and regulated by the Autonomous Community (in this case the Valencian Community). The requirements for the exams are: to have
studied a University degree (regardless of the subject), to have a Master’s degree in Pedagogy and to be able to work in Spain. In some cases, the University Degree and the Master’s degree in Pedagogy can be substituted by proven experience. Therefore, one might have studied Biology (as it is the case of Ariadna) and be a Social Care practitioner.

2.3.3. Linking themes
The central themes in the interviews with the VET practitioners were:
- The reasons/purpose for becoming an educator, specifically, in the field of VET.
- The difference between VET and other branches of education.
- The difference between practitioners and top-managers.
- Their role within VET, the meaning of their profession and, to a lesser extent, their impact on students’ lives.
- The challenges of their daily work.
- The socioeconomic changes and how they affect VET, the students and their jobs.

2.3.4. Theorising the results
The themes presented above were used in a detailed analysis to enhance the picture of students’ freedoms and oppressions and the role VET plays in them. Chapter 6 offers a comprehensive analysis, in which VET experiences are combined with the existing literature about VET practitioners’ values. The theorisation of the data obtained from the 8 interviews, using a social justice framework, is one of the key contributions of my research to VET literature.

3. Conclusion: moving towards the analysis
This chapter discussed the methodology and strategies employed for the practitioners, the VET students and employers. I developed the methodological processes used in order to reveal the capabilities of young people enrolled in VET, as well as expose the meaning of vulnerability beyond economic spheres and in the voice of the interviewees themselves. Even though I have dedicated a section to the design, another to the methods and a third to issues of data organisation and theme selection, I am mindful that not all the details of the methodological process and experiences undertaken through this journey can ever be fully
transmitted. However, with the presentation of my initial thinking about how to plan the research (Part I), followed by the decisions taken in the field (Part II), and the final preliminary order and analysis of the data (Part III), I hope to have given a holistic picture of the process.

Thus, I pause to recall the construction of my thinking before moving on to the two chapters of analysis and the final chapter of conclusions. The steps undertaken up to now have been a presentation of the rationale for the research as well as of the researcher. Having explained the aims and given a picture of Spain—a country where the government is eager for short-term solutions in order to reduce the numbers of unemployed, and VET is presented as a solution—the review of the literatures positioned this economic-centred discourse within a human capital one. Criticisms to the economist view were given by targeting its various shortcomings and, finally, I delved deeper into the body of authors pursuing social justice. Within this, a theoretical framework was presented built from the CA, the faces of oppression and the concept of vulnerability. In this framework, students were the basis of social justice and VET was “re-imagined” (McGrath, 2012b) on the basis of freedom. Keeping this broader framework in mind, and with the greater mission of analysing VET not only in terms of outputs but also in relation to society and structure, the research methodology was outlined.

Although using the CA has raised an already established criticism regarding its operationalisation (Clark, 2005), these sections have shown how it helped to frame a research focused on the voices of the interviewees in which qualitative methods were preferred and students’ experiences were put at the forefront. Throughout the chapter I have explained how the methods changed and adapted once the research started, until finally there were four: life-grids, semi-structured interviews, a research diary and a supportive secondary data analysis. The language of the capabilities and the core ideas of social justice and oppression helped me to ask different questions, by not being satisfied with explanations based on outcomes or economic revenues. The following two chapters of analysis show how the qualitative methodology (in conjunction with the theoretical framework developed) is a powerful tool to bring up the complexity and richness of individual stories whilst being aware of the general context.
Chapter Six – Being a practitioner: the experience of VET professionals

1. Overview
This first analytical chapter compiles the responses to conversations held between 2011 and 2012 with the VET professionals. Note that the term VET professional and VET practitioner are used as general terms to refer to teachers, the Head of the College (who is an annually appointed teacher), and the Inspector of the College, and that further information about the interviewees can be found in Table 10 and Figure 9 (Chapter 5).

This chapter concentrates on the operationalisation and empirical applications of my theoretical framework, aiming to collect the voices of the eight VET practitioners. It focuses on their perceptions about VET, an area not extensively-researched in the VET literature, barely heard at the policy level (Finlay et al., 2007; Clow, 2001), and almost non-existent in the Spanish literature (Gimeno Sacristán, 2010)

The chapter is structured in parallel with the review of the literatures (Chapter 3) in order to establish a critical comparison between them. The literature review was organised according to the underpinning discourses (VET for the economy, VET for the individual, VET for well-being). The division of this chapter is: VET as a passport to work, VET as an experience and VET as human flourishing. Just as with the authors cited in the review of literatures, the categories should be understood as dynamic. Practitioners expressed more than one conception and therefore the same interviewee can be found in different sections.

At this point in the research, a more complex theoretical framework has been elaborated to incorporate the identification of constraints and barriers to students’ ability to form capabilities. Consequently, the analysis of the perceptions of VET based on the series of conversations held with the practitioners is made by bearing in mind the relationship between the literature, the interviewees’ perceptions of VET and its effects on students’ vulnerability. The analysis constitutes an
opportunity to contrast the discussion presented in the literature review with the practitioners’ experiences.

The context that the conversations took place in, the critical time of crisis that Spain is experiencing, created a complex situation. Instrumental discourses about the role of VET intertwined with a concern and desire that the students become active contributors to society in a more holistic sense. Despite the constraints associated with labelling, I hope to reflect the fluidity and interrelationships between the three topics as well as the accumulative power that the third, human flourishing, has over the other two.

The selected quotes are only parts of longer conversations and the reader should bear in mind that VET professionals are, as the grey literature (educational strategies and policy reports) stated, under pressure to increase VET's attractiveness. This pressure is happening at a time of significant cuts in the budget for education, which directly affects the practitioners’ incomes and job conditions. This makes practitioners consider their responsibilities as being strictly those stated in the VET curricula. Consequently, instrumental aspects linked to the practical meaning of work have greater emphasis than they might have in a more prosperous situation.

2. VET as the passport to the world of work

The importance of having a diploma to access the world of work was recognised by all the practitioners, indicating the embedded discourse of credentialism and the conception of linking these credentials to a proof of an increase in one’s human capital and, hence, value in the market (Lopez-Mayan et al., 2013; López-Bazo & Moreno, 2008; Psacharopoulos, 1985). Although this was not the only vision, this section presents many views that align with this perspective.

Nerea, one of the participants on this study, has been teaching Administration since the 90s, and in this particular College almost since the beginning of her career as a VET practitioner. Her conversation expressed various views on the value of VET, but the commodification of education and the conception of a diploma as a trading currency for entering any job position were present from the outset:
[...] a person today without any qualifications has absolutely nothing, nothing, nothing at all...nothing to do in the labour market. It’s that, well, even for being a garbage collector you need to have certified skills and competences. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

Learning skills in order to improve one’s chances of employment has been extensively discussed in the literature review, under the concept of employability (Chapter 3, Section 2.2), together with the criticisms of this concept raised by authors such as McGrath (2009), Bonvin and Galster (2010) or Moreau and Leathwood (2006). Like Nerea, the quotes from the other practitioners show that there is a general awareness of the relationship between educational attainment, in terms of obtaining the diploma, and the probability of getting a job. However, their opinions (as will be shown throughout the chapter) go beyond the fact of having a diploma and indicate the economic climate as being decisive in obtaining a job.

Additionally, when comparing VET with other academic options the stories are also diverse. As noted earlier, the human capital literature suggests a relationship between years of education and labour opportunities (Caparros Ruiz et al., 2010) but this does not always prove to be the case. Even though there is a constant campaign to develop skills, over-qualification in Spain is 16 points above the EU average (Eurostat, 2012). This translates into a situation where the relation between the credential obtained (diploma) and the job obtained is not proportional. At the same time, over-qualification is not equally distributed and it affects female foreigners 65% more than others (see Table 4, Chapter 2).

From her words, Nerea seemed to be unaware of this situation. She referred to the students as a whole, ignoring that the capabilities of each individual are not dependent on one’s level of education.

Of course, it is better to do the Bachillerato (post-compulsory education for accessing University) and then go to University! The higher you study, the more chance you have of getting a good salary. But, what do you think? VET is also good, what can I say (laughing). It is better than nothing, isn’t it?. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

Contrary to this view of VET as a “second-option” (Pring, 1995), or as Nerea says “better than nothing”, Ariadna who is another participant shared
her personal story and the reasons why she encourages people to enrol in VET.

I went to University and even did a PhD. Yes, I have a PhD in Biology. Back then I had options but still, a PhD is too abstract. I am a VET teacher; I could have got it [the practitioner work] with much less. I always tell my students. Start with little and then do more if you feel (that you want to study further), but a diploma is all that you need. VET opens a lot of doors to you. (Ariadna, 08/06/11)

Ariadna is an example of an overqualified female. She worked for some time for private laboratories and then, eight years ago, she decided to do the exams to become a VET practitioner. The salary was not substantially less (according to her) and the security and personal rewards were higher. Up to now, she shares with me, she has not regretted having taken that decision. Like Nerea, Ariadna’s story also denotes an instrumental view of education, “I could have got it with much less” and “a PhD is too abstract”; but in her case she reveals awareness that income is only one factor of individual well-being.

The experience and perception of Ariadna that “VET opens a lot of doors to you”, is shared by many in contemporary Spain. Recent studies point out that 53% of students finishing VET find a job within three months (Adecco, 2011) and the perception of VET as a better professional option seems to be 73% higher than for other levels of education (Bertelsmann, 2013). Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 2, VET is in the spotlight of the educational agenda at the national level. Plans such as the Spanish Education Ministry Plan de Acción 2010-2020, with the primary goal of “matching skills to labour demands and increasing students’ employability” (Adecco, 2011, p. 2) or the new educational law (LOMCE), focused on increasing the competitiveness of young people and promoting national growth (LOMCE, 2013), are examples of this.

In the conversations with Nerea and Ariadna, students’ agency was understood as being isolated from social structures and, consequently, the responsibility for success was placed on the students themselves. Within the liberal rhetoric, the concept of achievement and work are framed in individual terms whereby each person and their desires are the only factors involved. It is, to paraphrase Bonvin and Galster (2010), a concept focusing on the labour market rather than on individuals. Embedded in this discourse is that the locus of the responsibility for
success falls on the individual, as an isolated matter (Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2001).

Blanca, the youngest practitioner of my sample, aligns with the responsibilisation discourse (Sultana, 2011; Young, 2004). To the question: “What, in your opinion, are the reasons for a person to enrol in VET or in other types of education?” she stated:

The studies do not matter; what matters is the students’ will. It is easy to say “I can’t…”, that discourse is very easy and the students keep repeating “I can’t do that, I can’t study more”. And I don’t know what you want me to tell you, but I find that the “I can’t” discourse is the easiest. Look, they just asked me, “please don’t put maths in the exam”. (Blanca, 08/06/11)

For Blanca, the student is seen as passive and lazy; a childlike image, which she emphasises by saying the words “I can’t” in a high pitched voice. In her quote, agency and a student’s individual performance are subjected to individual will. The instrumental vision of VET as the passport to work leaves aside the individual and her intrinsic features. Drawing on the CA, Robeyn’s (2005) personal, social and environmental conversion factors that have an effect on the formation of one’s capabilities are, in the words of Blanca, reduced to a matter of individual will, work and effort.

Such judgement carries simplistic conclusions about an individual’s performance based on race or country of origin, such as the one brought up by Ernesto. Ernesto is a man in his late fifties who became a VET practitioner 18 years ago. In our conversation, he made a comparison between Spanish and non-Spanish students:

Making an effort is not valued […] this is the difference between the immigrants and us. The immigrants adapt themselves, because of where they come from, they adapt. If they have to go and pick oranges, they do it. If they have to take care of the elderly, they do it. If they have to…I don’t know, wash the floor, they do it, and then if they find something better they go for it, and then they open a business. But the Spanish people don’t want that. I am not saying that is the case for all of us, but it is for the majority. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)

For Ernesto as well as for Blanca the individuals are in charge of their agency, and, as Nerea said, it is a matter of studying to have more chances of getting a job. However, Ernesto makes no reference to the value of work and the relation
between the level of education and the job performed; instead he focuses on work as a general concept, regardless of its quality and the qualifications involved with it. Ernesto refers to the immigrants as a group that adapt themselves to every type of situation, in contrast with the Spanish students. Although he refers to individuals adapting themselves to the situation, he makes me think about the employability discourse, the responsibilisation attached to it and the transformation of social issues into personal problems (Salais, 2014; Serrano Pascual & Crespo, 2002). In this liberal thinking, the individual is conceived as being in charge of her own destiny, hence, issues such as the dichotomy between training and academic education is seen only as a matter of personal choice, with the inexorable risk of ignoring personal diversity, circumstantial effects and, hence, State responsibility.

For Arnau, who has been a VET practitioner for almost 25 years, the educational path is also an individual choice.

[…] one has to think what one wants to do. Do you want a technical job or an intellectual job? So you need to explain to them [the students] how the labour market works, don’t you? Then students have to take that into account in their personal preferences. (Arnau, 03/06/11)

The classical division between the academic and the vocational, or between white collar jobs and blue collar jobs (Gimeno Sacristán, 2010; Winch & Hyland, 2007), is summed up by Arnau as a matter of personal preference. In this individualist paradigm, choices are presented equally to all individuals and they make the decisions about which position they want to occupy in the future labour panorama. The fact that there is no differentiation between choices and valuable choices, or between opportunities and genuine opportunities ignores the role that structure plays in shaping an individual’s vulnerability, agency and hence, capabilities.

The instrumental and liberal logic shared by these practitioners places marginalisation, understood as the non-engagement of productive activities, or even exploitation, understood as the exercise of economic activities over which the individual has no control or power to decide (Young, 1990), as a matter of consecutive individual bad decisions. Therefore, this chapter represents a theoretical reflection to point out the benefits of analysing interviews under a
social justice lens. As the students’ analysis further explores, the vision of humans as vulnerable subject (Fineman, 2008) locates the individual in a web of complex, and not always manageable, interactions that shape her range of options, and offers a fresh view into VET discussions. Within this framework, the outcomes of the students are not only dependent on their own decisions but require institutional responsibility for levelling the playing field.

For this practitioners named Ernesto, the responsibility or role of the College was elusive:

The term to be educated is much more complete than all that [a VET diploma]. The term “educated” is not only about mastering a profession […] as VET is structured […] because the fundamental, the basics of a person, as a citizen, should have already been developed, have been consolidated in the previous studies, in primary and secondary education. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)

Ernesto does not fully take the economist approach of VET that sees it as an education for increasing a nations’ productivity. Furthermore, he is not antagonistic to the idea of education as the formation of a person and a citizen, although he leaves that task to other levels of education. He notes that “the basics of a person, as a citizen” should be core in education but considers that “as VET is structured”; it is only about mastering a profession. “The basics of a person”, he notes, “should have already been developed”. The discussion about professionalism, in this case, is limited to the acquisition of technical skills and technical competences but excludes, once again, the relation between the individual and society.

In the next section (Section 3) I draw on the small but growing work on VET practitioners’ professional identities that was noted in Chapter 3, Section 3, with the work of authors such as Avis (2006), Bathmaker and Avis (2005) and Hodkinson et. Al. (2007), amongst others. At the same time, it includes a conception of professional development, such as those presented by Walker and McLean (2010, 2013) and Zimmermann (2014), in which (through a human development perspective) a professional is a person who develops a list of capabilities for enhancing not only one’s own, but also others’ freedoms.
Coming back to the conversation with Nerea, I include her quote on the role of VET practitioners to end this section in which VET is merely a passport to work:

[The role of the practitioner is to provide] the content, eh, I am the type that finishes, because I finish, the book. But always…of course, if I have to tell someone one day to get out because they came into class without a greeting or saying good morning…I will do it and I do not mind making the class lose five minutes and taking that person out. You must realise that it is an education about dealing with people. I cannot allow them to enter without a polite greeting of acknowledgement. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

I selected this quote to end the liberal and instrumental vision of VET because, whilst insisting on VET as an education about contents “I finish, the book”, Nerea enlarges the role of the practitioner and the concept of professionalism beyond the development of practical skills to the idea of the professional as an integrated person in society (Lambert et al., 2012; Walker & McLean, 2010). Consequently, the role of VET is not only about “mastering a profession” (as Ernesto stated), but also needs to include social aspects such as “a polite greeting” (as Nerea notes).

Although Nerea’s vision is still centred on the client, judging by her concern about greeting, one could say, that her tone differs from previous practitioners because it refers to VET students as future professionals with moral and social values that benefit the community (Walker & McLean, 2013; James, 2010). In fact, Nerea’s quote positions the student as an interconnected individual and the VET practitioner as an agent with a role towards the student that goes beyond “finishing the book”.

The next section, “VET as an experience”, goes beyond the individualistic and instrumental vision of VET and builds upon this human side of VET in which practitioners are too often in conflict between attending to managerial demands and attending to student needs.

3. VET as an experience: the practitioners’ experiences

The stories here reveal the daily negotiations between the practitioners and the students, not as passive elements, but rather as each being an individual agent. It was common in all the conversations to point to the problems that practitioners have in meeting the curricula requirements and handling students’ emotions.
Practitioners related how they had to deal with social, psychological and personal problems, and how the lines between teaching and social care were blurred to the point of being almost non-existent (Jephcote et al., 2008; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Brown et al., 2004; Colley, 2002). The stories emphasised their own experiences and values as practitioners, a topic highly neglected by the Spanish literature.

The following quotes represent one of the paradoxes in the Spanish (and European) VET. On the one hand, at the policy level, VET is considered a core element of economic growth strategy and competition in a globalised world, through increasing the effort put into training and skills; but on the other hand, VET practitioners are concerned with the individual beyond an economic sphere.

Ariadna, who earlier mentioned that she was content with her position as a VET practitioner, lowered her voice when she referred to her role in the classroom:

Here you have to be a mother all day long […] So, one of the goals that I aspire to obtain in a VET student is that they become good people, that they acquire positive attitudes, and that they function well […] when they go to do the placement, because, then, it is me who is responsible for the students that I send. (Ariadna, 08/06/11)

The reference to motherhood was also shared by Nerea who, contrary to Ariadna, seemed to enjoy it most of the time.

Nerea: I love the VET level much more than higher levels of education because here I feel like a mum. I like that. Although sometimes it gets complicated.
Aurora: Why is it complicated?
Nerea: […] At the VET level you have to make an extra effort to control the classroom every day. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

Both practitioners reflect on the daily identity tensions practitioners have to deal with and their double role as carers and educational professionals, which was noted in the literature (Finlay et al., 2007; Avis & Bathmaker, 2004b, 2004a). At the same time, the initial “here” of Ariadna is significant, as it reveals the perceived difference between VET and other levels of education, where, supposedly, the students’ behaviour does not play such a vital role (as noted by Nerea). Behaviour in VET is, according to both of them, a primary issue to work on in the classroom. Ariadna sees her role as a VET practitioner is to ensure that
the students “become good people”. Using the capability language, Ariadna sees VET as “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78), which is more than the “mastering a profession” that Ernesto referred to in the first section.

However, Ariadna’s conversation has a marked accentuation on the student fitting “or functioning well” in the workplace. This concern about students’ behaviour towards the client aligns with the words of Nerea, and her concern about the students greeting her when entering the classroom. Considering Nerea and Ariadna’s responses, we can analyse both to reveal three aspects.

Firstly, starting from the theoretical underpinnings, the instrumental view is still present. The idea of becoming good people to which Ariadna refers, is framed under the idea of acquiring attitudes to “function” well in the work environment. The closed notion and categorisation of “good people” on the basis of future productivity, leaves no room for a heterogeneous, debatable and wider concept of good in itself such as the CA describes (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Sen, 1999).

In both responses, VET is conceived as a means of providing attitudes to fit into society, a concept of education that is far from Nussbaum’s (1998) call for an education that produces responsible citizens. Ariadna’s reference to “positive attitudes”, alongside Nerea’s view of her role as a mum, is not transformative enough to expand the individual student’s agency and, henceforth, to challenge the forces of society and its norms, as represented by my theoretical framework in Figure 6, Chapter 4. On the basis of my framework, this conception of education leaves individual agency almost static, because the focus of the practitioner is on the outcomes of the student rather than on the enlargement of her capabilities to be and become what is valuable for her. The student is not an active doer (Crocker, 2009), or someone who acts and brings change (Sen, 1999), but someone who should fit into existing systems of labour.

Secondly, the self-image of the practitioner as a responsible of care (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004b) emphasised by Ariadna and Nerea when referring to the figure of the mother, reveals the high emotional cost of being a VET practitioner (Colley, 2002) but also positions the student in a powerless situation. These ideas of powerlessness and need of protection also find a home in the neoliberal mind-
set discussed in my theoretical framework, whereby dependency is not understood as natural but as something negative and often linked to personal inabilities (Fineman, 2005). Extending this pervasive logic to the social level gets to the point where, paraphrasing Young (1990) the citizens of a democratic State allow it to adopt the stance of a protector toward them; such citizens occupy a subordinate status, as in a household. Under this, the agent is again repressed and education is seen as a matter of fitting into the practitioners’ idea of good, rather than as an enabling space for enlarging students’ capabilities and their agency.

And thirdly, keeping in mind the normalisation and power relations established so far, Nerea and Ariadna share, as Gleeson and Knights (2006) noted, their strategic role as operators balancing managerial strategies and realities. Recalling the policy documents, there is an international trend to position skills at the top of the educational agenda. “Europe must focus more on skills than ever before. The skills to adapt and to shape the jobs of tomorrow are essential for Europe’s citizens” (Le Mouillour, 2010, p. 4). The practitioners, though, have other things besides the employability and skills discourse at the top of their daily agendas. The conversation with these practitioners revolved around the contents of the modules that they teach, how the classes are organised and what elements they are missing to enable the class to run smoothly. The contradictions between what is required from them as practitioners (as judged by policy strategies and managerial directives) and what they can accomplish, was a constant in all the conversations.

For instance, Carlota, a practitioner on her mid-thirties; and Beatriz, a senior practitioner also shared that tension:

Look, my goal is that the student body acquire skills in the area of health, and for instance, that if they see an old man that is having a heart attack, they know what to do. This is what I am aiming for here. […]. My classes are all based on the book because we do not have time for practical training or discussions that are also relevant in the work place. I think the contents are programmed at the top, in offices and bureaux but then, I think they should check the day-to-day things, the contents, the other classes, the time available to complete courses. All of that. (Carlota, 03/06/11)
We only have time to provide technical skills […]. Then everything is related to the world of work but students end up with a lack of understanding in basic broad areas such as maths, physics and language because they access VET, and the minimum level requirements are not necessary [for accessing VET] […] Then it is difficult to understand the technical skills if the basic knowledge is missing. (Beatriz, 02/06/11)

Despite their difference in seniority in the College, Carlota and Beatriz agree on the struggle to complete the syllabus on time and the shortage of content beyond the required skills. Although neither denies the importance of technical skills, both reveal that these skills need to be accompanied by other aspects. For Carlota this will involve “discussions that are also relevant in the work place”, and for Beatriz “basic broad areas such as maths, physics and language”.

According to Carlota, the contents focus on the learning of skills but leave no time for engaging students in discussion or for putting ideas into practice, which are features also needed in the health care sector, where team work is a constant. Beatriz points out the dangers of specialisation and over-emphasising the world of work without taking into consideration other types of knowledge such as language, that may not be directly related to specific labour skills but, as she notes, are “foundational”.

Another view on the curricula and how these narrow the content of VET and do not fit the real needs of the students was given by Blanca:

I think the psychological part is missing, because some students lack this aspect, they lack self-confidence. I tell you because here the students get very, very down. Some come asserting that they are the garbage of this society. And so, nothing matters. This is somewhat exaggerated because some come who are very charming, but I think, autonomy-wise, I think that society now is protecting them too much […] and the parents and college ways of working make them passive […] we need to work on that, that is a must […]. (Blanca, 08/06/11)

The review of the Spanish literature found that not many studies explored students’ experiences in VET (e.g. Figuera, 2006; Calero, 2012) and even fewer looked at the practitioners’ view of these experiences (e.g. Sacristan, 2010). The repetition by Blanca (like Ariadna) of the word “here”, again implies the practitioners’ need to differentiate between the work done in VET and other types
of education. Whilst research has been carried out to sample the body of students enrolled in VET according to background, gender or socio-economic status and compare it to other education paths (Escudero, 2009; Calero, 2008), there is no evidence found of research that has merged these with research on practitioners’ voices to draw pedagogical implications.

Blanca, Carlota and Beatriz shared a demand to change a purely skills-based curricula into something that, not only fits the future occupation but also responds to students’ current needs and provides general knowledge useful for every profession. Analysing the quote from Blanca under my theoretical lenses, the fact that the she refers to a “lack of autonomy” recalls the idea of agency and of the student as an active participant. Phrases such as “the garbage of society”, recall the powerless and marginalisation of Young’s faces of oppression. For Young, “the powerless are those who lack authority or power […] those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them” (1990, p. 56). Being powerless, “very down”, or “passive” as Blanca refers to the students, is the consequence of a society that oppresses individual agency and demands that individuals fit into pre-established norms rather than challenging them or creating new ones.

The final words of Blanca’s quote “we need to work on that, that is a must” are, indeed, a call to rethink, not only VET (Tikly, 2013; McGrath & King, 2002) but also society as a whole; to change how it affects young people’s autonomy. The demand from Blanca to include a psychological element in the curricula recalls the writings of Nussbaum (2010) and her call to revive the value of the arts and humanities in education.

This was also half-stated by Ernesto, who previously had presented the problem of youth unemployment as a question of Spanish young people having lost the value of work and the ability to adapt (in contrast with the immigrants).

There is a serious lack of personal, affective, emotional and humanistic elements in VET and students are lost. And, of course, it is a complicated issue: would it be good to include a humanistic area in general to strengthen these aspects or to complete them? I do not know. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)
In this quote, he is not so confident of it being just a matter of students’ adapting to the labour demands (as he noted previously), and he considers the possibility of including humanities on the VET curricula.

The selected quotes from Carlota, Beatriz, Blanca and Ernesto, represent a common feeling that the current design of VET, with a focus on imparting employable skills, falls short on the human side. This is in line with the increasing claims from some VET researchers about introducing “an affective element in education and training programs” (Hyland, 2014, p. 3). The individualistic, institutionalised and short-term VET project is challenged by a combination of social, familiar, and personal relations, which affect personal agency (or autonomy), resulting in the feelings of being lost as mentioned by Ernesto. Although the challenges driving Spanish VET policy are clearly focused on the high numbers of unemployed, a bigger picture, with a particular focus on the practitioners, would enhance the analysis.

Intriguingly, Blanca and Ernesto a young and a senior practitioner, agreed on the fact that the need to incorporate affective and human aspects has grown over time. This echoes the voices from the literature that criticised neoliberal practices in education and noted how, metaphorically, students were turning into “lone wolves” (Baptiste, 2001).

Isabel, also a senior practitioner, shared her view on how VET has changed and, therefore, how the students’ profiles and needs have also changed:

The truth is that, since I started 20 years ago, things have changed a lot. In this sense that before the kids…they always said that VET was the option of those who did not want to study or they did not know what to do, but the truth is that the kids came with the idea of acquiring a profession, of getting the technical knowledge to work, and the main difference to those that we have now is that before, they wanted to study VET, and the difference is that now they do not, they do it because they have no other option […] Before I hoped that they ended by being eager to work and to be technicians. Now, here we hope that they finish, that they have good behaviour, some skills and do something with their time […] the reforms, the educational system, the family, the economy… before the efforts had some value; now they want to reduce the College failure level […]. (Isabel, 01/06/11)
Isabel’s story moves back and forth between the past and the present and how VET as an experience has changed over time for both the students and the practitioners. Her tone when referring to her work was a mixture between excitement and disaffection, similar to Ariadna. The quote also has other two similarities. It is similar to other practitioners (Nerea, Carlota and Beatriz) the positioning of VET in a blurred space between being a provider of skills and being a social experience. And, it is also shared with Ariadna, Carlota, Beatriz and Blanca, the use of “us” versus “them” in a dichotomous manner.

Isabel positions herself as different from the top management and strategists “they always said…” and challenges knowledge and statements about VET by saying “the truth is”; a truth formed by her experiences as a practitioner. The use of a language that explicitly excludes top management from the body of practitioners reveals the clash of opinions; teachers seek to contest the spaces and contradictions embodied by the skills culture (Spenceley, 2006). In the case of my research, the fact of including only one external managerial figure (the Inspector of the College) is a limitation for presenting a comparative study of their opinions.

Looking again at the quote from Isabel, she compares her role in relation to the student body. In her view, the absence of work has raised interest in VET as an option. However, and using the capability language, this is not a genuine one but rather a forced choice that young people make because there are no jobs. The words of Isabel are interesting because she presents current VET as being more problematic than the older system; which according to her, had “kids [that] came with the idea of acquiring a profession”. This aligns with the critical literature of those who saw VET as an option for those who were not good enough to pursue an academic career or with a low socio-economic status (Hyland, 2008; Clarke & Winch, 2007; Davies & Biesta, 2004), and is critical to all the reforms and campaigns being made to increase “VET’s attractiveness”.

Although further historical analysis is necessary to empirically evaluate the force of Isabel’s comment, it is relevant insofar as it makes a connection between work and the capabilities that need to be acknowledged. The economic crisis has diminished labour capabilities, as Isabel states: the student body enrols in VET because there are no options outside education. The reality of VET as a temporary place for some young people reveals that there is little freedom in the agency of
the student, and that choices are in reality not always genuine ones, but rather decisions taken between non-valuable options.

The blindness of current policies to this perception, in addition to the emphasis on promoting VET, creates a tension that practitioners refer to when mentioning behavioural aspects and the top management’s cluelessness about the daily work (Isabel, Carlota and Beatriz). As Isabel says, the goal for the practitioners is that the students “do something with their time”, and for the managers what “they want [is] to reduce the College failure”. The relationship between the scarcity of jobs, the increase in VET enrolments and the demotivation and psychological needs at the classroom level, is the message that emerges from these practitioners. Nerea adds to the relation between the economic context and the student body in VET (and the practitioners’ work). From her experience as a VET practitioner for more than 15 years, she said that her main recommendation is:

To carry on with their studies, even if they get a job offer. Never leave your education because when economic growth returns, the companies will come and take them, or while they are doing in-company training [placements], or at the end, sometimes they abandon VET. Then, when things get bad like now they go straight to the unemployment queue without having finished their studies. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

To present the increase in VET enrolment as a consequence of the lack of jobs nullifies the aims of policy strategists on emphasising the need to increase VET’s attractiveness (EC, 2012) or the enthusiasm of the media for the increase in VET enrolments in Spain, in order to get closer to the European average levels each year (Adecco, 2011). The Spanish skills enhancements, on the one hand, and the cuts in the social and educational budget, on the other, represent a detachment. A detachment that, as Bonvin & Farvaque (2006) note, features neoliberal mind-sets in which human productivity is central and the voice of the market is considered worthy of inclusion.

However, as is argued here, not only are practitioners’ voices and experiences blatantly left aside, considered irrelevant to the strategist designing VET policies, but also the voices of the employers are also left aside, as will be further explored in the following chapter. The argument is that instrumental approaches to VET emphasise skills to be applied during the working life of individuals through notions of human capital as “the principal, if not exclusive, source of meaning and
measure of value for human beings” (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 4) but have little to say about human experiences and values.

The dichotomy between practitioners and top management noted earlier has become highly aggravated during the recession period. The austerity measures, which have greatly affected the educational budget and the heightened pressure on the policy to place VET as a flagship for education, have increased practitioners’ feelings of detachment; a detachment that is noted by two senior practitioners: Beatriz and Ernesto.

[...] at the end of the day, I am only accountable for what they pay me, and every time, it is less and less. We don’t count, so I do what I can. No more. (Beatriz, 02/06/11)

Yes, I am going to say it, why not? When you are 50 or 60 as the majority of the teachers here are, and you see that every year your salary decreases, that the teaching hours increase, and also that you are getting older, then you have other interests. You are not going to work in an altruistic way. If you treat people well, and you talk with them about changes, the people will respond well. But in an altruistic way? No one is going to do that. No one wants to become head of the department because it needs to be rewarded beyond the extra 200 Euros a month. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)

The comments from Beatriz and Ernesto illustrate how; on the one hand, they are overloaded with responsibilities and work; and, on the other, the rewards for being professional have diminished. The experience of being a VET practitioner has deteriorated over time in a way that goes beyond monetary terms, as the last interviewee (Ernesto) points out.

4. VET as flourishing

In the VET as a passport to work section, the benefits of learning were portrayed in the sense of getting a job in return. The added value of approaching VET from a capability perspective, in VET as an experience, gave space for individual experiences where practitioners revealed that were tensions underpinning the skills for job discourse. Both sections featured a common wish to improve students’ attitudes, not only to work, but also towards being integrated into society. Consequently, I argued that there is a demand from practitioners for an acknowledgement that their role extends beyond the teaching of technical skills.
This final section is dedicated to the stories that touch at the heart of what education is. These portray VET as an education that informs, guides and boosts students’ agency and capabilities in order to protect their vulnerabilities. The responses here are framed under the human development perspective of the CA, keeping in mind the realities of vulnerability and socio-political oppression embedded in every system.

The first quote comes from Ernesto, who started to work in this College in 1996. In contrast with his previous references to the daily tensions in the classroom and the disengagement of young people, he shared his opinions on the values and aims that he believes should frame VET in a clear and calm manner:

Aurora: What attracted you to this profession?
Ernesto: The possibility of offering my knowledge and providing others with the security that comes with knowing how to do a job. Mainly, the idea of helping others.
Aurora: Helping?
Ernesto: Yes, helping thanks to providing students with values such as tolerance, respect, security but also creativity.
Aurora: And is that how it worked out?
Ernesto: Well, sometimes…some years yes, some years no. It depends on the students and the reasons behind their enrolling on this course. If they have decided totally freely and based on their motivation for learning a profession and knowing how to act in different situations, then yes. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)

Security, help, creativity and freedom are the striking elements revealed here, which current VET strategies bypass. These concepts are far from the immediate, measurable outcome of the skills and employability of the strategists who structure VET (Caparros Ruiz et al., 2010; Psacharopoulos & Patrino, 2002). They also show a step beyond the descriptive literature about the relationship between education and personal endowments (e.g. Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). From Ernesto’s quote, I see the role of a VET practitioner as the person in charge of decreasing students’ vulnerabilities by imparting the necessary skills to enhance their autonomy that could lead then to perform a job; but beyond this, to also impart other values, such as tolerance.

The conception of the student as an individual, isolated, homo economicus, eager to absorb skills and reproduce them in a job, is replaced by that of the student as a rational being who co-habits with others (Powell & McGrath, 2013). This concept
of risk as a common project, rather than the obligation to self-manage (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Rawls & Kelly, 2001), shows a 180º turn from the philosophy underpinning most of the research carried out on VET.

Interpreting the practitioners’ experiences of VET as being capability enhancers is also relevant when looking at the words of Nerea, in her answer to what were the important dispositions to be learned at the College:

Autonomy. Autonomy is very important because the more you know, the freer you are. Studying allows you to do things, not because someone tells you to do them, but because you understand what’s involved and then decide to do it […] reading, studying, all that gives you autonomy and psychological freedom. Being flexible and to able to decide between different philosophies, without thinking that ours is the best. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

Here, the role of the VET practitioner revolves around the concept of student agency and freedom and ways of enhancing them. Although the concept of care is also found, its character has changed. In a previous quote, Nerea, along with Ariadna, referred to the role of being a VET practitioner as like being a mother.

Here, care is about mediation and of levelling the playing field (Sen, 1985), without the condescending implications that parental relationships imply.

Pursuing the idea of what should be learned at the College; Carlota moved the attention towards the individual. However, this time is not about responsibilisation but rather about the necessity to pay attention to diversity:

There are no homogenous classrooms or students. I try to treat everyone equally and then attend to the particularities of each […] the one that comes with problems from home needs more integration, to get along with others, so she can forget about her own problems a bit. (Carlota, 03/06/11)

There is the acknowledgement of the class as a diverse group, and the teacher as part of it, the person who has to guarantee that all members feel equally part of it. Carlota’s procedures for overcoming classroom inequality are, in a nutshell, how social justice is understood under the CA. Relations are no longer top-down (as when Nerea and Ariadna referred to being a like a mother) and on an individual basis, but from one—the VET practitioner—to the group, which is considered at the same level as the practitioner.
In interpreting the responses given by Ernesto, Carlota and Nerea under my theoretical framework, they showed a concern to help students go beyond their “adaptive preferences”, understood as the options taken without self-critical reflection (Teschl & Comim, 2005; Sen, 1999), to contest the idea of choice and self-responsibility for their future actions (Colley et al., 2003), to help those who accumulate more “have-nots” (Young, 1990) than others, and to stretch their “horizons for action” (Hodkinson et al., 2007) beyond their own personal axis formed by individual and family background (Walker, 2007). To be a VET practitioner, for these practitioners, was about helping reduce the vulnerability that being a young student in Spain implies nowadays. It was about transcending notions they have developed about the self, enhancing their agency for “gaining knowledge of the opportunities their environment provides, and overcoming perceptions from their life histories as to what they thought was achievable” (Sultana, 2014, p. 8).

Beatriz, who previously complained about the strictness of the curricula, also put forward the importance of teaching values (Jarrett, 1991), and of the role of communities of practice in the learning of a profession (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Community feeling. Yes, I try to build a community because then everyone is more relaxed, without trespassing on feelings, eh! Yes, that they are quiet and relaxed. But I am the teacher, I am more than a friend, I mean, I am a friend, but one that is going to help them always, I am the teacher so I look after them and I look after their whole well-being. (Beatriz, 02/06/11)

The role of the VET practitioner, was, according to Beatriz and Carlota, to see the student as part of a whole (James, 2010; Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez, 2001), and involved attention to diversity and community building.

Alongside practitioners’ role in the classroom (as a provider of values [Ernesto], as carer of individual heterogeneity [Carlota], and as community builder [Beatriz]), there are other factors influencing students’ motivation.
Isabel, Arnau, and Nerea provided three perspectives:

I think it largely depends on the things that you have experienced before. It depends whether your life has had a normal path without weird stories, or, without stories that are unclear. It’s hard to define what is normal, to define a normal life […] And the luck that one has in life […] That will affect your personality and your being. (Isabel, 01/06/11)

Family plays an important role. Here I have 30 students and I only saw two parents. It means that I have twenty-eight orphans. (Nerea, 03/06/11)

To have freely chosen and be totally motivated by a profession and, from there, to be willing to learn how to respond properly. (Arnau, 03/06/11)

Isabel, Nerea and Arnau pointed out different themes affecting individual motivation, but none for which the students could be held entirely accountable, in contrast to liberal rhetoric of responsibilisation (Gray, 2005; Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2001; Kelly, 2001) used by Ernesto and Blanca. The reasons noted can be grouped under two headings. The first refers to background, family and personal history; the second one concerns agency.

Whilst there is a proven correlation between family background and student achievement (Martín Criado, 2000; Ashton & Green, 1996), it is interesting to note that the second interviewee (Nerea) does not focus on the students’ background but on family involvement. Even though (based on College documentation and observation) almost 75% of the students in the classes that I researched were older than the 16 years required to access VET, three practitioners mentioned the lack of family involvement. This involvement could be discussed if it were relevant, for students under 16, but not for 18-year-old students (as is the case). The requirement for family involvement would put those students who are living alone in a complicated position. As Isabel noted “there are stories that are unclear”. Those unfamiliar with, unable or unwilling to engage with Spanish cultural meanings and understandings of normality are hence considered abnormal, leading to cultural alienation (Young, 1990). Whilst the educational enrolment of immigrant youth has been explored by some scholars (Izquierdo Escribano, 2007; Hirschman, 2001), this theme is not treated in the Spanish literature in relation to the perspective of VET practitioners. The
operationalisation of the framework opens up the possibility of exploring the College and practitioners’ understandings, and how these underpin the social norms of the College and the placement, which are not necessarily appropriate to or universal for all the students. Chapter 7, which analyses the student and employer responses, gives deeper insights into the issue of cultural marginalisation that students can face in VET and is critical about “challenging the dominant group’s claim to universality” (Young, 1990, p. 59).

Although family was noted previously, agency in the terms of the CA is the second concept influencing the students’ motivation. According to Arnau, a practitioner with 25 years of experience, students that enrol in VET because they “have freely chosen and (are) totally motivated by a profession”, is the key for having engaged students; a response that makes a clear distinction between options and valuable options (capabilities).

However, as noted earlier, the shortage of jobs have changed the space of young people’s capabilities and this has had an effect on students’ reasons for enrolling in VET. In this quote, Isabel reflected on her role as practitioner and what she most valued.

Well, as a group, they learn and learn…but also they ask you, and explain and, I like that […] I mean, not only books, to me it worries me. Not only does a student need to acquire a series of competences, he has to respect his colleagues, to know how to be social, maintain certain ethical values. I value that a lot, but I think that, first and foremost, one needs to be a human being. (Isabel, 01/06/11)

The response of Isabel that locates the student within a group illustrates that, the idea of a good education goes from being purely instrumental and even individual, to becoming an expression of relations of the solidarity of the individual within society.

Her reference to being “a human being” informs the idea of eudemonia, or human flourishing, where education is a process of learning that cultivates humanity and educates for world citizenship (Nussbaum, 1998). Without neglecting the value of competences, in answer to the question of what good is, the practitioners go beyond its contents to move on to humanistic issues.
Informing the research through the lens of education for societal development, when practitioners were asked about VET, some were able to detach themselves from their daily concerns and establish a link between education and the formation of a core part of being human. Arnau, in his references about the values of VET, did not differentiate VET from other levels of education:

> Because yes, the culture, the preparation, the knowing how to be and behave…it is so many things that I think that, in the end, education gives every person deeper insights and knowledge. (Arnau, 03/06/11)

Consequently, returning to my research question concerning what the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET are according to the practitioners, the human capital discourse is present, but implicitly, there is a persistent voice that transcends the formality of the curricula, institutional or policy goals and recalls that VET is about human flourishing, protecting student vulnerability, and community building. Education is good *per se*, an end in itself, broader than economic or attitudinal objectives. Furthermore, because education is transformative, as Arnau acknowledges, it is value-laden. As Walker reminds us (2008, p. 124), one cannot dismiss the fact that education can be a source of empowerment and inclusion, as much as a source of symbolic violence and exclusion.

Ernesto and Blanca, two practitioners whose opinions I have used in all three sections, offered a human development perspective when asked about their students’ expectations.

> I need to think. I could say: that they have got their qualification, but for me that it’s not important because not everyone needs or can finish the course and it does not mean they have or have not learnt the contents and so on. I think there is something that goes further than the diploma...Yes, it is that they have the will and motivation to keep learning and also to find a job, those two are important. (Ernesto, 14/06/11)

> Not only the diploma, but because the diploma implies that they have some knowledge. One needs knowledge to be able to work in the sector that one wants and finds interesting. And in order to know what you are doing. (Blanca, 08/06/11)

The material concept of “having a diploma” as the final goal is, in these comments, secondary. It is replaced by the idea of VET as a symbol of a knowledge that puts students in control of, not just the outcomes, but of valuable
ones. The second interviewee (Blanca) refers, without having the capability language to express it, to the concept that Bonvin (2006) coined capability for work: the real freedom to choose the job they have reason to value. The diploma is not only a passport to work, but also a passport that means “being able to work in the sector that one wants and finds interesting” (Blanca). It is a passport to enhanced opportunities.

As noted earlier, the current crisis in Spain has an influence on the responses and hence on the research. Ariadna’s reflection about how, in times of crisis, the need to provide knowledge in a wider sense is more necessary than ever, is used to close this section:

Now with the crisis we are seeing that competition in the classroom has increased, and also in companies. So, you need to have completed your studies and be up-to-date, yes you need to be up-to-date. The diploma does not matter, you need knowledge to be able to work and if you do not have that, then you are going to have a precarious and badly paid job. (Ariadna, 08/06/11)

The first part of the quote reflects on the need of completing VET in order to be up-to-date. However, in the second part, Ariadna reconsiders and notes that it is not just about the diploma, but also about the knowledge that the students have in order to avoid a “badly paid job”.

Consequently, Ariadna steps beyond the human capital logic and challenges the material outcomes (“the diploma does not matter”), the formal acquisition of knowledge (being up-to-date can be understood as a general form of knowledge acquisition that does not necessarily require going to college), and yet, the validity of work as paid employment as being enough in itself (when she refers to the possibility of having a precarious and badly paid job). In this sense, Ariadna emphasises the importance of knowledge and evaluates it as a capability for developing valuable and fulfilling outcomes (safe and well paid jobs). Interpreting this under my framework, it is a call for an enhancement of students’ agency to protect one’s vulnerability.

Additionally, the story has another extra value, its situatedness. Ariadna refers to “now” as a time marker. “Now”, according to Ariadna, is a special moment in which education is needed more, as neither employment opportunities nor good wages exist anymore.
This vision contrasts with their initial quotes, where Ariadna referred to VET as a diploma that opens doors, and Ernesto made a reference to some people’s lack of will to find a job. Instead, her final argument is in line with the VET human development literature (Tikly, 2013; Hollywood et al., 2012; McGrath, 2002) and the international reports about the dangers of economic recoveries without considering the conditions, equality and intrinsic value of jobs (ILO, 2014; WB, 2012).

I conclude by suggesting that the operationalisation of the theoretical framework in the formulation and analysis of the interviews has revealed that, despite their comments varying in tone, one can be assured that there is an unanimous practitioner voice which questions the current VET structures and seeks an acknowledgment of the practitioners’ role in producing, not only a good professional, but also a person able to live more completely within a community.

5. Conclusion
This chapter has analysed the responses to the research question of what the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET are, according to the practitioners. This question was already central to arranging the different bodies of literature in Chapter 3, but the interviews have shown that the importance given to the different discourses varies, and they are not equally represented in the literature.

The literature review discussed the benefits of promoting a VET centred on skills for work to increase the growth and competitiveness of countries, or as a critique, commenting on the shortfalls of this discourse and the impossibility for some population groups to achieve the economically rewarding positions that the human capital theory advocates. However, even though the grey literature revealed a broad discussion on the shortfalls in the current organisation of VET and the intention to expand it to include aspects of equality; the lack of a common language and theoretical framework upon which to re-imagine the new VET make it difficult to indicate where to start.

The social justice lenses applied in the analysis of the practitioners’ interviews have helped to formulate different questions focused on individual values (students and practitioners) and create a space to explore these within their
experiences and perceptions. This brought up other themes beyond the world of work such as:

- The perseverance of a dichotomy between VET and other tracks of education.
- The implicit neglect of students’ heterogeneity and the structural system within the experiences, in which outcomes are a matter of individual will and choices.
- A sense of not belonging, a lack of identity and influence from the practitioners in relation to the College and VET strategies.
- The tensions between College objectives and practitioners’ realities.
- The role of the practitioner as behavioural guide and carer.
- The call from the practitioners to include mechanisms to manage the social aspects of learning.
- The different forms of responsibility discourse in the shape of a call for greater family involvement.
- The broader aspects of professionalism.
- The shared understanding of VET as foremost education in a holistic sense, and secondly as training.

These themes, together with a graphic representation of the frequency of terms used by the practitioners (Figure 10\textsuperscript{27}), serve as the basis for concluding this chapter of analysis, which reveals that practitioners’ concerns differ from those prioritised in the literature.

\textsuperscript{27}The method used to create the pie chart (Figure 10) was a word search of the terms. Consequently, it has to be interpreted as a representation rather than an exhaustive analysis. Methodological issues were encountered relating to the inclusion of synonyms and exclusion of expressions that were used as filler words in informal speech, and not as terms of content and meaning. Decisions were made about how to be consistent and synonyms were included: In autonomy (14%): “autonomía” and “agencia”. In Motivation (14%): “motivación” and “ganas”. In Competences (23%): “competencias”, “técnicas”, “certificado”, and “título”. In Work (14%): “trabajo” and “empleo”. In Family (15%): “familia”. In Freedom & Interests (20%): “libertad”, “saber”, “intereses”, “gustar”.
Considering the analysis and conclusions, it has to be borne in mind that the conversations represent only a tiny part of the practitioners’ voices at a specific moment of time. Although the answers to the questions of VET, values and youth capabilities are limited by the sample size, the range of themes touched upon by almost all the interviewees supports the argument that the values of VET are not entirely represented by human capital theory principles. Even though competences, understood as skills, represented 23% of concerns; those concerning freedom and interests (20%), autonomy (14%) or motivation (14%) accounted for the biggest part. Looking at this, I conclude that, although the practitioners see VET as having the role of being an education for work, the role of VET does not end there.

The operationalisation of my theoretical framework guided the interview questions and contributed to the interpretation of the responses through a social justice lens, contributing hence, to the incipient VET human development literature. The conclusion is that although the primary literature focused on the benefits of VET for contributing to national growth, practitioners reveal that there is a strong demand for focusing VET on human flourishing, proved by the common concern among practitioners for the well-being of students (see section 3 and 4 of this chapter) and the reiterative use of words. In fact, Figure 10 shows...
that the areas of Autonomy, Motivation, Freedom and Interests, were mentioned as values to be protected and fostered in VET, at the level of 48% (compared to 37% of references being to Competences and Work).

Whereas instrumental approaches to VET emphasise the working life of individuals through notions of human capital and employability as “the principal, if not exclusive, source of meanings and measure of value for human beings” (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 4), the practitioners share the CA recognition of the full range of domains constituting human well-being, and present human productivity as a subset—an important subset, but only a subset—that has to be preceded by, and designed within, a social, diverse and community framework.

In fact, the values and interests of the students were reiterated themes during the interviews (20% of words given to the importance of providing an education that fosters student freedoms and interests). Regardless of how many years of experience they had in the College, all the practitioners indicated how their role in helping students involved an awareness of their individual lives and interests.

A capabilities perspective points towards the importance of agency, and the provision of an education that fosters it; seeing it as essential to individual freedom and positive social change. As noted in the theoretical chapter (Chapter 4), agency is linked to the individual but understood within a structural setting. “Agency here is taken to mean that each person is a dignified and responsible human being who shapes her or his own life in the light of goals that matter, rather than simply being shaped or instructed how to think” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 5).

The idea of agency is crucial to the theoretical framework developed through the thesis because of its assumption that people feel vulnerable to begin with and they remain so if they do not become active participants in their own personal development. Their vulnerability can be manifested through their behaviour, as described during the interviews by the practitioner group. The use of “them” and “us” during the conversations is a consequence of the image of students as passive recipients of educational strategies. The practitioners’ lack of agency was, using Sen’s view, a big barrier to their well-being in the profession because their passive
role meant they lacked the freedom to do what was, in their view in line with ‘the good’ (Sen, 1985).

It can therefore be seen that, notwithstanding the differences in the instrumental, the affective and the flourishing discourse, the practitioners agreed in their perception that their main role was to enhance their students’ capabilities. There is a difference, however, between the types of capabilities that the practitioners emphasised in each of the sections in this chapter.

In “VET as the passport to the world of work” capabilities for work are given the highest priority, which, as mentioned above, are highly influenced by the economic recession and the high level of youth unemployment.

In “VET as an experience”, the socio-economic climate also plays a relevance, but the central feature is the presence of an affective discourse. Inspired by Nussbaum’s writings on emotions as a core capability and functioning (2000, 2003), they centre on the highly discussed role of the teacher, not only as a skill provider, but as a human involved in the management of students’ emotions and responsible for enlarging the students’ capabilities for social integration.

Finally, the last section, “VET for flourishment” (which was least referred to in the literature but most commonly shared by the practitioners), refers to the role of VET personnel as providers of capabilities that can help students’ agency to flourish and develop. The analysis under the theoretical framework has allowed me to discuss themes and embrace the multidimensionality of the practitioners’ discourse.

Although, the human capital discourse was present throughout the conversations, the research offers a view on the College that has not been seen in the existent CA literature. As noted in the review of literatures, the CA literature centres on the expansion of student capabilities (Boni & Lozano, 2007; Unterhalter, 2003) or on the suitability of educational strategies (Souto-Otero & Ure, 2011; Marhuenda Fluixá, 2002), but leaves little space for the well-being of teachers and their perceptions of the value of the education that they deliver (Jephcote et al., 2008; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005). There is a gap in the literature for this last area, concerning the practitioners, to be scrutinised under the capability lenses.
Coming back to Figure 10, descriptions that refer to the practitioners’ main role as being to prepare students to become part of society are those that predominate. The high frequency of words relating to Autonomy (14%) underlines this and challenges the quotes from practitioners that presented students in a passive or childish manner. Therefore, even though some practitioners referred to students in a manner of paternalistic power relations, none of them had the impression of the students as individualistic and competitive reward seekers. The idea of humans as social beings that are part of a community (as Beatriz directly referred to) requires a different informational basis and targets by which to judge education outcomes than those provided by the human capital.

In relation to the concept of work, the practitioners shared their concerns about short-term solutions and growth periods, which caused students to leave college (or in times of job shortages, to go back to college). Criticisms of linking education to economics is well-embedded in the CA literature, which calls to move beyond strategies using education as a short-term remedy, towards the design of strategies centred on holistic and long-term measures. The analysis and promotion of VET in itself (and not as an instrument for growth) implies, then, a conceptual shift:

> Evaluating capabilities rather than resources or outcomes shifts the axis of analysis to establishing and evaluating the conditions that enable individuals to take decisions based on what they have reason to value. (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3)

Regarding these values, the practitioners have shown awareness of the reasons that impede students’ progression, citing numerous times the mismatch between curricula content and classroom needs throughout most of the conversations.

Another finding is that there is a gap within the policy strategies to represent the practitioners’ views and values within the general VET strategies. This gap has a direct impact on their professional engagement with their role. Whereas the general VET policies presented VET as the flagship of education to fight unemployment, the practitioners seemed divided when it came to defining the line between social problems and personal ones. Although some practitioners embraced the liberal discourse of responsibilisation (Blanca, Ernesto), others noted the need for individual attention and community building (Beatriz, Isabel,
and even Blanca herself). Concerning the concept of responsibilisation, Zimmermann (2006, p. 473) notes that “the capability logic allows the development of a conception of employability as a collective responsibility”. Under this principle, the responsibility for unemployment is far from being placed on the individual, but rather on the community. Although, the conversations did not reveal a common view of this concept, the sense of community was put forward when referring to the distinction between the needs of VET and the policy-makers’ demands. The distinction between the daily work at the College and the policy and managerial requirements was an area where all agreed that there were unresolved discrepancies.

The concept and value attached to work in relation to its quality, and the opportunities that knowledge (in a greater sense) provides for interacting with other domains of well-being, were other findings of the analysis. On one hand, Blanca and Ernesto expressed the neoliberal position of the individual will and focused on outcomes, regardless of their quality. Proof of this was Ernesto’s reference to immigrants accepting all kinds of work and nationals forgetting the meaning of effort. On the other hand, Nerea, Isabel and Arnau focused on the role of the family, the context, and the individual settings in forging one’s capabilities. Therefore, although all the conversations incorporated aspects of work, they had a different emphasis. Whilst this concept is further explored in Chapter 7, it is relevant to note that under a social justice approach, work is understood as beyond the economic sphere. As Sen (1999) notes:

> The use of the concept ‘human capital’, which concentrates on only one part of the picture (an important part), relayed to broadening the account of ‘productive resources’, is certainly an enriching move. But it does need supplementation. This is because human beings are not merely means of production, but also the end of the exercise. (Sen, 1999, pp. 295–296)

A theoretical framework centred on the idea of values, freedom and agency, makes it possible to define VET beyond economics. The analysis has revealed that the consideration of a framework interested in the space for opportunities gives voice to the practitioners and this offers a ground to contest assumptions stated at the policy level. A social justice framework adds a new dimension to the current discussions about VET by posing questions about freedom and values that are not addressed by the more general educational or even labour market debates.
Chapter Seven – Students’ life-plans and employers’ demands

1. Overview

This second chapter of analysis centres on the values and experiences of VET students, which is the core of my research. The students’ voices are complemented by those of the employers, to link the sphere of the College to that of the labour market, with two aims. Firstly, as a response to demands in the literature review for an education that relates to market demands and, secondly, to provide evidence that a different approach and methodology to education and the labour market creates a different outcome than that put forward by the human capital approach.

Drawing on previous chapters, this final chapter of analysis looks at students’ responses in terms of the capabilities that VET offers them, complemented by the interviews with employers, to obtain a perspective closer to the labour market. The analysis builds on the information provided in Chapter 5, specifically that in Figure 7 and Table 5. Alongside each quotation, the student’s pseudonym is given. Additional information on their area of study, the date, their age and country of origin are given the first time each student is mentioned. Note that, as mentioned in the methodological chapter (Chapter 5), the sample was formed of volunteers who felt that they had greater difficulties in accessing, continuing and finishing VET than their peers.

The chapter concerns a critical discussion about the opportunities that VET has created for the students and also the factors that have reduced these opportunities. The interviewees in 2011 were 15 students in their first year of VET, and 6 employers. From the initial 15 students, only 8 continued on to the final placement module and they were interviewed in 2012.

The theoretical framework developed using the CA and the faces of oppression shapes the structure of the chapter and the selection of stories. The first section of the chapter enquires about the reasons why the students decided to participate in the research, establishing a link with the vulnerable Spanish context. The second
section focuses on the concept of agency as transformative and on the exploration of their capabilities. The final part, before the conclusion, develops at length the daily oppressions that restrict students’ capability sets and, hence, act as barriers to them carrying out their life-plans. The conclusion of this chapter incorporates ideas from the previous chapter of analysis and serves as a bridge to the final section, Chapter 8.

2. Beyond being a volunteer for an interview: enlarging the capability set

No one is free; we all carry an Identity Card [...] and are afraid to speak out. (Antonio, 24, Spain, Marketing, 12/04/11)

The tutor had already talked to me about Antonio as being one of the oldest students enrolled in Marketing and probably the keenest to volunteer for my study. She was right, he volunteered, although I kept wondering about his reasons for doing so; he refused to be tape-recorded and sceptically looked at my diary notes as I took them (which I shared at the end of the week in electronic format so he could review them). In spite of his constant scrutiny of the procedures, because he does “not trust where information goes and what can happen” (Antonio, Marketing, 12/04/11), he seemed relaxed and the conversation was comfortable and fluid.

Leaning back in a chair, he described his full-time job as an estate agent (he was studying Marketing to obtain some credentials) and his ability to juggle two things, or even three (he joked, referring to his girlfriend), at the same time. The fact that he was in full-time work made up a bigger share of his identity than being a student and he referred to his classmates as “kids who go here and there but never want to do anything”, (Antonio, Marketing, 12/04/11). This description of young people as inactive or passive matches the media message noted in the context and review of the literatures (Chapters 2 and 3), whereby Spanish young people are “apolitical, sleepy […] and live comfortably with their parents” (El Confidencial, 2010). It also echoes the view that individual motivation is what determines individual perspectives and success, which is criticised in the literature (Unterhalter et al., 2012a; Kelly, 2001), but was echoed by some practitioners (Blanca and Ernesto).
The conversation with Antonio was one of the few occasions when, as warned about in the literature on conducting interviews, I had to be aware of not becoming the interviewee myself (Burgess, 1993). He was keen to know everything related to my work, my social life and my past, seeming to be eager to obtain what Kvale (1996, p. 5) describes as “a description of the life world of the interviewer”. Though I was not averse to sharing it, I was curious about what values he was giving to that information. Therefore, during the conversation, I exchanged pieces of information about myself for questions about why he was so interested.

Aurora: […] and now that I’ve told you a little bit more about myself, can you explain to me why that information is important to you?
Antonio: No, well, yes, I guess. I, you know, do not consider myself a fool, I am a smart [person] [pause and looks at me] I have a big interest in things, in a lot of things, places [enumerates] and also culture [refers to museums, music and activities he does outside the College] and, you see, Aurora, I also like to travel.
Aurora: I see.
Antonio: Travel is cool. I am busy though, I told you, and I don’t have much money. I do have [money] [laugh] but I want to buy an apartment. (Antonio, Marketing, 12/04/11)

During the interview, of almost an hour, he alternately presented his aspirations (to travel, buy an apartment, get engaged) and then associated these with monetary or time-related constraints “I am busy”, “I want to buy an apartment”.

Recalling Table 6, Chapter 5, money was put forward by 10 out of 15 of the students as the main obstacle to them carrying out their plans. After money, the second impediment to carrying out their life-plans was, according to the students, motivation. Two themes approached by Antonio. Although Antonio used the liberal rhetoric by referring to young people as “unmotivated”, he presented himself as fully motivated. As he mentioned above, he had a “big interest in things”. After the conversation I got the impression that he wanted to know “why me?”. Why was it that someone from the same region as him and just seven years older was able to travel, and do, according to him “an entertaining job, that involves travelling and talking to people”? (Antonio, Marketing, 12/04/11). Motivation and individual will, in this case, did not prove to be enough to surpass the differences in the capabilities that many of the students had in relation to me.
I was not able to get back in touch with Antonio in 2012. He did not need to do the placement module because he could validate his skills from his years of experience, so the College had ended its relationship with him. His phone number was no longer working, my emails went without reply and his classmates had never had any contact with him outside the College. However, in May 2011, just one month after our conversation, Antonio’s “kids … that do not want to do anything”, took to the streets. The grassroots Indignados (Indignants) Movement—also known as 15M after its first public square meeting on the 15th of May, just before elections for the autonomous regions—managed to mobilise and unite (through social media) all the people who felt “indignant” of the political parties’ manoeuvres and global capitalism at a higher level, resulting in the biggest demonstrations in Spain since its democracy began.

In the words of the BBC, the demonstrations showed how:

\[
\text{Spain’s young generation has been hard-hit by the crisis. […] Many highly-qualified graduates are forced to work as low-paid interns for years and a growing number have moved back home to live with their parents. Increasingly frustrated, they have finally found their voice. (BBC, 2011, p. 2)}
\]

The continuous demonstrations that took place for almost a whole year, and the grassroots characteristics of its foundations, had an effect on the students’ conversations. Even though I lack sufficient data for a comparable and longitudinal study, the research shows signs of an evident shift in the students’ responses from an individualistic responsibilisation discourse, whereby the person was the centre of their own achievements; to a discourse of interconnectivity, in which social structures and practices were questioned on the basis of fairness and opportunity (Crespo Suárez & Serrano Pascual, 2002; Kelly, 2001). However, because the sample was 15 in the first round of interviews that happened before the demonstrations, and then only 8 out of those were interviewed a second time, the analysis has less scope than if all of them had given a response.

For example, Carolina who was a student enrolled in Social Care, was one of those who answered on two occasions. She is originally from Valencia and at the
time of the interview was living with her parents. To the question of why she volunteered for the study, she responded.

I think I do not have [it] so easy. [My] friends are now thinking about degrees and I don’t know. I’d like one [a degree]. But I don’t know. (Carolina, 18, Spain, Social Care, 5/5/11)

A year later, she replied:

I volunteered because [I] think [if I] were you I would like people to volunteer, and also the themes that we have discussed, [I] think are necessary to talk about in the situation that we are living in now. (Carolina, Social Care, 10/5/12)

Carolina’s first impulse was to compare her studies (VET) to the academic paths taken by her friends. The ambiguity of her response does not totally correspond to the image of VET as a secondary track (Winch & Hyland, 2007). However, judging by her dubious answer and her uncertainty about entering University, she transmits an insecurity that (according to her) people that opt for the academic path do not have. This insecurity might be attributable to the mainstream human capital mind-set: that more years of education translate into higher income in the future (Psacharopoulos & Patrino, 2002). As noted in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6, when referring to the case of over-qualification, although it may happen generally, the transformation of education into more and more highly rewarded opportunities does not necessarily apply to all individuals. However, the insecurity that Carolina shares is also a concern for the government cuts to education and increases in fees. In 2013, an increase in the university fees combined with a reduction in the educational budget and scholarships was, according to universities, the major cause for reducing the number of enrolments; by 10% in the Valencian Community (El País, 2013d). This decrease consequently favoured an increase in VET (El País, 2013d), and was related more to the cost of an education than to the value associated with it.

Exactly one year later, following Carolina’s placement in a school for young people with special needs, her reasons for volunteering are no longer individualistic or personal (feeling herself vulnerable) but rather social (“the situation we are living in now”). She has moved from the concept of “I”, to the concept of “we”. This change from the individual to the social resonates with the humanistic approach of my research and the concept of agents in a “way that
expands the horizons of concern beyond one’s person” (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009, p. 37), and the concept of vulnerability, as students refer to a general vulnerability (Fineman, 2008). Nevertheless, even though the social crisis had created social awareness of interconnectivity, there is not enough evidence to present it as a general finding. As Simons (2009) notes, choosing the case study as a research method carries with it the limitation of not being able to generalise up from the particular.

The stories of Catalina, a student whose parents sent her to live with a relative in Valencia to start VET, and also to develop a new social circle; and Gonzalo, a social care student who had been living with only one of his parents, as his mother had remained in Chile with his grandparents and a little brother, expressed the shared perception of vulnerability and the value of VET:

For me I heard it and yes, [I] felt I had to volunteer because I am the lucky one, being here [College] and, I told you… I was very much losing it. My parents said that [losing it]. Now I hear about my old friends back home and…I do not have a relationship [with them]. Smoking, meeting in the park…I don’t know what we were [thinking/doing]. We were lost. Now they are here and there getting money in whatever [jobs] they can, still lost…I felt strong then, but now I understand TV, not the shows but the news. I see it, and [I] care. That makes me strong. I am happy and [my] parents (smile), [my] mum especially, [she] is very happy. (Catalina, 18, Spain, Administration, 12/4/11)

You came and [I] was curious and I think is important to talk to people and [I] enjoyed it. (Gonzalo, 19, Chile, Social Care, 5/5/11)

Catalina refers to herself as lucky for not having ended up like her old-friends. The concept of vulnerability for her is associated with the concept of being lost. Henceforth, for Catalina the value of VET (of “being here” as she refers) is not due to its links with finding a job or carrying out personal plans, but rather based on understanding the world around her and being able to make informed decisions. She felt vulnerable because she felt lost, and VET has provided her with the ability to function: being able to understand TV. This functioning is linked to the capability of caring about what surrounds her and what Nussbaum (1997) refers to as narrative imagination “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story” (pp. 10-11).
Gonzalo’s statement does not have, at first glance, a commitment to the importance of voicing his story as one of vulnerability, as Catalina had; neither does he make a direct reference to the College. However, Gonzalo remarks on the importance of conversation as a valuable functioning for him and the pleasure he gets from it.

Neither Catalina nor Gonzalo undertook the placement module. When I visited the College in 2012, both were attending twice weekly classes of the subjects that they had not passed the previous year. After talking to them informally, Gonzalo called me the same night to ask about job positions in the UK and whether I could have a look at his cover letter and curriculum vitae, which I did gratefully, and asked my partner to re-check the language for me.

Although the reasons for volunteering are varied, the concept of permanent vulnerability is a constant in all of them, which reveals that their doings are not solely directed by monetary rewards. Based on Antonio, Carolina, Catalina and Gonzalo’s comments, their reasons for volunteering, and the understanding of vulnerability, can be divided into two fluid categories: perceived disadvantage (Antonio, Carolina and Gonzalo), and sense of belonging (Gonzalo, Carolina, Catalina).

In the case of Antonio, interpreting his interest in knowing about me, I consider that the reasons that attracted him to the study are also related to him knowing the reasons for his limited set of capabilities. Based on his references, it suggests that he considered himself disadvantaged by not being able to pursue his plans to travel and buy an apartment.

For Carolina, vulnerability was also about life-plans, but in the sense of not being able to think about them. For her, the dividing line between academic and vocational education, mentioned by the practitioners Ernesto and Arnau, is far from blurred and she felt that people in higher levels of education have it easier (which recalls Nerea’s and Ariadna’s remarks about how VET was different to other levels of education).

A different vision was given by Catalina, for whom VET, rather than being an inconclusive option, constituted the education that gave her a sense of security.
and achievement (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000). Her case, in contrast with that of Carolina, is not about a perceived disadvantage for being enrolled on VET, but about a perceived advantage in relation to her peers that did not pursue any educational path.

Finally, Gonzalo’s volunteering for my study was driven by the power of communication and social relations. The understanding of vulnerability as a lack of social relations was a recurrent theme, especially amongst students not born in Spain, as it is referred to throughout the analysis.

Surprisingly, there has been little research into how young people in Spain make choices, how the factors which influence them reflect social processes, and how they create or diminish individual and group opportunities (Escudero, 2009). Gender and ethnicity are terms portrayed in the literature as defined categories that act as obstacles to progression both in and through education (Calero et al., 2009; Aja et al., 1999). In my research, in the same way that the individual is also understood within the concept of group, defined categories are considered under an analytical approach. That is to say, the purpose of the use of categories is to reveal the structural inequalities that determine people’s capabilities.

To categorise the interviewees (as in Table 5 and Figure 7 of Chapter 5) by noting their background and gender, involves a methodological risk (Maxwell, 1992). However, it has the theoretical purpose to make a strong case for the structural vulnerability of some individuals. As Haslanger (2000) notes in her study about gender and race, “the emphasis on an analytical project is not on discovering commonalities among females […] the primary goal is an analysis of gender that will serve as a tool in the quest for sexual justice” (p. 37).

Having looked at the reasons behind volunteering, and obtaining an initial impression of vulnerability and its relationship with VET, the following section looks further at Antonio’s reference to the students’ passivity, and focuses on students’ agency and capabilities.

3. Employers’ demands and students’ agency and capabilities
The concept of agency and the premise that students are agents of change—doers not passive receivers—who themselves contribute to development (Sen, 1999),
are the primary interests of the research. Although the question of motivation and the perception of young people has been one of the questions explored in Chapter 6, as well as a recurrent theme in this one, it is necessary to stress that the research takes the theoretical standpoint that it is inherent in humankind to be active contributors to society and to each individual’s life.

From this point of departure, the research critically moves away from the literature centred on supporting VET systems for endowing future workers (CEDEFOP, 2011), to relate to a VET that acknowledges the inputs necessary for enhancing students’ opportunities. It also examines how these opportunities “would expand certain capabilities, and how durable, equitable, and sustainable such expansions would be” (Alkire, 2008, p. 32). The following story reflects on the socio-economic situation and how it affects students’ capabilities in a way that goes beyond the College sphere.

They are prepared, well… [They are] young but when I was young [I] was I any better? We are satisfied with the level and indeed we repeat the same thing every year but that’s it. They do the training and then we cannot keep them. There is not work for everyone. (Pau, IT tutor/employer, 06/05/11)

Pau is the tutor of the students undertaking their placement in the intercom company where he works. As with all the other companies, this is a small/medium-sized company that has repeatedly taken on students for their placements. In regard to the skills and competences of the students, Pau does not have any complaints: “they are prepared”. Whereas the greater part of the literature emphasised the need to improve the skills and preparation of VET students, his words challenge that and complement the findings provided by the practitioners and their concern about students’ social attitudes and behaviour.

The interviews with the six employers bring another dimension to the aspect of youth unemployment as not being dependent on their skills or on their behaviour (as Pau puts it, in a rhetorical question, when he was young was prepared either), but rather on the lack of capabilities attached to the current socio-economic situation. Consequently, the main issue is not the students’ employability (their skills and social attitudes are well received) but rather the labour market per se which is not able to provide “work for all”, as Pau puts it.
Added to this, and recalling Antonio’s concern about money, it is worth mentioning that it is not only the absence of work that causes the impossibility of carrying out life-plans, but rather the disparity between the cost of living and the salaries received. A way to exemplify this is by comparing Valencia with Nottingham, two cities of similar size, in May 2014. Due to high inflation in housing up to now, the average price per square metre for buying an apartment in the city centre of Valencia is £3,045.82 (versus £2,500.00 in Nottingham). Considering that the average monthly disposable salary after tax in Valencia is £1,006.20 (versus £1,650.00 in Nottingham), a worker in Nottingham earns 63.98% more than a worker in Valencia and, additionally, her investment when buying an apartment would be 17.92% lower (Numbeo, 2014).

If employers’ voices are marginalised when it comes to defining employability, it deliberatively excludes other social issues, in addition to narrowing the definition of professionalism (Walker & McLean, 2013; Lambert et al., 2012). Including employers’ voices in the study has resulted in a widening of the notion of work beyond that of the students’ responsibility and lack of skills. The implication of decreasing College and student responsibility for employment is a revealing theme and puts into question the effectiveness of the current Spanish educational reforms that aim to enhance VET in order to create employment (LOMCE, 2013). Within my framework, students are seen as agents, hence VET needs to be analysed for its capacity as an enabler or constrainer of individual agency. Using Sen’s words:

> A person’s position in a social arrangement can be judged in two different perspectives, viz. (1) the actual achievement, and (2) the freedom to achieve. Achievement is concerned with what we manage to accomplish, and freedom with the real opportunity that we have to accomplish what we value. The two need not be congruent. (Sen, 1992, p. 31)

VET, in this sense, provides students with the actual achievement of having a qualification in a set of skills and the professional attitudes required in a specific work place (as the above employer notes). However, the students are not free agents because their employment is temporary and it is outside their control to retain it. An achievement (VET placement) without any real opportunity to transform it into a valuable job loses its congruence, and hence its value.
Once I had helped students fill in the life-grid that dealt with achievements (level of studies, previous work and so on), I moved the conversation towards their life-plans and the freedoms and oppressions related to accomplishing those. The sharing of their personal future stories was (and this was exacerbated in 2012) disturbed by the constraints that each of them saw on their freedom to achieve them.

Having looked at the employers’ perspectives of the limitations on developing individual agency, I present two quotes from a student at two different times that illustrate how, despite the lack of employment, VET needs to be evaluated in terms of its transformative and agency-enhancing role.

Tania is a Social Care student and, like Carolina, is doing her training in a school for children with special needs. In relation to her reasons for enrolling in VET and the values attached to it, I have selected these two statements.

I did not want to spend my entire life studying. They [the parents] talked to me about this and then, well, [they] convinced me. So here I am. It is not so bad (thinking) people [are] nice, but I am not one of those people that like to have books around. (Tania, 20, Spain, Social Care, 3/5/11)

A year later, Tania said:

Here we do important things. Some friends thought…well, [I'll] go and find a job. Yes, it was the easy option, ok, but then what? Then [that job] is not there and you haven’t done anything. Here [the College] we will finish with something we have put effort into, something that we have worked for. Then we can do something. (Tania, Social Care, 1/6/12)

Whereas Carolina thought by being in VET she would have more difficulties than her peers, Tania felt advantaged by being in VET in comparison with her peers who left education (like Catalina). Nevertheless, this was because her discourse evolved between 2011 and 2012.

In 2011 she reflected on her current situation as a VET student with an “it is not so bad” attitude. She was sceptical about the possible value of VET and whether it would be of any use to her and she did not make any reference to the content of the curriculum, but rather to the College ambience and how she met people and enjoyed it more than her previous circle. The human and social aspect of VET was the most important part of her daily attendance, as was noted by some of the
practitioners (Beatriz and Carlota) when referring to the community building in the previous analysis chapter. “People are nice”, she said, and according to the majority of the interviewees, “nice” is defined as respect and being listened to (see Table 8 of students’ values in Chapter 5).

In 2012, having successfully completed her studies, Tania had a placement as a social helper in a special needs school 30 minutes from her own house. At this time, VET was perceived as “important”, and she proudly differentiated herself from the other young people that had decided not to continue their education (“some friends thought…”). Like Catalina, when she referred to her previous friends, Tania felt less vulnerable thanks to having a diploma (“then that job is not there and you haven’t done anything […] here we will finish with something”).

In the first quotation, she presented herself as an individual looking for social interaction; whereas in the second, the change in expression reflects her new status as belonging to the group. In the quotations it is evident how she started to use the concept “we” to refer to those who have studied VET. After one year of being at the College, she had a new identity: she was a VET student, belonging to and speaking for them.

Additionally, Tania went beyond the material aspect of having a diploma because, as she noted, it is about “having something we have put an effort into”. Agency, in the sense of empowerment in my theoretical framework, is what Tania exhibited. It goes beyond individual self-esteem and includes developing capabilities that enable engagement in social change processes (Monkman, 2011).

Even though empowerment has a body of literature that has not been fully approached in this thesis, it is relevant to establish the points of contact between its tenets and my theoretical framework, and hence the use of empowerment within the analysis. From the critical feminist perspective, Kabeer (1999, 2005) complements the issue of conversion factors developed by Robeyns (2005) by putting forward a typology of empowerment that is in the same line of thought as Young’s (1990) faces of oppression. These assert that the concept of power is critical to any discussion on social justice and, therefore, under different individual physical, social and relational conditions, power is exercised and
“serve[s] to demarcate the boundaries of choice for different categories of individuals” (Young, 1990, p. 3).

Although the discourse of empowerment has a strong link to the individual, it also reflects the responsibility of the College or practitioners to support students’ agency and challenge any unwritten norms and attitudes that lead to discriminatory practices and inequality in the space of capabilities. Critical to my theoretical framework is the finding that VET is a valid and empowering education that provides them with critical understanding (Catalina and her reference to understanding the news), a broad knowledge (Tania), and the agency to carry out their life-plans.

Tania, similarly to the practitioner Nerea and her quotation about dropping out of education in periods of economic growth, referred to the situation of the young people who went directly into the construction and retail sectors and who are, in the aftermath of the crisis, unemployed. Her discourse on the relationship between education, labour and agency is more complex than the instrumentalist view. It gives an insight into how many of the students’ choices are influenced by family relations and how these create a sense of belonging and empowerment and can, hence, decrease students’ vulnerability.

Although the current economic situation limits the labour opportunities attached to VET (as the employer Pau noted), it is in this space between agency (what they would like and has a value for them to do) and freedom (what is genuinely feasible) where their capabilities, and hence my interests, lie. By centring on the daily barriers to achieving what, for each of the students, constitutes a valuable action, profession, ability or status, my analysis attaches value to actions (of the students, the College, the practitioners, the employers or general VET strategies) in order to investigate whether these lead to functionings (valuable outcomes) that create capabilities (genuine opportunities) or only outcomes. Under this perspective, the analysis is not limited to considering a diploma in the formal terms of human capital theory, as a way of getting a job, but rather the value the student gives to the education received and the job obtained.

The economic discourse of achievements is insufficient when it comes to refer to human well-being; therefore the framework complements it and outlines its
limitations by acknowledging the intrinsic value of VET. This multidimensional approach provides a more complex vision of VET in which practitioners are seen beyond economic terms as agents of change in the students’ capability sets.

This is displayed by Elvira, when she refers to the teachers:

Elvira: I like them [teachers] how they teach the classes. Some [I] like more and some I like less but there are at least four that are very good at teaching the content but also very good people.
Aurora: What do you mean?
Elvira: I mean that they [are] good people outside the classroom as well. But their impact is limited because society is there. Society makes us more ambitious, competitive, and also makes us grow as a person. But [it is] for good and for bad, eh? I think society is very important when we talk about students’ ambitions and then it has an impact on [how much] confidence one feels. (Elvira, 21, Spain, Social Care, 2/06/11)

Every student was asked to evaluate the features of a good teacher in order to select which practitioners would be interviewed. Elvira’s answer is in accordance with the other fourteen students interviewed. Good teachers are described as being “good at teaching the content but also very good people […] also outside the classroom”. Her comments echo three relevant themes also referred to by the practitioners: the role of the practitioner, the role of VET, and the role of society, each in relation to students’ well-being.

According to Elvira, a good VET practitioner is a person who masters the contents but also has an affective relationship with the students. In the previous chapter, there was a shared view about the importance of establishing a trusting and confident relationship with the students and on working on the emotional aspect (that the practitioner Blanca referred to as “psychological”), both inside and outside the classroom.

The words of Elvira imply recognition of the impact the College on student’s agency and well-being but also the constraints of it; as she says, it is “limited because society is there”. Recognising the limits of education means going beyond superficial uses of the terms motivation and choice, which assume that there has to be a direct result, and that it is the responsibility of education to achieve this result (Monkman, 2011).
Whilst international pressure is put on strengthening VET to combat high levels of unemployment (EC, 2012), the foundation on which it is grounded has been contested in previous chapters, when referring to the structural deficiencies and the discourse of responsibilisation (Chapter 2, 3 and 6).

Elvira’s comments acknowledge that “ambition” and “confidence” are constantly negotiated within a social structure and not simply a matter of individual choice or individual features. Her view of the relationship between individuals and society blends with that of the CA, which requires acknowledging the particularities within individual lives and contexts, and not assuming that everyone attending the College has the same values, priorities or conditions within which they live (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Not surprisingly, this vision of VET and student agency as a social contributor is hardly noted in the skills development VET literature, which is marked by approaches centred on economic growth (see Chapter 3, Section 2). Nevertheless, it is echoed by the practitioners, as was expressed strongly by Nerea, when she referred to the relevance of autonomy as one core value to be taught in VET; by Isabel, in relation to the reference of the role of the teacher in guiding students to deal with others; and by Ernesto, when referring to the task of VET to guide students to be motivated individuals who continue learning throughout life.

By including both student and employer interviews in relation to agency and capabilities, I presented how the shortage of jobs diminishes students’ capabilities but does not directly affect students’ values attached to VET as an education that enhance their agency. The next section builds upon these findings and looks more specifically into the students’ barriers to pursuing their life-plans, using the five faces of oppression as developed by Young (1990).

4. Oppressions: visible and invisible

4.1. Powerlessness and exploitation: the silenced voices

Coming from a clear Marxist tradition, where class and work go hand in hand, Iris Marion Young ranks her five faces of oppression with exploitation as the most important. Because my work centres on the freedoms and oppressions of VET students, in constant transition towards work and adulthood, the concept of power is a recurrent theme. The lack of power and the oppression felt due to the social
structures (as noted earlier by Elvira) is understood by Young (1990, 2001) as a structural phenomenon that positions some groups above others (as privileged). These structures do not necessarily respond to barriers or norms placed by the dominant group, but rather, more often than not, are created and perpetuated by the unconscious assumptions and behaviours of well-intentioned people and societies.

Powerlessness is of special importance when referring to young people in general (Giroux, 2001), but mostly when we consider them, not as individuals, but as a group. Individual liberalism, seen in the discourse of responsibilisation and also as a criticism of the CA (Clark, 2005), thinks of people as individuals, which leads to blaming those in less favourable position because it is a consequence of their bad choices and incapacity to be competitive. Such individualistic logic, which some of the practitioners (Blanca and Ernesto) and students (Antonio) appeared to subscribe to, obscures oppression. Using Young’s (1994) words: “[…] without conceptualising women [or young people] as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualise oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process” (p. 718). Consequently, approaching young people as a group is relevant when discussing the absence of capabilities for them in Spain, a country with around 25% general unemployment, and 40% youth unemployment (INE, 2014).

Every story here illustrates an ambiguous situation of constraint and dependency around material endowments (i.e. money) but also social (i.e. family) and personal (i.e. motivation) issues. In this section, I use the stories to share the powerlessness of young VET students to modify or negotiate what is happening and how they want to live in their future. Consequently, the stories feature intertwined aspects of exploitation, as a result of the disadvantaged power situation of young people to arrange their labour conditions. In conclusion, being powerless exposes their vulnerability, which co-exists with situations of exploitation.

The stories revolve around three themes recurrent in the interviews: mobility, the in-company placements (which are part of the diploma) and paid work. Each articulates part of the argument about the inability of the system to provide and enhance capabilities, to assure the students’ freedom to achieve functionings or to reduce youth vulnerability.
4.1.1. Mobility: a limited opportunity

Though mobility has been always a priority and a raison d'être of the European Union (EU), following the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, EU cooperation increased once more in 2009 with the strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020). The first (of four) priorities of the ET2020 is to recognise that high quality pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher and vocational education and training are fundamental to Europe’s success and competitiveness, and enabling lifelong learning and mobility has to become a reality (Vero, 2012).

The College where I conducted the interviews has, since 2009, actively engaged in different programmes and projects offered under the umbrella of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). Specifically, for VET, it advertises on its website the opportunity for students to complete the compulsory training part of their studies with the Leonardo Programme in another EU country for a period of 3 to 12 months, with a budget of €320 a month and the possibility of obtaining other types of bursary. Just €320 a month is an inadequate amount to live on in a foreign country, but the standard option (undertaking the compulsory in-company placement in Spain) does not receive any subsidy.

When I asked the person responsible for promotion and mobility about this, I was informed that, since the project’s implementation, only 24 students out of the 2020 students that have attended the College, have engaged in mobility to undertake the placement in another EU country.

Although I did not obtain information on the number of initial applicants, in my conversation with the mobility coordinator I sought to understand the reasons behind the low number:

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28 The four strategic objectives are: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. See in greater detail at EC (2013).

29 Remuneration depends on the employer. Legally, the training is part of their studies; therefore there is no obligation to pay the students for their work. In a few cases, the students can ask for a bursary to cover mileage or other costs incurred due to travel distance.

30 The Mobility Coordinator is a regular administrative worker responsible for promoting and organising the European mobility programmes in the College. The work does not entail an additional remuneration.
At the [information] sessions, students seemed eager and excited to enrol, then they have to do the language exam, which is basic but [some] fail or just do not come, and finally, there is the problem of finding one [a company] in a country willing to accept someone with a low level of English [sigh] and then some students that need to find the courage to go, so it is normal that in the end, very few [go]. (Mobility coordinator, 11/04/11)

Motivation (in terms of being “eager and excited”) appears in the conversation, not as a problem by its absence, but as something the students already possess. Although the mobility coordinator noted that the students are agents with valuable plans, ready to engage in the mobility program, he pointed out that it does not come to fruition because of the low level of language competence, which leads to a lack of “courage for going”. This quote is relevant for understanding that access to resources, or in this case, a mobility programme, does not guarantee the creation of capabilities.

Comparing the Erasmus and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, Spain had one the largest number of outgoing students in Erasmus, with a 14.61% share of the total (EC, 2011). The University of Valencia does offer language tuition to all students interested in participating in Erasmus courses before they apply and after they have been successful (UV, 2014). It could be that VET students’ enthusiasm would be similar to that of the University students when offered, not just an option, but also a genuine one that can be transformed into a valuable outcome. In this case, language classes would reduce their vulnerability and hence increase their ability to transform the mobility option into a valuable placement position.

In the theoretical framework, I used Robeyns’ (2005) diagram (Figure 5, Chapter 4) to reveal the crucial distinction between goods and final outcomes, the role of the capability set and conversion factors in determining the final outcome. By contrast, the mobility coordinator presented the issue of low mobility engagement as an issue of will. The treatment of agency as a matter of will (Galliott & Graham, 2014) leaves no space to ask the institutions to take responsibility and, hence, no opportunities to increase or improve the areas of information, counselling, or any kind of support. Despite the mobility coordinator’s claim that language is the main reason for not participating in the mobility programmes, it seems overly simplistic to present one reason only for the suppression of the initial enthusiasm. The case of Mercedes illustrates this.
Mercedes, came to Spain two years ago when she joined her father, who came following the call for people to work in construction. At that point, he was unemployed and that, according to Mercedes, was diminishing the chances of her mother coming to live with them in Spain. When I asked her about the possibility of her going abroad for the placement the following year, she answered:

Can I go? [Yes] Really? [she laughs] I am not sure, [I] told you I am not from here [Spain], I have residence but I do not know. And also I want to do the training here [Spain], then maybe [I] can stay, it depends. If [I] go [I] don’t know about later. (Mercedes, 18, Ecuador, Administration, 3/5/11)

Mercedes’ first reaction is one of incredulity that she too could participate in the programme. Even though she has the right to residence, she is uncertain about her right to participate at the same level as Spanish-born citizens. The inability of the College to provide further assistance and information to those who are not born in Spain, ignores the fact that there is a “differentiated citizenship” (Young, 1989, p. 250), and supports Sen (1999) and Robeyns’ (2005) criticism of considering individuals as homogenous with the same ability to transform resources (here, the information session) into valuable outcomes (to be truly informed). In addition to the inability of the College to deal with different students, the other theme that emerged from this quotation is the importance of a social network defined by relationships with family and friends.

Although family is still the biggest factor influencing students’ choices (see Table 6), the concept of networking expands beyond that and Mercedes shares a willingness (as Antonio and Gonzalo showed in their reasons for volunteering) to expand social networks. According to Young (1990) the social network needs to be defined in terms of economic relations of domination and subordination between agents which determine individuals’ present and future actions (1990). This explains the reasons why Mercedes’ initial enthusiasm for joining a mobility programme vanishes. After her initial enthusiasm, she concluded that she wanted to do “the training here, then maybe I can stay” because she is more confident about contacts than on the acquisition of pure skills (or expanding her CV), and she fears that she may lose a potential contact in Spain.

Although the literature features evidence of policies and campaigns under the European ET2020 to “Promote workers’ geographical mobility and boost
employment opportunities by […] delivering skills for growth and jobs skills” (EC, 2013), Mercedes show a distrust of the acceptance of skills gained somewhere else. Her distrust challenges and provides nuances, once again, on the linear relationship with work that VET strategies seem to be decided on.

Pilar, a woman in her early forties and a boss and tutor for placements in a legal firm, represents the employer’s view on this. Her comments give support to Mercedes’ supposed preference to train in Spain and not abroad.

People come here and then what we do is that sometimes they call me from other [businesses] and we send some students there […] the good [thing] is that we are in contact with many areas and we can redirect people. (Pilar, Administration, tutor/employer 11/4/11)

The calls that Pilar refers to, are not only a reference to job openings but to how companies often contact other employees when there is a vacancy. The sentence “we send students there” reveals the reason or hope that determines why Mercedes (and many others) decide not to join the mobility programmes. Interpreting it within the CA (Alkire, 2005; Sen, 1985), the choice of training in Spain with no grant is, then, a choice that does not represent a functioning because it does not necessarily imply a valuable and free decision.

The interviews reveal how the students’ capability for mobility is reduced by language resources (as the College notes), but also exposes unwritten social practices about job hiring and acquisition (Mercedes and Pilar). Mobility, thus, is not a capability but a choice which students’ feel that will increase their vulnerability if they engage in it.

Two other interviews cite the lack of access to information as another barrier to engaging in a mobility programme. The statements came from Lucia and Concepcion, students of Marketing who both live with their parents and come from within 20 km of the College. In the sample, they are among the students that accumulated less “have-nots” (see Chapter 5, Figure 7), meaning less difficult paths (Young, 1990). Consequently, it is not surprising that they are the only ones who engaged in the procedures for the placement abroad.

Lucia is an energetic girl who described herself as someone who likes American Soul, TV and talking to people; which are the reasons she thought Marketing
would be a good option for her. Along the same lines, she wanted to go to another country and improve her English. When I referred to the information sessions, she replied:

What? [I] knew that because Concepcion and I are always looking at everything. Then I, no […], she asked Maria (the tutor) and we went downstairs [to] ask the English [teacher]. We put [our] names and emails on paper, and then as I told you, we never heard anything more about it. (Lucia, 18, Spain, Marketing, 9/5/12)

Although the lack of information here is explicit (by her surprised reaction and about the fact that the information was not easily accessible) and this can be understood as a form of oppression, her story has elements of marginalisation, understood as a form of being “expelled from useful participation and thus potentially subjected to material deprivation” (Young, 1990, p. 53). The bigger story of Lucia is that the tutor sent both of them to the English Department, where they left their email addresses with the promise of being contacted with further information. They assured me that they never received any information emails; instead they later found out from a friend (enrolled in another diploma) that the language test was already in progress, so they had missed it, and with it their chance to participate in the mobility programme.

The interview with Lucia in the first round already revealed a story where life-plans were intertwined with oppressions. The story accounted for several external barriers that, in her opinion, determined her life or, using capability language, diminished her capabilities and narrowed down her functionings—that which constituted valuable outcomes for her.

[Talking about high-school and when she repeated the classes] I think that if I had been in another classroom I would not have had to repeat and now I would be at university. [Referring to the other class]. They were all super smart, people with focus and I could also have turned out like them. Why couldn’t I have turned out like them? If everyone studies, I also study. If the nuns had taken me [pause] I am angry. […] I look at her (her sister) and if she is able, why should I not have been able? We are sisters, aren’t we? [Swears] nuns! […] I come here and ... like music, I listen to English music, but the test, I didn’t know about it. No time. So, here I am. (Lucia, Marketing, 4/05/11)

Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) in their study of disadvantage, offer a pluralist account of disadvantage whereby disadvantage is corrosive, affects other
dimensions of well-being, and clusters, meaning that it agglutinates. In this case, Lucia’s marginalisation, by not being able to participate in the mobility programme, is another story to add to a long list of ‘have-nots’. A feature that, according to Young (1990), is common in powerless status and is best described negatively as no-authority status or sense of self.

Lucia, who, at first glance, would not have been selected in a vulnerability study, relates how throughout her life the opportunities she has had were either not valuable for her or not entirely genuine. Adding to that list, she referred to the future:

Aurora: And then, where do you see yourself?
Lucia: [studying] Advertising.
Aurora: 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, Marketing, 9/5/12)

At the time of the conversation, she had less than four weeks remaining to finish the placement and complete VET. The placement company said there were no open vacancies but, even if there were, her best choice would be to study Advertising. This choice is not a capability because it depends on her ability to pay for that education. The increase in educational fees, aligned with the level of State debt, puts her in a situation of oppression in the form of power. So she, like other young people, faces a jobless society with increased privatisation of education and reduced capabilities. Therefore, they “do not participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives” (Young, 1990, p. 56).

Her case illustrates how educational institutions (schools, high-school, the College, and even future educational settings) have either reduced her current capabilities or are a potential threat to them (future ones because of the cost). Finally, she also blames the State as an institution for not being able to secure her father’s salary and for allowing the proliferation of private businesses as deliverers of education that do not stand for the principle of free/accessible
education. As she remarked at the end, she wanted to keep on studying but that choice was subject to many other conditions outside of her control. In conclusion, and using Fineman’s (2008) account of vulnerability, in Spain, in a situation of crisis, the Social state has decreased its responsibility by reducing social expenditure and, hence, increased the vulnerability of those lacking individual and social networks.

The final example of barriers to mobility is given by Concepcion. She also lived with her parents and was brought up near the College. Our interview was distinguished by short answers and long silences. She diligently answered every question but hardly extend beyond basic answers. During the first session, she did not mention the issue of mobility (I knew about it because her colleague, Lucia, had mentioned Concepcion in her story), but in February 2012, the panorama was different. She was doing the placement in a shop selling handbags and hair-complements, a position that did not match her Marketing diploma. Although the mood of the interview was quite subdued, I asked her about the mobility application of the previous year.

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. (Pause) My parents would not be happy. Some people have gone; I know some are in England […]
Aurora: Why will you not go now?
Concepcion: 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.
Aurora: 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)

In less than one year the topic has moved from mobility to migration. The mention of “people who have already left” refers to the increase, nearly 22% higher than in 2008, of Spanish people registered in another country (El Confidencial, 2012). What could have been a capability for many young people, like Lucia or Concepcion, is now a non-valuable but plausible path in pursuit of capabilities somewhere else. The short answers from Concepcion regarding work and mobility reveal her powerless situation. She was aware of being exploited in
the sense of the shop exercising its power “to appropriate the product of the labour of others” (Young, 1990, p. 48). Additionally, she talks about material deprivation, “I don’t have the money” and a loss of control and exacerbated dependency on others “my parents would not be happy”, features that Young (1990) lists as markers of oppression.

Concepcion’s remark that “she is fine” is, once again from my normative standpoint, an adapted preference; in other words, a mechanism of people in an adverse environment to allow acceptance of current negative social and economic circumstances and to live through them with “cheerful endurance” (Sen, 1985, p. 309).

To conclude the mobility section, I argue that there is a common ground between the three stories presented here (Mercedes, Lucia and Concepcion). The three are disadvantaged insofar as they feel exposed and carried along by the course of events rather than taking the lead. Anxiety, as Standing (2011) defines it, is a “chronic insecurity associated not only with teetering on the edge […] but also with a fear of losing what they possess even while feeling cheated by not having more” (p. 20).

The three cases show that the opportunities that the College present cannot be turned into capabilities because there is a lack of institutional responsibility to address the reasons for low mobility (information, preparatory courses), as noted by Lucia. At the same time, there is an informal culture in which employers prefer to hire staff based on previous relations rather than skills, as referred to by the employer Pilar, and this affects the decisions of students who are in a less favourable situation (Mercedes).

Looking at this aspect, statistical data may show an increase in students enjoying grants for going abroad\(^{31}\), but there is still a big gap between opportunities and capabilities, which finally determines who benefits from them. Additionally, Mercedes’ fear of going abroad and missing possible contacts illustrates a country where prominent family/friend connections are what count in finding a job. Motivation, then, becomes a word full of fear, frustrated capabilities and hence

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\(^{31}\) A total of 40,000 (students, staff and employers) engaged in 2000 in Leonardo mobility programmes in Europe. In 2012 the number was almost 60,000. For further detail about countries and data see EC (2013).
individual vulnerability. The story of Concepcion’s placement leads us to the next section.

4.1.2. Placements: students without classes and workers without income

Concepcion (above) referred to her work as a shop clerk and how it did not match her studies (Marketing). The mismatch between studies and placement is, linking it to my framework, a form of exploitation under the promise of a future work that is non-existent. Concerning the faces of exploitation and powerlessness, the exercise of labour without individual security and guarantees, increases the vulnerability of the agent who is neither able to challenge the social conditions that produce the particular relations of production, nor the particular form of control exercised over her persona (Young, 1990).

The student training experience as a first step into working life was also discussed with the College tutor responsible for placements, whose task is to be an intermediary between the class tutor, the student and the company to find a suitable training place for the student. These are the reasons she gave to explain the incompatibility, in some cases:

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)

The College and the students are powerless in a this situation, where 25.28% of people are unemployed in the province of Valencia, which in the last quarter of 2012 was the third most affected Autonomous region in terms of people losing their jobs (Las Provincias, 2012). Although is not possible to find statistics on over-qualification for each region in Spain; taking the national figures, the ratio is 16% higher than the EU27 average (see Table 4, Chapter 2). Additionally, the mismatch between the job performed and the skills acquired increases to 22% for the female foreign population (Eurostat, 2012). A mismatch that can affect every level of education (Eurostat, 2012), because there is more demand for work than work on offer. This, translated to the placements, implies that only some students can be placed in a company that fits their diploma and, hence, use this time as proper training. The following three students articulate three different experiences regarding the placements: Javier, Manuel and Jose.
Javier, has a similar situation to Concepcion (previous section), but his personal situation of having dependents puts him in a situation of greater vulnerability. Manuel differs from Javier and Concepcion by the fact that he values the training and it meets his expectations. However, the conclusion is the same and, like Concepcion and Javier, he will be unable to transform that resource or opportunity into a functioning because the company does not seek employees. Therefore, his training is a source of free labour. The last case, Jose, represents the situation where VET is not a capability enhancer but a certification of a level of competence for someone who already has his life-path arranged and secured. Unfortunately, this section has no fourth placement experience illustrating a placement matching studies and leading to valuable work because none of the interviewees experienced this. I believe that if the research had been conducted at a different time, this scenario would probably have emerged. Moving on now to detail each of the cases, I start with Javier.

Javier is an IT student who lives in a shared apartment with his partner and child and at least two other people. He represents the minority but most disadvantaged group of VET students. He has no family connections in Valencia and is dependent on welfare benefits and small (undeclared) jobs to cover the cost of living. Since 2008, the social cuts have directly affected him. Javier came to Spain because, as he put it, a family loss put him on the list for scholarship eligibility when he was 14. The scholarship was linked to a boarding school in an isolated part of the North of Spain. Once he finished high school, he found himself with “nowhere to go” (Javier, 22, Equatorial Guinea, IT, 06/06/11). Through family contacts in Equatorial Guinea, he got to know that an uncle was living in Valencia, so he went there, “but things did not turn out well” (Javier, 06/06/11). During the interview in 2012, he recalled the course of events and his experience of the placement.

I came here full of anticipation. Spain was a place of opportunities. Other people also came. I rented this apartment and you see it is big and I take care of other people. 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. The bus fare has increased by 0.20 [Euros] in one month. They say they don’t cut social services, but if they increase everything else, it is impossible for me to live. I cannot imagine my future. 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, IT, 24/2/12)

Javier’s words give voice to the socio-economic changes exposed in the context chapter. The arrival of migrants due to the economic expansion that Javier refers to by saying “Spain was a place of opportunities”, and the later recession and social cuts that made it “impossible to live”, to the point of making people wanting to “go back” because they cannot even “imagine (their) future”. However, the story has other subthemes mentioned by other students (Gonzalo and Mercedes) and employers (Pilar): the importance of networks. As mentioned by Javier, he “cannot care for himself and cannot care for others”. This is what makes him feel the need to leave Spain and return to his own country, where “I have people”.

As noted in the methodological chapter (Chapter 5), family was mentioned by eight out of fifteen of the interviewees as the second barrier against pursuing their life-plans (Table 6). In this case, family responsibility combined with lack of social income (Standing, 2011) puts Javier in a vulnerable position that he, in doing a non-paid placement, feels he cannot cope with. The theme of social relations that emerged is new to the literature about VET, but responds to the critique of neoliberal and human capital discourse within the theoretical framework, assuming individuals are “separate and self-contained atoms” (Young, 1990, p. 227). The absence of a community or group puts the individual in a vulnerable position and thus exposed to oppression.

Focusing on Javier, his situation during the placement can be defined as being powerless, like “those (upon) whom power is exercised without their exercising it” (Young, 1990, p. 56). “I say yes always”, Javier pointed out, despite knowing that the employer is exceeding the labour agreement. A placement that does not correspond to studies and hence does not add any practical knowledge becomes a systematic form of exploitation in which “oppression occurs through a steady
process of the transfer of the result of the labour of one social group to benefit another” (Young, 1990, p. 48).

This is an oppressive relationship that, more often than not, also has a structurally disadvantaged relationship between groups; in this case, the immigrant student versus the capitalist hotel owner. The qualifications, in the sense of a diploma, lose the significance given by the human capital theory as an indicator of competence when the placement does not correspond to the studies. The current dichotomy between the purpose of placements and their reality was discussed further:

Aurora: Why don’t you talk to the tutor?
Javier: I don’t want to cause trouble. I did the first time. I talked with the rest, everyone is the same, they work in whatever for free but they don’t say anything. I don’t want to be the one who is always complaining. Maybe I am the problem. Maybe I am the mistaken one. I thought I would study and work here but not so. They told me that one learns from everything, that I should not complain. I complain in the street.
Aurora: Who are “they”?
Javier: The hotel. But it is the same everywhere. No one has work, young, old, with studies or without studies... One goes and has an idea and wants to open a business and cannot. If you don’t have money, you don’t make money. The banks don’t give anything. There are no opportunities. The country is very bad, yes, it is. You do well by not living here. (Javier, IT, 24/02/12)

These comments need to be situated within 2012, a year of economic recession and social cuts and, as Sen suggests (1999, 2009), the social climate and relational perspectives are critical to the creation and realisation of capabilities. Javier felt too discouraged to exercise his agency because he did not “want to be the one always complaining”. His experience is of powerlessness. In fact, he ends up questioning himself as being the possible reason for his discontent: “maybe I am the problem”. The responsibilisation aspect of turning social and labour problems into personal ones (Gray, 2005; Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2001; Kelly, 2001) that is featured in neoliberal approaches, is discredited by Javier based on widespread unemployment, “no one has work”. The situatedness of the study also occurs when Javier refers to the streets as the only place where he could freely exercise his voice. “I complain in the street” is a reference to his participation in the Indignados (Indignants) movement.
His comments relate a powerless situation and vulnerability in every space (inside the work place, inside the College and also in the social system). As he remarked, the only place where he has the capability of having a voice (Bonvin, 2012) is in the street. Although later in the conversation he acknowledged that he had only participated in one of several demonstrations, he embraced the need to protest against the hardships that growth-based strategies were causing in a big part of the population.

Manuel was also an IT student. He combined two day-jobs with the training period. On Thursdays, he drove a lorry alongside his stepfather, looking for old fridges, washing machines, cars and other metal items. On Saturdays, he cared for an old neighbour in exchange for some money. He was meant to go to the company where he was doing training on the other days. I was supposed to meet him there, but at the last minute, I called to see if he was coming and found that he was still at home. We met under his apartment in one of the many bars in that working area of the city. It was 10:00 a.m. on a Tuesday, but the streets were full of people:

Aurora: It is pretty crowded
Manuel: Yes, everyone is like me. They should be working but they are not (laugh). It is a disaster. I should have gone [to the placement], but since last week I haven’t been able to go. Lucas, my colleague, told me to take that company place with him because he has a car, so we could go together. But he had bad luck. Last week he got a flat tyre on Tuesday and he could not find enough money to repair it until Saturday. I called every day to say I couldn’t get there. He didn’t explain, so they are angry with him. He has never worked before, so he is like a little kid. He needs to show more care. This week he called to say that he had hurt his hand, so he cannot drive. So I called the work placement. They didn’t say anything, but they were angry. You can hear it in their tone of voice, can’t you? They are right. I told them I could not go every day because I needed to help my mum’s boyfriend, and they were OK with that. One thing is not going because of work. It’s another thing if it’s [for] whatever [reason]. So, the placement goes well but they are not very happy with us. Well, with me because I have not gone because of Lucas, and with Lucas because he does not work very well.

(Manuel, 21, Peru, IT, 09/05/12)

In contrast with Concepcion and Javier, Manuel does not refer to direct exploitation. He seems content with his placement. However, once again the placement is not a capability, due to its unpaid and unstructured form, rather it is a
form of oppression that puts the aspects of agency and well-being in constant danger.

Manuel has to sacrifice the training to earn an income. Accepting Crocker’s concept of agency, which highlights that “individuals and collectives (need to) have the freedom to make choices for themselves” (Crocker, 2009, p. 163), Manuel’s agency is restricted because he lacks the freedom to choose what is valuable for him. The in-company placement serves to oppress his agency because it does not give him the status and monetary reward of an employee but still demands a dedication. Under these conditions, a placement is not training for labour (Standing, 2009) but merely a means of exploitation.

Although the experiences of Javier and Manuel both share a powerless situation, due to their dependency in carrying out their functionings based on the actions of others, the big difference is that Manuel is learning and hence, enjoying, the training. In the following quotation, Manuel shares his thoughts on this, along with the barriers created by the government’s cuts in social expenditure, and how they affect his daily mobility:

Aurora: Is there any public transport?
Manuel: Well, there is a bus that takes me to the train, then the train to the town and from there, 2.5Km on foot or another bus. In the end, it costs around 20 Euros a week and a lot of time. I also pay Juan for petrol, 15 Euros a week. We don’t get paid [for the placement], so [the cost of taking the bus] is 5 Euros [more a week, not so much] but it’s money. I will go tomorrow on my mum’s boyfriend’s motorbike. I can go that way for the rest of the week. I don’t want them to get angry. I like the people there. There is a very good atmosphere and the job is good. They are moving the work to Madrid because they don’t produce enough to maintain the work here and in Madrid, but I still think it is good experience and I like it there; they even have a canteen. (Manuel, IT, 09/05/12)

The increased cost of public transport as a factor that diminishes individual capabilities was a topic that came up often in the interviews. Manuel valued going to his placement and seemed satisfied with the work, however he shared the same situation as Javier and other interviewees in not receiving any remuneration and having to face increased bus fares, not having a car, being placed in a company unreachable by foot or by bike, and not having a family who could help him to study without working. This made him unable to take decisions for himself and,
therefore, be an agent “whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives” (Sen, 1999, p. 19).

Along with the stories from Concepcion (previous section), and Javier and Manuel (this section), the third experience about the placement is given by Jose; who is also an IT student. He related how, for him, the placement represented a procedure in a job that had already been given to him.

Aurora: How is the training going?
Jose: Really well. As mentioned last time, I already studied this because it interests me as my uncle works in [name of the company] and I know what it is like [tells about what he likes about the company, facilities, close to home, good salary]. I have already been there. So when I finish, well not everything, because I have still one subject that I need to pass the exam [names the subject and the teacher]. But I will pass, no worries, but yes when I finish, we will talk and something will be offered. I like it. We go together by car and then come back home for lunch and go back. Let’s see if they can give me a position afterwards. (Jose, 18, Spain, IT, 09/05/12)

His situation of having family connections has a more decisive effect in times of job scarcity. According to the National Survey of the Active Population (EPA), in 2009, 47.9% young people found their first job due to personal connections (El País, 2010). This practice extends to other regions and countries beyond Valencia and Spain, which raises questions of equality and fairness and undermines the meritocratic assumptions of the human capital discourse.

Concepcion and Mercedes (in the previous section), and Javier and Manuel (this section), indicated how little they plan for their future because they lack an economic network. Creade, a Spanish temporary jobs agency, in a report in 2010, assured that networking is a practice that guarantees good quality workers because they have some credentials. In fact, they point out that 80% of the vacancies never get published because the selection process is made through recommendations (Creade, 2011). Belief in acquaintance recommendation rather than individual skills or competences, adds to the argument of the failure of mobility programmes, as well as questioning the real confidence employers have in education.

Although Jose hoped to take advantage of networking to obtain a position after his placement, this was not the case with the rest of the students in my sample, whose
capabilities for getting hired after the training were doubly constrained due to their lack of connections and the lack of demand for labour. In this sense, one can conclude that VET is not enough of an education to overcome the external barriers that students face.

Having analysed Concepcion, Javier, Manuel and Jose’s perspectives on placements, Pau, the tutor from an IT company, represents the employers’ voice:

> We feel bad about it. We have people with years of experience and more studies than I do, but still we say ‘no’. We do want young people with knowledge, but not many. It is sad; we can only hire a few people. Nothing compared with before. One needs to be extraordinary, and even being good, well, we had a student (last year) who was really good and we called a small company that sometimes works for us, so they hired him for a short time (Pause). I do not know where he is now. (Pau, IT tutor/employer, 06/05/11).

The theoretical framework is a good tool for assessing an individuals’ level of agency in an employment situation. The discourse of motivation and skills fails to consider this employer’s reference to the impossibility of providing employment, regardless of a student’s level of competence. Although there is no evidence in the literature of research in that direction, the work of Lopez-Andreu and Miquel Verd (2013) points in the same direction as my research. Their study of career development analysed under the CA, shows that the issue of jobs is far more complex than resources, entitlements and achievements and that institutional context requires further consideration. To that, I should add that the socio-economic context has revealed that the basic assumption of full employment on which the discourse of skills and individual responsibility is built has been revealed to be inadequate. As Pau noted, it is not solely a matter of students’ skills, but rather a matter of job scarcity.

Whilst undertaking the placement, students are working, but because they are still under College regulations they are still students and, hence, not paid. This forces some of them (those lacking family support) to seek other sources of income. Although some have two jobs (the placement and another one, usually informal), they still do not receive enough income to carry out their life-plans. The following section focuses on work and on the situation in which the formal employment sector is not willing to absorb informal activities and, by not doing so, the agency
of individuals is restricted. Paraphrasing Standing (2011), impoverished underemployment is more pervasive than open unemployment. In this section, the question is not whether VET would lead to a job, and if the job would be valued by the student, but under what conditions jobs are being created.

4.1.3. Work: a grey area

In 2011, 18.6% of the students aged between 20 and 24 years old were studying and working (MEC, 2012); a statistic that involves stories of limited choices and limited freedom of agency, such as the one told by Antonio. Although it is difficult to find official statistics about how many are carrying out productive activities because the majority of work is not declared, VET students often combine work with study.

The situation of informal work is, according to Standing (2012), a set of developments within a model of the working poor; individuals who not only work for less than minimum wage to guarantee a basic standard of living, but also lacking protective regulations and social security. Apart from a lack of recognition under any legal framework, the informal economy is characterised by a high degree of vulnerability, featured by deficits in rights, social protection, representation and employment (ILO, 2014). Training for labour means “compromising one’s time, effort and current income in pursuit of increasing one’s employment options” (Standing, 2011, p. 121).

However, as noted in some of the VET literature promoting broader human development, work and education are central to being human, hence cultivating and regulating them should be central to debate on VET policy (Tikly, 2013; Lambert et al., 2012; McGrath, 2012b). Whilst VET policy has not entirely embraced this, and skills still predominate when dealing with jobs, a move to go beyond a narrow economist view of jobs can be seen in international reports (ILO, 2014; WB, 2012).

Having said that, one needs to acknowledge that VET area strategies are still anchored in human capital approaches, in which a job is a goal in itself and it is an individual matter to acquire it. In the current context, placements are training that does not necessarily lead to work and no longer has the role of self-empowerment and achievement that VET policy often aims to emulate. On the contrary, it is a
form of structural domination of some social groups by others with the consequent exploitation of those who are in a disadvantaged or powerless situation. Whilst the CA describes the basis for distinguishing between choices and real (valuable) choices, the faces of oppression reminds us that humans are not economic subjects, but rather vulnerable ones (Fineman, 2008).

The next employer, from a social care institution, shares the situation of the informal economy and how this creates a vulnerable situation for everyone involved:

You know, there is a huge black market out there. People working for nothing [very low salary], Romanians but also Spanish, eh? [Things] are changing and so is everyone. That hurts us a lot, because there are no guarantees, but people need to find someone to care for grandpa and there is no money, or they do not want to spend it. I do not know, but in the end, grandpa is not well cared for, the professional has no job, and the person doing it very cheaply doesn’t have enough [money] to pay the bills. It is a horrible mess. (Reme, Social Care tutor/employer, 12/04/11)

According to this employer, none of the economic orthodox assumptions of the market as self-regulating seem to work in times of widespread unemployment. The situation that Reme describes transcends the human capital logic. Professionals, who have a higher level of education, lose their jobs because clients feel forced to sacrifice the quality of services in order to save money.

The situation of lowering prices falls under the concept of the “working poor” for both workers (professionals and not professionals). The “Working poor in Europe report of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions” (Eurofound, 2010), points out the limitations of work and how it is not always a solution to the problems caused by poverty. The report researched the EU27 countries and noted that the working poor formed 8% of the population on average, but in Spain it was 11%, and it added: “moreover, in Spain the risk of poverty is not only high for the working poor, but for the population as a whole (19%)” (Eurofound, 2010, p. 5).

Reme is an employer in the social care sector, a sector traditionally relegated to women and linked to low monetary and social returns. In Robeyn’s (2007) analysis of gender as a metric of justice, the author explored how gender determines the space for the capabilities of individuals due to de facto norms—
such as, that women should care for children and the elderly—which “reinforces their financial dependence and socioeconomic vulnerability” (Robeyns, 2007, p. 217). The vulnerability of workplaces with “gender exploitation” (Young, 1990, p. 51) is higher than those with wage workers, as their energies and powers often go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Reme’s interview reveals how, besides gender issues, there are other important axioms of difference when referring to work. Even though the economic boom increased the Spanish population (see Table 1, Chapter 2), it neglected the intrinsic and cultural aspects that acquiring full citizenship entails. Reme’s quotations reveal two things: firstly, that some people feel a need to differentiate between immigrants and Spanish people; and secondly, that, regardless of this, almost everyone (according to Reme) is working almost for free. As mentioned, oppressions are intertwined and the social (and gender) divisions of labour are also defined by professionals’ oppression of non-professionals (like the case of the students doing the placement for free) but also by features of racial segregation. The neoliberal idea of the market mechanism of self-regulation has proved, in the Spanish case, to result in a continuous decrease in salary levels and working conditions for both professionals and non-professionals.

However, one needs to be aware that the idea that this is a common vulnerability, one that all people living in Spain are exposed to and affected by in the same way (due to the crisis), is just on the surface. As the words of Reme reflect, throughout the statistical data of Chapter 2, the level of vulnerability and capabilities is also determined by access to information, or family networks which, more often than not, are greater in some groups than in others.

Focusing on the conditions of work, I return to the students and their in-between position during the placement as students outside the College, and workers without a salary. The placement, in this case, may be an unfortunate and dubious first step into the labour market that Spain offers. Due to the fact that the module of placement is not remunerated, students are left outside any labour market guarantee (adequate income-earning opportunities) as well as income security (assurance of an adequate stable income), which, as Standing (2011) notes, are cornerstones for assuring “labour security under industrial citizenship” (p. 10).
The oppression that the placement presents transcends the economic sphere insofar as the training is meant to be the acquisition of skills as an employee, but this is not always the case (Concepcion and Javier). Additionally, students are not given the rights that a worker should have.

Sergio, an IT employer responded in a nervous tone to the question whether a meeting between the workers’ representatives and the students placed in his company had taken place:

They have to come every day and yes, you are right, they are not being treated as employees and maybe we could inform them better. I did not think about the representative. Well, not yet, maybe later. It all depends. [On what?] On everything, surely it does not depend on me. I also have to take care concerning my job. It is not easy for me, I was once there, and I also have kids. That’s the way it is. That’s all. (Sergio, IT tutor/employer, 04/05/11)

Sergio, like Pau, Pilar and Reme (the other employers), also seems uncomfortable speaking about the role of the students in the company and the lack of job perspectives afterwards. However, the theme that is relevant in this exchange is the absence of a space and opportunity for the students to exercise their capability of having a voice (Bonvin, 2012).

This employer conversation gives weight to the story of Javier and his powerless situation in not being able to say ‘no’ when the hotel exceeded its power, and the story of Manuel with his struggles to meet the company’s time schedules. The fact that, during the placement, the students are neither students nor employees, translates into an increase in their vulnerability because they are governed by the College, but are in the workplace.

Although there is some literature that conveys the need to promote professional skills, understood as technical but also social affective and social competences (Hinchcliffe, 2013; James, 2010), more often than not the research makes the students responsible for making themselves employable (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Some of that discourse was found in the conversation with the practitioners (Nerea, Blanca, Ernesto), but little of it was mentioned during the interviews with the employers, who had greater concerns about the absence of jobs, and it was mentioned even less in the interviews with the students.
The handling of emotions, feeling inspired and having the motivation to carry out a profession, confidence in the worthwhileness of their professional work, having a space to be respected and heard, or having the real freedom to take up opportunities, were the constant functionings (valuable beings and doings) that students, employers and practitioners referred to during the interviews. These themes share great similarities with the recommendations that Walker and McLean (2010, 2013) put forward in their study of university professional programmes. They call it “public good”, professional orientation for the future. From this perspective, the constraint of the students and their capability for having a voice in the workplace is not only a restriction on their current capability but also undermines one important aspect of the placement insofar as it negates their future professional responsibility to act ethically and promote employer/employee rights within companies.

Under these circumstances, a placement is informal work in the sense that it is an oppressive and purely instrumental activity from which the student hopes to establish connections and the employer to obtain a short-term benefit. Like most of the informal jobs carried out by the students, it aims to alleviate (whilst compromising their current well-being) the economic pressure they are under.

Manuel, who I have already referred to (in reference to 2012) in relation to his impossibility of attending the placement because he was helping his mother’s boyfriend and caring for an old neighbour, also had various jobs whilst attending college in 2011:

Aurora: 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.
Aurora: Why do you work?
Manuel: I need [an] income. (Manuel, IT, 02/06/11)

In 2011 Manuel already had all sorts of difficulties. Though VET is an education with an emphasis on the labour market, strategies seem to escape the fact that VET may also become a constraint when looking for a job with guarantees. In fact, Manuel, as with many other students enrolled in non-declared jobs, places
his agency before his well-being. He is clear about his life-plans, “study further to get a higher VET in hot and cold air systems” (Manuel, IT, 09/05/12). However, to be able to develop that agency means that he needs to obtain some income from all kinds of non-professional jobs, with no security and, at the same time, attend training in a distant location. “The life of the non-professional by comparison is powerless in the sense that it lacks this orientation toward the progressive development of capacities and avenues for recognition” (Young, 1990, p. 57), and this is the status of these students who suffer as unrecognised workers, unrecognised trainees, and in most cases, unrecognised citizens.

The unprofessional work happens in the informal or black economy, a factor that contributes to the segmentation of the labour market (Etxezarreta et al., 2012). As noted in Chapter 2, it accounted for 28% of Spanish GDP in 2013 and there is only limited knowledge of its impact except for the fact that “it affects women more than men, and foreign workers more than national ones” (Etxezarreta et al., 2012, p. 7). No evidence relating to student workers was found in the literature but, in general, these unprofessional workers are mostly agricultural day-labourers, employed in the home and the care sector, or hotels and restaurants and the building and food industries; areas of work that affect some particular groups (young immigrants) more than others.

Building on the functionings that create future capabilities for the students should be one of the priorities of VET and the College. Yet in the three sections of: mobility, placement and work, the condition of powerlessness and exploitation are embedded in the College and work practices. The quotations above showed that, despite the existence of formal rights and recognition, there are clear differences in the capability space for those who have a family and social networks (born and raised in Spain) and those who do not. The next two sections (cultural imperialism and marginalisation) go further into the individual and group differences that are by-passed by economist approaches to VET.

4.2. Cultural imperialism: the endless bureaucracy

The term “cultural imperialism” is anchored in the idea of shared and intrinsic vulnerability. Whilst acknowledging human fragility and exposure from the moment of birth, cultural imperialism emphasises how “lives are supported and
maintained differently and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe” (Butler, 2006, p. 32). Though this refers specifically to physical vulnerability, the idea of different lives and hence unequal vulnerabilities is in line with Young’s idea of a dominant group which asserts its experience as neutral and by so doing, stereotypes and diminishes the experiences of others (Young, 1990).

Therefore, as the concept of cultural imperialism hints, the conditions of vulnerability are not only linked to control over one’s body (Butler, 2006) but are also historically constructed and traceable in an analysis of power relations (Misztal, 2011). Cultural imperialism is then, the rule of some or as Young defines it, the “experience of how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one group and mark it out as the Other” (Young, 1990, p. 59).

In my analysis, the term is used to describe the difficulties that a big part of the population have to navigate, in order to carry out their functionings and capabilities, in a particular society. Whilst the CA theoretically puts the individual at the centre, the concept of groups and their “existence in relation to other groups” (Young, 1990, p. 46) allows us to consider the differences under which capabilities are formed and the conditions in which students can carry out their agency. Social justice requires people to be treated as individuals, but also the acknowledgement of oppressions whereby people belong to one particular group (i.e. student, young, women, immigrants, etc.). This section focuses on cultural differences as a trait that increases the barriers to, and constraints on, young people’s capabilities following Young’s vision of a model that requires “not the melting away of differences, but the institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 47).

In the analysis I take the institution of the College and look at the role of the students’ capabilities within it, by emphasising the role played by bureaucracy. Though at first sight, the bureaucratic state is apparently transparent, the functioning of a society and the normative ways of carrying it out are designed and understood by specific people. The intentions of a liberal society, to which
Young refers in her writings (1990, 2002), leads, more often than not, to the oppression of one group by another, thus limiting their actions and participations.

From the fifteen initial volunteers for my study, at the time of the second round of interviews only eight were undertaking the placement module in a company scheduled for the second year. Hence, seven of the initial participants were unable to finish their VET diploma in two years. What happened to the others? Three stories, one referring to a moment prior to starting VET and two centred at the moment of the supposed training, elucidate the institutional constraints to exercising their individual agency that bureaucracy places on some students with specific traits.

The first student is Javier, referred to earlier in the sections on placements and work. The quotation is about his reasons for enrolling in VET and not in tertiary education (which, due to his previous level of studies, he could have opted for).

I could not because I did not do the entrance [tests] and this year I went to register for the examination but had just lost my NIE [National Identity for Foreigners]. I went that day, so I got the copy of the receipt. But with the receipt I could not [take it], it had to be with a photocopy of the NIE ... and I had already paid the fee and everything. (Javier, IT, 06/06/11)

Although the story of Javier’s trying to gain access to the exam is convoluted and includes confusing parts, it reflects the anxiety and stress that he had to live through. Whilst it is impossible to know whether the reaction of the examiner would have been the same if Javier had not been from Equatorial Guinea. His case shows that rules (having an identification card) are used as barriers that a priori can obstruct access (to do the exam) instead of being a condition to enjoy a capability (to register on VET once he had passed the exam). In this case, Javier could not do the exam for which he had paid, so the opportunity to access a higher level of VET did not turn into a capability. Blindness to the changes that the body of VET students have undergone in Spain (i.e. students who work, different nationalities) has resulted in College rigidity that ends by “disadvantaging them [the non-traditional students] in their opportunity to develop their capacities” (Young, 1990, p. 164)

It relates to the problem that Young’s (1989) critique of the ideal of universal citizenship poses. There is an assumed link between having citizen status (the NIE
in this case) and having a life and common vision with others in the group and, hence, being treated in the same way. The idea of citizenship as part of a general, common life, means “to enforce a homogeneity of citizens [...] that excludes groups judged not capable of adopting that general point of view” (Young, 1989, p. 251).

A similar discourse (in which anxiety is intertwined with the fear of not belonging to the dominant group) was provided by David. He does not have Spanish nationality so he always carries his passport with his student visa attached. He passed the theory part of his studies but he is not doing the placement module. When I called him he did not want to tell me the reasons by telephone, but he agreed to meet at his place so he did not need to take the bus.

David: I lost the documentation [passport] and I went home and started to look and nothing. I called the police to report it, but [the police] have not found it. Then every time they [the police] stop me on the street I show them the copy of the police claim and the ID from the College, so they know I am a student. Now I need someone to write a letter inviting me here so I can go back to [Equatorial] Guinea and come back here and get a student visa. But the people I know don’t work and I need a letter [from] someone who has worked for a long time and has an address, and I don’t know anyone. So, I think I have bad luck, very bad luck; I have my dreams because to dream they say is easy but then…

Aurora: Did you talk to the social services or anyone?
David: No! They just want to get people out of here, if I go to see them, they will send me back [laughs]. I cannot go back. I need to finish. (David, 19, Equatorial Guinea, IT, 10/05/12)

As a consequence of losing his documentation, David is now viewed with suspicion as an illegal immigrant. During our conversation he joked sarcastically about his situation, the mixture of identities and, most importantly, his abandonment by two bureaucracies: “how can I feel Spanish or Guinean if the police stop me every now and then and then and my embassy does not help me?” (David, IT, 10/05/12).

Although I made enquiries with his tutor about his placement, the College did not want to comment on the reasons why he is able to be a student but still be unable to do the placement. The reasons for it are (though this contrasts ironically with my analysis of the situation of the placement) that the placement represents a type of job contract. Therefore, even though the treatment of the students contrasts
heavily with the regular conditions of employees (no income, no representatives), David cannot finish his studies because these include a mandatory period in a company.

The strategy of assimilation, understood as bringing formerly excluded groups into the mainstream, implies “coming into the game after it has already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards” (Young, 1990, p. 164). Regular bureaucratic procedures pass unnoticed by the majority of students, but for others, such as Javier or David (in this section) and Mercedes (in the one about mobility), represent a barrier to participation and, hence, to carrying out their life-plans. In addition to the issues of constrained agency, dependent mobility, working poor, unprotected placements, family role and need for networking, a new theme has emerged within the stories of Javier and David: the concept of trust.

According to the Edelman’s Trust Barometer, as a consequence of the economic crisis, governments everywhere have experienced the “steepest trust decline in barometer history” (Edelman, 2012, p. 2). Specifically, the report continues, in Europe, trust in governments dropped more than 10 points in France, Spain and Italy [...] with the average global trust of 51 points and only 37 in the case of Spain (Edelman, 2012). The fact that people do not trust their governments or higher institutions can turn what is, at first sight, an opportunity, into a threat. David’s scepticism about being able to receive support from the social services forces us to reconsider the character of “routine” police stops and his past encounters with social services professionals.

The third student is Rafael. His story also presents bureaucratic rules as constrainers of individual capabilities in the sense of putting brakes on the doings and beings of an individual. He is one of those not undertaking the placement module and he is no longer registered at the College. The news came as a surprise to me because he had good grades and also high potential due to his linguistic abilities. During his teens, he and his family moved from Armenia to Poland and then to Spain. In each country he acquired a good level of language and in the first interview he even spoke to me fluently in Catalan and Spanish. Though I could not contact him personally, I reached his brother on the phone, who told me that
he had had to go back home because he was required there. Rafael was 19 and, despite living in Spain, the government of his country required him to go back to do one year’s military service. It meant dropping out of college, saying goodbye to his parents and brother and going back to a place where he had not lived for almost four years.

Since Spain became a democratic country (in 1978), the Constitution has safeguarded the non-exclusion from political and economic activities due to ascribed characteristics. Despite these formal rules, the students’ stories reflect the existence of invisible (insofar as they are unwritten or, in some cases, they are unaware of them) procedures that restrain the capabilities of some groups. As the context chapter (Chapter 2) noted, Spanish demography has radically changed in the last ten years. However, this change is not only in terms of numbers but also carries particular histories and traditions, styles of living and perspectives that continuously shape the Spain of today, but which the institutions, norms and rules are yet to adapt to. The next face of oppression draws attention to the aspect of gender.

4.3. Marginalisation: constrained capabilities

Marginals, the underclass or the lumpenproletariat as Marxist literature refers to them, are people that “the system of labour cannot or will not use” (Young, 1990, p. 53). Though all the faces of oppression are intertwined and hints of marginalisation can be also appreciated in the interviews, I centre on marginalisation as an invisible way of constraining capabilities and restraining individual agency by noting singularity and hence vulnerability. In the previous section (4.2) I mentioned cultural imperialism as a de facto form of exclusion insofar as it sets rules and norms based on the dominant group. In general terms, marginal has a shameful connotation applied to a large proportion of the population outside the production system. Although the situation in Spain means an increasing number of people are unemployed, those who are employed are, in a great number of cases, badly employed (as in the placement) or informally employed, showing that work per se is not sufficient to ensure well-being (Standing, 2011; Wringe, 1991). The interviews with the students and employers have shed light on the complexity of the Spanish labour market and revealed three main aspects.
Firstly, that motivation or personal competences are not the main barriers to obtaining a valuable job or securing an existing one (McGrath, 2002). Secondly, that liberal market needs are mistakenly presented as being the same as employers’ voices (Hinchcliffe, 2013) and there is a demand from them for professionalism to be understood also in terms of being a responsible citizen (Walker & McLean, 2013; James, 2010; Spenceley, 2006). Thirdly, being part of the system of production is no guarantee that an individual will be able to develop their agency and carry out valuable beings and doings in a transformative way (Bonvin, 2006; Young, 1997).

Consequently, I use Young’s (1990) definition of marginality to consider the experiences of the students analysed so far. In this case, the marginal are those who, although they may be part of the production system are: firstly, not fairly incorporated into it (which is the case of Sergio and his uncle’s job); secondly, not able to exercise valuable activities within it (which is the case of Concepcion and Javier, who are placed in companies that do not match their studies); and thirdly, are not allowed to participate on equal terms (which is the case for all the students, because they do not receive a salary and cannot exercise their voice through trade unions). In this sense, and taking the same train of thought as Standing (2011), who refers to lack of security as one of the main features of the “precariat” (the new “working poor” class), I define the situation of the students as marginal because they are unable to achieve security or form a valuable part of the system.

In order to centre the analysis, I focus on gender, not as a descriptive term but as a group term. Like ethnicity, class and background, the research has revealed that gender is a factor that shapes social structures and relations, in a way that entails an unequal and undervalued position for the individual in terms of access and negotiation. An analysis of education and particularly, VET, linked to the labour market cannot ignore gender as a factor that shapes individual choices and capabilities. By focusing on the differences rather than by assuming a false sameness and homogeneity amongst students, the CA merges with the faces of oppression and gives the possibility of “reflecting critically on the causes and consequences of these gendered forms of power, value and distribution, and
transforming those that do not provide women and men with lives they have reason to value” (Unterhalter, 2005, p. 112).

I start the analysis with two quotations. The first comes from Sergio, an IT employer, and the second from Mireia, a Social Care employer.

[…] we want to hire women but there are no graduates, I don’t know if you [Aurora] can do something. (Sergio, IT tutor/employer, 04/05/11)

Men do not come; you know it is still very much divided. People think it’s a woman’s job, but actually we are very happy to have men. We had two last year. Really nice! Everyone wanted them because there is a lot of handling to do and people are very heavy and some workers are not strong enough to help [exemplifies]. Yes, I hope I am in charge long enough to see that [male workers] [laugh]. (Mireia, Social Care, tutor/employer 02/06/11)

The IT and Care sectors are traditionally marked by gender. Using Miller and Hayward’s (2006, p. 70) definition of sex-role stereotyped occupations, that is “beliefs concerning which sex should perform certain jobs”, the employers’ demands are transformative of these unwritten practices.

Social Care is a profession that is both strongly gender segregated and positioned by normalised sex-role stereotypes, due to cultural assumptions that position women as more caring (Willott & Stevenson, 2006). This can be seen at the College, which has almost exclusively female enrolment on the Social Care course. Similarly, IT is commonly perceived as a male occupation and this is reflected in the gender balance of the student enrolment, and later in the workforce. Thus, despite the employers’ wish to break the gender-stereotyping, it is clear, judging by the number of enrolments, I can state that the students in this study seek to enter a profession for which they clearly match the accepted social stereotype (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). It is my interest to analyse if this choice was a real capability, or if it was based on the assumption and fear of being marginalised if they did not follow the stereotype.
The story of Lara, the only woman in a class of twenty students enrolled in IT reveals this vulnerable situation of marginalisation due to gender. During our first interview I asked her:

Aurora: What did you expect?
Lara: The same as now, that the boys would annoy me and ask me what I am doing here, because I am the only girl in class and at the beginning they thought I had made a mistake. (Lara, 18, Equatorial Guinea, IT, 06/06/11)

Though my question to her referred to her expectations about the contents received, Lara replied referring to the emotional or affective sphere. While certain groups, like women, are no longer formally excluded from the capability to enrol in traditionally masculine-professions, the situation is that gender differences occur from the moment of enrolment and how they are treated becomes central to their VET experience.

After that interview, I talked with the Head of the College about the policies carried out to change the gender-based enrolment that affects VET in general (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3). The answer was:

[...] we inform potential students of all possibilities during the open days, then everyone does as they feel, people have to break barriers. (Head of the College, 13/06/11).

The attempt to realise equality embodying the generality as opposed to the particularity of groups, “commonness versus difference”, as Young refers to it (Young, 1989, p. 256), tends to exclude and disadvantage certain groups. I do not want to argue about the justifications for differential treatment based on race or gender implied by affirmative action, but there needs to be a way to compensate for, and balance against, the cultural biases within the supposedly traditional views of employers. Remarkably, although they may be present, these views did not come across in my research. On the contrary, as shown by Sergio and Mireia’s comments, there is a will and demand to break gender barriers at work. However, no explicit strategy or plan was outlined about how the College aimed to inform students about the fact that breaking gender barriers in their studies would benefit them, as well as society.
Pilar is the third employer who makes a direct reference to gender. She works in a law firm where she takes on students from the Administration course for their placement:

Pilar: [talking about what a good trainee should be […] then you feel a lot the difference between boys and girls; it is an abyss.
Aurora: Mmm?
Pilar: In this sector I feel it, maybe because they are very young. If they come and are 20 years old, men are very immature… Well… with a lot of [she thinks about her words]… very immature, very much so, and they have a hard time adapting, much more so than girls [she carries on thinking]. The girls, I don’t know if it’s a just a coincidence, but … not really, I have been here for a long time, haven’t I? […] and normally the experience with men is never as good as with women. Even their attitude! They [women] are more cheerful, more willing […] I do not know if the fact that here, we are all women, can have an influence. We are four women, well, the bosses are men, no one sees them, though. But here we give a very personal friendly welcome to everyone … you see that. (Pilar, Administration tutor/employer, 11/04/11)

The unequal space for transforming the placement with Pilar into a job for a man or for a woman is already predetermined due to previous stereotypes and the preconceptions of the employer. The Spanish labour ethos remains sexist and VET strategies need to take that into account. Reflecting on occupational structures and formal education, Brighouse and Unterhalter (2010) point out that “the barriers women face to exercising the capabilities […] will be great, and the kind of education needed to overcome them may be very different from the kind of education needed simply to develop those capabilities in a non-sexist or less sexist society” (Brighouse & Unterhalter, 2010, p. 11).

While gender is not the only trait that can marginalise and restrict the capabilities of an individual and prevent her from performing valuable activities, it offers a deeper understanding of the invisible ways and manners rooted in society that are at the heart of every educational system. As long as the College and the employers fail to recognise and take positive action to prevent this phenomenon, the VET graduates, and hence the future primary jobs in Spain, are at great risk of perpetuating sex-role stereotyped occupations and reproducing an unequal society that offers more capabilities to some due to their personal traits, whilst marginalising others.
Gender imbalance and marginalisation have already been noted in the literature, for example Colley et al. (2003) or Arulampalam et al. (2007), and it is widely acknowledged that student recruitment into VET tends to mirror the gender-based division of labour and reinforces the stereotyping of some professions, where the low payment and low positioning associated with them causes these professions to be perceived as work for women (Willott & Stevenson, 2006; Haslanger, 2000).

Despite this, there is insufficient thinking about values or questioning of current theoretical underpinnings. The re-construction of VET requires a re-orientation of its foundational values and the closer attention of its stakeholders. The interviews carried out in this research present a very different perspective from that of VET educational policies which are built upon an approach to education—and more generally, to life—that considers itself to be from a rational, pragmatic and neutral perspective but, in fact, as shown through these stories, typically perpetuates existing social imbalances and puts forward a single, static and dehumanised voice.

4.4. Violence: a systematic oppression

The faces of oppression are, to paraphrase Young (1990), a family of concepts and conditions that inhibit an individual or a group and restrain them from their ability to develop, exercise and express. Violence constitutes the fifth face that she presents and, although it includes physical bodily violence it is not necessarily restricted to that. The students’ stories, like that of Lara in relation to her sense of not belonging in a class full of men; David in relation to his fear of being deported; Javier in relation to his disappointment at not having access to promised opportunities; or Concepcion and Lucia in relation to the subjection of their life-plans to their parents’ income, reveal that violence is a constant possibility under the practices, structures and policies in a system.

The experiences of the students and also of the employers, in relation to their inability to hire or provide a meaningful source of income to skilful students (Placement Coordinator, Pau) or to break gender stereotypes in jobs (Mireia, Sergio), are symptoms that current policies focused on growth are not enough to ensure well-being, understood in terms of diminishing the “threat of violence of one group from another” (Young, 1990, p. 63).
Using capabilities as the basis for assessing results makes it necessary to explore beyond the concept of free individual choice and put it into genuine perspective as a social choice. The wide gap between strong agency reflected in the students’ interviews, the employers’ demands and the affective role of the teachers on the students, highlights the enormous importance of information, dialogue and reflection between the different bodies involved, in order to consider the potential for reforming VET into a transformative education. As Unterhalter (2005) notes, “organisations and institutions would plan very differently for gender equality if it were evident to them that they had to take the agency and well-being freedoms of individuals into account” (p. 120).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of students’ freedoms and oppressions to carrying out their life-plans, and the strategic role of VET within this, have been the core of my research. The practitioners’ and employers’ voices were used as complementary material to provide a wider picture and these also contribute to this final analysis and conclusion. As a remark, one has to note that even though this research emphasised the concept of vulnerability, it could also have been written from a perspective based on the resilience of young people enrolled in VET.

The analysis has shown that what is at stake is not just a mismatch between policy and academic debate about skills, but rather a total examination of the practices, processes and aims of VET towards an educational future in which individual and social well-being are core. Concern for individual vulnerabilities and social oppressions could influence the practices of VET and the role of practitioners, policy-makers and employers.

Whilst Sen (1999, 2009) is not directly concerned with vulnerability, his emphasis on well-being sets the goal for the role of VET in the construction of that imagined society. The review of literature showed that Sen’s (1999) view of education is limited, and education and CA are somewhat under theorised. However, the analysis using this framework has proved of extreme relevance to show that VET, as it currently stands, does not enhances students’ capability space to its full potential. The interviews evidenced that VET may be, in fact, one
of those “[…] forms of education do not enhance freedom, or may do so only partially and in contradictory ways” (Unterhalter, 2003, p. 12).

The combination of the CA and the writings of Young (1990, 2002) revealed that the impact (and hence responsibility) of VET went beyond the College. The semi-structured interviews allowed the necessary space between the researcher and the interviewee to enlighten how the combination of visible and invisible barriers at several levels prevented young people from developing their capabilities. The discourse of vulnerability as an accumulative concept that incorporates several oppressions, offered a tool to examine the embedded barriers of contemporary Spain, and hence take a critical stance in a call for an education that reacts to these.

The stories exposed how the real opportunities or capabilities that each student has to pursue their life-plans are not solely determined by their own motivation, or the resources that they have access to, but also by a range of factors which determined the extent to which they could turn these into valuable functionings. My framework paid attention to the non-material circumstances that shaped students’ opportunity sets, and the circumstances that influenced their choices. Scrutinising the context in which economic, productive and social interactions took place, and in which people’s well-being was set (Robeyns, 2006a), helped me to analyse the interviews from an individual, social and group perspective and argue that although VET has an intrinsic and transformative value in students’ freedoms and life-plans (as shown by the story of Tania and Catalina), the settings of this education, the barriers to access it, and the structure of the placements do not always contribute to cultivating this.

The analysis showed that the dissemination of information and opportunities offered to the students were based on the false assumption of individual homogeneity in terms of capabilities and values. This assumption left students exercising a weak form of agency in which they could choose only amongst options that may have little or no value to them. The little freedom and value in these options revealed a vulnerability and a consequent lack of development. As Sen (1999) puts it, “achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people” (p. 4).
The results indicated that the mainstream educational discourse based on skills and outputs, does not tackle young people’s concerns, realities and futures, and that vulnerability is an on-going and aggregated reality that clusters in more than one dimension (as was the case for students with a more disadvantaged background; such as Javier, David or Gonzalo). The most significant advance in considering the concept of vulnerability as intrinsic and accumulative (Fineman, 2008) is that it makes a case for the argument that institutional responsibility is required. The employers’ demands for actions to break gender-stereotyping in professions (Mireia, Sergio), and the lack of response from the College puts forward the argument that experiences of vulnerability are not only located at an individual level but rather reinforced by practices. Thus, it is the College and VET’s responsibility to contribute to society, not only by providing skilled professionals, but also by enhancing the concept of professionalism by providing critical ones.

In this chapter, I hope to have shown the importance of education but, at the same time, the current limited role that VET has in providing students’ capabilities, especially from its blindness to group differences. Even though education is one of the pillars of each society, the stories of the students and employers relate a scenario where decisions were constrained by structural deficiencies that left young people, and most groups that depart from an already disadvantaged position, in a powerless situation; which in a wide number of cases, leads to forms of violence through exploitation, marginalisation and cultural imperialism.

I finish the analysis by saying that VET’s role is constrained by the limitations of its current theoretical discourses, which are based on the idea that a shortage of skills is the main reason for a shortfall in an individual’s freedoms and level of well-being.
The words of the OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría, coming in the aftermath of the financial crisis, on the need to reinforce a skills-based education serve as a final analysis:

Skills have become the global currency of 21st Century economies. They transform lives and drive economies. Governments must invest more effectively in the education and skills that people will need in tomorrow’s workplace. They need to deploy their talent pool more strategically so that these investments translate into better jobs and better lives. Achieving this is everyone’s business, and employers and unions have a central role to play. (OECD, 2012b, online)

The voices of the employers and students used in this chapter challenge this quotation on at least three different levels.

Firstly, current VET strategies are not built upon the concept that this is “everyone’s business”, as was put forward in my argument about human capital and its link to the discourse of responsibilisation. In fact, the case revealed a passivity on the part of the College to students’ difficulties in understanding and navigating the social rules and procedures (Mercedes, Lucia, Concepcion, Javier, David), in ensuring their capability for a voice in the workplace (Sergio) or in breaking the gender-based stereotypes at the time of enrolment (Lara) and in the workplace (Sergio, Mireia). This focus on skills reinforces existing forms of exploitation, cultural imperialism and marginalisation in the areas of mobility, placements and gender balance in the College, which not only bypasses students’ values, but also those of employers, and the role of VET to provide professionals that can create a better society.

Secondly, as seen in Chapter 2 (Figure 1 and Figure 2) and in the words of some practitioners (Ernesto and Beatriz), this emphasis on the promotion of a skills-based VET is not accompanied by an increase in the spending on education. Consequently, the suggestions of the OECD Secretary that “Governments must invest more effectively in (the) education and skills […]”, is not happening. This puts students in the vulnerable position of combining education with informal work (Manuel, Javier) and navigating between their College responsibilities and the search for income. The dubious quality of the first step into the work environment that the placement ended up being for most of the students (besides Jose, who had the connection through his uncle), revealed that the words of the
OCED secretary that “investments translate into better jobs and better lives”, are not directly applicable in current VET.

And thirdly, the last theoretical deficit in having a growth-based VET strategy based on skills is that it over-interprets market demands without taking into consideration employers’ voices. Through the skills discourse, the individual is required to acquire a set of knowledge for an immediate future that is supposedly full of opportunities and ready to accept these specific skills. The mismatch between the individual skills and the market demands are, therefore, the reasons behind one’s lack of, or bad, employment. Within this capitalist logic, the individual is not viewed as an autonomous agent who can create her own future and job (Tikly, 2013; McGrath, 2012b; Powell, 2012). Additionally, it also ignores the evidence from my interviews with employers that the demand for skills varies in relation to the sector (Sergio, Mireia); that employers are more concerned with individual aspects (Pilar, Mireia, Sergio); and, that the economic cost of hiring new people (Pau, Reme) is a greater concern than their level of technical knowledge.

Despite the character of the analysis, in which oppression was the dominant theme, each of their stories transmitted a strong resilience featured by the agency to challenge and transform current barriers. The conclusion is that there is a demand from the interviewees to construct a VET based on a perception of humankind that differs from human capital approaches. Within solely economic-based views individuals are, using Baptiste’s (2001) metaphor, “a lone wolf [who is portrayed as a selfish, avaricious beast that] seek[s] only to maximise its material happiness and bodily security” (p. 196). Having analysed the life-plans and daily concerns of employers, practitioners and students, I argue that, regardless of the severe economic downturn and the critical social situation that people in Spain are going through, the stories here evidenced that caring for others was more a predominant attitude than any such self-rewarding plans.
Chapter Eight – Reflections, conclusions and way forward

1. Rationale for the research

My research took place during a time of economic instability that was especially felt in Spain. Based on a model of growth, easy credit and construction, the Spanish economy and population grew rapidly between 2000 and 2008. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the easy credit stopped and the Spanish economy collapsed. The research was carried out at a time of great antagonism between citizens and institutions. Although European and national policies focused on easing labour conditions, promoting skills education and applying austerity measures in social spending in an attempt to adapt to the markets; social demonstrations were taking place regularly, demanding a way out of the crisis that did not compromise social and human well-being (see Chapters 1 and 2 for a greater account of this). Within this context, questions about the theoretical underpinnings that frame policies and the importance of looking for human-centred approaches are truly pertinent.

Although VET is education with an occupational focus, the low quality of many existing jobs, the cultural and social processes attached to the acquisition and conditions of a particular job, 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).

Having said that, I am also aware that the research is time specific. The high levels of youth unemployment and State debt are directly related to the speed and intensity of the neoliberal reforms that Spain is being subjected to and is currently undertaking. Specifically, VET is at the centre because it follows a human capital logic, under which it is believed that by improving the quality, quantity and relevance of students’ skills, their employability will increase, which in turn will lead to economic growth and improved competitiveness for the country (Lasonen & Gordon, 2008; Martín Criado, 2000; Robeyns, 2006b). However, in line with a
large body of literature about human development I argue that a model based on
growth does not automatically translate into an increase in social well-being.
Consequently, the social justice questions that are raised in this research are
important questions, regardless of the economic climate of the time. The
methodological contribution is a qualitative focus, through the use of human
development lenses, to a field dominated by quantitative research under the
human capital approach.

The review of literatures that informed the research, presented in Chapter 3, posed
the need for a theoretical contribution to the research about VET. The review
presented how much of VET policy is based on a toolkit of skills to be learnt, to
increase youth employability and hence reduce unemployment (McGrath, 2012a,
2012b). The rise of interest in VET in times of economic recession is transformed
by most strategists into a set of statistics and skills recommendations that are
linked to this logic. In these strategies, the outcome of national economic growth
is taken as the ultimate goal, and comes tied to an increase in skills to boost
employability and hence human development. Although the review shows the
dominance of economic-based approaches in the VET literature, there is also an
area of human development literature that challenges this (Chapter 3, Section 3.1
and 4).

The theoretical contribution of the chapter was to transmit and reflect on the
social inequalities involved in human capital theories and explore the literature
around VET that takes into account the experiences of students, employers and
practitioners, criticising the shortcomings entailed by reducing VET to purely
economic goals. This body of literature helped to explain the complex set of
feelings regarding identity, emotions and even mistreatment, experienced by the
VET practitioners (Avis, 2006; Gimeno Sacristán, 2010; Avis & Bathmaker,
2004a), as well as the variety of factors that influenced VET students’ horizons of
learning (Calero et al., 2009; Colley et al., 2003; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000).
The review confronted the human capital theory and also portrayed the situation
of the three collectives. This determined that my research would feature a critical
qualitative research. From the initial research commitment to social justice and
VET, the final group of literature reviewed was selected as that concerned about
the role of education for cultivating humanity (Nussbaum, 1998). Education, from
this viewpoint, was seen as an important transformative space for fostering individual agency and challenging social inequalities, in order to ensure that the opportunities available to students were genuine. Although the majority of the authors mentioned in Section 4 were focused on Higher Education, their research brought the language of agency, capabilities and social justice to the previous literature and helped to inspire the construction of a theoretical framework concerned with the processes by which opportunities are created, rather than with measurable educational outcomes.

Rooted in the concept of human development as multidimensional, and stating my theoretical contribution, Chapter 4 presented a social justice framework that suited my research because it acknowledged the relevance of the economy in human development, but looked beyond this. The theoretical framework developed under the lenses of the CA, the faces of oppression and the concept of vulnerability, shifted the focus away from economic growth and national income towards a focus on human well-being, not only for individuals, but also for groups. Although Amartya Sen, Iris Marion Young and Martha Fineman, do not specifically link their theoretical concepts to educational processes, this thesis provided a synergy in which individual freedoms were analysed through the prism of systemic embedded oppressions; thus contributing to the field of human development literature, particularly that concerning capabilities. Applying the CA in conjunction with the faces of oppression became not only a theoretical contribution, but also a methodological one. It positioned each of the interviewees in the light of being vulnerable subjects (rather than liberal ones), to which their agency and actions were subjected to visible, but also invisible, norms and oppressions (see Chapter 4, Section 4, Figure 6).

This framework required the use of qualitative methods to collect and represent the voices of the interviewees, adding to the field of VET literature that is, as noted previously, mainly dominated by quantitative research. These methods were outlined in Chapter 5, together with a profiling of the samples (Figures 7, 8 and 9) and an explanation of the adaptation of the methods to the challenges and themes that emerged during the research.
The analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 used the theoretical framework to investigate the formation of capabilities in the individuals, and also of group oppressions that may be occurring to young people in Spain. The conjunction of the methodological and theoretical contribution gave, as a result, an empirical one. The main empirical contribution is that, even though most EU and Spanish policy on VET has been driven by the view that the role of this education is to meet the requirements of the labour market (because work is the best way out of poverty), this human capital logic does not hold for everyone in Spain. Skills development strategies centred on increasing youth employability are a top-down approach, focused on placing individuals in work, rather than on reducing their vulnerabilities and challenging embedded social structures.

Inequality in terms of gender, class and country of origin is a constant within the Spanish society and labour system; consequently work in itself is not a guarantee of well-being. The lack of agency, without individual values being taken into consideration, involved in a strategy focused on acquiring skills for work, ignores the value and quality of the work performed as well as the transformational character that education can have in changing oppressive structures.

The analysis found that, although the dominant VET discourse about individual responsibility for one’s employability and success (Crespo & Serrano Pascual, 2001) trickles down to some interviewees, there is strong evidence that this is not the case for the students (Table 6), nor is it the main concern for employers or practitioners (Figure 10). The analysis showed a disconnection in which we find: a policy concern with educating students for skills for economic growth; a practitioner concern with educating about behaviour; an employer concern with the absence of work and social change; and a student concern about carrying out their life-plans. Thus, concern for a human-centred approach is stronger than for an economic one.

Within this scenario, VET is seen as disconnected from embedded oppressions and blind to the shared demand (from employers, practitioners and students) to educate about the rights of students in the work place, and in society, and the ways to develop their agency and reduce their vulnerability. Therefore, the conclusion is that VET approaches that focus on preparing students for work,
rather than on promoting their capabilities to choose the work they have a reason to value, are increasing students’ sense of failure and reproducing inequalities, because these approaches assume that work exists and is fair, that it is the responsibility of the individual to find it, and that work (or growth) *per se* is a guarantee of well-being. Consequently, as the findings reveal, human capital approaches to VET deny the increasing number of working poor in Spain, the existence of the difficulties that an individual belonging to a particular group faces and, finally, they reject a heterogeneous view of the future. The implications of this are threefold:

- The analysis raises questions about current pedagogical practices and reveals a demand for the configuration of a more human-based curriculum.
- The review of the literature and analysis shows that policies need to look beyond economics and centre on fostering individual and group capabilities to create a more equal society.
- Finally, my research, with the empirical findings on one hand and the commitment to social justice on the other, joins the human development literature in asking to reframe VET through a human-based approach and continue this small but relevant line of research in which VET is an education beyond skills for employment alone.

This chapter now turns back to the three research questions that guided the study, and the limitations encountered during the research.

2. **Answers to the research questions and reflections**

The research was motivated in pursuit of a change in the theoretical underpinnings of VET and structured around three research questions. The answer to each question carries within it the reflections on the empirical, theoretical and methodological aspects. However, Research Question Three is developed further, as it is the most holistic. The research had three aims, which were addressed in each of the research questions (see Appendix 4). The aims were: (i) To represent the current state of affairs of VET in Spain. (ii) To examine the multidimensional aspect and societal role of VET, and the risks involved in ignoring structural oppressions and forms of exclusion that an exclusively economically oriented system implies (iii) To contribute to current VET analyses, by moving away from
growth policies and focusing on capabilities. Having noted the aims, the chapter moves on to the answers to each of the questions.

- **RQ1: what are the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET according to the students, practitioners, and employers?**

Since my focus started from a commitment to well-being as a heterogeneous concept, it required the use of qualitative methods, to gather the values of each individual and, to some extent, of each group. These empirical findings were collected and analysed in Chapters 6 and 7. My work was centred on the processes through which these opportunities were created, the individual values, and possible group difficulties in their formation.

The theoretical commitment to process rather than evaluation of the outcomes, responded to the intention to move beyond human capital approaches. Qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and life-grids were used to collect the stories of these three groups (see Chapter 5, Section 2). When sampling the interviewees, I made use of a volunteer basis for the students, and recommendations for the other groups, in order to gather an open sample in which vulnerability was not necessarily identified to economic or physical conditions. The interviews identified a diverse range of themes in each of the groups (see Chapter 5, Sections 2.1.4, 2.2.4, 2.3.4). Below, I present an overview of the main findings.

**Students**

The most commonly occurring theme was that of feeling hopeless arising from being unable to pursue one’s life-plan. As noted in Chapter 7, this finding was not unexpected since Spain has a high level of youth unemployment. Closer scrutiny of the stories revealed that these feelings did not stem from the absence of work (as was put forward by the literature) but were instead already present and remained, even in cases where students were working or undergoing in-company training in the form of placements. The conditions involved in acquiring a job, the mismatch between their studies and the work performed, the quality of the placement, the treatment received and the lack of perspectives, were the main themes.
These distinctions are important when considering the value of work as a given, or of the value of the placements, the powerless situation of students as interns in a workplace and the implicit role of training as a means of exploitation. Students also made reference to the relevance of support networks, their economic dependence on them, as well as the role they play in acquiring future work. Although students valued the education received, they did not trust that a diploma would be sufficient and were concerned about networks for finding a future job. These findings shake the liberal principle of students as isolated beings; instead it places their agency as dependent on a complex network of institutions, relations and social factors that determine their vulnerability. Reaching students and providing them with opportunities to build up a network of social relations is recommended in order to improve the transition from college to labour market or to other levels of education. The data also highlighted the various challenges that students had in relation to navigating bureaucratic procedures.

The impossibility, reported by many, in transforming College opportunities (such as mobility, access to other levels, enrolment in disciplines, or even doing a placement abroad) into genuine ones that had a value for them, makes us reconsider the quality of the choices that are being offered and the equality of students to participate in them. In my data, marginalisation due to gender in male-stereotyped professions was presented and contrasted with employers’ demands to break these gender-stereotypes (see Chapter 7, Section 4.3). Even though the College does not have any policy regarding this, it would be interesting to pursue further research in order to understand the formation and conception of good working practices in relation to the College practices.

Employers

In order to understand the opportunities of young people enrolled in VET in Spain, I included the employers’ voice. Although I found little evidence of voices from this collective in the literature, the policy implied that skills were the main deficit and reason for youth unemployment. Regarding methodology and methods, the sample included six employers, recommended by the College, from different sectors. Semi-structured interviews were used and the data, although limited, revealed that skills were not one of the themes that employers referred to when thinking about the values of VET.
The values that employers shared were about commitment, autonomy, and knowledge on the part of the students. Additionally, their experiences referred to the economic crisis and the absence of work. The employers moved the responsibility discourse away from students to focus on the social system and, indirectly, the College, which was unable to provide a bursary for the work that students had performed, or even a placement in a relevant company. As described in depth in Chapter 7, even though the employers interviewed were the recommended ones, their stories still featured references to open gender stereotyping, as well as the voiceless situation of students in the workplace.

The empirical evidence reflected that, for the employers, VET had a value beyond that of the diploma. However, it is the responsibility of the College to further ensure, through the role of the employers that were placement-tutors, that the benefit of having a placement in a company does not become a time of learning dubious skills and constant exploitation.

It will be interesting for further research to link the concept of agency and VET. Whilst current policies encourage a greater adaptation of VET curricula to company requirements and even an increase in the time spent in the company, the greatest challenge in a country with a shortage of well-equipped companies to carry out this plan may involve focusing on the students, not as future employees, but as future employers. This would require a capability focus in VET in which the student, not the economy, would be at the centre and it would foster critical thinking, autonomy and reflection as well as further work on improving one’s network and sense of commitment to society.

Practitioners

The values of the VET professionals presented in Chapter 6 were in line with the group of literature seen in Chapter 3. The sample was formed by eight VET practitioners, who were selected by the students. The distinctions I had used when dividing the literature about VET proved to be useful in categorising the practitioners’ values of VET into three areas: VET for work, VET as an experience, VET as flourishing. As already argued, policy points towards VET for work, but the practitioners’ experiences centred mainly on behavioural aspects and emotional transitions.
Additionally, there was strong evidence that practitioners are involved in a complex interplay of different values, by having to combine managerial orders centred on skills with daily practice, requiring emotions and transmission of general knowledge. A strong value that emerged from my data was that of autonomy (see Figure 10). The empirical findings of the tensions and disengagement of the practitioners, in conjunction with their demands for a greater focus outside a skills-based curriculum, have consequences on understanding areas to improve VET.

Building mostly on the literature that uses the CA in education (Chapter 3), the interviews gave space to the area of the values and feelings of practitioners. It is important for the pedagogical implications of this research to review, in a holistic way, the purposes and types of knowledge students aim to acquire in VET, because “a curriculum is thus always grounded in a moral perspective on what version of the good life is desirable” (Walker, 2012c, p. 449).

In this case, the empirical findings have a direct impact on policy, as they reveal a gap between the perceptions of what values should be, which to some extent are being worked at in VET classrooms, and the instrumental values that are put forward in current VET policy-making. A comprehensive review and comparison between VET and other levels of post-compulsory education could be of interest in order to explore an area of the literature, and expressed by some practitioners, regarding the relevance of having a dichotomy between vocational and academic education, to what extent this dichotomy is still present, and if it is constructive.

A final note about the implicit and explicit values brought up by the interviewees, that is also a limitation to be considered as I draw on the findings, is that the empirical evidence would have been different had another theoretical framework or methodology been used, or even if another researcher had carried out the study. As individuals expressed more than one conception it is valid to imagine that shorter interviews or even methods would have brought different conclusions. As Ball (2000) recognises: “theory can, and often does, function to provide comforting and apparently stable identities for beleaguered academics in an increasingly slippery world. Theory can serve to conjure up its own anterior norms and lay its dead hand upon the creativity of the mind” (p. 64).
- **RQ2: how is VET perceived in relation to the genuine opportunities of young people enrolled in this education in Spain?**

Whilst RQ1 focused on the analysis of each of the group interviews, RQ2 centres on the students, who make up the biggest sample and are of the greatest concern in this research. In the analysis of students’ experiences of VET (Chapter 7), the theoretical weight of the writings of Young (1990) in relation to social oppressions became more relevant. The strongest finding is that even though students perceive their capabilities as linked to having a diploma, and this gives them a sense of fulfilment, their life-plans and actions are not subjected to, or entirely dependent on, the acquisition of a diploma. As Sen (1999) notes: “individuals live and operate in a world of institutions. Our opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function” (p. 38). In this case, the main institution is the State and the series of social cuts that affect all students, but especially those lacking family support.

The exploration of the experiences and perceptions in the light of the faces of oppression reveal how these affect their daily activities, from taking the bus to considering returning to their homeland, or emigrating, which affects their complete life-plans. Whilst the inclusion of Young eased the methodological difficulty of the CA to take a group perspective (Clark, 2005), the sampling did not aim for a group analysis based on particular variables (i.e. gender, background, and ethnicity), consequently the conclusions in this regard need to be viewed as in need of further research.

Nevertheless, and taking a general approach, the empirical finding is that there is a mixed perception of VET as a valuable education. On the one hand, students exhibit a greater sense of security and pride when referring to their previous self and to their peers who did not continue to study; on the other, there is a concern about being unable to find a valuable and monetarily rewarding job, or being able to pay for further studies in a climate of privatisation, that peers on other educational paths are not perceived to have.
RQ3: how can the operationalisation of the CA inform the research and findings?

The review of literatures and experiences of participants presented here provided a picture of the existing gaps of an economic growth system when applied to education. The results highlighted the vulnerability of students when dealing with education and the labour market and raised a host of issues with social justice implications. Question three asked how the operationalisation of the CA helped to interpret and inform the research. I dealt with this in some detail, since two entire chapters were devoted to it (Chapter 4 and 5). In this section I aim to present a brief summary of the capability-based framework I presented for the analysis (Figure 6) and how this allowed a broadening of the perspective of education and labour.

The framework that I proposed in Chapter 5 is a solid contribution to the field of social justice and VET in two senses. It enlarged the social justice literature by applying it to VET; at the same time, the contribution of merging the CA, the faces of oppression, and the concept of the vulnerable subject, provided a unique framework with potentiality for further exploration. Whilst each element added to the research, the predominant contribution was provided by the CA, because it allowed a shift in the focus from economic production and economic growth to a focus on human well-being. Taking well-being as the starting point, the research was designed by opting for qualitative methods that could be open to the different interpretations and values that the interviewees might bring up.

Rather than defining a successful VET as a measurable education that leads to employment, the choice of the CA as the main theoretical base argued that a good VET should be one that decreases students’ vulnerabilities and enhances their agency. Vulnerability, in this research, was defined as intrinsic to every human being and, hence, it is a social and institutional responsibility to be concerned about this (Fineman & Grear, 2013).

My use of the faces of oppression departed from the conversion factors developed by Robeyns (2005) but provided a deeper insight for understanding the complex interplay of both social structures and individual, or group, choices. The operationalisation of the writings of Young (1990) together with the CA provided
a framework for understanding oppression and vulnerability as experienced in people’s daily lives. It helped to reveal the injuries from classism, sexism and racism and also to explain the structural nature of these injuries. Just as the CA gave language to the processes for freedom, the faces of oppression gave a vocabulary to the processes in which oppression takes place. The concept of oppression, as embedded in every social system, suggested the need for the transformative character of education and work as expressed by the CA, but also dictated that the research would be alert to injustices and, consequently, to institutional responsibility.

In the introductory chapter, I included a short section reflecting on my personal positioning as the researcher and the inspiration for the research, in which I envisioned from the beginning that alternatives to the status quo and solutions to injustices are not easily found. In the context, the literature and even in the stories shared by the interviewees there is a sense of seeking for quick-fix interventions, for measurable gains in a bid to alleviate the unemployment situation. This impression of urgency might not have been so prevalent had the research taken place in a period with better economic prospects.

Nevertheless, the analysis revealed that the skills focus, under the banner of employability, is a repetition of actions that pursue economic growth (as seen in Chapter 2), which mask even greater injustices that have a long-lasting impact on general well-being. Instead, the CA proposed a comprehensive and long-term approach in which education policies are not subjugated to economic goals but to individual and societal values. Although this is a broad and long-term process, the starting point is to contribute to the literature by presenting a new theoretical framework and also by generating further questions: would these results differ in another moment in time? In what ways would the experiences be different if the sample had been selected based on gender, country of origin or even type of diploma? What is the role of the College culture in students’ agencies? Would the results have differed if the College had been private? Further research is required to address these, and other, questions raised during the study.

I conclude the review of the research questions, in which I presented the theoretical contributions of my empirical findings, from a methodological stance.
I argue that, despite the intrinsic difficulties involved in the operationalisation of a framework concerned with values, the operationalisation of the CA in conjunction with the concept of vulnerability and the faces of oppression has proved to be a strong analytical tool and is in itself a strong theoretical contribution to the field of VET and human development. This combination has allowed me to explore the opportunities of young people enrolled in VET in Spain in relation to current societal structures, at the same time reminding us of the collective responsibility of institutions to guarantee well-being. This has raised further questions but has also brought up political, pedagogical and research suggestions that aim to inspire future lines of work.

3. Concluding remarks and policy implications

I thus reach the conclusion of what has been a meaningful personal research journey, and also an extremely challenging one. Although the research questions guided the study, the path of events and the daily struggles of young people in Spain have been the real motivation behind my seeking and constantly inquiring how their capabilities could be protected and enhanced. The findings reveal the intrinsic relation between economy, labour, education, society, and social relations in order to guarantee individual and group well-being; a contribution that hopes to inspire a change of direction in the policy strategies of VET.

The perceptions and experiences of the employers, the practitioners and the students presented more synergies than one could have expected based on the literature review, and the findings provided the basis for stating that a social justice framework is needed. This framework, on one hand, would place the capabilities of VET students at the centre; and on the other, allow awareness of the embedded oppressions that society, and even more so the labour market, involves.

Additionally, many further questions have emerged. The analysis based on heterogenous individual experiences could be greatly benefitted by a complementary group comparative analysis in which the capabilities of young people finishing VET is researched under a particular variable, such as immigration, gender, or context. In addition to an analysis of group capabilities, another limitation of the research is that it is confined to a single College. A
bigger time frame could have made possible a comparative research between colleges and that could have brought light to questions left behind, such as the reasons for enrolling in VET, in a particular course and in that particular College.

The policy implications for this research are that VET skills development strategies focused on the labour market are not sufficient to guarantee or ensure societal well-being. Although work is an important aspect for every individual, this cannot be the ultimate goal of a strategy, nor can it be taken as an isolated variable. Within the theoretical framework that this research proposes, the economy is an important subset for a country, but it is only one part within a broader notion of human capabilities. Consequently, the implications for applying this social justice framework in VET would require moving from human capital to human capabilities, with a central emphasis on the opportunities that all individuals have for developing their agency. Shifting the focus from human capital and growth to a focus on societal well-being requires incorporating the values of every stakeholder involved in this form of education within VET.

The broader role of VET, acknowledged by this research, is one where the human capital standpoint, by which individuals have a responsibility to acquire skills, and that skills lead to development may be true on some occasions, but this is not necessarily always the case. The empirical evidence brought up by this research shows that the connections are more complex. Although individuals are confronted by choices in life, the methodological implications of this research imply a theoretical shift in which the CA informs us that choices are not always genuine, and the faces of oppression remind us that individuals are always seen as part of a group. As Young (1990) notes, “individuals should be free to pursue life plans in their own way, (but) it is foolish to deny the reality of groups. Despite the modern myth of a decline of parochial attachments and ascribed identities, in modern society group differentiation remains endemic” (p. 11).

The stories of the employers and practitioners but, even more so, those of the students, are abundant in terms of resilience and oppressions. Whilst the research is centred on the freedoms and oppressions of young people, it could also have been written from the perspective of resilience. The data provided in the overview of the Spanish context and each of the stories about exploitation, marginalisation,
powerlessness or violence from the students, revealed how the focus current policies place on skills, employment and measurable growth, ignores the institutional responsibility to provide an education that fosters individual agency and opportunities. The institutional responsibility that this research proposes is one where the College listens to the demands of the job market, and also provides an education that broadens the concept of professionalism to include social responsibility. Additionally, the College has the responsibility to safeguard the quality of future jobs by offering a valuable, rewarding and enhancing environment, not just in the College, but also during students’ placements, for all groups and individuals.

In conclusion—and as guidance for future research under a social justice prism—I end with the words of Sen (2004): “It is important to reclaim for humanity the ground that has been taken from it by various arbitrarily narrow formulations of the demands of rationality” (p. 51).

It is my hope that this study will contribute to reminding us that economic strategies are elaborated, driven and sustained by the work of individuals; hence, individuals should always be the basis, concern and goal of our analysis and actions.
References


Appendices

1. Spanish education system
2. Consent form
3. Information about the project given to the participants
4. Research table: aims, research questions, methods, outcomes and dissemination
5. Student interview guidelines
6. Example of life-grid
7. Theme categorization after the first round of interviews
APPENDIX 1 - Spanish education system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Families</th>
<th>Qualification Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture (AGA)</td>
<td>Competence in a group of professional activities related to relatively simple activities, in which the theoretical knowledge and practical capacities involved are limited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritime Industry &amp; Fisheries (MAP)</td>
<td>Competence in a group of well-determined professional activities with the capacity to use particular instruments and techniques concerning, mainly, an execution activity, which can be autonomous within the limits of the above-mentioned techniques. It requires knowledge on the technical and scientific fundamentals of the activity concerned and capacity for the comprehension and the application of the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Industry (INA)</td>
<td>Competence in a group of professional activities which require the command of different techniques and can be executed in an autonomous way. It involves responsibility on the coordination and supervision of technical and specialized work. It demands the understanding of the technical and scientific fundamentals of the activities concerned as well as the assessment of the factors in the process and the assessment of the economic repercussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry (QUI)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of complex professional activities performed in a great variety of contexts which require to combine technical, scientific, economic or organizational variables to plan actions, or to define or develop projects, processes, products or services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Image (IMP)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (SAI)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety, &amp; Environment (SBE)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical Manufacturing (FME)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity &amp; Electronics (ELE)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy &amp; Water (ENA)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Installation &amp; Maintenance (IMA)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraction Industry (IEX)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport &amp; Maintenance of Motor Vehicles (TMV)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction &amp; Civil Work (EOC)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glass &amp; Ceramics (VIC)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wood, Furniture &amp; Cork (MAM)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textiles, Manufactures, Leather &amp; Fur (TCP)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graphic Arts (AGR)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image &amp; Sound (IMS)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computing &amp; Communications (IFC)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration &amp; Management (ADG)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade &amp; Marketing (COM)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociocultural &amp; Community Services (SSC)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Industry &amp; Tourism (HOT)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical &amp; Sporting Activities (APO)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Craftwork (ART)</td>
<td>Competence in a wide group of professional activities of great complexity performed in different contexts, often unpredictable, which imply to plan actions or to conceive products, processes or services. Great personal autonomy, frequent responsibility on the assignment of resources and on the analysis, diagnosis, design, planning, execution and assessment.</td>
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FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO DE LOS PARTICIPANTES

Título del proyecto Las voces de la formación profesional: un estudio de caso utilizando el enfoque de las capacidades para analizar la desventaja como vulnerabilidad.

Nombre del investigador Aurora López Fogués - 685702172 aurora.fogues@nottingham.ac.uk

Nombre del supervisor Prof. Melanie Walker, Dr. Monica McLean (Reino Unido – Universidad de Nottingham)/ y mentora Dr. Alejandra Boni Aristizábal (España – Universidad Politécnica de Valencia)

• He leído la Hoja de Información de participantes y la naturaleza y el propósito del proyecto de investigación se me ha explicado. Entiendo y estoy de acuerdo en participar.

• Entiendo el propósito del proyecto de investigación y mi participación en él.

• Entiendo que me puedo retirar del proyecto de investigación en cualquier momento y que esto no afectará mi estado ahora o en el futuro.

• Entiendo que, si bien la información obtenida durante el estudio puede ser publicada, no voy a ser identificado/a y mis resultados personales se mantendrán confidenciales.

• Entiendo que voy a ser grabado en audio durante la entrevista.

• Entiendo que los datos serán almacenados en las copias electrónicas por el investigador en su propio ordenador. Los supervisores que participan en la investigación tendrían acceso a ella. Ninguna persona fuera del proyecto tendrá acceso a mis datos sin mi consentimiento previo (el del entrevistado).

• Entiendo que debido al compromiso del investigador de ser ético, en el caso de que durante el curso de la entrevista surja información que pueda ser dañina o poner en riesgo a mi persona u otros, ella se verá en la obligación de informar a las autoridades competentes.

• Entiendo que puedo contactar con el investigador o el supervisor si necesito más información sobre la investigación, y que puedo comunicarme con el Coordinador de Ética de la Investigación de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Nottingham, si deseo presentar una queja relacionada con mi participación en la investigación.

Nombre / Firma
Fecha/Lugar
APPENDIX 3 - Information about the project given to the participants

HOJA INFORMATIVA PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN - DOCTORADO

¿Quién soy?
Soy Aurora López Fogués, profesora del Centro Integrado de Formación Profesional (CIFP). En septiembre de 2011 obtuve una beca europea (Marie Curie) y se me concedió una licencia de estudios por parte de la Facultad para realizar un estudio sobre la formación profesional en la Universidad de Nottingham en cooperación con la Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, como parte del programa europeo Marie Curie "Eduwel - Initial Training Network - Education as Welfare".

¿Cuál es el objetivo de la investigación?
Mi investigación pretende capturar cuál es la concepción de los valores de la formación profesional en España y cómo estos se transmiten en el centro y en las empresas, así como el impacto final en las oportunidades de los alumnos para llegar a una vida plena.

¿Cómo podemos ayudar?
El objetivo es que descanse la formación de este estudio (15 alumnos), que harían la entrevista de 20-30 minutos en la que le preguntarían a cada uno de los alumnos su experiencia en el centro y en su futuro profesional, así como su valoración de las oportunidades de desarrollo personal y laboral que tienen.

Experiencia de la Formación Profesional (FP): Un estudio de caso basado en el enfoque de las capacidades para analizar las desventajas como vulnerabilidad en España.

Eduwel

Terminos de uso

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### APPENDIX 4 - Research table: aims, research questions, methods, analysis and dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Objectives/ RQ</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Outcomes/Analysis</th>
<th>Dissemination</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To represent the current state of affairs of VET in Spain</td>
<td><strong>RQ1</strong> - What are the explicit and implicit values and goals of VET according to the students, practitioners, and employers?</td>
<td>Content analysis: college documents + European and Spanish policy documents</td>
<td>To apply the Capability Approach by mapping the normative assumptions at the macro level as well as comparing it to the micro level. The micro level research will be done by gathering any disparity of goals, values and aspirations among those involved on this education.</td>
<td>Constant conversation with the practitioners involved and the College for informing of the results and points of view.</td>
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<td><strong>RQ2</strong> - How is VET perceived in relation to the genuine opportunities for young people enrolled in this education in Spain?</td>
<td>Analysis of relevant statistics related to the education, society and work of Spain, Valencia, and EU. Life-grids of 20 minutes each to 15-18 students enrolled in Intermediate VET. Semi-structured interviews - 40 minutes each, taped and full transcribed. - 1 head of the college - 1 inspector - 6 employers of the working in module - 15 students - 6 lecturers selected by the students as lecturers that enhanced their aspirations.</td>
<td>To change the current paradigm of evaluation which is centred on skills, competences and knowledge by focusing it on a social justice framework.</td>
<td>Brief summary of my research in Spanish to engage with Spanish journals, academia, magazines and other groups interested in the role, challenges and future of VET in the society.</td>
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<td><strong>RQ3</strong> - How can the operationalization of the CA inform the research and findings?</td>
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<td>Join the European community of researchers about education, development and capabilities.</td>
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To examine the multidimensional aspect and societal role of VET and the risk of bypassing structural oppressions and forms of exclusion that an economic single oriented system implies.

To contribute to current VET analyses, by moving away from growth politics and focusing it on capabilities.
APPENDIX 5 - Example of interview guidelines and themes to discuss

STUDENTS
- Life grid 20-30 minutes
- Interview 40-60 minutes

EDUCATION - Educación
1. ¿Podemos hablar de tus experiencias en el aula, puedes recordar y describir una ocasión o una lección en una clase donde sintieras que aprendiste mucho?
   Y una experiencia de aprendizaje en que era difícil
   ¿Te diste cuenta, ya sea en el aula o en el trabajo si las personas son tratadas de manera justa o injusta? ¿Qué pasó, puedes dar un ejemplo?
2. En la entrevista anterior hablastes acerca de la educación y la importancia de la misma, me puedes decir que fuentes usas para obtener información? ¿Puedes dar un ejemplo de con quién discutir o comentar esa información? ¿Qué cosas se discuten en el aula?
3. ¿Se corresponden las prácticas a lo aprendido en el aula? Por qué motivo?

WORK - Trabajo
4. ¿Crees que el título te garantiza un puesto de trabajo? ¿Dónde y cuál? ¿Qué es lo que más te beneficiaste de la FP para conseguir un trabajo? Y puedes dar un ejemplo de lo que ves que falta?

COMMUNITY – POLITICAL SPACE Comunidad / espacio político / Participación
5. En relación a los aspectos actuales ¿cómo crees que la situación social (lo que pasa en tu barrio, tu ciudad) y el trabajo (oportunidades) son? ¿Quieres que cambie algo?
6. Si hablamos de España en su conjunto, cuál es tu opinión acerca de las demostraciones y los movimientos políticos? ¿Recibistes información al respecto? Fue el tema abordado en las clases? Te involucrastes? ¿Cómo / Por qué?
7. Cómo crees que son las cosas para gente joven como tú?

EVALUATION - Evaluación
8. Mirando hacia atrás, ¿cómo te sientes acerca de estos dos años en la FP? ¿Qué crees que te aportó en comparación con otros niveles de la educación?
9. Si sueñas por un momento e imaginas una situación ideal, ¿qué te gustaría hacer, cómo te gustaría vivir o ser, y qué te gustaría tener?
10. Como curiosidad, ¿por qué eres voluntario para la entrevista? ¿Qué piensas acerca de los temas que hemos discutido en las dos entrevistas?
## APPENDIX 6 - Example of life-grid

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<th>Periodo Edad</th>
<th>Educación</th>
<th>Familia</th>
<th>Vivienda/Hogar</th>
<th>Amigos y otras relaciones significativas</th>
<th>Vida laboral</th>
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APPENDIX 7 - Theme categorization after the first round of interviews

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<th>Relaciones</th>
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<th>Autonomía</th>
<th>Externo</th>
<th>PREGUNTAR</th>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Se matricula en Ciclos siguiendo el ejemplo de su hermano, por saber que no iba a fracasar.</td>
<td>- Hermana suele trabajar, hermano estudia en la UNI. Padre estudios</td>
<td>- Importancia de saber convivir con la gente, eso lo tiene en la clase que “no hay problemas de raza”.</td>
<td>- Futuro: con el superior y ay decidir si la Universidad o trabajo. Depende de “no quiere pensar en eso, solo seguir luchando”</td>
<td>- “me ven como un niño pero no lo soy”. Claro que quiere ciclos por tener algo.</td>
<td>- Enfermedad “evacuación”. Se queda en España por miedo a volver y estar enfermo. Se define como pobre</td>
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<td>Buena porque asegura jubilación retribuida no como si eres autónomo.</td>
<td>- Apoyo para rescatarle de materias es un amigo guineano del aula.</td>
<td>- Un fracasado “es una persona que no sabe qué puesto ocupa en la vida”</td>
<td>- Cierto en España por miedo a volver y estar enfermo. Se define como pobre</td>
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<td>No puede nombrar un solo profesor como bueno.</td>
<td>- Libre” nadie es libre solo cuando descansa en paz”</td>
<td>- Sociedad “una sociedad con respeto. Son respeto no hay felicidad y sin felicidad no hay respeto”</td>
<td>- Ciclo es una meta, él no se rinde, nunca y quiere conseguirlo. “Conseguir lo que es bueno para él y para otros. No es bueno pensar en uno mismo solo”</td>
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<td>Si suspende es porque no estudia suficiente o aunque estudie porque tiene “muchas cosas en la cabeza”.</td>
<td>- Sociedad “una sociedad con respeto. Son respeto no hay felicidad y sin felicidad no hay respeto”</td>
<td>- El tutor es como un padre de familia, enseña y pregunta.</td>
<td>- Futuro: con el superior y ay decidir si la Universidad o trabajo. Depende de “no quiere pensar en eso, solo seguir luchando”</td>
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<td>Educado “es una persona con cualidades que sabe convivir en la sociedad.</td>
<td>- Educación Relaciones Valores Trabajo Autonomía Externo</td>
<td>- No entiende estándar de vida.</td>
<td>- “me ven como un niño pero no lo soy”. Claro que quiere ciclos por tener algo.</td>
<td>- Enfermedad “evacuación”. Se queda en España por miedo a volver y estar enfermo. Se define como pobre</td>
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<td>Ciclos un regalo porque no todos pueden pagar la Universidad. Es una oportunidad para tener algo en menos tiempo y con menos recursos (YO -NO lo liga a tema intelectual!)</td>
<td>- “me ven como un niño pero no lo soy”. Claro que quiere ciclos por tener algo.</td>
<td>- Ciclo es una meta, él no se rinde, nunca y quiere conseguirlo. “Conseguir lo que es bueno para él y para otros. No es bueno pensar en uno mismo solo”</td>
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**Hablabas de tener metas claras y luchar por conseguirlas, que factores determinan esas metas? Por ejemplo ahora trabajar o estudiar.**

**También de problemas de salud como razón que dificulta que te incorporases a los estudios, en que otras áreas crees que te (ha) limitado/condicionado**

**Cómo te sientes en España? A nivel social (participación en lo que pasa en tu barrio, tu ciudad, elecciones) y laboral (oportunidades)? Algo que cambiar? Nivel de bienestar? ¿Qué tienes en cuenta?**

**¿Cómo de libre crees que eres o como de posible crees que es que alcances tus objetivos?**

**Bienestar, que es para ti y que cuanto crees que está en tu mano para conseguirlo.**