

Exploring the professionals' perceptions on dual vocational education and training (dual VET) process of implementation in Spain

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the perceptions of professionals on the implementation and impact of Dual Vocational Training (Dual VET) in the Spanish education system.

Design/methodology/approach – The study involves interviews with various professionals in the education and employment sectors and two discussion groups.

Findings – Results reveal positive views on Dual VET's ability to enhance employability and reduce the education-to-employment gap. However, challenges like the involvement of small and medium enterprises and the need for continuous curriculum evaluation and adaptation are recognized. Additionally, the study highlights a lack of acknowledgment of antecedent programs to Dual VET, despite their recognition by experts as highly influential in facilitating the school-to-work transition for young individuals.

Originality/value – The study emphasizes the importance of promoting awareness among stakeholders and emphasizes the role of collaboration between educational institutions and the business sector to ensure Dual VET's success in Spain.

Keywords Dual Vocational education and training, Workshop schools, Policy analysis and evaluation, Education policy, Policy development, Competence and skills, Knowledge transfer, Employability, Youth transitions, Youth unemployment

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Dual Vocational Education and Training (VET) has emerged as an innovative alternative in the Spanish educational system, inspired by successful models in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Dual VET combines theoretical education in educational institutions with practical training in companies, allowing students to acquire relevant skills and competencies for the job market while preparing for their future careers (Comisión Europea (hereafter CE), 2012; Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010). In recent years, Dual VET has gained prominence in Spain, particularly during economic crisis, where it has been recognized as an effective



strategy to address youth unemployment and enhance the employability of young individuals (Echeverría, 2013, 2016).

A particular situation of Spanish Dual Vet is that Employers, unions, teachers, and young people did not actively advocate for Dual VET, nor did they participate in its initial development. Instead, it was primarily driven by the conservative party's agenda, influenced by a combination of neoconservative principles (introducing a separate educational pathway) and neoliberal policies (viewing the German VET system as a quick fix, despite the significant differences in historical roots and industrial structures between the two countries). This led to a hasty government response to the economic crisis, where apprenticeships were embraced as a *nouvelle viable* solution, even though they had already been part of the Spanish labor market for the past thirty years (Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2019).

The evolution and implementation of Dual VET in Spain, primarily driven by political agendas and economic imperatives, set the stage for a critical exploration of professionals' perceptions within this educational landscape. Understanding the origins and policy dynamics of Dual VET in Spain is essential for contextualizing the perspectives of professionals involved in this field (Pozo-Lorente and Poza Vilches, 2020). As we delve into the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of key stakeholders, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the complexities and challenges surrounding the adoption and development of this innovative approach to vocational education and training in the Spanish context.

Having that into account, this article addresses the knowledge gap pertaining to professionals' perceptions about the implementation of Dual VET in Spain. The objective aims to provide insights into how professionals view the early implementation of Dual VET, its impact on employability and the labor market, challenges in its implementation, and its potential to reduce the education-employment gap. The central aim is to gain insight into the perceptions, opinions, and experiences of professionals engaged in Dual VET, including union representatives, educators, educational institution directors, experts in employment and training policies, and others.

Based on this, the following research questions are posed for the design of this investigation:

- RQ1. How do professionals perceive the process of implementation of Dual VET in Spain?
- RQ2. According to professionals' perception, what are the challenges associated with the implementation of Dual VET in Spain, especially concerning the involvement of "Small and Medium-sized Enterprises" (SMEs) and the adaptability of the model to the Spanish reality?
- RQ3. What can be learned from Spanish Antecedents programs of Dual Vet?

2. Theoretical framework

To achieve a better understanding of the study, a theoretical framework is presented, aiming to provide a comprehensive view of Dual VET in Spain, highlighting its significance in the educational system and its endorsement by the European Commission and other international stakeholders.

2.1 The prominence of the German Dual VET model in global policy discussions

When discussing the Dual VET System implementation, the German model of dual vocational training stands out as the most internationally acclaimed. It is distinguished by its approach of combining apprenticeship training between part-time vocational schools

(*Berufsschule*) and companies (Alemán-Falcón, 2015), with a coordinated rotation between the two. This organizational and training framework yields both social and economic benefits, as it furnishes the business sector with a skilled workforce (Alemán-Falcón and Calcines-Piñero, 2022) and facilitates the transition from the educational sphere to the realm of employment (Cedefop, 2020). However, it is worth noting that this training operates within a system characterized by a “vertical stratification” of dual vocational training, resulting in disparities in job prospects associated with one’s educational level and social background (Protsch and Solga, 2016; Jiménez Ramírez *et al.*, 2023).

A global demand for vocational education has led to international cooperation, with various countries adopting elements of the dual vocational training system, often with the support of German companies and expertise (Pilz and Wiemann, 2021). German companies operating abroad often serve as driving forces behind this development, relying on the competency of well-trained skilled workers cultivated within the dual system. Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that hands-on learning represents just one facet of this multifaceted approach. In addition, the process entails close collaboration between social partners, business organizations, and the state, alongside the establishment of national quality standards pertaining to training content and teaching staff (Lübber, 2022; Pilz and Wiemann, 2021).

Remarkably, the services of the German Chambers of Commerce Abroad (hereafter AHK) on dual vocational education and training has deep roots, particularly in Latin America and Europe. Presently, AHKs’ services has been expanded (as seen in Figure 1) to Asia, North America, and Africa to implement Dual VET services. Remarkably, over 2,000 companies worldwide have entered into partnerships with AHKs, and this trend is on the ascent. However, it is worth noting that the scope and nature of AHK services may differ from one country to another, reflecting the varying demand and requirements of specific regions (DIHK, 2019).

Literature confirms that full transfer of an entire training system, such as the German dual model, is challenging (almost impossible) and that adaptation to local circumstances is necessary. For this to be possible, training must be cost-effective for companies, particularly in countries with flexible labor markets, where high turnover is a concern. Also, good post-apprenticeship development opportunities seem to be crucial for retaining young trainees. And, finally, regional characteristics and specific production needs also influence training approaches (Pilz and Wiemann, 2021).



Figure 1.
Countries where German chambers of commerce offer training services to improve VTE

Source(s): Extracted from DIHK (2019)

2.2 Promotion of dual VET by the European commission

The European Commission's promotion of Dual VET has been supported by various reports and recommendations that emphasize the benefits of this educational model. For instance, the OECD report in 2010 globally recognized the effectiveness of the dual system in Germany (Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010) highlighting it again in multiple reports (See OECD, 2020). Additionally, BUSINESSEUROPE advised in 2012 to implement dual VET systems in all EU countries as part of a set of measures to enhance vocational learning and professional internships (BUSINESSEUROPE, 2012).

The European Commission has consistently urged member states to adopt Dual VET as a strategy to address youth unemployment and improve the employability of young individuals. The CE's Bruges Communiqué in 2010 emphasized the importance of expanding work-based training to the maximum extent, including workplace learning (CE, 2010). This recommendation was reaffirmed in the strategic communication "A New Skills Agenda for Europe" in 2012, where the European Commission advocated that workplace learning, such as that provided through dual models, should be a central pillar of vocational education and training systems throughout Europe (CE, 2012).

To support this vision, the European Commission established the European Alliance for Apprenticeships in 2013, in collaboration with various business and trade union organizations. Through this Alliance, the aim was to promote collaboration between different key actors in the implementation of Dual VET, including public authorities, companies, trade unions, chambers of commerce, and youth representatives (EC, 2013). This initiative aimed to support educational systems intending to introduce or reform essential aspects of work-based learning, foster studies on this learning model, and stimulate measures promoted by the Alliance with resources from the European Social Fund, Youth Guarantee, and Erasmus+ (Echeverría, 2013).

The collaboration between the European Commission, EU member governments, and other key stakeholders has been fundamental in the promotion of Dual VET in the European context. The European Commission has provided guidance and technical support to countries interested in implementing Dual VET, encouraging collaboration across different sectors and facilitating the exchange of best practices between countries (Hippach-Schneider and Huismann, 2016). The transfer of knowledge and experiences among EU countries has been a key element in the promotion process of Dual VET, enabling recipient countries to learn from best practices and adapt them to their own realities (Novoa, 2002).

In this way, the European Commission's promotion of Dual VET has been a determining factor in the diffusion and development of this educational model in Spain and other EU countries. The European Commission has emphasized the benefits of Dual VET in terms of enhancing young individuals' employability and encouraged member states to adopt this approach as a strategy to address youth unemployment and labor market needs. The creation of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships has been a clear example of collaboration between different actors to promote Dual VET and support its implementation in EU countries' educational systems. However, it is essential to recognize that the transfer of the German Dual VET to Spain and other countries requires adaptations and adjustments to ensure its effectiveness and success in different educational and labor contexts (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Hereafter BMBF), 2012; CE, 2012; Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010; BUSINESSEUROPE, 2012; Echeverría, 2013).

2.3 Transfer of dual VET to Spain: implications and stakeholders

Dual VET in Spain represents a relatively recent policy initiative established through Royal Decree 1529/2012, dated 8 November 2012. This decree set the groundwork for the gradual introduction of dual vocational training within the country. Notably, this regulation

introduced an “nouvelle” training system, drawing inspiration from other educational frameworks, Germany among others, but lacking a real comprehensive study of the Germanic model of dual vocational training (Echeverría, 2016), and neither exploring the Formation in Alternance Programs already existing in the Spanish context (Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2019).

The transfer of Dual VET to Spain has been driven by various national and international actors. As we have previously noted, the European Union has enabled the implementation of dual vocational training policy in all its member countries by providing financial and organizational support for its development. However, this implementation varies depending on the organizational structures of each country, which do not always provide incentives for companies to participate in training (Šćepanović and Martín Artiles, 2020).

In addition, the German government and German Chambers of Commerce and industries have shown keen interest in spreading the dual model to southern EU countries, such as Spain, as a strategy to export training and professionalization services (BMBF, 2012). In this context, numerous German-Spanish cooperation projects have been established, supported by organizations like the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) and the German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ) (Bankia, 2015).

Furthermore, the Bertelsmann Foundation, in collaboration with the Princess of Girona Foundation, the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations (CEOE), and Chambers of Commerce, has led the Alliance for Dual VET in Spain, aiming to improve young individuals' employability and meet the needs of companies (AFPD, 2015). This initiative seeks to extend the Dual VET model, ensuring the quality of learning in companies, promoting collaboration between companies and SMEs, and enhancing the social prestige of VET in general (AFPD, 2015).

The transfer of the German Dual VET to Spain has not been without challenges and criticisms. One of the main challenges has been the lack of adequate diagnosis of the system's needs and possibilities in the Spanish context (Echeverría, 2013). Additionally, implementing Dual VET in Spain has required shared efforts from various stakeholders, including students, educators, companies, and educational institutions, necessitating the flexibility in curriculum development and providing learning opportunities in companies (Bankia, 2015).

The transfer of Dual VET has also raised questions about the adaptability of the model to the Spanish reality, considering cultural, structural, and organizational factors. It is crucial to recognize that the German Dual VET is rooted in a business culture and an educational system with specific traditions and practices, and its transplantation to Spain will require adjustments and adaptations to ensure its efficacy and success (Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010).

In fact, Spain faces a significant limitation in implementing this training model, as there is a lack of connection between education and the workplace. This deficiency creates challenges in adapting to changes and labor requirements, resulting in mismatches between supply and demand in the job market. Additionally, it restricts the ability to train qualified individuals through professional practice to meet the changing needs of the work environment (Martínez García, 2015). All of this unfolds in a context characterized by a high youth unemployment rate and incongruence between the educational system's training specialties and the characteristics of the productive system (Zúñiga and Sorinano, 2019).

Despite these challenges, Dual VET has emerged as a promising option to enhance the training and employability of young individuals in Spain. Collaboration between the government, companies, and educational institutions has been critical in driving the implementation and development of Dual VET in the country. However, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of understanding the essence and appropriate practices of this model, based on the experience of reference countries, to ensure its success in the Spanish context and promote quality training tailored to the labor market's needs. Dual VET provides

a unique opportunity to address the challenges of youth unemployment and the lack of relevant competencies in the labor market, and its success will heavily depend on the collaboration and commitment of all stakeholders involved in its implementation and development in Spain (Echevarría, 2016; Hippach-Schneider and Rieder, 2021; Izquierdo and Torres, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

In the data collection process, individual interviews were conducted with various professionals in the field of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and employment in Spain, between 2018 and 2021. These professionals included union representatives, educators, educational institution directors, experts in employment and training policies, among others (see Table 1). Through these interviews, the aim was to gain a deep understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding Dual VET during the first phase of implementation.

The participants were selected using the snowball sampling method (Noy, 2008), ensuring that they met specific criteria of belonging to the educational or training field and having expertise in the Dual VET topic. This approach allowed for the identification of relevant and well-informed professionals in the field, enriching the quality and diversity of the collected perspectives. To conduct this process ethical code of both REDEFORD's project and University of Granada where strictly followed.

In addition to individual interviews, two focus groups were conducted with professionals from different sectors. Focus groups, as a research method, are based on social constructionism and allow for the grouping of individuals to explore and share their

Profile	Relevant information	Recording allowed?
Labor Guidance Counselor	Labor Guidance Counselor at SAE	Yes
Labor Guidance Counselor	Labor Guidance Counselor at a different IES (not selected)	No
Union Representative	CCOO Union Representative, involved in FOREM training area	Yes
Adult Education Teacher	Teacher at an Adult Education school, previously Primary	Yes
Professional Certificate Teacher	Teacher at a private Academy, delivers Professional Certificates	Yes
Professional Certificate Teacher	Teacher at a private Academy, delivers Professional Certificates	Yes
VET Expert (Estepona)	Teacher at a private Academy, delivers Professional Certificates. Part of local council against early school leaving	Yes
Workshop School Director (Alhaurín)	Workshop School Director, also has experience as a teacher	Yes
Head of Studies at ET	Head of Studies at a Workshop School, also has experience as a teacher	Yes
VET Institute Director (Málaga)	VET Institute Director, also teaches classes	Yes
Expert. Andalusian Employment and Training Service	Professionals from the Andalusian Employment and Training Service	Yes

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 1. Sample interviews with professionals

experiences, perceptions, and interpretations on a specific topic. According to [Arboleda \(2008\)](#), focus groups go beyond mere discourse analysis and become a situation of interaction where symbolic and mythical systems, values, attitudes, and opinions are linked, allowing for an understanding of the relationship of the topic being discussed with the daily life of the actors involved.

In this case, two focus groups were held with professionals from the employment and education fields, providing a space for interaction where practices and experiences related to Dual VET and the transition of young individuals to employment could be shared. This exchange of ideas and experiences provides a context in which meanings and senses associated with Dual VET emerge, which may be key to understanding the training and labor transition process of these young individuals.

Specifically, the employment-focused group included professionals from the Andalusian Employment and Training Service, a union representative, Workshop School teachers, and other professionals related to employment and labor mediation. In the education-focused group, educational guidance counselors, Secondary and Baccalaureate teachers, and VET teachers participated.

In the first focus group, topics such as the involvement of companies in student training, perceived benefits, and challenges they face in the process were discussed. In the second group, the most addressed topics were curricular aspects, practical learning evaluation in companies, and pedagogical approaches used in Dual VET.

These data collection approaches allowed for a comprehensive and holistic view of Dual VET in Spain by involving key stakeholders from different sectors. The interaction between professionals with diverse perspectives in the focus groups enriched the collected data and facilitated the identification of common themes and challenges from different angles. The combination of individual interviews and focus groups provided valuable and complementary information that enriched the research and allowed for a deeper understanding of Dual VET in the Spanish context.

3.2 Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews and discussion groups was carried out using a qualitative approach, allowing for a detailed and in-depth exploration of the collected data. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety to ensure accurate capture of verbal content and enable subsequent analysis.

During the analysis process, patterns and emerging themes in the respondents' answers were identified and labeled as "codes." These codes represent meaningful units of information related to the research objectives and were grouped into broader thematic categories for better conceptual organization, the categories and associated codes could be found in [Table 2](#).

To conduct the analysis, a reflexive and iterative approach was used, involving constant review of the data to gain a deep and meaningful understanding of the researched topic. The qualitative analysis process allowed for drawing conclusions and interpreting the results to address the research questions posed and contribute to the knowledge about Dual VET in Spain.

4. Results

This Results section presents the findings from the analysis on the recognition and perception of Dual VET from professionals. The section is structured into several subsections, each focusing on different aspects of the professionals' views on Dual VET resulting from the categories emerged in the analysis of data.

Table 2. Categories of analysis and associated codes

Analysis category	Codes
Perception of dual VET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive appraisal of Dual VET - Connection with the labor market
Employability and adaptation to the labor market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early acquisition of competencies - Positive impact on employability
Challenges in the implementation of dual VET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acquisition of specific skills - Collaboration with the business sector - Participation of SMEs - Job stability in small businesses - Underrepresented sectors
Promotion and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Importance of promotion and awareness - Limited public perception
Evaluation and curricular adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Importance of evaluation and adaptation - Updating of contents
Reducing the education-employment gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connection with the labor market - Problems in education-employment division
Antecedents to dual VET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social mission - Teachers Role - Lack of acknowledgment

Source(s): Author's own work

4.1 Recognition of dual VET as a valuable alternative

The professionals interviewed in the study expressed a positive perception of Dual VET as a valuable alternative within the education and training system in Spain. They considered that this educational modality allows for a stronger connection with the labor market from the early stages of training, thus promoting a smoother transition to employment and early acquisition of practical professional skills.

I am an enthusiast of dual training at its beginning, and it has a lot of work ahead in this country.

Linking with the question of lifelong learning, a bit along the lines of what my colleague Carmen says, I believe that the paradigm is absolutely different and encouraging in relation to the training of young adults.

4.2 Improving employability and adaptation to the labor market

Experts concur that Dual VET can significantly enhance the employability of young individuals while enabling them to adapt effectively to evolving labor market requirements. They emphasize that by amalgamating theoretical instruction with hands-on experience within companies, students acquire specific skills and knowledge vital for proficient performance in their chosen professional domains. This, in turn, heightens their prospects of successfully integrating into the labor market.

A commonly shared perception among professionals is that Dual VET has the potential to foster a close and mutually beneficial collaboration between the education system and the business sector. This collaboration entails increased engagement of companies in the training process, allowing them to contribute to the formulation of curriculum content and ensuring that the training aligns with the actual demands of the labor market. These viewpoints often draw reference to the German model.

In Germany, they are involved and understand that it is important, not only because they are making a precarious contract in alternation to receive a modification in Social Security. There is also . . . I believe that there is . . .

Nonetheless, professionals have pinpointed several challenges linked to the adoption of Dual VET in Spain. A prominent hurdle revolves around the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the dual training initiative. In contrast to larger corporations with the capacity to allocate resources and personnel to mentor students, SMEs might encounter difficulties in taking on this responsibility.

And I was saying that not only do we not think about Volkswagen, Mercedes, Miele, the one with the appliances, but that there should also be coverage from small and medium-sized enterprises. But of course, here, I think that the small and medium-sized . . .

In Spain, this is more complicated because it is very difficult to carry out training in a small company. If you have two workers, how can you dedicate one of them to mentoring? They say no, it is not possible.

Furthermore, the business culture and labor market conditions in Spain may hinder the job stability of students participating in dual training in these types of companies. Additionally, it was highlighted that some sectors may not be adequately represented in the offer of Dual VET, limiting opportunities for certain professional profiles.

I acknowledge that dual training . . . I agree with what Cristina proposes, but the alternating training contracts, which are aimed at young people, often mean rotation of personnel because companies have social security bonuses, and what they do is . . . They spend three years training the person, and after three years, they change the worker. So, I believe that this should be made a little more stable, so that the person eventually integrates with the company's policy. One way this happens is that alternating training often involves rotation. So, in the end, it turns out that (someone says it does not exist here). Exactly. So, I think we have all looked at dual training in Germany, but the thing is that Germany is not us.

It is interesting to highlight that in this mention of Germany as a model, occurs even when discussing concrete examples about the implementation of Dual VET at the company level, where prominent examples such as Miele, Mercedes, and Volkswagen, all German companies, are mentioned. These examples contrast with the Spanish landscape, which is identified as less mature. This observation, as seen in the previous excerpt, reinforces the idea already introduced in the theoretical framework that these companies that have internalized this approach serve as a benchmark and even active agents in the international implementation of the dual model. At least, this is what the interviewees reflect. Additionally, the crucial role played by Chambers of Commerce in coordinating and developing dual training in Germany was highlighted, facilitating collaboration between the education system and the labor market, and questions about the role that Spanish Chambers of commerce could play in the implementation process were raised.

4.3 The need for continuous evaluation and curricular adaptation

The interviewees emphasized the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation of Dual VET curricula to maintain their relevance and quality. Changes in labor market demands and emerging technologies require constant updating of content and educational approaches to ensure the training of highly competent and up-to-date professionals.

We must take into account the panorama of entrepreneurs, ensuring that they are constantly renewing and being out in the field to see what happens (referring to education professionals). If you stay in your seat here . . .

4.4 Potential to reduce the education-employment gap

Professionals believe that Dual VET has the potential to reduce the gap between education and employment, better aligning students' skills with real business needs. This direct link to the labor market can contribute to greater employment integration and a reduction in the

youth unemployment rate. Although they acknowledge that the education system is very slow to adapt to change, which they see as a problem for implementation.

Education is very slow to change. I see that the education system, by definition, is very slow to adapt to the changes taking place. The employment part already has . . . One of the most important difficulties, at least in Spain, which is not known in any other European context, is the strong division between education and employment. They are training actions, but they are somehow . . . divided . . .

4.5 *The need for promotion and awareness*

The importance of promoting and raising awareness about the benefits of Dual VET among young people, families, and companies is emphasized. The public perception of Dual VET may still be limited due to lack of information, which requires greater awareness of the advantages of Dual VET to address the challenges of youth unemployment and the lack of relevant skills in the labor market.

Yes, there are many projects. It seems to me . . . that there is a lack of information because . . . I have also seen the insertion company, and they came from Italy . . . they were asked to train through pilot programs on alternation that had been carried out there and that had worked. However, I have not seen that here . . .

4.6 *School Workshops and Employment Workshops ¿historical antecedent of dual VET?*

As we discussed in the theoretical framework, despite the introduction of Dual VET in Spain since 2012 as a means to integrate a new form of vocational training into the country, many authors criticize that this model, which combines alternating periods of formation in school and training, has existed for decades. Specifically, it has been implemented through programs known as School Workshops and Employment Workshops. To better understand the implementation process and development of this model in Spain, we asked professionals about these programs, their evolution, and successful practices.

First and foremost, one of the main points of agreement among the interviewees was that these projects, belonging to the employment training subsystem (which was not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training until recent modifications), were relatively unknown and often overlooked by the administration. However, these programs played a significant social role, particularly in assisting disadvantaged groups.

I firmly believe that there exists a concerning level of ignorance within the administration, particularly at the political level, regarding the Workshop-schools and the significant results they generate. These projects hold the potential to fulfill a vital social mission. However, they remain largely unrecognized and unacknowledged, leading to a lack of advocacy and support. We have made efforts to raise awareness by inviting politicians to visit Workshop-schools, but it appears that their primary focus lies in formal education, modifying vocational education regulations, and allocating their resources elsewhere. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of genuine interest, as if it doesn't matter much. In essence, there is a notable absence of a vision for individuals who do not fit into the formal education system. This absence of attention is particularly disheartening, even within the city council, where Workshop-schools seem to be a mere afterthought. While they may acknowledge the existence of Workshop-schools, they fail to recognize their true importance. This situation underscores the lack of interest in this particular segment of society.

According to experts, this social role was particularly noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, during their inception, these programs included practical activities such as the improvement of public spaces and community service. This meant that the hands-on training component directly benefited the communities where these programs were implemented. Consequently, apprentices developed a strong sense of belonging and gained highly meaningful learning experiences.

Furthermore, the experts emphasize that a significant proportion of the students who enrolled in these programs had previously dropped out of the official educational system. This characteristic became an integral part of the identity of these programs. The professionals responsible for their training aimed to create a friendly and supportive environment, almost a familial or redemptive atmosphere, which starkly contrasted with the atmosphere in official schools.

It's just that . . . Workshop Schools played a pivotal role, and a substantial number of individuals experienced remarkable transformations. Of course, there were those who didn't quite find their way ("laughs"), but they were in the minority. For the majority . . . Well, to remove a student from a Workshop-school, we would exhaust every avenue, while in the formal school system, the process was considerably swifter. At the first sign of trouble, a student could be expelled and sent onto the streets within 15 days, as explained by school staff. In a Workshop-school, we provided numerous opportunities, and every decision was carefully considered.

In general, experts emphasize that these policies serve as a form of "social and educational compensation." They provide a safe haven and offer training and guidance to young individuals who have faced exclusion within the system. In this regard, the majority of experts underscore that the implementation of these policies enhances the self-reliance of these individuals. This is achieved through the development of not only professional skills but also the cultivation of social, attitudinal, and motivational abilities. These factors, in turn, contribute to bolstering their self-esteem and, consequently, reducing their uncertainty regarding their future prospects. Ultimately, this increased self-assuredness enhances their chances of entering the workforce successfully.

Indeed, gaining admission to Workshop Schools is seen as a favorable opportunity for students who lack a formal secondary education (ESO), are unemployed, or find themselves in socially disadvantaged situations. The program prioritizes individuals facing various challenges, including those who have experienced mistreatment, and even those with disabilities. This approach is geared towards creating a sense of social justice and equity, as the program is intentionally designed to cater to those with greater social difficulties.

One of the notable strengths of these policies, as highlighted by experts, is their emphasis on practical training. This approach not only stimulates students' interest and active engagement but also facilitates their reintegration into the educational system, bringing about a profound transformation in their lives.

This is precisely why, from the vocational training (VT) perspective, we believe in offering both employment and training opportunities. Often, in traditional schools (formal education), students can become disengaged or bored. In contrast, in VT programs like this one, the focus is on practical, real-world applications, which keeps students motivated. We are constantly providing them with reasons to stay engaged and enthusiastic about their learning journey. Personally, I share the sentiment that this approach benefits not only the students but also the educators involved.

Experts emphasize that a crucial element in transforming these young individuals lies not only in theoretical knowledge but also in the concerted effort to enhance their soft skills. Through their professional experiences and interactions with employers, they have learned that possessing these soft skills is fundamental for successful labor market integration.

it is a message that we consistently hear from employers, and it aligns with what they convey to us: they prioritize attitude and aptitude over sheer knowledge. Whenever I attend meetings or discussions on this topic, the sentiment from those involved typically echoes the same idea—it's all about aptitude and the desire to work. Employers place significant importance on these qualities. I genuinely believe that this is what companies require from individuals: a genuine interest in the work and a strong aptitude for it.

Another aspect highlighted by the experts as a key success factor is the provision of more personalized attention. This personalization extends not only to the practical aspects of the training but also to the theoretical components. Notably, the class sizes in these programs are considerably smaller than those found in formal education, typically consisting of 15–25 students per group.

In a typical high school classroom with 25 or 30 students, providing such personalized attention becomes a formidable challenge. A teacher often lacks the opportunity to inquire into why a student might be disruptive, as it may stem from a need for attention or affection. However, in the context of smaller class sizes, like the ones with 15 students, it becomes feasible to understand each student's unique needs and offer support. In these settings, it's possible to ask questions like, "What do you need? A bit of care and attention? Are you seeking recognition? Do you want a little encouragement?" (laughs) The atmosphere is notably distinct. In a conventional high school, such individualized attention may not be feasible due to constraints in time and resources. Perhaps, if there were additional support personnel available, they could address disruptive behavior more effectively. Unfortunately, this resource is often lacking.

Lastly, one of the highly esteemed elements, as highlighted by experts, is the profile of the teachers engaged in these programs and their ability to establish connections within the local community. According to experts, their active involvement and the informal communication channels they cultivate with local stakeholders significantly influence the progress and outcomes of these policies.

The achievement of these programs depends significantly on the professionals involved. However, I must clarify that it's not solely about the professionals themselves. Speaking from my position as a principal, I don't attribute the success solely to the school's leadership; I attribute it to the instructors. I consistently emphasize that if an instructor is highly skilled and committed to the success of the module, the students benefit immensely. They are the ones who drive effective implementation within the Workshop-school. Even in cases where a principal might not excel, but the instructor is exceptional, students connect with that instructor, and learning thrives. Conversely, if an instructor falls short or lacks commitment, the students suffer. It's crucial to remember this point; the instructors play a pivotal role. Much of the success of these programs is owed to the instructors—the dedicated professionals who motivate and educate students day in and day out.

Nevertheless, various interviewees have raised an important concern regarding the teaching staff's precarious situation, despite their significance and dedication to their roles. This precariousness stems from various factors, including subcontracting arrangements, reliance on temporary contracts, and questionable recruitment criteria. Additionally, changes in vocational training (VT) policies have further compounded this issue.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present study of interviews reveals a highly positive perception towards Dual VET as a valuable alternative within the Spanish education and training system. The interviewed professionals emphasize its ability to closely link students with the labor market from early stages of education, facilitating a smoother transition to employment and the early acquisition of practical skills (CE, 2010). This favorable perception of Dual VET aligns with the recommendations of the European Commission in its Bruges Communication of 2010, which emphasizes the importance of expanding work-based training, including workplace learning, as a measure to improve the employability of young people (CE, 2010).

Furthermore, the study results reflect that Dual VET can significantly enhance the employability of young individuals by combining theoretical education with practical experience in companies, providing them with specific skills and knowledge to excel in their professional fields and increase their chances of successful labor market integration.

This conclusion is in line with the recommendations of the European Commission and other international organizations, which have recognized the effectiveness of Dual VET in preparing young people for employment (Hoeckel and Schwartz, 2010; BUSINESSEUROPE, 2012).

Likewise, the study results highlight the close collaboration between the educational system and the business sector in Dual VET, allowing companies to contribute to the definition of curricular content and adapt education to the real demands of the labor market. This collaboration is a central pillar of the European Commission's strategy to promote Dual VET in Europe, as emphasized in its strategic communication on "A New Concept of Education" in 2012 (CE, 2012).

However, challenges in the implementation of Dual VET in Spain are identified, particularly concerning the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises (hereafter SMEs) in the training process. The lack of resources and capacity for SMEs to assume the mentorship of students has hindered the effective implementation of Dual VET in the country. This concern aligns with the recommendations of the European Commission and other international organizations, stressing the need to encourage collaboration between companies, including SMEs, to ensure the effectiveness of Dual VET (CE, 2012).

Moreover, the study results emphasize the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of Dual VET curricula to maintain their relevance and quality. This adaptability is essential to ensure that Dual VET remains an effective tool in enhancing the employability of young people in a labor market constantly undergoing change, as highlighted in the European Commission's recommendations on knowledge and experience transfer between EU countries to improve Dual VET systems (CE, 2012).

Furthermore, the study results underscore the importance of promoting and raising awareness about the benefits of Dual VET among young individuals, families, and companies. The public perception of this educational model may be limited due to a lack of information, necessitating increased awareness about the advantages of Dual VET to address the challenges of youth unemployment and the lack of relevant skills in the labor market (CE, 2010).

In summary, this study of interviews enriches existing theory on Dual VET in Spain by providing a specific perspective on the perception and experience of professionals in the country towards this educational model. The study results confirm the importance and effectiveness of Dual VET in enhancing the employability of young people, enabling them to acquire higher qualifications and specialization, which could result in improved job opportunities and an increase in employability (Rodríguez and Ramos, 2016; Consejo Económico y Social de España, 2023), aligning with the recommendations and promotion of this model by the CE and other international organizations. Furthermore, the study identifies specific challenges in the implementation of Dual VET in Spain, contributing new insights into the factors that may impact its effectiveness in the Spanish context. In this regard, the study emphasizes the need for close collaboration between the educational and business sectors to achieve an effective system adapted to the changing needs of the labor market in the country.

6. Policy implications and recommendations

In light of the research findings, a series of critical policy implications and recommendations emerge, with the overarching goal of reshaping the perception and status of vocational training, particularly dual vocational training.

To begin with, it is imperative to embark on a journey of enlightenment through comprehensive promotion and awareness campaigns. These campaigns should be meticulously crafted to reach young individuals, families, and businesses, and to illuminate the manifold advantages of Dual VET. It must be spotlighted the transformative power of Dual VET in terms of enhancing employability, nurturing valuable skill sets, and addressing the pressing issue of youth unemployment.

Furthermore, the hurdles that Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) encounter in their participation in Dual VET programs must be addressed. There's a need to construct a scaffolding of support mechanisms, which could include financial incentives or mentorship networks, to beckon SMEs into active involvement in the education and training of students. Collaboration with industry associations should be fostered, serving as a bridge to facilitate SME engagement in this vital endeavor.

In tandem with this effort, a structured framework for the systematic evaluation and evolution of Dual VET curricula should be established. This framework should be distinguished by a profound synergy between educational institutions and industry stakeholders. Such synergy ensures that the training programs remain in lockstep with the ever-evolving demands of the labor market.

Additionally, inclusive policies must be carefully crafted to welcome marginalized and disadvantaged groups, particularly those individuals who have prematurely abandoned formal education and were previously taken by antecessors programs. These policies should furnish targeted support, counseling, and resources, serving as a guiding hand to assist these individuals in successfully navigating their educational journey.

Simultaneously, a concerted effort should be made to enhance the working conditions and professional standing of Dual VET teachers and instructors. Previous pressing issues, such as subcontracting, precarious temporary employment contracts, and the recruitment criteria, need to be rectified. This rectification aims to attract and retain highly qualified professionals within the Dual VET sector on both education and employment part.

To fortify the educational structure, robust partnerships between educational institutions and the business sector should be facilitated. Such partnerships should actively involve industry stakeholders in the development of curricula and the provision of apprenticeships, internships, and mentoring opportunities for Dual VET students.

Lastly, an overarching, comprehensive, and long-term vision and strategic plan should be meticulously crafted. This vision charts the course for the seamless integration of Dual VET into the Spanish existent education and training system.

Through these policy recommendations, Spain has the potential to reshape the perception of Dual VET, positioning it as a highly valuable alternative within its educational and training landscape. This transformation, in turn, holds the promise of heightened employability, a reduction in youth unemployment, and a more profound alignment between education and the pressing demands of the labor market.

7. Limitations and further lines of research

The study on Dual VET in Spain, based on qualitative interviews with professionals, provides valuable insights into their positive perceptions and experiences with Dual VET. However, some limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Including a more diverse and larger sample of professionals from various backgrounds and industries would enhance the study's robustness.

Secondly, the study's temporal scope only captures a specific moment in time, and the perceptions and challenges related to Dual VET may change over time. Conducting longitudinal research would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the long-term effectiveness and impact of Dual VET initiatives in Spain.

Moreover, the participants in the study were primarily professionals with expertise in the VET system, which may not fully represent the perspectives of all stakeholders, such as students, parents, and policymakers. Engaging a broader range of participants in future research would offer a more comprehensive understanding of Dual VET's broader implications.

To address these limitations and advance research on Dual VET, several further lines of inquiry could be pursued. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress from Dual VET programs into the labor market would provide valuable insights into the program's long-term outcomes. Quantitative studies complementing the qualitative findings could offer a more comprehensive assessment of Dual VET's effectiveness. Comparing Dual VET graduates' outcomes with those from traditional educational pathways would help identify the advantages and disadvantages of Dual VET. Investigating the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds would provide insights into the program's inclusivity and accessibility. Expanding the research to include the perspectives of students, parents, and employers would offer a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' perceptions. Understanding the economic impact of Dual VET on businesses, especially SMEs, would provide insights into the cost-benefit analysis of participating in training programs.

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