Palomares Montero, D., Merino Pareja, R. & Alarcón, X. (2026). Perceived impact of work placements on the skills and aspirations of vulnerable young people. *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, *44*. https://doi.org/10.6018/rie.645451

Perceived impact of work placements on the skills and aspirations of vulnerable young people

Impacto percibido de las prácticas laborales en la adquisición de competencias y las expectativas de jóvenes en situación de vulnerabilidad

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Abstract

Internships bridge theoretical knowledge with practical experience. This experiential learning process enhances personal and professional development, improves employability, and fosters critical reflection (Jerez Gómez et al., 2023; Marhuenda and Chisvert-Tarazona, 2022). This study focuses on the importance of internships for vulnerable youth, particularly students from second chance schools, which offer a flexible educational approach (Palomares-Montero and Marhuenda, 2024). A survey was conducted among 1,336 students enrolled in 28 Spanish second chance schools during the 2022-2023 academic year. The questionnaire, distributed in May 2023, collected data on students' profiles, internship experiences, learning outcomes, and future expectations. The study applied both descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analysis to examine the relationship between internships and variables such as skill improvement and job prospects. The results show that 33% of students completed internships, while 54% had not started and 23%

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did not plan to undertake them. Students who completed internships reported more positive perceptions of skill development and a higher expectation of finding a job, particularly within five years. These findings highlight internships' positive impact on skill acquisition and expectations of employability, especially in older youth groups, contrasting with earlier research (Marhuenda et al., 2022) that found internships less valued. The study underscores internships' transformative role in overcoming socio-economic barriers and unlocking vulnerable youth's potential.

Keywords: internship programmes; labour; youth; dropouts.

Resumen

Las prácticas vinculan los conocimientos teóricos y la experiencia práctica, potenciando el desarrollo personal y profesional, mejorando la empleabilidad y fomentando la reflexión crítica (Jerez Gómez et al., 2023; Marhuenda y Chisvert-Tarazona, 2022). Se analiza la importancia de las prácticas para jóvenes vulnerables, en particular estudiantes de escuelas de segunda oportunidad (E2O), que ofrecen un enfoque educativo flexible (Palomares-Montero y Marhuenda, 2024). Se realizó una encuesta entre 1.336 estudiantes de 28 E2O españolas durante el curso 2022-2023. El cuestionario, distribuido en mayo de 2023, recogía datos sobre el perfil del alumnado, sus experiencias en las prácticas, los resultados de aprendizaje y sus expectativas. Se aplicó análisis descriptivos, bivariados y multivariados para examinar la relación entre las prácticas y variables como la mejora de las competencias y las perspectivas laborales. Los resultados muestran que el 33% del alumnado realizó prácticas, mientras que el 54% no las había iniciado y el 23% no tenía previsto realizarlas. La juventud que había realizado prácticas tenía una percepción más positiva del desarrollo de sus capacidades y una mayor expectativa de encontrar trabajo en un plazo de cinco años. Se pone de relieve el impacto positivo de las prácticas en la adquisición de competencias y las expectativas sobre la empleabilidad, sobre todo en grupos de jóvenes de mayor edad, lo que contrasta con investigaciones anteriores (Marhuenda et al., 2022). El estudio subraya el papel transformador de las prácticas para superar las barreras socioeconómicas y liberar el potencial de la juventud vulnerable.

Palabras clave: prácticas en la empresa; trabajo; juventud; abandono de estudios.

Introduction

Contextualisation of the problem: unqualified youth

The Spanish labour market is characterised by its polarisation between high- and low-skilled jobs and a strong segmentation between stable and precarious jobs (Marhuenda et al., 2022). Young people with little training, no work experience and, in many cases, other complex personal, family and/or socio-economic factors, will occupy the most precarious jobs. The education system plays a key role in the professionalisation of citizens. Educational justice is a guarantor of economic justice, and vice versa (Torres, 2005), which is why a lack of educational and personal development is directly associated with exclusion, placing specific sectors of young people at greater risk of marginalisation

(Fagan and Novak, 2018; OECD, 2015); reproducing the spiral of exclusion (Parrilla Fernández, 2016).

In the Spanish context, there is still a long way to go in offering training alternatives to a young population that has obtained low qualifications, or even lacks them, and has not received sufficient training to access employment (Lőrinc et al., 2019). Although the early school leaving rate in Spain, at 13.6% in 2023 (INE, 2024), has improved significantly (falling by 10 points in the last decade), it remains one of the highest in Europe (9.6%) (European Commission, 2023). In addition, the completion rate for ESO, the minimum level of education offered by the formal education system in Spain and a virtually indispensable requirement for accessing employment or higher education, shows variable and non-progressive growth (although a rate of 83% was achieved in the 2019-2020 academic year, it stood at 65% just a decade earlier and again in 2022 after the Covid pandemic) (OECD, 2023). The increase in enrolment in vocational training has been significant in this evolution. Although enrolment has been below that of post-compulsory academic studies for years, this trend has changed since 2019 (Marhuenda, 2021; Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2020).

The risk of joining the ranks of the unemployed or occupying very low-skilled jobs is very high for people who leave education prematurely (Rodríguez Poza et al., 2025). For this reason, programmes must be developed to ensure that they remain in the formal education system or to offer alternatives for continuing/resuming education in other contexts. The importance of vocational education and training is not in doubt, and it is a prerogative to meet the needs of this population. Observing the increase in enrolment in vocational training studies, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of this training offer in order to know how it targets the most vulnerable young people.

Basic vocational training: work experience as a solution

The Spanish education system has strengths and opportunities that are highlighted in national and international reports (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021; OECD, 2023). However, the data also point to challenges that need to be addressed, such as reducing the early school leaving rate, reducing the repetition rate of secondary school students, and increasing the percentage of people with a vocational training qualification. These challenges seem difficult to solve in secondary schools themselves due to a combination of factors ranging from low investment in education and the need to renew the teaching staff (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2021) to the difficulty of the task itself. All of this sometimes leads to the recommendation to leave secondary school and, in the best case scenario, to continue training at other institutions.

Interrupting education at any stage, except when completing vocational training that prepares students to enter the labour market with qualifications, often generates a feeling of failure, as the level of education attained is directly related to the employment situation in the current labour market (OECD, 2022), making it difficult to return to education in

the short term. As this is a widespread phenomenon throughout the Spanish education system, it is important to consider the limited educational opportunities available to guarantee the right to education for those who have not been able to exercise it at the first opportunity. What seems to be accepted is that it is almost impossible to access a job without recognition of professional skills. In this context, advancing the educational inclusion of young people who leave the education system without qualifications is a necessity aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, especially SDG 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable and quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities, including equal access and relevant technical and vocational training (United Nations, 2024).

To this end, much research highlights the predominant role of work placements in increasing the employability of young people. In particular, practical training in work environments serves to empower young people at risk of dropping out of school, as it combines the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom with practical experience in the world of work (Jerez Gómez et al., 2023; Marhuenda and Chisvert-Tarazona, 2022). The experience of working in a real environment also increases students' motivation towards their training and helps to reaffirm, or reconsider, their professional aspirations (Smith et al., 2004), which gives them greater confidence in their job search and increases the likelihood of continuing their studies. Work placements are also associated with the development of professional skills, greater employability and better adaptation to the work environment (Inceoglu et al., 2019). Young people with work placement experience tend to be better prepared for the labour market. However, the effectiveness of work placements depends on a combination of factors related to the work environment, the individual characteristics of the students and institutional support (Narayanan et al., 2010). Jerez Gómez et al. (2023) included duration, level of formalisation and motivational practices used by companies as determining factors.

There are various mechanisms that, based on basic training and close to professional practice, have attempted to recover, qualify, or promote the labour market integration of young people (Casal et al., 1998). The European Commission (1996) developed the concept of a second chance and the need to articulate policies and provide resources for programmes aimed at unqualified young people. Since then, the concept of second chance programmes has spread (Macedo and García-Rubio, 2022; Martins et al., 2020) and, within these programmes, Second Chance Schools (E2O) have been established as a specific and institutionalised network in the Spanish context (Farré et al., 2020; Martínez Morales, 2021).

Work experience in second chance schools

The European Union is working to provide training and professional qualifications to young people outside the formal education system (European Commission, 2001). However, analysing this young population is complex because it covers a wide range of situations. Here we will refer to students enrolled in E2O, which are educational

institutions designed to provide a new learning opportunity for young people who have left the conventional education system without obtaining a basic qualification (Palomares-Montero and Marhuenda, 2024).

In Spain, the Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools was established in 2016, with 47 accredited schools in nine autonomous communities, to serve nearly 8,000 young people. These schools offer flexible programmes tailored to the specific needs of their students, with a practical approach. In addition to academic training, they often include psychological support, vocational guidance and workshops to develop personal and professional skills (Merino et al., 2022; Tárraga et al., 2022). This educational model not only addresses the immediate needs of young people, but also responds to the global commitment to achieve SDG 4, especially for those who have been left out of the formal education system.

Internships are not part of all E2O models in Europe. However, in Spain, following the French E2O model, practical training in the workplace is common with the aim of facilitating educational reintegration and improving the employment and life prospects of participants. Thus, students over the age of 16 undertake work placements, either in training programmes leading to a professional certificate (mainly levels I and II), or through formal education (vocational and educational training) (Macedo and García-Rubio, 2022). The aim of this study is to learn about the experience of young people enrolled in E2O in training internships. We analyse how students value their internships and how this relates to their perception of improvement and learning, their intention to continue training and/or seek work, and their short-term job expectations upon completion of training. The initial hypotheses for understanding the relationship between the training experience in company internships and its impact on the perception of improvement and expectations are:

H1. Internships condition their perception of their results. Students who have completed internships have more positive perceptions of the improvement in their results within the second chance programme.

H2. Internships influence expectations regarding continuing training. Students who have completed internships have higher expectations of finding work (and lower expectations of continuing their training).

H3. Internships influence short-term employment expectations (five years ahead). Students who have completed internships have better employment expectations than those who have not.

Method

Participants

To address the overall objective, we surveyed 1,336 young people enrolled in 28 E2O schools belonging to the Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools in the 2022-2023

academic year. Table 1 shows the descriptive sociodemographic profile of the sample. Thirty-five per cent of the students are under 18 years of age, which represents a rapid transition from secondary education to second chance education; in fact, some E2Os have a shared classroom programme with 14- and 15-year-olds. The majority of students are between 18 and 20 years old (44%), although more than 20% are over 20, which shows the diversity of the sample in terms of needs and interests. In terms of gender, more than 73% are boys, which coincides with the known fact of the masculinisation of early school leaving (Borgna and Struffolino, 2017), although the strong gender bias in the provision of E2Os is being questioned. In terms of country of birth, nearly 40% of the sample was born abroad; this figure differs from that of foreign students enrolled in non-university general education in Spain, which stands at 11% for the 2022-23 academic year.

Table 1

Frequencies and percentages of the sociodemographic profile of students.

Social profile		N	%
Age	14–17 years	473	35.40
	18–20 years	590	44.16
	21–25 years	171	12.80
	26–30 years	102	7.64
	Total	1,336	100
Gender	Male	982	73.50
	Female	354	26.50
	Total	1,336	100
Place of birth	Native	813	60.85
	Migrant	523	39.15
	Total	1,336	100

Note: Prepared by the authors.

When the questionnaire was administered, 23% of the sample had had some contact with internships (16% had already completed them and 7% were doing them), while 54% had not yet started them. A considerable 8% said they did not know (or did not answer) whether they had to do an internship in a company; thus, 15% of young people said they did not plan to do an internship as part of their training (students in training programmes that, due to their type, do not include internships in their curriculum). Therefore, the total sample of participants consists of 313 young people who do have work experience and 916 who do not yet have it but hope to do so (thus omitting those who do not have - or do not know if they will have - work experience during their training at E2O).

Instruments

An ad hoc questionnaire was designed with questions about the social and academic profiles of the students, their perceptions of their experience at E2O, their learning outcomes and achievements, their expectations at the end of their training, and their perceptions of their work experience. Here we focus our attention on the latter. It was administered between March and May 2023[2] .

In order to ensure the content validity and suitability of the instrument for the target population, a two-stage validation process was carried out. First, a review was conducted by a panel of experts composed of four professionals with complementary profiles: specialists with direct experience in educational intervention in E2O and researchers with training in methodology. Each expert was asked to evaluate the items in the questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = quite a lot, 4 = completely), considering the following criteria: clarity (use of understandable and precise language), relevance (representativeness and informative value of the item), feasibility (real possibility of obtaining the information), stability (consistency of the item), and perceived usefulness (potential of the item to generate relevant knowledge). This review allowed us to refine and optimise the structure of the questionnaire, ensuring its internal consistency. Subsequently, a pilot test was carried out with a sample of 25 young people enrolled in an E2O, with the aim of checking the comprehensibility and functionality of the instrument. Based on this preliminary application, items that were ambiguous were identified and adjusted.

Procedure

The study is part of a larger project that began in October 2021 and concluded in December 2023. Authorisation from the university ethics committee supporting the research team ensures that the study complies with ethical standards. This process included a thorough review of the research protocol to ensure the protection of the rights, privacy, and safety of the participants. In addition, procedures were designed to obtain informed consent, clearly explaining the objectives of the study, its voluntary nature and the confidentiality of the data. Contact with the participating schools made it possible to coordinate the method of administering the questionnaire, which could be administered by a member of the research team or by the educational staff of each institution.

Of the total of 43 accredited E2Os at the start of the project (2021), 28 agreed to participate in the study. Due to the absence of disaggregated data on the population, no

[2] The length of the field study may introduce a bias in the responses due to the time gap between young people who respond in March (without having started their work placements) and those who respond in May, which explains the high percentage of young people (54%) who had not yet started their work placements.

sampling process was carried out, and a total of 1,336 responses were collected from an estimated 8,000 young people. The fieldwork was carried out between March and May 2023, using the digital version of the questionnaire via the Typeform platform.

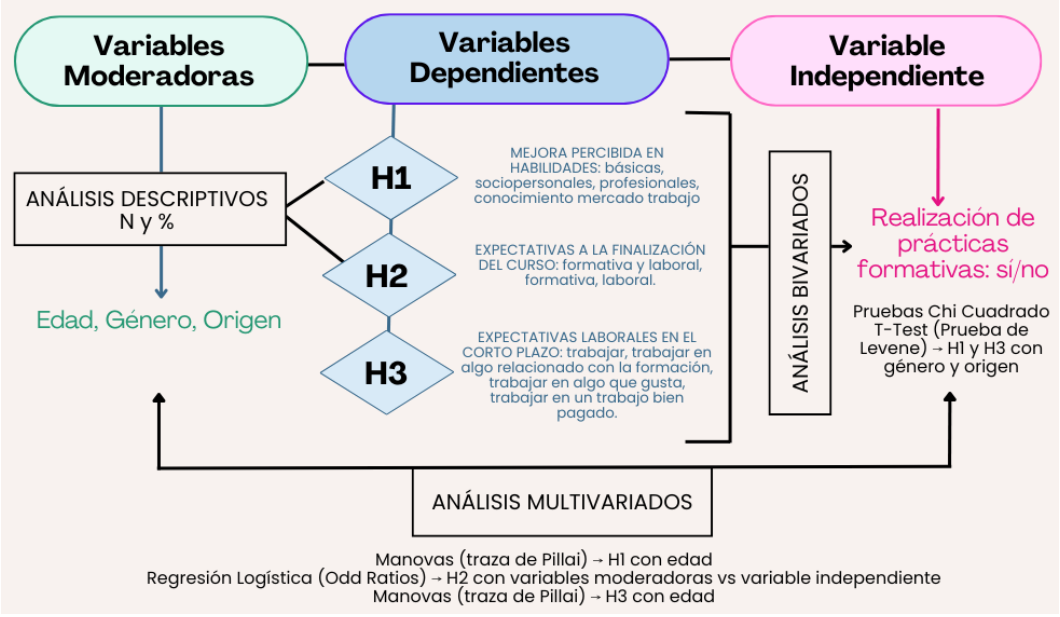
Data analysis

The methodological approach adopted is quantitative. Specifically, the analytical strategy uses descriptive, bivariate and multivariate statistical tests to examine the relationships between work experience and students' perceptions of the improvement of their skills, training and employment expectations. Preliminary descriptive analysis provides an essential overview of the data, highlighting general trends and distributions that set the context for further investigation. Bivariate analysis allows for the examination of specific relationships between variables, such as the correlation between work experience and perceived improvements in skills or expectations at the end of training. Finally, multivariate tests reveal the effect of the students' social profile on the analysis of relationships between variables.

In the bivariate analysis, the Chi-square test was used to explore the association between sociodemographic variables and the completion of training practices, identifying Age as the variable with the highest level of statistically significant association. Student's t-tests were also applied to compare the means of the dependent variables between the groups defined by Origin and Gender, in order to identify possible isolated effects. This approach allows for controlling the effect of sociodemographic variables, reducing the risk of interpreting spurious associations and favouring a more accurate interpretation of the results in relational, though not necessarily causal, terms. In the multivariate analysis phase, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were used for continuous dependent variables, and logistic regression for categorical variables. These techniques were chosen because they are appropriate for the nature of the variables involved and because of the interest in evaluating both main effects and possible interactions. The various analyses ensure a robust and well-founded approach that demonstrates consistency between the methodological proposal and the understanding of the hypotheses (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Flow chart between variables, hypotheses and statistical techniques



Results

Descriptive analyses: characterisation of the sample

The students report having acquired the various skills worked on in the E2O (basic, social/personal and professional skills) (Table 2). Seventy per cent of the students consider that their basic skills have increased considerably or greatly, 68% consider that their social or personal skills have increased considerably or greatly, and 83% consider that their professional skills have increased considerably or greatly. Seventy-nine per cent also report having acquired knowledge of the labour market to begin their job search. These data show the importance of the second chance model, as it appears to achieve improvements across the board. However, we must not overlook the percentages of students who say they have acquired little or no basic skills (17%), social or personal skills (19%), professional skills (13%) or knowledge of the labour market (18%). We must try to understand the reasons for this lack of learning.

Looking at expectations at the end of the training, more than half of the students consider that they will continue training while looking for work (Table 2). Twenty-three per cent and 24% value continuing their training or looking for work exclusively, respectively.

Table 2

Frequencies and percentages of perceived improvement in skills and expectations at the end of the 2022-23 academic year.

Perceived improvement in...		N	%
Basic skills	None or little	225	17.09
	Fairly good or very good	921	69.93
	I already had them	171	12.98
	Total	1,317	100
Social and personal skills	None or little	244	18.54
	Fairly good or very good	901	68.47
	I already had them	171	12.99
	Total	1,316	100
Professional skills	None or Little	168	12.77
	Fairly good or very good	1,098	83.43
	I already had them	50	3.80
	Total	1,316	100
Knowledge of the labour market	None or little	231	17.67
	Quite a lot or a lot	1.033	79.04
	I already had them	43	3.29
	Total	1,307	100
Expectations upon completion of training	Training and employment	659	52.89
	Educational	291	23.35
	Employment	296	23.76
	Total	1,246	100

Note. Own elaboration.

Bivariate analyses: testing initial hypotheses

To test the first hypothesis, a bivariate analysis was performed comparing the acquisition of basic, socio-personal and professional skills by students who have completed (or are currently completing) internships with the skills acquired by students who have not done internships (either because their training does not include them or because they have not yet started them) (Table 3). From a descriptive point of view, there are small differences in favour of students who have completed internships, the largest being in social and

personal skills and also professional skills, as expected (between 6 and 5 points difference in the rating of 'very much', respectively), but also in basic skills (almost 3 points) and knowledge of the labour market (almost 4 points). These small differences can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, practical training can be seen as adding value to the training received at school, but secondly, it is not essential to do an internship in order to have high ratings in the perception of skills acquisition. Another issue to be explored in further analysis is whether the difference in ratings can be attributed to the completion of internships or to other factors not taken into account in the analysis.

Table 3

Frequencies and percentages in the perception of skill improvement based on whether or not an internship was completed.

Variables	Values	N			%		
		No practice	Yes Practical	Total	Non-practical	Yes Practical	Total
Basic skills	None	14	7	21	1.5	2.2%	1.7
	A little	133	40	173	14.5%	12.8	14.1
	Quite a lot	379	118	497	41.4%	37.7%	40.4
	Very	263	98	361	28.7%	31.3%	29.4%
	Already had	115	46	161	12.6%	14.7	13.1
	NS/NC	12	4	16	1.3	1.3	1.3
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%
Social and personal skills	None	29	16	45	3.2	5.1	3.7
	A little	139	27	166	15.2%	8.6	13.5
	Quite a lot	347	104	451	37.9%	33.2%	36.7
	Very	276	115	391	30.1	36.7	31.8
	Already had	117	45	162	12.8%	14.4	13.2%
	NS/NC	8	6	14	0.9%	1.9	1.1
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%
Professional skills	None	24	9	33	2.6%	2.9%	2.7
	A little	85	21	106	9.3	6.7	8.6
	Quite a lot	378	116	494	41.3%	37.1%	40.2
	Very	389	147	536	42.5	47.0	43.6%
	Already	30	16	46	3.3	5.1	3.7

	had						
	NS/NC	10	4	14	1.1	1.3	1.1
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%
Knowledge of the labour market	None	36	11	47	3.9	3.5	3.8
	A little	118	33	151	12.9	10.5	12.3
	Quite a lot	377	118	495	41.2%	37.7%	40.3
	Much	344	129	473	37.6	41.2	38.5
	Already had	23	16	39	2.5%	5.1	3.2
	NS/NC	18	6	24	2.0	1.9	2.0
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%

Note. Own elaboration.

To test the second hypothesis, and with regard to continuing education, doing an internship has a small effect on expectations of leaving school and looking for a job, although most want to continue their education (Table 4).

Table 4

Frequencies and percentages in the perception of expectations at the end of training depending on whether or not an internship was completed.

Expectations at the end of training		**N**			**%**		
		No work experience	**Yes Internship**	**Total**	**Non-practical**	**Yes Practical**	**Total**
Continuing education	Yes	680	211	891	74.2%	67.4%	72.5
	No	89	53	142	9.7%	16.9	11.6
	NS/NC	147	49	196	16.0	15.7	15.9
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%
Job security	Yes	657	229	886	71.7%	73.2	72.1
	No	140	46	186	15.3%	14.7	15.1
	NS/NC	119	38	157	13.0	12.1	12.8
	Total	916	313	1229	100	100	100%
Continuing education and employment	I will look for work	188	79	267	20.5	25.2	21.7
	Neither training nor looking for work	7	6	13	0.8	1.9	1.1
	I will continue my education	211	61	272	23.0	19.5	22.1
	I will continue my	469	150	619	51.2	47.9	50.4

	education and look for work						
	NS/NC	41	17	58	4.5	5.4	4.7
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100%

Note: Prepared by the author.

To test the third hypothesis, related to medium-term expectations, Table 5 has been constructed with data on perceptions of the future depending on whether or not students have done an internship. In the medium term (the question is about 5 years), the possible impact of internships is greater than in the acquisition of skills. The most significant difference is in having a job related to their training (10-point difference in strongly agree), followed by having a better-paid job (9-point difference), and with less distance between working in a job they like (5 points) and being in work (4 points). It can be said that doing an internship increases students' job expectations. Another question is whether this increase can be attributed to the net effect of the internship or whether there are other factors (personal, academic) that influence this greater optimis .

Table 5

Frequencies and percentages of short-term job expectations.

I will be...	**Values**	**N**			**%**		
		No Internships	**Yes Practical**	**Total**	**Non-practical**	**Yes Practical**	**Total**
…working	Not at all	26	3	29	2.8	1.0	2.4
	Somewhat disagree	37	10	47	4.0	3.2	3.8
	Agree	182	54	236	19.9%	17.3%	19.2
	Strongly agree	627	227	854	68.4%	72.5	69.5%
	NS/NC	44	19	63	4.8	6.1	5.1
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100
... working in a field related to my education	Not at all	68	15	83	7.4	4.8	6.8
	Not much agreement	110	22	132	12.0	7.0	10.7
	Agree	243	72	315	26.5%	23.0%	25.6
	Strongly agree	451	184	635	49.2	58.8	51.7%
	NS/NC	44	20	64	4.8	6.4	5.2
	Total	916	313	1,229	100	100	100
... working on something I enjoy	I completely agree	25	6	31	2.7	1.9	2.5
	Somewhat	70	16	86	7.6	5.1	7.0

	disagree						
	Agree	201	59	260	21.9%	18.8%	21.2
	Strongly agree	574	211	785	62.7	67.4	63.9%
	NS/NC	46	21	67	5.0	6.7	5.5
	Total	916	313	1229	100%	100	100%
...working in a well-paid job	I completely agree	23	9	32	2.5	2.9	2.6
	Somewhat disagree	84	19	103	9.2	6.1	8.4
	Agree	247	62	309	27.0%	19.8%	25.1
	Strongly agree	509	202	711	55.6	64.5	57.9
	NS/NC	53	21	74	5.8	6.7	6.0
	Total	916	313	1229	100	100	100%

Note. Own elaboration.

Multivariate analysis: exploration of complex relationships and hypothesis validation

We delved deeper into the analyses to identify which elements of the students' social profile are most closely associated with completing training placements. In fact, there is a certain relationship between age and completing placements, and also between completing placements and gender, although in the latter case the relationship is less pronounced. Table 6 shows the chi-square tests between the categorical variables we want to analyse.

Table 6

Chi-square tests for categorical variables in the sample.

Independent variable	Moderating variables	Valid N	Chi-square	Degrees of freedom
Practices	Age	1145	60,695	2
	Gender	1204	5,468	1
	Origin	1225	0.346 NS	1

*The valid N excludes students who responded to the variables with "NS/NC". The older age group (26 to 30 years old) is also excluded because the category is underrepresented (N=25).
Note. Own elaboration. Total N=1230, NS=Not significant, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

The contingency tables show that it is more common to do internships in E2O if you are between 18 and 20 years old, representing almost half (139) of the students who do internships (283), and less common for younger students (between 14 and 17), who represent 60% of students who have not done internships. In terms of gender, men represent 80% of students who do internships (a finding that is conditioned by the masculinisation of

demand itself: only 1 in 4 students is female). Finally, in terms of origin, most students are born in Spain, and the distribution between those who do and do not do internships does not explain significant differences (25% of foreigners and 26% of natives do or are doing internships).

In order to address H1 and H3, T-tests and Manovas tests were performed. T-tests were developed for those with only two response groups (gender and origin), which also have little or no relation to the fact of doing internships. Table 7 shows the means for each group, the t-value, and indicates whether there is statistical significance with the sub-variables related to skills (H1) and short-term expectations (H3). To indicate the t-value, Levene's test of equality of variances was performed. This test assesses whether the variances of the two groups being compared are equal. This is relevant because the standard t-test assumes equality of variances between groups.

In terms of gender, it can be said that, in all dependent subvariables except "I will be working in something related to my training", there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the variances are equal (because p>.05) and the table indicates the significance by not assuming equality of variances in the t-test. In the exception case, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the variances are not equal, and the significance is indicated by not assuming equality of variances in the t-test. Considering origin as an independent variable, in the case of skills, there is insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the variances are equal, because p>.05. Therefore, the table indicates significance assuming equality of variances in the t-test. In the case of expectations, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the variances are not equal, because p≤.05. Therefore, significance is indicated by not assuming equality of variances in the t-test.

Table 7*

T-Test between skills and short-term job expectations with gender and origin.

	Dependent variables	**Moderating variables**	**N G1**	**N G2**	**Mean G1**	**Mean G2**	**t**
Basic	Basic	Gender	253	780	3.13	3.15	-0.362NS
		Origin	432	618	3.25	3.06	4,181***
	Social and personal	Gender	265	766	3.12	3.14	-0.321NS
		Origin	419	631	3.25	3.05	3,917***
	Professionals	Gender	282	861	3.26	3.35	1,789+
		Origin	465	699	3.33	3.30	0.733NS
	Labour market conditions	Gender	283	859	3.21	3.20	0.298NS
		Origin	466	696	3.23	3.17	1,059NS
E	I will be	Gender	286	859	3.63	3.66	-0.570NS

working	Origin	458	705	3.72	3.60	3,027
I will be working in a field related to my education	Gender	284	861	3.18	3.33	-2,319*
	Source	458	704	3.40	3.22	3,268
I will be working at something I enjoy	Gender	284	856	3.56	3.55	0.211NS
	Origin	455	704	3.69	3.45	5,687***
I will find a well-paid job	Gender	279	855	3.47	3.48	-,077NS
	Source	461	692	3.67	3.34	7,512***

* For gender, group 1 is "Female" and group 2 is "Male". For origin, group 1 is "Foreign" and group 2 is "Native".

Note. Own elaboration. N total=1230, NS=Not significant, +p<.1, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

The data indicate a strong relationship between origin and the subvariables. In all cases, the mean is higher for students of foreign origin. However, it should be noted that those subvariables related to obtaining greater professional skills or related to the labour market do not imply statistically significant differences. For gender, differences can only be identified in two subvariables: professional skills and expectations of working in something related to what they have studied. In both cases, men have more favourable views.

Next, MANOVA tests were performed for H1, which focused on whether internships condition students' perceptions of their results. In the previous tests, we observed that gender and origin do seem to have some influence. This test helps to confirm or reject the hypothesis and identify whether there are interactions between internships and age, which we have already seen to have a statistical association in the chi-square test.

The covariance matrices in the case of practices and age cannot be interpreted as equal because p≤.05. Therefore, Pillai's trace statistic has been used, as it is robust for cases in which the assumption of equality of covariances is violated and only age is statistically significant. Therefore, the variable that has a certain implication in the acquisition of skills is age and not internships for the most part, although in the results of the inter-subject effect tests (Table 8) we see that for those who have done internships there is statistical significance for social and personal skills, as well as interaction between doing internships and age for this sub-variable and the sub-variable of skills related to knowledge of labour market conditions.

Table 8

Summary of MANOVA F-ratios of two factors (internships and age) for perception results.

Dependent variables	Internships	Age	Interaction
Basic skills	0.01NS	10.27***	1.70NS
Social and personal skills	3.49+	16.03	2.91
Professional skills	0.47NS	3.64*	1.16NS
Market conditions knowledge skills	1.03NS	2.54+	3.57*

Note. Own elaboration. NS=Not significant, +p<.1, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

In H2, which focuses on whether internships influence expectations of continuing education, we performed a logistic regression incorporating all social profile variables and internships. Table 9 shows the odds ratios for whether they will continue studying and working after E2O for the variable of doing internships and the variables of age, gender and origin. Both dependent variables have been coded with 0 for "No" and 1 for "Yes". The responses "NS/NC" have been discarded.

The hypothesis is partially accepted, taking into account that there is no statistical significance in terms of whether or not they have done an internship and are looking for work, but there is significance in terms of not continuing their education. In addition, it is worth mentioning that those who responded that they would not continue their education tend to be older and identify as women. In the case of looking for work, all social profile variables have a greater implication than the fact of doing an internship. Specifically, those who mention that they will look for work tend to be older, female and born abroad.

Table 9

Odd ratios on continuing education after E2O linked to doing an internship and social profile

Independent variables	Will you continue studying?	Will you look for work?
Internship (ref. No)	0.570**	0.948NS
Age 18-20 (ref. 14 to 17)	0.571	1.786
Age 21-25 (ref. 14 to 17)	0.321***	3.843**
Gender (ref. Female)	0.401	0.666
Origin (ref. Foreign)	0.875NS	0.498***
Constant	24.319	7.579
Nagelkerke's R2	0.080	0.078

Note. Own elaboration. NS=Not significant, +p<.1, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

For H3, we performed a MANOVA. This focused on how internships condition medium-term job expectations (five years ahead). In the initial mean comparison tests, we

observed how origin seems to influence higher expectations. With this test, we were able to accept or reject the hypothesis and identify whether there are interactions between internships and age (Table 10).

The covariance matrices in the case of internships and age cannot be interpreted as equal because p≤.05. Therefore, we proceeded as in the analysis performed for H1, using Pillai's trace statistic. Similarly, the variable that has a certain implication in improving short-term expectations is also age and not internships. Furthermore, in the results of the inter-subject effects tests (the results and significance of which are shown in the table above), we see that there is no statistically significant interaction between and that doing internships has only a minimal influence on thinking that one will be working.

Table 10

Summary of MANOVA F-ratios of two factors (internships and age) for job expectations.

Dependent variables	Internships	Age	Interaction
I will be working	3.09+	5.38	0.28NS
I will be working in a field related to my education	1.94NS	2.99+	1.10NS
I will be working in a job I enjoy	1.77NS	7.29	0.12NS
I will find a well-paid job	2.53NS	8.34***	0.10NS

Note. Own elaboration. NS=Not significant, +p<.1, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Discussion and conclusions

This study analyses the effect of work placements on young people enrolled in E2O on their perception of learning, their expectations of continuing education and their short-term employment expectations.

The results allow us to conclude that students who have completed internships have a more positive perception of the improvement in two of the four sub-variables related to skills, thus validating H1. However, multivariate analyses indicate that this effect is mediated by the age of the students. In particular, there is a significant interaction between work experience and age in the improvement of social and personal skills and knowledge of labour market conditions, suggesting that work experience is more beneficial for older students, who are likely to be more mature and able to take advantage of these experiences. However, no significant effect of internships was found in basic and professional skills, which could be due to other contextual or individual factors not explored in this study.

On the other hand, the data show a limited effect on expectations of continuing education. Although more than 67% of those who did internships plan to continue their education, this proportion is lower than among those who did not do internships, although we cannot confirm that internships reinforce the decision to seek employment rather than continue academic education, only partially confirming H2. Logistic regression reinforces

this conclusion by showing that students who undertake internships are less likely to continue their training, with an odds ratio of 0.57 compared to those who do not. However, this effect is not independent, as other variables such as gender and age have a greater weight in the decision to continue training or not, which qualifies the relationship between internships and training expectations.

Finally, it can be confirmed that internships have a positive effect on medium-term employment expectations ( ), although this effect is limited (H3). The MANOVA results indicate that internships significantly influence the perception of being employed in five years' time, but not the perception of working in a job related to one's training or in a well-paid job. On the other hand, age emerges again as a key factor, with older students showing more optimistic job expectations in all the indicators analysed. This suggests that, although internships contribute to improving job expectations, their effect may be conditioned by other individual characteristics, which limits their generalisation to all subgroups.

Jerez Gómez et al. (2023) confirmed that the duration and formalisation of internships are determining factors for their effectiveness. However, the results shown here reveal nuances that broaden these perspectives. For example, the positive influence of internships on motivation and professional confidence is in line with the approaches of Smith et al. (2004) and Pineda Herrero et al. (2019), who pointed out that work experiences can reaffirm professional aspirations, improve motivation for learning, and, as a result, increase employability. However, the fact that a percentage of students do not perceive a significant improvement in their job prospects (15% with negative ratings) coincides with the findings of Narayanan et al. (2010) on how the characteristics of the work environment and institutional support affect perceived benefits. Furthermore, our findings are complemented by those of Macedo and García-Rubio (2022), which show that E2Os play a crucial role in ensuring skills and improving employability expectations, which can have positive implications for an effective transition to the labour market, although there is still room for optimising the implementation of internships. It should be noted that improving employability does not necessarily involve improving the skills associated with a specific vocational or professional profile, but rather personal and transversal skills, which are also acquired in work environments (Ivzori et al., 2020; Sánchez-Bolívar et al. 2023).

Although internships have a positive impact on the skills and job expectations of most students, the differences observed in terms of age, gender and origin reflect that these experiences are not equally significant for all subgroups. Older young people tend to report better job expectations, suggesting that maturity may influence the perception of the benefits of internships. It may also be due to selective practices by some companies, which tend to choose students with a profile that is a priori more employable (Bentolila and Jansen, 2019). In addition, students born abroad have a more optimistic assessment of job opportunities, possibly due to a greater sense of urgency to integrate into the labour market. These trends highlight the importance of contextualising internship programmes to meet the diverse needs and characteristics of students. From a more general perspective, the

results underscore the relevance of E2Os as transformative institutions, capable of equipping youth with practical tools and confidence to face a challenging labour market.

The practical implications are significant. It would be advisable to develop more robust mentoring programmes, in which educational guidance plays an active and accessible role, diversifying internship opportunities to ensure that they are aligned with students' interests and aspirations (Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2024). E2Os are recommended to prioritise actions to address gender and origin differences in the perception of the benefits of internships, promoting an inclusive and equitable environment that guarantees equal access to meaningful experiences. There are also important implications for companies that host VET students; Spanish companies still have a long way to go in assuming their training role in the implementation of internships, which is why the LOGSE refers to it as "training in the workplace". The future of vocational training in many countries lies in this involvement of the business world (Cedefop, 2023; De Simone et al., 2024).

The research presented has some limitations that condition the scope of the results. The first stems from the conditions imposed by the second-chance schools for conducting the fieldwork, as many students answered the questionnaire before completing their training in the workplace or with little experience, meaning that their perception of learning would be different if they were in the final phase of their internship. The second limitation is that the content or quality of the work experience was not taken into account, and the third is that it was not possible to analyse the real impact on employability because the research design was not longitudinal and there was no follow-up after the training. These limitations open up avenues for future research to explore the complex relationship between training and the integration into the labour market of vulnerable young people.

Acknowledgements

This work has received support from the Valencian Regional Government, through the Regional Ministry of Innovation, University, Science and Digital Society (Ref. AICO/2021/254).

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Date received: 14 January 2025
Date of review: 4 February 2025
Date of acceptance: 24 July 2025