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**PERSPECTIVES OF NON-TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY GRADUATES ON  
INTERNSHIPS: SKILLS, EMPLOYABILITY AND TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR  
MARKET IN SPAIN**

**PERSPECTIVAS DOS GRADUADOS UNIVERSITÁRIOS NÃO-TRADICIONAIS EM  
ESTÁGIOS: HABILIDADES, EMPREGABILIDADE E TRANSIÇÃO PARA O  
MERCADO DE TRABALHO NA ESPANHA**

**PERSPECTIVAS DE LOS GRADUADOS UNIVERSITARIOS NO TRADICIONALES  
SOBRE LAS PRÁCTICAS: COMPETENCIAS, EMPLEABILIDAD Y TRANSICIÓN AL  
MERCADO LABORAL EN ESPAÑA**

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**Abstract:** Employability has become a principal aim of universities in Europe and beyond. In this context, internships are a central strategy for the promotion of employability. This qualitative study, conducted in Spain and based on biographical-narrative interviews, focuses on the voices and experiences of 25 non-traditional university graduates, all from the field of social sciences, on employability, internships and skills. The data collected are analysed based on four categories: training received at the university; influence of internships on employability; assessment of the internships; and perspectives on skills in demand and mismatches between graduate profiles and labour market demands. Graduates feel the internships has not helped in the transition to the workplace. Graduates have criticised the lack of connection between university and workplace, the short duration of internships, and the insufficient focus on professional and transversal skills. The results also suggest that universities should develop more initiatives to improve internships, working in coordination with employers and other stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Employability; Internships; Non-traditional graduates.

**Resumo:** A empregabilidade tornou-se um objetivo principal das universidades na Europa e fora dela. Neste contexto, os estágios são uma estratégia central para a promoção da empregabilidade. Este estudo qualitativo, realizado na Espanha e baseado em entrevistas biográfico-narrativas, enfoca as vozes e experiências de 25 graduados universitários não tradicionais, todos do campo das ciências sociais, sobre empregabilidade, estágios e habilidades. Os dados coletados são analisados com base em quatro categorias: treinamento recebido na universidade; influência dos estágios na empregabilidade; avaliação

dos estágios; e perspectivas sobre habilidades em demanda e desencontros entre perfis de graduados e demandas do mercado de trabalho. Os estagiários sentem que os estágios não têm ajudado na transição para o mercado de trabalho. Os graduados têm criticado a falta de conexão entre universidade e mercado de trabalho, a curta duração dos estágios e o foco insuficiente nas habilidades profissionais e transversais. Os resultados também sugerem que as universidades deveriam desenvolver mais iniciativas para melhorar os estágios, trabalhando em coordenação com empregadores e outras partes interessadas.

**Palavras-chave:** Empregabilidade; Estágios; Graduados não-tradicionais.

**Resumen:** La empleabilidad se ha convertido en un objetivo importante de las universidades en Europa y fuera de ella. En este contexto, las prácticas son una estrategia fundamental para la promoción de la empleabilidad. Este estudio cualitativo, realizado en España y basado en entrevistas biográficas, se centra en las voces y experiencias de 25 graduados universitarios no tradicionales, todos ellos del ámbito de las ciencias sociales, sobre la empleabilidad, las prácticas y las competencias. Los datos recogidos se analizan sobre la base de cuatro categorías: la formación recibida en la universidad; la influencia de las prácticas en la empleabilidad; la evaluación de las prácticas; y las perspectivas sobre las competencias demandadas y los desajustes entre los perfiles de los graduados y las demandas del mercado de trabajo. Los graduados consideran que las prácticas no han ayudado a la transición al mercado laboral. Los graduados han criticado la falta de conexión entre la universidad y el mercado laboral, la corta duración de las prácticas y la insuficiente atención a las competencias profesionales y transversales. Los resultados también sugieren que las universidades deberían desarrollar más iniciativas para mejorar las prácticas, trabajando en coordinación con los empleadores y otros grupos interesados.

**Palabras clave:** Empleabilidad; Prácticas; Graduados no tradicionales.

## Introduction

Employability is a central aim of the policies of the European Union and the different states, as well as an essential objective of the Bologna Process, which has given rise to the European Higher Education Area. Universities in Europe and beyond have developed in recent years many initiatives and programmes to develop the employability of students and graduates. Among them, we should mention the competitive European funded project EMPLOY. This project has developed research and intervention on employability, through the cooperation of universities in England, Ireland, Poland, Sweden, Portugal and Spain. EMPLOY has aimed to improve the employability of non-traditional university students and graduates, promoting a more efficient transition to the workplace. This paper has been produced in Spain, in the context of the EMPLOY project<sup>1</sup>. It presents qualitative research on the perspectives of non-traditional

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university graduates with a focus on the study of internships as a means of improving employability.

The object of the research is to develop the employability of university students and graduates, particularly for non-traditional or under-represented groups. The aim of the research is the study of internships as a strategy for the improvement of employability and skills. The main objective of the research is to describe and analyse the voices and experiences of non-traditional university graduates, in the field of social sciences, on internships, with a focus on improving employability, the transition to the workplace and development of skills.

The specific objectives of the research are as follows: to find out the opinions of non-traditional graduates on the training they received at university, focusing on employability, skills for employment and labour market insertion; to study the assessment that non-traditional graduates make of external placements, concerning improving employability and prospects of insertion into qualified employment; to identify the positive and negative aspects of the internships; to explore the skills that the graduates have developed during the placements.

This paper has five parts. After the introduction, the second part offers a review of the most relevant national and international literature on employability, transition to the workplace and professional skills. The third part develops the methodology, including details on sample selection, data collection and data analysis. The fourth part presents the results through an analysis based on four identified categories. The fifth part provides the conclusions and some suggestions for the improvement of policies on internships and employability.

## **Theoretical Analysis**

### **The challenge of improving the employability of non-traditional graduates. The Spanish context**

In Spain, as in other European countries, employability has a fundamental role in universities, educational policies and employers. Universities have as one of their priority actions the employability of their students and graduates. For this reason, in recent years, many changes have been made in Spain in the curricula and management of universities (Michavila et al., 2018; Martín-González, Ondé Pérez and Pérez-Esparrells, 2015).

Employability is the ability of a person to find employment in a given period. Thus, the person will be very employable if he or she requires little time to get a new job (Cashian, 2017). Lantarón (2016, 79) defines employability as "the ability of an individual to obtain employment, considering the interaction between his or her personal characteristics and the

labour market". Employability includes different subjective aspects that are difficult to quantify, such as the attitudes and qualities that are necessary to obtain and maintain a job (Formichella and London, 2013). From the perspective of employers, employability is about an individual possessing a set of skills that enable him or her to perform well in a changing labour market. These skills include adaptation to new situations, availability for mobility, technical and managerial skills and problem-solving (Gómez-Vélez, 2012). The social structure of employability comprises a variety of complex elements, including the type of studies, age, social class, gender, ethnicity, university institution, and educational and family background (Cashian, 2017).

For university students, employability is related to personal characteristics, training received and skills. Several factors hinder employability, such as lack of work experience, difficulty in teamwork and barriers to access to skilled jobs due to scarce supply (Izquierdo and Farias, 2018).

The category of non-traditional students includes people with low economic and cultural capital, ethnic minorities, migrants, mature or adult students, first-generation students, the unemployed, the disabled, women in situations of inequality and, in general, people from groups that are under-represented at university (González-Monteagudo, 2010). All these groups have more considerable difficulties in accessing university and completing their studies (Jucevičienė, Vizgirdaitė and Alexander, 2018). The low economic and educational capital of the family of origin is also a significant disadvantage for access to the labour market. Difficulties may also relate to university staff and employers, who may not provide a suitable environment during training and internships (Espósito and González-Monteagudo, 2016). Non-traditional students take more time than conventional students to enter the labour market, access jobs that are low-skilled about their level of training, and receive low payment (Purcell, Wilton and Elias, 2007).

The economic crisis that began in 2007 negatively affected the employability options of graduates, especially those with non-traditional profiles. Spain was one of the European Union countries that most suffered from the effects of the economic crisis. Despite the progress made in creating new jobs, Spain had an unemployment rate of 14.7% in 2019. Among the unemployed population, the high rate of youth unemployment is noteworthy, reaching 32.4% (INE, 2019). In this context of massive youth unemployment, Izquierdo, Escarbajal and Latorre (2016) consider that university students could become a vulnerable group, and could even approach social exclusion, due to their difficulties in entering the labour market.

In the context of the Spanish regions, the problematic situation of Andalusia -the region where this research has been carried out- should be highlighted. Indeed, the unemployment rate in Andalusia was 21.08% in 2019. In the case of the Andalusian youth population, the unemployment rate in 2019 was 40.9% (INE, 2019). It has been noted that the level of training influences access to employment. Thus, the unemployment rate among young Andalusians without university studies is 55.01%, while the figure is 40.94% for those who have completed higher education (INE, 2019).

The transformation of university curricula in Spain has been driven by two initiatives in the European area: professional qualification frameworks and the credit system. These policies aim to promote comparability, transparency, mobility and employability (Martín-González, 2015).

### **University internships as a means of improving skills and gaining access to the labour market**

Internships are one of the ways in which students and graduates can be supported to improve and facilitate employment. All Spanish universities develop internship programs, intending to improve skills, promote employability and establishing a better relationship between university training and the demands of the labour market. University internships were regulated in Spain in 2014, through a legal norm that includes the following objectives: to contribute to comprehensive training; to facilitate knowledge of the professional reality; to develop technical, methodological, personal and participatory skills, to obtain practical experience that facilitates insertion into the labour market; to improve future employability; to develop the values of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship (Royal Decree 592/2014, of July 11, 2014, which regulates external academic internships for university students).

One of the main challenges of the University is to enhance the relationship between the training of students and the demands of the world of work, facilitating graduates' access to the labour market in the best possible conditions and a short period (Lantarón, 2014; Caballero Fernández, López-Miguens and Lampón, 2014). We are referring, therefore, to the process of transition from the educational system to the labour market, which is synonymous with entry into active, adult and independent life (Andreu Ferrer et al., 2018). The transition from the university to the labour market takes many forms, depending on the subjects and contexts.

Several factors in Spain hinder a successful transition to the workplace for graduates: difficulty in finding qualified employment consistent with the studies completed; precariousness and scarcity of labour contracts, most of which are temporary; low salaries; fewer opportunities for human and social science graduates (Pastor and Peraita, 2014). A crucial difficulty is the lack of work experience. Indeed, many young people start to seek employment with little or no work experience. Also, non-traditional graduates often have low social capital, which has a negative impact, as they have few contacts or networks among employers.

Skills are knowledges, abilities, attitudes and values acquired during the training stage, and which will later be applied in different qualified jobs and professional situations (López Ruiz, 2010; Bartual and Turmo, 2016). In the academic context, skills define the level that should be acquired for each training level (Martín-González, 2015). The skills related to the incorporation of university students into the labour market are the professional skills or the employability competencies. The contribution of the university to develop the practical and applied preparation of students seems insufficient, considering that graduates present numerous deficiencies in terms of skills (Padilla-Carmona, Suárez-Ortega and Sánchez-García, 2014). It is considered that a longer duration of internships could contribute to solving this problem (Freire Teijeiro and Pais, 2013).

Therefore, educational institutions aim to promote a correct adjustment between university training, the demands of the world of work and the processes of professional orientation. The university must incorporate a set of skills that are adapted to the training, orientation and employment needs of university students (Martínez-Clares and González-Lorente, 2019). These employability or professional skills must be acquired from the beginning of the university. They should be perfected throughout working life, in parallel with the development of the individual's professional, personal and social career, encouraging a proactive attitude when seeking opportunities at work and in other areas (Santana Vega, Alonso Bello and Feliciano García, 2018). The debate on transversal competencies is currently one of the significant challenges facing universities (Oleškevičienė, Puksas, Gulbinskienė and Mockienė, 2019).

For employers, university graduates have proper theoretical and professional training but lack generic or transversal skills, such as leadership ability, teamwork, verbal communication, interpersonal skills and knowledge of foreign languages. The graduates consider that they were not taught these skills during the period of university studies (Pineda-Herrero, Ciraso-Cali and Armijos-Yambay, 2018; Puente and Casado, 2016). To respond to

emerging and future needs, employers need the collaboration of universities, which should provide comprehensive and practical training, with emphasis on knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the labour market. The perception of employers is that universities are not moving in the right direction or at the right speed to help reduce unemployment among university graduates (Cashian, 2017).

To address the issue of employability, it is essential to know the views of students and graduates. In recent years, studies on students' and graduates' voices and experiences about employability are becoming more critical (Izquierdo and Farias, 2018; Bartual and Turmo, 2016; Yusuf, Okanlawon and Metu, 2018). These voices can help to improve the quality of education and to make visible the social and academic importance of employability (Arandia, Cruz, Alonso and Fernández, 2014). Espósito and González-Monteagudo (2016) focused on the perspectives of non-traditional students and graduates, investigating the perspectives of non-traditional students on employability, and concluding that the students considered that they had little chance of success in their professional careers and that the university training they received did not help them in their work performance. For its part, the study by Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez (2014), on university skills and employability of young university students, pointed out the existing mismatch between the university and the labour market, due to excessive professional qualifications and the scarce contribution of university training on professional skills, knowledge of languages and use of new technologies. There is other research on employment trajectories, which indicates the low or negative expectations of professional development and labour insertion of graduates, who have not been prepared to develop strategies for job search and transition to working life (Suárez, 2014). This research helps to understand and improve employability and skills.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative case study has been carried out, with a biographical-narrative approach, using the interview. The narrative approach is the most relevant when trying to collect information about personal experiences, events, transitions and social processes (Wengraf, 2001).

The main objective of the study is to describe and analyse the voices and experiences of non-traditional university graduates in the social sciences on external practices, with a focus on improving employability, the transition to the workplace and acquired skills.

The specific objectives of the study are: to find out the opinions of non-traditional social science graduates on the training they received at university, focusing on employability, skills for employment and labour market insertion; to study the assessment that non-traditional social science graduates make of external placements, about improving employability and prospects of insertion into the qualified labour market; to identify the positive and negative aspects of the placements; to explore the skills that the graduates have acquired during the placements.

### *Selection of informants*

The information has been collected from a total of 25 cases (14 women and 11 men), all non-traditional graduates, aged between 23 and 31, from three public universities in the region of Andalusia (southern Spain). All participants had completed a university degree, or were in the final semester of the degree, and belonged to the area of Social Sciences.

Identifying and locating potential informants has proved complex, as there are no disaggregated data on students or graduates that would allow for the identification of non-traditional profiles. The "snowball" strategy (Izcara Palacios, 2014) has been employed, including the use of personal and professional networks, student unions, bulletin boards, and informal visits to the faculties of the three participating universities. The identity of all participants was anonymised.

The five traits that define the profile of the non-traditional student, relevant to our study, were identified as follows: a) being an adult, over 25 years of age; b) being a first-generation student, coming from a family whose parents do not have a university degree; c) coming from a family with low economic capital; d) being unemployed; e) being a worker (González-Montegudo, 2010). All participants met at least three of the five traits listed. Besides, more than half of them met four traits.

To consider the gender variable, the selection of participants (14 women and 11 men) corresponds, approximately, to the over-representation of women in the field of social sciences. Five students or graduates were selected, belonging to each of the five faculties that make up the social studies: Pedagogy, Law, Economics and Business, Tourism and Communication.

### *Data collection*

The in-depth interview was used, with a biographical-narrative format, focusing on the main topics of the study: employability, skills and internships. The biographical-narrative interview begins with a general question ("Tell me about your university experience, in general, and concerning training for employability and internships, considering your background and previous experiences"), in which informants are given the freedom to address the topics they consider relevant. In a second phase of the interview, more specific questions are asked, which allow for completing the collection of information regarding the objectives of the research, following the guidelines presented below (González-Monteagudo, 2015).

The biographical-narrative interview emphasises the free discourse of the subject, based on his or her experiences and perspectives, from a subjective, holistic and broadly temporal point of view. The biographical interview favours communicative interaction, dialogue and reflection (Wengraf, 2001). All the interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate subsequent thematic coding, from a double deductive and inductive perspective. The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes.

Table 1. *Interview Guidelines*

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES		
DIMENSION	PURPOSES	EXPLORED TOPICS
Biographical data	To know social and family contexts, including influences of them on the participants.	(a) The relationship of the family to education and employability (b) First-generation students. (c) Influence of the family on studies and employment.
Economic situation and support	To explore the influence of the economic crisis on families and to identify supports received	a) Economic difficulties in the family. b) Influence of the economic crisis on the participants and the families. c) Scholarships, grants and support during studies.
School career until university	To investigate school background, from primary education to university access.	a) School period: teachers, classmates, subjects, learning, difficulties (b) Presence of the world of work and employment during secondary school, high school or vocational training
University experience	To know perspectives about university studies, internships and training for employability	a) University experiences: learning, changes, relationships with peers and lecturers (b) Assessment of the training received on employability and experiences about the internships. c) Work and training balance. (d) Assessment of the university in relation to employability and skills.

Perspectives and strategies on the labour market, skills and employment	To investigate work experience, strategies, inequalities, skills and notions about employability	(a) Strategies for job searches. b) Role of social capital (contacts, family and friends) in labour insertion (c) Possibilities of finding qualified employment (d) Difficulties and which may influence access to the labour market: age, inequalities, languages. e) Work experiences. f) Personal ideas about employability.
Future Projection	To know the life project within three years regarding employment and training.	(a) Prospects for employment in three years' time: employed, unemployed, in training (b) How the chances of finding employment could be improved (c) Opinions on the precariousness and difficulties of access to qualified and well-paid employment.

Source: Own elaboration

### Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically coded. This coding was done independently by the two researchers. Subsequently, the individual analyses were pooled, to rule out codings that were not coincidental, to ensure the credibility of the analytical process. Finally, four categories emerged, inductively generated from the data collected and deductively from the literature review (Gibbs, 2018), relating to: 1) training received at the university; 2) influence of the internships on the improvement of the employability and the possibilities of labour insertion; 3) assessment on the internships, identifying negative and positive aspects; and 4) proposals to improve the internships and the competencies demanded by the employers, to reduce the mismatch between supply and demand.

### Results

In the results section and the conclusions, the four categories identified are commented on, integrating excerpts from the transcripts relating to the categories, interpretive or contextual comments on those excerpts, and analytical comments based on the objectives of the research and the literature review.

#### *Training received at the university.*

Analysis of the data obtained in the interviews shows that most of the graduates have received scarce training in employability. This inadequate training has also been a prominent feature in the previous stages of secondary education and vocational training. The graduates

consider that the university has not facilitated the transition to the workplace.

The few subjects that might have some connection with the world of work have served as complementary training, to complete university credits or to finish off one more stage of the studies.

“The world of work has been absent in the university, and, also, in the previous educational stages. They prepare you for the compulsory secondary school certificate and for the university entrance exam, but there is no employment orientation. In my university years, I have had very few, if any, subjects dealing with employability. From my point of view, the university should have a greater relationship with the world of work, since in most of my career there was no talk of employment” (Rosario, Pedagogy).

Some graduates feel that there is little linkage between employability and university, and point out that information and training regarding the labour market should be increased during university studies.

“Employability has had no influence on my studies. There is very little information regarding employability and the labour market in universities. There is no strong link between university and employability” (Daniel, Economics).

This lack of relationship between the university and employability means that graduates want the university to modify the subjects, insisting on broadening the practical content. Also, many of the graduates express concern about the lack of preparation for professional functions due to scarce practical training.

“I value the training that I had with the world of employability, during my time at university, with the worst mark; we have received much theoretical foundation, but then that is forgotten; and when you go to practice law, you have no idea; I don't feel at all prepared to go out into the job market” (Elisabeth, Law).

“I would change a lot of things about the university, one of them being that the subjects are more practical. The theory is important to reinforce concepts; but when it comes to a job, practice is more useful” (José, Pedagogy).

On the other hand, the interviewees propose to the universities the updating of the curricula to improve employability, including training in new technologies, job search techniques, skills and languages. In addition, graduates rated the implementation of the Bologna Plan negatively, due to the reduction of numerous subjects and the failure to improve practical training.

“Faculties should include more language subjects in their curricula, such as English, Italian, French, and eliminate theoretical subjects that have little application to the world of work” (Irene, Tourism).

“The only thing I see that they have done is to reduce subjects with the Bologna Plan,

because, on a practical level, I think there has been no change” (José. A, Journalism).

To compensate for inadequate university training, some graduates comment they have been forced to take specialised training courses, outside the university, to improve their chances of entering the labour market.

“I don't consider that the university has prepared me to start working, you have to continue training on your own, through courses, searching for additional internships” (Inma, Economics).

### *Influence of internships on improving employability and employment insertion*

The internships are designed to improve employability and have real work experience. However, participants in this research have shown a general dissatisfaction with the management of internships by universities, and have criticised the marked disconnection between training and actual work, as expressed by an economics graduate.

“What you learn at university does not apply to the job market. You don't make a connection between what you've studied and the real world. And you ask yourself: 'what is the point of what I'm studying?' Then you're kind of lost and adrift; it's like you're studying something, but you can't apply it to anything. I think there should be better interconnection between companies and universities” (Inma, Economics).

In some cases, the graduates have done internships that were unrelated to their studies, as several graduates point out.

“The university should make more efforts to check the places where the internships are held. In my personal case, I have not learned anything that has benefited me during my internship. Well... it has been contacting with work; but what do I have to do with an engineering company? I don't know. I didn't do anything at all with respect to the field of audiovisual communication” (Daniel, Communication).

Good internships cannot be developed if companies do not fulfil the training purposes that the internships have. Sometimes companies used students as a very cheap labour force, replacing company staff who were on holiday or medical leave.

“My internship was not very positive because the company used me as an intern to replace the employees' holiday shifts. I don't think that the internship brought me much in terms of training, because the tasks I did were very simple, which did not require a university degree to perform them” (Manuel, Communication).

Many graduates (who had taken vocational training modules, before starting university) express that the preparation for access to the labour market was much better in the case of the VET courses, compared to university training, because in VET the internship period

was longer and directly related to the theoretical contents previously received.

“When I did the [pre-university] vocational training module, I had a very long internship, from which I learned a lot because I was taught how to perform my duties. But when I entered university, I realised how few internships I had, and how little they had to do with theoretical content. I miss more linguistic content, which will help us to improve, if we want to be tourist guides or managers in a hotel” (Rosa, Tourism).

Some graduates consider that improvements should be implemented in the didactic planning of the internships, through the regulation and supervision of them, to verify if the students are doing the internships in line with the objectives established in the regulations of each faculty. Finally, the participants consider it essential for the success of the internships that they are paid and that their duration is increased.

“The internships should be longer and more remunerated, and the company should have a commitment to you and help you; and offer you an employment contract, so that you can be motivated” (Laura, Law).

#### *Negative and positive aspects of the internships*

The following are the graduates' assessments of the internships undertaken. About the negative aspects, the interviewees once again highlight the short duration of the internships. Because of the short duration, they indicate that they do not feel prepared to carry out functions related to their degree in a possible employment position, since many of them say that they did not acquire professional knowledge during the internship. Several graduates consider that this issue could be improved by increasing the duration of the internship since it barely gives them time to learn about the characteristics of the position they occupied during the internship.

“I think that doing an internship helps you to gain work experience and practical knowledge, but you need more hours and time for your internship” (Anna, Pedagogy).

“When I finished my internship, I realised that I was not ready to practice law” (Alfonso J., Law).

“The internship period is very short; we need more time to be able to know what functions we can perform and to acquire the necessary skills” (Alejandro, Tourism).

Another unfavourable factor highlighted by some participants is that the internships should be compulsory, rather than optional, given their importance in future labour market insertion.

“I didn't have much information regarding the completion of the internship, it was an optional subject, but I think it should be mandatory for all students” (Daniel,

Economics).

The last two negative points correspond to the mismatch between the tasks carried out in the internships and the reality of the work, and the unilateral benefit of some employers over the interns.

“The university should strive to review the places or companies where the internships are done because the ones I have done have not been useful for anything, I was studying communication, and they put me to tasks of the engineering sector, it had nothing to do with my work reality” (Daniel, Communication).

“I got the impression that the company took advantage of me, as an intern, to replace the employees who were on vacation” (Manuel, Communication).

The positive aspects mentioned by the graduates are few. Although the internships were considered insufficient and of short duration, the graduates point out that they gave the possibility to get in touch with the possible future working environment. In addition, some graduates stated that the internships provided them with new work experience and knowledge, which they had not learned previously, within the theoretical framework of their university careers.

“I did my internships at Cadena Ser [a radio station], and they gave me a lot of work experience, I liked what I did, since I loved political journalism, and they taught me to do many functions that I never did during my studies” (José A., Communication).

“Proposals to improve the competencies derived from the internships, to acquire skills and to reduce the mismatch between supply and demand” (Filiberto, Tourism).

Regarding the proposals for acquiring or improving the skills demanded by employers, there is a common denominator in most of the interviewees, who insist that they have not had enough time to carry out the internships. Therefore, the improvement of competencies is linked to the need for the internships to have a longer duration.

“I was in a school as an observer, getting to know the functions and management of a school; I did an internship in an association of deaf and blind people. Nevertheless, I don't think I left with enough skills to work later on” (José A., Pedagogy).

“I don't think I have any professional competence, because if I was offered a job in a legal firm, I don't know what to do; I am not prepared to solve a civil law case” (Laura, Law).

More positive was the experience of those graduates who had the opportunity to extend the time of the internship in the workplaces, through the formalisation of an internship contract. It is encouraging to see that, in these cases, the graduates consider that they have obtained the necessary skills to perform the functions required by the employer, such as autonomy, self-initiative, creativity and teamwork.

“I did my internship at a public university's Faculty of Economics, within a guidance department. Furthermore, I learned how the university works, how to use different computer programs, to plan, to make schedules; and, above all, to be autonomous, to work in a team, to be creative” (Rosario, Pedagogy).

“I did my internship at a radio station. They taught me how to hold a press conference, interview politicians, do various interviews, write, and speak; they taught me a lot of things that theory didn't give me during my career. The internships have helped me to know how to get around in a job” (José A., Communication).

Some graduates have combined their university careers with jobs, usually not related to their training, to finance their studies. Interestingly, they point out that these unskilled jobs have provided them with the skills they expected to have learned during their internships.

“I have acquired some skills through some informal work, which I combined with studies; and I gained skills in dealing with clients and in dealing with people” (Norberto, Economics).

“Skills... I have only developed them in the jobs I have done during my career; in addition to financial support, these jobs gave me good work experience” (Alejandro, Tourism).

“During my work, which I combined with my studies, I did acquire skills; it is not the same to carry out an advertising campaign on paper, as to live it, they taught me to do many things” (Manuel, Communication).

Similarly, those graduates who had completed VET modules state that thanks to this training they have acquired work experience and skills demanded by employers, since vocational training placements were more extensive than university placements, and therefore helped to develop tasks in a work environment.

“During the internship of the professional training module I acquired great skills, and they gave me knowledge of the sector, how a hotel works, and above all how to deal with the public” (Rosa, Tourism).

“I have learned more about the world of work during my course of the professional training module of Image and Sound than during my university placement in the degree of Audiovisual Communication” (Nelia, Communication).

Finally, the graduates indicate that more specialisation is needed for the positions and tasks that are developed during the internships since they are not adapted to the employment demands of the current labour market. This is reflected in the opinions of those graduates who have combined their studies with professional employment, and most of whom are still employed.

“I have always combined my career with my work as a lifeguard; and thanks to that work I know how to get around, deal with the public, help people, keep to schedules” (Juan A., Tourism).

“The internship has not provided me with many skills, but in my current work, I have learned how to deal with the public, how to respond, how to develop, how to be a

decisive person and how to never give up in the face of uncertainty” (Andrea, Economics).

## Discussion and conclusions

This research has shown the importance of university internships in improving employability and professional skills, intending to foster a successful transition of non-traditional graduates into qualified employment. To this end, a study based on 25 biographical interviews with non-traditional graduates in Spain has been carried out.

The analysis of the interview results shows a significant dissatisfaction of the graduates, as they consider that the university training oriented to the development of both knowledge and skills for employability is insufficient. These testimonies coincide with the research of Campelo and Robles (2015), which showed the dissatisfaction of the graduates with the internships carried out. The graduates interviewed in our study call for the expansion of practical content in courses and subjects related to employability, since they state that the current content is excessively theoretical and is not very useful for career development. Some studies have pointed out that there is an evident mismatch between the theoretical training provided by the university and the practical needs of employers and companies. Therefore, it is proposed that the university should improve professional orientation, include professional topics in the teaching, and ensure that employers offer suitable internships to improve and strengthen professional and transversal skills (Freire, Teijeiro and Pais, 2013; Bartual and Turmo, 2016).

The participants expressed an almost unanimous request about the renewal of the curriculum, in parallel to the improvement of the management of internships. University students can only benefit from internships if the companies that collaborate with the university offer adequate work contexts, consistent with the preparation of students and equipped with up-to-date technological resources (Zabalza, 2016).

Among the proposals made by the graduates to improve the internships, the following stand out: a) increasing the number of workshops and courses on specialised and professional training; b) including subjects that favour the acquisition of knowledge related to specific functions that students must carry out during their internships; c) improving knowledge in university courses about the current demands of the labour market; d) working on innovative methodologies and tools for job searches; e) acquisition of skills on multilingualism, including the suggestion to make compulsory two foreign languages in university training, in order to improve professional qualifications.

Some graduates have expressed their satisfaction with their internships because, although the internships had been brief, they have been very productive and have helped them to train in the tasks and skills needed to perform a job. This fact highlights the importance of including, maintaining and improving university internships in the university curricula.

The primary function of internships is to provide students and graduates with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enhance professional competence. All the graduates interviewed stressed the importance of the acquisition of some generic or transversal competencies, such as analytical skills, organisation, planning, problem-solving, autonomous work and languages. Among the personal skills they have acquired in the internships, teamwork, improved communication and social skills stand out. Some studies show that the level of skills developed by graduates is below the level required in the labour market (Martín-del-Peso, Rabadán Gómez and Hernández-March, 2013). Most of the interviewees did not feel well integrated during the internships because they considered that they did not have a learning context based on real situations. In this context, Martín González (2011) and Pallisera, Fullana, Planas and Del Valle (2010) state that students must acquire not only theoretical knowledge but also transversal skills demanded by employers, such as team and autonomous work, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, decision making, communication skills and own initiative.

The longer duration of external internships and the integration of specific subjects into the university curriculum to improve the acquisition of professional skills are also among the significant concerns of graduates, highlighting the mismatch between theoretical knowledge acquired and practical training, due to the insufficient relationship between universities and the labour market (Puente and Casado, 2016). University institutions can learn about, and attend to, the suggestions and proposals of graduates regarding internships, as a strategy to improve employability, in a complex, competitive and globalised context.

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