Discourses and Understandings of Employability in Vocational Education

A Comparison of Swedish and Catalan Policies and Student Perspectives

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Abstract

The concept of ‘employability’ is an important aspect of the link between education and the labour market. This thesis describes, in the Swedish and Catalan contexts, the conceptualization of employability in the discourses of vocational educational policy through the analytical categories of representations of the world, social order, and social identity. It then examines vocational education students’ understandings of the concept through the themes of career building, experiences, and, employment outlook. Using critical discourse analysis, I collected and examined data from policy documents to analyse policy discourses regarding employability. On the other hand, I interviewed six vocational education students and used thematic analysis to build students’ understandings of employability. The results portray different pictures for the two contexts examined. While Swedish policy discourse includes on its account of employability some ‘humanistic’ values, such as democracy and human rights, the Catalan policy discourse focuses mainly in ‘market’ values such as competitivety and productivity. On the other hand, students in both contexts understand apprenticeships and personal attributes as key elements of employability. Two main conclusions are drawn from this study. First, the world represented in policy documents strives to reproduce relations of economic production and cultural hegemony. Second, by placing emphasis on apprenticeships and personal attributes vocational students have adapted to the goals of policy documents. Further research on the topic should explore the existing material contradictions between labour policy and vocational education policy.

Keywords
Employability; vocational education; critical discourse analysis; Sweden; Catalonia
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Introduction

Education systems in contemporary societies have two main roles. First, education systems reproduce the cultural norms of a society by teaching religious beliefs, historical narratives, literary traditions or linguistic conventions, that cohere a society. Second, they produce an efficient workforce that creates wealth through which to guarantee the reproduction of such society. Therefore, educational systems also function as a social mechanism with the capacity to alleviate or reproduce social inequalities. An educational system that provides equal opportunities and is well engrained in the society in which it takes part will have more probabilities to form more individuals that contribute to a cohesive and productive society. On the other hand, if there exist barriers to learning such as tuition fees, segregation or poor working conditions for teachers, not everyone will enjoy the benefits of education and, therefore, the society in its whole will turn less cohesive and productive.

Leslie Bash offers a brief but concise historical perspective of what is vocational education and training (VET) and how it is positioned in contemporary societies. She lists three characteristics that go beyond working definitions of VET and are of complete relevance today. In first place, Bash notes that the relationship between the world of work and education only started to gain interest when education stopped to be an elitist institution (Bash, 2009). This is an important aspect of the relationship between the labour market and education systems because it highlights the notion that education is subordinated to the economy through the labour market. Before education became a mass institution, it was regarded as an aspect of social distinction and not as a mean to increase a nation’s wealth. In second place, however, when social elites realized education could increase effectiveness and efficiency of the masses, training was adopted elsewhere in order to reach these goals (Bash, 2009). As much as this perspective could seem antique and outdated, the policy documents examined for this research place a great deal of attention on these issues to the point of including them in the goals, objectives, and mission of VET. Finally, Bash pays attention to the vocabulary aspects of the different names that education programmes receive depending on what is their goal (2009). She argues that the very naming of vocational education and training and university education responds to the social hierarchies produced by the educational institution that put in higher positions of the social ladder the intellectual professions at the expense of the manual professions. In that regard, indeed, it is interesting to note how in the both contexts examined here the names of upper secondary programmes respond to that logic. While in Swedish vocational programmes are called yrkesprogram (vocational programme), academic programmes are called högskoleförberedande program (higher education preparatory programme). The same occurs in Catalan where vocational programmes are called formació professional (professional formation) and academic programmes are called educació superior (higher education).

Furthermore, Bash hypothesises that the relationship between education and labour will become more interrelated insofar global commercial integration produces economic convergence that will be noted on education policies. In fact, by the examination of policy documents on vocational education in Sweden and Catalonia we can partially confirm Bash hypothesis ten years later it was formulated. Differences and similarities between the Swedish and Catalan context regarding the subordination of vocational education to the needs of the industry will be described in the results section. They will show the extent to which educational policies in these contexts advocate for vocational education models in which industry and economic interest play a crucial role. Moreover, the implications of global trends in vocational education will be also depicted insofar the policy documents refer to the question to some detail.
In that regard, vocational and general upper secondary education have different goals in an educational system. In one hand, general secondary education is aimed at providing students with knowledge to further their education and to participate actively in social life. On the other hand, vocational secondary education is aimed at providing students with the knowledge to acquire the necessary skills and competences to perform manual jobs (Nylund, Rosvall, & Ledman, 2017). In other words, the streaming in upper secondary education serves a sorting mechanism through which the tasks to be performed for the progress of society are dealt. Not coincidentally, this division within educational systems resembles in a large extent the divisions existing in society. The literature provides with a vast body of knowledge proving how parents’ educational attainment and occupation have direct impact on the educational achievement of their offspring. In that regard, therefore, it is feasible to assert that educational systems reproduce, to some extent, the existing social hierarchy based on occupations, instead of diminishing the pre-existing social inequalities. In that context, moreover, asking about how the link between education and work operates is a mandatory question to understand the hierarchization of society. For that reason, the topic of this thesis will be that of employability of vocational education students.

This thesis will research the ways in which employability is defined through policy discourses displayed by educational authorities and how employability is understood by vocational education students. This is a heavy endeavour and it requires further explanation on how it will be done and how it will be materialized in this thesis.

First, I will carry a literature review on the conceptualisations of employability with the intention to grasp the different perspectives around the term and the different meanings attributed to it. This will be an important step because of the nature of the concept itself. As it will be argued later, employability is a contested term because its location in the intersection between the world of work and the world of education. For that reason, several actors with different backgrounds possess interests in providing a definition serving those interests.

Second, because the research will be carried with an international and comparative perspective, I will explain what, how, and why I am comparing. I will describe the two contexts in which the research is framed because defining what are the similarities and the differences between the two contexts will allow me to set up the observational and explanatory units of comparison. Differentiating between two types of units of comparison is useful to understand better what is the aim of describing both contexts. For example, while the contexts examined here act as observational units because they are the source of data collection and data analysis, they also act as explanatory units because they can be the reason to why similar and/or different results occur in the different contexts (Manzon, 2014). In addition, this thesis will not only compare places but also the mechanisms that confer the explanatory power to those places. They are, in this case, the educational systems and the education policies of both contexts. Bray and Jiang (2014) argue that comparing educational systems renders some resemblances to the task of comparing places because of the same arguments given by Manzon; they can be both observational and explanatory units of comparison. In addition, educational systems are not designed in a vacuum, they are the outcome of several aspects of the societies in which they are embedded. They are part of the educational planning efforts which also include educational policy. As Bray and Varghese define it, educational planning is “an intervention by the public authorities to direct and align educational development with the requirements of other sectors to ensure economic and social progress” (Bray & Varghese, 2011, p. 21). From this perspective, this research will show how public authorities both in Stockholm and Catalonia direct and align vocational education with the requirements of the industry and the governments to ensure, to different extents, economic and social development. Because of, precisely, attending the requirements of these actors and satisfying their interests, educational planning is a tool that creates power relations and, therefore, these need to be critically examined in order to understand how comparing places, systems, and policies is useful to educational research.
On the other hand, the international is a complex concept to define, especially if it is confronted with that of globalisation. Is it comparing two places, systems, and policies of different countries of the same continent an international perspective or a global one? Why?

Third, having described the object of enquiry, in this case employability, and having described the contexts in which the research will be carried, I will also define the aims and the questions of this research. This approach stems from the three-fold aspects of the research process; ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Therefore, after having described the ontological features of this research (there exist several definitions of employability and contextual frameworks play a role in both defining the concept and creating policy accordingly) I am in a position to develop how I can approach this reality in order to research it. To do that, the aims and the questions of the research will be laid down while establishing a relation with the state of the art of employability and the characteristics of the two contexts chosen for this research. In other words, I will argue that the aims and research questions emanate from the understanding of the literature review and the structural mechanisms that conform the contexts. By taking this position I am acknowledging that the motivations to research sociological problematics originate within the reality in which they are framed. For that reason, therefore, I will define two sets of research questions with the intention of acknowledging how educational authorities in Stockholm and Catalonia define employability and how it is understood by vocational education students.

Fourth, as ontological and epistemological stances drive the research to methodological issues, the connection between these three will be explained as well. In framing the research problem in a manner where I will analyse both the way in which educational authorities create working definitions of a concept, in this case employability, and the way in which vocational education students understand the same concept, I will consider what the best approaches and research designs are to answer the research questions. Therefore, I will discuss quantitative and qualitative methodologies and I will justify why I will use critical discourse analysis to examine policy documents and thematic analysis to examine students’ interviews and focus group.

Fifth, I will describe the results obtained from the data for the two sets of research questions. For the first of the research questions, I will describe the results with three analytical categories that have been useful in examining in which levels educational authorities create discourse. These categories will be representation of the world, social order, and social identity. The origins and content of them will be later described in more detail. However, it is useful to stress here that, given the choice of critical discourse analysis and its focus on power relations, these categories illustrate how educational authorities create discourse based on to whom they respond, what is the place of education, and what is expected from students. Regarding the second set of research questions, I will put the emphasis on adopting an inductive approach. For that reason, three analytical categories have been created in line with what vocational education students expressed in the interviews and focus group. These categories are career building, experiences, and employability.

Sixth, I will discuss the results obtained and I will discuss to what extent they have answered the research questions together with an examination of the literature review described in the first section. I will place the focus on how the comparative model used here has turned useful to illustrate the effects of policy discourses on students’ understandings of employability.

Finally, I will conclude this master thesis with a review of all the steps taken and how successful the research has turned. In addition, I will show some light on future paths of research.
Literature review

The concept of employability has been a contested one during the past twenty years in several fields of academic research (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013; Graham, 2017; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Wilton, 2014). The first reason for this is that it brings together two important spheres of modern societies, those of education and work. Depicting and operationalizing employability, therefore, has been attempted from many knowledge fields ranging from psychology, educational sciences or sociology to human resources, economics or organizational studies, resulting in a myriad of perspectives and approaches to the topic. The second reason is that employability is a concept that entails several relations of power. For example, educators, employers, and governments are involved in the practice, influence and implementation of educational policy, including employability and, therefore, they comprehend employability in different terms (Mcquaid & Lindsay, 2005). A third reason is related to the changing nature of work as the outcome of the technological revolution that the world has and is witnessing. The skills needed to succeed in the labour market as well as the working conditions in which jobs are performed have influenced employers’ demands on what educational systems must produce. For example, because the flexibilization of the labour market, by which the opportunity to remain all life in the same job is reduced, more emphasis, especially in vocational education, is being put on the usage of hands-on pedagogies as a way to teach transversal skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, or communicative skills. Another example of how the technological revolution has affected the world of work, and therefore the world of education, is by the adoption of new technologies that have altered the modes of production and, at the same time, require new ways to study them. Finally, the globalization of work contributes to increasing the diversity, in cultural terms, of workers within organisations, therefore language and cultural skills are more often required in order to perform well in the labour market. In this vein, the purpose of education has also been modified so to prepare students to enter the labour market (Boahin & Hofman, 2013; Leach, 2017), which is a signal of which stakeholders are in advantage in terms of defining the concepts of the debate. This has had consequences on aspects of educational policy such as curriculum (Isopahkala-bouret, Lappalainen, & Lahelma, 2014). For example, research on curriculum studies has revealed the ways in which students of vocational education are expected to acquire worker-citizen identities in which self-perception of employability plays a key role (Isopahkala-bouret et al., 2014; Nylund, 2012).

Thus, several conceptualizations of employability that point out different dimensions of it are found in the literature. For example, employability is often described in the literature as the characteristics one individual possess and their chances to obtain or sustain a job. This conceptualization is erroneous in the sense that it departs from the deficit theory by which if an individual is lacking employment is because them are lacking some requisite for it. However, this theory is challenged by evidence on labour market mismatches of highly educated people. The existence of individuals performing jobs that demand lower qualifications than theirs is due to the fact that the supply of high-qualified jobs is lower than its demand. Thus, qualifications are not a guarantee of secure employment nor employability Therefore, other accounts of employability suggest the necessity to include contextual factors in the relationship between education and work as, for example, the supply and demand of work.
For example, Brown, Heskett and Williams (2003) defined employability as “the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment” (p.111). From this perspective the ‘relative chances’ of employability are noted and, therefore, open the possibility to define employability as relational to other agents and institutions and uncertain to one’s efforts. Because of this the authors acknowledge the several actors taking part in the conceptualization of employability. If there is an institution, the labour market, regulating the chances of the workforce to become employable, it will be interested in defining what is employability and how it must be addressed by individuals and other institutions. Therefore, as a policy issue, the employers’ perspectives employability are predominant in discourses, which gives rise to conflict and consensus theories (Brown et al., 2003). According to Brown et al. (2003), “personal qualities are emphasized in an attempt to legitimate the reproduction of inequalities, rather than to improve productivity” (p. 115). In this regard, then, it becomes necessary to comprehend the social forces (employers, policy-makers, educational institutions, etc.) shaping both the context and the definition of employability because employability is a dialectical tool in power relations.

Related to this dimension, there is also the understanding of employability as a competition for jobs both in absolute and relative terms. The absolute dimension understands that obtaining a job depends mostly on an individual possessing the necessary requisites and, therefore, misses the relative competition existing among candidates for the same position. In this sense, then, educational practices focusing on delivering employability measures either on the form of curriculum, pedagogy or policy without considering the relative aspect of employability are at

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**Figure 1. Conceptual framework**

![Conceptual Framework Diagram]

- **Structure**
  - Policy
  - Curriculum
  - Pedagogy
- **Vocational education**
  - Understandings of employability
  - Strategies for employability
risk of departing from wrong assumptions. For example, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007)
understand employability as a key to open the door of the labour market. They identified five
elements the individual must address in order to reach this key and have the chance to join the
labour market. These elements are: degree of subject knowledge, understanding, and skills;
generic skills; emotional intelligence; career development learning; and work experience. This
conceptualization revolves around the degree of subject knowledge, but authors maintain that
acquiring knowledge on a topic is not enough to be employable and, thus, students need to add
other skills to their profile. These other skills are, sometimes, termed as soft-skills and comprise
creativity, flexibility, autonomy, team-work, or time management, among others. The argument
to include these skills is that employers demand them as a way to employ workers that resemble
the most to the enterprise, especially in terms of competitiveness and productivity. For example,
“a graduate who could be described as enterprising would be imaginative, creative, adaptable
and a willing learner” (p. 283). In this model, being critic towards work settings or defending
worker’s rights are not included as employability skills, perhaps because they pose challenges to
employment perspectives.

Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin and Zehner (2013) research both organizational and individual
perspectives of employability. They conclude that organizations and individuals have different
goals in regards of employability, highlighting thus, the conflictual perspective on
employability. They argued that organizations were focused on raising enterprises’ advantage in
terms of competitiveness. On the other hand, individual perspectives focused on the
requirements for them to join the labour market (Finch et al., 2013). They identify, within the
individual perspective five categories of employability factors: soft-skills; problem-solving
skills; job-specific functional skills; pre-graduate experience; and academic reputation.

Bohain and Hofman (2013) discuss the contextual issues of employability. They argue that
corrections in employability in UK and Australia are different of those in USA, for example.
While in UK and Australia employability encompasses competencies, personal attributes and
values to be linked with the enterprise, in the USA employability refers more to the job-specific
skills. However, both accounts of employability outline the blurring of employee/citizen divide.
For example, “people are responsible for becoming employable by acquiring a particular
identity and set of attributes and skills required by employers” (p. 389). This way of linking
citizen and worker identity is the reflection of capitalist commodification of human beings.
What is more, it highlights how education is subordinated to capital in that educational systems
foster the employable identity rather than the citizen one. Reid (2015) digs deeper in this
question: “the significant ideology organizing all levels of education in westernized
industrialized countries is that of neoliberalism so that managerialism and performativity are
dominant in the everyday needs and experiences of both those who work or are educated at all
levels” (p. 56). He proposes a collaborative and political model of employability given that
relations of power define who does, who receives, and who controls employability.

If employability is to be conceptualized as the link between vocational education and work
under an international and comparative education framework, emphasis needs to be placed on
how societal contexts influence the design and implementation of educational systems and
policies and which are the effects these have in vocational education students. In that regard,
therefore, it is necessary to include in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1, above) the
relations between how the productive system is organized (what sectors and occupations are the
most relevant, for example), how educational policy, curriculum, and pedagogy are influenced
by it and what accounts of employability are produced in vocational education. In addition,
what strategies do individual students carry out - both in terms of reproduction and resistance of
the structures- to succeed in the labour market are to be also included as the outcome of this
framework. Therefore, this thesis will examine the structural mechanisms that produce
employability understandings and strategies of vocational education students in two different
contexts, those of Sweden and Catalonia. Structural mechanisms in this aspect will refer to (a)
educational policy regarding the regulation of vocational education and, especially concrete measures aimed at employability, (b) curriculum design in different programmes, with an emphasis on the development of employability skills, and (c) pedagogies adopted in vocational education courses, focusing on learning approaches directed at promoting employability.
Context of the study

This section will describe relevant aspects to employability such as the educational system or the labour market in the contexts to be compared; Stockholm county and Catalonia region. As it will be later explained, this research will use critical discourse analysis (CDA) as part of the methodological approach. Discourse analysis methodologies depart from the assumption that discourse conveys meanings that are framed in a specific framework (add bibliography) and that the channels for these discourses to be distributed (as policy documents, for instance, which will be used here) are set in social constructed contexts (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). For this reason, describing the contexts in which employability discourses are displayed is an essential part for understanding how this concept is constructed. These two geographic entities have been selected for comparison because of several reasons. The first reason is that, up to date, there is no international and comparative research, in the field of vocational education, taking these two regions as units of comparison. Regional comparisons are usually carried out within national boundaries as one way to study interregional developments, especially in the case of highly decentralized countries (Manzon, 2014). In this regard, taking Stockholm county and Catalonia as samples from Sweden and Spain seems to be a plausible approach given the high level of decentralization both countries offer in educational policy (Eurydice, 2019).

Stockholm län

Stockholm county (län in Swedish) is one of the 21 counties in which Sweden is administratively divided and hosts the homonymous capital of the country. The total population within the territory amounts to 2,339,640 inhabitants as of November 1st of 2018 which accounts to 23% of the Swedish population (SCB, 2019). According to Eurostat, Stockholm county had, in 2017, a GDP of 148 billion euros which represented 31% of the Swedish GDP.

Labour market and economic accounts

Stockholm län employment rate for the population aged 16-64 was 79.2% in 2017. Men had a slightly higher rate of 80.6% compared to women who had an employment rate of 77.9%. When disaggregated by educational attainment, strong differences were found, specially between individuals with primary or lower secondary education (ISCED 0-2) as their highest educational level and individuals with at least upper secondary education (ISCED 3-4) or tertiary education (ISCED 5-8). Those who were in ISCED levels 0-2 had an employment rate of 49%, individuals in ISCED 3-4 and ISCED 5-8 had, in contrast, employment rates of 83.2% and 89.5% respectively.

In terms of gross value added (GVA), Stockholm län produced, in 2016, 130 billion euros and the service industries were the most prominent contributors: the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, and real estate activities) contributed with 18.9% of GVA; in second place, 17.8% of GVA was produced by wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and catering activities; in third place, 17.5% of GVA proceeded from public administration (including health and education) activities; and 14.4% of GVA came from professional, scientific and technical activities.
In that vein, the percentage of persons employed in each sector adjusts quite well to the sectors’ contribution to GVA. For example, in the Stockholm län, 20.5% of the persons employed did so in wholesale and 14.2% were employed in professional activities.

**Vocational education structure**

Vocational programmes in the Swedish system are offered after compulsory education. When students graduate from compulsory education they can choose to enrol in national or individual programmes. There are 18 national programmes of which 12 are vocational and 6 are academic (Skolverket, 2012). On the other hand, there are 5 individual programmes: preparatory education, individual options, vocational introduction, individual alternative, and language introduction. Both academic and vocational programmes qualify graduates to higher education and last three years. However, the admission requirements to these programmes differs and, actually, this topic was discussed with the three Swedish students who participated on the group discussion for this study. While admission requirements for vocational programmes consist on students having passing grades in Swedish language, English, Mathematics and five extra subjects, the requirements for academic programmes consist on students having passing grades in Swedish language, English, Mathematics and nine extra subjects. In addition, some of these nine extra subjects are compulsory for students enrolling in specific programmes.

**Catalonia region**

Catalonia region (comunitat autònoma in Catalan) is one of the 17 regions in which Spain is administratively divided. The total population within the territory is 7,543,825 inhabitants as of January 1st of 2018 which accounts to 16% of the Spanish population (Idescat, 2019). In economic terms, Catalonia’s GDP was 224 billion euros in 2017, which made 19.2% of Spain’s GDP (Eurostat, 2019).

**Labour market and economic accounts**

Catalonia region employment rate for the population aged 16-64 was 66.9% in 2017. Men had a notorious higher rate of 70.9% compared to women who had an employment rate of 62.8%. When disaggregated by educational attainment, strong differences were found, specially between individuals with primary or lower secondary education (ISCED 0-2) individuals with at least upper secondary education (ISCED 3-4) as their highest educational level and individuals who had attained tertiary education levels (ISCED 5-8). Those who were in ISCED levels 0-2 and ISCED levels 3-4 had an employment rate of 54.5% and 65.1%, respectively. In contrast, individuals in ISCED 5-8 had an employment rate of 84.9%.
In terms of gross value added (GVA), Catalonia produced, in 2017, 203 billion euros. In contrast with Stockholm län, the manufacturing industry had an important role, in this regard, generating 19% of the region’s GVA. In addition, the wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and catering activities produced 24.8% of Catalonia’s GVA, which reduced the impact of public administration and FIRE activities to 14.7% and 15.3% respectively.

When it comes to employment rates by sector, these figures in Catalonia are also related to sectors’ GVA. For example, 25.5% and 18.6% of persons are employed in wholesale and manufacturing activities, respectively.

**Vocational education structure**

In organisational terms, Catalonia follows to a great extent the Spanish educational system. Vocational education in Catalonia starts after compulsory education although students in last year of compulsory education are allowed to start basic vocational courses. When students graduate from compulsory education they can choose to enrol in either academic programmes or vocational programmes. At this point, each path lasts two years but the continuation options are not the same. Students from academic programmes can, upon graduation, take the higher education entrance examination, they can enrol in post-secondary vocational education, or they can join the labour market. However, graduates from upper secondary vocational education can enrol in one of the academic programmes, they can enrol on a preparation course leading to the entrance examination to post-secondary vocational education, or they can join the labour market. Those who want to enrol in post-secondary vocational education must take an entrance examination. This examination consists in testing applicants’ knowledge of Catalan language, Spanish language, foreign language, mathematics, and two subjects related to the programme they want to access. For the academic year 2017/2018, 17% of students enrolled in upper secondary vocational education took the entrance examination.

Therefore, in terms of continuing to further education, academic and lower vocational programmes present two differential traits. In first place, academic programmes give the chance to apply to higher education while lower vocational programmes, at this stage, do not. In second place, academic programme graduates are granted their access to upper vocational programmes while graduates from lower vocational programmes must take an entrance examination. Therefore, given the differences on the access to them, it is clear that upper secondary vocational education and post-secondary vocational education are rather different programmes.

In fact, according to the International Standard Classification of Education, upper secondary vocational programmes (Ciclo Formativo de Grado Medio, on Figure 2, below) are considered secondary vocational education (ISCED 3) while post-secondary vocational programmes (Ciclo Formativo de Grado Superior) are considered tertiary education (ISCED 5).
Moreover, according to the Department of Education (2019), 57% of new students in post-secondary vocational programmes in 2017/2018 were studying the previous year on the same or a higher level (upper secondary vocational education, academic programmes, or tertiary education).

### Aims and research questions

The main goal of this research is to provide knowledge on employability discourses and understandings in the field of sociology of education. A second goal is to provide an international comparison to the debate of employability. Therefore, in order to accomplish these goals, I will examine, in first place, employability discourses embedded in policy documents and, in second place, employability understandings and strategies of vocational education students.

Two sets of research questions will lead this research. The first set will deal with how structural mechanisms contribute to the creation of policy and curriculum in vocational education in two different contexts with an emphasis on employability. Because two aspects of the contexts will be examined (policy and curriculum), it will be phrased as follows:

- What are the aims of vocational education policy in terms of employability in Sweden and Catalonia? Are they similar or different? Why?
- How is employability embedded in curriculum?

The second research question will deal with how the aforementioned dispositions contribute to the creation of understandings of employability among vocational education students and how strategies are developed from these understandings, therefore, two questions will be formulated:

- What are the understandings of employability of vocational education students in Sweden and Catalonia? Are there differences between the two contexts? Why?
- What are the employability strategies VET students use based on their understandings of employability?

Source: Eurydice (2019)
Methodology

The two research questions in which this study is based aim at answering different aspects of the same problem; the problem of defining employability. However, I will look at this problem from two perspectives, those of employability defined in education policy and the problem of how students understand employability and how they behave according to this understanding. By framing the research questions in this way, the focus of the inquiry is two-fold. In one hand, an interpretative account of employability discourses will be developed through the first set of research questions. In the other hand, an explanatory exposition will be drawn through the second set of research questions. Therefore, it is necessary to employ different methods to attempt to solve these questions satisfactorily. With that intention, this section will discuss and describe the methods used.

Because of the interpretive and explanatory nature of the research questions, a qualitative research strategy fits better the purposes of the research. Bryman (2012) distinguishes the characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative research strategies according to three criteria.

The first criteria is found on the realm of ontology. Quantitative approaches, usually, understand the reality as an objective and external one (Bryman, 2012) to the eye and mind of the researcher. This perspective allows the researcher to separate from the world and to delimit their object of study without any reaction interference between the object of study and the researcher. This conceptualisation of reality is the one used on the natural sciences and departs from the assumption that facts, such as an apple falling from a tree, would continue to happen regardless of the presence of a human observing the event. Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, assume that reality is partly constructed by humans and, therefore, their actions could alter this reality. Because of that, the researcher cannot be separated from their object of study and must be aware it. For example, in the field of politics, determining what ideas correspond to the right or the left side of the political spectrum is always a subjective endeavour because the objects examined (politics, ideas, and spectrum) are defined by human beings and, therefore, there can be as many perspectives as researchers looking at the event.

In the case of this thesis, for example, researching the discourses emanating from policy documents is a highly subjective exercise for two reasons. In first place, the reality those documents depict responds to the interests of the authors of the documents, being them institutions or individuals, therefore, that reality does not necessarily fit the actual events taking place in the world. In addition, the authors of the documents have the possibility, because their position of power (dictating the tasks of schools and teachers, for example), to alter reality and to make it fit with their descriptions. In second place, the interpretation I make of the policy documents is grounded on the theoretical framework used for this study. However, different theories attribute different meanings to the relevant concepts appearing on policy documents, therefore, the interpretation I make of the policy documents rely on my understanding of the theoretical framework. Because of the interpretive nature of qualitative data, “there are often multiple interpretations to be made of qualitative data” (Bryman, 2012, p. 643). If the research questions drafted for this thesis were somewhat different, these same documents could be used to answer these other questions. It is important, thus, to note the existence not only of reality (what is out there) but also the existence of meta-reality (the positioning of the researcher towards reality). Therefore, from the ontological stance, adopting an interpretive research strategy is suitable because the reality I am researching is manipulated by human entities and is an “emergent property of individuals’ creation” (Bryman, 2012, p. 36).

The second criteria is related to epistemological issues, or whether and how reality is cognoscible and researchable. Green states that “epistemology provides a basis to determine
what types of knowledge are possible, legitimate, and adequate” (Green, 2017, p. 372). According to Bryman (2012) quantitative approaches to social research are based on positivistic perspectives. These perspectives assume the existence of a unique reality that can be known through value-free variables measured by reliability and validity parameters (Fazlıoğulları, 2012). Positivist approaches consider that reality can be simulated in a closed environment as it happens in natural science laboratories. Moreover, these perspectives take a predictive stance to social science, i.e. they seek to emulate natural sciences in creating laws that explain the reality. On the other hand, qualitative approaches reject the natural scientific method and focus on how individuals interpret the reality (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative approaches usually are in line with constructivist paradigms that reject the idea of a single, closed, and objective reality. These approaches portray reality as being multiple, open, and subjective and, thus, the possibilities to know it must include the researchers’ position within the reality. In contrast to positivistic stances, constructivist epistemologies seek to generate interpretative, rather than predictive, accounts of reality. Therefore, because of the descriptive and interpretative nature of the research questions posed for this research, adopting an epistemological qualitative approach over a quantitative approach is more advantageous.

The third of them, finally, is the approach to relate the theories used as a background for the research and the evidence found through the methods employed. These approaches are the deductive and inductive approaches (Bryman, 2012). The difference between them is the direction of the relationship between theory and evidence. While a deductive approach seeks to test the theories on the light of the evidence, an inductive approach (re)builds the theories according to the evidence. Because qualitative data analysis is typically inductive (Thomas, 2006 in Bryman, 2012), I will use the latter approach in this research.

The following sections will describe the methods I have used to answer the research questions posed on the past section.
Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an approach to discourse analysis (DA) which “emphasises the role of language as a power resource that is related to ideology” (Bryman, 2012: 536). Under this approach, language is considered a conveyor of power because it is a social construct that is shaped, and in turn shapes, the social context in which it is embedded. In this way, language possesses elements, (such as meanings, conventions or codes) that are relative to the contexts in which they are framed (Hammersley 2013, in Cohen et al., 2018). Ideology, in turn, “is the means by which powerful groups promote and legitimate their particular interests” (Cohen et al., 2018).

Norman Fairclough, who is considered the father of this methodology, briefly describes the characteristics of CDA in Critical Discourse Analysis (2013). He states that CDA:

- “It is part of some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process,
- It includes some form of systematic analysis of texts, and
- It addresses socials wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting them.” (p. 10 – 11)

In ontological terms, CDA argues the existence of three layers of realities: social structures, practices and events (Fairclough, 2013). In addition, CDA “explores how texts construct representations of the world, social relationships and social identities” (Taylor, 2004: 435). In this regard, I will argue that policy documents display employability discourses that are the outcome of power relations between employers and education authorities. These discourses represent the world of work from the perspective of employers. The fact that vocational education policy documents take for granted that students will seek employment after their studies is an example of this. Employers take advantage of the capitalist social order and design educational policy serving their interests. This representation of the world is embedded in policy documents and it emerges from the real link between employment and education, i.e. CDA assumes the existence of an objective reality which gives rise to power relations that create discourse through language.

The justification for using CDA in this work is that CDA is a tool which works with the voices of marginalized, disempowered and oppressed groups (Fairclough, 2013). As many authors have pinpointed (Erikson & Rudolphi, 2010; Nylund et al., 2017; Wheelahan, 2007), the streaming into vocational and general programmes in upper secondary education constitutes a form of reproducing inequality because of two reasons. The first reason is that patterns of class division are identified in the enrolment to these sections of education; working class students end up in vocational education more often than middle class or upper-class students (Alexandersson, 2011; Rosvall, 2015). The second reason is that the outcomes of these branches of upper secondary education lead to the sorting of individuals in the labour market in dominant and dominated positions according to the tasks they develop in the workplace. For example, “Leena Koski (2009) argues that vocational education reproduces the working class by including processes that educate the future workers to enter into submissive, inactive moral states and power relations” (Hjelmér, Lappalainen, & Rosvall, 2010).

This context, therefore, could be regarded as a social wrong in the basis that education is not serving as a social tool to redress class inequalities in contemporary societies and,
therefore, could be set as the starting point for deploying a CDA methodology given that the identification of a social wrong represents the first stage of an ‘explanatory critique’ (Fairclough, 2013).

In order to explore these discourses and their relationship with reality, CDA proposes a multi-stage analytical framework in which social and semiotic aspects are jointly addressed (Taylor, 2004). In first place, social order is at the core of the social aspects and, in the case of employability, it could be argued that the prevailing social order establishes a relationship between the labour market and education in which the latter is subordinated to the interests of the former. In this sense, therefore, educational policy texts, drafted by education authorities in Sweden and Catalonia, will be analysed with a focus on the relationship between vocational education and the labour market. For example, in Sweden, Skolverket is the Swedish National Agency for Education and it provides English translations of both the latest upper secondary reform (2011) and the curriculum of upper secondary education. These two texts will serve as data sources for the Swedish context. However, because general and vocational streams of upper secondary education in Catalonia are regulated through different laws, there are no common reforms of curriculums. In fact, the Department of Education provides in its website the curriculum for general upper secondary education but not the curriculum for vocational education. For these reasons, the texts used for the analysis of the Catalan context will be the specific laws regulating the programmes chosen for the study.

In second place, semiotic and social aspects of discourse are related through genres, discourses and styles which can be understood as interactions, representations and identities respectively (Taylor, 2004). Woodside-Jiron, however, understands genres, discourses and styles as ways of acting, ways of representing, and ways of being (Woodside-Jiron, 2011) which provides a better perspective on educational policy texts in regard of employability. This is because it allows to frame educational policy texts as mediators of (a) the actions students must take to accomplish their goals, (b) the relationship between vocational education and the labour market, and (c) the identity students must adopt.

Finally, because educational policy can be assessed in policy documents by its aim and its impacts (Anderson & Holloway, 2018) and because critical discourse analysis “involves asking who uses language, how, why and when” (Van Dijk 1997: 2, quoted in Bryman, 2012: 538), deploying an analysis based in this methodology constitutes a relevant and useful tool to examine who, how and why employability discourses are created and how are understood by the recipients of the policies.

**Sampling**

As previously mentioned the texts to be analysed are drafted by education authorities in each country. In this section, I will describe the educational authorities in both countries and I will describe and justify the policy documents selected for the analysis.

Skolverket is the Swedish central administrative authority for the public-school system. Skolverket presents its main mission as to attain the goals set in the Education Act and the Curricula (Skolverket, n.d.). In that regard, Skolverket assumes the guidelines born in the Swedish political sphere and conveys them to the educational body of the State (municipalities, schools, school heads, and teachers). In addition, Skolverket develops tasks to ensure the good functioning of the school system. For example, Skolverket “supervises, supports, follows up and evaluates the school in order to improve quality and outcomes” (Skolverket, n.d., p. 2). To achieve its goals, Skolverket sets up “the frameworks and guidelines on how education is to be provided and assessed” (Skolverket, n.d., p. 3). These three characteristics are cornerstone for understanding the development of educational policy in the Swedish context. On one hand, Skolverket adopts the education laws that emanate from the Swedish parliament and executes them through the evaluation and supervision of the school system. On the other hand,
Skolverket needs to communicate educational reforms, and its consequences, to the school staff. It does so through guidelines and frameworks such as the curriculum. In addition, Skolverket (2011: 15) acknowledges the importance of discourses in policy documents when states that “all the documents above are intended to create a meaningful whole. They each fulfil an important function but also express together a common view of schooling”. Two conclusions come up from this description. First, the political sphere, the State apparatus and the school staff are the actors involved in educational policy. Their aims and interests are different and do not always match. For example, the political sphere seeks to shape the outcomes of education according to its ideology. The State apparatus, on the other hand, responds to the political power and safeguards the school staff obedience. Finally, the school staff follows the guidelines and implements them in the classroom. The second conclusion is that students are not involved in educational policy. They remain the passive subject and they are placed at the receiving end of this chain of power. This will be further highlighted in the analysis of the policy documents.

According to Skolverket, teachers and headteachers must take the curriculum as starting point for their activities (Skolverket, 2013). For that reason, the first of the policy documents analysed for this thesis will be the *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* 2011. The document is divided in two sections of 4 and 11 pages respectively and it describes the fundamental values and tasks of the school. This is an important aspect for the analysis because the document depicts the core traits of Swedish society. By doing so, the document creates not only a representation of the world but also the social order and the social identities within that world. For example, the first section of the document, which addresses the fundamental values of the school, assumes that Swedish society adopts both the Christian tradition and Western humanism. Because of that, the school should nurture “in the individual a sense of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4). The document, therefore, develops a specific cosmovision based on religious and cultural values. In addition, it also sets up the role of the school as an active subject in maintaining the social order. Lastly, it shapes students’ identities by elucidating which are the values they must possess.

In the analysis, I will focus on this section of the document and I will examine the data in detail. The first of these sections is *Fundamental values and tasks of the school* and it is divided in 8 subsections which are the following: fundamental values, understanding and compassion for others, objectivity and open approaches, an equivalent education, rights and obligations, tasks of the school, knowledge and learning, and each school’s development. The second section is *Overall goals and guidelines* and is divided in 6 subsections: knowledge, norms and values, responsibility and influence of students, choice of education, assessment and grades, and responsibility of the headteacher. I focus the analysis on the first section of the document, *Fundamental values and tasks of the school*, because it is the most descriptive and rich in terms of representations of the world, the social order, and social identities. Although the second section, *Overall goals and guidelines*, offers valuable insight into the specific tasks of teachers, it does not provide useful material for the analysis. Therefore, from this point onwards I will refer only to the first section of the document.

On the other hand, *Upper Secondary School 2011*, covers relevant aspects of Swedish vocational education such as definitions and structures of programmes, requirements for graduation, or goals. This document will serve as the main body of data because it digs deeper on employability aspects in vocational education. In this regard, two sections within the document will be analysed: the description of vocational programmes (ranging from pages 22 to 25), and also the description of the Health and Social Care Programme (VO) (ranging from pages 187 to 195).

In first place, *Curriculum for the upper secondary school* (Table 2 to Table 5, in the Appendix) is a document addressed to teachers, headteachers and other school staff at the upper secondary level (Skolverket, 2013). This document provides a broader overview of upper secondary education and it is useful to address the underpinnings of the Swedish school system. The
The Catalan Council for Vocational Education and Training is a body of consultancy and assessment of the Catalan government. It is formed by 7 members of the Catalan government, 4 representatives from employer organizations, 4 representatives from unions and 3 representatives from public authorities. The Council is attached to the Department of Education and its three main goals are: to integrate the three subsystems of vocational education (IVET, VET, and CVET); to elaborate the general plan for vocational education in Catalonia; and to follow up and evaluate the general plan. In contrast to Skolverket, given that the CCVET is a body of assessment, it is not in charge of implementing educational policy. In addition, the organ implementing educational policy is the Educational Policy Secretariat. Furthermore, the EPS is formed by four General Directorates among which the General Directorate of Curriculum and Personalization is found. However, this Directorate only focuses on curriculum issues at primary, secondary and upper general secondary levels. Therefore, vocational educational curriculum is regulated through ordinances passed by the Catalan parliament.

In that regard, the latest law concerning vocational education was passed by the Catalan parliament in June 2015. One of its articles stated the creation of the Catalan Public Agency of Vocational Education and Training (CPAVET) as an autonomous body with the task to manage and coordinate the vocational education system (Departamento de la Presidencia, 2015). Nonetheless, this law has not entered into force as of 2019 and, as a consequence, the CPAVET has not been created yet. The CCVET, therefore, constitutes a body where different social actors are involved in providing the government with political guidelines regarding vocational education. However, it does not have any direct relation with the administrative body of the educational system as Skolverket does.

Because of this, two documents will be analysed for the Catalan case: the law of vocational education and training 2015 (Tables 14 and 15 in the Appendix), and III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016 (Tables 16-18 in the Appendix). I will describe the preamble to the law of vocational education and training 2015 because it is the section of the text containing the richest material in terms of analytical categories. On the other hand, the III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016 aims “to allow the application of specific measures for the adjustments and orientation of the vocational training to be deployed in Catalonia” (Catalan Council for Vocational Education and Training, 2013, p. 2). I will focus on three sections of the document. The first one will be diagnosis of the current situation of the VET system which provides the strengths and weaknesses of the VET system and, therefore, gives a perspective of the orientation of VET. In second place, mission and general objective of the III General Plan for VET gives an understanding for the Catalan government to implement measures addressing the challenges identified in the first section. Finally, the section strategic areas and specific objectives narrows down the objectives to be accomplished in the period comprised on the general plan.

The results of the analysis are shown in Tables 5-18 in the Appendix. The analysis consists on identifying how the three analytical categories (representations of the world, social order, and social identities) are described in the documents. To analyse the documents, I focused on
sentences and, in some cases, paragraphs. The aim of the analysis was to come up with the policy discourses on employability drafted by the educational authorities in Sweden and Catalonia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum for the upper secondary school</td>
<td>Skolverket</td>
<td>Everyone</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>The document describes the school's core values and tasks, as well as overall goals and guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary school 2011</td>
<td>Skolverket</td>
<td>Teachers, headmasters, and vocational guidance counsellors</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>The first part of the material provides an overall commentary on the upper secondary school 2011. The second part contains the diploma goals and programme structures for each of the 18 national programmes as well as commentaries on these.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016</td>
<td>Catalan Vocational Training</td>
<td>Policymakers and all actors involved in the vocational education system</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>This paper formulates an action framework aimed at building an interrelated system, coherent and efficient, out of the current vocational education systems existing in Catalonia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection

Following the methodology of CDA by which policy discourses create representations of the world, social order and social identities, I collected excerpts of the documents in which these categories could be identified. To explain how I selected one excerpt over another I shall first describe what these three categories consists on.

In first place, the category ‘representations of the world’ is based on the assumption that “policy and political discourse represent the authoritative allocations of values and goals” (Woodside-Jiron, 2011, p. 154). In the previous section I have described the educational authorities in Sweden and Catalonia with the goal to portray how these social institutions have the power to allocate values and goals and, therefore, to represent the world. This is proven by the fact that all documents analysed for this thesis have sections in which the fundamental values of society or the goals and mission of education are extensively described. For that reason, the category ‘representations of the world’ will be constructed from these excerpts in the documents in which values, goals, or missions of society and education are described. This will help to create a coherent description of educational authorities’ discourse on society and education in Sweden and Catalonia and, thus, to compare them.

In second place, the category ‘social order’ is constructed under the assumption that “social practices networked in a particular way constitute a social order” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 265). In this sense, therefore, the networked social practices have been described along with the educational authorities of Sweden and Catalonia. By highlighting their relations with other social institutions, such as governments or industries, their social practices are uncovered. In the frame of this research, the most notorious social practices that constitute the social order are the tasks of vocational education in imposing social values and providing a qualified workforce for the industry. Several parts of the documents make explicit these practices to be assumed by vocational education providers, therefore I have selected these excerpts and, following, the same methodology I used for the previous category, I have used them to create a description on this matter.

In third place, Fairclough gives a strong emphasis on the role of practices in creating social identities. He states that:

“All practices involve identification, the construction of social identities – every practice is associated with particular ‘positions’ for people in terms of which their identities and social relations are specified.” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 172)

This is manifested by the role the educational authorities play in describing the social world and by the role of school in the social order (to impose social values and to create a qualified workforce). Because of this, students of vocational education are directed towards the development of practices which will create their identity, i.e. indirectly, educational authorities and schools create vocational education students’ identities. In policy documents this is exemplified by the expectations of educational authorities on the outcomes of vocational education. For that reason, I have collected all excerpts in which I have identified expected outcomes of vocational education in regard to students’ behaviours or thinking. Perhaps, the most striking expectation of the policy documents is related to the students’ future paths upon graduation from vocational education. In most cases, the expectations are narrowed, or simplified, to vocational education graduates joining the labour market. The possibility of continuing to higher education is mentioned few times and, in contrast to academic programmes, there is almost no mention to the expected role of vocational education graduates on the public life.

After having described the analytical categories used to examine the educational authorities’ discourses, I will now explain how I collected the excerpts that I used for the analysis. In first place, I read a first time the four documents listed before. Once I formed a general idea of the structure, content and goals of the documents I re-read the sections of the documents in which I could find material to fill up the three analytical categories. Then, I underlined the excerpts in which there was relevant content related to all three analytical categories. For example, I underlined the following excerpt from the section *Fundamental values in Curriculum for the upper secondary school* and identified elements of the three analytical categories:
“The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates that education in the school system aims at students acquiring and developing knowledge and values.”

This excerpt makes a representation of the world in which the law, and nothing else, is in charge of regulating the aims of education in the school system, i.e. this excerpt acknowledges that the aims of education are defined and imposed by the political power of Sweden. The excerpt also gives a picture of how the aims of education are achieved through the education system, i.e. it portrays how the education system is part of the social order in which the school works to meet the goals set by the law. Finally, the social identities are moulded through students being expected to acquire the relevant knowledge and the appropriate values.

In order to classify and extract the data for the analysis of each excerpt, I have drafted the tables 4 to 17 (in the appendix) for all the documents. As it can be seen in the tables, some excerpts do not fill all three categories but only two or one. I filled up the tables with the aspects of the three analytical categories following the method I set in the example. Finally, once I had the tables filled up, I started the data analysis.

**Thematic analysis**

In order to answer the second set of research questions, I carried out a focus group in Sweden and three interviews in Catalonia with students of vocational education. The reason for using different data collection techniques in Sweden and Catalonia was the misunderstanding on the contact process with gatekeepers. While in the case of Catalonia we communicated via email in Catalan, in the case of gatekeepers in Sweden, we communicated also via email in English, which was not our mother-tongue, neither mine or the gatekeeper’s. Thus, I was able to communicate clearly to the gatekeeper in Catalonia that I intended to carry out three individual interviews whereas, perhaps, language issues caused the gatekeeper in Sweden to believe I intended to carry out a focus group instead of three individual interviews.

Data on students’ understandings and strategies of employability were collected through semi-structured interviews (see the questionnaire in the Appendix 1) with vocational education students in Catalonia. In the case of Sweden, I held a group discussion with three students of the Health and Care programme. In spite of using different techniques to obtain students’ data, I used the same questionnaire to both procedures and the results were highly similar in content but, perhaps, not in length. Interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes and they were voice-recorded, transcribed, and coded. The group discussion lasted one hour and twenty minutes, and it was also voice-recorded, transcribed and coded. Interviewees in Catalonia were asked, before carrying out the interviews, in which language they preferred to be interviewed and all agreed to do so in Spanish. The group discussion with Swedish students was done in English given that students had a high level of the language and it was the easier arrangement.

In order to analyse the data I gathered from both the focus group and the interviews, I used thematic analysis techniques. The reason for choosing this technique is that it allowed me to find recurrent themes on the data and, thus, build analytical categories useful to explain the different aspects of employability. Thematic analysis consists in identifying recurrent themes on the transcriptions of qualitative data. Bryman (2012) acknowledges that thematic analysis is not a well-established methodology as CDA. In addition, he criticises it because many approaches to qualitative analysis make use of this technique, i.e. he claims that thematic analysis can be discerned in many qualitative analysis approaches (Bryman, 2012).

The themes that appeared in the focus group and the interviews are tightly related with the interview questionnaire I drafted (see Appendix 1). For example, the subtheme ‘choice of studies’, which is included in the theme ‘career building’, was identified mostly in the first questions of the questionnaire: “Why did you choose to study vocational education? Why this programme in particular?”. During the interviews I let participants express themselves freely with the aim of getting the most amount of data possible. In some cases, this approach caused participants deviating
somewhat from the questions but, in general, they provided a good deal of material. Thus, the themes were constructed in the base of the questionnaire and, actually, there is a connection between the order in which the themes are disseminated here and the questions used in the interviews. One relevant aspect, however, is that some subthemes appeared in more than one of the questions and, therefore, they overlapped. However, this also turned useful because it meant that similar issues were approached from different perspectives within the interview process.

Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research seeks to achieve a wide range of participants in order to get as many perspectives over one topic as possible (Bryman, 2012). That was the case of this research. Because I was interested in grasping the understandings that vocational education students have of employability, I did want to gain the largest possible range of their accounts. For that reason, I used purposive sampling. The goal of this method of sampling is “to sample participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). With that focus in mind, I set to gather six participants for each of the contexts of this research. However, because of time issues I could only include three participants from each context in the study.

Because I was interested in examining how the vocational programmes participants have attended had moulded their understanding of employability, I aimed to select participants who were on their last year of their vocational programmes. In addition, because my supervisor could provide access to vocational education students enrolled in the Swedish Healthcare programme, we co-decided to select students from this programme in both contexts. However, because of students’ availability I could only access three participants in each context. Nonetheless, the data I got from them has covered all the items I set and, especially, the participants that were interviewed expressed similar concerns over some of the items, suggesting, thus, that there was no much more material to gather in one or another respect.

The access to the interviews was carried out differently in the two settings. While in Sweden the author’s supervisor contacted her teacher students to gather students of vocational education who were willing to be interviewed for this thesis, in Catalonia the author himself contacted, through email and Facebook, some schools in which health care programmes were available.

The consent form and a draft of the interview questions were provided to schools’ staff, as well as information about how interviews were expected to develop (time, setting, recording, etc) with the intention to provide them with the maximum amount of information regarding the objectives of the interviews. Ethical issues included in the consent form (see Appendix 3), such as anonymity of informants, recording of interviews, and storage and use of records and transcripts were explicitly mentioned in the emails.

Below there is a table describing the profiles interviewed according to three criteria: programme in which they are enrolled; previous studies interviewees had done before; and interviewees’ working experience. As it was explained in the Background section, vocational education is organized differently in Catalonia and in Sweden. Because of that, there are some dissimilarities between the students’ profiles regarding what programme they are enrolled in.

For example, in Catalonia there is no single healthcare programme as it happens in Sweden, therefore, I intended to interview students from different programmes related to health care in order to grasp a broad overview of the sector. By doing so, I hoped to provide better grounds for the comparison with the Swedish data.
Table 2. Participants’ profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Previous studies</th>
<th>Working experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sweden</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1</td>
<td>Healthcare programme</td>
<td>Compulsory education</td>
<td>Summer job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>Dietetics</td>
<td>USVE in Nursing and PSVE in Make-up</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>Nursing home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catalonia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>Dietetics</td>
<td>USAE in Humanities and PSVE in Social Integration</td>
<td>Summer job as cleaner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>Prosthetic Audiology</td>
<td>USVE in Nursing and PSVE in Environment</td>
<td>Nurse assistant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

USVE: Upper secondary vocational education
PSVE: Post-secondary vocational education
USAE: Upper secondary academic education

Data collection

Because the second research question includes two differentiated issues, those of understanding and strategy, the interviews will be divided in two sections, one for each issue. In that regard, defining what are understandings and strategies is necessary.

Therefore, in this research, ‘understanding’ will be defined as the mental dispositions about a topic an individual possesses. It will be argued that mental dispositions are formed of previous knowledge and lived experiences. In the context of this research, previous knowledge will consist on what are the accounts the students’ contexts have provided to the individuals via teachers or parents who, presumably, play an important role on depicting the work life. In addition, lived experience will consist on what relation the students have with working life, i.e. have they been employed before? In this aspect, it is noteworthy to mention the existence of the possibility that previous knowledge acquired through contextual actors (teachers and parents, mainly) and individual’s lived experiences are in contradiction.

On the other hand, ‘strategy’ will be conceptualized as the actions carried out to achieve a goal. In that regard, therefore, it will be assumed that the goal VET students want to achieve is to become employed or, at least, employable. For that reason, strategy will encompass individual actions, including looking for help, aimed at improving their chances to gain a job.
Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are necessary in social research to decide what procedures are good, bad, right and wrong (Cohen et al., 2018). There are several ethical aspects that need to be addressed when conducting research and I will now explain how I have taken care of them.

In first place, I sought to obtain informed consent from the individual participants I interviewed for this research. I did so because informed consent “is a cornerstone of ethical behaviour, as it respects the right of individuals to exert control over their lives and to take decisions for themselves” (Aver Howe and Moses, 1999 in Cohen et al., 2018). In addition, some participants were minors and, for that reason, I required also their parents’ consent. In order to obtain the informed consent from participants I used the template provided by Stockholm University in which I explained the aims of my research, the data I was interested in collecting, the use I would do of that data (including recording, storage, transcription, coding, and analysis) as well my contact details and my supervisor’s contact details. Because the original template was drafted in English, I translated it into Spanish so informants in Catalonia would not have problems for understanding it. Because informants need to understand those aspects of the research that could compromise their integrity (Cohen et al., 2018), I sent via email both the consent form and the interview questions to their teachers in school when I made the first contact. In addition, I printed one copy for each of the participants, so they could read it before starting the interviews or the focus group.

In second place, privacy is another ethical aspect that needs to be addressed in social research. Privacy has been considered from the perspectives: sensitivity of the information given; the setting being observed, and dissemination of information (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 128). Because privacy entails participation in the research and answering questions, it was explained in the consent form, that participants could withdraw from the research at any point or not answer any of the questions. In that regard, therefore, I also safeguarded their right to no expose sensible information if they did not want to. Because of the topic researched and the questions formulated, moreover, there were low possibilities that participants could feel their privacy being invaded.

On the other hand, the process of disseminating the information I gathered was explained to them, again in the consent form. It was stated that I would record the interviews and the focus group, that I would transcribe the recording, that I would store the material in a safe account provided by Stockholm University, that I would anonymise the recording and that I would use the data only for this thesis. Therefore, participants were aware of the process. However, because the interviews were individual, and the focus group was done with other peers, a note regarding the privacy of the information given should be provided. Perhaps, because of the presence of classmates, participants of the focus group could feel inhibited to express certain opinions if they felt their privacy could not be granted.

As I have explained, the transcriptions were anonymised because “the essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity” (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 129). To ensure all the accounts were anonymised I transcribed the records by coding interviewees names by order of appearance. Therefore, I used the code ‘I’ for interviewer and the codes ‘R1’, ‘R2’, and ‘R3’ for respondents in the case of the focus group. For interviewees, I used the code ‘I’ for interviewer and then ‘R’ for respondent. Whenever an informant’s name was mentioned in the recording, I did suppress it.

Finally, confidentiality is about “not disclosing information from a participant in any way that might identify that individual or that might enable the individual to be traced” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 130). Because of the treatment I gave to the information I gathered, it was clear that confidentiality would, in every step of the research, be granted.
Analytical framework

In a first moment, because of the elaboration of two differentiated sets of research questions, the analytical framework consisted in two levels: the education policy level and the vocational education students’ level. This was designed this way in order to establish a relation between the aims of educational authorities, in regard of employability, together with how these aims were to be achieved through policy, on one hand, and the actual accounts of employability given by the students who were the object of these policies, on the other hand.

However, because of following an inductive methodology, the initial hypotheses and analytical framework have been altered after they have been fed with the empirical data. In the case of this research, this has been more notorious at the level of the analytical framework that covered the data collected in interviews and the group discussion. One reason for this could be that the elaboration of hypotheses and the design of the analytical framework, in this regard, departed from a critical review of the current conceptualizations of employability in the literature. At the level that addressed the policy discourses on employability, these were reviewed once students’ accounts of employability were drafted in order to identify to what extent policy documents and students’ accounts of employability matched, what aspects were missing, what aspects did not approach reality…

The first analytical framework, described in the Introduction section, presented, at the students’ level, the understandings and strategies of employability that could emerge from the students’ contexts. In addition, the intention was to fulfil these conceptualizations through the interviews carried with students and for that reason, interviews were structured in two separated categories: previous knowledge and future perspectives.

In a first instance, individual lived experiences, such as working experience, were intended to be included in the category previous knowledge, however, through the interviews, it has been proved that this element conveys a crucial role in linking what students thought of employability and how to best prepare to become employable. Interviewees continuously referred to working experience or apprenticeships as the way to gain knowledge about working life and to gain the necessary attitudes to become employable. Therefore, the importance of this discovery has caused a redefinition of the analytical framework designed ex ante and the category experiences has been created anew and it includes students’ past experiences in terms of apprenticeships and working life.

Therefore, the category previous knowledge has been converted to career building and this new category is formed by elements of choice of studies, studies satisfaction, and support. In first place, choice of studies contributes to the category career building because of the relevance qualifications, skills, and attitudes acquired during vocational studies have later in students’ professions. Secondly, satisfaction with previous or current studies is also an important element to career building in the sense that depending of the satisfaction vocational studies provide to students, a career or another will be pushed forward. Finally, support, both material and non-material, represents the personal circumstances that enable or block the pursuing of a career.

Finally, the category employability factors have substituted the previous category of future perspectives because of the link that exists between the new category and experiences. Attitudes, readiness, and having experience in prestigious working places, are the elements that form the employability factors category. They have been stated by interviewees as important aspects of joining the labour market.
Policy documents analysis

This section will show the results of the analysis carried out on the Swedish and Catalan policy documents.

The policy documents’ analysis consisted in creating a description of how the educational authorities of Sweden and Catalonia represented the world, portrayed the social order, and created social identities. In order to do that, I read all the contents of each of the three analytical categories and proceeded to describe which were the major topics covered in both contexts. A summary of the findings can be found at the end of this section (Table 3).

Representations of the world

This analytical category describes how the world is represented in policy documents as a result of the underlying power relations that give voice to the actors who create those documents. Therefore, this section will describe the discourses enacted by both Skolverket and the CCVET in regard of how the world is or ought to be in relation to vocational education and employability.

Sweden

In the Swedish case, at least three issues are found in the critical analysis carried out on Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School (see Tables 3-6). These are: the values of Swedish society; the concept of Swedishness; and the value of the individual. It is repeated in several excerpts of the documents that the values of Swedish society are fundamentally two: a strong commitment to democracy and a total respect for human rights. Other values such as individual freedom, integrity, equality, or solidarity are also mentioned as derivation of the other two.

In representing the Swedish society in these terms, the document implies that Swedish society is an open one and, therefore, it is affected by global trends. The main impact of globalization within Swedish society mentioned in the document is that of rapid changes in the labour market, however, other topics such as technological advances or environmental challenges are also considered. For example:

Changes in working life, new technologies, internationalisation and the complexities of environmental issues impose new demands on people’s knowledge and ways of working. (p. 5)

Perhaps, because of the topic analysed here, this issue would pose a valuable perspective to be analysed. However, the document does not go much deeper and there is not enough relevant material to be analysed.

Regarding how Swedishness is portrayed, the main tenet is the ‘othering’ that takes places through the document. In fact, in the section entitled ‘Understanding and compassion for others’ it is argued that discriminatory attitudes should be combated in school, especially xenophobia and intolerance. Because of that, it might be interpreted that this ‘others’ category is filled with social characteristics alien to swedishness. Although the idea of ‘others’ is displayed many times through the document, there is no explicit definition of who these ‘others’ are or in which way they are different to Swedes. Not least, there is no justification to why school should promote compassion towards them. Therefore, In addition, the document bases its defence of
swedishness in the history, culture, and language of Sweden and how these should be known by students and enhanced in schools. Moreover, Swedish identity is framed within transnational boundaries such as Nordic, European and, finally, global. Because of that, nonetheless, the document strives for an integrating and inclusive approach to these ‘others’ so that they could thrive in Swedish society.

Finally, the individual agency is emphasised over the collective. The document refers to the individual as the recipient of their own uniqueness and fosters a conceptualization by which the individual should acquire a wide range of skills such as, critical thinking, creativity, responsibility, active participation in social life, curiosity, or self-confidence among others.

If the first document examined showed the more cultural aspect of vocational education policy, the *Upper secondary school 2011* focuses on two aspects of vocational education related to the labour market. In first place, the document explains in several occasions the role that the industry plays in defining vocational education, both in designing the programmes and in establishing the goals of education. For example, in describing the reform of vocational education, Skolverket acknowledges the involvement of industry in vocational education by advocating for the strengthening of cooperation between industry and the education system with the aim to raise the quality of education. Moreover, the supply of courses was adapted in 2011 to meet the needs of local industry. Regarding the design of programmes, Skolverket explains that:

The Health and Social Care programme has no orientations (…) because the industry’s view that the vocational area needs a broad common foundation with option for flexible specialisation later on (p. 188).

By linking the industry’s needs and the quality of education, Skolverket implies that vocational education is successful insofar the graduates from within are valid to fill the needs of the economy. Therefore, the development of the individual through the acquisition of the knowledge to perform a profession is relegated to a secondary place. This perspective, thus, challenges the ideal of education as a tool to fulfil an individual’s potential. In fact, *Upper secondary school 2011* advocates for students developing a ‘vocational identity’ aligned with a ‘vocational community’:

Vocational education involves more than just vocational knowledge. It also involves students understanding the vocational culture and becoming part of the vocational community at a workplace as part of developing a vocational identity (p. 22)

However, the document does not develop further the concepts of ‘vocational identity’ or ‘vocational community’. In this way, it could be argued that Skolverket leaves the definition of these conceptualisations up to the will of industry’s actors.

In second place, the document touches upon the paths vocational education graduates can take after their studies making emphasis on students’ chances to join the labour market. For example, in the section describing the reform of vocational education, it is mentioned that:

Vocational education should provide good preparation for working life so that students can start working immediately after upper secondary school (p. 12)

In addition, in describing all vocational programmes, the document states that business and stakeholders should benefit from the outcomes of vocational education in the form of obtaining a qualified workforce.

**Catalonia**

In the Catalan case, the *Law of vocational education and training 2015* adopts a position by which Catalan society is fundamentally based in market values insofar it has become a knowledge society. For example:
The transition of the Catalan society towards a knowledge society requires strategies that allow to reach a sustainable and integrating growth (p. 3).

In this regard, therefore, the CCVET’s representation of the world verses around the goal of achieving economic growth through an increase on vocational education graduates’ abilities. Under that premise, vocational education plays an important role given that it contributes to the acquisition of competences and qualifications, and it improves people’s employability:

Vocational education must be considered as a facilitator of the necessary competences and qualifications to access and progress in the labour market (p. 2)

The law creates a framework oriented towards the implementation of the vocational education model in Catalonia as a strategic element to improve the qualification level of people, to increase their employability, and to boost companies’ competitiveness (pp. 4-5).

Implicit in these quotes there is the liberal ideal of meritocracy and competitiveness driving the market. This perspective assumes that the labour market rewards those individuals who achieve certain level of qualification without considering other dimensions of the labour market such as policy or competition among individuals. Moreover, this perspective links employees’ competences and companies’ competitiveness making, thus, individual employees responsible for companies’ development. However, there is no mention to the benefits for the graduate student in terms of working conditions for example.

Together with raising employees’ competitiveness, vocational education helps graduates to improve their employment options and, for that reason, the educational offer must be planned according the needs of the industry:

The improvement of the employment effectiveness of vocational education demands a more planned and specialized offer that is more adjusted to the needs of the labour market, especially in the emergent sectors and occupations that generate more employment and are strategic for the future of the Catalan economy (p. 4).

Therefore, these accounts point out to the prioritization of the strategic value of vocational education for the Catalan economy over the interests of the individual students and, thus, clarify the subordination relation that education renders to the economy. Notions of cultural values within Catalan society are not explicitly mentioned and, therefore, it seems plausible to argue that cultural values are tied to economic ones.

The III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016 follows the same arguments listed so far for the Catalan context. Nonetheless, it includes some references to the situation of the labour market in Catalonia, which is described as a weak one. Because of this, among the mission and general objectives of the plan, it is mentioned the necessity to raise the vocational education attractiveness by orienting the programmes to the needs of the economy.

As we have seen through the description of policy documents in Sweden and Catalonia, some differences and similarities arise regarding how educational authorities in both countries make representations of the world.

The first difference between the two contexts is related to the cultural values expressed through the documents. While we have seen how the Swedish authorities make a distinction between more humanistic values such as democratic culture or respect for human rights, the Catalan authorities link to a larger extent the values of the market and the values of education focusing on economic growth. A second difference is moderately related to the first one. Because of the distinction between humanistic and market values in the Swedish and Catalan policy documents, the individual dimension receives a closer attention in the first case.

On the other hand, we find two similarities within the representations of the world expressed in the policy documents. The first of these similarities is the emphasis both sets of policy documents make on the paths that vocational education students must take upon their
graduation. Both contexts agree that next steps in the life of vocational education graduates must be focused in joining the labour market or improving their position within it. For example, Skolverket expresses these ideas in the following excerpts:

- Vocational education should provide good preparation for working life so that students can start working immediately after upper secondary school (p. 12).
- The 12 vocational programmes provide a foundation for working life and further vocational education (p. 16).
- Vocational programmes lead to a situation where students have good employment prospects and can equip students to run their own businesses (p. 22).

Catalan authorities on the other hand mention that:

- Education systems (...) must prepare persons to manage their competences and be ready of change (pp. 2-3)
- Vocational education is a strategic element to improve the qualification level of people, to increase their employability, and to boost companies’ competitiveness (pp. 4-5).

As these excerpts show, there is a slightly difference in the perspectives taken by both education authorities that is related to the argument aforementioned regarding the individual dimension. While Skolverket and the CCVET set out that vocational education graduates must join the labour market once they have finished their studies, Skolverket takes an approach in which students are at the centre whereas CCVET talks about students as being the final output of education systems ready to feed the labour market.

The second similarity we find between Skolverket and the CCVET regarding representations of the world is that of the industry’s role in designing vocational education. Both authorities argue that education systems and economic actors must work together to achieve the goals of the latter. For that reason, it is argued that vocational programmes should be designed according to the needs of local companies so that these companies can recruit staff more easily and raise their competitiveness. From this perspective, therefore, the representation of the world pictures societies in which private actors’ interests are prioritised over public interests. In addition, the economic interests are praised at the expense of the working conditions that vocational education graduates will face in the labour market. In fact, there is no mention to these in the policy documents.

Therefore, it becomes clear that according to the policy documents analysed here, education systems must be designed and implemented to (a) satisfy the needs of the private economy, and (b) to reproduce the cultural values of the Swedish and Catalan societies.

Social order

The analytical category of social order, in this context, refers to the relationship between the labour market and education systems. As it has been argued, education systems develop two functions within contemporary societies, those of reproducing cultural values, in one hand, and creating an efficient, effective and productive workforce, on the other hand. The focus of this research has been put on the latter and, therefore, this section will describe the ways in which policy documents depict the subordination of education systems to labour market interests.

Sweden

In the case of Swedish policy documents, the notion of education systems being subordinated to the needs of the industry is made both implicit and explicitly. In first place, it is implicit on the
idea that students must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to perform well in the labour market. For example, Skolverket states that:

The programme specialisation module gives examples of the knowledge the industry needs for students to be ready for employment (p. 84).

This excerpt indicates how the industry expects to obtain a competent workforce that has acquired the relevant knowledge and is ready to be employed and contribute to the industry’s benefits. This is better exemplified in the following excerpt which explains the role of apprenticeships within vocational programmes:

Upper secondary apprenticeship education also leads to a situation where students get better insight into the conditions under which businesses operate. From the stakeholder’s perspective, this can make it easier to recruit competent staff (p. 24).

This excerpt highlights how vocational programmes are expected not only to provide knowledge and skills but also, they are meant to introduce students to the world of work through apprenticeships. As it will appear from the interviews with Swedish students, apprenticeships are not paid by the employer, in the best case the state grants a small sum of money to students as part of their studies. Therefore, the ‘conditions under which business operate’ remain to be clarified in the policy documents and, given the account of students, it seems that these conditions are based on the idea of extracting the maximum benefit out of education, mainly by obtaining a qualified workforce.

On the other hand, the role of industry in designing vocational education is made explicit through the documents in several occasions. For example:

The programme specialisation module can be adapted to local conditions in conjunction with the local programme council (p. 84).

Coordination between school and working life must be strengthened to ensure high quality of education and strong involvement from industry and the public sphere (p. 12).

These two excerpts point out the coordination between public authorities and private industry. By doing so, Skolverket directs the way in which public authorities must respond to industry needs. It is suggested that involvement of the industry in the vocational programmes automatically raises the quality of education, however, there is no rationale backing up that statement. It could be assumed, therefore, that Skolverket measures the quality of vocational programmes by their outcomes in terms of employability of its graduates. In that regard, therefore, it could be pointed out that vocational systems being measured as such is a suggestion of the way industry exhorts the educational system to its own benefit. Furthermore, the role of private industry is not constrained only to serving as an indicator of the quality of the system. As the following excerpts manifest, the provision of programmes is linked to the needs of industry. For example:

The Health and Social Care programme does not have orientations. This is justified by the industry’s view that the vocational area needs a common foundation with options for flexible specialisation later on (p. 193).

The organiser can, in conjunction with the local programme councils, adapt the education to changes in working life and in relation to research findings (p. 193).

Therefore, the views of the industry and the local councils are prioritized in terms of what is the offer of vocational education and how it should be provided.
Catalonia

The analysis of Catalan policy documents sheds a discourse that highlights to a larger extent the role education systems, and vocational education in particular, play regarding industry. As it has been said about how the world is represented through policy documents in Catalonia, by which competitiveness and economic growth are cornerstones of Catalan society, the way education contributes to society is understood mainly as a contributor to business development. This perspective is reinforced through both the law and general plan used in this context.

For example, the law of vocational education and training asserts that:

Vocational education is aimed (…) at the permanent updating of workers’ knowledge for them to be able to respond to the necessities of the economic infrastructure derived from its competitiveness (p. 1).

This is to say, as business must remain competitive they must, through vocational programmes, obtain a more qualified workforce. In addition:

Education systems must be flexible and high-quality; they must adapt to the evolution of the labour market (p. 2).

Social identities

This last analytical category mainly focuses on what individual traits vocational graduates must possess after their studies. After having described how the world is represented and what is the social order in policy documents, this category comes down to the most micro level of employability.

Sweden

In the case of Sweden, as it has been already argued, the values of Swedish society must be safeguarded and implemented by the education system. Therefore, the resulting social identities are closely linked to the two previous analytical categories. For example, regarding Swedish cultural values, although it is not explicitly mentioned, it is acknowledged that students should respect human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society. In addition, they must see themselves not only as Swedish citizens, but also European and global citizens:

Schools must help students to develop an identity that can be related to and encompass not only what is specifically Swedish, but also that which is Nordic, European, and ultimately global (p. 4).

Tied to this, however, is the understanding that students must be proud of their origins and they must empathise with the unknown collective of ‘others’:

A secure identity and awareness of one’s own cultural origins and sharing a common cultural heritage strengthens the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others (p. 4).

Apart from cultural aspects, students’ identity in Sweden is shaped by three other aspects which contribute to what Swedish policy documents call ‘vocational identity’; skills, entrepreneurship, and work. The identity related to skills is expressed through the skills students must possess once graduated. The first element is the fact that students must be ready to engage in lifelong learning:

The school system should promote (…) a lifelong desire to learn (p. 4).

This aspect of social identity is strongly related to the shift in the world of work as the result of the technological revolution that has open a wide range of occupations that require constant
updating of knowledge. This is best exemplified by the following excerpts that show that students must possess a broad spectrum of different skills and competences such as being proactive, responsible, independent, team-working, communicative, respectful or participative, among others:

Students should develop their ability to take initiatives and responsibility, and to work both independently and together with others (p. 6).

The education should thus lead to students developing a holistic view of human beings and an understanding of the importance of lifestyle for health (p. 187).

The education should develop students’ ability to deal with people in a professional way, communicate with respect for the integrity of the individual, and give people opportunities for participating and exercising influence (p. 187).

Because of having these skills, students are expected to graduate as competent workers ready to join the labour market and to adopt the vocational culture shaped by industry:

The vocational programmes provide a foundation for future occupations and further vocational education (p. 22).

[Vocational education] involves students understanding the vocational culture and becoming part of the vocational community at a workplace as part of developing a vocational identity (p. 22).

Finally, as part of the social identity traits that vocational graduates in Sweden must possess, entrepreneurship culture and identity are heavily promoted. The policy documents state the idea that everyone has the chance to become entrepreneur or run their own business:

As a result [of promoting entrepreneurship], the opportunities for students to start and run a business will increase (p. 6).
For that reason, students must develop attitudes toward entrepreneurship and they must embrace entrepreneurship culture:

The school should contribute to students developing knowledge and attitudes that promote entrepreneurship, enterprise and innovative thinking (p. 6).

Vocational programmes (…) can equip students to run their own businesses (p. 22).

**Catalonia**

In the Catalan context, social identities are not explicitly defined and, there are not clear expectations on students of vocational education and graduates. These appear only as receivers of education and deployers of knowledge to raise companies’ competitiveness. For example:

Vocational education must be considered as a facilitator of the necessary competences and qualifications to access and progress in the labour market (p. 2).

Although it is obvious the excerpt is referring to vocational graduates, it does not mention who is accessing and progressing in the labour market; students of vocational education, graduates, interns, or workers. In addition, graduates’ identity is reduced to being contributors to competitiveness and employment in the country; from a human capital theory perspective, they are seen as assets. For example:

It has to be said that increasing the qualifications entails a higher active human capital in the country (p. 14).

From this perspective, thus, educational authorities appeal to individual responsibility when it comes to acquiring and raising competences, and to expect uncertainty within their professional career:

Education systems (…) must prepare persons to manage their competences and to be ready for change (pp. 2-3).

As it has been shown in this section, social identities are framed differently in the two contexts analysed. While the educational authorities in the Swedish context put effort in describing the expectations they have on students of vocational education, their Catalan counterparts do not express these views so eloquently. One reason for that could be the emphasis educational authorities in Sweden put also in representing the world and establishing a social order in which vocational graduates have some presence. For example, it has been highlighted how educational authorities expect vocational graduates to follow the values of Swedish society and to develop an identity which is aligned with the social order in which education systems serve the needs of the industry. On the other hand, Catalan educational authorities have represented the world in a way in which economic-based aspects of society, such as competitiveness and growth, are emphasized. In addition, the social order they portray, although being similar to the Swedish one, does not pay much attention to the individuals beyond considering them as skills and competences carriers able to contribute to industries’ competitiveness.
Table 3. Summary of the findings of policy document analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representations of the world</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Catalonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swedish society respects human rights and democratic values. However, this does not challenge the ideal of subordinating the education system to the needs of the economy.</td>
<td>The economy is the fundamental driver of Catalan society. Because of global trends, Catalan economy is based on knowledge-based sectors with high-added value.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of vocational education is to imbue Swedish cultural values and prepare students for the labour market. Industry needs are to be satisfied and industry has an active role in designing vocational programmes.</td>
<td>The role of vocational education is to contribute to companies’ competitiveness, economic growth, and graduates’ employability. To achieve these goals, the needs of industry need to be prioritized in designing vocational programmes.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Social order | Vocational graduates in Sweden must acknowledge their global, Nordic, European, and Swedish cultures. They also must be respectful to human rights and democracy and empathetic with ‘others’. They, also, must develop a vocational identity in which they master several skills, are ready to progress in the labour market and are open to entrepreneurship. | Students of vocational education in Catalonia are portrayed as passive actors within society. Their contribution to economic development is acknowledged but not other cultural or social values. |

What are the conclusions from the analysis of policy documents in Sweden and Catalonia? The first conclusion is that two different pictures have been found on the basis of the analytical categories used for the analysis. While Swedish educational authorities represent Swedish society as being part of the global arena and as a safeguard for human rights and democracy, the Catalan educational authorities base their description of Catalan society on economic terms such as growth and competitiveness. This is not to say that Swedish educational authorities do not include economic aspects of society in their account, but they are not as emphasised as in the account of Catalan educational authorities. In fact, the industry needs of Swedish economic actors are prioritized and cherished through the policy documents. This, therefore, gives rise to a social order in which vocational education is subordinated to the interests of companies. In this regard, a similar trend is found in the Catalan context where the role of industry in educational planning is explicitly described as important and relevant.

These two different representations of the world, and the consequent impacts they have in social order and social identity, shape the discourses of employability by portraying the scenario in which social actors must behave. For example, by picturing the world as a global arena in which graduates of vocational education must be able to respond to global challenges, the Swedish context does attribute different tasks to the education system than the Catalan context. In this sense, tasks the Swedish education system must embark on are, for example, to develop an emphatic and understanding sense for ‘others’ because it is assumed that graduates of vocational education will work in multicultural places that require this ability. On the other hand, the
Catalan education system focuses more on producing graduates of vocational education that are ready to join a labour market that, although placed in the global frame, does not require skills to work on a multicultural workplace and, therefore, productivity and efficiency skills are emphasised.

Finally, the two other categories have a reasonable impact at the identity level. While the Swedish educational authorities take into account the individual as an active player within society, both in cultural and working terms, the Catalan educational authorities portray the individual as a passive agent contributing to the economic needs of society.

In the next section, I will provide the analysis of the focus group I carried with vocational education students in Sweden as well as the three interviews I did to vocational education students in Catalonia and I will attempt to bridge the impacts these policy analyses have on students’ understandings of employability.
Interviews results

In this section, I will analyse the data collected through interviews and group discussion in Catalonia and Sweden. I will first, describe for each context, the way that elements constitute each analytical category. For example, I will describe how career building is constructed, through the elements that constitute this analytical category, in the Catalan context and how it is constructed in the Swedish context. Once I have done this, I will compare both perspectives to career building and I will attempt to provide some contextual explanations to similarities and differences found. At the end of the section, I will provide a table summarising the findings (Table 4).

Career building

The analysis of interviews was done following the thematic analysis procedure. In first place, transcriptions were read and coded. I selected fragments that provided useful elements for building the categories previous knowledge and future perspectives. For example, I included sentences or paragraphs where students talked about choice of studies, previous studies, studies satisfaction or external support. The reason for including these elements in this category responds to the previously elaborated working definition by which previous knowledge consisted on how the students’ contexts have contributed to create for them a perspective about employability. However, because of the modification of the analytical framework, these elements constitute now the career building category.

Choice of studies

In first place, choice of studies encompasses reasons given by interviewees for choosing previous or current studies. These choices, however, are also mediated by other aspects of students’ lives that also make the career building category. For example, one interviewee appeals to the fact that choosing between two vocational programmes was decided based on friends attending or not that programme. This aspect, therefore, could be classified as support from close relations and it will be developed later along with other types of support identified on the interviews.

Sweden

In the Swedish context, Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3 had similar reasons to choose the Health and Care programme. Interviewee 1 chose the programme because she wanted to become a midwife after her studies. Interviewee 3 chose the programme because he had been working in a nursing home while studying compulsory education and he liked working there. Therefore, it could be said that they chose the programme based on their employment projections. However, there is a significant difference between these two cases. While Interviewee 3 decided to enrol in the Health and Care programme after having been working on a related job, Interviewee 1 decided to enrol because an aspiration of hers. This is an important aspect of choice of studies for two reasons. In first place, it shows that decisions such as choosing studies can be based both in past or potential experiences. I argue that this is a differential trait because expectations are, thus, born from distinct perspectives. Therefore,
interviewees’ experiences of the programme will be different. This, in turn, will influence their career building decisions. In second place, it shows that the analytical categories career building and experiences are related because two of their elements are interconnected.

On the other hand, Interviewee 2 did not know why she chose the Health and Care programme. In her case, in addition, external influence was very heavy in shaping her decision. Because of the important role school counsellors play in Swedish schools (something that will be deepened in the external influence section) she chose an academic programme following her school’s counsellor advice. However, after three weeks she changed her mind and enrolled in the Health and Care programme. In the same vein as with Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3, I argue that her expectations for the programme are different from the expectations of Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3. In addition, the lack of a reason to enrol in the programme shows that she did not choose the programme for the potential employment possibilities it could offer to her.

Catalonia

In the Catalan context, Interviewee 1 had always been interested in both post-secondary vocational programmes of Dietetics and Make-up. The interviewee chose and studied Make-up in first instance when realized that it was a post-secondary vocational programme instead of upper secondary vocational programme:

Interviewee 1: I liked both Dietetics and Make-up when I did the entrance examination for post-secondary vocational education, however, I wasn’t aware of the existence of a Make-up programme at the post-secondary vocational level; I thought it only existed at the upper secondary vocational level. Then, because the make-up sector is very badly paid, I enrolled in Make-up because I thought I could aspire to better working conditions once graduated from this programme.

In this case, three aspects of career building which could be contradictory are highlighted: career choosing because of passion; lack of knowledge about study paths and options; and the willingness to improve one’s working prospects. In this regard, the contradiction comes in terms of the interviewee taking decisions on both rational and irrational logics. In one hand, the interviewee believes that by achieving a vocational diploma in a specific field their working prospects will improve, which is a rational argument. On the other hand, however, the interviewee decided to enrol in post-secondary vocational education without being aware of the existence of the Make-up programme that she would like more.

Interviewee 2, on the other hand, studied a post-secondary vocational programme of Social Integration before enrolling in the post-secondary vocational programme of Dietetics (the current studies), because of several reasons. For example, not being sure about what to do after compulsory school and not seeing herself ready to engage in higher education were the main factors:

Interviewee 2: I started the post-secondary vocational education because I didn't see myself at university and I didn't know what to do.

When asked why she changed field of education, from Social Integration to Dietetics while having the chance to study another programme in the field she liked, she refers to not knowing what her vocation was at the time. In addition, job prospects were not a reason to choose studies in either case:

Interviewee 2: I didn't know very well, when I chose Dietetics, I didn't know what my vocation was.

Interviewee 2: Although I think your employment probabilities are higher if you have post-secondary qualifications, I didn't choose the Social Integration or Dietetics programmes because of that.
Therefore, the decisions taken by Interviewee 2 stemmed from lack of knowledge of what she liked, in career terms, rather than as a way to improve her employment prospects.

Interviewee 3 had studied a lower secondary vocational programme of Nurse Assistant and had been working as nurse assistant since graduation. Moreover, she keeps working as nurse assistant while she is enrolled in a post-secondary vocational education in Prosthetics Audiology. In her case, elements of her working experience and employment prospects have a heavy weight on the choice of current studies:

Interviewee 3: Being nurse assistant is not something I wish to do all my life because as nurse assistant you don’t have options to achieve something higher, you are assistant to the nurse and you do all the dirty job and is not my goal in life to remain stuck.

Interviewee 3: I chose this programme because there’s a lot of well-paid jobs [as Prosthetics Audiologist].

What comes clear with these accounts of choice of studies is that there are several reasons, that overlap, for vocational education students to choose one programme over another and that these reasons have little to do with employment perspectives. However, one element seems to stand out over the others. All three interviewees make reference to a potential improvement in their working conditions if they graduate from their programmes.

As we have seen, the first interviewee intended to enrol at the Make-up programme because she wanted to study at the post-secondary level and the Make-up programme was her favourite. However, when she discovered that the Dietetics programme was also taught at post-secondary level, and not at upper secondary level as she had thought before making any decision, she chose the latter over the former. Therefore, she first prioritised her decision on the fact of studying a programme at the post-secondary level over studying a programme she liked. She justified this choice by the chance of achieving better working conditions. The second interviewee, on the other hand, although admitting she did not know why she chose the programme of Dietetics, she believed that the programme could give her higher employment probabilities. Finally, the third interviewee explicitly mentions her desire to improve her career and, hence, the decision of enrolling in the programme of Prosthetics Audiology.

Therefore, in terms of career building, it could be argued that choice of studies although somewhat accidental, is quite based on rational choices.

Having analysed the construction of the analytical category choice of studies in the two contexts, some similarities and disparities can be identified. In one hand, choice of studies is very influenced by the past and potential experiences of students. In both contexts, students have argued that their choice of vocational programmes was based on the expectation to improve their working conditions or to get employment in something they liked a priori of engaging in the programme.

**External influence**

Students’ choices are barely taken in isolation either from other people or from material conditions surrounding students. Because of this, I address in this section how these two aspects influence students’ choices of studies and also, to a great extent, vocations. I will, first, focus on what aspects of students’ environment (or context) have influenced them in choosing one particular education over another. By education, I consider here two aspects: choosing between academic and vocational programmes, in one hand, and choosing one specific programme over another, on the other hand. From choice of studies and choice of profession to material and non-material support from close relationships, there is a body of aspects that drives students’ paths in one or another direction.
Sweden

The Swedish case paints a picture in which both material and non-material support have an important role. Regarding material support, the Swedish state offers, to vocational education students, a monthly grant of 1,000 Swedish crowns and free transport. In addition, it offers an extra grant of 1,000 crowns to students in the Health and Care programme as a risk compensation for their work. These benefits last during the three years of the programme and are compatible with salaries students could receive from employers.

Regarding non-material support, the focus in the Swedish case is put on school counsellors, a figure that is not present in the Catalan context. As it has been already mentioned, the role of school counsellors is quite important in supporting students to choose one study path or another. Students usually go to talk with school counsellors in their final year of compulsory education. All three interviewees mentioned that they had good grades in compulsory education and, because of that, school counsellors had advised them to take academic programmes. For example, Interviewee 1 was sure of enrolling in vocational education and had to explicitly challenge her counsellor when she was suggested to enrol in academic education.

Catalonia

In Catalonia, Interviewee 1 had enjoyed material support from her family in starting a make-up business after finishing the first of her post-secondary vocational programmes:

Interviewee 1: My father had an office for rental and he helped me to get loans to reform the office and all these things, so I could establish there my business.

In addition:

Interviewee 1: Because I did not have any kids or responsibilities I thought it could be a good idea to start again a vocational programme.

In this example material support from family members allowed the interviewee to start her professional career by her own. In addition, this material support, together with the lack of responsibilities the interviewee enjoyed, eased the way to pursue vocational education in a field the interviewee liked. This is to say, in this example, material support in the form of a space where the interviewee could establish her business helped her to start building her career. Moreover, it also granted her the opportunity to shift careers once she decided to do so.

However, having material necessities covered can be a blocker for finding employment after studies. For example, it is the case of Interviewee 2:

Interviewee 2: My parents have always inculcated me to study. The truth is that I don't have the necessity to work, that is to say, I don't have the necessity of money in the sense that I'm lucky enough that my parents can cover all my needs.

In this case, the interviewee wields parental influence to be a blocker because parents put too much emphasis on the interviewee achieving enough qualifications. She continues:

Interviewee 2: Parents have much much influence and, for example, why I don't want to work? Because mine haven't incited me, they haven't motivated me, they have been always focused on studies.

These two examples show that having material and non-material support does not necessarily equal to a boost in students’ careers. As we have seen, being supported by family can drive students either to pursue higher goals on their careers or to rely on this support for an indefinite time. Because of that, support from family, and especially in material terms, is a way to grant students the possibility to choose what they want.
In contrast to the accounts provided by Interviewees 1 and 2, Interviewee 3 acknowledges the barrier she faces by being forced to do an apprenticeship as part of the programme while she is simultaneously working. Beyond lacking the necessary time, other external factors do arise:

Interviewee 3: I work on weekdays from 14 to 21, and I can't stop working to become apprentice, I'm living with my parents but at home only my father is working and it's not the same having one salary than having two. I won't stop working.

In her case, family support is inexistent and, therefore, she does not have the freedom to choose what to do. By facing the dilemma of becoming apprentice at the expense of leaving a full-time job, Interviewee 3 highlights the constraints of not enjoying external support either by the family or the school.

Two different strands of external influence have been described here. In one hand, material support and, on the other hand, non-material support. The picture for the two contexts is meridionally different for both strands. In terms of material support, Swedish students enjoy at least three advantages over their Catalan counterparts. In first place, they receive study grants from the State while students in Catalonia have to compensate the study expenses themselves. In second place, they can receive a salary from their apprenticeships while Catalan students in most cases must work besides studying in order to sustain themselves. Finally, Swedish students receive free public transport benefits whereas Catalan students do not receive any type of compensation. In terms of non-material support, moreover, Swedish students enjoy the figure of the school counsellor. However, as it has been shown by students’ accounts of their experiences with the school counsellor, this figure can be counterproductive in helping students to choose a study path.

**Studies satisfaction**

As previously mentioned, this element of career building can be of importance in terms of continuing pursuing a career or stopping the further development of that career. Many reasons have been identified as being positive or negative in terms of studies satisfaction.

**Sweden**

In the case of Sweden, vocational programmes combine school-based training with apprenticeships. The students interviewed followed a model in which they spent two weeks taking classes at their school and two weeks doing apprenticeship in a workplace. This model is run through the three years of the programme, so the apprenticeships are a very strong part of the programme. Because of that, all three interviewees in the Swedish case allude to the role of apprenticeships and make them a central point on their studies satisfaction. Another important difference between the vocational programmes in Catalonia and Sweden is that the former do not include academic subjects at all. In Sweden, however, Swedish, English and Mathematics courses are compulsory at vocational programmes. This fact was also mentioned in the group discussion.

For example, Interviewee 1 finds her first year to have been a good one because schoolwork has not been overwhelming. She finds the model of combining apprenticeships and classes to be good because that way schoolwork is not extremely heavy, and the model allows to apply what they learn in school to what they do in apprenticeships. However, in spite of acknowledging that the programme is not overwhelming and school load is not extremely heavy, Interviewee 1 emphasises that students on the Health and Care programme still have a lot of assignments and readings. Interviewee 2 regards the “50-50 model” of classes and apprenticeship because that way students do not get tired of school. Finally, Interviewee 3 likes the fact of having two weeks of classes and two weeks of apprenticeship.
Regarding the fact of having academic subjects in the programme, all three respondents agree on its usefulness. Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2 mentioned that having academic subjects allows students to see other things apart from vocational subjects and because of that students do not feel excessively overwhelmed. Interviewee 3, on the other hand, agreed with his classmates in that having academic subjects was a good thing in spite of him considering them not useful for the apprenticeships.

On a last note, although interviewees did not make the connection explicitly, there is a relation between doing schoolwork and students reaffirming their own value. In the following section I will develop further the role of school counsellors but at this point it is interesting to remark interviewees’ opinions on how school counsellors work. Interviewees highlighted that school counsellors had advised them to take academic programmes because interviewees had good grades in compulsory education. Interviewees, in turn, expressed that school counsellors tend to direct students with good grades to academic programmes because of stereotypes on vocational programmes. Interviewee 1, for example, opined that vocational programmes are still viewed as the option for less intelligent students and Interviewee 3 thought that people still see vocational education as for the less talented. Because of that, interviewees stress the hard school work they have to perform in the programme.

Therefore, Swedish students praise the 50-50 model for two reasons; because it allows them to put in practice what they learn in school and, because practical tasks make the programme lighter. The first reason is linked to career building because it tells about the students’ desire to improve their skills for a potential job they could have in the future.

Catalonia

In the Catalan context, for example, Interviewee 1 is satisfied with current studies (post-secondary vocational programme in Dietetics) because she likes the topic, and, as already explained, she aimed for studying this topic for a while. However, she conveys some criticisms towards the programme:

Interviewee 1: It's true that some things have not been updated in this particular programme, they are somehow obsolete.

Interviewee 2 expresses the idea that she was very satisfied with the previous studies she engaged in (post-secondary vocational programme in Social Integration) and, although, she did an apprenticeship in that field and she enjoyed it, she chose to enrol in the current programme because of other reasons related to parental influence. However, she shows sharp dislike to current studies of Dietetics because of unexpected content taught at the programme and divergent opinions to how the topic is taught by teachers:

Interviewee 2: I don’t like this programme because it does not fulfil me (…) I take another approach to dietetics that is not shared with teachers. I think very differently, I think dietetics has more to do with emotions and feelings.

However, when asked why she keeps enrolled in a programme she dislikes, personal determination is the cause:

Interviewee 2: The truth is that I’m surprised by your question because I had never wonder about it, if Dietetics is truly my motivation… I guess it is but because I want to prove myself that I can graduate in spite of not liking the programme and not being good at it.

For Interviewee 3, although the current programme (Prosthetic Audiology) is though in terms of being demanding and, especially for her, makes it harder to combine studies and work, the satisfaction is high if the hard work pays off at the end:
Interviewee 3: It's hard, one does not stop working (for the programme), there has not been a single week without exams since Christmas... working and studying at the same time is very very hard.

Interviewee 3: If I get crushed but I learn absolutely everything about the profession, I don't mind being crushed, I want to learn as much as I can to start a business in the future and go forward.

Satisfaction and discouragement with vocational studies, therefore, arises from many points; liking the programme, not being successful, or getting ready to master the intended profession are some of the reasons that appeared in these interviews. These reasons help to make the argument that career building has more to do with subjective rather than objective elements.

In this section we have seen opposed perspectives of studies satisfaction. While Swedish students are favourable to the programme they are enrolled in, Catalan students do not share this perspective for their respective programmes. Arguments for both postures are given and are different. Swedish students point towards the combination of school and apprenticeships as a good model in that they have the opportunity to practice what they learn and because the programme is not excessively heavy in this way. In that regard, one student in Catalonia stresses that the programme in which she is enrolled is very demanding but, in spite of that, she still likes it because she believes the programme will grant her a good work opportunity. Therefore, it seems plausible to argue that students in both contexts value their studies according to the employment prospects they provide. Precisely that assumption is the ground to understand why two students in Catalonia do not like their programme. While one argues that the content of the programme is outdated and, therefore, it could put graduates in disadvantage in relation other graduates from other programmes, the other student argues that she disagrees on the approach taken by teachers and points towards the programme being useless for her. In conclusion, from the analysis of this section it becomes clear that the satisfaction with a programme is based on the employment opportunities it can provide.

Up to this point, I have compared the processes behind career building for Catalan and Swedish students of vocational education. Two rather different pictures have emerged. In one hand, it could be argued that both Catalan and Swedish students choose their respective vocational programmes in the healthcare sector based on the employment outcomes they think the programmes could provide. As I have shown, students form their beliefs on the programmes’ employment outcomes based on either past or potential experiences. There were two cases, one in each context, of students who had been working in the field of healthcare and who desired to obtain a better position in the labour market. Therefore, they chose the programme based on their experience and knowledge of the labour market. On the other hand, there were also two cases, one in each context, of students who enrolled in the programme because they thought they would enjoy working in the healthcare sector after their studies. These two last examples represent cases where the choice was made based on their expectations of both the programme and the working outcomes. In conclusion, thus, choice of studies constitutes a dynamic aspect of career building insofar that students choose studies as a way to build their careers and they do so either ex-ante or ex-post their career start.

In regard to studies satisfaction it has been shown that students in both contexts base their satisfaction on the contribution that vocational programmes could make to their careers. Because of this and because of the different organisation of vocational education in the two countries, the degree of satisfaction is different in each context. While Catalan students show discontent in some aspects of their programme because they think the programme lacks quality, Swedish students are rather satisfied because the programme brings them several opportunities. Therefore, I would argue that because students in both contexts use a similar criterion to value their programmes, and that this criterion is linked to the previous element of choice of studies, the organisation of vocational programmes plays a very important role in career building. This, of course, has a lot to do with the role of apprenticeships in the programmes. In the following
section I will elaborate more in the importance of apprenticeships for vocational programmes and I will link the conclusion I have drawn here.

Experiences

The _experiences_ category was not initially considered to be one of its own because it was assumed that programmes would convey the teaching of employability in the classrooms. However, it has become evident that, at least in Catalonia, this has not been the case. In contrast, the apprenticeship period within each programme has been the way for students to develop a concept of employability based on their experiences. In addition, because most of the interviewees had had work experience before enrolling in their current vocational studies, these experiences could not be left out of an account of employability.

Apprenticeships

In this section I will focus on how apprenticeships are helpful for students of vocational education in showing them what the potential workplaces to which they can aspire.

Sweden

As it has been mentioned in the _studies satisfaction_ section, apprenticeships in the Swedish vocational education are an important part of the curriculum. I have described there how apprenticeships influence students’ satisfaction with the programme in which they are enrolled. Because this section focuses on how apprenticeships bring students closer to their potential workplace, I will describe now two aspects of how Swedish students perceive this relation.

One of the aspects the three interviewees brought up during the group discussion was that of responsibility. They all agree that apprenticeships were or had been useful in learning how to develop their job under the supervision of mentors. The mentor is the person at the apprenticeship workplace that is in charge of students’ development. For example, Interviewee 1 put it this way:

  Interviewee 1: You’re not employed, and you don’t have many responsibilities in the same way because you are not allowed and it’s on your mentor.

This, in turn, brings two other relevant aspects of apprenticeships in the Swedish context. In one hand, the relations between mentors and teachers is very close. On the other hand, when interviewees feel themselves confident enough, they start carrying out tasks which are beyond their responsibilities and which should be done under their mentor’s supervision.

Regarding the relationship between school and apprenticeships, it is important to note that schools are in charge of setting the apprenticeships for their students. In addition, during the apprenticeships, students’ teachers and students’ mentors meet several times and, in last instance, teachers follow mentors’ insight to grade students. To do so, the three parts (student, teacher, and mentor) hold a common meeting in which mainly the teacher and the mentor discuss the student performance. This procedure might cause students to feel nervous by several reasons. Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2, for example, state that:

  Interviewee 1: I’m a bit nervous. I have to be in the room while they are talking about you.

  Interviewee 2: Yeah, it’s like you are not really there but you are. It’s awkward.

However, because teachers have the last word in grading, students feel that they are still closer to their teachers than their teachers to mentors. Therefore, students feel somehow supported by teachers. For example, Interviewee 3 holds that teachers acknowledge whether mentors are addressing or not students’ performance appropriately:
Interviewee 3: If the mentors only talks s**t about you, the teacher will understand this mentor is not good for you. Because the mentor is supposed to bring forward the good things you’ve done and the things that need improvement.

This cooperative model, therefore, can be helpful to students in developing their working identity because they are backed up by teachers and constructively advised by mentors. At this point, thus, it is helpful to bring forward how apprenticeships help students develop self-confidence by taking extra responsibilities in their workplaces. All three interviewees admit that they carry out tasks they are not supposed to. They base this behaviour upon two arguments. The first one is that after some time doing routine tasks they have learnt them, and they are not afraid of doing them. For example, in the case of working at the nursing home, Interviewee 1 claims that:

Interviewee 1: In the nursing home you learn everything there’s to know in like four weeks, and then you are just there doing things routinely.

The other argument is that they work independently because their mentors know they are capable of doing things they are not be supposed to be doing. They have gained their mentor’s confidence by having showed responsibility and good practices.

Another aspect of apprenticeships being useful for students is that they provide tools for students to develop their skills in the working place. In relation to having been working at a nursing home, all three interviewees share their opinion that they have developed techniques to identify patients’ problems and techniques to deal with different types of patients, which is a fundamental part of their potential jobs. This aspect is closely related to readiness which is included in the employability factors section and, therefore, it will be further developed there because it includes individual skills that help to build employability understandings.

Finally, the last aspect of apprenticeships that could be relevant in highlighting their role in the conceptualisation of employability is that of the opportunities that apprenticeship provide to students of vocational education. Interviewees mentioned that because shortage of personnel in the health sector, their mentors insisted in employing students in hourly basis. For example, Interviewee 2 states that the mentor at her workplace wishes she would be 18 years old so she could start working regularly in the nursing home. Interviewee 1, on the other hand, mentions that her mentor wants her to work during summer, or when there is a school break. Because of this, perhaps, Interviewee 3 argues that their chances of being employed after their studies are high if they just perform well and establish a good network while doing their apprenticeships. However, they complain that the working conditions available are not excessively appealing because of the hourly basis contracts they are offered and because of the low salaries paid. As much important this aspect could be in the formation of employability understandings, it is beyond the scope of this research.

**Catalonia**

In the case of Catalonia, however, in relation to how teachers address employability within the programmes, Interviewee 1 holds that teachers leave to the apprenticeship period the tasks of providing students with knowledge about joining the labour market:

Interviewee 1: Teachers drive you to apprenticeships, they tell you in which field you could work but I miss some efforts by them to enthusiasm you.

Interviewee 2 is exhaustive in pointing out the lack of help from teachers and school’s staff:

Interviewee 2: No, they didn't help us at all. Apprenticeships took place during the second year, but we didn't get help with contracts or agreements, if you give me now a contract I don't know what is correct and what is not.
Criticism for how apprenticeships are organized is also directed at being imposed over students' will. For example, Interviewee 1 states that:

**Interviewee 1:** The first stage of apprenticeships is done in a laboratory and in the second stage you can choose if you want to be in a clinic or in a hospital. I don't like this because I don't like being in a laboratory and I am forced to do it instead of being in a clinic or a hospital, which I like.

Moreover, the interviewee sees this imposition as an obstacle to finding employment after her studies:

**Interviewee 1:** It's harder to find a job in something you like if you haven't done enough apprenticeship or the enterprise does not know you enough.

Finally, a relevant aspect of criticism has to do with the tasks performed during the apprenticeship:

**Interviewee 1:** I was supposed to be working in a laboratory as quality controller but in reality, I was doing administrative tasks like introducing quality controls' results in the computer instead of running the controls properly, sometimes apprenticeships have nothing to do with what we have studied.

Nonetheless all the criticism pointing towards organizational matters, apprenticeships are kept in high esteem by students of vocational education for many reasons. For example, Interviewee 2 praises apprenticeships because of providing with experience and knowledge:

**Interviewee 2:** By doing apprenticeships you see if you like what you are doing, and you see yourself doing it in the future or not (...) One positive thing in that employment aspect is that apprenticeships allow you to put in practice what you did at school and then you realize that you learn by doing.

**Interviewee 3** supports this perspective:

**Interviewee 3:** We do apprenticeship three days a week and it is useful to gain experience. The good thing about this model is that enterprises train you in order to employ you afterwards. They train you the way they like the work done. On the other hand, is like they auction us. They train us but before picking who is going to work with them they interview us.

However, she is enrolled in a ‘dual model’ of vocational education by which enterprises design and actively deploy vocational programmes with the aim of recruiting graduates from these programmes afterwards. In this regard, therefore, this statement resonates with aspects of the organization of apprenticeships carried out by education authorities. According to Interviewee 2, this could be a good way to ease the transition to the labour market given that:

**Interviewee 2:** Apprenticeships give you more opportunities because enterprises are interested in employing people that have worked with them before, and you know how they work so there's no need for an adaptation period. For example, at one place where I did the apprenticeships they told me that they employed more often people they knew than someone unknown because they know how we work.
Finally, apprenticeships in vocational education provide advantage in relation to higher education graduates when it comes knowledge about how to perform well in the workplace. In the case of Interviewee 3 she refers to her job as nurse assistant:

Interviewee 3: I know nurses that come from higher education and they have studied the academic track at post-secondary education, they haven't been in vocational education, and they don't know how to work, how to relate with people, how to teamwork... I see apprenticeships as the most important thing.

Working experiences

Sweden

In the case of Swedish students, past working experiences have consisted in summer jobs that not in all cases have been related to the Health and Care programme. Only Interviewee 3 had been working at nursing homes before enrolling in the programme. He had done that in his summer holidays to get working experience and helped him to enrol in the programme. On the other hand, Interviewee 1 mentioned that she had been doing some small jobs during past summers and these summer jobs have turned to be better paid than jobs at the nursing home.

Catalonia

In terms of how past working experiences helped students of vocational education in Catalonia to enrol in these studies, all accounts refer to the being able to overcome poor working conditions they faced at their workplaces. For example, Interviewee 2 narrates her experience as cleaner in a hostel in the following terms:

Interviewee 2: I was working one summer in a hostel. I was doing cleaning and receptionist tasks because it was a small hostel and I had to do everything. There I realized that working in something you like is important because at the end of the day I was exhausted, and it was something I didn’t like… I used to think “what a crap!”.

Interviewee 3 provides a similar description of her current job as nurse assistant with the addition of improving her life conditions:

Interviewee 3: I want to do something that really fulfils me, because being here you don’t know for sure if tomorrow you’ll be sacked, or they’ll change your schedule... my future plans are to emancipate from my parents and I need money for that, I can’t afford it by working here.

From this evidence, it remains proved that apprenticeship and previous working experience provide not only with knowledge about what one likes or not but also with knowledge about what is necessary to perform well in a job and, therefore, have greater chances to be employed in the future. This aspect is linked through the emphasis interviewees place on doing a job they like and constitutes a central element in what they understand by employability.

Employability perspective

What do vocational education students think is important for them to gain, or maintain, a job in their fields? So far, this question has been partially answered here by looking at how students of vocational education have built, and keep building, their career and how the experiences they have had so far have shaped their perspective of employment.
In that regard, two brief conclusions have been exposed at the end of the two previous sections: in one hand, the accidentality of career building that has arisen from several elements such as lack of knowledge about possible paths within the education system, passion for one field of education over another, or personal circumstances out of students’ range of power; and, in the other hand, the relevance that previous working experiences have carried on students’ perspectives, either by helping they realize what they desire to accomplish later in life or by giving them a chance to be placed in an actual working context.

However, personal attributes, readiness to work, or prestigious working places, have turn to be an important aspect of how employability perspectives are constructed, and they have not been included in the explanation up until this point. Because of that, this section will expose them.

**Personal attributes**

**Sweden**

For the Swedish context, two main issues have arisen regarding the personal attributes that build employability. In one hand, socializing with patients is regarded as the most important issue by the three interviewees. Socializing requires knowing what the patients need and knowing how to provide a solution for this. For example, Interviewee 1 refers to the case of patients with dementia. She asserts that as workers they need to be able to comfort people because of the requirements of that particular illness.

In the other hand, interviewees think that teamwork is also a necessary attribute to work in a health-related environment because of the tasks they have to carry out and because of the shortage of personnel they face very often. For example, because of the existing routines in the nursing home, workers need to coordinate to do all tasks required for the care of patients. In the hospital, however, because a different nature of work, doctors, nurses and apprentices develop close relationships because they spend most of the working time together. In addition, because of being constantly understaffed, good teamworking is necessary because the situation stresses workers and they need to collaborate.

**Catalonia**

In first place, Interviewee 1 mentions qualifications, attitudes, motivation, experience and liking the job as important issues to become employed:

Interviewee 1: I think the more qualifications you have the better, but also the attitude you bring is important (…) attitude is valued and prioritised.

Interviewee 2 refers in similar terms to personal attributes being an important aspect of employability:

Interviewee 2: *I think the will to work and a good attitude are important factors (…) If you work with energy and you make an effort, you get a reward, being it economic or feeling good, you know? I think attitude is the most important factor, and also being confident in oneself because when you are an apprentice you can make mistakes, but when you are an employee you can’t make those mistakes.*
Interviewee 3 includes in her perspective attributes that could be specific to her field of vocation (Prosthetic Audiology):

Interviewee 3: An important thing for employability is to be a good person, mainly because we are going to be dealing with people and if you don’t care about what the other person is going through and you’re going to take advantage of them, you are not doing your work properly.

Interviewee 3 also provides insight on teamwork:

Interviewee 3: To be very patient and to accept your mistakes, because if you are able to do so, the others will look at you differently and you had gained a lot of points.

Readiness

Sweden

In the case of Swedish vocational education, objective and subjective perspectives to readiness can be analysed. The facts that, in most cases, students take further responsibilities than they are required as apprenticeships and, that mentors show interest in employing them after their studies, prove that these students are ready to join the labour market. However, subjective aspects are also found. For example, students mention that apprenticeships have helped them be ready to perform the job they have been practicing. On the other hand, nonetheless, they state that most of the things they have learnt in the programme are not totally useful, especially when they refer to working in the nursing home. They find apprenticeships as being the crucial factor in making them ready for working because several reasons. In first place, apprenticeships allow students to develop self-confidence to carry out tasks they had never done before. For example, Interviewee 3 explains how his mentor guided him in dealing for first time with a patient suffering from schizophrenia.

Vocational education students in Sweden base their readiness on having completed the apprenticeship period satisfactorily. The following excerpts from Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3 summarise very well why they think they are prepared for joining the labour market:

Interviewee 1: I think after your apprenticeship you’re kind of prepared.

Interviewee 3: You’re not prepared for work until you’ve done your apprenticeship.

In addition to this, interviewees make a distinction between being ready for working in a nursing home and being ready to work in a hospital. Interviewee 3, who has experience working in both environments, argues that work is different in every section of the hospital (transplants, cancer, psychiatry, etc) and is not until one has been working in them that he or she knows the details of the job and then is ready. In contrast, he agrees with Interviewees 1 and 2 when they argue they are ready to work in a nursing home because the job is highly repetitive and easy to learn.

Therefore, they place more emphasis on what they have learnt through the apprenticeships rather than on what they have learnt in school lessons, and Interviewee 1 expresses it in these terms:

Interviewee 1: You forget what you’ve learnt in school if you don’t practice. When I started in hospitals, I forgot some details from the nursing home. If you do apprenticeships in the cancer section, you know everything there is to know.
Catalonia

In the Catalan context, several aspects are in play in how students self-perceive theirs. For example, Interviewee 2 explains her readiness to work in both fields of education she has engaged in (Social Integration and Dietetics). Regarding Social Integration, a field she liked while studying and enjoyed during her apprenticeship, she states that:

Interviewee 2: I was insecure before working with Down Syndrome patients, but when I had the chance to work with them I realized I was good at it.

Interviewee 2: In working with Down Syndrome patients, I don’t want to take flowers, but I’m gifted.

However, in the field of Dietetics which she abhorred:

Interviewee 2: I don’t search for a job as nutritionist because I feel very insecure, I don’t think I’ve reached all the necessary knowledge for being a nutritionist.

On the other hand, Interviewee 1 appeals to motivation and experience as elements of her readiness to work:

Interviewee 1: I stay positive and motivated, and I guess the fact that I have had my own experience gives some motivation and can be helpful.

Interviewee 3 agrees to some extent with Interviewee 1 in the importance of previous experience and the lack of criticism she has received during her working life:

Interviewee 3: I believe I’m ready to work, I’ve been working since I was 16 and no one ever told me anything bad, and I guess if that would have been the case, someone would have told me… in that regard I see myself ready.

Employment outlook

Together with the personal attributes of the students and their readiness to perform a job, the employment outlook is a relevant aspect of employability. In this section I will analyse what do students think are important factors in this respect. Again, apprenticeships turn to be a significant element of employability. While in previous sections I have described how apprenticeships help students both to learn a profession and to make them self-confident, I will focus here on how apprenticeships can be a stepping-stone into the labour market.

Sweden

In Sweden, students interviewed perceive an optimistic situation of the labour market. All three agree they have good chances to join the labour market once they have graduated from the programmes. They attribute their high chances of employment to the shortage of staff in the healthcare sector. As it has been mentioned before, some interviewees note that employers at their apprenticeship places have insisted on employing them. In addition, interviewee 3 explains he is currently working at three places because those places need personnel and because he accessed them through the apprenticeships.

Catalonia

In this sense, in Catalonia, the fact of having been working or doing an apprenticeship at prestigious companies or hospitals is regarded by students as a positive thing towards employment prospects. For example, Interviewee 1 states that:

Interviewee 1: Yes, the fact of doing the apprenticeship at a big hospital gives me more chances. This hospital provides services to other companies, schools, nursing homes, so the hospital has many branches and they can place you in any.
She also states that apprenticeships can be helpful in creating networks and they increase students’ chances to gain employment. However, she believes that students need some luck if they decide to look for employment in other workplaces of that where they have been apprentices.

Interviewee 2 also sees an advantage in having done the apprenticeship period in a well-known company in the nutrition business:

Interviewee 2: If you are lucky enough to work in very well-known brands is an advantage in your curriculum because it’s not the same to work for a local herbalist’s shop than to work in a company traded in the stock market, for example.

Finally, Interviewee 3 stresses the fact that companies have funded and designed the programme in which she is enrolled. According to her, companies are highly interested in contracting the students because there is a shortage of skilled workers in that field (Prosthetic Audiology). In that case, apprenticeships in that programme would be a safe way to join the labour market.
**Table 4. Summary of findings of the focus group and the interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Catalonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career building</strong></td>
<td>This category is based on students’ choice of studies, external influence, and studies satisfaction. In the case of students in Sweden, the choice of studies was grounded on students’ desires to pursue a career on their chosen field. They were heavily influenced by study counsellors who advised them to enrol in academic paths given their good grades in compulsory school. Perhaps, because of having chosen their studies because of their preferences, they were highly satisfied with the programmes they were enrolled in.</td>
<td>Students in Catalonia chose their programmes because several reasons. Among them, liking the programme and improving their position in the labour market were the most notorious. External influence did have a different impact on them. In contrast to their Swedish counterparts, they did not enjoy the figure of a school counsellor. However, the lack of funding for apprenticeships or studies made it hard for them to combine apprenticeships and work. Studies satisfaction, in addition, was not excessively high because of the way apprenticeships were organised or the programme content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiences</strong></td>
<td>Students of vocational programmes in Sweden had had few working experiences besides the apprenticeships within the programme. These apprenticeships, however, had turned very useful in several aspects. For example, apprenticeships increased students’ confidence in themselves, they also served to grow networks and, finally, to put in practice what they had learnt in the programmes.</td>
<td>In contrast to students in Sweden, most students in Catalonia had had work experiences before enrolling in their programmes. In fact, having worked before was, sometimes, the reason to enrol in vocational education. Because of that, they found they had already a good deal of knowledge about the world of work. Regarding apprenticeships, they found them to be a good stepping-stone into the labour market because they provided confidence and experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employability</strong></td>
<td>This category is based on personal attributes, readiness to work, and employment outlook. Students of vocational education in Sweden expressed the more important personal attributes to perform their job were socialization and team-work. They saw themselves as ready to join the labour market, especially after the apprenticeship period, because they were confident in themselves. Finally, they thought their employment outlook was good because of a shortage of health personnel in the sector.</td>
<td>Students in Catalonia expressed that having knowledge, good attitudes, motivation and team-work spirit were the most important personal attributes in terms of finding employment after graduation. In addition, they felt confident to join the labour market especially after having done the period of apprenticeship in which they learnt how to perform a job in an actual workplace. However, they did not see the employment outlook to be very attractive because they felt working conditions were not good enough.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The aims of this study were two. The first was to expand the existing knowledge on both discourses and understandings of employability in the field of vocational education. The second was to carry out an international comparison of two different context on the issue.

In order to achieve these aims, I based the study in two separate sets of research questions that demanded different methodological approaches. In one hand, because I intended to research the discourses of employability made by educational authorities’ in Sweden and Catalonia, I used the latest policy documents they published and used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine them. I chose CDA because it allowed me, in first place, to portray the power relations in which educational authorities are involved and, in second place, to create a picture where representations of the world, social order and social identities were described (Fairclough, 2013). Under this framework, I developed the Swedish and Catalan context and identified similarities and differences in how the educational authorities described their societies, the role of vocational programmes, and the individual characteristics vocational graduates should possess after their studies. In the other hand, as I was interested in uncovering students’ understandings of employability, I carried out a focus group and three interviews. As I have explained already, this was an unintended outcome of a misunderstanding on the access process. However, using two different techniques to grasp students’ perspectives allowed me to acquire a richer data. Mainly, informants in the focus group were more prone to discuss their opinions and views among them. This was especially useful when their opinions on an issue diverged because it started a debate in which opinions changed. That was the case when they discussed their working conditions and one participant argued that working with hourly contracts was a better employment because the higher pay he got. Nonetheless, the other participants challenged this opinion arguing that they preferred more stable working conditions and, eventually, changed the mind of the first participant. On the other hand, individual interviews provided an environment in which informants felt they could elaborate their answers and, therefore, give a more detail account of their situation.

On the debate about what criteria of quality are to be considered in qualitative research I argue that the middle ground position adopted by Hammersley (Bryman, 2012) is the more adequate for this research. As I have argued, CDA advocates for the existence of an external reality, something supported by Hammersley who, at the same time, “disavows any suggestion that it is possible to reproduce that reality” (Bryman, 2012, p. 398). Therefore, and because I argued that my interpretation of the data could be different from the interpretation carried by a colleague I will use reliability and validity measures of the quality of this research. In one hand, reliability can be both external and internal. While the first addresses the replicability of a study, the second considers the agreement between several observers about the data. Because I used public policy documents, the data for that part of the study is accessible and, therefore, can be used for other studies. However, as I have mentioned, other observers could interpret this data in a different way to the way I did, and, therefore alter the results. Nonetheless, my supervisor acted as external observer and we kept discussions as to how interpret the data, therefore, the reliability of this part of the research lies on that fact. This also happened with the data acquired through the focus group and interviews. In addition, as I transcribed the full record of both the focus group and the interviews, this data would, eventually, be available to other researchers. One issue in this regard, however, is whether the data I acquired would have been equally
acquired by another researcher. Because the homogeneity the data provided, which allowed me to build several themes, I argue that this aspect of replicability is also secured.

Regarding internal validity, which addresses “whether there is a good match between researchers’ observations and the theoretical ideas they develop” (Bryman, 2012, p. 390), the coincidences between the theoretical background and the findings of this research support the claim that internal validity is also guaranteed for the two sets of results.

The findings of the policy documents and the interviews analysis show some coincidences and challenges with the theoretical framework from which this research departed. I will discuss now what those results reveal and how they interact with one another. Because of the two set of research questions in which I based this thesis, the results from the policy documents analysis give rise to the discourses on employability while the results from the interviews are the ground for the understandings of employability. Therefore, I will first address the linkages between the discourses created through the policy documents with the previous literature and, second, I will repeat the process with the understandings of employability from students.

James Reid argued that “the significant ideology organizing all levels of education in westernized industrialized countries is that of neoliberalism” (Reid, 2016, p. 56). Although this hypothesis was not one that drove my research, it provides an important guiding aspect. Reid’s words manifest that education is a politized field and that western industrialized countries (categorisation in which both Sweden and Catalonia fit) are so in a specific way. Neoliberal perspectives of education include processes of deregulation, privatisation and marketization (Dovemark et al., 2018) but also the implementation of new public management (NPM) which both Sweden (Lundahl et al., 2013) and Catalonia (Verger & Curran, 2014) have adopted. The implications of education being a political arena are that several sectors of society become interested in shaping educational processes. In addition, because of neoliberal tendencies have gained a stronger role in the recent past, economic interests advocating for deregulating, and privatizing education have prevailed. Vocational education is not excluded from these trends and, actually, the first set of research questions of this thesis aimed at uncovering the role of economic actors in shaping this sector of education.

In this regard, and as we have seen through the analysis of policy documents, the representations of the world made in both Swedish and Catalan contexts respond to a great extent to the interests of economic actors. While Swedish policy documents include democratic and patriotic values, such as respect for human rights and the safeguard of swedishness, in their depictions of society, economic development is a cornerstone issue. For example, Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman have addressed the ‘neoliberalisation’ of Swedish upper secondary education and argue that “the policy approach of promoting unification and citizenship has become marginalised in favour of promoting goals such as competition and employability” (2017, p. 3). On the other hand, Catalan policy documents describe explicitly the Catalan as a knowledge society based on competitiveness and economic development. Although they did not focus on vocational education, Verger and Curran (2014) researched the role of stakeholders in implementing NPM measures in the Catalan education system and concluded that semiotics was a useful approach to understand the processes of designing educational policy according to stakeholders’ interests.

Representing society in a way in which economic interests are to be satisfied has implications on the social order conformed by the arenas of work and education. Given that vocational education prepares young people for the world of work, employers’ demands are prioritised in schools’ functions. In describing how neoliberalism influences education discourses, Leach goes on to state that “the role of governments and others in positions of power is to ensure individuals have the knowledge, skills, powers and freedom to become innovative entrepreneurs in the competitive global market place” (Leach, 2017). This social order is clearly identified in the policy documents analysed in the two contexts of this research. In several occasions they
stress the need of individuals to acquire knowledge to become employable in the global labour market and to embrace the culture of entrepreneurship. Because of the development of new forms of work in a neoliberal context such as technological innovations, multicultural workplaces or flexible working times, vocational programmes put emphasis on students acquiring not only subject knowledge but also the so-called soft skills, embracing communication, team-work, or problem-solving skills. In addition, this is part of the process Leach calls “cooling out” in which individuals are made responsible of their situation in a context of weak labour markets (Leach, 2017). In this regard, Kendall and French (2018) argue that this is a consequence of education policies being informed by neoliberal accounts in which self-interested individuals and deregulation of markets are core elements.

Picturing society under the frame of neoliberalism and assigning specific tasks to schools to comply with the neoliberal social order results on vocational education students being demanded to adopt a determined identity in order to thrive socially. For that reason, I have also analysed the resulting social identities of policy documents. In comparing employability discourses in the UK and the USA, Boahin and Hofman (2013) concluded that the boundary between employee and citizen has become indistinguishable on the basis of education being informed by employers’ demands. This is the case of the Swedish policy documents in which a ‘vocational identity’ is explicitly demanded as an outcome of vocational programmes. This process of instilling social identity through the curriculum has an impact, as I have shown on the analysis of interviews, on how students of vocational education realize the precariousness of the labour market they will join once they graduate, highlighting thus the structural weaknesses they will face. In response to that, aligned with policy demands, students of vocational education deploy a strategy in which personal attributes are reinforced in order to become employable, i.e. the knowledge they develop in vocational programmes is not enough to reach a satisfactory position in the labour market (Siivonen & Isopahkala-bouret, 2016) because individual responsibility has been established as the explanatory factor by educational authorities.

On the perspective of vocational education students’ understandings of employability, I highlighted three main themes: career building, experiences, and employability perspective. Relevant literature has addressed the issue of career management as an important aspect of how students understand employability (Boahin & Hofman, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009; Pool & Sewell, 2007). As the findings show, in both contexts, students of vocational education based their choices of studies on their career plans. This conceptualization of career management, however, differs somewhat to what is meant in the literature, especially in the literature focusing on higher education graduates’ understandings of employability. The meaning of career building, here, includes the previous decisions to enrol in a specific programme because it considers that a career starts before enrolling in education and not after graduation as it is usually considered. In addition, as it has been argued in the results section, choices of studies respond to both irrational and rational logics. Therefore, the conceptualisation is a broad one and contributes to the understanding of employability by highlighting the perspectives individuals take on managing a career.

Experiences were also an element of employability conceptualisations in the literature (Pool & Sewell, 2007) and the results of the interviews resonate with the arguments used to include it in employability models. Pool and Sewell argue that “graduates with work experience are more likely to secure employment than graduates without (p. 285). Although they were referring to higher education graduates, the interviewees of this research wielded similar arguments regarding how work experiences helped them to feel more self-confident towards the labour market because they had had the chance to develop their abilities and skills. In addition, vocational education students regarded apprenticeships as the best tool available to them for stepping into the labour market successfully.
Finally, most conceptualisations of employability found in the literature focused on the individual aspect of employability (Cremin, 2009; Finch et al., 2013; Gedye & Beaumont, 2018; Graham, 2017; Howieson, Mckechnie, & Semple, 2012; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Vocational education students in this research argued that individual factors were important regarding their chances to get a job. However, they were aware of other aspects external to them such as labour demand by the part of employers.

The findings of this study draw some conclusions of interest for how employability is conceptualized, both in the discourse of educational authorities and in the understandings of students, in the field of vocational education. In first place, employability is discussed in policy discourses as both a situation vocational graduates encounter and a quality they must possess. In the two contexts analysed here, work is the cornerstone factor to drive economic growth and also, according to the representations of the world made by educational authorities, societal development. In the case of Sweden, in addition, cultural aspects are also emphasised as part of the discourse but in a way that these not pose a challenge to the discourse of economic growth; there is neither mention of democratic values being a counterbalance to capitalism nor even a mention to industrial conflict between employers and workers. Under the framework, then, of an unchallenged discourse of productivity and competitiveness, policy portrays employability as the necessity for societies to manage the workforce in a way that reaps off as much productive labour as possible. As we have seen, this representation of the world creates social order and social identities materialized in the role of schools and the identities of students. Vocational programmes, for example, have as a goal to form a skilled and adaptable workforce and, to promote entrepreneurship. Students of vocational education, on the other hand, are required to develop a vocational identity in which they adopt the logics of perpetual development in terms of career, at any expense.

A second conclusion of the study is that students of vocational understand employability as the goal and expected outcome of their studies, i.e. vocational education is the necessary but not unique mean to achieve employment. This understanding is linked to the discourse of employability drawn in policy documents. In one hand, students assume the paradigm of endless economic growth and do not challenge it, in some cases because they do not have the chance to do so because of material conditions. In the other hand, students of vocational education attend those programmes in order to improve their chances of employment by upskilling themselves in a field they like. However, they acknowledge that acquiring the necessary knowledge to perform a job is not enough to be employable. They realize that developing a vocational identity, based in soft skills and employer-friendly attitudes, is a necessary option to thrive in the labour market.

Implications beyond research

These conclusions have an impact on conceptual, practical and political matters. In first place, the concept of employability has gained a broader perspective in which the context, as described by actors with a relevant role in defining employability, is taken into consideration. This has revealed that definitions of employability are not neutral and respond to existing power relations in society. On the other hand, including context in the conceptualization of employability has meant that individual aspects are not to be overemphasised. Because students of vocational education understanding employability as a necessary but not sufficient mean towards a greater goal indicates that employability does not solely depend on the individual efforts. Therefore, the absolute and the individual dimension of employability need to be reviewed in order to accommodate these perspectives.

The practical implications stem from the issue of researching employability. Because the context, and the builders of that context, need to be taken into account, focusing only in the
individual agents’ perspectives leaves the structural mechanisms out of the picture. For that reason, I argue that identifying the authors, mission, and vision of policy documents is an important matter when researching discourses on employability. On the other hand, as we have seen in this study, the way students of vocational education understand employability does have implications in shaping their careers and, therefore, including this aspect is also important in order to build a comprehensive concept of employability.

Finally, in terms of political implications, these results highlight the hegemony of neoliberalism which eases the way in which the State aids capital on the submission of public institutions to private benefits. As I have pinpointed, the role of the school is, under this framework, relegated to produce a competent workforce able to assimilate its position within the social order. To raise a critical citizenship that challenges the status quo seems to be left for other arenas if any.

**Where to go from this point?**

In terms of future research, these results point towards the need to study in more detail the structural mechanisms found in the context of employability. Although it has not been the focus of this research, the broader political, social, and economic context is relevant to employability. I have shown how differently Swedish and Catalan educational authorities conceptualize employability. An underlying reason for that could be the variety of neoliberalism implemented in both contexts. While Sweden has been subject to social democratic policies in recent decades, that has not been the case of Catalonia.

This hypothesis, of course, would need a more detailed formulation and it would seek to include how the different political regimes have, for example, shaped the labour market and the educational system. To do so would allow to establish more solid relations between the structural definition of employability and the understandings of it made by individual agents.

In turn, as employability is just a part of the neoliberal discourse on vocational education policy, researching the impact on other aspects of that discourse such as competence-based learning, teacher autonomy, or new public management, would help in creating a broader perspective on how policy is designed and to what ends. In this regard, therefore, the role played by skills, or competences, in employability is relevant because the political implications of neoliberalism in areas such as education and the labour market have shifted the way individuals behave. How skills are assessed, developed, or governed, thus, could be of interest in order to understand the way employability is used as a legitimizing tool for the new world of work.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to accomplish three purposes. In first place, I wanted to understand how policy documents portrayed a discourse regarding employability in the vocational education sector. Previous research, from a myriad of fields, theorised on employability issues regarding higher education graduates and paid little attention to vocational education graduates. Therefore, I aimed to provide some knowledge to the field. In second place, I sought to provide accounts from vocational education students on which were their understandings of employability and how they did position themselves in the labour market according to these understandings. Finally, I intended to link the two sets of research questions in order to see how the former influenced the latter. These three tasks were carried out comparing two contexts from an international perspective. I compared Sweden and Catalonia, their education systems and their policies.

In order to accomplish the aims of this research, I used two different methodologies. In first place, to research how policy documents create discourse I based my research design in critical discourse analysis. Under the premise that education policy in the field of vocational education responds to the interests of economic actors, I assumed that policy documents would create employability discourses which prioritise economic interests over social ones. An example of this could be the stark argumentation for subordinating vocational programmes to the needs of companies or businesses. For that reason, CDA is a useful methodology because it takes into account power relations in the social reality. Therefore, I described the actors behind the policy documents I examined in both contexts and put them in perspective according to their aims and interests. Later, I selected some of the policy documents more relevant to the topic of employability and proceeded to collect the data of interest within those. Data collection and data analysis was carried using three categorical analysis used in CDA methodology; representations of the world, social order, and social identity. These three could be, briefly, described as: how society is portrayed by powerful actors; how the social order is created through policy documents; and, finally, what are the identities these power relations create. For the topic of this research, these three analytical categories have turned to be very useful in examining the different representations of the world made by the educational authorities of the two contexts researched. In addition, has highlighted that social order patterns respond in a similar way in both Sweden and Catalonia. Finally, it has been shown how the social identities created have been heavily influenced by the social order in which they are framed. Therefore, CDA has accomplished the task of describing and highlighting the similarities and differences of employability discourses forged in policy documents in the two contexts analysed.

In second place, in order to answer the research questions regarding vocational education students’ understandings and strategies of employability, I adopted a thematic analysis methodology by which I was able to uncover the themes around employability. These turned to be career building, experiences and employment outlook. These, in turn, were formed by several subthemes that have been largely addressed in the interviews’ analysis section. These three themes have been useful to identify what are the most pressing issues of vocational education students when it comes to employability. The first of them is the role of apprenticeships in
shaping students’ views on employability. Perhaps because it is, in many occasions, their first touch with the world of work, students of vocational education regard apprenticeships as the best way to gain a glimpse of the labour market and adjust themselves to it. If this were true, it could be suggested that there is a link between the students’ understanding of employability and the social order in which vocational programmes operate. As it has been shown, vocational programmes are largely designed by, or with its interests in mind, industry. In that regard, thus, providing students with apprenticeships is a cheap way for business to select and mould an effective and efficient workforce either by identifying who are the competent future workers or by discouraging those who do not see themselves as working in there.

The second issue raised by students of vocational education, and it could be thought as their strategy for employability, is the aspects they think are relevant for joining the labour market. Because they mentioned in many cases the cultural aspects of performing a job, such as socializing, teamwork or motivation, it could be assumed that this issue is linked to social identity aspects. As it was shown before, Swedish policy documents talked about the ‘vocational identity’ necessary to join the ‘vocational community’. In that regard, therefore, it seems plausible to argue that vocational education students have adopted this vocational culture and they are ready to deal with its consequences.
References


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Appendix 1

Interviews and focus group questions

Introductory questions
1. When did you enrol in this programme?
2. How is the programme going for you? Are you satisfied with your performance so far?
3. What subjects do you like more?

Previous knowledge
1. Why did you choose to study vocational education? Why this programme in particular? Were employment prospects a reason?
2. Did someone help you to decide what to study after compulsory education? Who was it? What advice did they give to you?
3. What have your teachers told you (and your classmates) about the labour market in your field after your studies?
4. Have you attended apprenticeships in this programme? Have you worked before? What are your thoughts on the job itself?
5. In which ways did apprenticeships or other working experiences help you to know more about the job? What are your impressions of the apprenticeship?
6. What do you think about your possibilities of having a job after your studies?
7. Which do you think are the most important factors and skills in your field to find or keep a job?

Future perspectives
1. Do you think you are ready to join the labour market?
2. What do you think is necessary to find a job in your field?
3. How has the school helped you in looking for a job?
4. In which ways are you preparing yourself to find a job?
5. Have you asked someone to help you finding a job?
Appendix 2

Table 5. CDA of Curriculum for the upper secondary school, I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Fundamental values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excerpt</td>
<td>It [the school system] should promote the development and learning of students, and a lifelong desire to learn. Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. Each and everyone working in the school should also encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person and the environment we all share. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people are the values that the education should represent and impart. The task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Representation of the world | The law regulates the school system. Normative values | Swedish society is based on democratic values. Each individual is valuable and there is an environment which deserves respect. Description of the values of Swedish society. |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Social order               | The school system takes an active role in implementing | The school staff must ensure these values are met. The school system is the safeguard of the values of Swedish society. |
Students are expected to acquire knowledge and values passively.

Students are expected to desire lifelong learning.

Students should respect human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society.

Students are unique and must participate in society responsibly.
Table 6. CDA of Curriculum for the upper secondary school, II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Understanding and compassion for others</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excerpt</strong></td>
<td>The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize. The school is a social and cultural meeting place with both the opportunity and the responsibility to strengthen this ability [to appreciate the values of cultural diversity] among all who work there. Familiarity with the culture and history of Sweden and the Swedish language should be strengthened through teaching in many of the subjects studied in the school. A secure identity and awareness of one’s own cultural origins and sharing a common cultural heritage strengthens the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others. Schools must help students to develop an identity that can be related to and encompass not only what is specifically Swedish, but also that which is Nordic, European, and ultimately global.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation of the world</th>
<th>There are ‘others’ who do not share Swedish values. Cultural diversity is defined in reference to Swedishness. The national values must be well-known.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social order</td>
<td>The school has the mission to accommodate them. The school is responsible of promoting cultural diversity. The school is in charge of teaching national values. Swedish identity is given priority over other supranational identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identities</td>
<td>Students must understand and empathize with the ‘others’. Swedishness is prioritised over other cultures and histories. Students must be proud of their origins and they must empathise with the ‘others’. Students must become Swedish but also Nordic, European and global.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. CDA of Curriculum for the upper secondary school, III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Tasks of the school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excerpt</td>
<td>The main tasks of the upper secondary school are to impart knowledge and to create the preconditions for students to acquire and develop their knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation of the world</th>
<th>Society is based on democratic values and human rights.</th>
<th>Reality is complex and the world changes rapidly.</th>
<th>Requisites for working life have changed and they are these ones.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary school is in charge of imparting knowledge.</td>
<td>Education is in charge of modelling students’ attitudes.</td>
<td>The school is in charge of imparting this specific knowledge.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identities</td>
<td>The roles of students in the social life are set.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Students must reunite certain characteristics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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## Section

### Fragment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tasks of the school</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students should develop their ability to take initiatives and responsibility, and to work both independently and together with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school should contribute to students developing knowledge and attitudes that promote entrepreneurship, enterprise and innovative thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result, the Entrepreneurial opportunities for skills are valuable students to start and in working and run a societal life and business will for further studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education in different subjects should cover ethical perspectives and provide students with a foundation for and support their ability to develop personal views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching in different subjects should give students knowledge of the European Union and its importance for Sweden, as well as prepare them for a society that will have closer cross-cultural and cross-border contacts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Representation of the world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tasks of the school</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurship is portrayed as a desirable outcome of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to Working life require workers to develop from entrepreneurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden is at the centre of the picture and supranational organisations portrayed as of interest for Sweden.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Social order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tasks of the school</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School must promote entrepreneurship, enterprise and innovation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School should promote, in turn, ethical perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is in charge of promoting Sweden’s interests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Social identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tasks of the school</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students must be proactive, responsible, independent and team entrepreneurship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone can become an entrepreneur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students must develop attitudes towards entrepreneurship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8. CDA of upper secondary school 2011, I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Reforms of 2011 in vocational programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>Vocational education should provide good preparation for working life so that students can start working immediately after upper secondary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordination between school and working life must be strengthened to ensure high quality of education and strong involvement from industry and the public sphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The number of specially designed programmes increased substantially as did the supply of local orientations and local courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The vocational programmes provide a foundation for working life and further vocational education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With a diploma from the programme, students should have the knowledge needed to work in health and social care or in the social services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation of the world</strong></td>
<td>The following step after education is working life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry is involved in education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local industry needs shape provision of vocational programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studies follow a straight path to graduation and knowledge acquisition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>The task of vocational education is to prepare an efficient workforce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordination between school and work raises the quality of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education must provide programmes for the local industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School prepares students for working life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identities</strong></td>
<td>Students must become workers as soon as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students are expected to acquire the knowledge provided without problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9. CDA of upper secondary 2011, II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Vocational programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>The vocational programmes provide a foundation for future occupations and further vocational education. Vocational programmes lead to a situation where students have good employment prospects and can equip students to run their own businesses. In addition, vocational programmes provide a foundation for further studies in vocational higher education. Vocational education involves more than just vocational knowledge. It also involves students understanding the vocational culture and becoming part of the vocational community at a workplace as part of developing a vocational identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation of the world</strong></td>
<td>The following step after education is working life. Industry is involved in education. Local industry needs shape provision of vocational programmes. Students develop a vocational identity which matches the expectations of the industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>The task of vocational education is to prepare an efficient workforce. School must form vocational identities according to the industry needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identities</strong></td>
<td>Students must become workers as soon as possible. Students are also expected to embrace entrepreneurship culture. Students are expected to understand the vocational culture shaped by industry and to become part of the vocational community ruled by the industry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The organiser must be able to demonstrate that there are planned APL places available before the education starts. It is only if planned APL places disappear during the education due to circumstances outside the control of the organiser, such as bankruptcy or a downturn in the economy, that APL can be located at the school.

Upper secondary apprenticeship education contributes, amongst other things, to a more flexible vocational education programme. Upper secondary apprenticeship education also leads to a situation where students get better insight into the conditions under which businesses operate. From the stakeholder’s perspective, this can make it easier to recruit competent staff.

Both industry and other stakeholders emphasise that upper secondary apprenticeship education imposes high demands on students’ study motivation and the ability to take personal responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Vocational programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>The organiser must be able to demonstrate that there are planned APL places available before the education starts. It is only if planned APL places disappear during the education due to circumstances outside the control of the organiser, such as bankruptcy or a downturn in the economy, that APL can be located at the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation of the world</strong></td>
<td>Flexibility within vocational education is necessary. Business and stakeholders must benefit from the outcomes of vocational education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>Companies will be in charge of providing APL as long as their economic results are good enough. If that were to change, the public sector should take the responsibility of providing APL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identities</strong></td>
<td>Students must graduate from vocational education as competent workers. Vocational education students must be highly motivated and personally responsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Diploma goals for the Health and Care programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment</td>
<td>With a diploma from the programme, students should have the knowledge needed to work in health and medical care, and the social services. In the programme, students should be given the opportunity of studying courses that provide preparation for higher education studies mainly in these areas. Working in the area requires knowledge combined from different subject areas such as medicine, pedagogy, sociology, psychology and health care sciences. The education should thus lead to students developing a holistic view of human beings and an understanding of the importance of lifestyle for health. The education should develop students’ ability to deal with people in a professional way, communicate with respect for the integrity of the individual, and give people opportunities for participating and exercising influence. Students should also be able to develop an understanding of the different needs and conditions people have and face. In addition, students should develop the ability to discuss and develop their thinking on ethical questions concerning the practice of their profession and follow the ethics applicable to their vocational area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Representation of the world | The following step after education is working life. Industry is involved in education. Local industry needs shape provision of vocational programmes. |

| Social order | The task of vocational education is to prepare an efficient workforce. |

| Social identities | Students must become workers as soon as possible. Students’ vocational identity must include communications, respect, and participatory skills. |

Table 11. CDA of upper secondary 2011, IV
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Commentaries on diploma goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fragment</td>
<td>The education should contribute to students developing the skills required for working closely with patients and users in health and medical care, psychiatry, care of the elderly, and in the functional impairment area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The core knowledge areas given prominence in the diploma goals are those required for working in all activity areas in healthcare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The focus in the programme is on students developing the ability for good customer relations and attitudes which amongst other things means respect for individual integrity and the opportunity to influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation of the world</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social order</td>
<td>The focus of the education is to provide competent workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identities</td>
<td>Students are expected to cover a wide range of disciplines within the healthcare sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patients are seen as customers and students, insofar potential workers, must satisfy their needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 12. CDA of upper secondary 2011, V

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Commentaries on the programme structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>The Health and Social Care Programme has no orientations. This is justified by the industry’s view that the vocational area needs a broad common foundation with options for flexible specialisation later on. Without orientations, the organiser can in conjunction with the local programme councils adapt the education to changes in working life and in relation to research findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>Industry has the power to decide how vocational programmes should be structured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>Vocational education is aimed at the acquisition and improvement of vocational education as a lifelong learning process, as well the permanent updating of workers’ knowledge for them to be able to respond to the necessities of the economic infrastructure derived from its competitiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation of the world</strong></td>
<td>Worker’s knowledge contributes to companies’ competitiveness and vocational education can improve this knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>(Public) knowledge must be devoted to (private) economic gains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identities</strong></td>
<td>Workers must raise their company competitiveness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14. CDA of Law of vocational education and training 2015, II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragment</th>
<th>Representation of the world</th>
<th>Social order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a wide consensus about the necessity to improve the productive model so that it becomes internationally more competitive and is able to generate more value added.</td>
<td>Competitiveness and growth are the cornerstone issues of society.</td>
<td>Qualifications and knowledge must respond to the needs of the economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implementation of proper qualifications to the real needs of the economy must avoid risks and dysfunctions in the productive system.</td>
<td>Employment is a crucial element of competitiveness and growth and, therefore, the more it contributes to these, the better.</td>
<td>The offer of vocational education must be adjusted to the needs of the labour markets and not to students’ desires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The improvement of the employment effectiveness of vocational education demands a more planned and specialized offer that is more adjusted to the needs of the labour market, especially in the emergent sectors and occupations that generate more employment and are strategic for the future of the Catalan economy.</td>
<td>Access to and progression within the labour market depend on companies’ competitiveness.</td>
<td>The law creates a framework oriented towards the implementation of the vocational education model in Catalonia as a strategic element to improve the qualification level of people, to increase their employability, and to boost companies’ competitiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The aim of correctly planning the educational offer is that companies improve their competitiveness and that people enjoy better conditions to join or progress in the labour market.</td>
<td>People’s employability and companies’ competitiveness depend on the vocational education model.</td>
<td>This structure must facilitate one of the main goals of this law: to relate all vocational education and make it closer to companies’ requirements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 15. CDA of III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016, I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Diagnosis of the current situation of the VET system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>It has to be said that increasing the qualifications entails a higher active human capital value in the country. This will contribute to the competitiveness of enterprises and the employability of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representative of the world</strong></td>
<td>Qualifications contribute to competitiveness and employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>Education is in charge of contributing to competitiveness and employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectiveness and impact of VET must be measured in their impact on companies’ competitiveness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Catalan labour market is a weak one and, therefore, employability needs to be strengthened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The education sector must save the labour markets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 16. CDA of III General Plan for VET in Catalonia 2013-2016, II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Mission and general objective of the III General Plan for VET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fragment</strong></td>
<td>The contribution to the implementation of a VET, professional qualification and guidance model in Catalonia that fosters the competitiveness of companies and improves the professional competence of people as well as their employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation of the world</strong></td>
<td>Improving competitiveness of companies implies improving people’s professional competence and employability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social order</strong></td>
<td>VET must be adapted to the needs of the Catalan economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social identities</strong></td>
<td>VET must improve people’s employability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

Master’s Programme in International and Comparative Education (2019)

Consent form

We hope you are willing to take part in the study comparing vocational education students’ understanding of employability in an international context. The implications of the study are to contribute to the elaboration of the student’s master thesis. In order to carry out the study we need to collect data regarding vocational education students’ understanding of employability during the period of March 2019.

The study forms part of the compulsory program curriculum and is supervised by one of the assigned supervisors of Dept. of Education at Stockholm University, who will ensure that students adhere to all the necessary rules. The resulting thesis is assessed and graded by an examiner at the end of the course.

We ask for your approval to use the data collected for the study. Participation is always voluntary. In order to collect data for the study, we need your signed consent on the second page of this form. Even in the case that you sign the form at this point, it is still possible for you to withdraw from participation at any time without giving a motivation why.

During the course of the student working on the study your personal data are protected and will not be disclosed to unauthorized persons. We will store recordings and other details in a safeguarded manner. Any photographic/video/sound collected in the first phase will be anonymized, coded and transcribed as text. This will be done immediately upon transmission in order to disable any potential for detecting that you have participated. The consent forms will be kept in locked storage at Stockholm University so that they may not be linked to our recording. When the study is completed, and the thesis has passed assessment, we will destroy the original data that has been collected (e.g. film/sound files, or digital survey).

The results of the study will be published in the thesis in a manner that will not reveal the participant’s identity. The study adheres to the guidelines on research ethics and common laws. You may read more about these at the bottom of page 2.

In order to complete the study, it is very valuable for us to receive your consent. Please contact us in case you need further information.

Supervisor’s name: Marianne Teräs
Email: marianne.teras@edu.su.se
Telephone 08-16 39 75

The student’s name: Alex Cuadrado
Email: acuadradoe@gmail.com
Telephone: 073 998 53 02
Date

Consent Form

I have taken part of the information of the study and accept that the material is recorded and stored for use in the master’s thesis.

☐ Yes

☐ No

The name of the informant, date and signature………………

Print name………………

(in case of a minor) Legal guardian’s/parent’s signature……

Print name………………

(in case of officials) Official’s/administrator’s signature……

Print name………………

(in case needed) Principal’s/Leadership signature………………

Print name………………

At bottom of page

Further regarding guidelines and legislation related to the study

The personal data essential for carrying out the study are regulated according to the requirement of consent (samtyckeskravet) in the Swedish legislation (the Personal Data Act, in Swedish) Dataskyddsförordningen. Stockholm University is responsible for personal data. According to the law of protection of Personal Data Act (dataskyddsförordningen f.o.m. 25 maj, 2018) you are entitled free access to all information involving you and if needed, to have incorrect information amended. You also have the right to request deletion, limitation or objection to the use of personal data, with an opportunity to lodge a complaint to the data security officer at Stockholm University at dpo@su.se alternatively the Swedish Data Protection Authority at https://datainspektionen.se/kontakta-oss/. Please approach the supervisor or student for further information.
Consent Form (School personnel)

I have read the information about the study and agree to the material being recorded, saved and used for research.

□ Yes
□ No

Signature:

Print Name:

Date