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Desarrollo de competencias transversales de los egresados universitarios: el programa de movilidad Galeuropa

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Abstract

The development of transversal skills, beyond those that are strictly academic, has become one of the central pillars of university education today. It is supported by the formation of the European Higher Education Area. This means that it is useful to identify all of the educational possibilities that help in the development of competences beyond the set curricula and activities in the university system, such as non-formal education programs. The objective of this study is to determine whether

university students' participation in a mobility program (Galeuropa) helps them to improve their transversal skills that are fundamental for employability. It also aims to identify the profile of university students who benefit the most from participation in this program. A questionnaire was applied to 439 young people (graduates participating in Galeuropa and final year university students). The results showed that the participants in the program demonstrated the greatest development of transversal competences (proactivity and personal adaptability, intercultural competence, and leadership). Non-formal education (particularly in mobility programs) helps reinforce academic education, especially in terms of youth employability.

Keywords: higher education, non-formal education, transversal competences, employability, mobility.

Resumen

El desarrollo de las competencias transversales, más allá de las estrictamente académicas, se ha convertido en uno de los pilares centrales de la educación universitaria actual, apoyada por la formación del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior. Por ello, es conveniente identificar todas las posibilidades educativas que ayuden al desarrollo de dichas competencias, fuera de los planes de estudio y actividades establecidas en el sistema universitario, como los programas de educación no formal. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar si la participación de los estudiantes universitarios en un programa de movilidad (Galeuropa) les ayuda a mejorar las competencias transversales fundamentales para la empleabilidad. También pretende identificar el perfil de los estudiantes universitarios que más se benefician de la participación en este programa. A tal fin, se aplicó un cuestionario a 439 jóvenes (titulados que participan en Galeuropa y estudiantes universitarios de último curso). Los resultados mostraron que los participantes en el programa demostraron un mayor desarrollo de las competencias transversales (proactividad y adaptabilidad personal, competencia intercultural y liderazgo). Así pues, la educación no formal (especialmente en los programas de movilidad) contribuye a reforzar la educación académica, especialmente en lo que respecta a la empleabilidad de los jóvenes.

Palabras clave: educación superior, educación no formal, competencias transversales, empleabilidad, movilidad.

Introduction

Universities have faced a series of unprecedented changes in recent years and especially since the beginning of the 21st century. Their principles

and functions have been reformulated from a social and more strictly educational point of view. In Europe, the shaping of a new model of university has run in parallel with the creation and consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which promulgates the guiding principles of a university education meeting the requirements of the post-industrial knowledge society, where knowledge and technology have become the main driving forces of development (Santos Rego, 2016).

The university is the main institution through which the new social model is articulated, and the requirements of the university justify the wholesale changes being made to European higher education. Various policy proposals and ministerial announcements have highlighted particularly important issues. These include increased mobility, a learning process centered on students and working autonomously, strengthening the social dimension of learning and links with the community, and improving student employability through focusing on the development of transversal competences (Gargallo et al., 2011; Santos Rego et al., 2020).

The new university dynamic is expected to contribute to the proper development of competencies that must ensure better personal and professional development for students at a time when the realities of work are in constant flux (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). All of this should be considered without ignoring the high rates of youth unemployment which, in the case of Europe, put Greece (31.1%), Spain (29.8%), and Italy (24.2%) at the top of an extremely concerning ranking¹. Almost two decades ago, the Commission of the European Communities (2003) warned that universities in the knowledge society faced new challenges and expectations, since social needs meant that technical and specific learning had to be complemented with transversal competences and life-long learning opportunities.

Therefore, the links between university and employment have had to become increasingly close. Examples of this include the recent meetings and sessions of the EHEA (Yerevan, Paris, and Rome) wherein direct reference was made to the need to improve graduate employability through innovative training in line with changes in the labor market and 21st century job profiles. However, this does not mean that the university will turn into a mere tool in the service of employers for the technical

¹ Eurostat data for October 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment

training of workers. The university-employment relationship needs to be understood from the dual perspective proposed by Escámez & Sanz (2017) who spoke of a university that responds to the logic of the market and/or human development, both orientations being understood as necessarily coexistent. In short, if human capital is perceived as an indicator of economic and social growth and prosperity, the university has an unquestionable role to play in workers' lifelong learning processes which should lead it to pay attention to its graduates' chances of finding and maintaining employment (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008).

Given these arguments, and with the aim of training future professionals and citizens, higher education must provide students with a set of generic and transversal learning content which, together with the mastery of disciplinary content, will enable future graduates to perform successfully in a labor market and social environment that are characterized by instability and accelerated change (Barrie, 2006). This was stated in the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), which called for combining transversal, multidisciplinary, and innovative competences with those of a specific type, in order to properly meet the needs of the labor market.

For all of these reasons, it is advisable to explore educational channels and spaces that would allow for the broadening of the competences acquired in the classroom. There is no doubt about the possibilities that have been opened up by initiatives such as professional internships, problem-based learning, and service-learning at the formal and curricular level (Santos Rego et al., 2020), but experiences and programs in non-formal education should not be ignored. In fact, the development of transversal and employability-related competences can be further strengthened through participation in these initiatives that take place outside of the classroom, but which offer young people the opportunity to acquire contextualized learning and to connect to the world of work. This type of learning may even be considered to have better operability and outreach, since it is acquired within a context in which it is useful.

The present study focuses on youth mobility programs, which are an ideal means of supporting higher education institutions in their quest to contribute to the development of global citizenship. However, Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022) indicated that it was worth determining how these international experiences were reflected in the development of student learning, including intercultural learning. That is not to ignore the impact of these programs on the improvement of social commitment, graduate employ-

ability, or intercultural competences, since contact with other cultures improves social and human capital, which are catalysts of employability (Bracht et al., 2006; Jones, 2013; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

The specific aim of the present study is, firstly, to analyze whether students' participation in the Galeuropa mobility program² enables them to improve their transversal competences, which are fundamental for their employability. Secondly, the aim is to discover the profile of university students who benefit the most from participation in this program. The Galeuropa program is an initiative of the regional government in Galicia in Spain (Xunta de Galicia). It started in 2012 with the aim of strengthening the mobility of young people aged between 18 and 30 with university or vocational degrees, facilitating the discovery of cultural diversity and richness, and promoting the acquisition of knowledge, competences and qualifications, which would contribute to their training and subsequently to their finding employment. The most recent round of the program was in 2019, because due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was suspended owing to the difficulties of international travel.

The objectives of the Galeuropa project include improving participants' general competencies, their employability (especially for those who are not in education or training), and strengthening vocational training programs as a complement to the personal and professional development of the youngest participants. The program participants select their destinations according to their personal and professional interests. The program is open to young people aged 18- 30 who have gained university or vocational qualifications in the previous five years and who have sufficient language skills.

The length of the program has grown continuously, from a maximum stay of 4 weeks in 2012 to a minimum stay of 2 months (and a maximum of 4 months) in the most recent round (Santos Rego et al., 2018).

Non-formal education, university, and the development of transversal competences

Non-formal education can be defined as an «organized educational process that takes place alongside mainstream systems of education and

² <https://xuventude.xunta.es/programas-eu/galeuropa>

training, and that does not typically lead to certification. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis and the individual is usually aware that (s)he is learning» (Souto-Otero et al., 2013, p. 12). Based on this definition, these activities can complement the training provided by higher education institutions, as they allow the consolidation of generic and transversal learning which must accompany specific education in each field. They may also involve a direct approach to the students' potential professional activity (Santos Rego et al., 2018; Souto-Otero, 2016). Furthermore, what non-formal educational programs provide in comparison to formal training is better procedural learning, derived from practical actions and participation in solving real-life problems (Colom, 2005).

However, these kinds of activities have not always enjoyed recognition in university education. As suggested by Fernández García & Rodríguez Menéndez (2005), between the 1970s and the advent of the EHEA, non-formal education in European universities has gone through three stages: A first period where it had no place because of the rigidity of the curriculum and the prevalence of theoretical learning; a second stage, in which practice began to appear in university education; and a third stage, with the Bologna Process, which introduced and encouraged programs close to non-formal education, such as volunteering, youth entrepreneurship programs, and mobility. Nevertheless, as Talbot (2015) acknowledged, perhaps the main reason for the introduction of non-formal learning in the university was related to advances in theories of economic growth and human capital. This author argued that higher education institutions were seen in the political agenda as pillars of economic development and growth, paving the way for a readjustment of the university system in order to promote new models of learning and development of competences.

From the perspective of human capital, investment in education and training is essential to strengthen university graduates' employability (Becker, 1962, 1994; Schultz, 1961). Many studies have highlighted the importance of developing various types of generic competencies in university to promote students' entry and proper adjustment into employment and the wider social world. There is evidence of a skill mismatch between the transversal competencies students develop in the university system and what employers seek (Freire et al., 2013; Santos Rego et al., 2018).

In this context, non-formal education, which is understood as the large set of social and educational activities done outside of formal, regulated

institutions, has become a keyway of establishing better links between the academic world and the community. These types of educational programs complement university students' training and improve their employability as part of lifelong learning (Colom, 2005). In this study, we focus on non-formal mobility programs which, unlike university-led programs such as ERASMUS+, are run by non-academic institutions (mostly local government) and have become a means to extend university training in international contexts (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

The positive coexistence of higher and non-formal education in recent years is a consequence of the current university training framework, in which the guiding principle is the development of competences through students' autonomous work. In European universities specifically this idea is reflected in the proposals from the Tuning Project (González & Wagenaar, 2003), which acknowledges that university education must pay equal attention to the development of specific competences (strictly academic and associated with each field of study) and generic, transversal competences (transferable to any degree). The purpose of combining both types of learning is quite clear and is aimed at improving graduate employability, which are the competences required for adequately accessing and retaining employment (Sá & Sherpa, 2018).

This model, based on generic competences, is the result of a dialog between universities and social and professional bodies that is aimed at defining the basic learning content for various professions (Villa & Poblete, 2007). In this regard, Vilcea (2014) stated that a university culture focused on quality should promote learning content which would go beyond the professional field of immediate reference for each degree, and was confident that the introduction of non-formal education programs would be beneficial in this context. Nevertheless, the perspective of the higher education institutions and employers does not always agree, because, as Sá & Sherpa (2018) stated, the curriculum tends to prioritize theoretical content over practical application, somewhat hindering the development of transversal competences. In any case, involvement in non-formal education activities is valued by employers and recruiters in access to employment (Souto-Otero, 2016).

The issue at stake is ultimately that of understanding non-formal education as part of the same continuum as formal education, with the aim of preparing individuals for the changes and innovations that they will have to face in both their personal and professional lives (Colom, 2005).

This is all occurring at a time when a university degree is no longer a guarantee of a job as it was in the past, meaning that degrees are losing their status as a possible «advantage » in a labor market characterized by being highly competitive, in which extracurricular activities become more important in graduates' education (Tomlinson, 2008).

Research has shown how these educational programs can train competences which prove to be very useful in terms of young people's employability (Santos Rego & Lorenzo, 2019). In this regard, Souto-Otero (2016) used the «Youth organizations and employability (YOE) database», which collected 1076 responses from young people from more than 40 European countries, and concluded that those who participated in non-formal education activities within the framework of youth organizations experienced improvements in their capital in three dimensions:

- Human capital, which the author equated with «soft skills», highlighting communication skills, adaptability and flexibility, teamworking skills, intercultural skills, and self-confidence.
- Social capital, given that 80% thought they established contacts and networks which would be useful for them in the future and two-thirds reported that these contacts would be useful for them in finding a job.
- Psychological capital, in terms of resilience, with the respondents also stating that they expanded their expectations regarding job-seeking, both in terms of how hard they would look and the type of work or locations they would look at.

The same author had previously conducted a study (Souto-Otero et al., 2013), based on a direct sample of 1301 young Europeans who had participated in non-formal education, which were confirmed by these results. The same soft skills produced the most significant improvements and these were the skills that employers reported as being the most sought-after. Giancaspro & Manuti (2021) reported that involvement in volunteer work was linked to the development of personal competences (self-awareness, taking responsibilities, and respect), communication competences (managing discussions, building social networks), and interpersonal competences (teamwork, capacity to adapt to new situations, negotiation). Similarly, in a study on trainee schoolteachers, Tang et al. (2017) found that participation in these kinds of programs enabled them to improve their competence in the classroom, gener-

al pedagogical knowledge, organizational and systemic learning, and their teamworking competence. Non-formal education can also facilitate flexible and tacit learning environments, which can contribute to the development of entrepreneurial competences in university students (Ripollés & Michavila, 2020).

Mobility programs and youth employability in a global society

Within the framework of non-formal education, mobility programs are activities which, although complex to implement, have a considerable impact on young people's employability by offering them the opportunity to gain life and work experience at an international level (Santos Rego & Lorenzo, 2019; Van Mol et al., 2021). The Commission of European Communities (2009) considers educational mobility as the means of turning the European Union into an optimal space for developing young people's potential and talent as well as advocating in favor of cross-border mobility beyond the formal education system, such as the case of young volunteers.

Mobility is even more important in higher education, since the EHEA considers it as the cornerstone of processes for harmonizing, restructuring and internationalizing university systems, in pursuit of an open and borderless educational area, as required by the Lisbon European Council (2000). However, it also responds to a new educational model, since it allows a contextualized education (in this case at an international level), which, by basing itself on the experience of the students, places the learning processes into specific circumstances that occur when in contact with other people (Ortega & Romero, 2021).

Mobility goes beyond the strictly academic sphere, in which it is part of study plans and, in the case of the European university system, has been the subject of robust development thanks to the ERASMUS program (currently known as ERASMUS+) (Haug, 2010). The matter concerning us specifically is the potential of mobility as a non-formal education strategy, which has grown considerably in recent years (Devlin, 2017). Although many mobility initiatives were designed to favor young people who were not part of the formal system, many of the participants are still students, particularly university students (Şenyuva & Nicodemi, 2017). This indicates that the social and human capital of young people and their families is a variable that directly influences the decision to become

involved in these international experiences (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). In addition, from the perspective of their preparation for the labor market, research shows that students benefit more from participating in occupational mobility (internship abroad) than in academic programs (study abroad) (Petzold, 2021; Van Mol et al., 2021).

Since having a degree no longer guarantees employment, given that graduates are also required to have experience, for which they would need to work, international mobility (e.g., the European Voluntary Service) enters the scene as a resource which helps them develop competences and gain experience beyond precarious jobs or unpaid internships (Şenyuva & Nicodemi, 2017). Several studies have demonstrated the possibilities offered by educational mobility. It helps students to develop competences and, given that these experiences are in an international context and outside of their comfort zones, they can lead to improvements in both human and social capital, with significant results in terms of employability (Potts, 2015; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). The Council of the European Union (2011, p. C 199/1) echoes the potential of mobility in young people's educational and professional development:

Learning mobility, meaning transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, skills and competences, is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship.

The ERASMUS program is a good example in this regard. Jacobone & Moro (2015) carried out an experimental study and found that students participating in this European program showed significant improvements over non-participating peers in language skills, employability—in terms of generic competence development—, self-efficacy and intercultural sensitivity. Looking at intercultural competence, including with ERASMUS students, Almeida et al. (2016) showed that international experience completing formal and non-formal education activities had an impact on the respective learning processes.

Along similar lines, Souto-Otero et al. (2013) concluded that young people who participated in non-formal education abroad experienced better improvement in foreign language skills, intercultural skills, and leadership than those who were involved in these programs in their coun-

try of origin. In addition, Geudens et al. (2017), starting from the RAY (Research-based Analysis of Youth in Action) project, noted the development of transversal competences in international youth programs: communication in a foreign language, social and civic competences, entrepreneurship, and cultural awareness. This study also highlights different development depending on the profile of the young people, as those with few opportunities exhibited better results in terms of self-confidence, career-goals, ideas about further education, participation in political life, intercultural skills, and planning and organizational skills. This does not match the results of the study by Souto-Otero et al. (2013), in which young people with a higher level of education experienced the greatest improvement in competences derived from non-formal education activities.

In short, international experiences, both in the academic and non-formal framework, influence the development of young people's transversal competences. This is what Wordelmann (2017) proved in a study on the «Integration durch Austausch» (Integration through Exchange) mobility program in Germany. At the end of the program, the managers of the host institutions confirmed that the participants had improved in a range of personal and professional competences. When carrying out a follow-up on those young people 6 months later, the author found that 35% were already working, whilst 25% were continuing their education.

Furthermore, when mobility as a non-formal strategy takes place at the university level, students can observe and learn about their profession's dynamics and procedures in other countries (Tang et al., 2017). This must necessarily be accompanied by a serious process of reflection which would allow them to analyze their experience within a rigorous, critical, and comparative framework. Certain variables must be taken into account which may affect the degree to which students develop these transversal competences when participating in non-formal education programs. Young people who are involved in youth organizations more frequently and for longer periods of time experience a greater development of competences and furthermore, the higher the level of their formal education is, the greater the development of competences (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). In the case of international mobility, in addition to the duration of the stay, the level of involvement in the activities of the host entity also has a direct impact (Wordelmann, 2017). Similarly, participants need appropriate linguistic, cultural, and psychological preparation, before starting

their involvement in the program, which would help them to cope with the challenges and problems that they will have to face. There also need to be processes on their return aimed at reflecting on their experiences in order to convert them into meaningful learning (Wordelmann, 2017). The Dutch Xplore mobility program is a good example of these support activities upon return, in which the young people share their experience with a broad audience by means of presentations, theater, workshops, etc., thereby demonstrating better results in acquired competences than other, similar programs (Janssen & Nuyens, 2013).

At this point, we present a study analyzing how participation in a mobility program (Galeuropa) allowed university students and graduates to improve the development of transversal competences in a non-formal education framework. We also aim to identify the variables that define the subject profile that obtained the most benefit from the program.

Method

Participants

There were 439 participants in this study, who were selected by means of non-probabilistic intentional sampling from the university students involved in the 2013 and 2014 editions of the Galeuropa mobility program and from university students at the three public universities in Galicia (University of Santiago de Compostela, University of A Coruña, and University of Vigo). The sample was made up of 160 male (36.4%) and 279 female subjects (63.6%), with a mean age of 21.14 years ($SD=3.78$). Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in the study. The participants were divided into three groups:

- 194 university graduates who had participated in the Galeuropa program (44.2%): 73 male (37.6%) and 121 female subjects (62.4%), with a mean age of 27.51 years ($SD=3.58$).
- 145 students in the final year of a bachelor's degree or studying for a master's degree (33%) at three public universities who had been involved in volunteer action organizations during the previous 12 months: 52 male (35.9%) and 93 female subjects (64.1%), with a mean age of 20.11 years ($SD = 2.29$).

- 100 students in the final year of a bachelor's degree or studying for a master's degree (28.8%) at three public universities who had not participated in such organizations in the previous 12 months: 35 male (35%) and 65 female subjects (65%), with a mean age of 20.81 years (SD = 2.39).

Instrument

Two questionnaires were administered: the «Questionnaire on non-formal education and youth employability» (for participants in the Galeuropa Program) and the «Questionnaire on competence development for youth employability» (for non-participants) (Santos Rego, 2015; Santos Rego et al., 2018). In both cases, a scale of generic competences was included, comprising 14 significant items (initially there were 20, and the number was reduced following exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis) (Vázquez-Rodríguez, 2020). The purpose of this scale is to evaluate the degree to which the subjects feel that they have developed a series of generic competences considered by scientific literature as fundamental for youth employability.

The questionnaire for Galeuropa participants was sent to the personal e-mail of each of the participants who consented to participate in possible surveys when they applied for the program. Data collection with this questionnaire was carried out between July and September 2015. The second questionnaire was administered in person in university classrooms, collectively, under the guidance of members of the research team throughout October 2015.

The dimensionality of the scale was determined first by an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), using Principal Components Analysis and Varimax rotation (Vázquez-Rodríguez, 2020). The initial extraction yielded three significant factors which explained 50.56% of the variance: proactivity and personal adaptability (items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10), intercultural competence (items 1, 7, and 11), and leadership (items 12, 13 and 14). The rotated component matrix produced the following results:

- Proactivity and personal adaptability ($\alpha = .79$): item 3 (.671), item 2 (.645), item 9 (.640), item 5 (.600), item 4 (.599), item 6 (.565), item 10 (.493) and item 8 (.474).

- Intercultural competence ($\alpha = .65$): item 11 (.785), item 7 (.776), and item 1 (.501).
- Leadership ($\alpha = .68$): item 12 (.808), item 13 (.808), and item 14 (.564).

Data analysis

In order to determine whether young people who participated in non-formal education programs were more competent in various skills which are fundamental to employability than those who are not involved in such programs, we performed an Analysis of Variance to find statistically significant differences between the three groups in the 14 transversal competences in the scale. Next, given the differences in age—as the program participants were graduates and the comparison groups were composed of students in their final years of bachelors' or masters' degrees—we performed an Analysis of Covariance to control for the effects of age on the results. Finally, we identified the profile of young people who benefited the most from these programs by means of a Student's t-test.

Results

The data analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences between the groups (Table I), except for the factor «leadership capacity», where there were no differences between the participants in one of its items (I am capable of coordinating a group of people).

The post-hoc tests showed differences between the young people involved in the Galeuropa program and the other two groups, with the former attaining higher levels of competences. In other words, they had greater proactive capacity and personal adaptability, higher intercultural competence, and greater leadership capacity. More specifically, the largest differences were in the items related to intercultural competence.

Given that the members of the Galeuropa group were older (27.51) than the members of the other two groups (20.11 and 20.8), the age variable might have co-varied with the dependent variable, which could explain the better development of transversal competences in the group that participated in the program. Hence, we performed an ANCOVA

TABLE I. ANCOVA between groups on transversal competences, the co-variable being Age

Dependent variables	Groups	Mean/SD	F	Post Hoc	Age
1. I adapt easily to other cultural environments	1	3.69 (.584)	F(2,438)=23.689***	1-2*** 1-3***	F _(2,438) =1.19
	2	3.30 (.578)			
	3	3.30 (.595)			
2. I am aware of my capabilities and attitudes	1	3.42 (.591)	F(2,438)=5.225**	1-2**	F _(2,438) =1.199
	2	3.20 (.640)			
	3	3.31 (.647)			
3. I find it easy to take a position on a problem	1	3.18 (.585)	F(2,438)=7.646***	1-2* 1-3**	F _(2,438) =1.289
	2	2.98 (.679)			
	3	2.90 (.628)			
4. It is easy for me to evaluate and accept the consequences of my decisions	1	3.30 (.615)	F(2,438)=7.927***	1-2** 1-3*	F _(2,438) =1.112
	2	3.05 (.641)			
	3	3.07 (.671)			
5. I am always honest with myself and others	1	3.39 (.637)	F(2,438)=6.174**	1-2**	F _(2,438) =1.35
	2	3.15 (.625)			
	3	3.22 (.705)			
6. I am able to identify and control my own emotions as well as the emotions of others	1	3.08 (.678)	F(2,438)=14.905***	1-2*** 1-3***	F _(2,438) =1.751
	2	2.68 (.731)			
	3	2.77 (.712)			
7. I can communicate in a foreign language	1	3.45 (.691)	F(2,438)=30.804***	1-2*** 1-3***	F _(2,438) =1.988
	2	2.90 (.847)			
	3	2.79 (.913)			
8. I am able to generate new ideas (solutions, products, viewpoints, etc.)	1	3.28 (.625)	F(2,438)=3.952*	1-2*	F _(2,438) =1.628
	2	3.12 (.584)			
	3	3.13 (.506)			
9. I am able to find alternatives to obstacles and difficulties	1	3.26 (.609)	F(2,438)=4.019*	1-2*	F _(2,438) =1.370
	2	3.11 (.538)			
	3	3.11 (.510)			
10. I am able to analyze information from a critical point of view	1	3.42 (.608)	F(2,438)=6.016**	1-2* 1-3**	F _(2,438) =1.347
	2	3.25 (.583)			
	3	3.20 (.534)			
11. I am comfortable in an international environment	1	3.55 (.619)	F(2,438)=22.751***	1-2*** 1-3***	F _(2,438) =1.53
	2	3.14 (.661)			
	3	3.11 (.723)			
12. I like working in a team	1	3.53 (.645)	F(2,438)=13.102***	1-2*** 1-3*	F _(2,438) =1.001
	2	3.14 (.755)			
	3	3.29 (.743)			

(continued)

TABLE I. ANCOVA between groups on transversal competences, the co-variable being Age
(continued)

Dependent variables	Groups	Mean/SD	F	Post Hoc	Age
13. I easily relate with other people	1	3.42 (.710)	F(2,438)=5.239**	1-2*	F _(2,438) =.007
	2	3.18 (.794)			
	3	3.20 (.682)			
14. I am capable of coordinating a group of people	1	3.07 (.709)	F(2,438)=.247		F _(2,438) =.069
	2	3.07 (.663)			
	3	3.02 (.586)			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

* 1st Group: Galeuropa; 2nd Group: Participants in volunteer action organizations; 3rd Group: Non-participants in volunteer action organizations.

(Analysis of Covariance) to statistically control for the effect of age and to assess whether there were statistically significant differences in the 14 transversal competences in the scale. As the table above shows, age did not significantly affect the results.

In addition, we identified the participant profile that benefited most, in terms of competence improvement, from the Galeuropa program (3rd quartile). This included 164 young people, mostly female (64.6%), with a mean age over 27 years old ($M=27.47$; $SD=3.11$). Their parents had primary education (39.9% father and 38% mother) or university education (35.6% father and 35.6% mother), 44.6% declared having participated in youth volunteer action organizations in the previous 12 months, and 78% were involved in activities related to the work that they would like to do in the future.

At the other extreme (1st quartile) there were 30 young people with a mean age of 28.03 ($SD=5.423$), equally divided (50%) between men and women. The educational levels of both their mothers (50% primary education and 28.6% university education) and fathers (46.7% primary education and 26.7% university education) were lower than in the previous group. They reported high participation (60%) in youth volunteer action organizations in the previous year, but no activities or very few activities related to their job expectations (80%).

Comparing the two groups, we found statistically significant differences between the subjects in the first quartile ($n=30$) and those in the third quartile ($n=164$) in all competences analyzed (Table II).

TABLE II. Differences in competences between the highest and lowest scoring participants of the Galeuropa group

Dependent variables	Groups	Mean/SD	t
1. I adapt easily to other cultural environments	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.93 (.828) 3.82 (.398)	$t_{(31.500)} = -5.768^{***}$
2. I am aware of my capabilities and attitudes	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.53 (.571) 3.29 (.507)	$t_{(36.757)} = -5.396^{***}$
3. I find it easy to take a position on a problem	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.80 (.664) 3.40 (.561)	$t_{(192)} = -7.390^{***}$
4. It is easy for me to evaluate and accept the consequences of my decisions	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.80 (.714) 3.50 (.559)	$t_{(192)} = -5.200^{***}$
5. I am always honest with myself and others	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.47 (.730) 3.20 (.605)	$t_{(192)} = -6.022^{***}$
6. I am able to identify and control my own emotions as well as the emotions of others	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.43 (.774) 3.68 (.505)	$t_{(36.648)} = -5.149^{***}$
7. I can communicate in a foreign language	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.90 (.691) 3.47 (.847)	$t_{(192)} = -5.781^{***}$
8. I am able to generate new ideas (solutions, products, viewpoints, etc.)	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.63 (.669) 3.40 (.539)	$t_{(192)} = -6.905^{***}$
9. I am able to find alternatives to obstacles and difficulties	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.60 (.675) 3.38 (.512)	$t_{(192)} = -7.312^{***}$
10. I am able to analyze information from a critical point of view	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.97 (.809) 3.51 (.525)	$t_{(192)} = -4.707^{***}$
11. I am comfortable in an international environment	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.83 (.699) 3.68 (.505)	$t_{(34.739)} = -6.361^{***}$
12. I like working in a team	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.97 (.809) 3.63 (.556)	$t_{(192)} = -5.545^{***}$
13. I easily relate with other people	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.50 (.861) 3.59 (.530)	$t_{(33.133)} = -6.677^{***}$
14. I am capable of coordinating a group of people	1 st quartile 3 rd quartile	2.30 (.702) 3.21 (.614)	$t_{(192)} = -7.319^{***}$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

As the table shows, the 3rd quartile group always scored higher, thereby demonstrating that they benefited more from this program. The program was more effective for female subjects whose parents had higher educational levels and who participated in volunteer organizations where they took part in activities related to the work that they wanted to do in the future.

Conclusions

One of the major challenges for higher education in the 21st century is for students to develop transversal competencies. For this reason, and because of the consequences of this type of learning for employability, there is a pressing need to find places and times that allow students to acquire this type of learning outside the classroom and beyond their academic schedules. One good example of this is provided by non-formal education programs (Santos Rego & Lorenzo, 2019). This is the idea behind this study, in which we were able to see how participation in international youth mobility programs allowed university students to acquire a series of transversal competences which will ultimately have a positive impact on their chances of finding and keeping a job (Potts, 2015; Vázquez- Rodríguez et al., 2021).

In short, we showed that participation in mobility programs complements and enhances university students' training. This contributes to the better development of generic learning which, being common to all university degrees, should ensure better preparation for participation in a social context characterized by uncertainty and rapid transformation. More specifically, the results showed that young people who participated in the Galeuropa program demonstrated a higher level of development in the competences we evaluated than students in their last year of studying for a bachelor's or master's degree, the latter group being divided according to whether or not they had been involved in volunteer action organizations. The graduates who participated in this program exhibited greater proactive capacity and personal adaptability, greater intercultural competence, and greater leadership capacity, the latter dimension containing the only element in which the differences were not significant: The capacity to coordinate a group of people (Santos Rego et al., 2018; Vázquez- Rodríguez, 2020).

The potential of the Galeuropa program in terms of developing transversal competencies comes from the fact that the participants themselves choose their destination and the field in which they participate, based on their own motivations (Santos Rego et al., 2018). These non-formal programs put students in similar situations to their future professions, promoting the development of appropriate transversal competences that will improve their employability and social inclusion (Souto-Otero, 2016).

Our study confirms the results of previous studies, such as Souto-Otero et al. (2013), who reported that in addition to foreign language skills,

leadership and intercultural skills, there are aspects in which the young people who participate in non-formal education abroad are positively differentiated from those who are involved in such programs in their own country. It is worth highlighting the possibilities offered by mobility programs in aspects related to students' intercultural development by putting them in international contexts in which cultural diversity marks the course of activities that, in most cases, are linked to their future professional practice. Our findings agree with those of Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2022), in demonstrating positive correlations between mobility experiences and intercultural sensitivity, given that such experiences contribute to reducing ethnocentrism. This is confirmed by research focused on the evaluation of mobility programs within the formal, academic system (Jacobone & Moro, 2015) as well as the framework of non-formal education and youth organizations (Cheng & Zhao, 2006; Geudens et al., 2017).

International mobility enables young people to improve their human capital. Our results agree with the study by Souto-Otero (2016), who showed that participation in non-formal educational activities led to an improvement in human capital, defined in terms of soft skills, highlighting adaptability, flexibility, and intercultural skills. The transversal competences which develop the most during mobility are also those most in demand by employers (Nuijten et al., 2017), which highlights the possibilities that programs such as Galeuropa offer for improving young people's employability. However, our results also indicate that these programs are not equally effective for all young people, because the participant profile is strongly determinant. The effects were greater for women whose parents had higher educational levels and who were involved in activities related to the work they wanted to do in the future. That said, there are several other important aspects, such as the duration of the experience, the level of involvement of the host organization, the young people's previous training, and the eventual dissemination and communication of their experience to various audiences and agents (Janssen & Nuyens, 2013; Souto-Otero et al., 2013; Wordelmann, 2017). Young people's educational and socioeconomic levels also play a role, although studies in this regard have shown mixed results. A study by Geudens et al. (2017), showed that those with fewer opportunities experienced greater development of competences, while Souto-Otero et al. (2013) found the greatest development of competences in young people with higher levels of education. It is noteworthy that young people's human and social

capital (especially that reflected by their family situation) may result in different motivations for getting involved and different results. There is “social selectivity” conditioning involved—in addition to the impact of non-formal education programs—which highlights the effect of variables such as the socioeconomic level, financial resources, and family support (Holloway & Pilmott-Wilson, 2014; Purcell et al., 2012; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Similarly, aspects such as the heterogeneity of the labor markets of the destination countries, or of the university systems, in the case of academic mobility, could also explain the results obtained by the young people (Van Mol et al., 2021).

The study is not without limitations. Perhaps the main limitation is the age of the data we analyzed, as it comes from 2013 and 2014, although there are various reasons to believe it to be useful. Firstly, there were no studies in Spain looking at the development of transversal competencies as a result of non-formal educational mobility, as the only studies which have been done have focused on the ERASMUS+ program (formal, academic mobility) or volunteer programs (non-formal programs without mobility). In addition, although the most recent edition of the program took place in 2019, the most recent data available is from 2014, and it was impossible to expand the sample due to university data protection policies.

Our results are relevant with regard to what Brown & Hesketh (2004) defined as the “economy of experience”. In other words, if employers pay increasing attention to complementary indicators that they base their decision-making on in personnel selection processes, participation in non-formal education programs, such as Galeuropa, will compensate for young people’s limited professional experience. At the same time, employers expect them to have a set of transversal competences that are not recognized in the degree programs in the formal education system (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Souto-Otero et al., 2013; Tomlinson, 2008).

In view of the above, our results underscore the usefulness of non-formal education as a complement to what is provided within the framework of the university system, since it encourages more instrumental learning that will help students to deal with the changes they will have to face in their personal and professional lives (Colom, 2005). Within the framework of non-formal education programs, we highlight the potential of international mobility programs, such as Galeuropa, since they undoubtedly stimulate the development of competences that can be acquired through

participation in academic mobility programs (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Precisely for this reason, youth mobility is becoming a topic of interest for university systems beyond Europe, highlighting thereby the case of countries such as Australia (Potts, 2022) or the United States (Davis & Knight, 2021). In our context, if mobility is a strategic issue for the European Union (Teichler, 2009), this study shows that, apart from contributing to the internationalization of the European university system, mobility also ensures a type of learning that is more in line with the educational interests proposed by the EHEA, combining specific and transversal training, and thereby contributing to improved student employability.

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