



Educación XX1

ISSN: 1139-613X

ISSN: 2174-5374

educacionxx1@edu.uned.es

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
España

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Decent work in career development: A comparative analysis of Italian and Spanish university students'
Educación XX1, vol. 27, núm. 1, 2024, Enero-Junio, pp. 131-156
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
Madrid, España

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5944/educxx1.36969>

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Decent work in career development: A comparative analysis of Italian and Spanish university students' perceptions

El trabajo decente en el desarrollo de la carrera: Un análisis comparativo de las percepciones de estudiantes universitarios italianos y españoles

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How to reference this article:

Romero-Rodríguez, S., Mateos-Blanco, T., Moreno-Morilla, C., & Zammitti, A. (2024). Decent work in career development: A comparative analysis of Italian and Spanish university students' perceptions. *Educación XX1*, 27(1), 131-156. <https://doi.org/10.5944/educxx1.36969>

Date of received: 15/02/2023

Date of acceptance: 13/09/2023

Published online: 02/01/2024

ABSTRACT

Employment and decent work for young people is one of the most urgent challenges in European policies, especially in those countries where youth unemployment rates are higher than the EU average, such as Spain and Italy. The scientific literature has shown how people's conception of work affects their employment trajectory. This study aims, on the one hand, to describe the conception of work and decent work held by Spanish and Italian university students, and on the other hand, to identify the existence of possible differences in their conceptions. For this purpose, a mixed methods design ("QUAL + QUAN") was chosen. The

final sample consisted of 128 university students of Psychology and/or Pedagogy between 18 and 30 years of age. The results show that Italian and Spanish students have a reductionist view of the concept of work, mainly related to the economic aspect (salary/money/salary). Along the same lines, it was found that the concept of decent work is identified only with good economic remuneration, well-being and personal growth, and respect for minimum rights. On the other hand, aspects such as security, fairness and reconciliation of work and family life are secondary. The results also show a more optimistic view of Spanish students in relation to the possibility of finding a job and/or decent work in their own region, while Italian students show greater willingness to move, considering that for them it is easier to find a job abroad. In conclusion, the analysis of this study reflects the need for dialogic interventions and reflective thinking about work and decent work with university students. Addressing sustainable employability and decent work in career development processes becomes a valuable tool for the promotion of an optimal and rewarding working life as future workers.

Keywords: decent work, sustainable employability, mixed methods, comparative analysis, university students

RESUMEN

El empleo y el trabajo decente de las personas jóvenes constituyen uno de los desafíos más urgentes en las políticas europeas, en especial, en aquellos países donde los índices de tasa de desempleo juvenil superan la media de la UE como son España e Italia. La literatura científica ha demostrado cómo la concepción que tienen las personas sobre el trabajo afecta a su trayectoria laboral. Este estudio pretende, de una parte, describir la concepción de trabajo y trabajo decente que tienen estudiantes universitarios españoles e italianos, y de otra, identificar la existencia de posibles diferencias en sus concepciones. Para ello, se ha optado por un diseño de métodos mixtos («QUAL + QUAN»). La muestra final estuvo compuesta por 128 estudiantes del Grado de Psicología y/o Pedagogía de entre 18 y 30 años. Los resultados muestran cómo los estudiantes italianos y españoles tienen una visión reduccionista del concepto de trabajo, principalmente relacionada con el aspecto económico (salario/dinero/sueldo). En esta misma línea se constató que el concepto de trabajo decente lo identifican únicamente con una buena remuneración económica, bienestar y crecimiento personal, y respeto de unos derechos mínimos. En cambio, aspectos como la seguridad, la equidad o la conciliación de la vida familiar y laboral quedan en un segundo plano. Los resultados también aportan una visión más optimista de los españoles en relación con la posibilidad de encontrar un trabajo y/o trabajo decente en su propia región, mientras que los italianos muestran un perfil más disponible para la movilidad, considerando que es más fácil encontrar trabajo fuera. En conclusión, el análisis de este estudio refleja la necesidad de intervenciones dialógicas y de pensamiento reflexivo sobre el trabajo y el trabajo decente con estudiantes universitarios. El abordaje de la empleabilidad sostenible y el trabajo decente en los procesos de desarrollo de la carrera se convierte en una herramienta valiosa para el fomento de una vida laboral óptima y provechosa como futuros trabajadores.

Palabras clave: trabajo decente, empleabilidad sostenible, métodos mixtos, análisis comparativo, estudiantes universitarios

INTRODUCTION

Employment and decent work for young people is one of the most urgent challenges in European policies, especially in those countries where youth unemployment rates exceed the European Union (EU) average, such as Spain (32.3%) and Italy (23%) (Eurostat, 2022). The latest report published by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2022) points out that young university students who lose their jobs or fail to get one are at risk of experiencing the phenomenon of “scarring” that leads them to accept jobs for which they are overqualified, thus running the risk of experiencing a career path with irregularities and low wages. In this context, the transition process to work of young people who have recently graduated from higher education is very different in each EU country. According to 2021 data from Eurostat’s Labour Force Survey, the employment rate of recent graduates in Spain is 72.8% and 57.9% in Italy. These figures are considerably lower, at 34.5% in the case of the Sicilian region and 63.3% in Andalusia.

The development of young people’s employment trajectories in the current socio-occupational context of uncertainty, dynamism, flexibility, or instability requires a series of key individual resources, such as employability, which helps people to manage both their labour market insertion process and the development of their careers efficiently, proactively, and sustainably (Di Fabio, 2017; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Literature suggests that a person has a higher or lower degree of employability depending on intrapersonal factors (e.g. personal characteristics, level of education or value of the job) and external or contextual factors of the social and labour environment (e.g. economic conditions, labour market opportunities) as well as both factors interacting with each other (Fleuren et al., 2020). According to these factors, employability, as a psychosocial construct, has been directly related to the individual’s perception of opportunities to find and keep a decent job (ILO, 2004) or to find a new one in a particular socio-economic context (Rothwel et al., 2008). In this study, we aim to approach this relationship from the conception that Spanish and Italian university students have about their employability and decent work and the possible differences between students from both countries.

Work and decent work

Work is a multidimensional construct through which people can satisfy three needs: survival, social relations, and self-determination (Blustein, 2008). To respond to this objective, in 1999 the ILO introduced the concept of decent work, understanding that.

It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. (<https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-es/index.htm>)

Since 2015, the attainment of decent work for all people has been part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, although it is still a pending issue, especially in the case of young people, according to the United Nations (UN, 2019). The commitment assumed by universities at the international level to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals implies the consideration, among others, of actions that promote student awareness of the meaning of decent work, according to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017).

Decent work promotes personal satisfaction and well-being (Blustein et al., 2016), empowerment (Blustein et al., 2017) and society's growth (Blustein, 2019). Traditionally, however, decent work has been addressed more from a macroeconomic approach (Ribeiro et al., 2020) than at the level of the individual, although this approach has been increasingly taking hold (Blustein et al., 2016, 2019; Duffy et al., 2017; Pouyaud, 2016). This perspective has been developed especially through the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), from which a conceptual bridge is established between decent work and meaningful work for the individual (Blustein et al., 2020, 2022; Duffy et al., 2016). From a socio-constructionist approach (Ribeiro et al., 2016) it is suggested that the conception of work is configured through the discourse and narratives that people create in their relationships, so these perceptions should be the object of study.

Although the concept of decent work is discussed in other fields (e.g. labour policies, labour management or social welfare), career development counsellors have also been interested in this construct. Work representations contribute to structuring the construction of people's careers and identities (Guichard and Pouyaud, 2014); therefore, some authors (Di Fabio and Maree, 2016) have emphasised the possibility of approaching this concept from career development disciplines.

Despite its importance, however, the inclusion of decent work as an object of research is still recent (Pereira et al., 2019) and is “under construction” (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 1120). However, significant progress has been made in the analysis of the factors that predict decent work. Thus, the influence of structural determinants, such as economic constraints and marginalization (Blustein and Duffy, 2020); generational aspects (Kalleberg, 2018) or educational level (Blustein et al., 2020) have been studied. The analysis of people’s subjective perceptions of different aspects of work as a predictor of aspiring to and obtaining a decent job has been a major focus of attention. The studies that have focused on the influence of the perception of job insecurity among young people (Allan et al., 2021; Blustein et al., 2020; Purcell and García, 2021), or those that have focused on work volition, defined as “a subjective perception that one has the power to make career choices despite constraints” (Duffy et al., 2015, p. 128). This latter factor has been shown to be highly predictive (Blustein et al., 2020; Blustein and Duffy, 2020; Smith et al., 2020) of decent work aspiration, while it is strongly influenced by economic and social structural determinants (Duffy et al., 2019), limiting it in the most unfavourable situations. Cross-cultural studies (Blustein et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2020) have highlighted the situated nature of people’s perceptions of decent work and the need to research common and differential elements to contextualise the concept (Ribeiro, 2020).

Sustainable employability as a guarantee of decent work

The concept of employability has evolved over the last decades largely depending on labour market conditions, as well as on national and international social, educational, and employment policies. In the current context of technological innovation, the emergence of new occupations, or labour relations, there is a commitment to improving the employability of workers as a key element of social and personal well-being. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the ILO (OECD/ILO, 2016) propose this improvement based on the commitment to guarantee full respect for fundamental principles and rights at work to promote decent and sustainable employment for all. This new challenge has led to a reconceptualization of employability, with the term sustainable employability (SE) being coined. This new concept illustrates the process by which the individual reviews his or her personal values, the meaning of work, as well as the level of personal and social well-being and, from there, contrasts them with the external and internal factors operating in the labour market (van der Klink et al., 2016). Thus, employability is defined because of how people are employed or aspire to be employed and their ability to function at work and in the labour market (Fleuren et al., 2016, 2020). According to Fleuren et al. (2020) and Hazelzet

et al. (2019), this ability can be positively or negatively affected by intrinsic job characteristics by directly interacting with the intrapersonal indicators from which sustainable employability is operationalised: health domain; well-being and work value; productivity and long-term perspective. According to these components, we can affirm that the SE contributes to the achievement of decent work given that it seeks above all to enable the person to have a meaningful and valuable working life that has a positive impact on their quality of life, happiness, and personal and social well-being.

Recent research on SE has mainly been linked to employees and has focused on the analysis of the indicators that shape it (Neupane et al., 2022; Picco et al., 2022), the factors that promote it within organisations (Gürbüz et al., 2022) or the interventions that can be carried out by companies and workplaces themselves to improve it (Hazelzet al., 2019). Nonetheless, we believe that identifying SE as a capability that only affects workers with a consolidated career path is a far cry from the richness of its contribution to the career development process. As Lo Presti and Fluviano (2016) point out employability is

A personal resource that individuals develop across their working lives aimed at increasing one's own career success, both attaching importance to (i.e., employability orientation) and committing to (i.e., employability activities) making sense of past work experiences and envisioning one's own professional future, acquiring valuable competencies and skills, improving their formal and informal career-related networks, exploring their social environment in search of opportunities and constraints to their own career pathway. (p.196).

In this sense, SE is a concept that is built over time and involves the development of different activities and behaviours that enable the enhancement of its different dimensions. By extension, the concept of SE can be applied to any stage of a career (Fleuren et al., 2020; van der Klink et al., 2016). Ultimately, the literature shows that people's representations of work, and thus of decent work, influence the way they construct their careers. Therefore, the need to investigate the perceptions of university students, who are in the process of preparing for work, is justified to be able to provide guidance interventions that favour their transition to decent work.

Taking this background into account, we set out the following research objectives:

1. To describe the conception of work and decent work held by Spanish and Italian university students.
2. To identify the existence of statistically significant differences in the conceptions of Italian and Spanish students in relation to work and decent work.

METHOD

To address these research objectives, we chose a mixed-methods design. Thus, we identified two data components, one qualitative and one quantitative in nature. The use of the mixed method has allowed us to integrate and diffract the responses provided by Spanish and Italian students through the decomposition of the different units of analysis (Uprichard and Dawney, 2019). The design follows the “QUAL + QUAN” model according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011). The QUAL component has been approached according to grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This type of analysis allowed us to use a data-driven inductive approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). For the QUANT component, hypotheses were proposed with the aim of being tested (Chigbu, 2019), given that the research was conducted in two contexts that have similarities, we assumed that we would not find any significant differences between the two groups.

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 204 Italian students (56 men and 148 women) and 190 Spanish students (40 men and 150 women) enrolled in the 1st to 3rd years of the Pedagogy or Psychology Degrees at the University of Seville (Spain) and the University of Catania (Italy). Participants were selected by non-probability and incidental sampling based on accessibility to the students involved in both countries. All students filled in the research protocol. However, the following inclusion criteria were considered for the subsequent analysis: not to be in employment and not to be older than 30 years. After eliminating incomplete protocols and those that did not meet at least one of the inclusion criteria, it was decided to equalise the samples. Accordingly, 128 students participated, 64 Italian and 64 Spanish. In each country, 50% of the sample were male (32 students) and 50% female (32 students). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 30 years old ($M=21.96$, $SD= 2.92$).

Data collection

Data was collected during teaching hours at each of the universities. The completion of the research protocol was divided into two parts. The first part included:

- Biographical data (sex and age).
- The decent work/work idea: “What is your definition of work and decent work?”

This qualitative survey methodology has been used in previous studies (Ferrari et al., 2009; Zammitti et al., 2021), and allows an adequate approximation of people's perception of the concepts of work and decent work. We decided to use a single-item assessment, as there are no validated and standardised instruments in the literature that assess the dimensions under analysis. This methodology has advantages: it allows for less time-consuming research protocols and is more satisfactory for respondents (Allen et al., 2022). In addition, single-item measures may be acceptable when the construct to be assessed is unidimensional and clearly defined (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2009), as in our case. For this reason, such measures are as valid and reliable as their multi-thematic counterparts (Ahmad et al., 2014; Ang and Eisend, 2018).

In the second part of the protocol, a series of questions were asked and organised on a Likert-type scale (1 [not at all likely]-6 [very likely]).

- Perception of how easy it is to find a decent job in your own region or outside your region: "After reading the definition of decent work, how likely do you think you are to find a decent job in your region? And outside your region?"
- Intention to relocate to find a decent job: "Do you think you will relocate to find a decent job in the future?"

The collection of information respected all the indications present in the deontological code of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP, 2015) and those established in the internal regulation in Social Sciences by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Seville.

Data analysis

The QUAL and QUANT components were analysed separately, and subsequently integrated into the results discourse (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Before proceeding with the analysis of the QUAL component, the data were subjected to a double-checking process by two researchers. During this phase, some grammatical errors were corrected, and some dialect words were translated. The data were analysed using NVivo 12.0 software. First, the words most frequently used by participants to describe the concept of work and decent work were identified. Through a word frequency analysis, the most relevant themes were identified, and nodes were defined (QSR International, 2014). Subsequently, the most frequently used words consisting of four or more letters and repeated at least four times were identified. All articles and adverbs, incorporated in the list of non-significant words, were excluded, as well as the word "work" itself since it was the concept being defined. Following completion of the process, tables 2 and 4 illustrate the nodes utilized by the university students to depict work and decent work. Subsequently, we conducted a textual and discourse analysis of the fragments comprising these

nodes, combined with a chi-square test correspondence analysis to evaluate the quantity of classifiable responses for each node and case. For the QUANT component of the protocol's second part, we conduct a descriptive analysis using measures of central tendency such as mean and standard deviation. Following this, we calculate the discrepancies between the two samples (Italy-Spain) by employing Student's t-test.

To check the sample size adequacy and statistical power we used the G*Power software version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007; Faul et al., 2009). Statistical power is considered good when it is equal to or greater than 0.80. As an additional metric of effect size, *Cohen's d* was calculated. The following guidelines were used for the interpretation of *Cohen's d*: small if > 0.2 , median if > 0.5 , and large if > 0.8 (Cohen, 2013). The input parameters were as follows: statistical test = t-test: difference between two dependent means (two groups); effect size = 0.5; α err prob = 0.05; sample size group 1 ($n = 64$); sample size group 2 ($n = 64$); mean group 1; mean group 2; standard deviation group 1; standard deviation group 2.

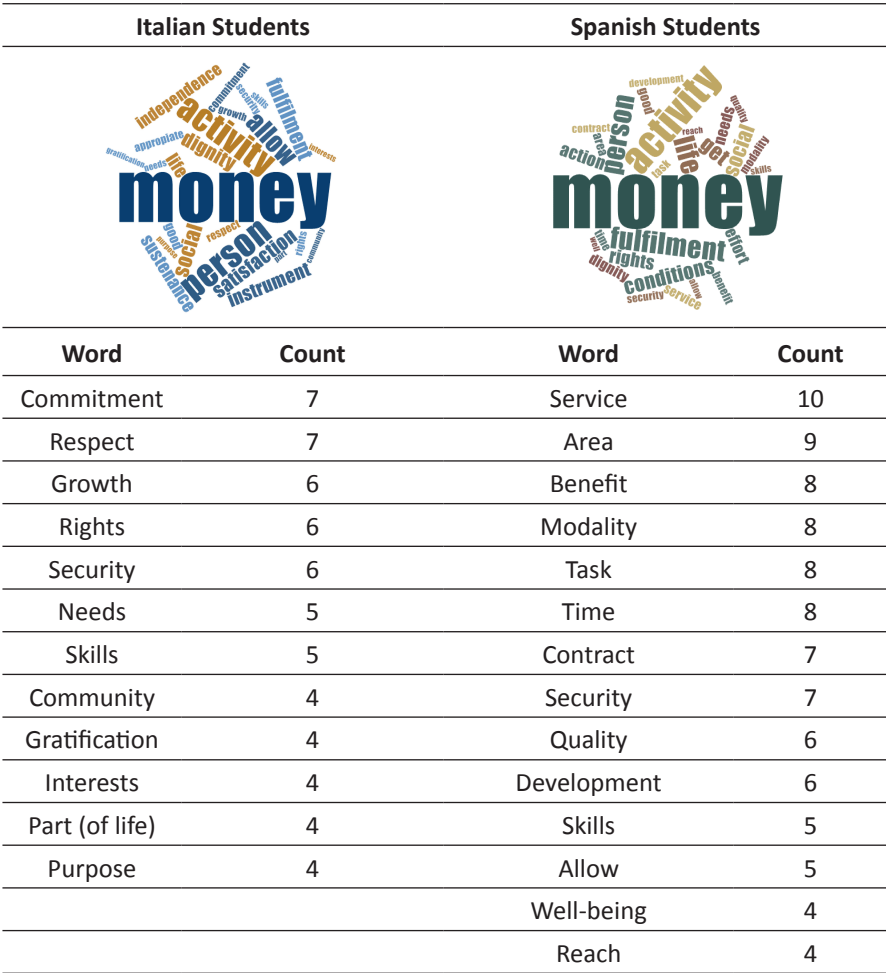
RESULTS

University students’ perception on the concept of work

Results related to the concept of work showed that the word most used by Italian (IT) and Spanish (ES) students was related to the economic aspect (salary/money/ salary). Both groups refer to other words such as activity, personal fulfilment, social, satisfaction and life. All these results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Word frequency analysis for the concept of work

Italian Students		Spanish Students	
			
Word	Count	Word	Count
Money	67	Money	102
Activity	29	Activity	46
Person	29	Fulfilment	30
Allow	21	Person	29
Fulfilment	16	Life	29
Social	16	To get	22
Dignity	15	Conditions	20
Satisfaction	15	Social	20
Instrument	14	Rights	17
Sustenance	13	Action	16
Life	13	Effort	14
Independence	12	Needs	13
Good	9	Dignity	12
Appropriate	7	Good	10



The word frequency analysis made it possible to better identify the nodes that students used to describe the concept of work. The first node was called *Economic aspects* and refers to the idea of work as something that serves to get money. This node includes words such as money, sustenance, and contract. Some of the definitions given are: “an activity that leads to financial gain” (IT-19) or “a means of earning money” (ES-96).

The second node was named *Well-being* and *Self-fulfilment* and includes words such as well-being, fulfilment, and gratification. Some examples are: “a way to feel fulfilled” (IT-21) or “work is about doing what makes everyone happy” (ES-108).

Within the third node, called *Social utility*, we find words such as service, community and social. These words indicate that the definition of work is linked to the possibility of providing a service and contributing to the growth of society. For example: “an activity that allows [...] to contribute at a social level” (IT-12); “any action in which a service is rendered to society” (ES-105).

The fourth node is called *Personal development* and includes words such as growth, skills, and purpose. This node refers to an idea of work associated with the possibility of achieving growth goals in one’s future (independence, skills development, or identity construction). For example: “something that allows you to structure your identity” (IT-5); “it is something that allows you to develop skills” (ES-116).

The fifth node was labelled *Effort and time*. It contains responses that refer to work as something that requires effort and commitment from people and takes up a good part of their lives. For example: “an [...] activity that is carried out continuously for a good part of the individual’s life” (IT-6); “work is an activity [...] that is carried out throughout a person’s working life” (ES-76).

Another node, the sixth, was called *Rights*. This node includes words such as respect, rights, dignity, among others. These answers underline the existence of fundamental rights that allow them to live a dignified life. For example: “the only way [...] to live in dignity” (IT-15), while ES-124 stated that work is “an activity that is carried out legally”. Some participants gave answers that could not be classified in the nodes described above. These responses were placed in a new node called *Not applicable*. Finally, participants who did not give an answer contributed to an additional node called *No response*. Table 2 summarises the quantified results described in this section:

Table 2

Nodes and references for the work concept

Nodes	References		
	IT	ES	Total
Economic aspects	27	43	70
Well-being and personal fulfilment	24	7	31
Social utility	8	12	20
Personal development	9	11	20
Effort and time	4	11	15
Rights	4	3	7
Not applicable	8	5	13
No response	5	5	10

Correspondence analysis showed that there were no significant differences for the following nodes: Social utility (inertia=0.01; chi-square=0.95; df=1, p=0.33), Personal development (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.57; df=1, p=0.81), Effort and time (inertia=0.03; chi-square=3.70; df=1, p=0.05), Rights (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.15; df=1, p=0.70), Not applicable (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.12; df=1, p=0.73) and No response (inertia=0.01; chi-square=0.77; df=1, p=0.38). Instead, significant differences were found for the Economic aspects node (inertia=0.06; chi-square=8.07; df=1, p=0.004) and Well-being and personal fulfilment (inertia=0.09; chi-square=12.30; df=1, p=0.000). Spaniards provided more classifiable responses in the Economic aspect node and fewer classifiable responses in the Well-being and personal fulfilment node.

Finally, an analysis was carried out on the perception of the possibility of finding a job in their region or outside their region, as well as the possibility of mobility. The results show that Spanish students have a more optimistic attitude towards the possibility of finding a job in their region (M=2.77; SD=1.09), while Italian students score higher on items related to 'ease of finding a job outside their region' (M=4.05; SD=0.86) and 'intention to move to find a job' (M=4.64; SD=1.38). The comparison between Italian and Spanish students showed statistically significant differences in dimensions D1 (work in own region) and D3 (commuting to work). Cohen's d was high for D3 (commuting-work) and low for D1 (work-own region). Statistical power was acceptable only for D3 (commuting).

Table 3*Descriptive analyses and differences between Spanish and Italian students*

	F (df)	t	IT		ES		p	d	P
			M	SD	M	SD			
D1. Perception of how easy it is to find a job in one's own region	1.44 ₍₁₂₆₎	-2.24	2.38	0.86	2.77	1.09	0.03	0.40	0.72
D2. Perceived ease of finding a job outside one's own region	7.61 ₍₁₂₆₎	1.54	4.05	0.86	3.77	1.18	0.13	0.27	0.45
D3. Intention to move to find a job	2.89 ₍₁₂₆₎	4.51	4.64	1.38	3.47	1.55	0.00	0.80	0.99

Note. N =128; F= Fisher's F; df= Degrees of freedom; t = t test; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; p=Significance; d=Cohen's d; P=Statistical potential.

Perceptions of decent work among university students

Word frequency analysis was also used for the concept of decent work. The words most frequently used to describe decent work are summarised in Table 4.

After performing the word frequency analysis, we coded the nodes shown below. The first node was called *Good and fair financial remuneration*. The responses belonging to this node describe decent work as a job where the remuneration is adequate in relation to the workload. In this sense, words such as money or adequate constitute it. For example: "work that allows you to have a decent salary" (IT-33); "decent work allows you to have a salary commensurate with the work" (ES-144).

The second node was called *Personal well-being and growth* and includes words such as well-being, satisfaction, or fulfilment. This node includes responses that frame decent work as a way of working that allows people to experience feelings of well-being and satisfaction, as well as personal or professional growth. Responses of this type are: "decent work 'is the work that allows you to feel happy and'" (IT-59); "decent work as the professional activity that allows you to feel fulfilled" (ES-96).

The third node refers to responses that generally emphasise the importance of respecting rights for a job to be considered decent and to ensure the dignity of the individual. This node has been labelled *Respect* and includes words such as rights or decent. For example: "any work that respects the" (IT-51); "work in which human rights are primarily" (ES-82).

Table 4
Decent work word frequency analysis

IT		ES	
			
Word	Count	Word	Count
Money	30	Money	28
Decent	12	Conditions	20
Adequate	10	Decent	18
Respect	10	Rights	18
Allow	9	Good	16
Person	7	Fulfilment	15
Satisfaction	7	Time	8
Good	6	Social	8
Security	6	Security	7
Social	4	Life	6
Well-being	4	Contract	5
Rights	4	Adequate	5
Equity	4	Development	5
		Regarding	5
		Activity	4
		Quality	4
		Effort	4

The fourth node, *Safety and security*, brought together all the responses relating to the importance of work being carried out in safe and healthy working conditions. These conditions, according to the participants, contribute to decent work. Some examples are: “decent work is work that respects safe” (IT-5) or “work that is carried out in safe and hygienic” (ES-86).

The fifth node was called *Equity*, which refers to fairness in decent work, the absence of discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. The word equity is included in this node. Some responses noted: “decent work is a job where I am not underpaid, especially because I am a” (IT-46) or “the absence of discrimination based on gender or sexual” (ES-88).

The sixth node includes those responses that underline the possibility of reconciling private life and work and is a job that respects fair working hours. This node is called *Work-life balance* and includes words such as time and respect. For example, IT-28 says “a decent job is a job with the right working” and ES-93 says “[...] allows a good work-life balance”.

Uncodable responses were placed in the *Not applicable* node. Non-responses were coded in the non-response node. Table 5 summarises the results of these analyses.

Table 5
Nodes and references for the concept of decent work

Nodes	References		
	IT	ES	Total
Good and fair financial remuneration	39	35	74
Personal well-being and growth	16	20	36
Respect	16	19	35
Safety and Security	11	20	31
Equity	1	5	6
Work-life balance	7	12	19
Not applicable	5	4	9
No response	4	1	5

Again, correspondence analysis was used to test for differences between Italian and Spanish students. It should be noted that there are no significant differences for any of the identified nodes: Good and fair financial remuneration (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.51; df=1, p=0.47), Personal well-being and growth (inertia=0.01; chi-square=0.71; df=1, p=0.39), Respect (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.35; df=1,

p=0.55), Safety and Security (inertia=0.03; chi-square=3.45; df=1, p=0.06), Equity (inertia=0.02; chi-square=2.80; df=1, p=0.09), Work-life balance (inertia=0.01; chi-square=1.55; df=1, p=0.21), Not applicable (inertia=0.00; chi-square=0.12; df=1, p=0.73) and No response (inertia=0.02; chi-square=1.87; df=1, p=0.17).

Finally, the analysis of the differences regarding the perception of finding a decent job in their region or outside their region revealed significant differences between Spanish and Italian students, in favour of the latter, in the dimensions D5 (decent work-outside region) and D6 (commuting-decent work) (see Table 6). Cohen's d was medium for D5 (decent work-outside region) and D6 (commuting-decent work) and irrelevant for D4 (decent work-inside region). Statistical power was acceptable only for D5 and D6.

Table 6

Descriptive analyses and differences between Spanish and Italian Students

	F _(df)	t	IT		ES		p	d	P
			M	SD	M	SD			
D4. Perception of how easy it is to find decent work in own region	3.08 ₍₁₂₆₎	-0.48	2.28	0.84	2.36	0.98	0.63	0.09	0.12
D5. Perceived ease of finding decent work outside own region	6.79 ₍₁₂₆₎	3.64	4.00	0.89	3.36	1.09	0.00	0.64	0.98
D6. Intention to move in search of decent work	0.16 ₍₁₂₆₎	3.56	4.47	1.43	3.56	1.48	0.00	0.63	0.97

Note. N =128; F = Fisher's F; df = Degrees of freedom; t = t test; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; p=Significance; d=Cohen's d; P=Statistical potential.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results show that Spanish and Italian university students attribute common and different elements to work and decent work. The economic aspect and personal well-being are present in both concepts. However, it seems that decent work is identified more with the achievement of healthy, safe, respectful (self-centred) working conditions, while work, in general, is seen as having a social function.

Looking at the five elements of decent work proposed by the ILO (2022), our students seem to have included four of them: fair remuneration, job security, personal development and equal opportunities. However, they do not allude to more participatory and challenging aspects. On the other hand, if we look at the four components of decent work identified by the Psychology of Work Theory (Blustein et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2016), the students would clearly consider only one of them (the management of survival needs) and more partially and ambiguously way the social contribution or the creation of a self-determined and autonomous life. On the other hand, students do not refer to the fourth factor included in the model developed by this theory, namely social relations. These results highlight the lack of awareness among university students of the full extent of what is involved in achieving one of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely decent work. Therefore, with Dood et al. (2019), we consider these results as a wake-up call for the University to reflect on how to address sustainable employability and decent work to favour the empowerment of students and future workers. Otherwise, the university would be participating in the perpetuation of a biased view of its function as preparation for professional practice, leaving aside the development of critical thinking and awareness at the service of sustainability and social transformation. Despite the commitment expressed by universities to include sustainability as a transversal axis in the training of students, the work of Valderrama-Hernández et al. (2020) shows that there is still some way to go to achieve this goal.

On a comparative level, and in response to the second objective of the study, it is highlighted that Spanish students attach greater importance to financial retribution and less importance to personal well-being. These results complement those found by Zammitti et al. (2023), who show that students from the south of Italy have a lower level of life satisfaction than students from the south of Spain. Another possible explanation could be related to values, as concluded by Caggiano et al. (2017) in their study with young Spaniards and Italians, based on results like those obtained in this paper. This difference could, according to the studies by van Holland et al. (2018), lead to Italian students being able to pursue a more sustainable employability, as they have a higher aspiration for personal well-being. As a result, the need for cross-cultural work is evident, as pointed out in the scientific literature (Blustein et al., 2022; Duffy et al., 2020).

The current state of the labour market (Álvarez-González et al. 2017; Mazalin and Parmač Kovačić, 2015), according to Blustein et al. (2022), directly impacts the conception of decent work and perception of employment chances among students. Spanish students display more optimism towards securing employment or decent work in their region. It appears Italians express more assurance and eagerness to secure a reputable occupation beyond their place of origin, displaying that seeking psychological contentment through fulfilling work (given decent work conditions) has a significant impact on perceived employability evaluations, as demonstrated in the research conducted by Petruzzello et al. The study's results show that Spanish and Italian students' views on work and decent work are influenced by their individual, societal, and cultural backgrounds.

Our findings demonstrate the necessity for dialogic interventions and reflective thinking sessions on work and decent work with students in higher education, despite the limitations of our sample being incidental and restricted to Pedagogy and Psychology degrees from two universities. These results are significant as they were obtained from the very degrees from which professionals who will aid other citizens in the career guidance process will graduate. However, they had not had the chance to ponder the import and impact of decent work and its effect on career advancement. The provision of clear career development guidance is crucial in encouraging decent work and creating a sustainable workforce. Career development processes should be integrated into conversion factors, which are essentially a work culture that enables individuals to adjust their focus towards work performance values that they deem important (Van der Klink et al., 2016).

The literature illustrates that the incorporation of sustainable employability and decent work into career development processes is a useful approach to promote an optimised and rewarding future working experience over an extended period (Hazelzet et al., 2019). Fleuren et al. (2016) argues that providing students with the opportunity to appreciate work and reflect on it can lead to sustainable employability. Through reflecting on university students' conceptions of work and decent work, a critical awareness window has opened for them. Shaping the characteristics of a job that promotes sustainable employability through a fit between the individual and the environment is a joint responsibility of individuals and organisations (Fleuren et al., 2020). Based on this institutional commitment, universities must ensure that curricular placements are carried out in institutions and companies that guarantee decent work.

The present findings, in line with prior research (Blustein et al., 2019b; McMahon and Watson, 2020), emphasise the importance of conducting additional research on individuals' perspectives regarding work and proper working conditions to identify the underlying factors hindering the attainability of decent work. Such research may offer valuable insights for the development of interventions promoting sustainability and establishing more just and humane academic institutions (Hartung and Blustein, 2002).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was made possible through the innovation projects ‘Career construction at the University in the Post-Pandemic Transition’ (Ref. 23993-Convoc. 2021/22) and ‘Sustainable Careers construction towards Digital Transformation and Decent Work from the University’ (Ref. 665-Convoc. 2022/23) of the University of Seville’s III and IV Plan Propio de Docencia. It was made possible by the research stay of authors Soledad Romero-Rodríguez and Celia Moreno-Morilla at the University of Catania (Italy).

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