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Integration of short-cycles on university campuses. The case of pre-primary education in Spain

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ABSTRACT

The so-called 'short-cycle' tertiary education (level 5 of the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011) is an area of education which has been inadequately researched, where a number of questions remain regarding its true definition and uneven social recognition across Europe. Although it has gain visibility in recent decades, it is perhaps too early to affirm that its has an established position within Higher Education. This paper aims to contribute to improving its image and, ultimately, offer a perspective of Higher Education as a broad range of programs effectively integrating university studies and other options. Using a mixed paradigm, the study evaluates the opinions of students and university administrators regarding the integration of university studies and short-cycle programs (Advanced Vocational Education and Training, VET) into the same university campuses. The sample consists of all Spanish universities which impart on the same campus, the University Degree in Pre-Primary Education and Advanced Vocational Education and Training in Pre-Primary Education. Results suggest that the offer of short-cycle and university degree programs in the same space presents an opportunity for university institutions, in line with the European Strategy for Universities (2022), with excellence and inclusion as a distinctive feature of European higher education.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Formally speaking, 'short-cycle tertiary education', corresponding to level 5 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011), is a part of Higher Education, and is officially classified as such within European and Spanish regulatory frameworks.

While there has been a growing demand and increasing regard for short-cycle tertiary education in recent years, many countries have a long way to go in truly integrating these programs into their Higher Education systems. The term 'Higher Education' is often considered synonymous with 'university', relegating to a second level institutions which are not universities (Orellana, 2011). The consolidation of tertiary education outside the university is an ongoing process although a consensus has yet to be reached on the designation this should receive: short-cycle, non-university Higher Education, professional Higher Education, alternative Higher Education, first cycle Higher Education, etc. The majority of these proposed terms, explicitly or implicitly, define the sector in terms of its relation to its 'big brother', the University, whereas what is in fact required is for the sector to have an individual identity, free of the long shadow of the University (Teichler, 2009, p. 118).

The interconnectedness of both higher education programs is ever greater and the notion of lifelong learning offers new opportunities for both. Thus, complementarity and collaboration are essential factors in the development of these programs and in meeting the challenges they face.

The necessary collaboration between both systems, Vocational Training and University, which requires complementarity and the redefinition of their purposes and objectives, must become an essential factor

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contributing to the individual development of each and, cooperatively, to greater socio-economic development. From another perspective, the integration of Vocational Training and University on the same campus provides a more comprehensive and versatile offering for students, families, and ultimately, society.

However, a fully integrated higher education system that incorporates both university degree and short-cycle programs is far from becoming a reality. The present work will show how some private Spanish universities have understood this vision of higher education and have undertaken to incorporate on the same campus students of both types of education. The proposition is that the inclusion of both forms of higher education in the same space is mutually beneficial, and particularly, represents an added-value for students of short-cycle programs who, on many occasions, subsequently seek to pursue a university degree.

1.2. Literature review

In 2017, the European Commission warned that European higher education systems face a number of challenges in their future development and explicitly called on public authorities to implement the necessary measures to meet these challenges. The various components of higher education systems do not always work together harmoniously, and the European Commission has emphasised the need to create higher education systems which are both interconnected and integrating. In this direction, a number of reports emphasise the need to favour the social dimension, that is, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; European Students' Union, 2019; Kottmann et al., 2019).

The necessary collaboration between both systems, short-cycles with professional or vocational orientation and university degree programs, should become an essential element contributing to the development of each system, in a collaborative manner, to further socio-economic development.

A recent Ministerial Conference, held remotely in Rome on 19th November 2020, urged national governments to act in adapting higher education institutions to the needs of different types of students (part-time students, students from underrepresented or marginalised communities, etc.), including the creation of flexible avenues for education and training (EHEA 2020 Rome Ministerial Conference, 2020).

It is, therefore, necessary to promote an integrated higher learning space that involves both the modernisation of the University and the promotion of short-cycle tertiary education. As Cayón (2014) suggests, this represents a long-term opportunity for the coordination of both education options, and nothing could be better for this than the presence of both on the same campus.

Chacón (2011) and Lostao (2014) underscore the advantages of an integrated system of higher education: facilitating a greater connection between theory and practice, favouring the proximity of the professional and business world while, at the same time, fomenting the coordination and transfer of knowledge and experience between teachers in both areas.

Debate surrounding the so-called 'short cycles' in Higher Education (*Short Cycle Higher Education*, SCHE) is not new. For over half a century there has been debate on how to diversify systems of higher education. In the early 1970s the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1973) defined short-cycle programs in higher education as post-secondary education of a shorter duration with a strong vocational focus, generally part of the non-university sector of higher education. The question remains important to this day, and requires in-depth consideration given the strategic importance of this type of education in terms of employability and, ultimately, social development.

Teichler (2006a) notes that the changes in the form and size of systems of higher education have been key issues in recent decades, both in terms of policy and research into higher education. Orellana (2011) observes that, after World War II, there was a global expansion in higher education, gradually transformed from a privilege of very few to an opportunity for many. Importantly, this period saw the appearance of international organisations specifically addressing issue of education, leading to a certain 'harmonisation in the understanding the larger questions affecting education policy' (Valle, 2012, p. 112).

Beginning approximately in 1960, European countries began to undertake reforms and while initially there was a relatively strong conviction in the international convergence of higher education systems, this trend waned in the following decades (Teichler, 2006b).

The same author (2009) affirms that research into higher education has offered differing theories regarding these dynamics. Notions of 'expansion and diversification' have had the greatest impact on public

debate, based on the theory that the growth in higher education generates a diversifying pressure since the needs of students and potential users of education services have become increasingly diverse.

In recent decades, the majority of European countries created binary structures to meet the demand for higher education and professional training (Kyvik, 2004). This binary system recognises the difference between universities on one hand, oriented towards research and having, above all, a theoretical orientation in its study programs, and professionally oriented higher education institutions on the other, predominantly oriented towards applied or vocational training.

In the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, ministers urged more study into 'the possibility and ways to link short-cycle programs in higher education with first cycle programs in the European Qualifications Framework of the EHEA'. Short programs were introduced into the European Qualifications Framework through the incorporation of short-cycle programs or linking them to first cycle programs (*bachelor's degree*).

Thus, since the Berlin Conference, the Bologna Process has incorporated short-cycle programs and qualifications within its framework, redefining in the process the nature, role and purpose of these courses (Slantcheva-Durst, 2010; Vögtle, 2019).

More specifically, what in Europe is referred to as short-cycle tertiary education are programs of 2 years or less of full-time study, approximately 120 ECTS, which also simultaneously prepares graduates for the job market and for further higher education.

Short-cycle higher education in Europe is enormously varied, both in terms of size and range of programs and institutions. The organisation and duration of ISCED Level 5 programs (Short-cycle Tertiary Education) is also heterogenous across Europe. These programs generally have a practical focus, centred on a specific occupation and prepare students to enter the job market. However, these courses often serve as the first step towards other programs of higher education.

A study by the CEDEFOP (2014) of 15 countries identified 31 types of qualifications associated with Level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). It concluded that the qualifications or programs are defined by their objectives and content or by duration; thus, qualifications linked to Level 5 are difficult to compare. Another more recent study (CEDEFOP, 2021) provides an overview of the situation regarding Vocational Education and Training (VET) and tertiary education in the European Union, reflecting on its prevalence and results in terms of employment.

The latest European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2020) report on Bologna Process Implementation notes that, according to available figures, the number of higher education institutions within the EHEA has risen from 3,009 institutions in 1999/2000 to 3,537 in 2018/19.

A previous report (2015) on the implementation of the Bologna Process, notes that, while higher education institutions may have an academic or professional orientation, the difference between these two models is increasingly hard to distinguish. In many countries, the formal distinction between these two types of institutions persists but in practice this has been greatly diluted. Considering that current models of higher education are continuously developing, increasingly offering open and distance learning programs, it is no simple matter to define precisely what can be considered an institution of higher education.

Finally, to clarify certain aspects of this question, it is important to note a comparative study conducted in 2003 by the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) on short-cycle programs in Europe. The study presented interesting results which were contrasted with those of another study carried out seven years later, significantly titled: *L5 Missing: Level 5 the Missing Link, Short-Cycle Higher Education in Europe*.

The general aim of this comparative study was to provide a detailed analysis of short-cycle programs in higher education in 32 signatories of the Bologna Process. The report concludes that short-cycle programs are gaining ground in Europe. However, there is not always a clear identification between Level 5 and short-cycles in higher education. In most of the counties surveyed, students may apply the majority of their credits obtained in these programs towards subsequent university degree studies. The report affirms that short-cycle programs offer real added-value to higher education in Europe.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives and research sample

One of the aims of the present research is to assess the opinion of students regarding the integration of short-cycle programs into university campuses. The principal independent variable is, therefore, the form

of accessing university degree programs, fundamentally in two ways: the university admissions test after completing secondary school or a Certificate of Higher Education after completing Vocational Education and Training (VET) on the university campus or other institution. Therefore, the research question is as follows: How do students perceive the integration of short-cycles on university campuses?

The study uses a mixed paradigm, firstly by means of an *ad hoc* questionnaire collecting information on the perception of students in the 4th year of the Degree in Pre-Primary Education and secondly, this vision is complemented by the contributions of university administrators using semi-structured interviews (Section 2.2: Instruments).

This is a non-experimental or *ex post-facto* research project. Additionally, it has a transactional design, according to spatial and temporal aspects, as it focusses on a specific moment in time. An intentional sampling method was used, incorporating within the sample all Spanish universities and institutes imparting on the same campus, the Degree in Pre-Primary Education and the Advanced Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Pre-Primary Education, during the course of a minimum of four years, thus allowing for students of the short-cycle, at the moment of answering the questionnaire, are completing their university studies (4th year of the Degree in Pre-Primary Education).

A search was made of the Registry of Universities, Centres and Qualifications (RUCT) for the Spanish universities and institutes offering a Degree in Pre-Primary Education and, subsequently, to identify those offering VET in Pre-Primary Education on the same campus. In this way, the following universities meeting these requisites were selected:

- Cardenal Spínola Centre for University Studies (Seville), affiliated to the University of Seville.
- Don Bosco Centre for Higher Education (Madrid), affiliated to the Complutense University.
- Centro Florida Universitària, affiliated to the University of Valencia.
- San Antonio Catholic University of Murcia (UCAM).
- Francisco de Vitoria University (UFV) of Madrid.

All of the universities and institutions generously and enthusiastically agreed to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of 202 students in the 4th year of the Degree in Pre-Primary Education.

The design of the study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEI) of the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid (UAM).¹

2.2. Instruments for data collection

The information on students' perceptions is gathered through a questionnaire across three dimensions:

- Past: The main factors for enrolling in the university where they are completing their studies.
- Present: Their current university experience. This paper focuses on items related to this dimension.
- Future: Their plans upon completing a degree and their career expectations.

Once the questionnaire was created, it was verified by a group of 13 experts to determine if the instrument was sufficient and adequate to meet the objectives of the research project. The draft questionnaire is sent via email to experts selected based on their work and/or research experience in the field of Higher Education. In the body of the email, the justification for the research, the study's objectives, and the subjects of application of the instrument to be validated are presented. This information contextualizes the research and allows experts to have a comprehensive view of the study.

Along with the first version of the questionnaire, a validation guide is attached, directed at the experts who, based on their experience, assess whether the items are clear, suitable for the intended recipients, and relevant to the study. This revision resulted in a second version of the questionnaire.

With this second version, a pilot study or small exploratory research project was made with a group of students from the 4th year of the Degree in Pre-Primary Education at the Universidad Autónoma of Madrid. Once the questionnaire was completed the results were analysed using the SPSS Statistics

Table 1. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy.

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		.892
Bartlett test of sphericity	Est. Pearson's Chi-squared test	3819.788
	Gf	435
	Sig	0.000

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results.

software, version 21, for Windows. A Cronbach's alpha reliability test was performed, producing a value of 0.873 for all polytomous items in the questionnaire.

After this analysis and final modifications, a third and final version of the questionnaire was created in both physical (paper) and electronic (Google Forms) format.

An exploratory factor analysis was performed to verify construct validity using the Principal Components method. The results of the prior tests suggest the data is appropriate for factor analysis (Table 1).

A factor analysis (Oblimin with Kaiser) shows that over 66% of total variance was explained by six factors, although, as mentioned above, the present study is focussed on the consideration of the integration of short-cycles into university campuses.

Finally, a Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was applied to determine the normality of the sample distribution. The significance level was below 0.05, suggesting non-normal distribution. Although the runs test showed the samples to be independent, it was decided to apply non-parametric testing to contrast the hypothesis.

The questionnaire is complemented by contributions from some members of university management teams through a semi-structured interview to understand the current situation faced by Vocational Training and the University degrees as educational options. Questions are aimed at gathering the management team's perception regarding possible differences in the university experience of students based on their method of access to the Degree, their academic performance, and relationships within the class group. Additionally, more descriptive information is collected about the educational plan offered to students.

Interviews with the management team are recorded in audio format and later transcribed. Anonymity is ensured through coding, assigning a code to each interviewed person. After the transcription of these interviews, their content is analyzed using supporting software such as ATLAS-ti.

3. Results

The final sample of the quantitative study consisted of 202 students in the 4th year of the Degree in Pre-Primary Education of five Spanish university institutions.

Approximately two thirds of these students (66.83%) are under the age of 24, with the mean age being 23.83 years. In terms of gender, there is a significant preponderance of women studying Pre-Primary Education (187 women and 15 men).

One of the fundamental questions of this study is the manner in which students accessed the Degree in Pre-Primary Education or, as it is formulated in the questionnaire, what qualifications did you have to access the Degree in Pre-Primary Education. The results showed that 110 students accessed through the university admissions test, 84 through with a Certificate of Higher Education (after short-cycle studies, Advanced Vocational Education and Training in Spain) and 8 with another university degree.

Almost half of the students (47.62%) accessing the Degree program through a Certificate of Higher Education took their Vocational Education and Training at the same university campus. A large percentage of students studying VET did so through presential classes (77.11%).

One of the most crucial results of the questionnaire shows that a large majority of students (71.64%) view positively the imparting of Advanced Vocational Education and Training (VET) at the university. The remaining percentage is made up of students who reported being indifferent on the subject. No students were opposed to the imparting VET on campus.

However, while some 46.35% of students consider that VET is adequately integrated into university campuses, 43.75% note that, although the initial steps have been taken, a great deal remains to be

done in terms of this integration. Some 9.90% of participants did not perceive any relation between short cycles and university degree studies.

A large number of students indicated that they would like VET Pre-Primary Education and the Degree in Pre-Primary Education to occasionally share spaces and, to a lesser degree, teachers. The proposal to share complementary activities (talks, visits, etc) received the highest approval, with 110 students affirming that these should always be offered jointly for both educational programs.

However, one may ask if this opinion on the incorporation of short-cycles in university campuses will vary depending on the form in which students accessed the degree program. Thus, one of the general hypotheses of the study was:

H0: There are no significant differences among students in their view of offering the VET on university campuses.

H1: There are significant differences in their view of offering VET on university campuses.

Based on these general hypotheses and the research question ('How do students perceive the integration of short-cycles on university campuses?', [Section 2.1](#)), the following three specific hypotheses were formulated:

Specific hypothesis 1.1

H0-1.1: There are no significant differences in the views of students, according to the form in which they accessed the degree program, on the fact that the university in which they study also offers VET.

H1-1.1: There are significant differences in the views of students, according to the form in which they accessed the degree program, on the fact that the university in which they study also offers VET.

The results of a Pearson's Chi-squared test ([Table 2](#)) show that these differences do in fact exist, thus confirming the hypothesis of the research.

An analysis of the contingency table shows that students with a Certificate of Higher Education are those who most strongly agree with the university offering short-cycle programs: 83.3% of students have a positive view and 16.7% are indifferent. These percentages vary among students who report taking the university admissions test to access the degree program: some 66.1% have a positive view and 33.9% are indifferent. Students having other university degrees are those who expressed the greatest indifference on this question (75% reported being indifferent and 25% had a positive view).

Specific hypothesis 1.2

H0-1.2: There are no significant differences in the views of students according to the form in which they accessed the degree program, on the integration of VET in the university.

H1-1.2: There are significant differences in the views of students, according to the form in which they accessed the degree program, on the integration of VET in the university.

In this case, there are no significant differences in the responses of students, according to the form of access, in terms of the extent of VET integration ([Table 3](#)). Thus, the specific hypothesis of the research is refuted.

Specific hypothesis 1.3.

H0-1.3: There are no significant differences in the willingness of students to share spaces, teachers and complementary activities among VET and degree programs in Pre-Primary Education according to the form in which they accessed the degree program.

Table 2. Pearson's Chi-squared test.

	Value	gl	Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-squared test de Pearson	15.893 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood ratio	15.357	2	.000
Linear by linear association	.411	1	.521

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results. Opinion on the university imparting VET and the form of access the degree program.

Table 3. Pearson's Chi-squared test.

	Value	Gl	Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-squared test	5.238 ^a	4	.264
Likelihood ratio	4.980	4	.289
Linear by linear association	3.276	1	.070

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results. Degree of integration of VET in the university and the form of access the degree program.

Table 4. Pearson's Chi-squared test.

	Value	gl	Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-squared test	13.121 ^a	4	.011
Likelihood ratio	13.950	4	.007
Linear by linear association	.827	1	.363

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results. Students' opinion on sharing spaces between VET and Degree in Pre-Primary Education and the form of access the degree program.

Table 5. Pearson's Chi-squared test.

	Value	gl	Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-squared test	16.397 ^a	4	.003
Likelihood ratio	19.069	4	.001
Linear by linear association	1.276	1	.259

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results. Students' opinion on sharing teachers between VET and Degree in Pre-Primary Education and the form of access the degree program.

Table 6. Pearson's Chi-squared test.

	Value	gl	Asymptotic sig. (bilateral)
Pearson's Chi-squared test	11.597	4	.021
Likelihood ratio	14.688	4	.005
Linear by linear association	2.676	1	.102

Source: The authors based on the SPSS results. Students' opinion on sharing complementary activities between VET and Degree in Pre-Primary Education and the form of access the degree program.

H1-1.3: There are significant differences in the willingness of students to share spaces, teachers and complementary activities among VET and degree programs in Pre-Primary Education according to the form in which they accessed the degree program.

In terms of sharing spaces, there are significant differences among students according to the form in which they accessed the degree program (Table 4). The contingency table shows that 68.2% of students who took the university admission test after completing secondary school believe that spaces could occasionally be shared between the university degree and short-cycle programs. Students who previously studied VET are those most in favour of always sharing spaces (33.3%). The majority of students with another university degree favour the occasional sharing of spaces (62.5%). However, none of the students in this group believe spaces should be shared on a permanent or systematic basis, while over a third (37.5%) believe that spaces should never be shared.

With regards to teachers, significant differences are also encountered (Table 5). Students who took the university admission test after completing secondary school largely believe that teachers may occasionally impart classes for VET (62.7%). Students with a Certificate of Higher Education are divided among those who believe that all teachers should impart classes in both programs (54.8%) and those who believe this should be merely occasional (40.5%). Students with another university degree are those most resistant on this point, given that, while some 87.5% believe teachers can be shared occasionally, 12.5% believe the VET program should have different teachers from those in the degree program.

Finally, students taking the university admission test and those accessing with a Certificate of Higher Education agree on the frequency with which they would like the VET in Pre-Primary Education and the Degree in Pre-Primary Education to share complementary activities (Table 6). Over half of the students of both groups (55.5% and 58.3%, respectively) believe that complementary activities can be conducted

jointly for both programs. Here again, students with another university degree stand apart. Although 87.5% believe complementary activities may be shared occasionally, some 12.5% believe these activities should never be conducted jointly between the VET and degree programs.

These results were complemented with interviews conducted with administrators of the five universities participating in the study. One of the questions in the semi-structured interview was: 'Are elements of the degree and VET programs conducted jointly: shared activities, spaces and/or teachers, etc?' Another question in this line was: 'do you believe it is better that these programs remain differentiated or do you favour greater synergies between them?'

A common characteristic of the five universities, and one of the reasons that took part in the study, is that both university degree and short cycle programs are imparted on the same campus. As underscored in the results of the interviews, imparting both programs on campus is an advantage given that all students benefit from these common spaces and resources are optimised.

In addition to the physical spaces, universities offer common services to students and, on occasion, to a greater or lesser extent, propose activities for students of both programs equally. Although shared activities are often proposed, the majority of these only occasionally take place.

Interestingly, some participants were of the opinion that these complementary activities should be offered not indistinguishably in both the short-cycle and the degree program but should maintain the characteristics and aims of these more advanced studies.

With regard to teachers, in two of the five universities, some teachers impart classes in the short-cycles and in the degree program. In another two universities, teachers, in principle, impart classes in both programs. However, organisational difficulties have meant that the programs are taught by different teachers. The directors of both study programs are the same in three of the five universities.

Without being explicitly asked on the subject, some universities indicated that, beyond shared activities and/or common teachers, there is a shared or common educational mission. Thus, those interviewed coincided in pointing out that, while both programs are a part of higher education and there should be points in common given the current socio-economic realities, they each have a different emphasis which must be redefined.

4. Conclusions

Before considering the conclusions of this research project, a number of limitations should be noted which may have affected the scope of the results.

Among these limitations, one can distinguish between those derived from the nature of the object of study and those which are inherent to the design of the research project. The former include the lack of specialised scholarship on the subject. Few studies have focussed on the so-called short-cycle of higher education and the virtually non-existent bibliography on its integration into university campuses. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity for present and future studies which will contribute to the greater visibility of short-cycle within the broader field of higher education.

As for the limitations related to the methodology, one is the sample size, limited to five private Spanish universities. However, it should be noted that the field work has been exhaustive given the coincidence between the population and sample: all Spanish universities offering Pre-Primary Education on campus (both short-cycle and university degree programs) participated in the study.

The conclusions synthetically and comprehensively integrate the results from the questionnaires completed by students and the perspectives of the administrative teams reflected in the interviews. This article focuses on evaluating the integration of short-cycles on the same university campus. One of the principal conclusions of this research project is that both the university administrators and a high percentage of students (71.64%) view positively the imparting of short-cycle higher education programs on university campuses.

However, differences do exist based on the method of access to the degree in the evaluation of three aspects that could be shared between the degree and the short cycle: spaces, faculty, and complementary activities. Students from a short-cycle higher education program are more likely to support this shared approach.

Both from the perspective of students and administrative teams, variations in responses are perceived based on the organizational model of the university. These differences undoubtedly relate to the credit transfer plan established, the option to create or not a group composed of students from the short-cycle, the location and material resources of the university itself, and ultimately, its organizational model and educational project.

In one of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, students are invited to justify their evaluation of the fact that short cycles are also offered at the university. Many responses are positive, using terms like 'possibility', 'opportunity', 'enrichment', or 'addition'.

The term 'enrichment' is also mentioned in some of the interviews. All five universities, although with different models, seek to generate synergies between both of these two educational programs. A key factor in this effort to create alliances and points in common benefiting both short-cycle and university degree programs appears to be the existence of a common project or shared mission based on a strategic vision. Further to this, from the interviews one can deduce the importance of leadership actively pursuing these synergies along opportunities and spaces for coordination between the teaching staff of both educational programs in dealing jointly with issues related to teaching, research, complementary learning activities or an integrated orientation system. Both educational programs should embrace not only their local environment but should also offer greater opportunities for mobility and international exchanges of students, teachers and researchers. In this line, one of the objectives of the Council of the European Union (2020) is for 8% of students of Vocational Education and Training to have an international exchange for educational purposes prior to 2025.

5. Discussion

Considering the growth and diversification of Vocational Education and Training, there are reasons to believe that short-cycle programs will become even more diverse in many regions (CEDEFOP, 2017). This may be positive, in that it responds to specific needs, or negative, in leading to further fragmentation and polarisation. Ultimately, greater transparency and permeability of education systems is crucial, based, for example, on the European Qualifications Framework. In this direction, ideally all European countries should endeavour to clearly establish the duration of all higher education studies, including short-cycle programs, by means of the ECTS system.

This study aims to further the integration of short-cycles into university campuses in effective recognition of their part in higher education and the opportunity they offer for the modernisation and growth of university education. Above all, short-cycle programs are an avenue for students, regardless of their profile, to have a place where they can pursue their personal and professional education.

The integration of short-cycle programs into university campuses should go beyond the possible transfer of students from one study program to another. International organisations such as EURASHE maintain that the so-called short-cycle programs in higher education play an important intermediate role between the university and the labour market, facilitating the connection between higher education and the job market. Furthermore, the fact that short-cycle tertiary education is imparted in a wide range of scenarios (vocational schools or adult education centres in some European countries, institutes and some universities in the case of Spain), no doubt facilitates and expands the opportunity for accessing higher education to the benefit of society as a whole.

The offer of short-cycle and university degree programs in the same space presents a magnificent opportunity for level 5 education, university institutions themselves and, above all, for students studying on these university campuses. The notion of integrating both types of programs on the same campus must be qualified. The aim is not to minimise or even eliminate the differences between short-cycle and university degree programs but rather to consolidate the identity of both. Although these programs go 'head to head' and enter the same job market, short-cycles cannot be considered as a mere avenue for access to university studies nor should these lose their educational essence and acquire a purely utilitarian character. Both educational options are a part of higher education, but both need to acquire or recuperate their individual identity and thus provide a clearer and more complete picture of higher education.

Equity and inclusion are two of the key values for a European Education Area. Ensuring them is also a clear priority of the European Strategy for Universities (2022). Because Europe needs more people with high level skills, EU Member States have set the target that by 2030, at least 45% of 25–34 year-olds should obtain a higher education qualification (Council of the European Union, 2021). Widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies requires a reformed education system that facilitates flexibility in higher education progression (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022).

There are guidelines for future lines of research, emerged throughout the research process as new questions:

- A possible line could be oriented towards employers and/or teachers' perceptions of students coming from a short-cycle: their profile, academic performance, etc.
- It would also be desirable to continue the work initiated here with other university institutions offering different short-cycles and degrees than Pre-Primary Education. This way, further exploration of other organizational models could be achieved.
- New variables or measurement parameters could be considered: motivations of students studying a short-cycle at a university versus an institute.
- Another line could focus on the systematization of international experiences and best practices related to short-cycles of Higher Education.

The future lines emerging from this research represent a continuation and provide a starting point for further work in subsequent studies. The goal is to create within the campus a genuine space for higher education, where Vocational Training and university studies can solidify their identity and, at the same time, establish collaborative relationships.

Note

1. On 11 May 2018, in consideration of the submitted documentation, the CEI approved the research project (CEI-88-1651) as it met all ethical standards required for execution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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