

# Starting to do research on youth employment: my experience with the STYLE “squad”

Fermín López\*

The recovery of the Spanish economy has become evident for some time now. In fact, according to official statistics, GDP annual growth has been positive since 2014 and employment has also started to increase since 2015. However, as a young Spaniard in his final formative stage, I perceive the situation differently. Many friends that have finished their university degrees are caught in a trap of precarious and low-quality employment. Others, especially those who have not continued with their education and training, accept jobs that last some hours or a few days, in the best case.

Official statistics give overoptimistic politicians a clear advantage, since employment rates do not reflect the quality of jobs. However, the serious problem of youth employment in Spain is evidenced in Table1 (see below). As the table shows, the lack of jobs is more intense for less qualified and despite the improvement of the economy, the situation has not changed for young people. The weak performance of the Spanish labour market for young people has been already documented extensively by other groundbreaking studies from a multidimensional and longitudinal perspective (Hadjivassiliou et al. 2015).

Table 1: *Employment rates in Spain and other EU-countries by education and age in 2016*

Source: Eurostat, *LFS* (access on March 2017).

	ISCED 0-2				ISCED 3-4				ISCED 5-8		
	16-19	20-24	25-29	20-64	16-19	20-24	25-29	20-64	20-24	25-29	20-64
<b>Spain</b>	4.5	36.9	54.6	52.7	5.7	22.4	60.9	61.8	45.7	70.6	78.3
<b>EU-27</b>	11.6	44.5	54.5	53.9	30.7	49.9	74.0	71.7	60.8	80.8	83.7
<b>Sweden</b>	20.4	41.2	55.5	61.4	65.6	68.4	82.4	82.5	64.8	82.9	88.3
<b>Italy</b>	1.5	32.6	49.6	50.6	12.0	31.2	56.8	65.5	24.1	54.6	78.5
<b>UK</b>	20.9	54.3	63.7	61.9	42.8	66.9	81.3	77.7	78.4	87.9	85.1
<b>Germany</b>	21.5	55.7	54.0	59.0	51.2	64.4	80.2	79.0	71.9	84.7	87.9

These facts lead to highly relevant questions, which have been part of my research and to which I would like to respond here from my personal point of view. Since I started my

---

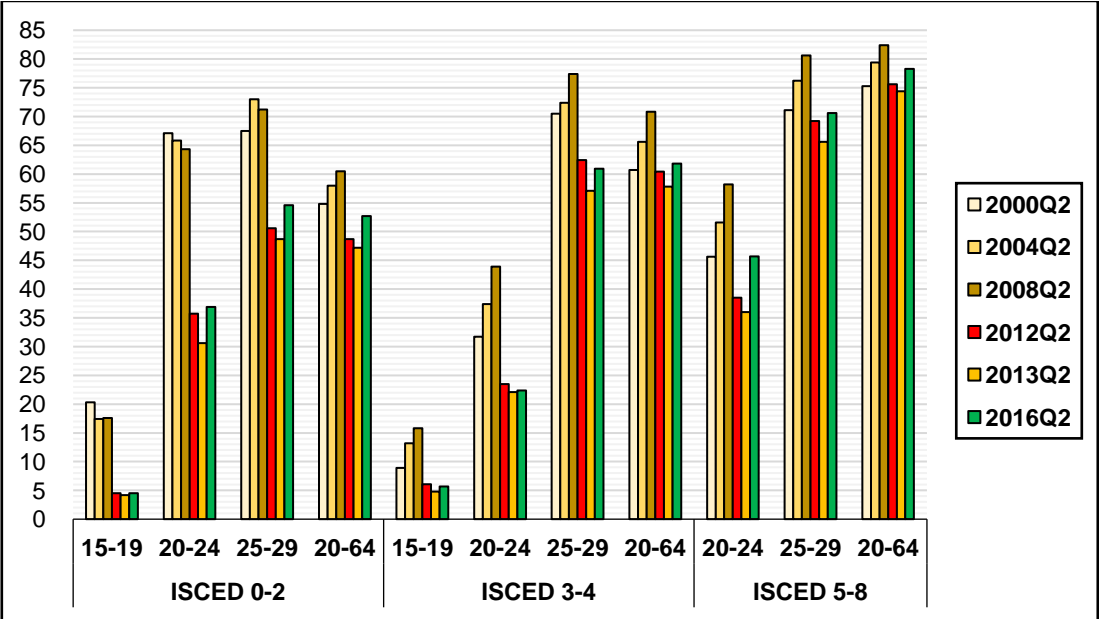
\*At the time this book chapter was written, Fermín López was a PhD candidate at the University of Oviedo and had participated in different activities with the STYLE project (Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe, 7th EU Framework- Grant ID: 613256) through a scholarship of excellence (“*beca de colaboración*”) from the Ministry of Education of the Government of Spain.

university studies, I have always had a special interest in sociology, labour economics and public policy analysis. In these academic fields, I have found the motivation and support necessary to expand and deepen my knowledge on the situation of young people in the labour market. The following questions and their answers arise from a body of research which I have been revising since I joined the Department of Sociology of the University of Oviedo in 2016. In addition to these short questions, I would also like to share my experience within the STYLE project and how this has helped me to find out new perspectives on the issue of youth employment.

**Are the low youth employment rates associated to the crisis or are structural traits of the Spanish labour market?**

Figure 1 shows the employment evolution by age groups and education level for the second quarters of different years from the 2000 to 2016. It can be seen that the occupation of Spanish young people was already low before the economic crisis. In spite of this, it is also true that those with low education level aged between 20 and 29 years had high employment rates, even higher than other young people with more education. This can be explained by the high level of early school drop-outs registered before the crisis. Many young people abandoned their studies to seek employment in the services and building sector.

Figure 1: Youth employment evolution in Spain (2000-2016)



Source: Eurostat, LFS (access on March 2017).

### **Which young people have been more affected by the economic recession in Spain?**

Although the inclusion of young people in the labour market was already low before the crisis, the employment reduction has affected significantly those between 15 and 24 years with low education levels (see figure 1 above). Besides that, it has been reported by other studies that women, immigrants, and children from low socio-economic backgrounds have been particularly hit by the economic downturn (Moreno Mínguez, 2015).

### **Why is youth employment especially low in Spain?**

Some authors have already pointed out the long-term nature of low youth employment rates. Garrido et al. (2016) disaggregate the evolution of employment rates by different population cohorts and argue that what really fails is the youth labor integration model as a whole. This integration model has been discussed broadly in comparative research. Following an institutional approach, there are two main reasons that can explain the low labour market participation of young Spanish people.

On the one hand, the disconnection between educational system and employability has caused an increase of long-term youth unemployment and NEET rates. Many students left their training during the expansionary phase of the previous economic cycle and others did not invest enough training time to be able to get a job afterwards. This, in addition to the lack of effective and targeted active labour market policies is one of the main reasons of the exclusion of less-qualified young workers from labour participation.

On the other hand, the Spanish contractual framework has fostered a pattern of “biographical” dualism. What this means is that the formal rule and primary channel of young people to reach a stable employment is through fixed-term employment contracts. Unlike labour segmentation in other countries, working conditions that involve temporality in Spain are much more correlated with the biographical and working age. This temporality pattern, besides being involuntary, reduces future labour opportunities and blocks employee’s professional development (Dolado et al. 2013).

### **My experience with STYLE: what I have learned**

My interest in the previous questions and the support of my teacher María González Menéndez gave me the opportunity to accompany the STYLE research network during their

visit to the European Parliament in the European Youth Event (EYE). I participated in different workshops and presentations discussing about how we can tackle with youth unemployment.

One of the main concerns expressed in the different thematic sessions was the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. Young people coming from across Europe agreed in identifying a set of potential improvements to this policy. The most important were those related to training and the funding of the policy. Focusing on training, it was noted that it should not depend on the companies that are going to hire the recipients of the policy and external evaluations should be implemented. Regarding the funding of the Youth Guarantee, it was stated that European Commission should make additional efforts to get member states involved with youth employment policies.

However, despite the unquestionable benefits of the workshop discussions, I would like to stress that probably the greatest lesson I have learnt was the spirit of the event and the attitude of the STYLE “squad”. During those days, I shared impressions and perceptions with other young people that face youth unemployment in their countries from different perspectives and with different social concerns. I also became part of a diverse group of people which included teachers, students, practitioners of social organizations and other peers, some with disabilities. Having had the opportunity to meet all those people has helped me to realize that many times society gives us a wrong view of the social problems and how to cope with them. It is normally assumed that some issues require complex and difficult solutions. But what I really think is that great solutions do not come from very sophisticated schemes. Great solutions arise when different and diverse people come together and talk about their own problems and think about what they, and the rest of the society, can do to improve the situation.

### **References:**

Dolado, J. Felgueroso, F. Jansen, M. and Wolf, A. (2013), “Youth labour Market Performance in Spain and its Determinants- a micro-level perspective”, *OECD Economics Department WP* 1039/2013.

Garrido, L. Gutiérrez, R. and Guillén, A. (2016): Biographical dualism: Youth employment and poverty patterns in Spain”. In Petmesidou, M. Delamónica, E.

Papathodorou, C and Henry-Lee, A. (eds.): *Child Poverty, Youth (Un) Employment, and Social Inclusion*. Stuttgart: Ibidem.

Hadjivassiliou, K. Kirchner, L y Speckesser, S. (2015): “Key indicators and drivers of youth unemployment”, *STYLE Working Paper* (WP 3.1).

Moreno Mínguez, A. (2015): “La empleabilidad de los jóvenes en España: Explicando el elevado desempleo juvenil durante la recesión económica”, *Revista Internacional de Investigación en Ciencias Sociales*, 11-1: 3-20.