

[Original Articles]

## Gender Framing Erasmus+ Mobility – an Analysis in Vocational Education and Training in Portugal\*

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## Resumo

### **Mobilidade Erasmus+ com Enquadramento de Género - uma Análise na Educação e Formação Profissional em Portugal**

Este artigo decorre de um estudo que teve como objetivo identificar se o género influencia a participação na mobilidade internacional Erasmus+ no Ensino Profissional (EP) em Portugal. Em termos metodológicos, foram analisados dados quantitativos sobre frequência do EP e participação na mobilidade Erasmus+ entre 2014-2020, correspondente ao primeiro período do Programa Erasmus+ a abranger o EP. Foram ainda entrevistadas duas diretoras, duas gestoras de mobilidade e quatro professoras de duas escolas profissionais. Os resultados indicam uma sub-representação feminina no EP e na mobilidade, decorrente da 'genderização' das áreas disciplinares no EP. Contudo, contrariamente à escolha de um percurso no EP, a mobilidade E+ parece atrair mais o género feminino, dado que, nesse caso, os valores relativos da participação são mais elevados. Conclui-se que, embora o género não determine a participação na mobilidade, surge como fator influente, moldando-a através de processos prévios, nomeadamente na opção pelo EP e escolha do curso.

**Palavras-chave:** educação; Programa Erasmus+; mobilidade internacional de estudantes; ensino profissional; género

## Abstract

### **Gender Framing Erasmus+ Mobility – an Analysis in Vocational Education and Training in Portugal**

This article stems from a study that aimed to identify if gender influences participation in Erasmus+ International Mobility in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Portugal. Methodologically, quantitative data on VET attendance and Erasmus+ mobility participation for 2014-2020 were analysed, corresponding to the first period of the Erasmus+ Programme covering VET. Additionally, two directors, two mobility managers, and four teachers from two vocational schools were interviewed. Findings reveal an underrepresentation of women in VET and participation in mobility that stems from the 'genderisation' patterns of VET's subject areas. However, in contrast to the choice of a VET course, Erasmus+ mobility in VET seems to attract women more than men, as in this case, the figures of female participation are higher. In conclusion, although gender does not seem to determine participation in mobility, it emerges as an influencing factor, shaping it through previous processes, namely choosing VET and the course options.

**Keywords:** education; Erasmus+ Programme; students international mobility; vocational education and training; gender

## Résumé

### Mobilité Erasmus+ avec un Cadre de Genre - une Analyse dans l'Éducation et la Formation Professionnelle au Portugal

Cet article est issu d'une étude qui a eu pour objectif d'identifier si le genre influence la participation à la mobilité internationale Erasmus+ (E+) dans l'enseignement professionnel (EP) au Portugal. D'un point de vue méthodologiques, nous avons analysé des données quantitatives sur la fréquence de l'EP et la participation à la mobilité E+ entre 2014 et 2020, correspondant à la première période du programme E+ couvrant l'EP. Nous avons également interviewé deux directrices, deux coordinatrices de mobilité E+ et quatre enseignantes de deux écoles professionnelles. Les résultats révèlent une sous-représentation du genre féminin dans l'EP et une participation à la mobilité E+ qui découle des normes de « genrification » de l'EP par domaine disciplinaire. Cependant, contrairement au choix d'un parcours en l'EP, la mobilité E+ semble attirer plus le genre féminin que masculin puisque, dans ce cas, les valeurs de chaque genre se rapprochent. L'étude a permis de conclure que, bien que le genre ne semble pas déterminer la participation à la mobilité, il est un facteur d'influence qui configure et caractérise cette participation par des processus qui lui sont préalables, notamment concernant l'option pour l'EP et le choix des cours dans l'EP.

**Mots-clés:** Erasmus+; Mobilité internationale des étudiants; Enseignement professionnel; Genre

## Resumen

### Movilidad Erasmus+ con un Marco de Género - Un Análisis de la Educación y Formación Profesional en Portugal

Este artículo procede de un estudio cuyo objetivo era determinar si el género influye en la participación en la movilidad internacional Erasmus+ (E+) en la Enseñanza Profesional (EP) en Portugal. Desde el punto de vista metodológico, se analizaron datos cuantitativos sobre la asistencia a la EP y la participación en la movilidad E+ entre 2014 y 2020, correspondiente al primer periodo del Programa E+ que abarca la EP. También se entrevistó a dos directores, dos responsables de movilidad de E+ y cuatro profesores de dos centros de formación profesional. Los resultados revelan una infrarrepresentación del género femenino en la EP y una participación en la movilidad E+ que se deriva de los patrones de "genderización" de la EP por áreas temáticas. Sin embargo, a diferencia de la elección de un itinerario EP, la movilidad E+ parece atraer más a las mujeres que a los hombres, ya que las cifras para cada sexo se aproximan.

El estudio llevó a la conclusión de que, aunque el género no parece determinar la participación en la movilidad, sí es un factor influyente que moldea y tipifica esta participación a través de procesos que la preceden, a saber, la elección de la EP y la elección de los cursos de EP.

**Palabras clave:** Programa Erasmus+; Movilidad Internacional de Estudiantes; Enseñanza Profesional; Género

## Introduction

The European Erasmus Programme has actively promoted students' international mobility for over three decades. Initially dedicated to the higher education context, the Programme expanded in 2014 to additional domains, such as Youth and Sports, and further education fields, namely School Education, Adult Education, and Vocational Education and Training (VET). This configuration as a framework programme has been called "Erasmus+" (E+), a designation that accounts for its previous success, whereas sectorial programmes dedicated to these education fields were formally abandoned. The new configuration was set for the 2014-2020 programme, being renewed for 2021-2027. In this context, knowing the configuration of international mobility in remaining education fields becomes relevant, as in the case of VET, which, like higher education, targets young students' traineeship mobilities.

In the case of higher education, the success of the Programme and the structuring effects of international mobility fuelled the Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration, 1999), being also driven by it (Reilly, Sweeney, 2022; Rich, 2010; Xavier, Leite, 2023). This mutual effect has made it easier for millions of higher education students to have an international experience, both in studies and traineeships, ensuring the recognition of the outcomes achieved abroad at diploma (qualifications) and curricula (qualifications and work experience) levels. The combination of the Programme's long duration in higher education, where it has been running since 1987, and its success, namely shaping the European higher education area derived from the Bologna Process, attracted scientific research, resulting in significant scientific production (Gümüş, Gök, Esen, 2020; Roy et al., 2019).

On the contrary, in the case of the additional education fields of School Education, Adult Education, and VET, the configuration and effects of the Programme are not so significantly studied, possibly because of its recent application and the consequent lack of a historical impact of the Programme shaping European education policies in those fields. The VET case seems particular not only because it poses challenges related to the different VET systems and configurations occurring between the European Union's (EU) member states (Brockmann, Clarke, Winch, 2008; Salas-Velasco, 2023) but also because of its inherent articulation of the education and working dimensions.

Despite the progress that has been made, namely as a result of the Copenhagen Process (Copenhagen Declaration, 2002) and, more recently, of this extension of the Programme to VET, the implementation of a harmonisation and standardisation process seems more difficult (Rauner, 2008) when compared to other education fields, with consequences on international mobility outcomes. Compared to higher education, VET international mobility has been somewhat intermittent and subjected to different funding programmes, successively reconfigured (De Olagüe-Smithson, 2017, 2019; Pépin, 2006, 2007). Such a scenario increases the challenges of performing VET mobility, which may limit mobility effects in this education field.

In the context of initial VET, commonly occurring at the secondary education level and targeting students between 15 and 18 years old, age, among other factors, may represent an additional dimension influencing the decision to go abroad on mobility. Minors live under the tuition of their legal tutors, depending on their choices. In their turn, VET schools face additional challenges to ensure legal authorisations and prevent potential risks when engaging minors in missions abroad. But beyond these barriers and legal constraints, other challenges may exist, potentially impacting VET international mobility, such as gender. Given the VET's vital link between education and the labour market, the gender factor represents a potential impact factor on both dimensions (Blossfeld, Pratter, Uunk, 2023; Zazueta, Accinelli, 2021). Therefore, the power of gender to shape career choices and influence the labour market's configuration (Macías, de Guadalupe Arras Vota, Ibarra, 2020; Mozahem et al., 2020; Pessoa, Vaz, Botassio, 2021) seems relevant for looking at international mobility within an education field where it is commonly shaped as “traineeships in companies”, as is the case of VET.

Within this context, this article is focused on the VET field. It is based on a study that aimed to identify if gender differences are present in E+ international mobility and how far gender shapes or influences VET students' participation in mobility. The study focused on data reflecting the outgoing student flows in the Portuguese VET system where E+ VET mobilities for traineeships apply.

The Portuguese VET system, similar to the other VET systems in the EU, is characterised by specificities that turn it into a particular context associated with its historical pathway. The creation of the vocational education structure and dimension in the Portuguese education system dates back to the second half of the XIX century with the creation of dedicated schools

(Alves, 2014), being reformulated during the period of the *Estado Novo* (1933-1974) (Grácio, 1996). The system was supposed to generate intermediate-level workers capable of responding to emerging or increasing needs of the labour market. Later reconfigurations, during the democratic period, aimed, in addition, to respond to problems relating to the education system, such as early school leaving and school failure (Azevedo, 2014). In common is a strong focus on low-skilled technical work that is culturally associated with the less favoured socio-economic fringes of the population.

Changes occurred during the democratic period aimed to deal with these problems while not compromising fundamental indicators of the country's convergence with the European Union, namely: (i) the realisation of a robust compulsory education of 12 years, which would take the country away from the image and consequences of deep and persistent illiteracy inherited from the dictatorship; (ii) the possibility to proceed to higher education, which the country still lacked given its history where only the elites would access it, and which is, initially, fundamental for political-administrative and scientific modernisation and, later, for consolidating the 'knowledge economy' advocated at European level; and (iii) the nurturing of the labour market by intermediate technicians in specialised areas whose needs emerged or were pressing. These needs would be the basis for political decisions on the training programmes and curricula to be promoted, thus completing a promising, ethically-based education-training-employment cycle (Azevedo, 2014).

The Portuguese VET system seems to have become masculinised due to its historical context and the inheritance of the sociocultural matrices in place. Gender as a cross-cutting dimension produces and absorbs specificities on such a triangle, particularly shaping school education pathways and the labour market's features. Both its historical influence, where the world of work was masculinised, particularly low-skilled technical work, and the school indicators, where school failure and school drop-out rates continue to be predominantly masculine (Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality [CIG], 2023), have been fuelling, respectively downstream and upstream, the option for a VET pathway.

It should be noted, however, that many dimensions have led to changes at this level over the years, namely a growing supply of training in feminised fields, which, through the combination of policies to promote gender equality with the evolution of society, has led to successive reformulations

and impacts on the Portuguese VET system. The data show, however, that it is still heavily masculinised (Directorate-General for Statistics of Education and Science [DGEEC], 2023).

Based on this situation and considering this masculinisation, a study was carried out aiming to identify whether gender is an influential factor in participation in Erasmus+ International Mobility (E+) in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Portugal and the results it may be producing. This article, presenting the study, is organised into five sections. This first introductory section is followed by the theoretical framework focusing on the main conceptual approaches. A third section presents the methods used in the study, followed by the fourth section dedicated to delivering the main findings. The discussion and conclusion section closes the study's presentation.

## **Theoretical framework**

The gender divide produces differences in the labour market that risk deepening gender segregation and discrimination, of which the gender pay gap is one of the most recognised and discussed in the EU, at least since the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957 (Van der Vleuten, 2016). However, differences in professional careers and working assignments of men and women are not restricted to different payments penalising women. Additional effects are socially transversal, leading gender equality to be one of the most commonly addressed factors for anti-discrimination in the EU. The EU legislative framework highlights its relevance in the labour market:

Among the various prohibited grounds of discrimination, 'sex' plays a leading role, not only because it was a pioneer in the field, but also because [...] the considerations of the CJEU<sup>1</sup> on discrimination between men and women in labour matters have greatly influenced the other directives (Mestre, 2020:90; original in Portuguese).

This fact implies the importance of such a dimension as a discrimination driver on top of additional factors such as race or ethnic origin, religion and beliefs, disability, age, and sexual orientation (idem). This also shows how the configuration of the labour market is subjected to the gender dimension before other influencing factors. In line with this, the analysis presented in this article addresses the same European geo-social-political space on which the E+ Programme applies. At the same time, the impact

of gender on VET, as a field directly connected to the labour market and permeable to its configuration, should, therefore, be considered. A recent report, based on a European-funded project promoting gender equality among young people, states that VET tends to attract more men than women (Ingellis, Diaz, 2019), a situation worth analysing under the gender equity framework.

## VET and Gender in Portugal

The Portuguese VET context, in the democratic period, is strongly marked by the creation of Vocational Schools in 1989 (Portuguese Decree-Law No. 26/89, of January 21), which were imminently cooperative in nature and publicly funded, and later by the creation of vocational courses in public schools (Portuguese Decree-Law No. 74/2004, of March 26). However, the creation of vocational and technical-vocational courses dates back to 1983 (Portuguese Normative Order No. 194-A/83, of October 21), when they were addressed to specific schools within the public network, then subjected to successive adjustments, particularly about changes in the country's social and, above all, economic and business reality. All the courses created at the time corresponded, with one exception, to disciplinary areas leading to traditionally masculinised occupations, so the exception was the only one whose designation appealed to the possibility of both genders: *Secretário(a)-dactilógrafo(a)* (male or female “Secretary-typist”). The remaining courses are described by using the male form of the foreseen occupation exclusively, anticipating and reinforcing its masculinisation: *Técnico de agricultura* (“agriculture technician”), *Técnico de manutenção mecânica* (“technician for mechanical maintenance”), *Técnico de instalações elétricas* (“electric installations technician”), *Técnico de obras* (“building work technician”), *Técnico de contabilidade* (“accounting technician”), *Prático agrícola* (“farm worker”), *Ourivesaria - ourives, prateiro e cinzelador* (“Goldsmiths - goldsmiths, silversmiths, and chisellers”). The courses described only by the subject area, not resourcing to its performer, also corresponded to traditionally male occupations: “Metallurgy”, “Agriculture mechanics”, “Electricity”, and “Civil construction”.

The social, political, and economic changes resulting from the democratic regime built since the revolution of April 25<sup>th</sup> of 1974 have triggered and driven new approaches in education, not only in terms of the educational reconfigurations required in a democracy, such as universal access, but also in terms of promoting equal opportunities and, in a later stage, searching for equal results (Seabra, 2009). However, changes were still

marked by the ‘privileged status’ of accessing and attending secondary schools against the vocational pathways (Teodoro, 1997). Gender divisions were thus also marked by this circumstance in education since the vocational field pointed towards masculinised professions, following the assumption that the ‘women’s place’ was primarily in the domestic setting (Ferreira, 1996). The very moment of the introduction of compulsory 4-year schooling was initially granted exclusively to men (1956) and only years later (1960) and in an ‘embarrassing’ way (Adão, Remédios, 2009), to women - although by that time, there were already more girls studying at secondary schools (Nóvoa, 2005). At the intersection of these socio-economic dimensions (‘school education’ for the elite and ‘vocational education’ for the disadvantaged groups) and gender (work and career for men and domestic space for women), which marked education under the *Estado Novo*, the changes in education brought about by the democratic construction of the last 50 years, also embedded by globalisation and Europeanisation processes (Cerqueira, Martins, 2011), cause new configurations and relevant elements, among them the school success of girls compared to boys (Torres et al., 2014) and the consequent greater presence and completion of women in higher education (Seabra, 2009; Torres et al., 2018).

This global context makes it possible to recognise the trends in girls’ and boys’ school choices. In fact, the choice of a vocational route tends to occur in the context of greater difficulty and failure at school: “Too often, VET is seen as a fallback option for students who struggle with school or lack motivation, rather than as a first choice that leads to attractive career paths” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023:9). This situation allowed students to envisage a quicker ending of the school course and an earlier entrance into the labour market. Gender differences in the choice of school and vocational pathways are backed up by the successful or unsuccessful pre-secondary school pathway itself, where women are more successful than men: “In the case of girls’ success at school, the explanations for this “school energy” have pointed out that it is a combination of two factors: the advantages of family socialisation in fulfilling the “student’s role” and the over-investment they will make in schooling as the best way to achieve their path to emancipation”<sup>2</sup> (Seabra, 2009:94). Thus, not only are girls socialised with a view to ‘good behaviour’ and ‘knowing how to be a student’, but they also perceive that occupations with a lower status will not facilitate their foreseen role as ‘future working women’, conditions that point them the choice for pursuing higher education. In addition, in terms of employment, Portugal

seems to emphasise the ‘higher education diploma’ over marked gender discrimination at the end of higher education: “Younger women have consistently higher inactivity rates than younger men across all attainment levels except for tertiary-educated women in Portugal” (OECD, 2023: 81), which may emphasise the importance of pursuing higher education for women in the country. Lower-skilled occupations, typically targeted by vocational training courses, which, as mentioned, are also historically offered in masculinised areas, are those showing the greatest quantitative difference between men and women, with a significant male predominance (Torres et al., 2018).

In summary, choosing a VET route has been associated with school failure and lower socio-economic and socio-cultural status (Portuguese Education Council [CNE], 2023), and it tends to be taken by boys, for whom this training offer has also historically been more orientated. It should be noted, however, that the successive changes and updates to the course offer in VET currently cover a whole range of subject areas, including typically feminised areas, which has led to an increased permeability of this education system to female participation. Given the historical association between VET and lower socioeconomic and sociocultural status in Portugal, women’s greater access to VET could mean that they accumulate class and gender stigma factors in society and participation in the labour market as ‘working-class women from underprivileged social groups’. Specific devices, especially political ones (Resolution of the Portuguese Parliament No. 166/2019, of September 10) and recent studies (Barbosa, 2023) have pointed to ways of valorising VET. Given the social prestige built up over almost four decades in higher education, the E+ Programme could also represent a mechanism to be considered in favouring and valuing VET, starting with support for the emancipation of students: “sharing experiences through the Erasmus+ programme could help motivate and open up horizons for VET students”<sup>3</sup> (idem:50) and thus also facilitate social and labour market equity.

## Gender and the Labour Market

Gender concerns have not only been the first anti-discrimination factor enounced in the EU legislative framework, but they also represent a formally enounced dimension of the EU Treaties, accounting, at a first stance, for the labour market concerns and, afterwards, for social justice. The Treaty of Maastricht (European Union, 1992) is an example of the concern in the first case, as its formulation appeals to the member states

observance of gender equality under the sphere of the labour market, ensuring “equality between men and women with regard to labour market opportunities and treatment at work” (Article 2 of the Agreement on social policy of the Treaty). The focus of the Maastricht Treaty goes further, stating that EU member states should “[...] make it easier for women to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in their professional careers” (Article 6, item 3 of the same Agreement). In the following Treaties, the formulation changed to a broader anti-discriminatory perspective beyond the professional sphere. The formulation in the latest and current version of the Treaty on the European Union (European Union, 2020), derived from the Lisbon Treaty (European Union, 2007), states that equality between men and women is inscribed as a founded value of the EU (Article 2, Title I – Common provisions) and that the EU shall fight discrimination and promote equality between men and women (Number 3, Article 3, Title I). Such a context provides evidence for the relevance of the gender equality approach in the EU and, therefore, in the EU funding programmes.

Gender equality is, however, imbued in paradoxes and misrepresentations, one of which we found to be the “gender balance” paradox. Gender balance is commonly assumed as the quantitative measure in which the number of women equals the number of men within a certain context, for example, within a company or a school class. This situation may lead to the assumption that gender equality exists within a given context because gender balance exists within it. The paradox occurs whenever gender balance is promoted in order to establish and increase gender equality while gender differences that may risk equity are being emphasised along the process. The paradoxical aspect of assuming that “gender balance” equals “gender equality” is that the gender balance may represent severe gender segregation. Such a situation might occur in horizontal or vertical terms (Sousa, Gonçalves, Faria, 2024).

In horizontal segregation, parallel genderisation occurs in different fields. An example of horizontal segregation would be a transport company employing the same number of men and women in occupations of equal power (and even equal payment), thus respecting gender balance, but where car drivers would always be men, and car cleaning staff would always be women. In vertical segregation, genderisation occurs within the same field but in different power positions. A classic example would be a big company where each chief position is occupied by men, and each secretariat position is occupied by women. Still respecting quantitative

gender balance in those examples, gender equality is questionable, particularly concerning decision-making power and “equal opportunities”. For this reason, the concept of “gender equity”, even if commonly mistaken for “gender equality”, seems more appropriate as it diverges from the quantitative perspective commonly addressed in gender equality to claim that “opportunities and resources are allocated according to the specific characteristics and situation of the target community” (Petinelli-Souza, 2021:78). Within such a perspective, in the examples above, gender balance would have a chance to occur both in the car driving and cleaning occupations and in chief and secretarial positions – idealistically, meaning that no segregation would occur, including a gender pay gap.

Still, the historical context of equal rights for women and men in the labour market is characterised by additional misleading impressions. Women conquered the right to occupy spaces previously exclusive to men in an effective conquest of equal rights, but men have not occupied spaces exclusive to women in equal terms. For example, domestic and family care are cases representing a double penalty for women when, on top of a job, they are overwhelmed by the amount of work under “their responsibility” at home. At the same time, these achievements are still socially undervalued, given the social devaluation of domestic roles and family care compared to productive and business activities (Pessoa, Vaz, Botassio, 2021). Professional undervaluation also occurs when the verbal enunciation of low-qualified occupations occurs in the feminine and high-qualified occupations in the masculine. For example, in the Portuguese language that requires gender determination of most occupation names, the expression *empregada doméstica* (domestic worker) is always used in the feminine, including in texts addressing gender equity (Moschkovich, Almeida, 2015). Indeed, the idea of its enunciation in the masculine might appear strange and forced, given the historical nonexistence or irrelevance of men in such positions that would justify it. This situation is even against the common and general gender rule of the language, where, while enouncing the plural, the male form is adopted to address both genders (a situation becoming progressively questioned). The common general enunciation for highly qualified occupations, such as a medical doctor (*médico*) or business manager (*gestor de empresas*), follows the rule of using the masculine form, even if women also occupy such positions.

The social representations of gender equity and gender gaps in the labour market are emphasised by language, but they are not restricted to it. Gender itself plays a role in representations, or misrepresentations, of

how far women and men play equal roles and have equal rights in the labour market. From their unprivileged standpoint, women tend to be more aware of the gender gap in the labour market. At the same time, awareness is crucial in promoting and directing appropriate policies to address the gender gap and consequent concerns (Malul, 2023), such as the gender pay gap and the social valorisation of feminised occupations. In addition, social representations are relevant as they determine either the break or continuation of the existing gaps. This is as relevant as the labour market's gender configuration, which is determined by aspirations and career choices made at school (Gomes, 2019), where the increasing schooling of women emphasises possible gender differences. Such choices start at the secondary school level (Mozahem et al., 2020), which in the Portuguese case includes the initial VET field (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 2023), proceeding, in the applicable cases, to higher education choices (Gorjón, Kallage, de Lafuente, 2022; Macías, de Guadalupe Arras Vota, Ibarra, 2020; Olsson, Martiny, 2018; Pessoa, Vaz, Botassio, 2021). However, the reverse situation also applies: The established gender configuration of the labour market also influences the aspirations and career choices of both women and men (Molina, Usui, 2023), supporting the gender gap continuation.

Traineeships, including those performed in E+ VET mobility, occur within this bidirectional genderised context. Combining the school and labour market dimensions, apprenticeships are upstream and downstream permeable to existing gender prejudices, barriers, and tendencies (Fernandes, Huber, Plaza, 2023). The relevance of the inclusion processes and practices in VET pathways, including the reduction of gender gaps (Nylund et al., 2018), is crucial to reducing social stigma and unfavourable social representations persisting in such education field (Doroftei, Marques da Silva, 2024; Riele, Crump, 2002).

## Gender and E+ Mobility

Gender is a variable that has captured the attention of research into the E+ Programme in higher education, both as a central variable in the research (see, for instance: Restaino, Primerano, Vitale, 2021; Bötcher et al., 2016) as well as a secondary variable (see, for instance: Aba, 2019; Álamo-Vera et al., 2020; Amendola, Restaino, 2017; Asoodar, Atai, Baten, 2017; Lesjak et al., 2015; Monteiro, Pereira, 2016). The results of these investigations point to a trend towards greater female participation in the programme, which can be explained by greater female representation in

higher education, but also by other reasons, namely the possibilities of greater female empowerment resulting from participation in mobility (Benedictis, Leone, 2020).

However, as we have seen, the case of higher education is the opposite of VET in terms of the presence of women and men, which could indicate the same trend in terms of participation in E+ mobility (in this case, more men than women). Furthermore, unlike higher education, which has been included in the Programme for over three decades, VET has only been part of it for a decade (since 2014), despite the existence of different previous programmes that have applied to it. This difference may explain, at least in part, the reduced attention that E+ mobility in VET has received in terms of scientific research compared to higher education, even if the same period of analysis is considered (Bronze, Leite, Monteiro, 2024).

Looking to bridge this gap, the study described in this paper takes the inclusion perspectives proposed by E+ as its starting point, which can be extended to all the education fields and thematic domains covered by the Programme. Those are based on the Programme's most recent priorities, particularly inclusion and diversity (European Commission, 2023). Combining the gender perspectives inscribed in the EU Treaties and the gender equity dimensions and barriers in education and the labour market, as described above, should represent a relevant driver toward reducing gender gaps and favouring a more equitable society. Finally, stressing gender symmetry in school and career choices, including apprenticeship engagement, should also positively affect the labour market's gender gaps, including the gender pay gap (OECD, 2018).

## Methodology

The study was based on the analysis of statistical data available in secondary sources (Denscombe, 2014) and semi-structured interview surveys (Creswell, Creswell, 2018).

Regarding the analysed statistics, a data report and a database were searched concerning the attendance of boys and girls in VET courses and in Erasmus+ mobility. The considered period was the same for both cases in order to respect the context under analysis and facilitate comparisons. Both searches used the academic years between 2014 and 2020, corresponding to the period where E+ applies to Vocational Education and Training.

In the case of VET attendance, the data report “Educação em Números – Portugal 2023” (Education in Numbers - Portugal 2023) and the statistics database (<https://www.dgeec.medu.pt/>) of the Directorate-General for Statistics of Education and Science (DGEEC) were consulted, providing the national official data, which account for the robustness of the conclusions.

Following this first step and given the genderisation found in VET attendance per disciplinary area, a second step was established to understand if VET students’ enrolment in E+ mobility follows similar gender patterns.

In the case of E+ mobility participation in VET, the Erasmus+ Barometer data platform of the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Education and Training was consulted. This database also corresponds to the official statistics, in this case for the Portuguese participation in mobility, in search for the same level of robustness of conclusions. In this database, however, data are grouped by field of study, each comprising different and non-identified courses; therefore, it is not possible to determine which courses are included in each field. Accordingly, data were disaggregated by VET area of study and gender and extracted by type of mobility in the different applicable years.

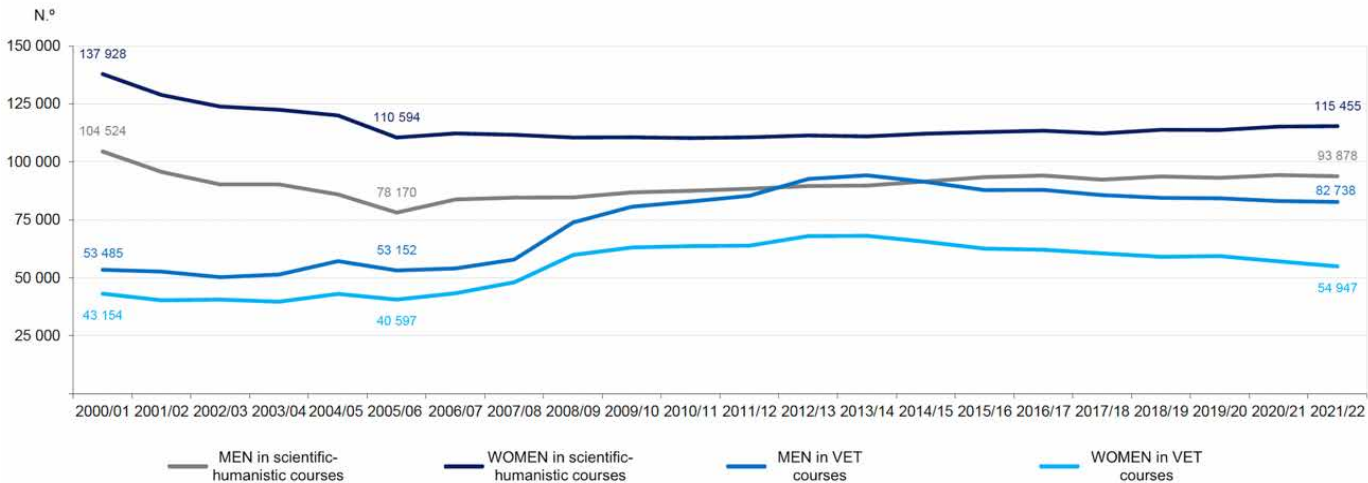
The existing types of mobility consist of traineeships during the school cycle, traineeships after the end of the school cycle, traineeships in companies, traineeships in vocational institutions, mobility with VET charter, and mobility without VET charter. Not all years included in the analysis had the same type of mobility, specifically regarding “mobility with VET charter” and “mobility without VET charter”. A “VET charter” is an E+ accreditation granted by the National Agency to VET institutions, facilitating access to funding through simplified application processes for its holders. Data regarding institutions “with VET charter” are available from 2016 onwards. It was considered that these differences do not affect the observed results since they apply to the access requirements of institutions to obtain funding and not to the configuration of mobility itself or its accessibility to individuals. Therefore, the data presented and analysed in this document result from the sum of the different VET students’ mobility types enounced above.

Alongside these procedures, semi-structured interviews were conducted with directors, project managers, and teachers with experience in E+ mobility from VET schools. Interviewees were identified following an identification and screening procedure for VET schools active in the E+ Programme. Initially, the data from successful applications to the Programme in the last decade, available on the National Agency website, were used to identify the most active schools in the Programme. In a second moment, the identified schools were contacted and asked about their affiliation policies with the Programme. Two of them were found to be of particular relevance for considering the Programme as an “active flag” that they use to (i) define their organisational culture and (ii) shape their public image. Both schools are based in Porto, Northern Portugal, and are part of the Portuguese VET system. Their educational offer includes VET courses of double certification (professional and school certification) targeting youngsters aged between 15 and around 18+ years old. Their course catalogue includes Information and Communication Technology, Social Care, Tourism, Management, Commerce, and Design. Following the required authorisations and informed consent, eight interviews were conducted, with equal distribution in both schools, with two school directors, two mobility project managers, and four teachers, among those most experienced in E+ mobility. Without any intentionality, all interviewees were women.

## Results

In Portugal, the VET system registers a higher number of male than female students, contrary to what happens in scientific-humanistic education. As shown in Figure 1, this situation has occurred at least since 2000, although the historical course of the VET system in the country points to an identical situation in the previous periods. Figure 1, extracted from the data report *Educação em Números 2023* (DGEEC, 2023), shows this relationship, also showing that the number of male students in the academic years from 2012 to 2014 in VET is sometimes higher than in scientific-humanistic courses.

**Figure 1**  
Students enrolled in secondary education by curricular orientation and gender (2000-2022)

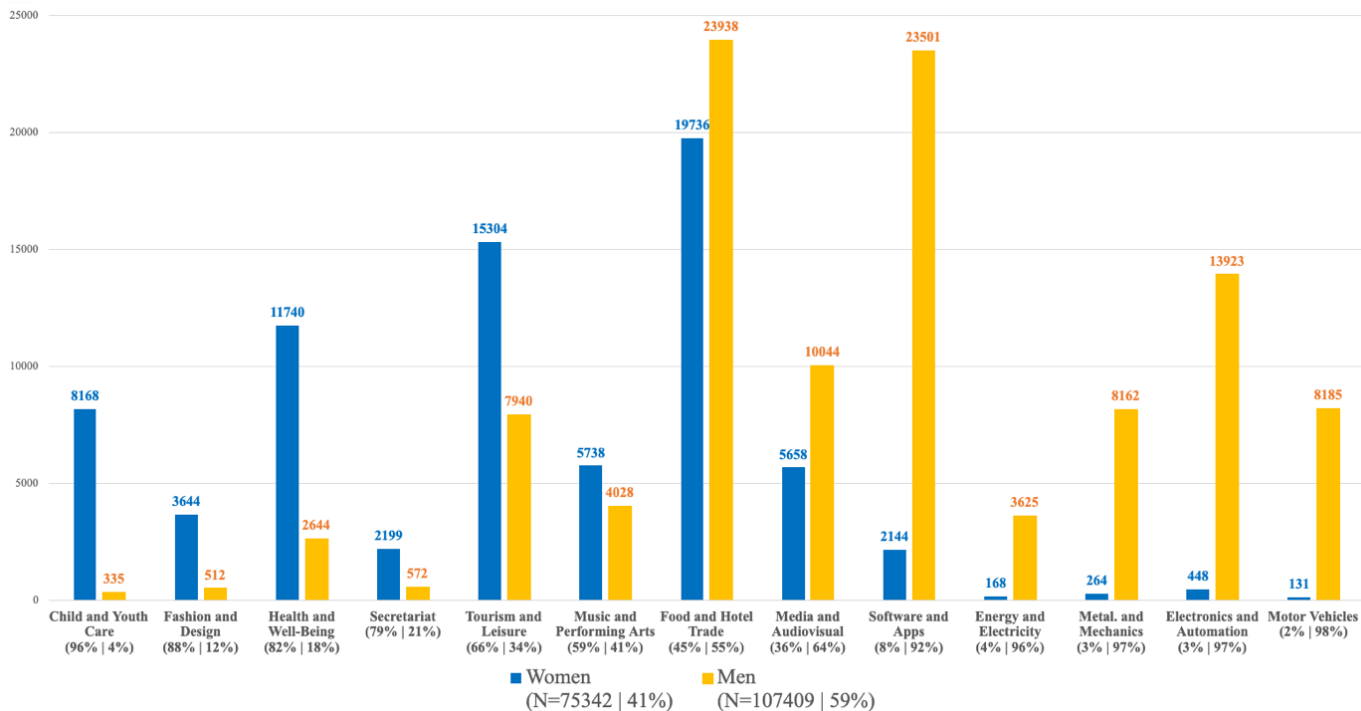


Source: DGEEC (2023). Educação em Números - Portugal 2023, p. 42 (subtitles edited/translated by the authors).

This study sought to understand whether this masculinisation of VET may affect E+ mobility, that is, if mobility data appear to denote pronounced gender differences, suggesting that there are gender factors shaping or influencing the quantitative expression of mobilities.

Knowing the latest gender distribution in the VET courses became relevant following the VET historical context. Figure 2 shows the data distribution of VET attendance per disciplinary field during the period under analysis, ranked from highest to lowest feminisation.

**Figure 2**  
VET area attendance distributed by gender (2014-2020)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data extracted in January 2024 from the DGEEC statistics database (<https://www.dgeec.medu.pt/>).

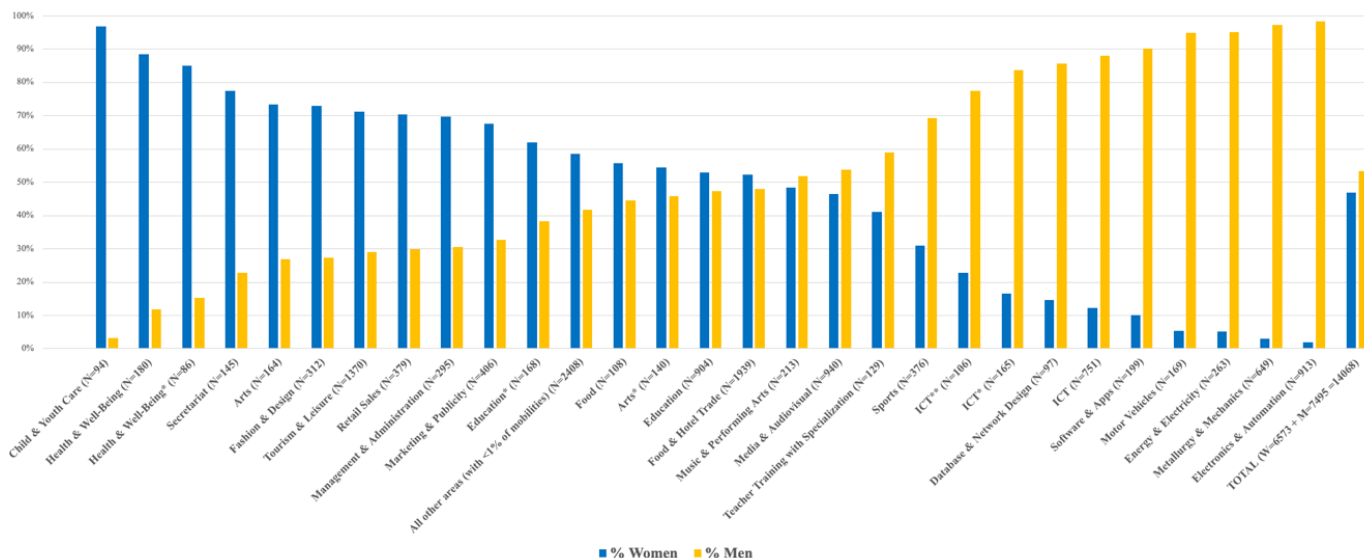
Figure 2 shows VET areas that include specific courses under the same category. Due to course floatation over the comprised decade, only the most regularly offered courses were included in each area. It shows a prevalence of men attending VET (59% against 41% of women). It also shows the genderisation pattern of the courses, with the major feminisation in “Child and Youth Care” and “Fashion and Design” (respectively, 96% and 88% of women) and the major masculinisation in “Metallurgy and Mechanics”, “Electronics & Automation” (97% of men in both cases) and “Motor Vehicles” (98% of men). In these cases, genderisation is deeper in masculinised areas, with five areas having over 90% of male predominance, and less profound in feminised areas, with only one exceeding such a threshold. The less genderised area is “Food and Hotel Trade”, showing a slight masculinisation (55% men and 45% women).

Following these results, Figure 3 shows E+ mobility data distribution by VET thematic area (not by single courses due to data unavailability), extracted from the E+ Barometer. It covers the period under analysis, 2014-2020, for institutions with and without VET charter in the categories: “ErasmusPro Mobility of VET learners”, “Mobility of VET learners”, “VET learners traineeships in companies abroad”, and “VET learners traineeships in vocational institutions abroad”.

## Gender Framing Erasmus+ Mobility

**Figure 3**

Erasmus+ Mobility of VET Learners in Portugal (2014-2020)



\*Other courses belonging to the main topic area; \*\*Interdisciplinary courses

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data extracted in January 2024 from the E+ Mobility Barometer (<https://erasmusmais.pt/candidaturas-e-projetos/barometro-mobilidade-erasmus/>).

Figure 3 was produced by ranking data from the highest to lowest values of female mobility. The result shows the genderisation of E+ mobility per VET area, evidencing that, across areas, as one gender's mobility decreases, the other increases. It also shows that while three VET areas show values higher than 80% of mobility in the women's case, eight VET areas overcome such a threshold in the men's case. Therefore, the total values show that men's mobility is quantitatively higher than women's, following the general trend of gender engagement in VET. E+ mobility appears to follow the same gender trend as VET attendance. However, as shown in Figure 1, while the account of girls in the VET attendance is lower than boys (41% against 59%), this does not translate to a higher percentage of boys engaging in E+ mobility. Table 1 shows the numbers retrieved when considering only the VET areas described in Figure 2.

**Table 1**  
Distribution of E+ mobility (2014-2020) per gender

VET areas*	Women	Men	TOTAL
VET attendance	75,342	107,409	182,751
E+ mobility	3,189	4,197	7,386
TOTAL Mob. %	4.2%	3.9%	4.0%

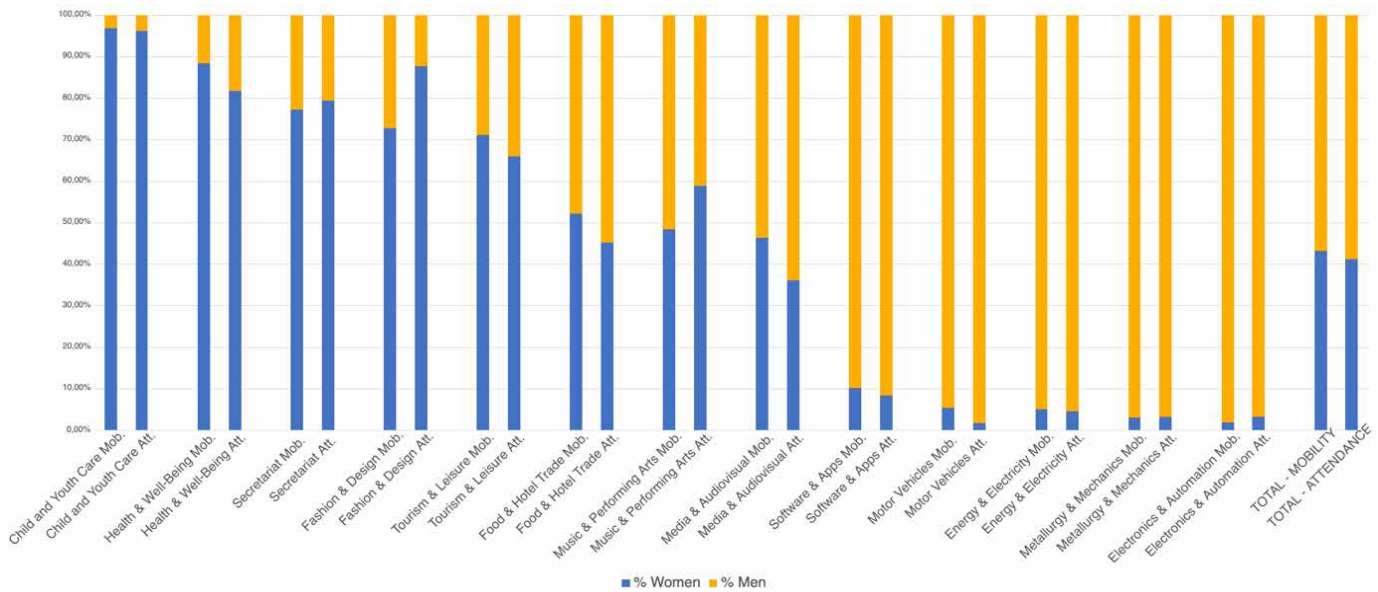
\*13 VET areas considered in Figure 2  
Source: Prepared by the authors based on data extracted in January 2024 from the E+ Mobility Barometer (<https://erasmusmais.pt/candidaturas-e-projetos/barometro-mobilidade-erasmus/>) and the DGEEC statistics database (<https://www.dgeec.medu.pt/>).

The total percentage of men engaged in E+ mobility is 3.9%, while the total percentage of women is slightly higher, 4.2%. Such figures suggest that the engagement of women in E+ mobility is higher than that of men, irrespectively of VET being a masculinised set. This analysis should, however, be cautious since its figures result from the combination of VET area data with E+ mobility data, while the extracted data for both realities do not come from the same sources nor necessarily represent the exact same population. As described in the methodology section, data available in the DGEEC platform are disaggregated by VET course, and data available in the E+ Barometer are only available per VET area, so it is not possible to know, in this latter case, which specific courses have been included/excluded. Still, aligned with such a possibility, all the VET areas that show residual mobility of less than 1% (but whose total mobility number is higher than in the other areas, totalizing 2,408 cases) show a feminisation of mobility (58% of women in mobility, compared to 42% of men), suggesting that, despite the possible masculinisation of many of such areas

(if the general VET pattern is kept), women tend to participate more in E+ mobility than men. Such figures correspond to 111 thematic areas and sub-areas, representing each less than 0.95% of the total mobility in the analysed period. Such a marginal representation was the reason for not including them in the further analysis.

Following the previous analysis, Figure 4 shows the top five genderised cases and the three areas in between (less genderised). The 13 VET areas shown in Figure 2 and in Table 1 were kept in this case. The areas not selected (from Figure 3) correspond to one or both of two situations: (i) areas that consider courses or training activities falling outside the scope of VET schools (for instance, isolated training activities promoted by companies); (ii) areas where E+ mobility represents a very low share of total mobilities carried out in the observed period (the 111 areas referred to above).

**Figure 4**  
VET attendance and E+ mobility distribution by gender (2014-2020)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data extracted in January 2024 from the E+ Mobility Barometer website (<https://erasmusmais.pt/candidaturas-e-projetos/barometro-mobilidade-erasmus/>) and the DGEEC statistics database (<https://www.dgeec.medu.pt/>).

Beyond the predominance of men, highlighted in the “Total” columns, these results drew particular attention to the genderisation of VET thematic areas, with some areas showing massive participation of men and others massive participation of women. A smaller number of areas showed, however, some gender balance.

The similarity between the two columns for each area in every given case shows that E+ mobility follows the same gender pattern as the attendance of VET courses. On the one hand, a strong feminisation and masculinisation of most thematic areas are visible, respectively, on the left and right sides of the chart. On the other hand, some fewer areas shape a more balanced zone with closer gender values, in the central part of the chart (“Media & Audiovisual”, “Music & Performing Arts”, and “Food & Hotel Trade”).

The data for the VET areas and E+ mobility showing higher genderised values are systematised in tables 2 and 3 for a clearer reading.

**Table 2**

VET thematic areas and E+ mobility showing higher female genderisation

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
VET area*	VET attendance			E+ Mobility		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
a) Child and Youth Care	8,168	335	8,503	91	3	94
% of total participants	96%	4%	100%	97%	3%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	1.1%	0.9%	-
b) Health & Well-Being	11,740	2644	14,384	159	21	180
% of total participants	82%	18%	100%	88%	12%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	1.4%	0.8%	-
c) Secretariat	2,199	572	2,771	112	33	145
% of total participants	79%	21%	100%	77%	23%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	5.1%	5.8%	-
d) Fashion & Design	3,644	512	4156	227	85	312
% of total participants	88%	12%	100%	73%	27%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	6.2%	16.6%	-

**Table 2**

VET thematic areas and E+ mobility showing higher female genderisation (cont.)

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
VET area*	VET attendance			E+ Mobility		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
e) Tourism & Leisure	15,304	7,940	23,244	972	397	1,370
% of total participants	66%	34%	100%	71%	29%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	6.4%	5.0%	-

\*Courses covered in the “VET area” data extraction:

a) Technician in Child Support;

b) Technician in Ocular Optics; Technician in Health Assistance; Technician in Prosthetic Assistance; Technician in Laboratory Analysis;

c) Technician in Secretariat;

d) Technician in Fashion Coordination and Production; Technician in Fashion Design;

e) Technician in Tourism; Technician in Environmental and Rural Tourism.

**Table 3**

VET thematic areas and E+ mobility showing higher male genderisation

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
VET area	VET attendance*			E+ Mobility		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
a) Electr. & Automation	448	13,923	14,371	16	897	913
% of total participants	3%	97%	100%	2%	98%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	3.6%	6.4%	-
b) Metal. & Mechanics	264	8,162	8,426	19	630	649
% of total participants	3%	97%	100%	3%	97%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	7.2%	7.7%	-
c) Electricity and Energy	168	3,625	3,793	13	250	263
% of total participants	4%	96%	100%	5%	95%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	7.7%	6.9%	-
d) Motor Vehicles	131	8,185	8,316	9	160	169
% of total participants	2%	98%	100%	5%	95%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	6.9%	2.0%	-

**Table 3**  
VET thematic areas and E+ mobility showing higher male genderisation (cont.)

A	B	C	D	E	F	G
VET area	VET attendance*			E+ Mobility		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
e) Software and Apps	2,144	23,501	25,645	20	179	199
% of total participants	8%	92%	100%	10%	90%	100%
% within the same gender	-	-	-	0.9%	0.8%	-

\*Courses covered in “VET attendance” data extraction:  
a) Technician in Electronics, Automation, and Control; Technician in Electronics and Telecommunications; Technician in Electronics, Automation, and Computers; Technician in Electronics, Automation, and Instrumentation; Technician in Industrial Electronics;  
b) Technician in Mechanical Construction; Technician in Industrial Maintenance - Electromechanics; Technician in Mechanical Construction Design; Technician in Naval Mechanics; Technician in Metalworking Production - Quality Control; Technician in Metalworking Production - Programming and Machining;  
c) Technician in Renewable Energies; Technician in Installing Photovoltaic Solar Systems; Technician in Electrical Engineering;  
d) Technician in Automotive Mechatronics;  
e) Technician in Management Informatics; Technician in Management of Computer Equipment; Technician in Management and Programming of Computer Systems; Computer Operator; Technician in Computer Science - Installation and Management of Networks; Computer Programmer; Technician in Computer Science - Systems.

The proximity of percentual values of students attending each VET area and engaged in E+ mobility (columns B and E, and columns C and F), in both cases (feminisation and masculinisation), suggests that the genderisation process observed in E+ mobility precedes it. In different terms, such proximity suggests that there may not be factors other than the VET area’s genderisation factors affecting the E+ mobility genderisation. Another aspect highlighted in the tables is the different number of courses integrating the highest masculinised and feminised areas. Such difference suggests that a larger option for courses typically attracting men, or traditionally considered as male professional domains, may explain, or partially explain, the larger number of men in VET compared to women, as shown in Figure 1, following the historical pattern of the VET context described. Finally, another aspect to highlight is the fact that in most cases, the proportion of students engaging in mobility (% within the same gender) is higher for girls than for boys, indicating a tendency of women to engage more in E+ than men, like in higher education, despite VET being a masculinised domain. The exceptions to this occur in “Fashion & Design” and “Secretariat” in the feminised sample (Table 2), and in “Electronics and Automation” and “Metallurgy and Mechanics” in the masculinised sample (Table 3).

Again, this analysis should be considered with caution since it combines data extracted from two different data sets organized in different ways, as previously mentioned.

Once the genderisation of E+ mobility appears to mirror the genderisation of VET thematic areas with slight variations in strength, the importance of the gender factor turns into a relevant matter to question people responsible for mobility at VET schools strongly active and engaged in the E+ Programme. Accordingly, key people in E+ mobility in two VET schools were interviewed. They were directors (2), E+ mobility managers (2), and teachers experienced in mobility (4) - by a matter of chance, all being women.

During the interviews, a perception was gained about the undervaluation of the “gender” topic and its relevance as a mobility influencing factor. When asked whether gender factors influence and/or are present in mobilities, either in the preparation, performance, or return of the mobility experience, all the respondents except one responded negatively, stating that up to their views, no major influence of gender occurs. They reinforced that equal treatment for girls and boys is always ensured as a good practice at their schools, which levelled students’ mobility chances, experiences, and results. Some declarations were extracted to illustrate how this issue was addressed:

Gender equality doesn’t come as a topic here at school because we treat everybody on equal terms... no differences considering any project... we have both men and women in the projects. The teaching staff is equally made by men and women... there are no major issues concerning it...IT courses used to have many more boys than girls, right? But that’s their choice, we’re not the ones who decide that we will select more or fewer boys... the candidates were mostly boys... but now this is reversing a little, we are now having girls coming to IT courses... (Director of school A)

As far as gender equality is concerned, we want everyone to be able to take part. For example, the “Computer Programming” course generally has only boys, whereas the “Educational Support” course has mostly girls... We try to balance this by promoting courses where one gender predominates and courses where the other gender does. So, this isn’t occurring by chance; it was a conscious decision we took to run both options... Concerning E+ mobility, I don’t think there are any gender differences. It’s very balanced... half of the current group in mobility is made of boys and the other

half of girls; on courses where one gender predominates, sometimes the other gender isn't even represented, so there's no chance of promoting gender-balanced mobility if one gender is not represented at all in a given course...! But for example, in "Educational support" we have a class with only two boys, from which two people, a boy and a girl, went on mobility... but in classes where men are mostly represented, it might not be so easy for a similar situation to happen... (Director of school B)

These results are aligned with the perspectives gained from the quantitative data showing how genderisation of E+ mobility seems to precede it, deriving from VET areas and courses' genderisation. The major differences found in both directors' approaches are based on the willingness of one of them to promote a gender balance at school, expressing how she consciously decided to promote courses known to be genderised in opposite ways. In contrast, the other director appears more passive in accepting gender differences in how they preceded the school's action scope. In this case, the "equal treatment to boys and girls" is argued as a way to address possible differences. Another relevant aspect is the impossibility of promoting gender-balanced mobility if one gender is missing within a given course, a reason that validates the "previous genderisation" effect identified in E+ mobility. If a given gender is not missing but shows minor representativeness, this seems to increase the difficulty it will have to engage in mobility. In this case, one of the directors refers to the fact that it is more common to have boys in mobility on feminised courses than vice versa, pointing to a potential tendency of masculine rather than feminine mobility occurring within opposite genderised contexts (this would be the case, for instance of "Fashion and Design" and "Secretariat", as shown in Table 2). This might result from the fact that feminised courses appear to be more permeable to boys than masculinised courses are to girls, as seen in Figure 2 above. Data show, however, that the opposite case also occurs (see, for instance, data in Table 3 concerning the percentage of mobility within the same gender in "Electricity", "Motor Vehicles", and "Software and Apps", masculinised areas where girls' mobility is proportionally higher than that of boys).

The perspectives of E+ managers at the schools are aligned with a view not emphasising gender as an issue in E+ mobility in VET:

Being a boy or a girl doesn't raise any questions or limitations concerning E+ mobility; it's equal for both. (E+ mobility manager at school A)

I don't think that gender equity is even an issue here: there is gender equity! We currently have an equal number of girls and boys in mobility. It simply happens this way: The number of student applications is gender-balanced because, in this school, there is gender-balance. For example, we have an "Educational support" course with many girls and an IT course with many boys, creating a global gender balance at school... We did have a girl candidate who gave up going into mobility because she was afraid of losing her foreseen job and being apart from her family and boyfriend... but I can't tell if this is related to her being a girl or not, as effectively many boys don't even get to the mobility application stage as she did, so... (E+ mobility manager at school B)

Gender differences in E+ mobility and their possible effects do not appear to be relevant for these interviewees since they feel that there is equal treatment at school. The previously referred difference between the two approaches seems to be kept in this case. School A interviewee does not elaborate further on possible differences as she assumes the plain existence of gender equity. School B interviewee emphasises the gender balance created by the combination of highly feminised and highly masculinised courses, despite, as we argue, this possibly mirroring major gender differences in VET, and not the opposite. Since the question was related to E+ mobility genderisation and not to preceding genderisation, the answers seem to reflect the, at least, apparent gender balance in mobility.

Three out of four interviews with teachers who are experienced in E+ mobility with students and responsible for preparing the students' mobility projects follow similar approaches:

I don't notice differences between boys and girls or their families' contexts regarding E+ mobility. But I had never thought about that... I don't know... maybe if I could think further about it... (Teacher 1 at school A)

There are no gender differences. Students are treated the same way. I also don't see any difference between boys and girls regarding E+ mobility. (Teacher 2 at school A)

I think gender equality is ensured. In my opinion, gender equality isn't about ensuring half of mobility includes boys and the other half girls. It's about ensuring the selection of students who meet the selection criteria, and none of the criteria has to do with gender. So, no discrimination occurs

in that aspect. Regarding mobility, no differences based on gender are observed, neither among students nor concerning their families' perspectives. (Teacher 1 at school B)

These statements suggest that, on the one hand, teachers may not be sensitised about gender issues and their possible effects on mobility and, on the other hand, that considering gender equality seems to be based on equal treatment for boys and girls, meaning that the elimination of differences in treatment would eliminate possible differences in outcomes. Again, the perspective of equal treatment prevails over a perspective of equity, which may require differential treatment to achieve equality of outcome. Considering the last interviewee's statements may bring additional insights into this subject, as in her case, gender differences seem differently considered:

All we care about is equal opportunities. We have a set of criteria to select students for E+ mobility, and gender is not one of them. However, once students are selected or are in mobility, I feel differences based on gender, coming from the hosting companies and from the selected students themselves and their parents, in the case of girls. It's incredible how, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people think that girls can't go on mobility if they have to walk home in the evening, even if together with colleagues. I didn't usually think about these issues, but I was forced to start thinking about them! Parents present obstacles if their daughters are required to share an apartment with male colleagues, even though they have the privacy of a single room. In other words, if we reflect on this, we realise that society imposes obstacles on girls' mobility. Accordingly, if we have limited mobility vacancies, we are now considering, for example, selecting only boys or girls in order to manage such barriers and difficulties. (Teacher 2 at school B)

This statement shifts the previous approaches as it considers gender differences impacting mobility processes and flows. Looking at the solution to gender barriers considered by this teacher, that is, selecting only girls or boys to go on mobility aiming to prevent the problem of mixed gender house sharing, one may think that it might be more feasible if only boys are selected, given that additional barriers, such as the fear of walking home late, are described as exclusive to girls. Regardless of which gender ends up selected in such cases, this option entails, and reinforces, the "previous genderisation character" of VET areas impacting on E+ mobility. This example shows that, although gender may not appear as a formal selection criterion for mobility, as in the case of this school, it

may be an unofficial but effectively applicable criterion worth knowing further. In addition, ‘families’ and ‘companies’ are also referred to as sources of fears and barriers, referring to issues that are upstream and downstream from school and mobility, such as socio-cultural and labour market gender inequalities.

## Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study highlight a strong genderisation of VET mobility per VET area, showing the same effect of gender on E+ mobility configuration. Therefore, the effect of gender on mobility seems to precede it, occurring in the choice of VET areas and courses. Possible direct effects of gender determinants in E+ mobility seem rather difficult to unveil due to two sorts of reasons: on the one hand, the mobility figures for women and men are close to each other and follow previous VET areas’ genderisation patterns; on the other hand, most people inquired, responsible for or involved in mobility processes at VET schools, do not value gender as an influencing factor on mobility, also in regard for this “previous genderisation effect”. Such an approach suggests that gender inequality is based on the crystallisation of gender roles at school, as in the labour market (Fernandes, Huber, Plaza, 2023; Olsson, Martiny, 2018). The consequent social segregation of gender seems to be conditioning the choice of educational pathways (Gorjón, Kallage, Lafuente, 2022) in VET, which is visible in its strong genderisation as an education field attracting more men (DGEEC, 2023; Ingellis, Diaz, 2019). Within it, specific VET courses and areas attract either men, the majority of the course offer, or women, a minority and historically most recent course offer, but hardly both in equal terms.

Simultaneously, interviewees’ approaches reflect a perspective of gender quantitative balance as a reflection of gender equity. Like other gender-equity dimensions evidencing paradoxical situations (Balducci, 2023; Blossfeld, Pratter, Uunk, 2023; Breda et al., 2020; Sousa, Gonçalves, Faria, 2024), this view may imply a paradox. Quantitatively, the global presence of men and women in various social spheres may be balanced, as men and women exist in similar numbers. Thus, the presence of only or mostly women or only or mostly men in specific domains may result from gender differences and inequalities and not the opposite. In this sense, simply combining different genders within the same context as a school while leaving the studies’ dimension firmly genderised may not resolve inequality; it may exacerbate it. However, this appears as a possibility used

by VET schools to try to mitigate a problem that seems to precede their activity and influence, looking to avoid genderising the school itself. VET seems, though, particularly susceptible to gender differences generated upstream and downstream from their action, respectively, the family and basic school cycles (Gorjón, Kallage, Lafuente, 2022) and the genderised labour market (Olsson, Martiny, 2018).

Accordingly, during the interviews, a lack of perception on the gender subject was identified, with some of the interviewees referring to the fact that their schools treat girls and boys in the same way, which, in their view, seems to eliminate possible gender-based differences or inequalities. They confirm that in many VET courses, either boys or girls are predominant or even exclusive. This situation seems to be accepted as the result of well-defined gender roles rather than as indicating gender segregation in VET pathways and professional choices based on patterns or historical trends. Thus, gender appears not explicitly implied as a determining factor in the configuration of E+ mobility. In most cases, it is not consciously present in individuals active in mobility contexts in the researched VET schools. However, it seems to be a latent factor influencing mobility somehow since, among other dimensions of qualitative nature, the number of women and men undergoing mobility shows differences worth studying to understand causes and effects. On the one hand, a minor representation of women on E+ mobility may be explained by their minor representation in VET, an effect of the previous genderisation occurring in most VET areas. On the other hand, despite such a significantly lower presence, the proportion of women who engage in E+ mobility once attending a VET course seems to be higher than that of men, following a similar trend of higher education. Considering that E+ mobility in VET is placed within a “labour market’s set” (traineeships in companies abroad), this might as well imply additional barriers to the mobility of women, given the labour market’s unequal context and the pointing out of “companies” as a source of barriers by one interviewee. According to data, women seem, however, available to challenge such additional barriers, as their representation in E+ mobility in a masculinised set such as VET appears significant. In other words, since data point to women possibly engaging more than men in mobility and to their minor representation in E+ mobility as a result of their minor representation in VET, this suggests that barriers associated with E+ mobility of women may not be strong enough to prevent their participation or to strongly or negatively impact their engagement. In line with the situation in school education (greater success of women) and higher education (greater E+ participation of women), where women seem

to have internalised the relevance of outcomes for their emancipation, such barriers may also represent the trigger for women participation, as a form of pursuing empowerment. This emphasises women involvement, as despite facing more barriers than men, they remained more mobile - an insight that requires further research.

In conclusion, the outcomes of the study on which this article is based suggest that genderisation processes precede E+ mobility. Therefore, it may be difficult to quantitatively level out mobility figures (gender balance) or raise gender equity (which acts beyond merely quantitatively driven dimensions) in deeply genderised courses, as there are still not enough women in strongly masculinised courses, and *vice-versa*, allowing to do so. For this reason, mitigating gender differences in mobility will have to occur upstream, at the promotion and access levels to VET courses.

Notwithstanding, the surveyed VET schools are applying a technology of diversification based on the intentional widening of their courses' catalogue by offering feminine genderised courses to attenuate the masculinised VET trend, searching for gains in gender balance. This reveals their assumption of "gender" as relevant in the VET context, regardless of a possible or an apparent unawareness or undervaluation. Considering that these schools are firmly committed to the E+ Programme, this resource should increase the number of women participating in mobility, which, combined with the effect of peer influence, may result in increased mobility by both men and women in the future.

This study lays the place for further analysis on this topic, particularly related to surveying E+ mobility participants themselves, their expectations, and decision-making reasons, namely: 'Do girls envisage increased empowerment and equal labour market's conquests by engaging in E+ mobility?'; 'Are girls willing to engage in mobility to escape from adverse, upstream, current or downstream, contexts?'; 'Which barriers are limiting boys' and girls' engagement in E+ mobility?', 'How do they respectively address such barriers?' among many others.

The dimensions of this study were limited to the data of the binomial male/female gender categories statistically available for VET attendance and E+ mobility. Therefore, it lays the ground for further research, namely addressing upstream dimensions of VET choices, including family and basic school context, and for downstream dimensions of E+ mobility by inquiring participants in mobility. In addition, the search for diversity

beyond the stable gender categories (Butler, 2011) expressed by the male/female gender binomial may be as well considered. Such possibilities support additional knowledge about factors influencing and determining the VET pathway choices appearing so expressively genderised, as well as additional differences between men and women and additional gender categories concerning E+ mobility configuration and effects.

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## Notes

1. Court of Justice of the European Union
2. Translated by the authors of this paper; original citation in Portuguese: “No caso do sucesso escolar das raparigas, as explicações para esta “energia escolar” têm assinalado tratar-se da conjugação de dois factores: as vantagens da socialização familiar no cumprimento do “ofício do aluno” e o sobreinvestimento que farão na escolaridade, como melhor meio de concretizar a sua trajectória de emancipação”.
3. Translated by the authors of this paper. Original citation in Portuguese: “partilha de experiências através do programa Erasmus+ poderá ajudar a motivar, a abrir horizontes dos estudantes VET”.

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