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Social innovation and employment in the digital age: The case of the connect employment shuttles in Spain

Marta Enciso-Santocildes, Arantza Echaniz-Barrondo, Laura Gómez-Urquijo*

University of Deusto, P.O. Box 1, 48080, Bilbao, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has shaped the modern world in unprecedented ways. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the value of digital technologies. As the health crisis' effect rippled through economic, political, and social structures worldwide, it also accelerated the adoption of digital tools to pool expertise, ideas, and capacities for generating solutions to the pandemic's short- and long-term implications. One of the areas where major challenges have arisen is employment.

In the whole panorama of digital social innovation in Spain, we find an experience that can be described as outstanding and that links employment and digitalization. However, despite being highly successful, there is hardly any academic literature on this experience. The Connect Employment Shuttles will be the subject of specific in-depth analysis in this article. This is a socially innovative program that has been developed since 2020 in collaboration with the Santa María la Real Foundation. The Connect Employment Shuttles are an existing model specialization, the Employment Shuttles, but applied in the field of digitalization. In this article, we present the origin of the Employment Shuttles and the differences between them and other labor market integration initiatives, their constituent elements, and the social impact they exert.

The research question of our study is whether this innovative mechanism combining employment and digitalization is valid and reliable. The answer is particularly relevant for private and public entities interested in implementing effective measures against unemployment, especially in vulnerable groups. The main contribution of this study is the systematized presentation of the experience of the Connect Employment Shuttles and its results so far, being the major limitation is the scarcity and dispersion of information sources.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has shaped the modern world in unprecedented ways. Technological advancements have accompanied the rise of the global economy by enabling cross-border value chains and multi-site company operations to flourish, which, in turn, has led to the creation of new jobs in otherwise marginal economies. Automation has also led to the so-called

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 944 139 003; Extension: 2049.
E-mail addresses: marta.enciso@deusto.es (M. Enciso-Santocildes), aechaniz@deusto.es (A. Echaniz-Barrondo), laura.gomez@deusto.es (L. Gómez-Urquijo).

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"network effect," where industries are able to enhance their efficiency, growth, and value creation at lower costs (Bria et al., 2015). Digital technologies have indeed been an important driver for economic growth as evidenced by the fact that the top global firms are from the digital sector (Gruber, 2017). The commodification of knowledge and intellectual products over the past decades has also spurred digitalization and its effects, paving the way for the emergence of an information society and knowledge economy driven by human capital.

Alongside its economic benefits, technology has been framed as a driver of innovation to overcome inequalities and promote inclusive participation (World Economic Forum, 2018). There is a growing body of research that draws a negative link between inequality and growth (Piketty 2014; Berg et al., 2012), thus reinforcing the need to tackle economic growth, political stability, and the reduction of inequalities inseparably. In response to this challenge, new notions of public value have emerged, whereby social challenges can be managed by adding "purpose" to traditional capitalism (Mazzucato, 2018) and by making shared prosperity a serious goal instead of an afterthought. Alongside these initiatives, we are also witnessing a number of new ways of understanding economic success in a wave of neo-concepts (Chaves and Monzon, 2018) that combine a critical spirit with cooperativism and Social Economy. Those are recognized as sustainable business models that advance inclusive and sustainable development to generate decent work, productive employment, and improved living standards for all (ILO, 2019). Similarly, social innovation has emerged as a driver of social change while addressing social, economic, political, and environmental challenges on a global scale (Howaldt et al., 2016).

In recent years, digital technologies have played a more visible role in addressing socioeconomic challenges, which has converted them into powerful tools with which to magnify the outcomes of social innovation (Maiolini et al., 2016). For instance, the United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda features digitalization and employment as transversal themes cutting across different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Digital solutions, together with social innovations, especially those oriented to employment, will be able to promote job creation, regional development, and competitiveness, which are actions against exclusion, poverty, inequality, and resource scarcity. As supported by the UN (Conceicao, 2019), it is essential to adopt a more robust view of growth that transcends income, synthetic measures of inequality, and the present. The SDGs offer a dynamic and interrelated framework of objectives and indicators that are cross-culturally acknowledged and useful to inspire what a policy aimed at shared prosperity could be (UN Economic and Social Council, 2019). Meanwhile, the 2020 Strategy launched by the European Commission already alluded to digitalization, employment, and equality as integral aspects of achieving its social, economic, and sustainability objectives (European Commission, 2010). A decade later, the European Commission's assessment of this 2020 Strategy led to the conclusion that a new long-term policy agenda was needed to combine the EU's competitiveness in the global context with sustainability and inclusion in the digital era (European Commission, 2019a). Consequently, the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019b) highlighted the role of digitalization in transforming the EU's economy toward a sustainable future aligned with the UN's 2030 SDGs.

The EU response to the outbreak of the pandemic also provided new actions in the same direction. The Annual Sustainable Growth Survey 2021 (European Commission, 2020a) captures the dimensions of environmental sustainability, productivity, macroeconomic stability, and justice, emphasizing how the crisis has again affected the most vulnerable groups. In this effort, digitalization joins just recovery and transition. The Next Generation EU financial package, and its European Recovery and Resilience Facility (European Commission, 2020b), is oriented to a green, digital, and fair recovery, allocating its funding to these priorities. Accordingly, the Commission presents the fund-greener-more-sustainable" title="https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/commission-welcomes-agreement-connecting-europe-facility-fund-greener-more-sustainable">Connecting Europe Facility (European Commission 2021a), which was set up to fund greener, more sustainable transport and energy networks and digitalization, and sets out Europe's Digital Decade (European Commission 2021b) to pursue digital policies that empower people and businesses to seize a human-centered, sustainable, and more prosperous digital future. This includes addressing vulnerabilities and dependencies as well as accelerating investment. Similarly, the recent Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2021c) proposes three headline targets to be achieved by 2030. These pertain to poverty reduction, employment, and digitalization, including providing digital upskilling and training to 60 percent of the workforce annually, in order to raise the share of adults with basic digital skills to 80 percent.

At a time when the pandemic has increased the need for responses to social needs using technological resources (Deganis et al., 2021), this study aims to deepen the connection between digitalization, cross-sectoral collaboration, and employment from a social innovation perspective. We focus on the situation of Spain, one of the EU countries with the most persistent and highest unemployment rates, and the role of digitalization in tackling this problem. Our research question pertains to the validity and reliability of a concrete innovative mechanism that combines employment and digitalization, called Connect Employment Shuttles (the original denomination in Spanish is *Lanzaderas Conecta Empleo)*. In this vein, both in the Action Plan for Youth Employment and in the Program to fight against long term unemployment, the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security (2018b; 2018c) has acknowledged the employment shuttles as an innovative initiative and a good practice, encouraged by the Public Employment Services in order to learn about the management of this program and to improve it nationwide.

This research study is focused on the experience of the Connect Employment Shuttles, a social innovation related to employment and digitalization quickly developed in Spain beginning 2020, and as will be explained in Section 3, it constitutes an adaptation to the digital world of Employment Shuttles, the origins of which date back to 2013. Surprisingly, this social innovation has received practically no attention in the scientific field until now despite the impact and the public recognition achieved. The implications of the innovation and the results obtained in terms of employment created and gender impact, as

argued in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, make this case worthy of scientific analysis and dissemination. Despite this, only few references exist on this experience; the sources found are public although scattered and nonformal; hence, this study has aggregated and systematized them using content analysis techniques and data analysis as explained in Section 3.5. These sources have been completed by a relevant literature review to accompany certain concepts related to employment inclusion mechanisms and the opportunities and threats posed by the digitalization process to employment, with special focus on Spain. We have also used legislative and content analysis techniques to examine the official position of the Spanish government regarding digitalization, the plans to be developed, and the established objectives. Accordingly, before presenting and discussing the experience of Connect Employment Shuttles in Section 3, we will contextualize digitalization and the issue of employment in Spain in Section 2.

Therefore, the main contribution of this article is to analyze at a scientific level an innovative mechanism such as the Connect Employment Shuttles, where employment for vulnerable groups and digitalization are successfully and impactfully combined. This analysis allows us to establish the characterization of the employment shuttles, stressing the novelty they represent as a mechanism for labor market insertion, as well as their origin. It also permits us to distinguish them from other mechanisms with which they even share their name although they are substantially different. Finally, the extraction and systematization of data from this variety of sources of information have allowed us to ascertain the results of the impact of this innovative labor market insertion experience. This evaluation considers the two years wherein it has taken place to assess the extent to which it has developed in relation to its objectives and to analyze those results. Along with this, we argue that it is a replicable innovative experience, as it has proved by spreading to Italy and Portugal, and could be an inspiration to other innovative employment mechanisms.

2. Digital transition and employment in Spain: The framework for digital social innovation

The demand for generalists and advanced digital technology specialists is steadily increasing but cannot be met either in Spain or for that matter in the European Union. The European Commission estimates that digital technology specialists account for 3.9% of the total workforce in the EU and 3.2% in Spain (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2020). In addition, the Commission estimates a 4% annual growth in workforce demand in this sector, with a shortage of 756,000 digital technology experts in the European labor market in 2020 (Telefónica Foundation, 2021). This need affects not only technology companies in the strict sense of the term but also non-technology sectors such as professional, scientific, and technological services, insurance and finance, industrial production, health and social services, and educational services (Telefónica Foundation, 2021).

Responses to COVID-19 have accelerated the digital transformation of companies and have highlighted their strengths as well as their shortcomings from economic, social, and territorial perspectives (Government of Spain, 2021). In fact, in 2020,[1] 70% of companies had implemented a digital transformation plan, 11% had a plan that had not been implemented yet, and 8% were preparing a plan for the next year. In other words, only 11% of the companies surveyed did not have such a plan and did not plan to do so in the coming year (Telefónica Foundation, 2021). This evolution indicates a growing need for professionals with the necessary qualifications in terms of knowledge and handling of technology.

The Digital Economy and Societal Index (DESI) shows that Spain is one of the EU countries with strong performance in 2015–2019, ranking eleventh in 2020 (European Commission, 2021d). However, Spain shows mixed results with regard to human capital: almost half of the Spanish population (43%) lacks basic digital skills, and 8% have never used the Internet. ICT specialists constitute 4% of graduates and 3.2% of the workforce. The female workforce constitutes approximately 1% for the past four years (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2021).

Similarly, in Spain in 2019, 36% of the workforce lacked digital skills—55% among unemployed persons and 32% among the employed. Moreover, employees with limited or no digital skills are more at risk of losing their jobs, which further accentuates the digital divide. Therefore, one of the goals of the Digital Spain 2025 Agenda is to strengthen the digital skills of employees and the population in general so that by 2025, 80% of people will have basic digital skills and 50% of them will be women (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2020).

In fact, in the analysis of the digitalization process in Spain, human capital deficiencies and limitations have been identified as a weakness, and improvement targets have been set (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2020):

- 15 million people trained in basic digital skills
- 7 million people trained in advanced digital skills, with an equity-focused approach
- 8 million people trained in digital skills in the workplace
- 250,000 people trained as specialists in digital technologies (design, development, and exploitation)
- Closing the gender gap in the sector

To achieve these objectives, the National Digital Skills Plan (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation, 2021) has been developed with seven lines of action and 16 specific measures:

[1] Data collected from a survey carried out by Everis on large companies in industrial sectors in Spain and Europe. The purpose of the survey was to find out the evolution of attitudes towards digital transformation. Reference and data taken from Telefónica Foundation (2018).

- Ensuring digital inclusion among the general public
- Bridging the gender digital divide
- Acquisition of digital skills to education by teachers and students at all levels of the education system
- Advanced digital skills for the workforce
- Digital skills for public administration staff
- Digital skills for business, especially for SMEs
- Promotion of ICT specialists

To adequately respond to these multidimensional challenges, it has become increasingly important for diverse actors to work together. Academic literature shows the efficiency of cross-sector collaboration between state and civil society to reach common goals on development and inclusion (Enciso Santocildes et al., 2020; Dayson et al., 2017; Vangen and Huxham, 2012). Through collaboration, participants can enjoy the benefits of synergistic work—such as access to resources, risk sharing, enhanced efficiency, learning, and generating solutions to complex problems—or what Vangen and Huxham (2005) refer to as collaborative advantage. Technology plays an enabling role in collaborative contexts by rendering processes more efficient by automation and overcoming spatial and geographical limitations. Likewise, it contributes to inclusive processes by improving access to knowledge and resources, giving voice to otherwise disempowered citizens, and driving collective knowledge and action (Bria et al., 2015).

Used interchangeably with terms such as partnerships, networks, and alliances (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010), collaboration is viewed as an essential feature of contemporary organizations. It is related to other concepts, including citizens' involvement, stakeholder deliberation, and democratic participation. More specifically, cross-sectoral collaboration is a commonly referenced activity for addressing complex societal challenges (Bryson et al., 2006; Klein and Spychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020). It involves either a formal or an informal arrangement between stakeholders and collectives, such as public bodies and third-sector organizations. It may also occur between different professional sectors, such as ICT and education. By definition, cross-sectoral collaboration pertains to the "linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately" (Bryson et al., 2006, p.44).

The need for people trained in digital issues has been seen by social entities as an option to insert into the labor market people with difficulties because they are long-term unemployed, are at risk of social exclusion, or come from sectors wherein they do not find stability, optimal salaries, or the possibility of growth. Some women, moreover, try to re-enter the labor market after a period of caring for their families. Therefore, we can find multiple initiatives carried out by social and solidarity economy entities wherein training programs combine digital knowledge and skills with personal accompaniment processes to achieve the social and labor market insertion of the participants.

In this context, women face greater difficulties, with an estimated 26 million jobs predominantly constituted by female workers in 30 OECD countries at high risk of being displaced by technology in the next two decades. Female workers face a higher risk of automation than male workers do (11% of the female workforce when compared with 9% of the male workforce). Female workers are less educated, older (40+), and in lower-skilled jobs (Fernández et al., 2018). There is a great need for professionals in the digital economy sector concomitant with a shortage of women, making it a very good opportunity for women to enter the labor market or get better jobs. A detailed analysis of this issue can be found in Mateos and Gomez (2019). The digitalization training needs of Spanish women are greater because their starting point is worse as reflected in the Women in Digital Scoreboard – Spain 2020 (European Commission, 2021e). Millennia 2015 (s.d.) considers the empowerment of women in all disciplines, including science and ICT, as one of the elements in the process of improving women's empowerment and gender equality within its 37 strategic variables.

Precisely to meet these objectives, particularly in the field of Social Economy, in Spain, we find remarkable examples of digital training for women, such as the social enterprise ADALAB (2021). This entity offers 12-week courses to women for them to work as computer programmers. Once the course is done with, they have job-finding support through the development of personal branding, a job bank, and a personal mentor. Until now (July 2021), there have been 10 batches (each of them named after a female scientist or technologist), 350 women trained, and a 93% employability rate (during the pandemic, it has dropped to 50%). In addition to this, a community of *adalabers* has been engendered, as have social network groups with former students providing in-person tutorials, mentoring, and accompaniment to new students. Another notable case is that of the EmakumeEkin Association (2018), which trains long-term unemployed women and those at risk of social exclusion as programmers to access a market with high demand for professionals, such as web programming. The training course is fully funded by the Regional Government of the Province of Bizkaia (Basque Country) and has agreements with technology companies to ensure the employability of course participants.

3. The connect employment shuttles: A digital social innovation for employment

3.1. The origin of connect employment shuttle

In the whole panorama of digital social innovation in Spain, we find an experience that can be described as outstanding in linking employment and digitalization: the Connect Employment Shuttles. On the one hand, is the example with the highest

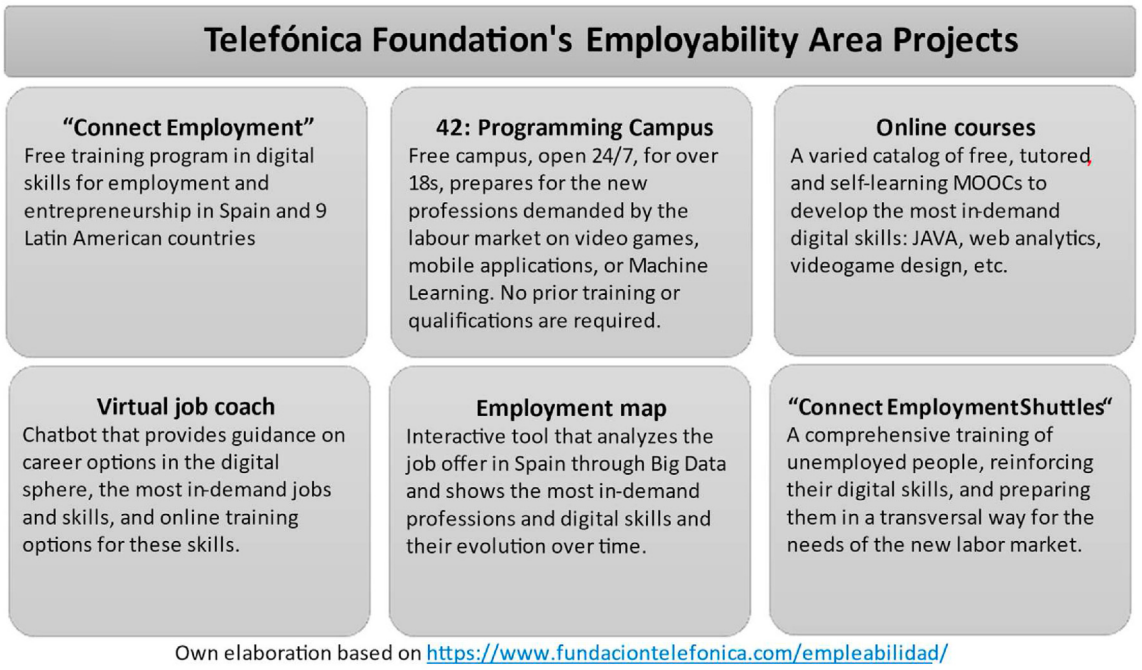

Fig. 1. Telefonic Founation's employability area projects.

number of beneficiaries involved and a high degree of success (employability), covering the entire national territory, overcoming the localism that is typical of other similar initiatives (ADALAB or EmakumeEkin). On the other hand, they have obtained the acknowledgment of the Spanish Ministry of Employment and Social Security as one of the mechanisms of labor insertion for both young people and the long-term unemployed.

This experience is developed by Telefónica Foundation, which was created by the Spanish telecommunications company Telefónica in 1998 to be a catalyst for social inclusion. It aims to fight against poverty and social exclusion in different areas, all of them structured by digitalization. In 2020 alone, more than 20 million people benefited from its actions (Telefónica Foundation, 2020b). The activities are grouped into four main strategic areas: education, employability, digital culture, and volunteering.

We will focus on the second area, employability, which develops a number of different actions aimed at people over 18 who want to work in the digital world, structured in six lines of work, as shown in Fig. 1.

In particular, one of the lines of work, the Connect Employment Shuttles,[2] will be the subject of specific in-depth analysis in this article. This is a socially innovative program based on an existing model specialization, the Employment Shuttles, but applied in the field of digitalization Employment Shuttles, the full name of which is Employment Shuttle and Solidarity Entrepreneurship,[3] constitute an innovative mechanism for the integration of unemployed people into the labor market and can be described as a new philosophy in social intervention in the field of unemployment (Cárcar, 2015).

The value proposition of this innovation is already clear from the definition that its ideologist and promoter, José María Pérez González (2015) ,[4] known as *Peridis*, establishes: "A collaborative business, formed by a team of voluntary, visible, active and supportive unemployed people, who work together to find a job for everyone, improving their attitude and aptitude."

In Fig. 2, we can see the differentiating characteristics that this definition highlights.

Following a similar scheme, the Action Plan for Youth Employment (Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2018b) also defines this innovation as consisting of teams of unemployed people who are dynamic and committed job seekers, coordinated by their coach, who work together to improve the chances of finding a job by all those involved in the project.

Through the years that the original program has existed, the modalities have been increased to adapt to the changes in the labor market itself as well as in the participants. Currently, there are different types of Shuttles (Employment Shuttles, 2021a):

[2] In Spanish, the program is called *Lanzaderas Conecta Empleo*.

[3] The original name in Spanish is *Lanzaderas de Empleo y Emprendimiento Solidario*, although it is usually referred to on the project's own website (www.lanzaderasdeempleo.es) with a shorter name: *Lanzaderas de Empleo* in Spanish, *Employment Shuttles* in English. This abbreviated format will be used throughout the article.

[4] José María Pérez González, Peridis, (Cabezón de Liébana, 1941) is a Spanish architect, writer, cartoonist and humorist, promoter of the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools, and of the Employment Shuttle and Solidarity Entrepreneurship. Promoter, and trustee until 2017, of the Santa María la Real Association as well as the Foundation.

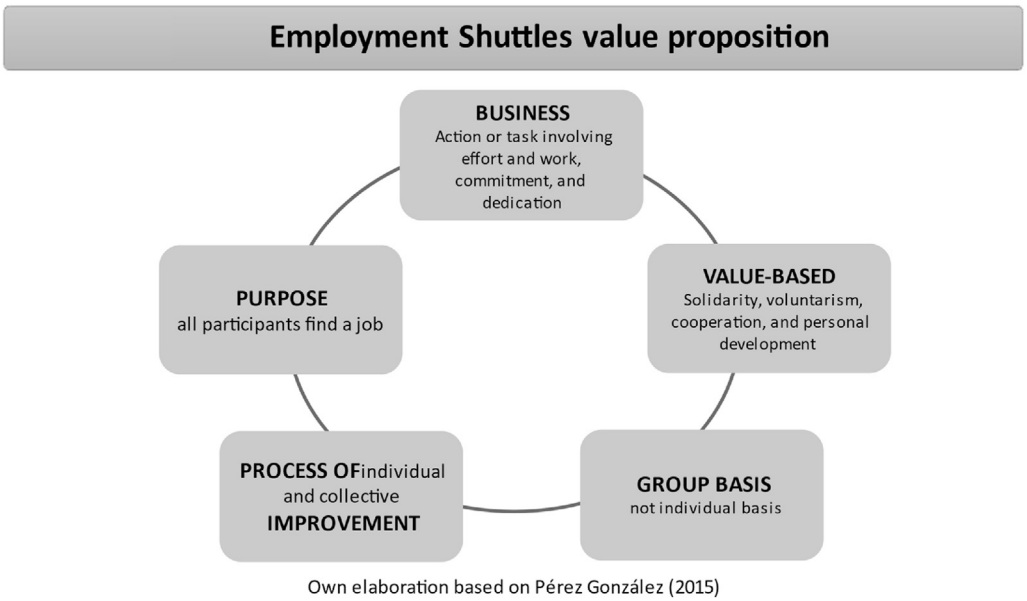

Fig. 2. Employment Shuttles value proposition.

Employment Shuttles (the original model); Express Employment Shuttles (same structure and methodology with a shorter duration); Shuttles for Women; Senior Shuttles (aimed at people between 45 and 60 years old); Entrepreneurship Shuttles; and Sectorial Shuttles (specialized in job placement in high-growth sectors such as the environment and renewable energy). As of July 2021, a total of 61 Shuttles are in operation (Employment Shuttles, 2021b): 14 original Shuttles, 44 Connect Employment Shuttles, two Shuttles for Women, and one Express Shuttle.

It is in this context of specialization that the Connect Employment Shuttles are found, wherein new techniques, as well as digital tools, are incorporated to meet the needs of an increasingly digital market.

In 2019, the Santa María la Real Foundation and the Telefónica Foundation signed a collaboration agreement to develop a new type of Shuttle with a digital focus. The aim was to develop a tailormade employment counseling program, adapted to the needs of each group so that unemployed people were not left out of the labor market and could acquire technological skills and abilities (Connect Employment Shuttles, 2020a). The collaboration between the two foundations dates back to 2014, when the Telefónica Foundation joined the Santa María La Real Foundation project as a strategic partner and founder (Telefónica Foundation, 2019).

Figure 3 shows graphically the three elements that constitute the program. The main activity is the Connect Employment Shuttles, and the program is complemented by two other activities: Digital Literacy and Employment Satellites, created during the pandemic to strengthen the employability of unemployed people or those at risk of becoming unemployed (Telefónica Foundation, 2020a).

On the issue of financing the program, the overall budget of which is 7.7 million euros for the next 4 years, part will come from the Telefónica Foundation itself and another part from the European Social Fund, by way of the POISES[5] operational program (Ministry of Employment and Social Security, 2018a). With POISES economic contribution of 10.6 million euros for the Project in 2016, in addition to the Telefónica Foundation's contribution of 4 million euros, it has been possible to consolidate and multiply the efforts against youth unemployment (Telefónica Foundation, 2016).

3.2. Connect employment shuttles as a digital social innovation

The Connect Employment Shuttles can be considered as a social innovation example. While the definitions that have been given in recent years with regards to Social Innovation are embedded in different areas of knowledge and approaches (Howaldt et al., 2014; European Commission 2013), there is a definition (Howaldt et al., 2017, p.11)that can fit and be of general acceptance and has been contrasted in a worldwide analysis of more than 1000 experiences of social innovation (Howaldt et al., 2016).

[5] POISES: Operational Programme for Social Inclusion and Social Economy for the period 2014–2020, co-financed by the European Social Fund. It is one of the instruments that the Spanish State designed to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set by the Europe 2020 Strategy, especially those related to inclusive growth: strengthening the fight against poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination, guaranteeing equal opportunities in access to the labor market, and harnessing the potential of the Social Economy for economic recovery.

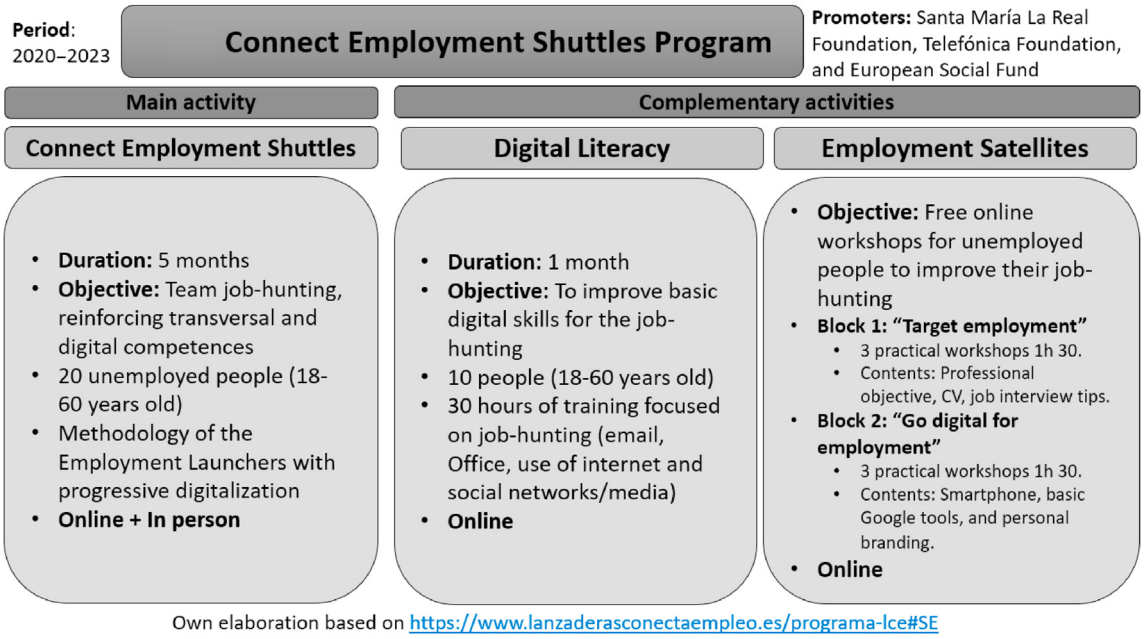

Fig. 3. Connect employment shuttles program.

> "Social Innovation is described as a new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action or social contexts, prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentional targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices"

From this definition we can extract a series of features that can be applied to employment shuttles:

1. Novelty either by combination or by new configuration. In this case, it is inspired by a previous experience such as the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools, explained in section 3.1. As argued there it also differs from other similar models, with which it even shares a name. In fact, half of the social innovation initiatives come from the modification, more or less significantly, of other initiatives (Howaldt et al., 2016)
2. The social context in which this innovation is being developed is Spain, where unemployment and the difficulty of entering the labor market is a major problem as argued in section below. It is an initiative that has managed to overcome the usual local character of many social innovations, 41%, developing practically throughout the Spanish territory and even scaling it to an international level (only achieved by 24% of the initiatives) (Howaldt et al., 2016).
3. The initiative is prompted by a set of diverse actors: a charismatic leader (José María Perez, *Peridis*), strategic partners (Telefónica Foundation, Santa María la Real Foundation), active participation and empowerment of the beneficiaries and the collaboration with public entities (Ministries, City Halls.). This feature of manifold actors and cross sector collaborations is a characteristic attribute of social innovations, which is shared by this example, since over 70% of Social Innovation initiatives are triggered by individuals and network groups (Howaldt et al., 2016)
4. The social need that is being covered is the employment of people with different types of difficulties in accessing employment (age, gender, migrants, training or skills limitations, market mismatches …). This indicates that the experience of the employment shuttles does not address a single problem, employment, but also cross-cutting themes, which is a characteristic of social innovations (Howaldt et al., 2016). In this case, for example, migration, ageism, gender gap, etc., which in themselves each of them constitute a social challenge.

But in addition, the Connect Employment Shuttles may be identified as a form of digital social innovation, which Bria et al. (2015) refer to as "a type of social and collaborative innovation in which innovators, users and communities collaborate using digital technologies to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of social needs and at a scale and speed that was unimaginable before the rise of the Internet."

This initiative covers the features indicated in the previous definition. On the one hand, the aforementioned features of social innovation, where the use of digital technologies to generate solutions to social problems is added as a fundamental axis. In this case, the social need is employment, and the training in digital technologies on which the connect employment shuttles are based, allows participants to cover their training and skills gaps, and to access an expanding labor market with a

strong demand for professionals, which would otherwise not be possible. This is shown by Spain's digitalization data and the needs of its labor market in this area, analyzed in the previous section.

3.3. Differences with other labor market integration initiatives

We must distinguish the Employment Shuttles from other social and labor market integration initiatives. The term Shuttle is also used in the field of entrepreneurship and refers to training and coaching programs for entrepreneurs so that in a short period of time (3–4 weeks), they can develop the Lean Canvas (Business Plan) and start the development of a prototype of their project. The term is associated with other concepts such as business incubators or accelerators, which refer to the next phases of entrepreneurship. In both cases, the image of the space shuttle is used, hence the name, associating it with ideas of strength, the absence of limits, and going far. The differences with the Employment Shuttles are stark as these pursue not only entrepreneurship but also the labor integration of the participants in consideration of whether they are self-employed, their group nature, and the values they are based on (solidarity, voluntariness, and cooperation), as we will see later on.

The main antecedent and inspiration for the Employment Shuttles are the *Educational Workshops and Trade Schools*[6] launched in the 1980s in Spain. It was a program, the purpose of which was the integration of unemployed young people under 25 years of age through a mixed program of employment and training, participating in useful public works and services of social interest[7] (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2001). It was "an initiative that consisted of recovering young people, recovering trades and recovering heritage, under the principle of 'learning by doing and doing by learning.'" (Juntos, 2021) The training processes in the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools, which lasted a maximum of three years, were aimed at upskilling young people between 18 and 25 (men and women) and had a training contract during which they were paid around half the minimum wage.[8]

One of these useful public works and services of social interest was the refurbishment of the Santa María La Real Monastery in Aguilar de Campoo, directed by the architect José María Pérez González, *Peridis*. It coincided with the launch of the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools. This initiative gave rise to the Association of Friends of Santa María la Real de Campoo, which later became the Santa María la Real Foundation, promoter of the Employment Shuttles, the subject of this research work. Although there is a common substratum with the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools, the differences are substantial. Unlike in the 1980s, unemployed people are now better prepared and come from very diverse sectors (Pérez González, 2015, p.92). In addition, the age limits (18–25) and the type of work to be done (public utility and social interest), among other elements, have disappeared. However, from the experience of the Educational Workshops and Trade Schools, the values of teamwork and common learning were salvaged: "The magic formula was 'do it yourself', but 'help yourself, helping your companions'. It meant—no more and no less— 'moving from the assistential to the existential.'" (Retortillo Osuna, 2019).

The Employment Shuttles could be confused with the Employment Antennas, which are related to outplacement services. In order to minimize the economic and psychological impact of redundancies, it is essential to facilitate early reintegration into the labor market, considering people's skills and preferences. This is why outplacement, as a process of support, counseling, and training, is a tool that provides good results (Pereira and Ríos, 2017). Likewise, in some legislations, an outplacement plan is required in cases of collective redundancies. In Spain, if there are more than 50 employees affected by the collective redundancy, the company must offer a relocation plan of at least six months through an authorized relocation company. This plan must include vocational training, career guidance, personal attention to the affected worker, and an active job search (Ministry of the Presidency, 2012).

The Employment Antennas are led by a consultancy firm hired by a company, where, due to restructuring, relocation, takeover, or merger, a large number of workers have been made redundant, to counsel these people in their search for a new job. The methodology used in an Employment Antenna combines interactive and practical group sessions on the labor market, professional marketing, CV preparation, and types of interviews, with individual and face-to-face support on the basis of an individual assessment (Alonso, 2006). This same strategy has been used by some public employment services (Haro de, 2020), as well as by organizations of persons with disabilities, for the promotion of employment among this group (CECOMFE, 2018). In the latter case, the organization contacts companies to detect and define inclusive job opportunities.

The differences between Employment Antennas and Employment Shuttles, which are significant, are also important to identify. In the case of the Employment Antennas, the leader is the company that carries out the collective dismissal of the workers. All the participants come from the same company and compete with each other in the same segment of the labor market. As we will see below, this situation does not occur with Employment Shuttles, which precisely seek heterogeneity and complementarity among their participants.

[6] In Spanish, Escuelas Taller y Casas de Oficios.

[7] These activities refer to occupations related to the recovery or promotion of artistic, historical, cultural, or natural heritage, as well as to the rehabilitation of urban environments or the environment, the improvement of living conditions in cities, as well as any other activity of public utility or of general and social interest.

[8] This program, which was quite innovative at the time, has now been included in different training programs under different names such as dual training or work-linked training at different levels (professional training, undergraduate, and postgraduate degrees).

3.4. Constitutive elements of the connect employment shuttles

We now proceed with an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of Employment Shuttles. The overall premise is that it is essential to be aware that finding a job depends largely on oneself and that this must be done in an active way. "The Shuttles aim to bring the unemployed out of isolation, loneliness, discouragement and invisibility and, through teamwork, to transfer them to a situation of visibility and proactivity, with the collaboration and the support of people and solidarity organizations." (Retortillo Osuna, 2019) The main Shuttle participant's job is job hunting. They do this voluntarily (they do not pay to participate and are not paid either), and it implies engagement and keeping working hours.

They have a physical space to "work" in and a coach. The coach is responsible for facilitating the individual and group dynamics, for selecting the participants along with the organizations involved, and for accompanying the group (and each person) in this solidarity task of mutual help. The coach is the only person who is paid. The group consists of 15–20 people, intentionally heterogeneous (so that they complement each other and do not compete for the same jobs), who work and help each other over a period of 5–6 months (Cárcar, 2015).

The Employment Shuttles are a project to transform people both professionally and personally. Joan Cruz, from the Telefónica Foundation, expressed in an interview how this process takes place (Bachiller, 2017): "At first they are confused. And also lost because when you are unemployed you don't know how to act, you are discouraged. Seeing how they gain confidence and discover things about themselves that they didn't know or were afraid of … It's such a spectacular transformation process that I feel privileged to live the experience."

There are a number of features that Cárcar (2015) highlights that show the potential of Shuttles. These include the existence of a shared goal—job hunting for oneself and for others; creation of synergy; peer learning; creation of mutually supportive relationships; reinforcement of motivation; and empowerment; among other things. Moreover, in the Employment Shuttles, there is genuine collaborative work, an aspect increasingly valued by organizations. Likewise, the coach has a key role to play on two occasions: the selection of participants (he/she has to detect their talent, values, and skills) and the development of the Employment Shuttle (he/she has to create the space and conditions for people to transform themselves and bring out their potential).

The Employment Shuttles are a good example of a public–private partnership as they count on the collaboration of public institutions (at local, regional, national, and European levels—European Social Fund), companies, associations, and foundations. The promoting entity is committed toward implementing the Employment Shuttles, relying on previous experiences and the expertise of the Santa María la Real Foundation. Its functions are defining the project; selecting, training, and hiring the Coordinator of the Shuttles; training the coaches; supporting the selection of participants; managing the communication of the project; and controlling and monitoring it (Cárcar, 2015). The Employment Shuttles work in a network, both within and among themselves.

Within their innovative character and in their more civic and social dimensions, the Shuttles host a group of volunteers who share their experiences and knowledge with the participants, helping them to better integrate into the world of work. Only the analysis for 2016 is publicly available (Serrano, 2017). It indicates that more than 1000 people participated, most of them being entrepreneurs or active workers (86%), contributing to mentoring, entrepreneurship, communication, and development of job interviews, to mention a few examples. Likewise, in the annual reports of the Telefónica Foundation, the participation of its volunteer group in the Shuttles is mentioned.

Cárcar (2015) addresses the question of the link between the group and the tasks performed. Legally, the Shuttles have gone beyond the framework of friendly, benevolent, or goodwill work, regulated both at state and regional levels through legislation on volunteering, but they do not have any other type of legal connection either. It is a form of solidarity work wherein an attitude of active support for the needs of the group prevails. Participants are covered by a reimbursement of expenses and an insurance that covers the risk of accidents and illness, paid for by the promoting institution.

Visibility is an important element in Employment Shuttles because of its ripple and multiplier effect. They maintain active profiles on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn They also have a website where the publication *Employment in positive terms, Shuttle success stories* is available (Employment Shuttles, 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2019). This publication (there are four editions) presents testimonies from the different agents involved (promoting entities, participants, and companies). In the latest edition, the testimonies are accompanied by a final sheet with data and the social impact of the project. This is undoubtedly an improvement in the field of communication and dissemination of the project.

3.5. Social impact of the connect employment shuttles

Measuring social impact in a social organization offers both internal benefits for the organization itself and external benefits in the relationship with its stakeholders. On the one hand, it allows to better understanding the service provided and its continuous improvement, and makes possible determine both the results and the impacts on the beneficiaries (GECES, 2014). The first thing that stands in the way of achieving the objective of measuring the social impact of this experience is the scarcity of data and its disaggregated nature. This scarcity of information and measurement can be applied to Social Enterprises in general, as they do not measure its social impact as a regular activity (most likely while rising funds) probably due to a lack of measurement culture and limited human and financial resources to conduct and use this mechanism (OECD, 2015). Moreover, there is a risk to reflect more market activities delivered, being neglected the ones that are not so easily measurable (Zimmer and Pahl, 2016). These general findings can be also be applied to Spain being the specific barriers the lack

of funding, lack of a positive or strong evaluation culture and lack of general knowledge of evaluation and its methods (KPMG, 2018) as well as the increase of bureaucracy, considered as a serious (40%) and very serious problem (60%) (Zimmer and Pahl, 2016). The data offered in this section have been prepared by the authors based on public disaggregated information obtained from the websites of the two entities participating in the project: Telefónica Foundation and Santa María la Real Foundation. This is the first time that this information has been structured as of July 2019 in an aggregated manner so as to provide data on the results and impact of this social innovation as a whole since its inception, as the last public study dates from 2016 (Telefónica Foundation and Santa María la Real Foundation). On the one hand, we have used the Telefónica Foundation Annual Reports from 2014 onwards in relation to the employment shuttles and from 2019 (the starting year) in relation to the Connect Employment Shuttles. On the other hand, information from the website of the Santa María la Real Foundation from its news blog. All the entries that provided information on the different rounds and cities were reviewed. All these blog entries provided a link to the web page of each of the shuttles, from where the data on cities, participants and gender distribution were obtained. This review of information took place between June and July 2021.

The Employment Shuttles were launched in 2013, and the latest available social impact data (February 2021) support the success of the program, as can be seen in Fig. 4.

In the specific case of the Connect Employment Shuttles, the forecasts at the time of their establishment (2019) considered the following achievement indicators for the period of 2020–2023 (Connect Employment Shuttles, 2020a):

- 188 Shuttles launched
- Launched in more than 100 Spanish cities
- Direct participation of more than 6000 unemployed people and almost 50,000 beneficiaries through complementary online activities open to the general public

These achievement indicators are aligned with those established by the Spanish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation and presented in section 2.

Its first year of operation was 2020, and the Telefónica Foundation's annual report (2020 b) shows the first results. It indicates that 49 projects have been developed, with 1653 beneficiaries and an employment insertion rate of 30.73%. Likewise, 4.23% of participants decided to embark on regulated studies. This report aggregates the Digital Literacy and Employment Satellites activities, together with the Connect Employment Shuttles, so we cannot determine the impact of the latter program. The programs have also continued to evolve throughout 2021 (Connect Employment Shuttles, 2021a, 2021b), expanding the number of initiatives, participants, and cities.

To present results that allow us to evaluate both the degree of achievement of the objectives set and their impact, we have searched for the information available on their website. Figure 5 shows the number of Connect Employment Shuttles that have been conducted, the number of participants (including the percentage of women), and the number of cities wherein they have been conducted. The data were collected in July 2021, and it is not known whether further rounds will be organized in the remainder of the year.

The number of participants could also change, as some are still in the registration period. No other data of a public nature have been found. Of particular relevance would be the insertion rate, the type of employment accessed, and its quality. These

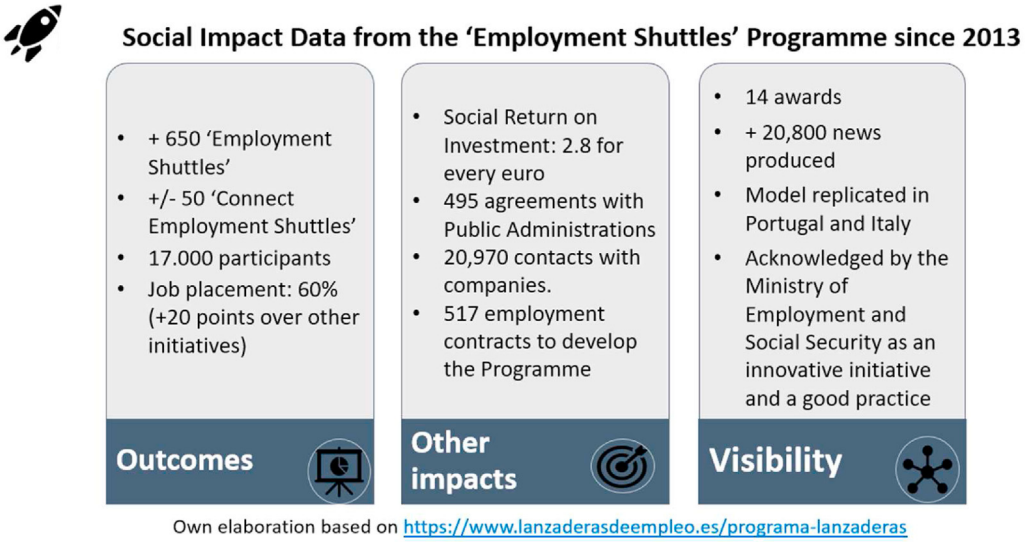

Fig. 4. Social impact data from the 'employment shuttles' programme since 2013.

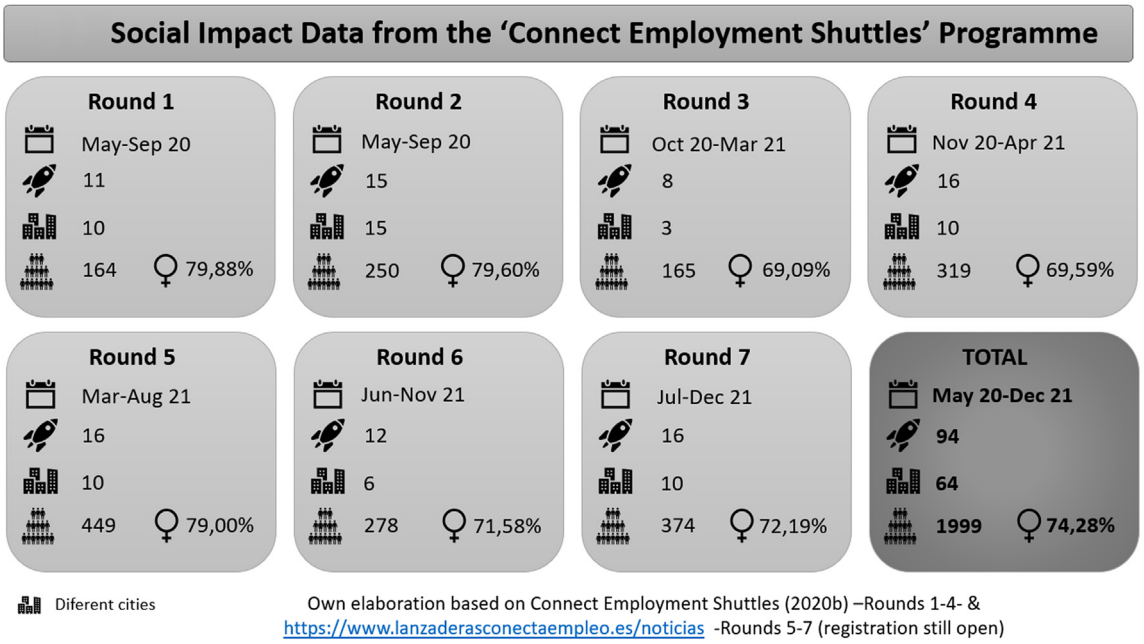

Fig. 5. Social impact data from the 'connect employment shuttles' programme.

detailed data, in a public manner, have only been provided in a 2016 report (Telefónica Foundation and Santa María la Real Foundation, 2016).

With regard to the progress of the program in these first two years, we can see that the number of Connect Employment Shuttles organized is half of the total planned (188), so the pace in this aspect is adequate. Regarding the number of participants, 33.31% of the planned number of participants has been reached, with participation by almost 2000 people. Even though the planning implied the participation of 30 people per Shuttle, in this two-year period, except in some cases, this number has not been reached. It is very likely that the pandemic situation may explain this slower-than-expected progress. We also observed that when the Shuttle is carried out for the first time in a city, the number of participants is lower, increasing in the following editions. It is also noted that in the first editions, the number of women is higher; a greater number of men participate in subsequent editions, while the Shuttles maintain a higher percentage of women.

Indeed, the data show an average participation of women in the Connect Employment Shuttles of around 75%. This figure is striking and higher than the percentage of female participation in the original Employment Shuttles, where 62% of the participants are women (Employment Shuttles, 2019). This can be explained by the worse position of women in the Spanish labor market, with a higher unemployment rate, which has also suffered a worsening because of the economic effects caused by COVID-19. This group, in general, suffers from lower-quality working conditions in terms of salary, working hours, and stability, which may encourage a change of sector. The Foundation is aware of this situation of initial inequality and of particular difficulties entering or re-entering the labor market, and therefore, it promotes a gender perspective in all phases of its programs (Employment Shuttles, 2018b), as well as organizing specific Shuttles for Women.

As for the data on labor market integration by gender, they are not usually segregated in the reports of the Employment Shuttles, and the only data offered, corresponding to 2015, indicate a lower rate for women: 55%, when compared with 74.3% female participation (Telefónica Foundation and Santa María la Real Foundation, 2016). In terms of presence in Spanish cities, 64% of the four-year target of 100 cities has been achieved. There was a repetition of the experience in Madrid (which can be explained by the size of the city) but also in other cities (for various reasons, such as the dynamism of their city councils, the success of previous editions, or the higher unemployment rates).

Despite the limitations, and recommending strongly the Foundations a deeper analysis, still it is possible to assess to a certain extent the experience based on the Impact Value Chain (Social Impact Investment Taskforce, 2018) as seen in Fig. 6.

4. Conclusions

Connect employment shuttles are fully integrated in the framework of digitalization transition, which is an unstoppable process wherein we are immersed, with consequences in all economic, industrial, social, and political dimensions. Among these effects, digitalization is presented as a driver for overcoming inequalities and promoting the inclusion of people. However, it cannot be ignored that adverse effects on people can and do occur as argued in scientific studies and analyses and supported by statistical indicators. The risk, among other elements, may come from the increase in the digital gap, job losses

'Connect Employment Shuttles' Programme Impact Value Chain

Impact Value Chain	Definition	Connect Employment Shuttle results	Data available
Imput	Resources that are deployed in service of a certain (set of) activities	Funds by Telefonica foundation and the POISES Program	7.7 million euros for 4 years
Activity	Actions, or tasks, that are performed in support of specific impact objectives	Number of Shuttles organized	94 in 1,5 years
Output	Tangible, immediate practices, products and services that result from the activities that are undertaken	Number of beneficiaries and gender distribution	1999 persons in 1,5 years • 74,28 % females • 25,72% males
Outcome	Changes, or effects, on individuals or the environment that follow from the delivery of products and services	Digital skills achieved Job insertion and employability Quality of jobs obtained Quality of life improvement	Digital skills are considered achieved by all participants, without specifications as each person and each shuttle establishes which ones. Job insertion data (60%) does not refer specifically to connect employment shuttles but for the general project. The rest of the outcomes data only available as for 2016 and for the general project
Impact	Changes, or effects, on society or the environment that follow from outcomes that have been achieved	Advancing in the digital transition in Spain Reducing unemployment in Spain	Both derives from the participation and job insertion of the shuttles

Own elaboration based on Social Impact Investment Taskforce (2018)

Fig. 6. 'Connect employment shuttles' programme impact value chain.

in certain sectors and professions, as well as the new knowledge and skills required in the new jobs created, which part of the population is unable to meet. This process has been accelerated by the impact of COVID-19; hence, we have been able to see the benefits of digitalization globally and in a very short period of time—and also bluntly see its negative effects.

In this process of digitalization, it is essential that neither individuals nor population groups are left out of the process and its benefits, as they would end up as the major victims of this global process. The employment element is a substantial issue. Governments in their different spheres of action must implement policies that favor digitalization as a key element in overcoming the crisis and strengthening economies and at the same time support and protect the most vulnerable people and groups with respect to digitalization. Thus, we see the action plans at the European Union level as well as the Spanish case. For its part, the social economy has an important field of action in this area, both to alleviate the negative effects in terms of employment and vulnerability and as a base to support this process and innovate in actions and programs to achieve social cohesion significantly by the combination of employment and digitalization.

This is true for the Connect Employment Shuttles, where the aim is, first, to limit the digital gap and then to increase the employability of the participants either to improve their employment or (re)insert them into the labor market. In addition to this novelty, the innovation comes from the mechanism used and the underlying values: mutual help, collaborative work and networking, solidarity, and teamwork. Needs are addressed in terms of not only digitalization knowledge but also skills and competences required by the labor market.

The Connect Employment Shuttles are an outstanding initiative of digital social innovation in the Spanish labor market that can be extended to other countries and contexts taking profit of its experience and results. The analysis of the Connect Employment Shuttles confirms that it gathers the characteristics of social innovation using digitalization as a driver for overcoming inequalities and promoting the inclusion of people. It is noteworthy its aim of limiting the digital gap and increasing the employability of the participants enhancing their skills and competences. But the innovation comes not only from the mechanism used but specially by the value proposition of this innovation where active and supportive unemployed people, work together to find a job for everyone, improving their attitude and aptitude. In the Connect Employment Shuttles new techniques of collaborative work as well as digital tools are incorporated to meet the needs of an increasingly digital market to transform people both professionally and personally. Sharing: a purpose of participation on the labor market, commitment and a process of individual and collective improvement contribute to enhance and the values of solidarity, cooperation, voluntarism and personal development.

Despite the scattered data systematized in this study, they evidence a successful innovation that combines employment and digitalization in terms of the number of Shuttles organized, the number of cities, the number of participants, and the employability ratio and other indicators like:

- The recognition given by the Ministry of Employment and Social Security as one of the mechanisms of labor insertion for both young people and the long-term unemployed.

- Its geographical extension: it is the example with the highest number of beneficiaries involved and a high degree of success (employability), covering the entire national territory, overcoming the localism that is typical of other similar initiatives.
- The positive impact on the number of participants. The analysis of all the available data allows to expect the achievement of the forecast of impact reaching in 2023 the Direct participation of more than 6000 unemployed people and almost 50,000 beneficiaries through complementary online activities open to the general public.
- The gender dimension, as it promotes a gender perspective in all phases of its programs. Moreover, the results of the Connect Employment Shuttles evidence a 75% participation of women, contributing to address the difficulties of one of the less favoured groups in the Spanish labor market.

In spite of these successful contributions the quantitative measuring of the impact of this experience is one of the limitations of this study due to the above-mentioned scattered information and the lack of achievement indicators. Consequently, to further enhance the value of this innovative initiative and allow greater socialization, it is suggested as an improvement of data collection and presentation to be disaggregated with respect to the other initiatives, focusing more on the employability results, to analyze the type of employment in terms of its quality.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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