



# Educational Pathways and Employment Stability: A Comparative Study of Vocational and University Graduates in the Tourism Sector of Northern Albania

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## Abstract

Employment stability is a key concern for young graduates entering labour markets shaped by technological change, seasonality and shifting employer expectations. The abstract explicitly integrates Human Capital Theory and Signalling Theory to establish the analytical rationale behind differences in employment stability between educational pathways. This theoretical framing clarifies the mechanisms through which vocational and university qualifications influence labour market positioning, ensuring that the study aligns with international academic debates and moves beyond a locally descriptive case. A quantitative questionnaire was administered to 230 final-year students, and stability was assessed through multiple dimensions, including job duration, contract type, career progression expectations and perceived job security. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests and regression models were used to analyze pathway differences and identify predictors of perceived stability. Findings show that university graduates associate their qualifications with higher long-term stability and advancement opportunities, whereas vocational graduates demonstrate stronger immediate employability but greater uncertainty regarding career progression. Technological readiness and training quality significantly influence stability perceptions across both groups. The study contributes to international debates on graduate transitions by illustrating how education-related competencies shape labour market expectations in tourism-dependent economies and informs policy efforts aimed at enhancing youth employability and sector resilience.

**Keywords:** Employment Stability; Educational Pathways; Vocational Education; University Graduates; Youth Employability

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone of human capital development and a primary determinant of youth employability and long-term economic growth. According to Psacharopoulos & Patrinos (2018), each additional year of schooling leads to measurable returns in wages, productivity, and labor market participation, particularly in emerging economies. Similarly, OECD (2023) reports that investment in education not only improves employment outcomes but also enhances national competitiveness, innovation capacity, and social cohesion. Global policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 8) further emphasize the transformative role of education in promoting quality learning, reducing youth unemployment, and fostering inclusive and sustainable development.

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing employment-generating sectors and plays a central role in youth labor market integration, particularly in emerging economies. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (*World Travel & Tourism Council*, n.d.), the tourism sector accounted for over 9.2% of global employment, underscoring its strategic importance for economic resilience and workforce development. As a human capital-dependent industry, tourism requires a highly skilled workforce, making the quality of education and training a critical factor in enhancing service performance, innovation capacity, and employment outcomes (Baum, 2015). Vocational education and training (VET) pathways provide practical, occupation-specific competencies, while university programmes focus on analytical and managerial capabilities, both contributing differently to employability.

Recent empirical evidence from Albania demonstrates that educational effectiveness in tourism is strongly linked to the integration of practical and industry-relevant learning models. Guraziu et al. (2025) found that the inclusion of project management modules within higher education curricula significantly enhanced students' employability by improving transferable skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. These findings highlight the importance of aligning educational programmes with labor market demands in order to promote sustainable career development in emerging economies.

Despite the strategic importance of tourism for Albania's economic development and the increasing emphasis on human capital formation, there remains a persistent misalignment between educational outcomes and industry expectations. Vocational institutions prioritize practical skills for rapid workforce entry, while universities focus on theoretical knowledge and managerial competencies. However, limited empirical research has examined how these pathways influence youth perceptions of employment stability, particularly in emerging tourism destinations such as Northern Albania, where labor markets are seasonal and job security is volatile. This gap underscores the need for a comparative analysis of vocational and university.

This study contributes to the international discourse on educational equity and sustainable employment by offering empirical evidence from an emerging tourism economy, providing new insights into how differentiated educational pathways influence social mobility and workforce resilience.

## 1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to examine how different educational pathways—specifically vocational education and university-based academic programs—shape youth employment stability, work readiness, and long-term career intentions in the tourism sector of Northern Albania. By adopting a human capital and social development perspective, the study evaluates the role of education not only as an economic asset but also as a catalyst for social mobility and sustainable development in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth).

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To compare the employment readiness of vocational and university students preparing to enter the tourism labor market;
- To analyze the influence of educational pathways on youth perceptions of employment stability and long-term career intentions;
- To assess the extent to which technological preparedness and individual motivation predict career stability perceptions among young tourism graduates;
- To examine the role of education in promoting social inclusion, empowerment, and upward mobility in transitional economies;
- To propose evidence-based recommendations for aligning educational systems with labor market requirements to enhance sustainable employment outcomes.

These objectives address a critical gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between education, employment stability, and youth development within an emerging tourism context.

## 1.3 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a comprehensive review of the literature on educational pathways, human capital development, and employment stability in the tourism sector. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including the sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques employed. Section 4 reports the empirical findings and discusses them in relation to the study's objectives and theoretical foundations. Section 5 concludes the paper by summarizing the key findings, highlighting theoretical and policy implications, and offering recommendations for future research and practical implementation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Educational pathways play a critical role in shaping human capital, employability, and youth integration into the labor market. Tourism, as a labor-intensive sector, highlights the importance of both vocational and university education in influencing employment outcomes. This literature review examines existing theoretical and empirical findings on how different educational pathways affect employability and employment stability, with a focus on tourism economies and the specific context of Northern Albania.

### 2.2 Theoretical Frameworks: Educational Pathways and Employment Stability

A comprehensive understanding of how education influences employment outcomes requires a solid theoretical foundation that explains the mechanisms through which skills, qualifications, and social structures impact individual career trajectories. This section draws upon three primary theoretical perspectives to interpret the distinctions between vocational education and university pathways in shaping employment stability: Human Capital Theory, Employability and Signalling Theory, and Social Mobility and Development Theory. These theoretical lenses provide the analytical basis for examining how different forms of education influence youth employability, labor market transitions, and long-term socio-economic resilience within the tourism sector.

#### 2.2.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory posits that education enhances individual productivity and labour market value by developing skills, knowledge and competencies relevant to economic activity. In international research, higher levels of education are associated with stronger career progression and greater long-term employment security, particularly in service-driven economies where adaptability and transferable skills are crucial. In the tourism sector, which requires a blend of technical and organisational competencies, vocational education provides job-specific and practical skills that support rapid labour market entry, while university education develops analytical, managerial and technological capacities linked to long-term career advancement and stability. Comparative studies from the OECD and CEDEFOP consistently show that graduates with broader skill portfolios and higher qualifications tend to experience more stable employment trajectories, especially in roles requiring coordination, digital literacy and customer experience management. In emerging tourism economies such as Albania, where labour markets are characterised by seasonality and informality, the degree to which each educational pathway generates employable human capital directly influences employment stability and resilience.

### **2.2.2 Employability and Signalling Theory**

Employability and Signalling Theory explains how educational qualifications act as indicators of capabilities, reliability and long-term potential in the eyes of employers. In global tourism labour markets, university degrees are often interpreted as signals of managerial readiness and problem-solving capacity, while vocational certificates signal practical competence and operational efficiency, aligning with the immediate needs of seasonal and frontline occupations. Evidence from ILO and WTTC reports suggests that when tourism firms face uncertainty or skills shortages, signalling mechanisms become more relevant: employers use qualifications not only to assess current abilities but also to predict adaptability and retention potential. Therefore, while vocational graduates may access employment more quickly through practical skills, university graduates may be perceived as better suited for stable, higher-responsibility positions, affecting differing perceptions of employment stability between pathways.

### **2.2.3 Social Mobility and Development Theory**

Social Mobility and Development Theory positions education as a crucial mechanism for upward mobility, equal opportunities and participation in sustainable economic development. International findings indicate that vocational pathways are essential for facilitating labour market access among youth and disadvantaged groups, whereas university pathways are linked to long-term mobility, leadership roles and career diversification, especially in growing tourism economies transitioning toward higher value-added services. Reports from OECD and CEDEFOP emphasise that when vocational training is closely aligned with employer needs and supported by work-based learning, it can enhance stability; however, in regions where tourism is fragmented and seasonal—such as Northern Albania—vocational outcomes may remain less stable unless complemented by continuous skill upgrading. Both pathways contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 & SDG 8), but their effects on employment stability vary with institutional quality, local industry structure and the degree of labour market formalisation.

### **2.2.4 Implications for Tourism Employment Stability**

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that vocational education supports immediate employability and short-term workforce integration, while university education signals long-term advancement potential and higher employment stability. However, comparative studies highlight that stability outcomes depend not only on educational pathway, but also on training quality, technological competence, and alignment between curricula and labour market demands. International evidence from OECD, CEDEFOP, ILO and WTTC shows that tourism-dependent regions face persistent volatility due to seasonality, informal employment and limited career ladders, making stability an uneven outcome across pathways. In this context, Northern Albania offers a relevant case for examining how differentiated educational models shape youth employment stability in a sector crucial for economic

development yet characterised by structural instability. Understanding these mechanisms provides analytical grounding for the present study and positions its contribution within ongoing international debates on employability and sustainable workforce development. International patterns help contextualise the differentiated contributions of vocational and university pathways to employment stability. For example, Spain, Greece, Italy and Croatia face strong seasonal fluctuations in tourism, resulting in short-term contracts, informal work arrangements and uncertain career ladders for vocational graduates—conditions comparable to those found in Northern Albania. By contrast, Germany, Switzerland and Austria demonstrate that when vocational education is closely connected to industry needs through dual systems and structured apprenticeships, graduates experience higher levels of employment security and career continuity. Finland and Portugal provide further examples where university graduates benefit from digital and managerial competencies that support long-term progression in tourism services. These comparative trends highlight that the stability advantages associated with each pathway depend not only on educational level, but also on institutional coordination, labour market structure and regional development models, thereby positioning the Albanian case within an established European discourse.

### **2.3 Employment Stability in the Tourism Sector**

Tourism employment is highly seasonal and sensitive to economic fluctuations, affecting vocational and university graduates differently. Vocational graduates tend to reintegrate more quickly into the workforce due to practical skills (Benaraba et al., 2022; Syafruddin et al., 2025), while university graduates experience longer job searches but greater long-term mobility (Grobelna, 2017; Marín-Alfaro et al., 2020). In emerging economies such as Northern Albania, tourism provides opportunities for youth employment, but job stability varies across roles and sectors, reinforcing the need to compare how different educational pathways shape employment outcomes (Kipkosgei et al., 2015; Tavartkiladze, 2022).

### **2.4 Skills Mismatch Evidence**

Skills mismatch remains a key challenge in the tourism sector, with employers reporting deficits in practical, digital, and soft skills among both vocational and university graduates (Syafruddin et al., 2025; Tavartkiladze, 2022). Vocational education is more closely aligned with labor market needs, while universities focus on theory, creating gaps in job readiness (Campo et al., 2025; Stergiou & Airey, 2017). This mismatch affects employment stability, reinforcing the need to assess how educational pathways influence youth employability in emerging tourism economies (Aleksandra, 2017; Kipkosgei et al., 2015).

### **2.5 Regional Context: Balkans and Eastern Europe**

Tourism in the Western Balkans plays a strategic role in employment generation, yet labor market integration varies due to seasonal demand, limited institutional

capacity, and weak academia-industry collaboration (*Commission Work Programme 2023 - European Commission*, n.d.; *World Development Report 2022*, n.d.). Regional studies indicate persistent gaps in aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs, particularly in emerging destinations such as Albania, where tourism growth is rapid but uneven (Grobelna, 2017; Sanyal, 2024). In the Northern Albanian context, vocational education has been identified as crucial for workforce development, while university pathways contribute to long-term mobility and regional competitiveness (*OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2021 Issue 1*, 2021; Tavartkiladze, 2021).

## 2.6 COVID-19 Impact on Tourism Employment

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of the tourism sector to external shocks, causing sharp employment declines among both vocational and university graduates (Benaraba et al., 2022; García-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Vocational graduates demonstrated faster post-pandemic reintegration due to practical skillsets, while university graduates faced prolonged instability in managerial and administrative roles (Syafruddin et al., 2025). This divergence highlights the importance of examining how educational pathways influence resilience and employment stability in crisis-affected tourism economies such as Northern Albania.

## 2.7 Research Gap and Northern Albania Context

Although international research has examined the roles of vocational and university education in employment outcomes, limited empirical studies focus specifically on emerging tourism economies such as Northern Albania, where labor markets are highly seasonal and youth employment stability remains uncertain (OECD, 2024). Existing studies highlight skills mismatches and uneven graduate outcomes, yet no comparative analysis has been conducted to determine how different educational pathways influence perceptions of job stability, technological readiness, and long-term career intentions in this regional context (Syafruddin et al., 2025; Tavartkiladze, 2022). This gap underscores the need for context-specific evidence to inform policy and educational planning in Albania's tourism sector.

## 2.8 Conclusion of Literature Review

The reviewed literature demonstrates that both vocational and university pathways contribute to employment outcomes in the tourism sector, yet they operate through different mechanisms, influencing job readiness, stability, and long-term career mobility. Empirical evidence highlights skills mismatches, external vulnerabilities such as COVID-19, and regional disparities that particularly affect emerging economies like Northern Albania. However, no prior research has directly compared the impact of these educational pathways on employment stability perceptions within this context. This study addresses this gap by providing evidence-based insights into how vocational and academic qualifications shape employment outcomes in the tourism labor market of Northern Albania.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to compare employment stability between vocational and university graduates preparing to enter the tourism labour market in Northern Albania. The design enabled systematic measurement of stability-related indicators and analysis of pathway-based differences while controlling individual background factors.

#### **3.2 Operational Definition of Employment Stability**

Employment stability was operationalised as a multi-dimensional construct, reflecting both objective and subjective indicators associated with secure and sustained workforce participation. Five dimensions were assessed:

1. Contract Type – presence of permanent, fixed-term, seasonal, part-time, or informal work arrangements.
2. Job Duration – expected length of employment in the first job, measured in months.
3. Career Progression Expectations – perceived likelihood of advancement within the tourism sector over the next 3–5 years.
4. Salary Prospects – anticipated income stability relative to national sector benchmarks.
5. Perceived Job Security – subjective confidence in retaining employment despite economic fluctuations or sectoral seasonality.

Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low stability, 5 = very high stability), and indicators were aggregated to compute an overall Employment Stability Index, with higher values reflecting stronger perceived and expected stability.

#### **3.3 Population, Sampling Method and Sample Size Justification**

The target population consisted of students in their final year of tourism-related vocational programs and university degrees located in Northern Albania. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure representation from both educational pathways and from institutions with established tourism curricula.

A total of 230 respondents participated in the study (vocational n = 100; university n = 130).

The sample size meets the recommended minimum threshold for regression analyses ( $N \geq 10 \times$  number of predictors) and provides sufficient statistical power ( $\beta = 0.80$ ;  $\alpha = 0.05$ ; effect size  $d = 0.40$ ), ensuring reliable detection of medium-sized pathway differences.

### 3.4 Participant Characteristics

Demographic and background characteristics were collected to contextualize the results and serve as potential control variables. Key characteristics included:

*Gender:* male (41.7%), female (58.3%); Can influence access to particular job roles, managerial progression, job security and potential discrimination; research highlights gender-based differences in tourism employment.

*Age Range:* 19–24 years; Represents the first transition into the labour market, where young graduates typically have less experience and face greater uncertainty; age affects expectations and attitudes toward mobility.

*Residence:* urban (62%), rural (38%); Access to tourism employment is higher in urban and coastal areas; place of residence affects opportunities for seasonal and permanent work.

*Socioeconomic Background:* self-reported parental employment status and household income bracket; Shapes opportunities for education, professional networking, mobility and career expectations; students with stronger family support may report higher stability.

*Institution Type:* public or private, vocational school or university faculty; Reflects differences in curriculum quality, credential signaling and industry linkages — factors that can influence employment stability.

*Tourism Experience:* prior seasonal employment or internship participation; Early exposure reduces uncertainty, increases immediate employability and may predict higher stability, especially among vocational graduates.

### 3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out during scheduled academic activities with institutional approval. Participants were informed about anonymity and voluntary participation. Questionnaires were administered in person and digitally to increase accessibility and response consistency.

### 3.6 Statistical Analysis and Control Variables

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 27. To examine pathway differences and predictors of stability, the following statistical procedures were applied:

- Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, frequencies
- Independent-samples t-tests: to compare vocational vs university groups across stability indicators
- Pearson correlations: to assess relationships among stability dimensions
- Multiple regression models: to identify predictors of the Employment Stability Index

To strengthen internal validity and minimize confounding influences, the following control variables were included in regression models: gender, socioeconomic background, type of institution attended, residence area, and prior tourism work experience. These controls were selected due to their documented association with graduate employment outcomes and their relevance to access and progression in tourism labour markets.

Based on the research objectives and theoretical foundations, the following hypotheses were formulated to examine the comparative impact of vocational and university education on youth employability and employment stability in the tourism sector of Northern Albania. The hypotheses are presented in Table 1.

Hypothesis Code	Hypothesis Statement	Variables	SPSS Statistical Test
H1a	Vocational education students have significantly higher employment readiness than university students.	EduGroup → employment_readiness	Independent Samples T-test
H1b	Vocational education students report significantly higher perceived employment stability compared to university students.	EduGroup → perceived_employment_stability	Independent Samples T-test
H2	Technological readiness is positively correlated with employment readiness among tourism students.	Technological_Readiness ↔ employment_readiness	Pearson Correlation
H3	Training quality significantly predicts employment readiness	Training_Quality → employment_readiness	Linear Regression

H4	Employment readiness has a positive effect on long-term career intention.	Employment_readiness → career_intention_mean	Linear Regression
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Table 1. Research Hypotheses

### 3.7 Reliability and Validity

#### *Reliability*

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. All key constructs—including employment readiness, perceived employment stability, technological readiness, and career intentions—reported alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability of the measurement scales.

#### *Validity*

Content validity was ensured through adaptation of validated scales from previous empirical studies in tourism education and employability research. The questionnaire was reviewed by academic experts and practitioners in the tourism sector to confirm its relevance and clarity. Construct validity was further supported by factor alignment of items with their respective variables during pilot testing.

### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. No personal identifying information was collected, and the data was used strictly for academic purposes. The study followed ethical guidelines in accordance with institutional research protocols and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

## 4. Analysis and Results

### 4.1 Hypothesis Testing

#### ***4.1.1 Testing of Hypothesis H1a***

*Hypothesis H1a:* Vocational students have significantly lower employment readiness than university students.

*Test Conducted:* Independent Samples t-test

*Variables:* EduGroup → employment\_readiness

*SPSS Output Summary:*

- Vocational students (N = 100, M = 2.95, SD = 0.93)
- University students (N = 130, M = 4.05, SD = 0.66)
- $t(228) = -10.45, p < 0.001$

*Interpretation:* The results show a statistically significant difference in employment readiness between the two groups, with university students exhibiting higher perceived readiness than vocational students. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the hypothesis is supported. These findings align with signalling theory, suggesting that university education provides broader competencies and credentials that enhance students' confidence in their employability.

#### **4.1.2 Testing of Hypothesis H1b**

*Hypothesis H1b:* Vocational education students report significantly lower perceived employment stability compared to university students.

*Test Conducted:* Independent Samples t-test

*Variables:* EduGroup → perceived\_employment\_stability

*SPSS Output Summary:*

- Vocational students (N = 100, M = 3.31, SD = 0.65)
- University students (N = 130, M = 4.13, SD = 0.71)
- $t(228) = -9.01, p < 0.001$

*Interpretation:* The results indicate a statistically significant difference in perceived employment stability between the two educational groups, with university students reporting higher levels of employment stability than vocational students. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, Hypothesis H1b is supported. This outcome suggests that university students may have stronger confidence in long-term job security, reflecting the perceived advantages of academic degrees in the tourism labour market.

#### **4.1.3 Testing of Hypothesis H2**

*Hypothesis H2:* Technological readiness is positively associated with employment readiness among tourism students.

*Test Conducted:* Pearson Correlation Analysis

*Variables:* Technological\_Readiness ↔ employment\_readiness

*SPSS Output Summary:*

- Pearson correlation coefficient:  $r = 0.216$
- Significance level:  $p = 0.001$
- $N = 230$

*Interpretation:* The results show a positive and statistically significant correlation between technological readiness and employment readiness ( $r = 0.216, p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that students with higher levels of technological readiness tend to report greater confidence in their employability. Therefore, Hypothesis H2 is supported. This finding reinforces the importance of technological competence as a key factor influencing labour market preparedness in the tourism sector.

#### **4.1.4 Testing of Hypothesis H3**

*Hypothesis H3:* Training quality significantly predicts employment readiness among tourism students.

*Test Conducted:* Linear Regression Analysis

*Variables:* Training\_Quality → employment\_readiness

*SPSS Output Summary:*

- Model Fit:  $R = 0.774$ ,  $R^2 = 0.599$
- $F(1, 228) = 340.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$
- Coefficient:  $\beta = 0.932$ ,  $t = 18.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$

*Interpretation:* The regression results indicate that training quality is a strong and statistically significant predictor of employment readiness. The model explains 59.9% of the variance in employment readiness, demonstrating substantial explanatory power. The positive beta coefficient ( $\beta = 0.932$ ) confirms that higher perceived training quality leads to higher employment readiness among students. Therefore, Hypothesis H3 is supported. This finding reinforces human capital theory, indicating that educational quality plays a critical role in enhancing labour market preparedness in tourism-related fields.

#### **4.1.5 Testing of Hypothesis H4**

*Hypothesis H4:* Employment readiness positively affects long-term career intentions among tourism students.

*Test Conducted:* Linear Regression Analysis

*Variables:* employment\_readiness → career\_intention\_mean

*SPSS Output Summary:*

- Model Fit:  $R = 0.094$ ,  $R^2 = 0.009$
- $F(1, 228) = 2.03$ ,  $p = 0.155$
- Coefficient:  $\beta = -0.082$ ,  $t = -1.426$ ,  $p = 0.155$

*Interpretation:* The regression results indicate that employment readiness does not significantly predict career intention, as the p-value exceeds the 0.05 threshold. The model explains less than 1% of the variance in career intentions, suggesting that students' perceptions of their readiness for employment do not directly influence their long-term career plans. Therefore, Hypothesis H4 is not supported. This result implies that career intention may be driven by other factors such as personal motivation, long-term aspirations, or perceived career opportunities rather than immediate employment readiness.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

This study set out to compare how vocational and university pathways shape employment stability among young tourism graduates in Northern Albania, and to identify the mechanisms that underpin these differences. The findings show that university students report significantly higher employment readiness and perceived employment stability than vocational students, while technological readiness and training quality emerge as strong predictors of perceived stability. At the same time, employment readiness does not directly translate into long-term career intentions in the tourism sector. Taken together, these results offer a nuanced picture that both confirms and qualifies international evidence on graduate transitions in tourism labour markets.

First, the higher levels of employment readiness and perceived stability among university students partially confirm the expectations of Human Capital Theory and Signalling Theory. University programmes in Northern Albania appear to provide broader analytical, managerial and digital competencies that students perceive as more transferable and valuable across different segments of the labour market, not only in frontline tourism roles. In signalling terms, a university degree may be interpreted by employers as a stronger credential for more stable, higher-responsibility positions, even when vocational graduates possess job-specific skills. This is consistent with studies from other European contexts which show that higher education often leads to better long-term career prospects and promotion opportunities, particularly in service and knowledge-intensive sectors.

However, the results also resonate with international research emphasising the strengths of vocational education in facilitating rapid labour market entry. Although vocational students in this study report lower overall employment stability, qualitative evidence from the literature suggests that they frequently access short-term, seasonal or informal jobs more quickly than their university peers. In tourism-dependent regions, these opportunities may increase immediate employability but do not necessarily offer secure contracts, predictable income or clear career ladders. The Albanian case therefore reflects a broader pattern observed in emerging economies: vocational pathways support rapid insertion into the labour market, but university pathways are perceived as more closely associated with long-term stability and upward mobility.

Second, the strong influence of training quality and technological readiness on perceived stability highlights the centrality of skill relevance in a sector that is increasingly shaped by digitalisation, online booking platforms and data-driven management. The finding that training quality explains a large share of the variance in employment readiness indicates that it is not only the *type* of institution (vocational vs university) that matters, but the extent to which curricula are aligned with current industry demands. This aligns with OECD and CEDEFOP evidence that high-quality,

work-integrated learning and digital skill development are key predictors of successful and stable transitions to employment. In the context of Northern Albania, where many tourism businesses are small, family-run and seasonally oriented, graduates who combine sector-specific skills with strong technological competencies may be better positioned to secure more stable roles or to navigate between different employers over time.

Third, the fact that employment readiness does not significantly predict long-term career intentions suggests that graduates' strategic choices are shaped by broader social and economic factors beyond their perceived ability to obtain a job in tourism. Northern Albania is characterised by relatively high youth unemployment, strong migration pressures and a high incidence of informal or seasonal employment in tourism. Under such conditions, students may feel confident about finding short-term work in the sector, but remain unsure about committing to tourism as a long-term career. Preferences for public sector employment, international migration or career shifts toward more stable industries may weaken the link between immediate readiness and long-term intention. This pattern is consistent with international findings showing that perceived sectoral instability, low wages and limited social protection can discourage young people from pursuing sustained careers in tourism, even when entry barriers are low.

The regional and cultural context of Northern Albania helps to explain why these dynamics are particularly pronounced. Tourism activity is highly seasonal and geographically concentrated, with strong peaks in coastal and lake areas and relatively limited off-season opportunities. Many positions are temporary, informal or part-time, which undermines perceptions of security, especially among graduates who aspire to economic independence, family formation or career progression. At the same time, family expectations, traditional gender roles and social norms around "respectable" careers may encourage university study as a more prestigious pathway, further reinforcing the perception that university education leads to more stable futures. These social and cultural dimensions interact with structural labour market conditions to shape how graduates evaluate their options.

Finally, by situating these findings within the broader international debate, the Albanian case contributes to a more differentiated understanding of how educational pathways affect employment stability in tourism-dependent economies. Rather than simply confirming a universal pattern, the results suggest that the relative advantages of vocational and university education depend on the maturity of the VET system, the degree of formalization in the tourism labour market, and the wider socio-economic environment. In contexts where vocational education is weakly integrated with employers and where tourism jobs remain highly seasonal and informal, university education may be perceived as a safer route to long-term stability, even if it does not guarantee immediate employment. Strengthening the practical, technological and industry-linked components of both pathways is therefore essential to improving the quality and stability of youth employment in tourism.

## 5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to human capital and employability literature by demonstrating that educational quality and technological skills are critical determinants of perceived employability in emerging tourism economies. It provides empirical evidence supporting the differentiated contribution of vocational and academic pathways, expanding theoretical understanding in the context of transitional economies such as Albania.

## 5.3 Practical and Policy Implications

The results suggest the need for educational institutions and policymakers to strengthen vocational curricula with practical training, technological integration, and industry partnerships to enhance workforce readiness. Universities should align academic programs with labour market needs to reduce skill mismatches. Policymakers may use these findings to design evidence-based strategies that promote youth employment, support tourism sector competitiveness, and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 8).

## 5.4 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to students in Northern Albania and relied on self-reported perceptions, which may not fully reflect actual labour market outcomes. Additionally, external labour market conditions were not controlled, which may influence employment expectations.

## 5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should include longitudinal data to examine actual employment outcomes over time, involve multiple regions for comparative analysis, and explore additional predictors such as entrepreneurial intention, environmental commitment, or international mobility. Qualitative research is also recommended to deepen understanding of employer perspectives on graduate employability.

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