

# Social representation of nonacademic work from the perspective of company gatekeepers in the Mexican tourism sector

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## Abstract

Cooperations or transfers of the German technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system have taken place in different cultural contexts in recent decades. In Mexico, the so-called *Modelo Mexicano de Formación Dual* has been adapted to Mexico's cultural conditions. Yet, it still seems to be largely unknown in society, the education system and the labour market. Attitudes, perceptions or so-called 'social representations' are culturally anchored in a society and can be identified in artefacts and individual narratives. Especially social representations of company gatekeepers, such as human resources employees are focused because they regulate access in companies and to higher positions. Although this happens on the basis of organizational transition policies, decision-making processes are shaped by culturally anchored individual perceptions. The target group of company gatekeepers from the tourism sector was interviewed within the framework of a qualitative study during eight semistructured 'face-to-screen' interviews, analysed according to grounded theory methodology. Based on social representation analysis, the Mexican labour market seems to be dichotomized.

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Academic titles have a high symbolic value, promising prestige. TVET options are given little focus, lack a high social esteem and are still largely unknown. Those produce *técnicos*, while holders of *oficos* often do on-the-job training within their families. Both depend upon their employers and have to accept unfavourable working conditions. This implies physically demanding, often gender-specific work. Promotions are possible, even without academic degrees. Because of a lack of institutionalization, these are subjective, depending on the goodwill of company gatekeepers. Promotions are possible to a certain extent, so nonacademic workers are facing a glass ceiling.

## INTRODUCTION

The German system of dual technical and vocational education and training (TVET) demonstrated a great potential at the international level in terms of promoting the skilled labour qualification (Busemeyer & Vossiek, 2016; Wiemann, 2020). As a consequence, TVET cooperations, as well as complete and partial transfers of the German TVET system, have taken place in different cultural contexts in recent decades (Gessler et al., 2019). In Mexico, after a pilot phase from 2013 to 2015, the vocational training sector was expanded and includes, at present, the so-called *Modelo Mexicano de Formación Dual* (MMFD). The TVET programme is based on the German dual vocational training but has been adapted to Mexico's cultural conditions (Cáceres-Reebs & Schneider, 2013) and currently represents an educational option (SEP, 2015). In fact, MMFD has already been introduced in some regions of the country (Wiemann & Fuchs, 2018; Wiemann, 2020). Yet, it still seems to be largely unknown in the Mexican society, its education system and the labour market.

In addition to the basic idea of meeting the demand for skilled labour through TVET, it is assumed that it also offers other opportunities, such as creating better working conditions, opportunities for promotion and so on (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019; UNESCO, 2022). Although TVET programmes have a great potential, the demand for TVET among the Mexican population is relatively low. According to the OECD, the enrolment rate in TVET programmes in Mexico is 38.2%, which is below the OECD average of 45.7% (OECD, 2019).

This raises the question of how technical upper secondary education and nonacademic work are perceived by the company gatekeepers in the tourism sector, such as people working in human resources departments and business managers. In this context, it is assumed that through their narratives it is possible to advance to the culturally anchored 'social representations' (Moscovici, 1988) in Mexico concerning the aforementioned topics. In this regard, in the broader project context of *Cultural Practice of Nonacademic Work in Mexico* (Kulturelle Praxis nicht-akademischer Arbeit in Mexiko), funded by the German Federal

Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, funding code 01BF18004A9), investigates social representations of non-academic work in cultural artefacts and individual narratives.

Of particular interest in this context are the social representations of company gatekeepers because they regulate access in companies but also close or open doors to higher positions in the company hierarchy. Although this happens on the basis of organizational transition policies, decision-making processes are—according to our assumption—decisively shaped by culturally anchored individual attitudes and perceptions. Apparently, company gatekeepers have a special position of power, as they carry out a mission of selection and consequently determine the internal structure of the respective organization (Behrens & Rabe-Kleberg, 2000). For this reason, the perceptions of company gatekeepers appear particularly revealing, as their statements on vocational schools, nonacademic work<sup>1</sup> and labour allow conclusions to be drawn about whether and to what extent educational investments made at the level of vocational training are recognized and valued in their organizations, reflected by offered work conditions and promotion practices.

The question guiding the research in this article is as follows: What are the social representations or perceptions about nonacademic work, TVET schools and programmes from the perspective of company gatekeepers in the tourism sector? The aim is to understand the meanings expressed in relation to nonacademic work and to analyse the cultural values and practices that guide the decisions of company gatekeepers.

The subsequent sections briefly introduce the concept of company gatekeepers and social representation in its cultural dimension. This is followed by the description of the applied methodology in terms of research design, data collection and analysis before presenting some of the key findings and conclusions.

## Company gatekeepers

The process of gatekeeping always implies the execution of power (Behrens & Rabe-Kleberg, 2000). Therefore, people in gatekeeping positions should also be understood as ‘decision-making access guardians’ (Struck, 2001, p. 39; translation by the authors) who regulate the transition into the respective field, organization and/or within the hierarchy of the company. In this context, we focus on company gatekeepers, such as people working in human resources departments, managing directors and so on, who determine the internal structure of the organization due to their decision-making power (Behrens & Rabe-Kleberg, 2000). Although company gatekeepers make their access decisions, such as the promotion of employees to higher hierarchical positions, on the basis of organizational transition policies, the decision-making processes—it is assumed—are decisively shaped by collectively anchored ‘social representations’ (Moscovici, 1988). These can manifest themselves, on the one hand, in cultural artefacts such as movies, memes and so on (Clement et al., 2021), and on the other hand, in narratives. In this article, we focus on the narratives of company gatekeepers in the tourism sector. From these narratives, we can deduce which social representations of nonacademic work are predominant.

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, labour in gastronomy, tourism and other services, which require competences not acquired in universities, will be subsumed under the umbrella term of nonacademic work.

## Social representations of company gatekeepers from the tourism sector

The concept of social representations, introduced into social psychology by Moscovici in the early 1960s, is considered particularly valuable in this article, as it has the function of transforming the unknown into the known, which is also referred to as ‘anchoring’ (Araya Umaña, 2002; Moscovici, 1988). Furthermore, the concept of social representations focuses on the elementary form of social knowledge that enables coping with everyday and work-related situations (Araya Umaña, 2002; Clement et al., 2021; Schützeichel, 2007):

Social representations [...] concern the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that gives coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe. They make it possible for us to classify persons and objects, to compare and explain behaviours and to objectify them as parts of our social setting. (Moscovici, 1988, p. 214)

Moscovici (1988) conceptualized social representations as relational to the respective context and social structure. Thus, social representations combine seemingly paradoxical characteristics. They represent dynamic entities that are constantly updated through practices of action and narratives. At the same time, social representations have a certain degree of autonomy in the production of meaning (Moscovici, 1988; Schützeichel, 2007). In view of this, Abric (1993) divides social representations into the core and the peripheral elements. The latter is characterized by dynamism because they are directly related to an individual’s experiences. Furthermore, peripheral elements form the interface between the outside world and the core, while at the same time they take on the function of the protective shell and lend relative stability to the core. Accordingly, social representations to some extent ‘have a life of their own’ (Moscovici & Duveen, 2001). However, events and experiences that continuously deviate from the core, as well as profound influences, can lead to a restructuring of the core (Abric, 1993; Clement et al., 2021).

This raises the question of the prevailing social representations in terms of nonacademic work, such as the figures of the *oficio* and *técnico*, but also TVET schools and programmes, promotion practices and so on, of company gatekeepers in the tourism sector<sup>2</sup> in Mexico. The tourism sector was chosen because for years it was considered one of the pillars of Mexico’s economy. After oil production and remittances<sup>3</sup>, it historically ranked third in foreign currency earnings (Herrera Lima, 2016). Before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the tourism sector accounted for 8.7% of the national GDP (SECTUR, 2019a) and had a growth rate of 3.3%. The number of people employed in the tourism sector was approximately 4,187,000 (SECTUR, 2019b). Given the importance of tourism, this article focuses on the company gatekeepers in this sector. The methodological approach to this data is outlined in the following section.

### Methodological approach

This article is the result of a broader research project that analysed in a first step cultural artefacts and conducted afterwards semistructured interviews to understand the social

<sup>2</sup>Consist of the hotel and gastronomy industries.

<sup>3</sup>These are money transfers by Mexican migrants to their families in their home country.

perception or representation of nonacademic work in Mexico. Cultural artefacts, such as murals, movies and so on, constitute a part of the tangible culture and are analysed in relation to the representations of nonacademic work. The analysis served to reconstruct the meaning of nonacademic work based on the cultural artefacts (Clement et al., 2021). These findings shaped the development of the guiding questions of the survey instrument for the semi-structured interviews with the company gatekeepers. The survey instrument intended to create thematic comparability, but at the same time also to open space for extensive narratives. These can give insight into key passages in the interview (Bogner et al., 2014; Meuser & Nagel, 1991) and make the core of social representations accessible. In the first part, the survey instrument was structured according to different categories such as work tasks, working conditions, professional advancement or promotion and so on, and the corresponding questions, while in the second part of the instrument we asked questions about the sociodemographic characteristics such as age, company and others. This type of data was always collected at the end of the actual interview to avoid a question–answer staccato. Regarding the development of the survey instrument besides the results of the artefact analysis reference was also made to the German concept of *Beruf* to contrast it to nonacademic work (Clement, 1999; Kutscha, 2008; Matthes & Vicari, 2018). The German concept of *Beruf* is understood ‘[...] as a pattern of work skills (labour force pattern) related to socially legitimized knowledge and qualification standards, which is characterized by a role-typical combination of knowledge, skills and abilities and is oriented towards the expectation of being able to take advantage of employment opportunities’ (Kutscha, 2008, p. 2; translation by the authors). In the Mexican cultural context, this ‘social institution’ (Pries, 2019) is nonexistent. So nonacademic work is mostly related to the so-called *oficios*, which are associated with craftsmanship and learned through on-the-job training within the family tradition. Another variety of nonacademic work in Mexico is the so-called *técnico*, which is institutionalized and taught in the Mexican TVET system.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, potential interviewees in Mexico were approached online and by telephone. Considering the time difference and home office situation, finding a sufficient number of interviewees turned out more difficult than in presence. Therefore, attempts were made to identify contact details and target addresses on the companies’ websites. After the first interviews had been conducted ‘face-to-screen’ (Otto & Philipp-Jahnke, 2021), the so-called *snowball effect* developed to a certain extent.

In view of the focus on interpretative knowledge and the different data material analysed in the broader project context, such as cultural artefacts but also semistructured interviews, the research style of grounded theory methodology was suitable in this context because of its openness regarding the different data material<sup>4</sup> (Bogner et al., 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Those topics that seemed relevant were then inserted into case descriptions and paraphrased. Although Bogner et al. (2014) consider paraphrasing to be problematic and exclude this step, we considered the production of paraphrases useful in the context of this study, because through this intermediate step, a certain distance to the data material is initially maintained and one does not immediately switch to interpretation (Bohnsack, 2014). Minimum and maximum contrasts emerged from the cross-case comparisons facilitated by the case descriptions. Hence, the minimum contrasts are related to the core of the social representations, while the maximum contrasts are considered more peripheral elements. After

<sup>4</sup>Coding and creating memos were carried out with a computer program before paraphrasing to make it easier to find thematically similar text passages (Kelle & Kluge, 2010).

presenting the theoretical sample in the following chapters, parts of the findings are presented according to the category system used.

## Theoretical sample

The data collection was carried out in 2020 and 2021 with a sample of eight interviews with company gatekeepers from the tourism sector, including the hotel and gastronomy sector, to approach the social representations regarding nonacademic work<sup>5</sup> through their narratives.

A total of four experts from the hotel sector in the state of Jalisco were interviewed. The gender distribution was balanced. The age range of the female interviewees is between 31 and 40 years, while the male interviewees are between 41 and 50 years and 51 and 60 years old. Besides Ramona, all interviewees are experienced in this sector and have an extended professional network. Jessica, Ramona and Juan employ interns from vocational schools and universities in their organizations, while Miguel has no interns in his company. Nevertheless, the MMFD<sup>6</sup> was unknown to them at the time of the interview.

Regarding the gastronomy sector in the State of Hidalgo, the gender distribution was also balanced. Ana and Alejandra are between 31 and 40 years old, while Pedro is between 41 and 50 and Pablo is between 21 and 30 years old. Apart from Alejandra the interviewees are experienced in their sector and have an extended network. Alejandra's organization does participate in the MMFD, while the other three interviewees are not aware of this educational opportunity.

## RESULTS

The results are presented in five sections, the first of which refers to the brief work biography of the company gatekeepers. It is assumed that their working and life circumstances in the past influence current behavioural patterns and cultural and perceptual structures regarding (nonacademic) work. This is followed by the examination of their social representations regarding nonacademic work, focusing on the value of academic<sup>7</sup> degrees as a precondition getting a *good* job and social esteem. In particular, the categories of education and training, working conditions and tasks are analysed. Finally, the actual function of company gatekeepers is examined by focusing on the narratives concerning their practices regarding the promotion to higher positions within the company hierarchy.

In the course of above-mentioned analytical steps, the contrast is made between academic and nonacademic work to work out why the academic type of work is valued more. The

<sup>5</sup>The names used here do not correspond to the real names of the interviewees for the purpose of anonymization.

<sup>6</sup>The Mexican government created a very own model of dual training in 2013, introducing the so-called MMFD as a pilot project. This model is based on the German dual educational system, but adapted to the complex Mexican education system and labour market. It is stipulated that dual courses must last a minimum 3 years and follow a curriculum pursuing the general, technical and vocational competencies. By 2014, the MMFD was extended to 6 training programmes and 11 federal states. Finally, 1 year later it was officially approved as an upper-secondary education programme. During 2016, the number of graduates in the food and beverage and tourism hospitality programmes was 134. Nevertheless, currently, the model still has not been consolidated and is considered to be 'currently in the process of institutionalization' (Wiemann, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>In this article, academic and university degrees are used synonymously.

comparison of academic and nonacademic work is made transparent through corresponding quotations.

## Company gatekeepers' work biography

All the interviewees came from the Mexican social middle class and six of them have many years of professional experience in the tourism sector, while Alejandra and Ramona only have been working there for about 2 years. Ramona always wanted to work in human resource (HR) but used to work before her employment in the hotel in a sales department, whereas Alejandra is very experienced in HR but works for the first time in the HR department of a restaurant chain. Both studied for a bachelor's degree, a so-called *licenciatura* in psychology. Our other interviewees also have academic degrees. However, only Jessica and Juan have studied for a *licenciatura* in tourism and Pedro and Ana studied gastronomy. The latter have a postgraduate degree equivalent to a Master's degree.

Among the other interviewees, Miguel left his parental home due to family circumstances and started working at the age of 13 as a dishwasher for economic reasons. He acquired a baccalaureate degree, a technician's degree and later a university degree in marketing as a second education. Miguel describes himself primarily as a technician. Ramona also had to begin working at a relatively early stage after lower secondary education to finance upper secondary school (*preparatoria*), while Jessica reported that she had to work alongside her studies. Regarding their nonacademic work experiences, Miguel and Jessica believe that they have found their vocation through these experiences and attest to them having an orientation function for young people.

At the time of the interview, Miguel was the owner of three companies in the tourism sector (development of hotel concepts, hotels and real estate), which he managed quite successfully. Considerably proud of himself, he was talking about his achievements, even though he described himself as 'lazy' compared to his family members. In view of his work biography, Miguel presented himself in the conversation as a self-made man who lives the *American Dream*. Ana, Pablo and Pedro also run their own businesses and are owners of restaurants. However, they took over the businesses from their parents. Jessica is employed as a hotel director, while Juan used to work as a hotel director. Ramona works in an HR department of a hotel and Alejandra works in an HR department of a restaurant chain, which was established and is still run by a family.

## Academic degree as a precondition to good work and social esteem

Work occupies an important place in the life of the interviewees. In this regard, all company gatekeepers from the tourism sector agree that work contributes to their personal and professional growth. Especially Miguel verbalizes that work gives dignity to a person and that only through work a person can experience the greatness that one can achieve as a human being:

Dignity. (longer break) Dignity, I think that, and that, I say that a lot to X (name of his daughter), to my daughter. The only way to know of what size we are, as a person and as professional, is through work. Because work is what challenges us. And every time we have a challenge and we overcome it, we realize that we can go further, further, further, further, further, further. And that we have more and more



capabilities what we have to do is, focus and concentrate on the things we are doing [...].<sup>8</sup> (ET4M, pos. 127–132)

Based on the previous quote and the statements from the other interviews, it becomes evident that they refer to their own work, which is considered academic, because of their study background. Nonacademic work, however, is not present when they talk about the meaning of work and what they consider as *good jobs*. The reason might be the fact that it does not correspond to the reality of their lives as all interviewees have a university degree.

In contrast, the function of nonacademic work in orienting young people in their private and professional future is of great importance to Miguel. He believes that young people can only find their professional vocation through practical work experience as he did during the first years in his professional biography. Miguel says that the best path for all young people in the Mexican education system is first to pursue a technical career and then to integrate them into the labour market for at least 2 years. He points out that he has nothing against a university degree, but would only recommend it after at least 2 years of work experience, as he believes that there is a lack of professionals with practical skills in Mexican society:

[...] If I had it my way, all the, all the young people finishing high school should study for a technical career. All of them, one hundred percent, all of them, all of them, all of them. A technical career of two or three years. After that, they should necessarily go to work for two years, and then go back to the university to finish, validating their technical degree, the subjects they need for a bachelor's degree. But if it were in my hands, one hundred percent of the population would have the obligation and the responsibility to study for a technical career. I believe that countries like Mexico need many more people with technical knowledge. I'm not saying that having university knowledge is bad, but I think that this country today needs many more technicians, who understand how things are done [...] That they do it and then, later, in their work, they find their true vocation, and they complete a university degree, having their technical degree validated [...].<sup>9</sup> (ET4M, pos. 392–401, 403–405)

So, he strongly advocates for the *técnico*, which is a career path like the one he has pursued. Thus, his perspective is in a maximum contrast to the other interviewees, as he considers himself as a *self-made man*. Furthermore, he is very critical about the social representation, *the*

<sup>8</sup>Dignidad. (longer break) Dignidad, yo creo que, y eso, se lo/por ejemplo se lo digo mucho a X (name of his daughter), a mi hija. La única manera de saber de que tamaño somos, como personas y como profesionistas, es trabajando. Porque el trabajo es el que nos reta. Y cada vez que tenemos un reto y que lo superamos nos damos cuenta, de que podemos ir más, más lejos, y más, más allá, y más allá. Y que tenemos más y más capacidades lo que tenemos que hacer es, centrarnos y concentrarnos en las cosas que estamos haciendo [...]. (ET4M, pos. 127–132)

<sup>9</sup>[...] Si en mis manos estuviera, toda la, todos los jóvenes terminando la preparatoria deberían estudiar una carrera técnica. Todos, cien por ciento, todos, todos, todos. Una carrera técnica de dos o tres años. Después deberían de salir forzosamente dos años al mercado laboral, y después regresar a la universidad a terminar, validándole la carrera técnica, las materias que les hagan falta para una licenciatura. Pero si en mis manos estuviera, el cien por ciento de la población, tendría la obligación, y la responsabilidad de estudiar una carrera técnica. Yo creo que países como México, nos hacen falta muchas más personas, con conocimientos técnicos. No digo que tener conocimientos universitarios sea malo, pero creo que a ese país hoy, le hacen falta muchos más técnicos, que entiendan, el como se hacen las cosas, [...] Que lo hagan y ya después, después, en el trabajo encuentran su verdadera vocación, y terminen una carrera universitaria, habiéndose les validada la carrera técnica [...]. (ET4M, pos. 392–401, 403–405)



higher the educational degree, the better the salary and states that an investment into the higher education pays off only if the demand side of the labour market is taken into account.

However, the overarching goal for Miguel, as for the other interviewees, seems to be an academic degree. This is particularly interesting in his case because, despite his professional success, he still felt the need to obtain a university degree afterwards. The focus on achieving such certificates proves to be a minimal contrast between all the interviewed company gatekeepers or in the words of Abric (1993), the core of social representations since such academic educational degrees seem to promise a *good* workplace.

All interviewees agree to associate the *good* work with professional and personal growth, but also with appropriate remuneration. Therefore, it becomes evident that a higher education entrance degree is perceived as a stepping stone to the tertiary education with the purpose of achieving the *good* work in the long term due to an acquired university degree. The growing importance to invest in higher education is mentioned by all the interviewees and creates the impression of a higher educational title inflation. This impression, for example, is strengthened by Juan's statement, which is about the present tendency to invest in higher educational titles, while the *técnico* is becoming less important:

[...] So, yes, he or she has to start looking, he or she can be a technician in a high school, the high school, but from there he or she has to go on to higher education and postgraduate studies as well. Because yes, unfortunately in this country we have been growing in terms of work and academics, and now a technician is seen as being far behind in his or her duties.<sup>10</sup> (ET3M\_Juan, pos. 156–160)

In all the conducted interviews it becomes apparent that the company gatekeepers aspire tertiary education for their younger family members and not TVET programmes. Against the background of their narratives, the aspiration for academic careers appears to be a *normality* and, moreover, an intergenerational family project to maintain the achieved social status or even evoke social advancement.

In this regard, Miguel narrates that his grandparents decided to emigrate to another Mexican state to provide an academic education to their children. According to him, the succeeding generations of his family still follow the aspirations of their grandparents, which underlines the participation of all family members, except for him, in the intergenerational family project. Therefore, he sees himself as the great exception in the family because he has chosen a different career path. In this context, he describes himself as 'lazy'<sup>11</sup> (ET4M, pos. 58), while one of his cousins, being a scientist with a doctorate and research experience abroad is considered '[...] the pride of the family [...]'<sup>12</sup> (ET4M, pos. 54). Concerning this, Miguel emphasizes that the accumulation of academic titles is to be considered as a typical aspiration of the Mexican middle class. Accordingly, such educational degrees seem not only to guarantee a *good* work, but also have a high symbolic value within the Mexican society. This could be an explanation for Miguel's subsequent acquisition of academic educational titles, despite his professional success. Consequently, holders of high academic education degrees enjoy considerable social esteem and prestige in Mexico.

<sup>10</sup>Entonces sí tiene que ir buscando, puede ser un técnico en una preparatoria, la preparatoria, pero de ahí tiene que ir creciendo al estudio superior y al de posgrados también. Porque sí, por desgracia en este país hemos ido creciendo laboralmente y académicamente, y ya un técnico ya se le ve mucho muy atrás en el deber. (ET3M, pos. 156–160)

<sup>11</sup>'Vago'.

<sup>12</sup>'el orgullo de la familia'.

## Nonacademic work and the corresponding training paths

There are widely varying training paths for tourism sector workers in Mexico. One relevant form seems to be training at the job place within the family, which does not have a formal institutionalized framework. In this context, the so-called *oficios* were mentioned, which are normally passed on within the family (see footnote 6). In this context, it becomes particularly clear from the *oficios* of cooks and bakers that people who have no formal training are in demand because of their practical skills, abilities and knowledge and are willingly hired. In this regard, Alejandra makes it clear that although these people have great importance for Mexico, they are not always esteemed, '[...] the truth is that they are worth a lot, and in Mexico that is not always valued [...]'<sup>13</sup> (EG1F, pos. 88). We believe that she expresses a general assumption, which could be valid for Mexico as a culturally anchored statement.

Besides the *oficios*, the so-called *técnicos* represent another variation of nonacademic work. However, in this case, the training, the so-called *formación técnica*, is formalized within the Mexican vocational education system. Various training modalities can be subsumed under *formación técnica*, including the MMFD. For successful completion of the *formación técnica*, company internships are mandatory or, as in the case of the MMFD, an apprenticeship in a company. However, not all the interviewees offer young people the opportunity to gain such practical work experience in their company. Juan, Ramona, Alejandra, Jessica and Ana accept such interns or apprentices from vocational schools. Pablo's company applied for participation in two government programmes, the so-called *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* and *Mi Primer Empleo*,<sup>14</sup> for receiving interns paid from the government but his company did not get accepted in any of these programs because the number of companies that were allowed to participate was limited.

Especialy Ramona points out that she gives youth the opportunity to work in the hotel during their school enrolment with the aim to help them to complete with their school studies. She also mentions that the hotel gives them a gratification because they are already generating some income for the organization:

We don't manage it as much as salary, but we do give them support. We give them food and help with transport. It's like a bonus that we give them because they support us in the operation. Because, although they are practising, they are performing. They are not paid a salary like a worker, because they are just practicing. But they are given, they are paid in that way, food and help with transport.<sup>15</sup> (EG1F, pos. 121–126)

<sup>13</sup>[...] La verdad es que lo valen mucho y en México no siempre se valora esa parte [...]. (EG1F, pos. 88)

<sup>14</sup>The government programme *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro* (Youth building the Future) seeks to offer a first employment opportunity to people between 18 and 29 years of age, who are not studying and not working (NEET). The programme links them with companies where they can develop or strengthen work habits and technical skills to increase their employability in the future (Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión Social, n.d.). Particularly the state of Hidalgo created a similar programme, *Mi primer empleo, mi primer salario* (My first job, my first salary), for young graduates of technological high schools to obtain better job opportunities and to generate their first professional experience (Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico, Gobierno del Estado de Hidalgo, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup>No lo manejamos tanto como becas, pero sí se les da un apoyo. Por decir, se les da los alimentos y ayuda de transporte. Que es como una gratificación que nosotros les damos a ellos porque ellos nos apoyan en la operación, pues. Porque, aunque estén practicando, están haciendo funciones. No se les paga un salario como un trabajador, porque apenas está practicando. Pero sí se les da, se les retribuye de esa manera; alimentos y ayuda de transporte. (ET2F, pos. 121–126)

Apart from Ramona and Alejandra, the other interviewees have not mentioned any gratification for interns. In Alejandra's company, they also used to give to the interns some money for public transport, but her bosses cut off the gratification because they had the plan to open another restaurant and for that they wanted to save as much money as possible. This indicates in a certain way a disregard for this workforce.

Alejandra is the only interviewee who is aware of the MMFD and used to have interns from this educational opportunity from a CONALEP school. However, since the removal of support for public transport, the apprentices from CONALEP are no longer taking their training at the restaurant chain. In this regard, Alejandra pointed out that these educational institutions have a 'terrible reputation'<sup>16</sup> (EG1F, pos. 252), which is in line with the other interviewees. But she also mentioned that the graduates from this school are technically well prepared for working life and contributing a lot to the companies. Due to their skills, she would have liked to continue taking apprentices, but since the aforementioned change in company policy, this has not been happening anymore:

[...] The objective that motivated me to collaborate in the Mexican model of dual training, the truth was for free manpower, let's be honest, it is qualified manpower that does not cost us, because the kids already have experience, in fact the kids from CONALEP in the area of gastronomy have several courses [...].<sup>17</sup> (EG1F, pos. 393–397)

Therefore, it could be assumed that there is only a limited interest in providing training, whereby the focus is less on training and more on the availability of free manpower. Accordingly, the interest in exploiting qualified unpaid work ultimately prevails. Alejandra is convinced about the quality provided at vocational schools, although, according to the other interviewees, it seems obvious that those institutions have a poor reputation and attract mainly people with few economic resources. This becomes particularly clear in Pedro's statement on this topic:

[...] I have a nephew, I have told him to study digital programming because in my family they have the resources to study in a good school, but on the other hand, I had a lady who was a cook and I recommended her son to enter a technical baccalaureate, so it depends on the possibilities and it will sound ugly, if you don't have the possibilities, a technical baccalaureate will help them to get ahead and if you have the possibilities to take them, a normal baccalaureate will help them.<sup>18</sup> (EG4M, pos. 136–141).

Based on this statement, a pronounced class consciousness can be deduced. Thus, it becomes clear that vocational schools primarily address people with lower economic incomes, while people from higher social classes attend regular high schools and universities. Direct

<sup>16</sup>'una fama horrible'. (EG1F, pos. 252)

<sup>17</sup>[...] El objetivo de que me motivo a colaborar en el modelo mexicano de formación dual, la verdad fue mano de obra gratis, seamos honestos, es mano de obra calificada que no nos cuesta, porque los chicos ya tienen experiencia, de hecho los chicos del CONALEP en el área de gastronomía tienen varios cursos [...]. (EG1F, pos. 393–397)

<sup>18</sup>[...] tengo un sobrinito, le he dicho que se meta a estudiar programación digital porque en mi familia tienen los recursos para estudiar en una buena escuela, pero por el otro lado, tuve una señora que era cocinera y le recomendé a su hijo que ingresará a un bachillerato técnico, entonces depende de las posibilidades y va a sonar feo, si no tiene las posibilidades, sí les va a ayudar a salir adelante un bachillerato técnico y si tienes las posibilidades de llevárselas chicas pues un bachillerato normal. (EG4M, pos. 136–141)

entry into the labour market for members of the lower social class is known and accepted, as they cannot afford higher education due to a lack of economic resources.

## Working conditions and tasks in nonacademic work contexts

One way in which appreciation of a work activity is expressed and can also be measured is the wages for gainful employment. According to Alejandra, they are very low in her company. For example, the bakers in her company, as well as in other companies, receive a very low hourly wage, which is why these employees are forced to work many hours to make a living. Alejandra mentions that a wage of 3.000 Mexican pesos a month is not enough to make ends.<sup>19</sup> She is also particularly critical of the practice of low wages, and she has set herself the goal of improving the working conditions prevailing in Mexico. At the same time, she justifies the low wages of the *oficios* and *técnicos* by the lack of educational qualifications, as the following quote illustrates:

[...] They are paid per hour in most of the companies, so they have to work many hours to be able to have a more or less decent salary and it is a very heavy job physically, but they also don't go to the university to become bakers [...].<sup>20</sup> (EG1F, pos. 88–91)

According to this, the practice of paying low wages is somehow legitimized by the absence of higher education degrees, which is in line with the narratives of the other interviewees. This means physically demanding work is less valued, while cognitive activities are gratified by good salaries.

Regarding the staff with higher education degrees in gastronomy, Alejandra notes that they usually leave after about 1 or 2 months working in the company because they do not accept the rough working conditions and the low salaries, while traditional cooks, *oficio* holders or graduates from vocational schools, *técnicos*, from, for example, Centro de Bachillerato Tecnológico Industrial y de Servicios [Higher Secondary School for Industrial and Technological Services] (CBTIS), Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica [National College for Technical Vocational Education and Training] (CONALEP)<sup>21</sup> and so on, find the salaries offered attractive. Pedro tells a similar story, favouring traditionally trained cooks over holders of academic education degrees because, he says, the latter usually have a problem subordinating themselves hierarchically. This is reflected in the fact that they immediately slip into the role of the restaurant manager and quit if things go differently than imagined in the respective company. In this context, Pedro refers to the social background of traditional cooks who, in his opinion, have no possibility to formalize their training due to a lack of economic resources and therefore depend on the goodwill of the

<sup>19</sup>[...] con \$3000 pesos que les ofrecemos al mes tampoco les alcanza [...] (EG1F, pos. 195–196). At the moment of the interview, this amount corresponds to 132 Euros.

<sup>20</sup>Se les paga a destajo en la mayoría de las empresas entonces, tienen que trabajar muchas horas para poder tener un sueldo más o menos decente y es un trabajo muy pesado físicamente, pero ellos también digamos no van a la universidad hacer panaderos. (EG1F, pos. 88–91)

<sup>21</sup>Both schools belong to the upper-secondary technical educational system, which offers different technical training modalities: CBTIS, CONALEP, Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica [National College for Technical Vocational Education and Training] (for further information see Wiemann, 2020).

employer. This economic dependency seems to be particularly attractive to most of the company gatekeepers because they can count up to a certain point on the limited job mobility of their staff, which could be considered a *forced loyalty*.

With two exceptions, all nonacademic staff, that is, those working at the operational level, receive written employment contracts from the interviewed company gatekeepers. The only exceptions are Pablo and Pedro, who conclude spoken employment contracts on the basis of trust. However, while Pablo provides social security for his employees, Pedro employs his permanent staff without any social security, ‘[...] those who are employed for an indefinite period have a verbal contract, without health insurance’ (EG4M, pos. 81). Accordingly, his workers are employed informally, which was already close to 60% in Mexico before the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2014). Jessica particularly associates *oficios* with informal employment. In this regard, she values Mexicans as people who never give up and describes them as ‘very fierce’<sup>22</sup> (ET1F, pos. 55). This perception of what Mexicans are like can also serve as a justification for employers to avoid social responsibility for their employees because the employees can supposedly deal with their problems on their own. As a concrete example of the resilience of Mexicans, she mentions her former employees who lost their jobs in the hotel due to the pandemic and says:

[...] Those who lost their jobs [in the hotel due to the pandemic] sell food or do other jobs, such as painting or bricklaying [...].<sup>23</sup> (ET1F, pos. 57–58)

As a result, nonacademic work seems suitable for everyone and requires no particular qualification, thus acting as a catch-all opportunity in times of crisis. In view of this, those jobs, in particular, could be perceived as the last option in life.

With regard to the nature of the tasks in the field of nonacademic work, there is an agreement among all the interviewees that these are simple routinized tasks that are cognitively undemanding but physically exhausting. However, the company gatekeepers admit that specific skills, abilities and knowledge are needed for workplaces in the kitchen, such as cooks and bakers. Consequently, this work has little to do with their idea of *good work*, which is also about self-realization and personal as well as professional growth.

## Promotion practices in nonacademic work contexts

The classic function of company gatekeepers is among others the regulation of transition into higher company positions. Especially in the tourism sector vertical mobility within the organization is possible even without higher education degrees what Miguel, for example, describes as ‘tremendous virtue’ (ET4M, pos. 774–777). In his opinion, the absence of educational titles can be compensated through hard work and motivation, as he did when he started working at an early age and climbed up step by step within the organizational hierarchy. This view is also shared by the other interviewees regarding the tourism sector, although promotion opportunities and attainable company positions are often limited by a

<sup>22</sup>‘muy luchona’. (ET1F, pos. 55)

<sup>23</sup>[...] Ya los que se fueron ya tienen su negocio propio, de comida o están haciendo algunos otros trabajos o que de pintura o que de albañería [...]. (ET1F, pos. 57–58)

certain level. Moreover, employees often undergo internal trainings within the company to qualify for the upcoming promotions, as Jessica, for example, clarifies:

[...] If people have the skills, demonstrate those skills, the knowledge, the experience and we see what they need to develop, then we develop it and we grow it, right? In the end it is a motivation for, for (unintelligible, unstable connection). You don't have to do differential calculations, or very complicated technical things. At the end of the day, the next levels are personnel coordination, and most of them develop a little bit of leadership, work distribution, teamwork, so that most of them can integrate well into the job, into the next positions.<sup>24</sup> (ET1F, pos. 322–329)

However, this also means that these types of in-house trainings are often not recognized outside the respective organization. Accordingly, intercompany transfer to equivalent hierarchical positions can be more difficult. Besides, her statement manifests how individualized promotions are handled and that they are always dependent on the goodwill of the supervisor, as there are no institutionalized promotion paths in the field of nonacademic work.

In addition, the following statement by Alejandra makes it clear that the promotion of staff is subject to company policies that are often difficult to understand. For example, only women are hired and promoted in the kitchen of the restaurant chain she was working for at the time of the interview:

[...] it is a matter of the owners who have that perception and basically in the kitchen area the kitchen managers are women, we don't hire men as managers [...].<sup>25</sup> (EG1F, pos. 349–350)

This could mean that certain nonacademic work, which is mostly physically demanding, is also gender-predetermined, as women are determined to work in the kitchen. This leads to the situation that vocational training could become pointless in the face of such a *law of nature*.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the gatekeepers' narrative from the point of view of the theoretical approach of social representations, we have registered the dichotomization of the Mexican labour market into the *good* work and the catch-all work, while the prerequisite for the *good* work is an academic degree. Moreover, higher education titles have a high symbolic value, promising prestige to their holders. Vocational training options, such as the MMFD, on the other hand, are given little focus and do not have a high social esteem. The MMFD as a training

<sup>24</sup>[...] si la gente tiene las habilidades, demuestra esas habilidades, el conocimiento, la experiencia y vemos que le falta para desarrollar pues, se lo desarrollamos y lo crecemos, pues, no? Al final es una motivación para, para (unintelligible, unstable connection). Tampoco se tiene que hacer calculos de diferencial, o cosas técnicas muy complicadas. Al final los que siguen, los siguientes niveles es coordinación de personal y de en su mayoría casi todos desarrollandoles un poco el liderazgo, es de, distribución de trabajo, trabajo en equipo, con eso la mayoría se puede integrar bien al puesto, a siguientes puestos. (ET1F, pos. 322–329)

<sup>25</sup>[...] es cuestión ya de los dueños que tienen esa percepción y pues básicamente ahí en el área cocina las jefas de cocina son mujeres no contratamos hombres en las jefaturas [...]. (EG1F, pos. 349–350)



option was largely unknown to the company gatekeepers, whereby the only person who employed MMFD apprentices in the company did so for economic reasons and not because the dual training modality was considered particularly useful or attractive. Against this background, Wiemann's (2020) statement that the MMFD is in the process of institutionalization still seems valid. Such a perception related to the TVET programmes could be one reason why implementation attempts do not receive much social resonance.

Furthermore, vocational schools seem to attract primarily economically disadvantaged people, while members of higher socioeconomic classes are more likely to invest in regular higher education since such educational qualifications, on the one hand, function as a symbol of distinction, and on the other hand, are intended to evoke social advancement or at least contribute to the preservation of the inherited status. In this respect, there is a recognizable tendency to invest in increasingly higher education titles, which could indicate their inflation. As a result, it is conceivable that the phenomenon of *running to stand still* might also occur in Mexico. This means that the following generations of a family must work even harder to secure their achieved social status. Accordingly, the accumulation of higher education titles appears to be a family project, which could be a possible cause for the lower social acceptance of vocational training programmes in Mexican society.

The TVET programmes in higher secondary education produce *técnicos*, while holders of *oficios* often do on-site job training within their family businesses. Due to their social and economic background, both *técnicos* and holders of *oficios* strongly depend upon their employers and, as a consequence, often have to accept unfavourable working conditions. This usually implies physically demanding, often gender-specific work. Promotions are possible, particularly in tourism, even without academic degrees. However, due to the lack of institutionalization, these are highly subjective and thus depend upon the goodwill of the company gatekeepers. Furthermore, promotions are only possible to a certain extent, which is why nonacademic workers face a glass ceiling. This also becomes clear with regard to intercompany changes, where the hierarchically equivalent company positions are often difficult to obtain, as the worker's skills are not documented and have to be proven over again.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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