Vocational Identity and Working Conditions in the Sector of Tourism: 
Today VET Students, Workers of Tomorrow.

Author: Navas, Almudena;

Departament de Didàctica i Organització Escolar
Universitat de València
Facultat de Filosofia i Ciències de l'Educació
Blasco Ibáñez, 30 - 46010 València - España
Tel.: 34 96 386 4440 ext. 1091
Fax: 34 96 386 4971
e-mail: anavas@uv.es

Abstract:

Today VET Students, Workers of Tomorrow This paper draws upon qualitative data from a research project (Vocational identity, flexibility and mobility in the European labour market - FAME) funded under the 5th Framework Programme of the EU. The data used here was obtained using several research tools as part of the research we conducted in Spain. It is about work in progress. It relates a part of the project that aims to explore the relationship between Vocational and Educational Training System of the Tourism sector and the identity formation of the participants as workers. The transformations that happen in the European labour market have a direct influence on the conception of the self-identity as a worker. The sample we have used consists of all the students of Cookery and Hostelling, both of which are certificated courses that belong to the formal system of Tourism. We are exploring the similarities, differences and peculiarities that these students have in their understanding of the meaning of work. This research enables us to understand how current fundamental aspects and changes in the labour market are impacting on student's daily work and their self-identity formation in a specific productive sector. Insights from the research allows us to define the appropriateness of the educational formal system on VET-education in relation to the new demands of the labour market on the Tourism sector.
**Introduction.**

This paper draws upon qualitative data from a research project: Vocational Identity, Flexibility and Mobility in the European Labour Market – FAME. The information described in it, is related to the general aims of the project focusing on the Tourism sector. We are looking for capturing the nature of the relations between different agents in this sector (employers, employees, teachers and students).\(^1\)

Our aim in this part of the project is to explore the relationship between the Vocational and Educational Training system (VET from now) of the Tourism sector and the identity formation of the students as future workers. In Spain, the VET system is addressed to different target populations, an it is a mixture of three systems. The present paper takes into account one of these system: the one belonging to the formal and national system of education, specially its develop in the Valencian region.

In the beginning of the FAME project, it was not intended to ask students about their identity formation as future workers, but as the project goes we think that it might be interesting add to our research findings the student’s point of view. We were looking to compare the representations of the world of work by the students and those of the employers and employees. So, this paper pretend to reflect which is the nature of the beliefs related to work that the students have, and which is the notion of work that they are taught in their courses.

**Inquiry Assumptions and methodology.**

Our two main research questions are: (i) How the students are (re)socialized in these VET courses; (ii) and what notion of work develop these students.

As a post-compulsory education, is usual that in these kind of courses people has already been in touch with the labour market, or combine both work and studies. So, we wanted to know how was their notion of work and how they were socialized in the job placements they had or have, and grasp the gap with the socialization on these VET courses. This is related as well with the notion of work taught in the courses, and the notion of work learned by the students. As we will see further on in this paper, the sample is heterogeneous enough to give us a widespread information on this two points.

We develop these research questions looking for information relevant that might be based upon:

- Their notion of work.

\(^1\) In order to know more information about this part of our work in the project, see papers presented by Ignacio Martínez, Fernando Marhuenda and Alicia Ros at the ECER 2002.
− Their career expectations.
− Their ideal models (what a good professional should be).
− Information from subject areas: Student’s work experience and their introduction into the world of work..

To grasp this information we asked as well teachers as students of the tourist sector of the Valencian Region in Spain.

With the students, data gathering was conducted through three different kind of tools:
− a questionnaire on several identity fields: personal relations, expectations with regard to work, views about what is work, views about their work and their studies.
− a debate upon a figured case on the profession they are studying, that we take from the pilot interviews to employees.
− a projective technique with slides of a real workplace settings and situation in the sector, with an open debate about the slides.

As we attended to the schools, we were placed to grasp the information in the subject area ‘Introduction to the world of work’. Both debates were recorded in tapes and transcribed later on. We were interested as well in the student’s teacher point of view so we sent a questionnaire by mail related to the same subjects addressed to them.

The sample of this part of the research is composed of 8 schools, and consist of all the students for either restoration or hostelry, both of which are certificated courses that belong to the formal system of tourism. The 8 schools are:
− 2 private (one of the promoted by employers in the sector)
− 2 promoted by the governmental agency
− 4 public VET schools.

In these schools we get in contact with 10 different class groups. Nine of them were studying the high VET and one of them the intermediate one\(^2\). There is an

\(^2\) In the Spanish VET system there are two different levels of courses: an intermediate level (*Ciclo Formativo de Grado Medio*) and a high one (*Ciclo Formativo de Grado Superior*). They are addressed to people with different levels of accreditation. Both of them have different diploma, and they are a two academic year courses. To be able to access to the intermediate level of VET you need to have the ‘Graduate on Secondary education’, the only one provided after successful completion of compulsory education. It provides the first specialized VET. To have access to high level VET, you needed to have the ‘Graduate of Post-compulsory Secondary Education’. After
important subject to remark: even if these courses belong to the formal educational system, there is an special exam for people who can prove their work in the sector for three or more years. That’s why we have found a large age range: between 16 and 45 years old. This wide age range corresponds to the high VET.

We have to take into account that in this sample it is reflected the students population of VET formal system, and nearly a 60% of it are women. As we say in the preceding paragraph population is quite heterogeneous, and corresponds to people with a pretty well defined notion of the values of the courses for the work.

Our inquiry assumptions related to their previous experience of work is safe: most of them work or have worked in the sector. We are quite happy with the collaboration in the gathering of information with students and teachers.

**Student’s notion of work**

In general terms, what we wanted to know with the interviews and the questionnaire was the student’s notion of work, through their actual vision on the profession. Most of them have already work in jobs related to the tourism sector and the major part of the students interviewed were on their final year to get the diploma.

Our starting point is that we are addressed to students with a clear notion of their position in these courses. Even if most of them are working in the sector, all of them are ‘successful’ students of the formal system. That’s important in order to understand their vision about the values of the training provided and the future representation of their work.

They know different aspects of the profession through their own experience on the sector, and through their on-the-job training provided on the courses. Even so, there is an important question to take into account: these students have a large practical training of their field, so it’s quite important their reference to the differences between theory and practice. For them, it’s very important to pass through a formal training on hostelling or cookery, because it’s the only way they have to learn how to do things in a proper way. But there is a difference between the reality of the workplaces and the learned theory at the school. This difference its related to needs of time, space and the resources available at the real place where the organization doesn’t play the role played in the school. In the school the administration of time and spaces don’t have to respond to needs of the real workplace (the most part of the time these needs become urgent as customers are waiting for the services).

completion of high level, one is awarded with the title of ‘qualified technician’ in the corresponding area.
Passing through school experience is the way the students find to make possible to reinvent the theory. The knowledge acquired in school is perceived as a ‘theoretical’ one, sometimes far away from the real practice. But that is not perceived as a bad feature of the scholar system. It is perceived as a good experience that everybody should pass through it because acquiring this kind of knowledge give them the opportunity to make flexible the own practice. In others words: the think that knowing how to realize the different functions properly is the way they will have to face the future conflicts at the workplace.

So the years passed studying allow student to achieve the adaptation strategies needed to resolve a full range of situations, all of them possible at any job they will have. That’s why we think that these students have, in some sense, a clear notion of the sector. They can perceive that practice is often changed due to external factors to the enterprise. The balance between resources available in the enterprise and the supposed needs of time and space to fit the offer of the enterprise to the demand of the customers is something that remain uncertainly for the workers even when they have quite experience. That’s why students think that they have the tools to reduce the uncertainty but this really get reduced as they acquire experience at different workplaces.

As VET students are highly satisfied with the training received in VET schools, they perceived themselves well-prepared to start working anywhere. It is general in the answers of the questionnaire to find two moments in their career, as we will see in the next part of this paper. The first one is related to the wide range of jobs these students think they want to have before starting their ‘good’ job. It is common to read in their answers which is the most attractive feature for them: how dynamic the sector is for them.

They don’t perceived their future work as hard due to the creative possibilities that the sector offers them. They are so glad with the work that the don’t mind seasonality, timetables and wages (they even think that wages are better than in other professions). One thing they repeat is that they don’t mind working festive days, at Christmas, summer holidays, etc. because they understand the needs of the sector and that seasonality is one of the bad features, but a necessary one.

They are so satisfied with the training they are receiving that they have in general a romantic vision of the training and of the job placements. They know that every workplace is a different world due to the companions and to the enterprise culture, but they think that with a two years experience its enough to acquire a good level of experience. They expect to be these years in different job placements so they can get the more experience as possible.
For them it is important to go on learning and to go on with the training. Due to
that it is impossible to make longer the VET courses (as some of them would wish),
most of them want to go on studying the university degree on tourism.

Finally, we asked them to resume their notion of work in a sentence, by defining
a good worker in the sector. Here we present some of the most representative:

- A good worker is someone who knows how to cook, who never stop
  learning
- Someone who accomplish his/her job.
- A responsible, good and worker person.
- A professional who knows his/her function deeply.
- Someone who knows the maximum about the sector, and how to
  apply this knowledge.
- To be professional, flexible, to know t work in team, able to resist
  stress.
- Someone open-mind, a good public relations.
- A professional: an specialist, a well formed person able to work hard
  and honestly.

**Student’s career perspective**

As we said in the preceding section of the present paper, most of the interviewed
students were studying the high VET level. But, in fact, more than 50% of them wanted
to enter to the university degree. The proceeding to start studying this university career
pass by having the mark corresponding to it. As it is high enough, most of them stayed
out of it so they decided to study the high VET, and after it, get inscribed in the
university. Anyway, they have to take a good result at high VET, because it will be the
only way to entering the university.

The high motivation on the tourism sector doesn’t get low because of that fact.
For them the training provided in the VET courses is good enough, and it is seen as an
intermediate step to the future they represent on their mind for themselves. Another step
through this future is the university degree.

So, most of the students who wants to continue, are highly motivated to training
and studies. They perceived themselves well placed in five years, but this situation pass
through spending this first five years studying and acquiring the experience enough.

Even if nearly all of them want to go on further education (related to different
aspects of the their sector: informatics studies, administration, languages, masters,
diplomas, different specialized coursed related to cookery or hostelling, and of course
the university degree), all of them agree in the subject of the needs of education of the sector: to improve they practice it is needed not to stop learning.

The relaxed vision of these students related to the time they want to spend studying is not against the needs of work. For them, find a job it’s easy and quick. Even a good job in their sector like a big hotel or a good restaurant. They give a lot of importance to their future workplace. It’s important how prestigious the place is. They are looking for a good treatment to customers (quality and service) and related to the own employees of the enterprise.

Nearly 90% of them, has a clear future for themselves. They all want to manage their family business, or even their willing is to be able of creating their own business. But this is seen as the final goal to achieve. The very first years, 5 to 7 more or less, are the training years. Not only referred to formal studying but highly focused on the experience of places with enough reputation on the sector. They think that is easy to achieve because of the quickness they have to find a job due to the bad features of the sector: in this case, for instance, seasonality is well seen because this fact allow them to find a good job.

They have an idea about how their future workplace should be: with good wages and good possibilities of learning on-the-job. As they perceive the labour market collapsed in other sectors, they found the features of their own sector as an advantage. this is related to the good wages that it’s easy to found at the hotels and restaurants. Even if timetables are terrific for having a ‘normal life’ this two features compensate the others. They think they will work where they will find themselves as better paid, but they give importance to the freedom they need to feel at the workplace. They understand that a good workplace must have a high level of autonomy to improve their creativeness, and this feature allow them to choose jobs on hotels or restaurants not that reputated as they should wish.

One difference between restoration and hostelling is that for the first geographical mobility is not perceived as needed. However, for the hostelling students traveling is perceived as one of the best features of the sector. Even if they are forced to move fro their town they agree that this is a very interesting point of the nature of tourism. This feature allow them meeting people and learning different ways of working.

**Student’s models**

For us, it was interesting to ask students about how were their models on the sector. As we remark before, the most of them are working or have work. Even so, many of them have a family business. So, the students we have interviewed have a quite good reference of the ideal of a worker should be. We asked them about how they think
a professional on the tourist sector should be, the qualities and the ways of managing at
the workplace.

For them, the qualities that a good worker should have are:

- To know how to deal with public
- Have an interest of learning
- To be professional
- Responsible
- Patient
- Humanity
- To be a good mate
- Perseverance
- Dedication
- Need to be able to make sacrifices
- Autonomous
- Creativity

We asked them to think on a professional they looked up to. As we perceive in
their answers we should point that even if learning and training is important in order to
play a good performance on their workplace, this has to go on the hand of the good
ambiance at the workplace. Even if you have the work of your dreams, if there is a bad
feeling around the hierarchic relation (with boss or with elder companions) there is no
way wanting to stay working there.

Even here we can sign again their romantic vision of themselves at a workplace.
They seem to be so highly motivated that the bad features of their profession
(timetables, seasonality…) are perceived as less important at the workplace due to the
relationship that they found in the enterprise.

**Student’s work experience**

As we have said most of them have already a labour experience in the sector.
We asked them for the reason, and there are quite different answers. They have labour
experience due to:

- Need of pocket money
- Learning
- Experience
− Need to work
− Pay their studies

The kind of work they are performing it’s not the work they should wish for them in the future. Anyway, they know that it is easy to find this kind of jobs at fast food restaurants, small hotels, canteens, family business, cafeterias, and small restaurants. This kind of jobs are understood as a good experience in order to find a better job, once they will finish their actual training. Even if they want to go on studying, they understand their career an straight line where you must pass by all this different kind of jobs.

So, most of them have an eventual relation with the sector, but want to look for something better as we have explained before.

Conclusions.

There is for us a clear situation related in the vision of the students about their future labour market sector. It seems that they have understood clearly how it is build the future career in this sector. These students have clear goals to achieve. They understand that the path they have to follow is made of training (in order to achieve a good performance) and of being able to make relationships. They are so highly motivated to the future work and to the profession itself, that they don’t mind some features minded when they are asked as workers.

They mind seasonality now, because they understand that their actual workplace is just a needed step in order to achieve future goals, as we have describe through this paper. But they think that in the future workplace they will have, one that satisfied their expectations, they won’t mind seasonality because it will be seen as less relevant compared to the advantages that wages and relationships will give them.

They give as much importance to the training as to the experience at performing. It seems to us, like if they make a clear difference between the kind of jobs, not wanted jobs, you can find in this sector now that they don’t are experienced enough and they kind of creative, autonomous and attractive job they will have in the future. That’s why we’ve pointing that we perceive their vision as a mixture of romanticism and reality, built through their on-the-job learning and on the vision of people they look up to, but hoping to see reduced the bad features of the sector as soon as they arrive to the workplace of their dreams.