

# Factors shaping occupational identities in the tourism sector: research in Spain, the Czech Republic and Greece

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*This contribution provides results from research into formation of occupational identities in tourism conducted in regions of Spain, the Czech Republic and Greece. Research discovered that the sectoral conditions have a direct impact on occupational identities and behavioural patterns of workers in tourism. Extensive demands for functional flexibility of personnel in tourism come into tension with objective requirements for higher qualifications and better and more flexible skills. Skill gaps and labour shortages manifest the failure of initial education to meet changing requirements in the sector. Continuing training and human resource development is not granted a necessary importance. The sector suffers from the labour-market segmentation: the more dynamic element provides better and stable jobs and thorough human resource development strategies; the secondary segment, with high job insecurity and labour turnover, sees its main competitive advantage in low labour costs and thus does not invest in human capital. The working conditions result in deteriorating effects in occupational identity. Social dialogue needs promotion at all levels.*

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## 1. Introduction

The contribution is based on a research project <sup>(1)</sup> covering a number of European countries and sectors. Tourism was a subject of investigation in three countries – Spain, the Czech Republic and Greece – with in-depth interviews conducted with owners, human resource managers and employees of different tourism businesses.

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<sup>(1)</sup> FAME (Vocational identity, flexibility and mobility in the European labour market), funded under the 5th Framework Programme of the EU, contact number HPSE-CT-1999-00042. Available from Internet: <http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/fame/fame.htm> [cited 11.3.2005].

In Spain we focused on the quality hotel sub-sector in the region of *Comunidad Valenciana*. We also conducted research in the schools that offer post-secondary vocational education and training (VET), for either catering or accommodation, where we used questionnaires as well as case studies and classroom debates. In addition, we performed a questionnaire survey among teachers.

In the Czech Republic we conducted a questionnaire survey in the region of north-west Bohemia among tourist information offices, travel agencies and hotels, followed by in-depth interviews with employees in the same companies. A number of focus groups included social partners, education and training providers and regional policy actors.

In Greece, we concentrated on small businesses in the island of Crete <sup>(2)</sup>.

Input from workers, in different positions and with different responsibilities, in relation to their educational background, working conditions and corporate environment shed light on factors which shape their occupational identity. A more detailed explanation of the methodology of the project can be found in Kirpal (2004) and, specifically about tourism, in Marhuenda et al. (2004).

## **2. Trends and challenges across the three countries**

Tourism is a very important sector in national economies in these three countries, where its share in national employment is high, as along with its growth potential and added value. Yet the sector's future steady growth is subject to external factors due to general vulnerability of the sector across continents. The challenges the sector has to face in all three regions have many commonalities: wages in hotel and catering are far below national averages; there is a high labour fluctuation; seasonal variation is a very important feature of the tourism offered.

It should be noted, however, that tourism in these countries is of a different character. While both Spain and Greece are among the most popular world recreational destinations, Czech tourism is of the urban type, with spa tourism also having an important role to play, and is less affected by seasonality.

There is a high proportion of external labour (immigrant workers, mostly temporary) and of the grey labour force. The weight of micro companies, often family owned, in the sector is predominant in all three countries. However, merges and acquisitions are becoming common practices in recent years, especially in Spain. Overall, we may well identify a double characteristic of sectoral trends: the human touch of tradition versus the technological effect of modernisation.

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<sup>(2)</sup> The Greek partner in the project was Laboratory of Sociology and Education, University of Patras, represented by Prof. Nikitas Patiniotis.

Spain and Greece report very good growth indicators in the sector, with arrivals growing by around 10 % in both countries. Tourism receipts, already initially comparatively high in Spain, enjoyed growth of 9-10 % for several years in Spain, whereas in Greece, where the volumes of receipts were modest, the growth was over 10 % (CSO, 2000). The development of previous years pushed Spain up to second place among tourist destinations in Europe with the number of arrivals the highest after France. Greece came 13th in the world ranking of tourist destinations. The contribution of tourism to Spanish GDP reached a peak of 12.1 % in 1999 enjoying a high growth rate between 1996 and 1999 (INE, 2002). In Greece the tourism sector contributed around 8 % to GDP.

The rapid increase in the number of international tourist arrivals in the Czech Republic, and the volume of receipts from tourism, in the first half of the 1990s was caused by the opening of borders and the curiosity of many foreign tourists about the situation in the post-communist states. Once the initial interest was satisfied, the next period (from 1996) was marked by a decline in the number of arrivals. Still, the Czech Republic had the second highest number of international arrivals among central and eastern European countries, and it was eighth among all European countries, demonstrating rates comparable to those in Austria and Germany, enjoying 12th place in the world ranking of tourist destinations (Mag Consulting et al., 1999). Tourism receipts in the Czech Republic recorded steady growth until 1998. Although a decline was in evidence in the last few years, the net contribution of the tourism industry foreign currency revenues to GDP in 2000 was still 5.6 % and the share in national exports was around 10 % (CSO, 2000).

Tourism in these regions represents a sector with exceptional demands in terms of functional flexibility and mobility of the personnel. However, the sector hardly offers fair compensation mechanisms for such requirements, not only in terms of financial remuneration but also job security, career development and training provision.

Among many challenges within the sector, the following are particularly important due to their direct influence on work and the way it is understood: workforce shortage, service quality and the integration of new technologies. The image of the company depends on the quality of service provision and influences the level of customer satisfaction. In this sector the tourist or customer identifies the product with the company that provides the service and, at the same time, the destination visited. Company competitiveness is linked to and affects the competitiveness of tourist areas. The chain of relationships from the worker to the tourist destination is clear and direct, and this is why the definition of work and the way it is understood are so important in this sector. Despite this, neither business owners and managers nor society seem capable yet of giving the necessary importance to this aspect: tourism lacks a clear sectoral identity, a circumstance which partly explains its low political visibility, and the fact that it does not occupy a place which corresponds to its vital economic importance (ILO, 2001b, p. 91).

### 3. Qualifications and flexibility

We observed a broad agreement among employers and human resource managers about the lack of adequately qualified labour available for recruitment in the tourism sector. Personal and social skills are requested most frequently with additional capacity to learn and to work independently are gaining in importance. Knowledge of foreign languages and specific knowledge and skills linked to technological innovation and information technologies penetration of the sector are often listed as lacking.

The demand for flexibility is seen in growing pressure for multiskilling where a combination of different qualifications, or a combination of specific skills typical for various qualifications, is required from staff, leading to emergence of new – hybrid – occupations. This is especially typical for small and micro enterprises with limited personnel and consequent demands for mutual *ad hoc* substitution across occupations. Another type of multiskilling was observed at individual level due to high horizontal mobility in the sector (both geographical and cross-occupational) and due to high staff turnover. Especially typical for temporary workers is engagement in different occasional jobs and professions, leading to different professional and occupational experiences not recognised formally. Skills and qualifications normally available from VET for other sectors, but with certain skills necessary to perform a job successfully in tourism, are increasingly in demand (e.g. IT professions, managers, medical doctors and nurses in spa tourism).

The demand for flexibility, however, is not limited to skills. Temporary and unstable employment structures link with human resources management strategies that rely on a high level of personal flexibility under pressure of *ad hoc*, frequent deployment of staff and little social security. Part-time work centred on temporary workers; overloaded permanent staff; irregular working hours including frequent work on holidays and weekends; these and other demands for personal flexibility are largely taken for granted by employers and not reflected in the remuneration policy. Unfavourable working conditions and lack of professional development prospects cause high staff turnover and outflow of skilled personnel from the sector. The demand for personal flexibility, therefore, comes into direct conflict with the demand for skills flexibility: the former based on the minimal labour costs and no interest in human capital investment, the latter requiring thorough training and human resource development policy from employers. Moreover, participation in training is hindered by the workload and extra working hours, and often means for employees an even greater sacrifice of personal time.

In the attempt to reduce labour costs employers often seek to employ cheap personnel. They apply informal recruitment mechanisms not acknowledging previously acquired qualifications or deliberately hire non-qualified workers as a cheaper solution in comparison with those trained for the sector (particularly in Greece). As a consequence, initial vocational preparation in tourism is less valued than work experience, practical training and personality, especially in Greece and Spain. It is, however, important to note that the stronger the role and tradition of formal initial vocational education in the country, the better recognition and the higher the

demand for workers with formal qualifications in the sectoral labour market. The latter was observed in the Czech Republic where those trained in tourism technical and vocational schools have an advantage over individuals who do not have such qualifications. In all countries, middle management is increasingly expected to have a formal qualification, including university degrees. Both employers and employees broadly agree that personnel with higher levels of qualification adapt more easily to changes and transformation in the market and especially to changes induced by new technologies (Marhuenda et al., 2004).

In all three countries, systems of initial vocational education are not prepared to meet the skill requirements of the sector. Therefore, continuing training combined with practical work experience and training on-the-job supports skill development more effectively. Although employers regard continuing training as important for promotion, mobility and flexibility of staff, most of them do not invest in training. In addition to employer preference for work experience over formal training, companies, especially small ones, do not have the means and financial resources to invest in training for their employees. Furthermore, the limited opportunities for internal promotion constitute a major hindrance to motivating employees to pursue – and employers to provide – training opportunities.

In all three countries, there are two clearly differentiated labour-market segments: a more stable primary segment and a temporary, insecure secondary segment. The former tries to minimise negative effects of seasonality and labour fluctuation. There, one can observe complex management strategies and active investment in human capital. This segment is largely represented by hotel chains, tour operators and travel agencies: all large companies. Although not yet typical for the sector in general, the size of the segment is steadily growing. The secondary segment (still more widespread and typical of the sector) is characterised by low qualification, little recognition of previously acquired experience, scarce learning opportunities and lack of career prospects. These result in instability and low prestige, elements that could not provide an anchor to vocation, and hence weak occupational identities in the segment.

#### **4. Discourses on work: employers, employees, teachers and students**

Changes in work imply difficulties for people in giving a meaning to their experience. Workers must deal with instability, fragmentation or uncertainty, which are typical of work nowadays as has been shown by Sennett (1998), Dubar (2000) or, for the specific area of tourism, Mériot (2002) and Martínez (2003).

Identity processes are shaped in the interaction of oneself with others. These processes happen through common experiences and practices, through formal and informal learning processes, competence acquisition and shared meanings. Identity is linked to representations and conditioned by the cultural dominant model. Representations are types of knowledge, socially constructed and shared, with an underlying practice which allows a common reality for a social group, a sector in our case. Socialisation processes and skill acquisition are fundamental to

occupational identities, insofar as they are responsible for the learning and relational influences that an individual assumes within a professional context and group. Competence, thus, includes procedural, technical and conventional knowledge, but also semantic knowledge shared by the members of a restricted group which forms the profession or occupation. All skills are adapted, according to the specific working context and to the judgement by the community of practice relevant to the individual. That is why the working context is very important in order to identify the conditions which contribute to shaping identities. These are defined not only by objective conditions but also by how they are perceived and understood, read by individuals.

For these reasons, our research tried to identify the different patterns of discourse, the different understandings which were shared by groups of workers, in order to find different types of workers, all of them trying to adapt to the conditions of the sector. There was also another issue: whether dominant positions in the sector were transmitted via formal or informal ways, particularly through socialisation as well as training processes (Criado, 1999). Do learning processes, education and training provision, play a role in identifying workers' discourse with those of managers and employers?

The research helped to identify five different conditional identity patterns among tourism workers:

- (a) the devoted professional,
- (b) the 'high flyer',
- (c) the conciliated worker,
- (d) the dissatisfied active seeker,
- (e) the newcomer or unconsolidated worker.

These have been explained in greater detail in Marhuenda et al. (2004) and we offer here a very brief summary.

The devoted professional is a competent and well-trained worker, satisfied with his work – a clear vocation – whose extreme dedication to work is compensated by the sense of professionalism which is the axis of his vocational identity. The 'high-flyer' is focused on career, with expectations of vertical mobility, hence the availability to assume responsibilities and a high corporate identification. The conciliated worker shows a compromise with the company and its demands for high availability by finding his/her place in a functional way with identity focused on customer orientation. The dissatisfied active seeker is so because of the lack of recognition of his/her skills and training, as well as career expectations. Working conditions, workload and lack of perspective cause dissatisfaction and make him/her look for an alternative job. The unconsolidated worker is often a young person with an unstable work situation, changing jobs frequently and without a clear prospect in the trade.

All of these types have been constructed around seven different categories which surround occupational identity in tourism. The same factors were used to develop a typical discourse of employers, teachers and students:

- (a) involvement in the profession (stability and satisfaction);
- (b) the significance of work;
- (c) group or corporate references;
- (d) personal labour capital, skills, knowledge;
- (e) perception of the hierarchy;
- (f) sense of involvement of the product in one's work;
- (g) education and training.

In searching for the interactions that might happen among different actors, we relied very much on the belief that occupational identities are negotiated. This is clearly the case between employers and employees, as it is certainly also the case for teachers and students.

Different sources determine a collective identity, elements of which in tourism apply to how they perceive the changes and challenges in the sector, how they face them and what expectations are raised in each group. The important issue here is that negotiation around those aspects takes place in the processes of training, while people acquire their professional skills, be it initial or continuing training.

The most important issue we have been able to identify among different positions (managers, employees, teachers and students) are common elements in their discourses, which shows that learning and training practices have an impact on developing a projected identity, a common set of elements towards which those willing to be part of the sector look. These are the features of such a construction:

- (a) pride in working for the sector, and this is a topical justification of sector's peculiarities and conditions;
- (b) students and teachers are aware of the sectoral trends as perceived by managers and employees;
- (c) students and teachers are aware of working conditions in the sector, which they have sometimes experienced, as this is also the experience of managers and all other workers;
- (d) the role of teamwork is important in the sector, in that 'we are all in the same boat';
- (e) because of the emotional aspects of discourse, socialisation is a very strong factor;
- (f) there are opportunities in the sector and therefore professional expectations are raised at all levels.

The reference group is important in many discourses: the community model is widely extended. Yet, the hierarchies are very well defined and each one addresses immediate superiors or people below. There is more division of labour than real teamwork, yet the discourse of the teamwork is the one that dominates.

The justification of extra tasks and hours is explained via the ethic of work, but that extra work also compensates for insufficient earnings in the original wage.

At lower levels the employee typology involves fewer vocational elements and more inner obligations and assumed duties: it is here that the community model vanishes. Not surprisingly, there is more talk of continuing than initial training.

The employer only considers staff who are valuable to the company for their expertise, seeming to ignore in his discourse the existence of the non-qualified workforce which is part of the secondary labour market. It is not strange either that the employer tries to foster the professional model among all workers. There are certain constant elements in how workers see their roles, but this does not apply in the case of peripheral workers. We do not know how the corporate culture deals with those 'down the ladder'.

In summary, we may conclude that there seems to be a strong influence of employer discourses embedded in all other agents. Such dominant discourse provides elements anchoring workers' identities: it is not strange that the discourse is named as the 'professional' in the employee's typology. Socialisation is purposefully promoted in both formal and informal ways, particularly fostering the notion of the 'professional' and what being a professional in the sector means: carrying it with you. The occupational role and the position in the hierarchy have an impact on identity discourses, as is clearly the case with cooks. Strong tensions exist between sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Anchors to solve those tensions are the calling, the occupation ethics, common effort, and identification of all with the service provided. We therefore perceive a growing importance in formal education, and of acknowledgement and accreditation of previous learning (formal, informal and non-formal), though experience is what counts more and there is little recourse to continuing training.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

We consider that sustainability of tourism in the EU has to start taking into account employment relations, and training and socialisation practices. Statements often made such as 'the need for motivation', 'to feel the profession', 'the fun of the profession' conflict in trying to foster strong identities that working conditions do not help to develop, resulting in difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled labour and fostering learning practices that find a recognition in the workplace. Obviously, this is not just a matter of curriculum standards, training gaps or accreditation of existing skills. It is not even an issue of identifying the skills needed. Rather, it implies taking into account that if the sector really demands a differently skilled workforce, it has to offer them appropriate working conditions; otherwise people will consider the sector as a transition into something else where they can develop their own career prospects. If this is not possible, those remaining in the sector below the level of management will probably suffer tensions along their career. Wage policies and working conditions conciliated with family life are needed to guarantee the retention of those workers who have the appropriate skills and vocation. Education is still a very relevant source for breeding occupational identity and work ethics, and these are the source for motivation, involvement and quality of work.

Tourism is a growing industry with many small companies and with competitors in other areas of the world; global players are rooted in Europe and act elsewhere. Because of its potential to

generate employment, EU policies regarding tourism are addressing the sector, to which much attention has been paid in the last decade. Most of the resulting documents have been mainly oriented to employers. While flexibility and, in a very particular way, mobility have been considered as intrinsic features of work, their impact upon occupational identities has received little attention.

The marked segmentation of the sectoral labour market and its seasonal character pose a risk that improvements will only reach certain parts of the workforce. The rest could remain unaffected, low qualified, with no career prospects other than being called again for the next season. Improvements in one segment may bring worsening of the conditions and experiences of workers in the ‘outside’ segment. The gap between the segments is widening (the opening scissors effect).

Therefore, we think it is sensible to ask for a greater effort in promoting the importance of social dialogue at all levels and in learning processes. This seems difficult because of the fragmentation that exists, the trend towards the individualisation of labour relations, and the demands of some managers and employers to reject collective bargaining in the sector or to reduce it to an internal affair of each company. Other reasons are the burden of extra hours and economic incentives in this sector and prospects, especially in large companies, to make a career based upon exclusive fidelity to the company and the service provided.

Mobility and flexibility are intrinsic features, in a very particular manner, to working days, working hours, seasons varying with the time of the year, and so they are assumed as ‘natural’ by the workers. These aspects are not something new for them, yet they bring problems for which appropriate solutions have not been found, such as the constant issue of conciliating working time with personal and family life, with an important mix of priorities and sources of satisfaction arising from both. This, however, is ignored in training processes and causes problems for retention.

Alternatively, it is substituted by something else: working and living in this sector relies very much upon identity or the ‘call’; it draws upon ‘pride’, ‘work well done’, the ‘artisan’ service in some cases, and the mission of caring about people, common to many service professions. This is something that will increase with customers among people of higher age and with certain disabilities.

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