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**Actor networks to promote vocational education in the Mexican
tourism sector**

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Abstract

For some years now, interest in high-quality training has been growing in Mexico. In connection with this, practical skills are to be taught to an increasing extent, which is why the combination of school-based and company-based training is gaining in importance among schools as part of the dual training model initiated by the Mexican government. But universities are also increasingly interested in cooperating with companies to improve their training activities. For this reason, cooperation between public and private actors is fundamental. This paper presents first findings from the BMBF funded project “DualReg”. These results show that especially tourism enterprises and vocational education organizations (vocational schools/universities) are relevant to establish dual practices.

1. Introduction

As in many countries around the world, interest in high-quality vocational training has grown in Mexico in recent years, primarily to improve the competitiveness of companies and the social situation of young people. There is already a wide range of cooperation between companies and educational organizations in Mexico, with German industrial companies in particular having established dual practices based on German vocational training. This is done partly in cooperation with vocational schools and universities, partly as an in-house solution. The Mexican government supports dual approaches, which are also inspired by the German dual vocational system. Dual approaches are already being implemented in various regions (Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Wiemann 2019).

This article is based on selected findings from the project “DualReg: Locally rooted - worldwide linked up: Mexico - Success conditions for transfer of vocational education and training and dual practices” and focuses on the tourism sector, an industry little studied with regard to dual practices. In Mexico, as in many countries of the global South, mass tourism for international visitors is a central factor for the economy and employment in the formal sector. The focus here is on a specific region: As early as the 1970s/1980s, the Mexican government initiated the Cancún tourism “mega-project” on the Caribbean side of the Yucatán Peninsula (Vorlaufer 1996). In the meantime, mainly high-priced multi-star hotels extend over a strip of land of about 20 km enclosing a lagoon. Annually, about six million tourists come to Cancún and neighboring areas along the coast (Statista 2020). Cancún has a population of about 900,000 (INEGI 2020). The tourism boom has attracted many workers from other parts of the (indigenous) Yucatán Peninsula as well as from other areas of Mexico. At the same time, the demand for labor in the region continues to grow steadily as more hotel zones are built around Cancún and new tourism projects are initiated.

This paper discusses the extent to which regional actor networks contribute to vocational education in Cancún's tourism sector. In this way, the research project

addresses a sector that has hardly been systematically studied with regard to actor networks in the field of vocational training activities. While studies already exist regarding the implementation of dual practices in some other regions of Mexico, such as on industry in Mexico's Central Highlands (Wiemann et al. 2018; Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Wiemann 2019), little is known about the tourism industry. Accordingly, regional conditions must be approached in an open and context-sensitive manner (Emmenegger/Graf/Trampusch 2019). While dual practices in Mexico's industrial economy are often inspired by Germany (see Wiemann/Pilz 2017; Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Wiemann 2019), this is less true for other sectors, such as tourism. Nevertheless, there is a great need for action here as well, since in this industry learners must be taught practice-oriented skills and abilities in addition to technical-theoretical content.

2. Regional actor networks in vocational education and training research

In recent years, issues of networking have gained importance in various societal contexts. This also applies to vocational education, for which networking of the macro, meso or micro levels is sought (e.g. Mitchell 1998) in order to involve many actors (Thelen 2004). This is particularly obvious in the context of learning site cooperation, which plays an important role in the thematic field of vocational education in Germany, but also internationally (e.g. Pilz 2003; Valiente/Scandurra 2017).

Local networks are the main focus of attention because they can react particularly efficiently to local conditions and changes. The reason for this is that they not only serve to mobilize actors, but also have decision-making power over locally bound resources (Mitchell 1998). Such so-called localized networks may therefore consist of diverse stakeholders, such as government, nongovernmental organizations, vocational education organizations, decentralized community groups, or the private sector (Seddon/Billett 2004).

As a consequence, it is crucial that all stakeholders with a legal, economic or de facto stake in vocational education are also able or allowed to participate in these localized networks and actually participate actively in order to both identify challenges and subsequently develop possible solutions (Field 2000). In this context, making the different interests and motives visible and calibrating them through negotiation processes is repeatedly highlighted as central in particular (Steiner-Khamsi 2004; Seddon/Billett/Clemans 2005). Likewise, some discourses argue that the success of cooperation is determined by several key factors (cf. Mitchell 1998; Atchoarena 1999; Büning/Schnarr 2009): Among other things, success depends on the extent to which the local government is willing to delegate authority and responsibility to other actors. The government must therefore create an appropriate legal framework that enables cooperation between different actors.

This also includes, for example, the recognition of certificates or clarification of the financing of vocational training activities.

In the course of a study, Billett et al. (2007) identified important conditions for success in order to ensure the establishment and continuation of cooperation within vocational education and training. First, a common goal or concern must be identified. Likewise, a partnership should be maintained. Trust work counts as another important criterion. During the implementation of the trust process, the diverse needs of the players have to be identified, which are of particular importance. The capacities required for cooperation must not be disregarded here. They include both the required resources and an infrastructure. Another principle mentioned is the leadership or coordination of the actors. This is essential, among other things, for compliance with common rules.

Despite these important findings, there are still only a few research results in the international context regarding regional cooperation between different training providers such as vocational schools, chambers and companies (Dang 2016).

3. Methodology

Since there are strong economic relations between Mexico and Germany as well as long-standing cooperation in the field of vocational education (Auswärtiges Amt 2020; BIBB 2015), this country is of interest for an in-depth analysis.

A qualitative research approach was chosen for the scientific analysis. The method includes an empirical survey consisting of both on-site fieldwork in August 2019 and online interviews conducted between November 2020 and July 2021.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted with 26 experts, including six experts of hotels (three Mexican and three international hotels), three experts of other tourism-related companies (international tour operator, two Mexican theme parks), and representatives of two business-related government agencies (Municipal Tourism Office, Ministry of Tourism), experts of educational organizations (one vocational school, four universities), an expert of a travel agent association, and an expert of an employer association. Experts from universities were interviewed because universities and companies in Mexico are interested in implementing dual concepts (Graf et al. 2014).

The selection of interviewees was based, on the one hand, on an extensive Internet search and, on the other hand, on a snowball principle. Contact persons in the companies were human resource managers and training officers of international and Mexican tourism companies. By interviewing different company nationalities, it was possible to check whether the tourism companies developed and implemented local training offers or adopted the available training concepts of the parent company. In addition, the other experts were in schools, universities and other public and business-related organizations.

The interviews were conducted using semi-structured guiding questionnaires in order to gain a deeper understanding regarding the regional network of vocational training in the tourism sector. All but one of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted between approximately 40 and 120 minutes. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and their analysis was carried out through qualitative methods in order to do justice to the specificity of the topic, the conceptual approach and the openness of the question. Qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014) was combined with other procedures, such as focusing evaluation methods in the sense of documentary methods (Soeffner 2004). Thus, the relatively strongly formally structuring qualitative content analysis was complemented by other, more understanding-oriented methods. Such a mix of methods is particularly important for intercultural work (Hitchcock/Nastasi 2014). A document analysis on vocational training in the country and in the region rounded off the survey in order to better place the interviews in the local context.

4. Findings

The regional actor network for vocational education in the field of tourism in Cancún is mainly based on the relations between international and national tourism companies on the one hand and vocational schools and universities on the other hand. This is because these vocational education organizations (vocational schools/universities) and the tourism companies are the two main actors to organize dual approaches in the region. Accordingly, learning takes place in different learning venues, in consequence, learners participate in a dual concept.

The training provided by a vocational school in Mexico lasts three years and, as a rule, learners are between 15 and 17 years old. After successfully completing the program, they receive a university entrance qualification. In contrast, students already have this qualification and have begun a course of study. The first degree [Licenciatura] is comparable to a bachelor's degree, which lasts eight to ten semesters (Wiemann 2020).

In Cancún, a vocational school offers two training courses in tourism: "Hospitalidad turística" (hospitality) and "Alimentos y bebidas" (food and beverages). The first two years the students spend exclusively in the vocational school. In the last year, learners spend four days a week in the companies and one day in the vocational school. The internships for the students at the vocational school focus on areas with rather low skill requirements, such as jobs as an assistant cook.

The locally based universities, on the other hand, offer various tourism-related courses of study, such as tourism management, which include practical phases. The internships for students who also have English skills, for example, take place at stations with direct customer contact.

To enable learners (both vocational school pupils and students) to complete internships in companies, contracts are concluded between the vocational education

organizations and companies. These contracts are necessary for the companies for insurance reasons, because only in this way the companies are not liable in case of an accident. One vocational education organization describes the content of the contract as follows:

“The agreement is very general. It states that the company has no labor responsibility towards the learner that it is completely free from any labor lawsuits or bears no responsibility in case of accidents because the learner is covered by the country's social security, the Mexican Institute of Social Security (...). That's basically what the agreement says.” (Vocational education organization 3)

According to this, a learner maintains either student or pupil status; no contracts are made between learners and companies.

The internships are integrated into the curricula of the vocational education organizations and can last from a few weeks to several months, depending on the vocational education organization and the training program. The companies usually prefer long-term internships (at least two/three months) because the learners can gain more comprehensive insights and it is more beneficial for themselves in financial terms. One company explains this as follows:

“For example, if an intern comes for one month, it is not very practical for me or for the person because I will spend very little time with the person. If the person comes for six months, it is better. The person will learn more. (...) [An internship] between three and six months is efficient for us. One year: Great!” (Company 1)

During the internship, the companies usually pay for travel expenses and provide uniforms and meals for the learners. Only in very rare cases do the learners receive additional monetary support. The HR managers also state that they fulfill their supervisory responsibility towards the learners and that the respective colleagues in the individual areas are directly responsible for the training activities. This is perceived by the companies as an “emotional salary” for the learners. Various interview statements document that learners are not only used for simple routine work. Nevertheless, there is a risk that they can be exploited by companies, as the following quote shows:

“I have to be honest: (...) Especially now during the covid-19 pandemic it is cheaper for us. I have to be honest. (...) Paying learners is of course cheaper than someone who has already finished a university degree. We do that a lot.” (Company 7)

Although the learners represent cheap labor for some companies, the human resource managers also point to their possible employment in the long-term perspective. If there is a need for hiring only at a later point in time, the learners form a potential reserve pool.

In order for the cooperation between the tourism companies and the vocational education organizations to last, not only the necessary contracts play a role, but especially the communication between the two main actors. Based on an existing

communication, for example, the general conditions or the course of the internship can be determined. One vocational education organization explains:

“There is a supervisor in the company. (...) We have already explained everything to [the supervisor] either in person or by mail. We have explained the whole procedure (...). We have constant communication with this person (...), by mail or through the [company's own Internet] system, or if possible by meeting or phone. All kinds of communication.” (Vocational education organization 3)

Furthermore, there is little consultation regarding possible learning contents of the participants. Ultimately, local tourism companies in particular are in a strong role, and their interest in more detailed coordination proves to be limited. The same applies to theoretically conceivable further cooperation and influence, for example by the parent companies of the international and supra-regional Mexican hotels. However, such supraregional or international “pipelines” of knowledge transfer (Bathelt/Cantwell/Mudambi 2018) only play a role in exceptional cases with regard to the design of dual vocational education in Cancún. Influences from headquarters or such transregional and international “pipelines” are consequently hardly present. An influence can only be noted in a few exceptional cases, e.g. in the case of some interns coming from abroad or foreign management teams who bring certain “mindsets” regarding the organization of training with them from their home countries. However, as these are exceptions, overall training is clearly a local decision-making competence.

Certainly, the local network cannot be reduced only to the two main actors, training organizations and tourism companies, as there are at least isolated networking activities with other local actors, such as the hotel or travel agent association. The networking is based on various exchange opportunities, such as the use of social media tools or informal settings at a joint lunch or coffee break. However, such networking, at least so far, has had little impact on the activities of the two main players and has had only a minor impact on qualification activities (see Figure 1 for an overview). The regional chambers also have little influence on vocational education in Cancún, which is an essential difference from the German dual system. Nevertheless, the interviewees from the vocational school in particular emphasize that the chambers should understand the importance of vocational education for regional development. Likewise, in their opinion, the advantages of dual practices should be demonstrated more and the practice-oriented parts should be integrated more systematically.

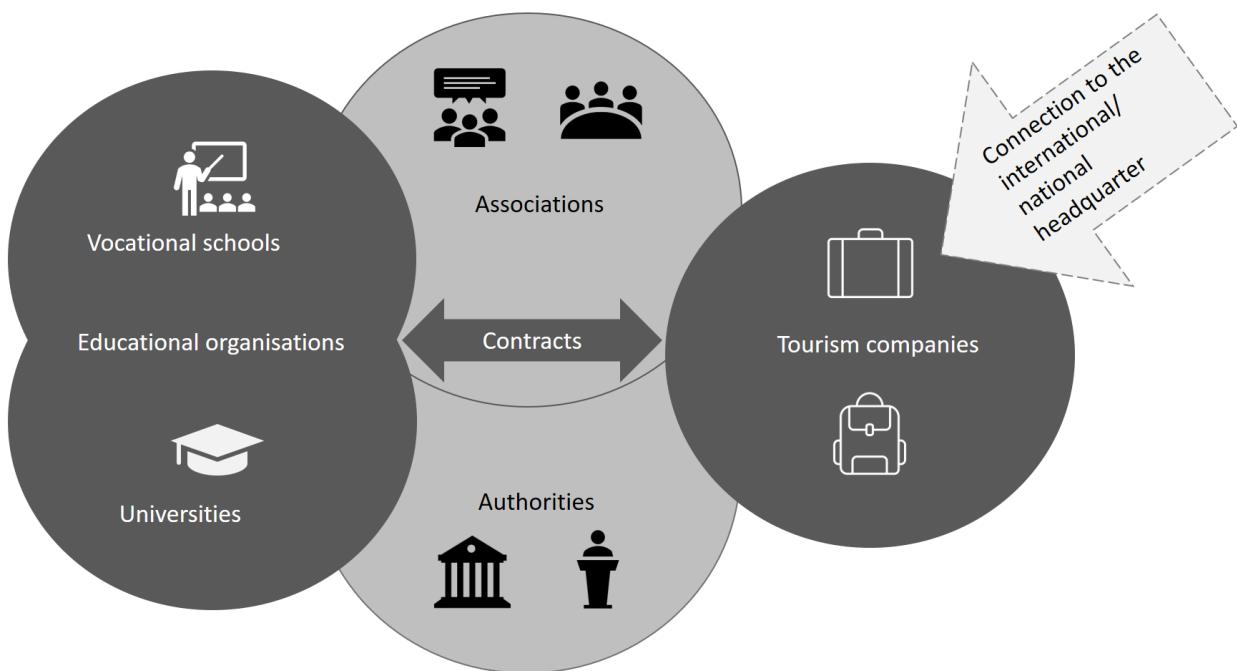


Fig. 1: The network of actors in Cancún's tourism sector. Own illustration.

Within this network, tourism-focused universities are in a stronger position than vocational schools because students are more likely to meet the expectations of hotel businesses than pupils of vocational schools. Interviewees in a vocational school underscored that their learners often come from precarious family backgrounds. Many households in Cancún consist of first- or second-generation immigrants from other parts of Mexico (Bianet Castellanos 2010). Accordingly, their learners have often not been socialized into a work ethic that meets corporate expectations. At the same time, however, human resource managers see the personal development of these learners:

“When they come to us, they still have a year to go before they (...) graduate. We say they have a certain level of immaturity. They still party (...). But we see that change. The contact with the work teams helps them to learn a different discipline, because they know that in a company they have to keep a standard of external presentation: Proper uniform, speaking up, following processes and procedures, safety issues. All of this helps them to engage in these work processes. And in the end (...) they are different.” (Company 6)

In line with the above-mentioned conditions in the local labor market, the interviewees in the human resource departments emphasize that it is extremely difficult to find qualified learners as well as employees - and to keep them in the company. Migration to neighboring hotel businesses is a major challenge.

However, interviews with human resource managers indicate that relatively high upward mobility is possible among employees, provided that appropriate positions become available and employees can demonstrate required learning successes:

“We even have what we call success cases of learners who have progressed. Today they are area managers, assistant managers or can become specialty chefs. We believe they are our success cases because we've gotten to know them since they came [to us] in the field and they've made it to management level positions through their own skills, knowledge, and effort they put into their work.” (Company 6)

5. Discussion

The results show that the regional actor networks in Cancún's tourism sector differ from the vocational training system in Germany (Pilz 2017; Emmenegger/Graf/Trampusch 2019). However, this finding also applies with regard to other sectors, such as the industrial economy in Mexico, where different types of dual training activities are increasingly detectable (Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Wiemann 2019).

The regional actor network in Cancún relies in particular on two main actors: tourism companies and vocational education organizations (vocational schools and universities). In order for tourism companies to cooperate with vocational education organizations, contracts are necessary. These contracts are mainly used for accident insurance of the learners. Beyond that, there is hardly any agreement between the organizations, e.g. with regard to learning content. However, the findings also show that tourism companies in particular can benefit from such cooperation, as this offers the possibility of securing the pool of future employees. But also the vocational education organizations benefit from such agreements because they can offer more attractive vocational education programs with integrated practical phases.

Despite international or supra-regional Mexican headquarters, hardly any influence from these levels can be detected. The hotel companies are therefore not “satellites” of external or foreign ownership structures with regard to training activities (Markusen 1996), but have a high degree of autonomy of action.

Other - local - actors such as local authorities, employers' association or trade unions, which are otherwise considered relevant in the context of regional network concepts, also play only a marginal role (Röhrer/Vogelsang/Fuchs 2021). However, participation in the Mexican model of dual training, as it occurs on the part of the vocational school, can in principle set new institutional dynamics in motion (cf. Fortwengel/Jackson 2016; Fortwengel/Gospel/Toner 2021; Wiemann/Pilz 2017).

In addition, there are definitely expressions of interest in the direction of the need for expanded practice-relevant skills transfer by means of in-depth dual training practices, such as those known from German industrial business establishments in Mexico (Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Wiemann 2019).

In all activities, the vulnerability of the tourism sector in terms of externalities must be taken into account with a view to future opportunities for the young population in Cancún. For example, travel restrictions due to the covid-19 pandemic also significantly limited tourism in Cancún. Furthermore, in the long term, it must be taken into account that the previous expansion of tourism may be influenced in the future by international competition among tourism destinations or changing preferences of customers regarding certain forms of tourism and, last but not least, relevant framework conditions, such as ecological sustainability (Röhrer et al. 2020).

6. Conclusions for German vocational education

The findings, which are only presented here in rudimentary form (for more details, see: <https://wipaed.uni-koeln.de/de/forschen/lehrstuhl-fuer-wirtschafts-und-sozialpaedagogik/dualreg>), can not only provide an empirical basis for further developments of the training system in Mexico, but also have implications for German vocational education.

This is because the problems in the cooperation between learning venues have not been completely solved in the German dual training system either (Kleber/Schulze 2019). Thus, in both countries, the need for clear agreements and the early articulation of claims and expectations between the actors involved in each case can contribute to sustainable cooperation.

In more recent times, more complex regional networks have also been established in the German context. For example, activities on municipal education management have been initiated (Sloane/Euler/Jenert 2020) or regional vocational education networks (currently referred to as regional education centers) have been established in North Rhine-Westphalia, among other things to improve the coordination of regionally located vocational schools and to combine resources (Buschfeld/Dilger/Fischer 2018). Again, some parallels to the findings in Mexico emerge. For example, intensive communication between decision-makers in the various and sometimes competing vocational education organizations is necessary to achieve the desired goals.

The findings can also be used by German companies with a presence in Mexico to align their own training plans with local conditions (Wiemann/Pilz 2020; Fuchs et al. 2017). In a narrower sense, this applies to German tourism service providers in Cancún, but in a broader sense, in a modified form, it also applies to German vocational education actors in other regions and sectors in Mexico.

The final point to be made is the teaching level: For vocational school instruction in training occupations, such as travel agent, the example of vocational training in Cancún outlined here can offer exciting insights into the personnel side in the context of providing high-quality tourism services, in addition to technical infor-

mation about a popular long-distance destination for German tourists. This didactic approach is also supported by the motivational potential provided by the personal involvement of the learners, who are themselves in a similar personal situation. In this context, the study on vocational education in Mexico (Wiemann 2020: <https://www.bibb.de/dienst/veroeffentlichungen/en/publication/show/10386>), which can be downloaded free of charge from the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, as well as an article on the impact of ecological aspects on local tourism (Röhrer et al. 2020 in writing: https://www.berufsbildung-international.de/files/ibb_publikation_nachhaltigkeit_final.pdf), which can also be downloaded free of charge, can be used, among others.

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