

# Representations that Society Builds about Vocational Education: Perspectives of Stakeholders Involved in Portuguese Apprenticeship Courses

Representaciones de la sociedad sobre la formación profesional: perspectivas de los actores implicados en los cursos de aprendizaje de Portugal

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## Abstract

*This paper focuses on the perspectives that stakeholders involved in Apprenticeship Courses have regarding the social representations of initial vocational education and training, given the stigma surrounding this educational pathway in Portugal. Method: For the purpose of this paper, we will use 90 semi-structured interviews, with four groups of stakeholders related to this IVET modality, conducted in the North of Portugal (54 trainees; nine leaders of training centres; 18 trainers; and nine tutors of on-the-job training). Content analysis was performed using deductive-inductive analysis and a micro-meso-macro analytical framework with the support of NVivo software. Results: The results point to the predominance of negative over positive social representations. The micro-meso-macro analytical framework indicates that the micro level, related to the trainees, prevails within the negative social representations, whereas it does not appear in the positive ones. Discussion: Overall, the participants mention that society has a negative image of IVET, which is essentially associated with the trainees' educational pathways and socioeconomic status. Conclusions: The stigma reported by the participants may be suppressed when parity of esteem between vocational education and mainstream education exists. This change implies, among other factors, a levelling of the quality of both educational*

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offers. It is necessary to publicly value vocational education; identify its advantages; increase the quality of its curricula; attract young people from a diversity of pathways; and reduce public references, namely in the media, that induce negative images about this educational track.

**Keywords:** initial vocational education and training; apprenticeship courses; social representations; qualitative research.

## Resumen

*El artículo se centra en las perspectivas que los actores implicados en los cursos de aprendizaje tienen sobre las representaciones sociales de la educación y formación profesional inicial, ya que esta vía educativa está estigmatizada en Portugal. Método: Para el propósito de este trabajo, utilizamos 90 entrevistas semiestructuradas con cuatro grupos de actores relacionados con esta modalidad de FP inicial, conducidas en el norte de Portugal (54 aprendices; nueve líderes de centros de formación; 18 formadores; y nueve tutores de formación en el trabajo). El análisis de contenido se realizó en base a un análisis deductivo-inductivo y el marco analítico micro-meso-macro con el soporte de lo software NVivo. Resultados: Los resultados apuntan a la predominancia de las representaciones sociales negativas sobre las positivas. El análisis señala que el nivel micro, relacionado con los aprendices, prevalece en las representaciones sociales negativas, mientras que no aparece en las positivas. Discusión: Los participantes refieren que la sociedad tiene una imagen negativa de la FP inicial y que esta imagen está esencialmente asociada a las trayectorias educativas y al estatus socioeconómico de los aprendices. Conclusiones: El estigma señalado por los participantes puede desaparecer cuando se establezca la paridad de estima entre la formación profesional y la educación general. Esto cambio implica, entre otras, una nivelación de la calidad de ambas ofertas educativas. Es necesario valorar públicamente la formación profesional, identificando sus ventajas; aumentando la calidad de sus planes de estudio; atrayendo jóvenes de una diversidad de rutas; y reduciendo las referencias públicas, concretamente en los medios de comunicación, que inducen imágenes negativas sobre esta vía educativa.*

**Palabras clave:** educación y formación profesional inicial; cursos de aprendizaje; representaciones sociales; investigación cualitativa.

## Introduction and objectives

Initial vocational education and training (IVET) in the Portuguese context is, broadly speaking, seen as a “second-line” choice (Torres & Araújo, 2010), shaping a stigma that may negatively affect both young people already attending it and young people who, influenced by these representations, may not choose this educational pathway. Social representations of this educational pathway point it out as less valid, namely in terms of social capital value. These ideas often find echo and reinforcement in the media (C.A.C., 2018; Francisco, 2018; Lusa, 2019), which contributes to grow and influence public opinion. Martins, Pardal, and Dias (2008) call attention to the influence of the media and of certain influential groups on the construction of social representations and the determination of social and educational policies.

Social representations, as conceived by Moscovici (2001, p. 22), “conventionalize the objects, persons and events we encounter. They give them a definite form, locate them

in a given category and gradually establish them as a model of a certain type, distinct and shared by a group of people". This formulation, applied to IVET, would mean that young people attending this educational track are socially categorized in a negative way, due to the social image of IVET, regardless of the reasons for selecting this path or their school trajectory performance. Negative representations about IVET raise social justice issues that are worthy of analysis. For example, it is important to understand the reasons why people consider IVET "not as valuable as other" educational pathways (Baker et al., 2004, p. 34). This discussion is particularly relevant considering that: 1) traditionally, this educational pathway has been attended mostly by young people from low social classes (Alves et al., 2001; Doroftei, 2020; Neves & Figueiredo, 2007) – often "guided" to this pathway (Tarabini et al., 2022) – and 2) tends to give access "to the employment-work system, at an intermediate level, or to polytechnic higher education" (Martins et al., 2008, p. 139). This trend is known to the general population, thus shaping and reinforcing social expectations and representations about IVET, which, in turn, influence young people's choices in upper secondary education (Pantea, 2020a).

The stigma surrounding IVET in Portugal – as in other countries (cf. Lehmann et al., 2014; Nylund et al., 2018; Pantea, 2020b; Ryan & Lórinç, 2018) –, seems also to be associated with the division between the academic track, considered more noble and distinct (Bourdieu, 2010), and the vocational track, considered less noble (Hyland, 2017; Lehmann et al., 2014; Nylund et al., 2018) because it is generally linked to manual labour occupations. Martins et al. (2008, p. 145) consider that social representations related to IVET are deeply dependent on the representations related to the world of labour, since it is an education that qualifies more for manual than for intellectual occupations "which have been negatively signalled throughout history and tend to remain so today". This situation occurs despite the country's needs for intermediate-level technicians and the fact that generally there are more job opportunities for those technicians (Cedefop, 2014), which seems to be a paradox.

According to Hyland (2017), the fragmentation between educational tracks is historic. The author traces this academic/vocational divide back to the time of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, in which theoretical and intellectual knowledge was ennobled as opposed to practical knowledge. Hyland (2017, p. 310) indicates that this hierarchical divide was deeply linked to a stratification based on social class and an "axiology of values concerning educational activities", thus relating "instrumental or applied" knowledge to social classes at the lower levels. In this sense, a fundamental reason for the stigma of IVET is based on its curriculum and the knowledge – largely instrumental – that it conveys (cf. Doroftei, 2020).

The problem of unfavourable representations of IVET in terms of social justice thus relates to the impact on the social recognition of this type of education. The stigma on IVET interferes with the educational choices of young people in general, and, possibly, with the representations of themselves among those attending IVET in particular. This educational choice is often considered the last resort for young people who tried to attend mainstream upper secondary education, or for those who were flagged by situations of academic failure, whereas those who made a conscious choice of enrolling in IVET based on their interest are small in number (Alves et al., 2001; Neves & Figueiredo, 2007; Pantea, 2020a).

Te Riele and Crump (2002, p. 257) refer to a European Commission report that points out the danger of linking vocational education to “difficult” students or to school failure because it “stigmatises vocational training as a ‘dumping ground for rejects’”, which socially devalues this type of education. The Portuguese legislation regarding, for example, the Apprenticeship Courses (AC), an IVET modality, relates these courses to early school leaving and, consequently, to disruptive school paths, which reinforces a negative representation of the individuals attending this training modality, leading to the resistance of young people and their families to opt for this pathway (Pantea, 2020b). However, this situation is not limited to the Apprenticeship Courses because, in general, Portuguese society does not distinguish training modalities within vocational education (cf. Doroftei, 2020). Thus, even if people have not read the legal documents of each IVET modality, which clarify the specificities of each one, the information that is conveyed socially, either in the media or in schools (where the legislation can be known), reinforces certain representations on IVET.

According to a report by Cedefop (2014), the attractiveness of vocational education for young people is dependent on, for example, the “social background of the students” and the “reputation of the programme”. The comparison that is socially made between educational paths is dichotomous between mainstream and vocational education, and there is no similarity in the representations between the two types of education (Cedefop, 2014).

The social representations surrounding IVET, which influence its social recognition, seem, then, to be based essentially on two assertions: 1) the division between paths of access to knowledge (academic vs. vocational), which is closely linked to the recognition attributed to professions (intellectual vs. manual); and 2) the target public of IVET, to whom disruptive educational paths are attributed.

The present study focuses on the Apprenticeship Courses (AC), a modality within Portuguese IVET offers. Apprenticeship Courses are a dual IVET modality, conferring a level 4 EQF certificate and equivalence to upper secondary education in Portugal (12<sup>th</sup> grade). For an explanatory description of the Portuguese AC, see Doroftei, Silva & Araújo (2018). The study aimed to collect the perspectives of young trainees, trainers, leaders of training centres offering Apprenticeship Courses, and tutors of the on-the-job training component, about the social representations of IVET, discussing the implications their perceived representations have in terms of social justice.

Although the study focused on the training modality of Apprenticeship Courses, the authors came across the difficulty of the young trainees and tutors to distinguish the specific characteristics of AC, identifying them as professional courses (another IVET modality, attended by the majority of Portuguese IVET students). The analysis revealed that, when the participants were asked about the social image of AC, they reported to IVET in a grouped way. Therefore, the authors chose to consider the data as referring to IVET and not specifically to AC, except when it is explicitly mentioned.

## Method

The study from which the data for this article is extracted was developed using a mixed methodology of convergent parallel design (Creswell, 2003), of the dominant-mi-

nus dominant type (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), with a dominance of qualitative data. The overall study aimed to analyse whether Portuguese AC is a measure to promote educational equality for young people in Portugal. The study included an online questionnaire with a national scope for AC trainees (N = 665) and semi-structured interviews (N = 90) with four groups of participants from nine training centres in northern Portugal.

For the purpose of this paper, we use a qualitative approach and focus on the analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the 90 people interviewed. The following research question was selected for this paper from the several dimensions of the study and aims to analyse the perceptions about the social image of IVET: *What is the perception of the participants about the social image of initial vocational education and training in Portugal and about the young people that attend it?*

In this contribution, the perspectives on the social image of IVET are analysed based on qualitative data resulting from semi-structured interviews (N = 90) with four groups of participants from nine training centres in northern Portugal: training centre leaders (N = 9); trainers (N = 18); on-the-job training tutors (N = 9) and trainees (N = 54) (Table 1). The participants were linked to nine training centres offering AC at the time of data collection and agreed to participate in the study. Informed consent was given and signed by all the participants. A code was assigned to senior participants (leaders, trainers, and tutors) to avoid identification. For practical reasons, the trainees were assigned aliases. To guarantee anonymity and confidentiality, we have chosen to indicate the areas of education and training to which the courses belong, and not the identification of the course the trainees attended. Table 2 presents the areas of education and training by the number of trainees. In the results and discussion section, for trainees' excerpts, the aliases are followed by gender (M for male and F for female), then by age (yo meaning years old), school grade, and finally the Portuguese acronym of the area of education and training (Table 2). For other participants, we mention the group of participants, gender, and the code of the training centre to which the participant is linked. For trainers, we present the component of the curriculum that he/she teaches (sociocultural; scientific; and/or technologic). The study complies with the ethical standards of the authors' institution.

Table 1

*Sample of participants.*

Characteristics	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors
N	54	9	18	9
Age				
Min	17	42	28	23
Max	26	72	62	65
Mean	21.1	55	44	41
Gender				
Female	21 (38.9%)	5	9	5
Male	33 (61.1%)	4	9	4

Characteristics	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors
Experience on AC (in years)				
<i>Min</i>	n.a.	7	3	0,5
<i>Max</i>	n.a.	32	25	20
<i>Mean</i>	n.a.	19	11	9
Year of attendance on AC				
<i>1st (10th grade)</i>	1 (1.9%)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
<i>2nd (11th grade)</i>	24 (44.4%)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
<i>3rd (12th grade)</i>	29 (53.7%)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Table 2

*Distribution of the number of trainees by area of education and training.*

Abbreviation (PT)	Area of education and training of the AC	N = 54
A	Craftwork	3
APM	Audiovisual and Media Production	5
CI	Computer Sciences	1
C	Trade	3
CRVM	Construction and Repair of Motor Vehicles	2
CB	Beauty Care	2
EE	Electricity and Energy	5
EA	Electronics and Automation	1
HR	Hospitality and Catering	8
ITVCC	Textile, Clothing, Footwear and Leather Industries	6
M	Materials (Wood, Cork, Paper, Plastic, Glass and Other Industries)	5
MM	Metallurgy and Metalomechanics	4
PPB	Protection of People and Goods	2
S	Health	1
STA	Secretariat and Administrative Work	2
TSO	Social Work and Guidance	4

## Procedure

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author, who has 10 years' experience of conducting interviews. A script was used for each group of participants, containing questions, probes and prompts relating to several dimensions of

the study. Although the scripts were different because they contained specific questions for each group of participants, all scripts contained a question about the participants' perceptions in relation to the social image of IVET. The scripts were designed on the basis of the literature review and a previous exploratory case study in a training centre, and validated by two senior researchers. All interviewees were asked the following general question about the social image of the AC: *"What do you think is the perception of society in general about the AC and the young people who attend them?"* (for leaders, trainers, and tutors) / *"What do you think society, in general, thinks of the AC?"* (for trainees).

Data analysis was conducted with the support of NVivo 12® software. A common categorization was developed deductively, according to the research goals and to the literature consulted, as a basis for analysis of all interviews and, therefore, of all participants. The categorization is organized as a hierarchy, taking a main category (parent code), designated "social image of vocational education/AC", divided into common subcategories (child codes), among which is the subcategory "perspectives on the representations of society". This child code was further subcategorized into "positive" and "negative". Within these subcategories, we conducted an analysis using a micro-meso-macro analytical framework. The micro level, or individual level, relates to the young people who attend IVET. The second, meso level, related to the courses, refers to the characteristics and/or functions of IVET. The third level, macro, or societal, refers to structural and functional issues of society that interfere with the image of IVET. A final round of categorization – integrated into the previous ones – defined the categories inductively from the units of meaning that emerged from participants' words.

The following section focuses on the exploration, interpretation and triangulation of data, taking into consideration the categories explained earlier. We will also quantify the qualitative data based on the references coded in the final categories, as it allows highlighting the expression of certain categories in relation to others. The qualitative references – negative and positive – from the four groups of participants, regarding society's representations of IVET, were compiled into the following Tables 4 and 5. The numerical values refer to the number of references and not the number of people who mention a certain aspect, as is the case in Table 3. This means that the number of negative or positive references is higher than the number of participants who mentioned them. The counting of references was done in relation to the number of times an expression was used. Apart from the fact that a participant may have mentioned different expressions of negative or positive meaning, he/she may also have repeated the same expression, and in this case, the repetition was not counted.

## Results and discussion

As mentioned previously, we aimed to understand the perceptions of four groups of stakeholders involved in AC in Portugal, regarding the social representations of IVET, discussing the implications of these representations in terms of social justice.

The data collected from the four groups of participants suggests the existence of a negative social image of IVET. As shown in Table 3, most (N = 70) of the participants consider that society's general representations of IVET are negative, while only 12 consider them to be positive, and 8 do not have a defined position. The analysis broken

down by group of participants indicates the tendency is similar, with the exception of the group of tutors, where there is a balance between negative and positive representations. This situation may be explained by the fact that the work context may more often promote positive representations of IVET, since they evaluate it considering the experience with the staff (employees and/or trainees) who came from that educational pathway (cf. Doroftei, 2020).

Table 3

*Categorization of the social representations of IVET by group of participants.*

Participants	Negative	Positive	Undefined	Total
Trainees	46	4	4	54
Leaders	6	1	2	9
Trainers	14	3	1	18
Tutors	4	4	1	9
Total	70	12	8	90

### Negative perspectives on the social representations of IVET

As far as negative perspectives on the social representations of IVET are concerned, we considered three levels, as mentioned previously. A micro, individual level, related to young people attending IVET, and which gathers most of the references (N = 89), meaning that the problem of the existing stigma is essentially attributed to its public. A second, meso level, concerning courses (N = 32), refers to the characteristics and the functions of IVET. A third, macro, societal level (N = 27) refers to structural and functional issues in society that interfere with the image of IVET.

Table 4

*Categorization of the negative social representations of IVET by group of participants.*

References	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors	Total
<b>Micro level</b>					<b>89</b>
It is for dumb people; who do not succeed in mainstream education	26	4	5	3	38
For young people who fail and do not succeed at school	3	1	6	0	10
For young people who are not interested in school; who do not want to study	6	0	1	1	8
For young people without support at home; disadvantaged	4	1	2	0	7
For young people who don't want to do anything; lazy	5	0	0	0	5



References	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors	Total
For young people 'hanging around' in the courses	3	0	1	0	4
For bad students, with bad behaviour	4	0	0	0	4
Those who do VET will never be anyone in life	2	0	2	0	4
The courses are for those who live in social housing areas	3	0	0	0	3
For young people who drop out of school	0	0	1	1	2
We are put aside	2	0	0	0	2
For young people without any manners	1	0	0	0	1
Whoever is on the courses is marginal and excluded from society	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Meso level</b>					<b>32</b>
Training is easier	9	1	5	1	16
It's a second choice, second chance, second line, second category	0	1	5	0	6
People think that we learn nothing in training	4	0	0	0	4
Education's poor relative	0	1	2	0	3
People are in training to be instructed to work, like animals	1	0	0	0	1
Training is for doing dirty work; working with your hands	1	0	0	0	1
There was money for training not always serious	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Macro level</b>					<b>27</b>
Training spends taxpayers' money because trainees are paid to study	7	0	0	0	7
Mainstream education contributes to the prejudice about VET	0	2	4	0	6
There is stereotyping and prejudice	0	1	2	2	5
Ignorance of the Apprenticeship System leads to prejudice	1	2	0	0	3
Parents of good students prefer them in mainstream education	1	0	2	0	3
Vocational education is not recognized in Portugal	0	1	0	0	1
Whoever goes to the courses won't get a job easily	1	0	0	0	1
Stigma is related to the social recognition of professions	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>148</b>

Most of the references that indicate a negative social image of IVET are situated at a micro level and are related to the young people who attend it and to characteristics that are pointed out to them, such as cognitive incapacity; lack of family structure; social disadvantage; laziness; school failure; inertia; lack of interest; bad behaviour; bad education; school drop-out; social housing; as well as marginality and exclusion.

As can be seen in Table 4, there are many references to the cognitive incapacity of trainees to pursue mainstream education. All groups of participants refer to this, but it is the group of trainees who most frequently mention that, in general, society thinks that IVET is “for dumb people, who do not succeed in mainstream education”, as Adrião states: *“I’ve heard many comments, I’ve even heard people saying that these are courses for dumb people, for people who can’t complete a normal course, or who don’t have the skills”* (Adrião, M, 21 years old, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, MM).

The references to school failure, associating those who attend IVET with unsuccessful school trajectories, are also found in all the groups of participants, with the exception of the group of tutors: *“There are some parents who say ‘God forbid... Oh no, my child won’t go to vocational education. Oh no, that’s only for those who fail and who don’t succeed at school’. They don’t know the reality and they don’t want to”* (Leader, F, EF-03).

References to the inertia of young people are considerable, with statements mentioning a lack of interest in school and studies, laziness, and “hanging around”, suggesting these young people lack life objectives and are indolent. It is especially the trainees who display this type of reference, although trainers and tutors also mention it: *“About three years ago, there was an interview with a young man who was very good, he had a grade average of 19 in mainstream education... he went to a professional school because he didn’t like mainstream. And my mother said, ‘you’re a liar, you’re probably just lazy as hell’. Exactly that sentence. I don’t forget it because now I’m here and she doesn’t say that anymore...”* (Guilherme, M, 18 yo, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, EE). The trainees’ references to the statements of family members regarding their attendance in IVET, or about the attendance of other young people, suggest that the perceptions they create about what they consider to be the representations of society arise from contexts close to them.

Disadvantaged social conditions and the lack of family support are also attributes that are ascribed to young people attending IVET. These are often related to social housing and associated problems, such as bad behaviour, bad education, marginality and exclusion. Trainees and trainers are those who mention these situations: *“I think that society, in general, thinks very badly of these courses. They think that people in these courses are marginal or excluded from society or are drug addicts or are in [institutionalised] schools or don’t make it in the mainstream, and often it’s the other way around.”* (Petra, F, 24 yo, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, APM). *“They think that vocational training is the solution to the problems of young people both from disadvantaged and excluded family groups”* (Trainer, M, Scientific and Technological components, EF-05).

Another idea that is mentioned as a negative social image pertains to the view that those who are in IVET “will never be anyone in life”: *“I think an idea has emerged that those who had a professional course would never be anyone, they would never have a title, they would never have a job, they would never have what a degree gave us, which it doesn’t (...). Because many times students come here and they are already used to it, they have left school, ‘you are no good, you will never be anyone, you are going nowhere’”* (Trainer, F, Socio-cultural Component, EF-07).

At the meso level, pertaining to the courses and IVET *per se*, we find ideas related to the ease of learning, where “nothing is learned”; to being a second-class or second-line option; to being the “poor relative of education”; to the lack of seriousness of some courses and/or training institutions; and to the association with manual and dirty work.

The idea that IVET education is “easier” than mainstream education is an idea that reinforces or creates more stigma. It is associated with the assumption that young people attending IVET are unable to follow the mainstream curriculum, with vocational education – its curricular contents – being undemanding and the assessment “easy”. This is a reference pointed out by all the groups of participants: *“I used to say that too when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade [in mainstream school], so a person can’t be a hypocrite, it’s true, anyone says ‘ah, it’s easier’”* (Tomás, M, 19 yo, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, M). *“I think there is still some part of society that thinks it can be a more facilitated education.”* (Tutor, F, EF-08).

In the literature, we found references to vocational education being a second-class or second-line education (Cedefop, 2014; Torres & Araújo, 2010). These types of references are found in the discourse of leaders and, mainly, of trainers: *“Because here young people already have, perhaps, a second choice, a second opportunity, let’s say, they are already segregated by society.”* (Leader, M, EF-01). *“But I think there is so much to be done, it’s a type of teaching that is so often despised. ‘It’s a second-class education, it’s no good’, and I think it’s so important, and there is so much to do, to improve.”* (Trainer, F, Socio-cultural Component, EF-07).

Although appearing with reduced frequency, it is interesting to highlight the expression “poor relative of education” to refer to the social image of IVET. This usually happens by comparison with mainstream education, revealing the lack of parity of esteem between the two educational tracks. The parity of esteem would be fundamental to transform the social image of vocational education (Cedefop, 2014). The expression “poor relative of education” is used by leaders and trainers: *“Let’s say that vocational education, and I’m objectively referring to the Apprenticeship part, has always been the poor relative of education, hasn’t it? It has always been seen..., because the most diverse governments, ministers, people from the training area of Ministries of Education, Ministries of Labour, Ministries of Economy – because this also varies – have always had a perspective that this would always be, let’s say, a second line of education.”* (Trainer, M, Technological Component, EF-03).

At the macro and structural level of IVET, related to society in general, there are references to the expenditure on IVET, particularly the expense with benefits attributed to trainees; to the contribution of mainstream education to the prejudice towards IVET; to the idea that ignorance leads to prejudice and that IVET is not recognised in Portugal; to the idea that it is more difficult for young people to get a job if they choose the vocational pathway; and to the stigma of this educational track being directly related to the social recognition of the professions.

The public expenditure on IVET is a reason for the reinforcement of a negative social image, according to the participants. They point out that society considers negative that young people who attend IVET are “paid to study”. Only the trainees mentioned this aspect: *“People don’t like to feel that their money, what they pay in taxes, goes to people who are basically studying, or doing nothing...”* (Rogério, M, 26 yo, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, C).

As for the reference “mainstream education contributes to the prejudice towards IVET”, it results from the relationship between training institutions and public mainstream

schools, and relates to the idea that the latter, for reasons of “survival”, only “release” students with school difficulties or bad behaviour into IVET. Only the group of tutors did not refer to these issues: *“I have also often had trainees with difficulties who, above all, are assigned to here, normally the schools assign the kids to us. Forgive me for being frank, they don’t want the kids with difficulties. And they try to prevent those who they consider to be good pupils from coming here. Sometimes, I have been told, they try to convince the kids who are good students not to come here, and I know teachers from the upper secondary school next door, I talk to them, sometimes even with some indignation on my part. I remember one case where a teacher said: ‘Wow, but he’s such a good student! He’s going to take that course with you?! What a pity! He is such a good student!’.”* (Trainer, M, Scientific and Technological Components, EF-05).

“Ignorance of the Apprenticeship System leads to prejudice” is an infrequent reference, but it makes sense when we consider the solutions proposed by the participants to change the negative social image of IVET, which include promoting the courses (cf. Doroftei, 2020). Only one young person and one leader mention this situation: *“But... society... I think they see... they don’t see it as bad as I did; I don’t want to explore this issue too much, but... some people see it as bad, because it is a vocational course, it is a professional course, it is a technical course; so, people think it... There are many ignorant people, people perish for lack of knowledge, don’t they? Just like I perished.”* (Bernardo, M, 23 yo, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, ITVCC).

A final reference we considered pertinent to highlight is that the social image of IVET is affected by the “social recognition of professions”. This reference is explicitly presented by a leader: *“On the other hand, it also involves something else that is beyond us, which is the recognition of certain professions, right? (...) And people still continue to associate certain professions with, not only being minor professions, how can I put it, being a mechanic for example, ‘Ah, to be in the garage, poor man, with the oils and so on... maybe something more related to computers and so on, multimedia, offices’. That’s still a long way to go, isn’t it? And I think that society is still very much in that direction.”* (Leader, F, EF-09).

This last issue seems to be important in the social recognition of IVET. As Hyland (2017) argues, the division between the academic and the vocational tracks corresponds to the division between intellectual and manual professions. As noted before, IVET prepares young people for intermediate-level professions that have received little social recognition (Martins et al., 2008).

It is interesting to verify that, when trainees express what they perceive to be society’s way of thinking about IVET, they express self-defence, a ‘but’, stating that the scenario they find in the courses does not correspond to its social image. This self-defence may be either a psychological defence mechanism or an acceptance of their own life trajectory, or even a justification for themselves – as they do not consider themselves “dumb” – that, for some reason, they had to enrol in the AC (with the exception of those who made this choice after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, because they liked the area). This situation may then be a way to deal with the stigma, reducing its weight. Notwithstanding, it may also be a reality they did not expect, since it is possible that many also believed – before enrolling in the course – that it was an “easier” type of education. Some young people assume they thought negatively of IVET until they enrolled in the AC: *“They think it’s for dummies. It’s the most used word among many people ‘ah, those who take the courses it’s because they are dumb’. I also said that when I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, so a person can’t be a hypocrite, it’s true, anyone can say it.”* (Tomás, M, 19 yo, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, M). This suggests that, for some trainees, this was

a non-chosen path. Considering the school paths of the trainees interviewed, we can see that few of them chose AC after the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (seven participants). The young participants seem to have internalised the stigma of IVET, because they consider, for example, that they are undermining their parents’ expectations of being something “better”, as can be seen, for example, in this excerpt from Pedro’s interview:

*Interviewer: You always wanted something more practical?*

*Peter: Yes, yes, yes.*

*I: So why didn’t you do your ninth grade in a vocational training course?*

*Peter: Maybe because of my mum too.*

*I: Why because of your mother?*

*Peter: She wanted me to be something better,... maybe..., right? Follow, I don’t know... another area... But now she likes it and supports me. (Pedro, M, 20 yo, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, EE).*

Given this, a concern emerges about the feelings of the young people enrolled in these courses, who thought these courses were for dummies. How do they construct acceptance processes that allow them to cope with and explain their enrolment in the course? When they answer the question regarding society’s representations of IVET, are they answering on the basis of their own vision? These processes – not analysed here –, we suppose, become more acute mostly for those who have attended mainstream upper secondary education, some of them until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and ended up enrolling in IVET. Those are the individuals who most strongly experience the curricular difference between the two educational paths. Those who went directly from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade to IVET by choice of the vocational area are possibly more relaxed about this issue, since they do not have the experience of learning in mainstream upper secondary education, and because, in these cases, the interest in the vocational area of the course is of central importance.

**Positive perspectives on the social representations of IVET**

The positive references reported by the participants about the social image of IVET were only 15 (Table 5) and were also subcategorized by micro, meso, and macro levels. As can be seen in Table 5, there are no positive references at the micro level, related to the trainees. The level that gathers more positive references is the macro level.

Table 5

*Categorization of the positive social representations of IVET by group of participants.*

References	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors	Total
Meso level					6
VET gives faster access to the labour market	1	0	0	2	3
It is good to have schools where students learn practical skills	0	0	1	0	1
Vocational training is an added value	1	0	0	0	1

References	Trainees	Leaders	Trainers	Tutors	Total
It has the advantage of combining theoretical and practical training	0	0	0	1	1
Macro level					9
Social image is good, it is positive	3	0	2	2	7
There are employers who want their children to go into VET	0	0	1	0	1
Young people learn a profession that is useful for society	0	0	1	0	1
Total	5	0	5	5	15

At the meso level, we find references to IVET as facilitating access to the labour market; having schools where students learn practical skills; and the advantage of combining theoretical and practical training.

The practical component of teaching-learning is valued as positive, although without a concrete reference to what the advantage of the practical component implies. Two references may be framed here, namely that “it is good to have schools where the students learn practical skills” and “it has the advantage of combining theoretical and practical training”: “I think that people’s opinion is exactly that, that it is good that we have schools where students learn the practical part.” (Trainer, M, Technological component, EF-08).

At the macro level, and overall in the positive references, the most frequently mentioned idea is that the social image of IVET “is good and positive”. This is a vague and abstract statement that does not translate into concrete justification, as is the reference to IVET being seen as an “added value”. Here we have references from trainees, trainers and tutors: “I think that people don’t see contempt in this type of courses, they even say that it’s good to take a training course, most people are receptive, think it’s good, think that it’s always an added value.” (Rogério, M, 26 yo, 11<sup>th</sup> grade, C). “So, I think that society looks favourably upon this.” (Tutor, F, EF-09).

Another scope of positive considerations concerns the relationship between IVET and work and is mentioned by trainees, trainers and tutors. Here we find references to learning a profession that is “useful for society”; and to employers’ preference for IVET to place their offspring. This last reference is presented by a trainer who teaches in a training centre whose IVET courses serve a particular and local business niche, so it is somehow natural that business people want their offspring to be trained in the area to continue their family’s business: “There are already some businessmen who even want their kids to come here and study here.” (Female trainer, F, Technological component, EF-05).

Apart from the lack of expression and depth of positive references, we notice that leaders do not mention positive references, which is somewhat disturbing, as they represent the training centres that receive trainees for IVET courses.

## Discussion

The data places great emphasis on the negative representations about IVET. The different groups of participants converge, although the group of tutors shows a balance

between negative and positive social representations. The negative social image, from the participants' point of view, is mainly related to the individual, micro level and, therefore, to the trainees. The most frequently mentioned reference attributes to trainees the epithet "dumb", suggesting that those who follow IVET have cognitive difficulties in keeping up with mainstream education, to which all comparisons are made. This representation ("it is for dumb people") about IVET is not exclusively Portuguese. Te Riele and Crump (2002, p. 262), reporting specifically on vocational education in the Australian context, state that "students who have difficulties with the (still dominant) school curriculum, designed primarily around university access, should not be labelled 'dumb'". These authors suggest that changing the social image of vocational education is about it being, as the participants in this study suggest, "a pathway like any other", that is, targeted to all young people:

*While VET is likely to cater well for the needs of marginalized and alienated young people, its benefits are diminished if it is perceived by the wider community to be inferior. Although seemingly contradictory, in order to provide marginalized young people with genuine opportunities, VET must be aimed at the entire student population. (Te Riele & Crump, 2002, p. 261)*

The perception of participants is that society, in general, considers that vocational paths are intended for young people who do not have the cognitive capacities to follow mainstream education and who have had unsuccessful educational trajectories (Ferm, 2021). This representation can have a detrimental effect on the choices of young people in general, who, being on the verge of transiting to upper secondary education, even though they could prefer the vocational path, choose the academic pathway due to the existing stigma surrounding IVET (Hyland, 2017).

Therefore, we consider that negative social representations of IVET invoke a "subordination of status" in the "institutionalised hierarchies of value" (Fraser, 2002) for the educational field. That is, IVET is subordinated to mainstream education in the sense that it is socially considered inferior to the latter. This situation jeopardizes equity, because it represents a situation of domination where the collective of subjects attending IVET is socially stigmatized – even if individually, in the contexts where each person moves, it may not be the case, as the contexts have "naturalized" this type of pathway, or because, as it seems to be the case in the labour market (Doroftei, 2020), these pathways are valued.

## Conclusion

This text has focused on the perspectives of the social image of IVET in Portugal, particularly of four groups of stakeholders involved in Apprenticeship Courses: leaders, trainees, trainers, and tutors.

In sum, the participants report two types of social representations of IVET, namely, negative and positive. The first type prevails, in stark contrast to the other, which sums far fewer references. Moreover, the data indicate that the *burden of the blame* falls on the trainees, since it is the micro level, within the negative representations, which gathers

the highest number of references. Thus, according to the data, that is, to the participants' perspectives, negative social representations about IVET are predominant in Portugal.

We believe the stigma reported here can be eliminated when parity of esteem between IVET and mainstream education exists (Cedefop, 2014), which implies, among others, a levelling of the quality of both educational offers, namely in terms of curriculum. For that, and in line with Samanes and Clares (2021) it is necessary to publicly value IVET; identify its advantages; increase the quality of its curricula; attract young people beyond those who are immediately identified with this pathway; and reduce public references, namely in the media, that induce negative images about this educational path.

This study focused on the perceptions of stakeholders directly involved in IVET, and, therefore, data was not collected to verify and compare the perceptions of individuals external to IVET. This is a limitation of the study and also a possible development of the research.

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