

## **SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF STUDENTS: WORK VALUE, EMPLOYABILITY, UNIVERSITY VOCATION AND REDEFINING PEDAGOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS. (A SURVEY OF A STUDENT SAMPLE FROM THE CITY OF ORAN)**

**Nait Bahloul Mokrane<sup>1</sup> Kansab Elhadj M'hammed<sup>2</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

*This paper was prompted by the phenomenon of student disengagement. We decided to move beyond the frustration faced with this unprecedented situation by trying to understand the social representations of students. As much as the field of pedagogy is familiar to us, we feel a distance separating us from the students. The collective beliefs of students seem to hold the answers to the problem of disengagement, considered as a distancing of students from the university. Our goal is to understand the social representations of the student on three fundamental aspects with the perspective of reconsidering the pedagogical relationship. Three hypotheses were put forth, each corresponding to a section of an online questionnaire. The collected data were subject to qualitative analysis, and the results provide an update on what we believe a student should be. Ultimately, it will be much more about proposing a strategy for reconstructing the pedagogical rapport.*

**Keywords:** *Social Representations; Students; Disengagement; Entrepreneurial Education*

**JEL Codes:** *A2; I23*

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### **1. Introduction**

Over the last decade, our experience in university teaching has confronted us with a notable decrease in student attendance. Some courses scheduled for the afternoon are canceled due to a lack of participants, reflecting a widespread trend of demobilization observed by our colleagues as well as in various institutions. Contrary to a certain academic tradition that, since the observations of O. Beau (2010), tends to avoid university self-analysis, we propose to directly address this issue. Inspired by the reflections of C. G. Jung (2019), we view the disaffection of students as a symptom of deep-seated beliefs and attitudes, heralding a social transformation worthy of in-

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<sup>1</sup> University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria, Laboratory for Research on Euro-Mediterranean Economies LAREEM-CRECORH, Associate Professor; nait.bahloul@gmail.com, ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3642-0393>;

<sup>2</sup> University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria, Laboratory for Research on Euro-Mediterranean Economies LAREEM-MCI, Associate Professor; medkansab@gmail.com, ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2448-6197>

depth exploration. We argue that collective student beliefs shape their collective university experience (Searle, 1997), prompting us to explore social representations from a social psychology perspective.

We assume that the prevailing mindset among contemporary students generates a dissonance with the educational institution, which struggles to engage in reflection to understand it. These mindsets, stemming from collective beliefs, are not yet validated by empirical studies but emerge from our daily interactions with students. Therefore, the aim of this work is to probe the existence and social scope of these perceptions. If confirmed, they would attest to a tangible gap between students and the university. The first intuition concerns the professional pessimism felt among students, leading us to question their social representations regarding their professional future. We assume that a pessimistic view may loosen the bond with teaching. The second intuition relates to the perception of work and professional goals, seen through a utilitarian prism that could alter their conception of work. This materialism contrasts with the traditional idealistic vocation of the university, deepening the gap with the educational institution. The third intuition focuses on the negative view of the university's role, not matching their materialistic aspirations and exacerbating the separation from the institution.

Our theoretical approach is based on the concept of social representations (Moscovici, 1976; Jodelet, 1989), which constitutes the pillar of our analysis framework. We will examine their nature, structure, and influence on social reality. The literature review will target the mission of the university, a central question of our survey, which presents a debate between utilitarianism and idealism (Collini, 2012). This exploration of the literature will be concise, as our study is part of a research-action project aimed at promoting student engagement.

Our observations will be formulated as research hypotheses. The results will guide our action towards a research-action initiative. This approach, encouraged by M. Catroux (2002), proves particularly relevant for teachers seeking to deeply understand their practice. By alternating between immersion in the pedagogical act and analytical reflection facilitated by the survey, our goal is to unveil the hidden facets of this complex dynamic. The ultimate ambition is to decipher this reality to establish the foundations of an innovative program capable of effectively countering student disengagement.

## **2. Literature review**

We begin our conceptual framework with social representations as generators of reality, specifically the phenomenon of student nonchalance, which has been persisting and intensifying for over 10 years.

### **Social Representations**

The definitions we draw upon agree on the fundamental idea that social representations generate social reality. For D. Jodelet (1989), "Social representations

are systems of values, ideas, and practices that allow individuals to make sense of their world and render it intelligible." Marková (2003) maintains the same definition, emphasizing the dynamic character of the knowledge constituting social representations. Overall, social representations are shared cognitive constructions that emerge from social interactions within a group. They serve as a dynamic system of collective knowledge, structuring the perception and interpretation of social reality. These mental constructions integrate information from various sources and organize the common understanding of a social object. They facilitate communication, mutual understanding, and the regulation of social interactions within the group.

As for us, we adopt the definition of S. Moscovici (1976), one of the founders of this concept, defining it as "forms of knowledge socially elaborated and shared, with a practical aim and contributing to the construction of a common reality for a social ensemble." In this sense, beliefs are creators of a social reality, and the discovery or transformation of this reality cannot be done without examining or acting on collective beliefs. We proceed with the components and roles of social representations.

#### *Components of Social Representations*

To analyze the social representations of students regarding the mission of the university, we will once again rely on the work of Serge Moscovici (1976), examining opinions, attitudes, and stereotypes. These elements constitute the content of the social representation and are essential for understanding the stance of university actors.

In 1976, Serge Moscovici defined opinions as, on one hand, a socially valued formula to which a subject adheres, and on the other, a position on a controversial issue in society. Stereotypes can be considered as pre-established conceptions that are adopted and repeated without being subjected to critical reflection by an individual or a collective, influencing their modes of thought, feeling, and action at different levels. If the opinion results from a reflective process in an individual, the stereotype is a somewhat fixed or reified idea, often emanating from a group. Regarding attitudes, they are likened to "affective and cognitive states predisposed to act in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner regarding a psychological object." (Rosenberg, M. J., & Hovland, C. I., 1960). Ajzen (2001) proposes a similar definition, thus referring to predispositions to react in a given way to an external stimulus, making attitude a fundamental component of social representations.

Grasping the components of social representations will be useful for understanding the underlying logics regarding the statement of the university's vocation by students.

#### *Functions of Social Representations*

The decisive role of social representations is manifested in their social impact and more precisely in the functions they perform. Several contributions suggest at least five functions associated with social representations.

- The function of knowledge (Moscovici, 1984): It allows understanding and explaining reality, which is essential in analyzing students' attitudes.
- Identity function (Flament, 1994): It situates the individual within the university community and influences their identification with or dissociation from the institution's initiatives.
- Orientation function (Jodelet, 1989): It serves as a guide for individuals' expectations, which is crucial for adherence to the proposed changes.
- Justification function (Doise, 1984): It helps individuals legitimize their choices and behaviors, including their engagement or resistance to institutional changes.
- Communication facilitation function (Blumer, 1969): It highlights the shared meanings that facilitate communication.

These aspects underline the usefulness of mobilizing the apparatus of social representations to grasp a social reality, understand the orientation of its actors, and the logic of their behaviors.

### **University Vocation**

What the university is and its mission as represented by its actors determine their attitude. If students perceive the university's mission in a pejorative or demeaning way, their engagement will be significantly affected. The vocation of the university has been approached from very varied angles. Nonetheless, Collini (2012) identifies two major opposing orientations: idealism versus utilitarianism. We briefly develop these two viewpoints.

The idealist vision was defended by Newman (2014), who assigns the university the function of forming individuals capable of methodical thinking. From the research perspective, K. Jaspers (2008) believes that the university's task is to seek the truth within the community of researchers and students. Derrida (2001) echoes this idea, arguing that "the university demands and should be recognized in principle, in addition to what is called academic freedom, an unconditional freedom of questioning and proposition, or even more, the right to publicly say everything that a research, knowledge, and a thought of the truth require. [...] The university professes the truth. It declares, it promises an unlimited commitment to the truth." Forming people who with method and the quest for truth are concerns of the university that fall within the idealist viewpoint. Other idealistic visions of a societal nature attribute to the university roles in promoting social justice (Turner, 1960) as well as being the guardian of cultural values and tradition (Nussbaum, 2010; Bok, 2003).

Concurrently, the utilitarian spirit of Jeremy Bentham remains influential. Newman (2014) has long raised the fundamental paradox of higher education that exists and persists, despite a civilization increasingly dominated by utilitarian concerns. The utilitarian vision is expressed in two orientations. The first refers to a traditional vocation, scientific research, innovation, and skill development (Clark, 1998). The second orientation emphasizes professional training and preparation for

the job market (Barnett, 2007). The contemporary trend insists on entrepreneurship, the new vocation of the university (Bécharde and Grégoire, 2005; Clark, 1998).

For an overview of what constitutes the vocation of the university, we revisit these two trends, enriched by two dimensions, individual or societal. The intersection of the two axes generates 4 scenarios mentioned in the following table:

*Table no. 1. Typology of the university's vocations*

	<b>Idealism</b>	<b>Utilitarianism</b>
<b>Individual</b>	Cultivation of the scientific mind	Employability and entrepreneurial spirit
<b>Society</b>	Promotion of social justice, culture, and humanistic values	Education, innovation, and scientific research

*Source:* author's research

The vocation of the Algerian university is defined by the regulations of 1999, which attribute to the university the classic missions of education and scientific research from a societal perspective. This examination of the university's vocation demonstrates a great ambiguity of trends. Recent literature emphasizes entrepreneurship and employability. This brief review of the university's vocation will help us to position the social representations of students in relation to the role currently played by the university. The issue will be to establish the existence of a correspondence between the social representations inherent to the notion of work and the ambitions of the students with the vocation of the university.

### **The Concept of Disengagement**

Although this notion will not be studied directly, we will review a brief selection of literature to clarify our understanding of this concept. At first glance, student disengagement is perceived as a generational phenomenon where students are more concerned with academic results and degrees in the sense described by Kazmi (2010). Flacks, Thomson, Douglass, and Caspary (2004) study disengagement as a lack of participation in pedagogical activities. Other authors, like Kraus (2005), prefer the notion of inertia. Harper and Quaye (2009) have asserted that engagement is more than just involvement or participation; it requires feelings and the construction of meaning as well as activity. That is why Hockings et al. (2008) warn against simplistic tendencies and highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. In their attempt at synthesis, Chipchase et al. (2017, p.35) define academic disengagement as "a multifaceted, complex, yet fluid state that combines behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains."

In this brief review of literature, disengagement is apprehended much more as individual reactions, which is not the case for the phenomenon that is the subject of our study. We consider student disengagement as a social fact in the Durkheimian sense,

"ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are external to the individual, and which have a coercive power by virtue of which they are imposed on him" (Durkheim 1967, p.37). Just as Durkheim (2007) did not study suicide from a psychological standpoint, we will analyze the phenomenon of disengagement through the apparatus of social psychology but from a holistic perspective.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Our field of investigation is deeply rooted in a social reality where we play the role of participants contributing to its existence and perpetuation, even through seemingly insignificant daily gestures (Giddens, 1984). The initial perception we have of what a student is and the underlying reasons for their lack of engagement is currently only intuitive. It requires empirical validation through systematic data collection and analysis. To this end, we have developed an online questionnaire, aimed at a diverse student spectrum, covering all specialties and levels of study, except for the doctoral cycle. The parts of the questionnaire correspond to three hypotheses that we develop below.

The first suggested hypothesis relates to the pessimism of students that may affect their engagement in pedagogical activities. This pessimism primarily concerns the low expectation of professional success in Algeria. It also refers to the difficulties in obtaining employment that matches their aspirations due to the low credibility of recruitment processes. The ensuing hypothesis is as follows: students are pessimistic about their professional future in Algeria.

The second hypothesis is devoted to the social representations of students regarding the mission of the university. Students perceive the mission in a demeaning way, coupled with a poor evaluation of the teachings, which may increase the gap with their institution and thus contribute to low involvement. The second emerging hypothesis is formulated as follows: Students have a negative judgment about the vocation and performance of the university.

The third hypothesis relates to the notion of work among students, which is presumed to be dominated by material dimensions. Exchanges with students suggest an attraction to material success that contrasts with the university's idealistic vocation. The third hypothesis is stated as follows: Students have a materialistic view of the notion of work and their career goals. The materialistic vision of the concept of work and career objectives creates a distance between the student and teachings focused on an idealistic vision.

The questionnaire consists of 4 parts, the first part relating to the identification of the student, then each part contains two to three questions related to each of the hypotheses, as mentioned above. Our study primarily aims to understand the attitudes and perceptions of students through the prism of their social representations. To this end, we place particular emphasis on the collection of qualitative data, intended for content analysis. It also involves illustrating the discussion with a descriptive analysis.

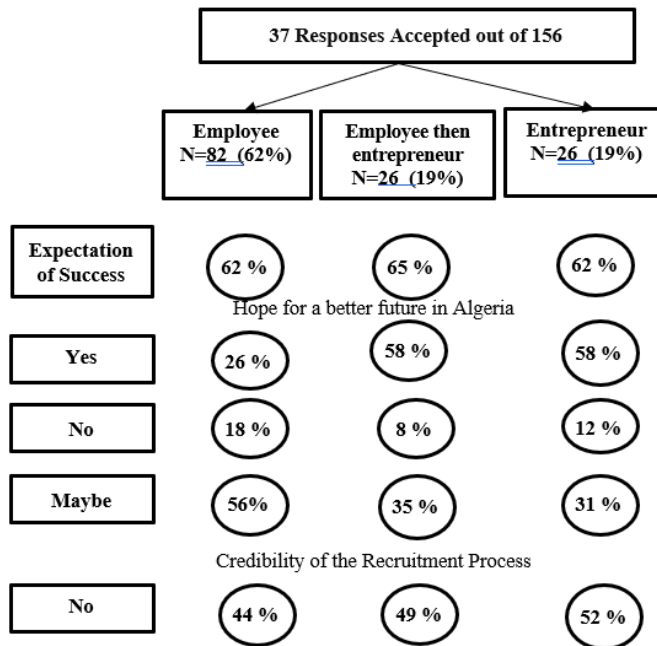
#### 4. Survey Results

The questionnaire was distributed to all students, regardless of their specialty or level of study. 156 students participated in the survey, of which the initial processing yielded 137 relevant responses admitted for analysis. Two types of processing were carried out depending on the questions formulated. The purely qualitative data underwent content analysis, and the second category of data was subjected to descriptive analysis resulting in quantified data.

For a more detailed analysis, the students were classified into three categories based on the professional perspective they chose: employee, entrepreneur, or employee then entrepreneur. Thus, 62% of the surveyed population opt for an employee career, 19% choose the entrepreneurial path, and 19% envisage starting as an employee and then becoming an entrepreneur. The data are generated, with the exception of one question, according to these three perspectives.

**Hypothesis 1:** Regarding the first hypothesis, students are pessimistic about their professional future in Algeria. The questions asked relate to the expectation of success in Algeria, the hope for a better future, and the credibility of the recruitment process. The treatment of the responses provided the following data:

Figure no. 1 Results of the first hypothesis  
The expectation of success in Algeria

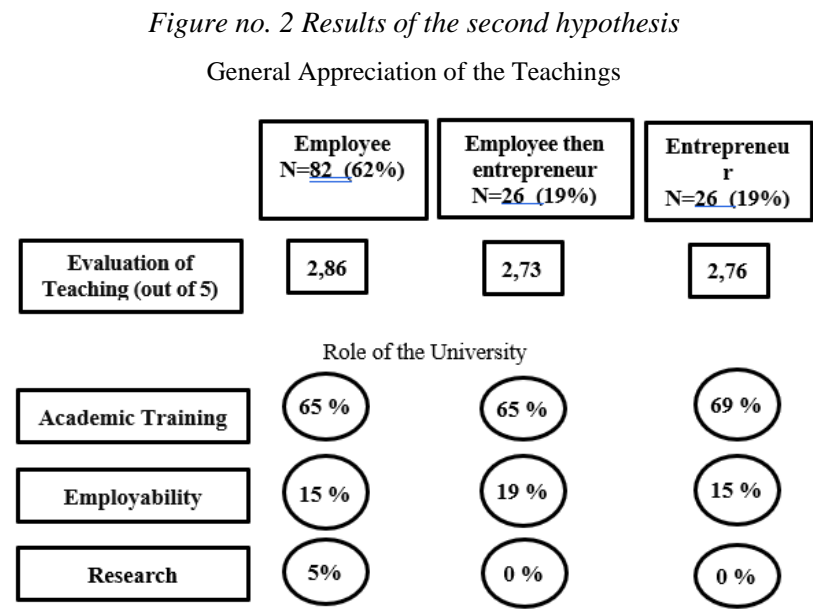


Source: author's research

The first observation is the expectation of success in a professional career in Algeria, which stands at 63% for all three categories of students; this high level of expectation was unforeseeable for us. Regarding the question of their feeling of a better future in Algeria, the employee profile expresses a lower expectation compared to the other profiles. This same category expresses 56% doubt about a better future, which might be the reason they opt for an employee career. Credibility was measured by access to employment through skills, which is attributed an average score of 49%. In this sense, a job candidate has a fifty-fifty chance of obtaining employment by demonstrating their qualities and competencies.

Aside from the aspiring employees who express doubt about seeing a better professional context, the other categories show optimism regarding their professional success and the hope for a better tomorrow. As for the credibility of recruitment, we consider the score of 49% to be average and to leave a 51% chance of accessing a job through skills. These figures reveal an optimism, in most cases, from moderate to high, leading us to invalidate the first hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2:** The second hypothesis assigns a pejorative meaning to the mission of the university and to services that fall below students' expectations. We allowed the survey participants complete freedom to express what the role of the university is. They were also asked to evaluate the university's educational services on a scale of 1 to 5. The processed questions yield the following results:



Source: author's research

The evaluation of the university's mission provides nearly identical results across the three categories of students. The overall appraisal is slightly above average, an assessment that is not negative. As for the mission of the university, it was



subjected to content analysis to yield categories: academic training, employability, and research. Other responses were mentioned but with too low an occurrence to constitute categories in their own right. Academic training is the primary vocation of the university with an average proportion of 66%. It is followed by employability with a nearly identical proportion for the three student profiles. When considering employability as a sub-category, it occupies a proportion of 21%. Notably, there is a lack of awareness among students regarding the scientific research aspect, which was mentioned by only 2% of students. We also note the weakness of the societal dimension, mentioned only three times as a secondary position. The most significant finding is the almost complete absence of pejorative judgments about what the university currently is. Regarding the employability category, it was more of a claim rather than a current function of the university.

The results obtained refute the second hypothesis since negative judgments are almost absent, and students rate the teaching they received as above average.

**Hypothesis 3:** The third hypothesis refers to the notion of work and career objectives, where the predominant material aspect creates a distance between the student and the teachings delivered in an idealistic logic. Verifying this hypothesis required two questions: the first concerning the notion of work among students and the second related to career objectives. Both responses underwent content analysis.

### **Social Representations of Work:**

Exploring students' perception of work is a fundamental pillar of our study. To this end, we asked students to define the concept of work in five words. This approach allowed us to organize the collected data around five main categories through thematic content analysis. Here is the summary table of the results obtained:

*Table no. 2. Categories of the Thematic Analysis of the Concept of Work*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Number of mentions</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Income and Economic Security</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Growth and Personal Development</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Aspirations and Goals</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Work Environment and Dynamics</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>Values and Social Impact</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>22%</b>
- Including Personal Values	112	20%
- Societal Values	11	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>566</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source:* author's research

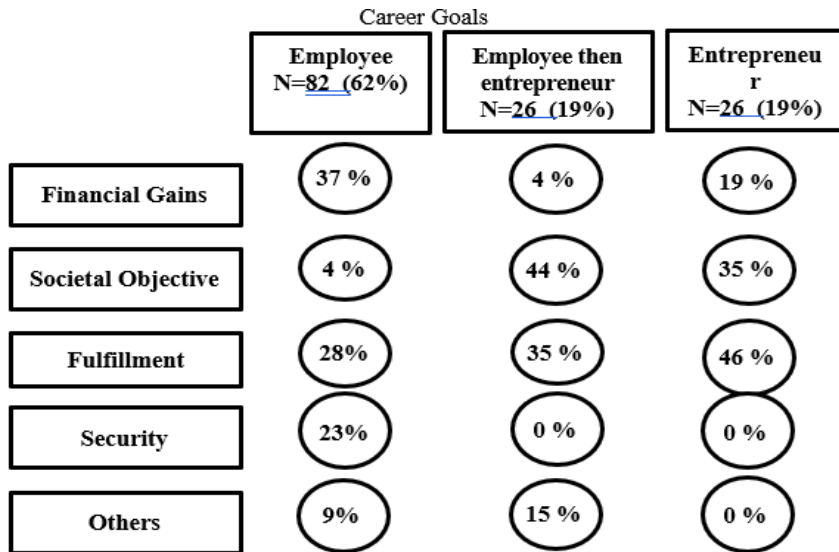
An analysis without categorization, focusing on word frequency, highlights the financial aspect. The introduction of categories relativizes the importance of income and gives precedence to dimensions of growth, aspirations, and values, which accumulate 59% of the citations. In comparison, aspects related to compensation and economic security only represent 18% of the responses, underscoring a lesser priority given to the direct financial benefits of work. Although money was mentioned by 31%

of the students as a career goal, the concept of work remains predominantly associated with considerations of growth, aspiration, and values, in a proportion of 59% of the responses. This distinction sheds light on the importance students place on the more personal and fulfilling dimensions of work. Personal aspirations and goals, individual growth and development, as well as adherence to personal values, are perceived as fundamental components of their conception of work. However, the societal dimension of work seems to be under-represented, constituting only 2% of the responses, which highlights a lesser interest in the societal impact of work among the surveyed students.

### Career Goals

The question regarding professional objectives was posed with full latitude for responses from the students. The content analysis is organized around five categories, whose results appear in the figure below.

Figure no. 3 Results of the third hypothesis



Source: author's research

The processing of responses underscores a notable divergence in motivations and values associated with the different career paths contemplated by students. While financial gains seem to be a predominant motivation for those aspiring to become employees, societal goals hold a central place for those aiming to embark on entrepreneurship. This inclination towards societal impact among future entrepreneurs reflects a search for meaning and a desire to contribute positively to society, contrasting with the pursuit of financial security and stability typically associated with employment.

Regarding hypothesis three, although financial gains were mentioned by 31% of all students, the notion of work is dominated by categories related to development,

aspirations, and values, accounting for 59%. These elements lead us to refute the third hypothesis related to the materialistic aspects of the notion of work and career objectives. However, it should be noted that the meaning of work remains predominantly individualistic, with a weight of 2%, societal values are underrepresented. Finally, hypothesis three is refuted.

## **5. Discussion**

We began our investigation with intuitions stemming from our feelings about the student mindset. The action research undertaken by the teacher should help improve pedagogical practice (Catroux, 2002) and update the significant meanings related to their work environment. These are primarily the reasons why this research was undertaken. Students of the last decade show an attitude of nonchalance. We assumed that this attitude is explained by their professional pessimism, the essentially materialistic meaning of work, and a devalued image of the university. Three assumptions constituting the mindset that distances the student from the original function of the university, the formation of a methodically reflective mind. The verification of this assumed mindset was made through an online questionnaire.

The results from the questionnaire analysis were adjusted according to the future perspectives expressed by the students who participated in the survey. This approach allowed for precisely capturing the future expectations of students, serving as a foundation for data generation. The analysis highlighted some significant variations in survey responses, variations directly related to the different professional paths envisioned by the students. These disparities offer valuable perceptions, revealing the specific beliefs entrenched within each student group. We proceed to discuss the three hypotheses, putting them in perspective with the core of our research question.

The initial analysis reveals a marked contrast in the anticipations of a promising professional future between students aspiring to entrepreneurship and those considering a salaried career. Notably, professional optimism is observed in 26% of future employees, as opposed to 58% among their counterparts inclined towards entrepreneurship. This differential suggests a significant correlation between entrepreneurial intention and an increased level of optimism regarding professional future.

Moreover, an unexpected finding concerns the rate of personal success expectancy, which stands at 63% across all respondents, regardless of their future professional orientation. This homogeneity suggests a widespread perception of the ability to succeed personally, transcending the professional divisions envisaged. Regarding the perception of the fairness of the recruitment process in Algeria, the data indicate that 49% of participants perceive low credibility in the recruitment system, hinting at a potential for fair treatment for 51% of candidates. This informs us of a pessimistic mindset concerning the general situation among future employees, yet at the same time, a resilience that gives them the same chance of personal success as other profiles.

The second hypothesis highlights a general appreciation of the teachings slightly above average, indicating that students recognize the value of their academic training. However, the emphasis on employability and the underrepresentation of scientific research in their responses underline a desire for training more oriented towards the labor market. This situation invites a reconsideration of the university's role in preparing students for their future career, particularly through a stronger integration of entrepreneurship and professional skills into the curriculum, coupled with strong awareness of their societal responsibility, especially for future employees. The results of this part of the questionnaire did not ultimately reveal the expected gap, resulting from a significant depreciation of the university's image among students.

The items related to hypothesis 3 inform us about how students project themselves into their professional future, from the perspective of career objectives and the meaning of work. This image, once established, must guide us on the appropriate pedagogical approach to satisfy the future ambitions of the student and integrate what is lacking. The results of the qualitative treatment emphasize the dimensions of personal and professional development for all students. Students associate work with personal values and omit societal dimensions, a mindset on which pedagogy must be oriented.

With all three hypotheses refuted, the gap we supposed is not explained by the social representations of students concerning the three aspects. These results have implications for our research program and suggest new directions regarding the pedagogical relationship with the student, two points that will be discussed in the conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to improve our experience with students by trying to understand their social representations. We see the current work as an exploratory step into familiar territory but with shadows, especially the beliefs and convictions of students on crucial issues. Although disengagement has been mentioned, we felt it was not yet appropriate to measure it systematically, thinking that the expected results of this work would present a student profile out of alignment with the university's idealistic mission. It was this discrepancy that seemed to explain the distance of the student from their educational institution, but this was not really the case. All hypotheses stemming from our experience with students were invalidated by unexpected results, leading us to consider a different problem.

The survey we conducted constitutes a decisive step that allowed us to correct our hypotheses regarding the social representations of our students. Furthermore, we identified deficiencies in the formulation of the questionnaire that we plan to address in future work. We also intend to conduct more in-depth work on the collective beliefs of students. Nevertheless, the current work has implications that it is time to highlight. We start with the entrepreneurial intent among a category of students that gives them a sensitivity to societal issues. For several years, a multitude of actions have been

taken to spread the culture of entrepreneurship among our students. Many surveys in Algeria confirm the positive impact of these actions on the intention to start a business (Madani and Bendaïda, 2017; Yahia Abed, Djellil, and Khelassi, 2020; Guennoun, Seguini-Djamane, and Benyahia-Taïbi, 2018). Similar observations were reported by Dimitrakaki (2018) following a study in Europe.

Students show a utilitarian spirit but also and above all pragmatism. They claim a training that promotes their competence, more fulfilling pedagogies. Pedagogical approaches must be re-thought in the image of archetypes that succeed in many universities (Bécharde and Gregoire, 2005; 2007; Chambard, 2014 ; Nait Bahloul and & Kansab, 2024).

This study constitutes a decisive step in our action research program, which seemed to be oriented towards entrepreneurial education. This requires a redesign of pedagogy that will also allow for a revision of relations with students to take into account the aspirations from this study. Thus, more active pedagogies must be implemented (Toutain and Salgado, 2014) or consider more radical approaches, such as the incubator method (Condor and Hachard, 2014). Research insists on introducing the culture of entrepreneurship first among teachers (Pepin and Maigret, 2021; Miço and Cungu, 2023). The government policy involving the university in the startup ecosystem contributes to the spread of the entrepreneurship culture among our students (Belgoum and Bensalah, 2023 ; Ghezal and Taleb, 2023). In the end, the goal is not so much to train entrepreneurs, but to produce enterprising individuals (Bécharde and Gregoire; 2007).

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