Learning Needs of the Tourism Industry

[1]Dr. Moira Kostić-Bobanović

Associate Professor

Juraj Dobrila University of Pula

Faculty of Economics and Tourism"Dr. Mijo Mirković" Pula

Preradovićeva 1, 52100 Pula, Croatia;

mbobanov@unipu.hr

ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the industries with fastest growing importance in nowadays globalised world and tourist professionals are facing different challenges on daily basis. The acquisition of skills in higher education has become a growing concern in a worldwide context of the need to enhance students' employability. Great efforts are being made to close the gap between industry expectations and what academic studies offer.

The purpose of this research is to investigate if tourism students at University Juraj Dobrila in Pula feel that their university experience enhances skills, which the tourism industry values as important, and whether there are differences in this respect between full-time and part-time students. We conducted a longitudinal study starting with the first year students and repeated with the same sample of students during their third year of study.

The results of the study indicate that students perceive that the teaching strategies and curricula seem to be appropriate to help them to acquire the skills and competences that the industry needs.
Furthermore, the findings show that there are significant differences in acquisition of the skills between full-time and part-time students. This calls for university training to reinforce the skills (attitudes, aptitudes, behaviour) that students will need in their future careers.

KEY WORDS: tourism, learning skills and competences, higher education, full-time and part-time students.

---

[1] Dr. Moira Kostić-Bobanović, Associate Professor, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Faculty of Economics and Tourism"Dr. Mijo Mirković" Pula, Department of foreign languages, Head; mbobanov@unipu.hr

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has a significant role in the world economy. It is a dynamic and competitive industry that requires the ability to constantly adapt to customers' changing needs and desires, as the customer's satisfaction, safety and enjoyment are particularly the focus of tourism businesses.

Tourist company managers have been confronted with a number of challenges over the last two decades. Among the most significant are the changes in tourist tastes and needs (Briggs et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2007); concerns over quality and the environment (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2012); new tourist typologies (Kim et al., 2007) and the internationalization of tourist companies (Gray et al., 2000; Szivas et. al., 2003).

The exponential and continuing growth in tourism reveals a demand of efficient professionals. In such a situation, tourist companies' human resources hold the key to this entire process.

The acquisition of skills in higher education has become a growing concern since the 1990s, in a worldwide context of the need to enhance students' employability. According to David et al., (2011) great efforts are being made to close the gap between industry expectations and what academic studies offer. Since the tourism schools created by most of the world's universities in recent years are designed to deliver a holistic industry-oriented education, both the employability of future professionals and the training intended for them to acquire the necessary skills have become key elements in higher education institutions (Gilhespy, 2005).

According to some researches despite the importance of tourism as an economic sector, tourism degree studies are discussed in relation to a lack of agreement on the content of tourism syllabuses, which leads to confusion on the part of applicants to courses, students and potential employers.

 This is reflected in the discussion around the value of general subjects (King et al., 2003) versus specialisation (Dale, Robinson, 2001). Tourism schools have traditionally focused on helping students acquire the necessary technical expertise, while neglecting other aptitudes needed to rise to today's challenges (Christou, 1999; Sigala, Baum, 2003). Tourism-related fields such as hospitality, leisure, sport and event management deal with specific sectors of the tourism industry and, as such, can be thought of as applied subject areas. This is in contrast with generic business subjects such as accounting and marketing. Applied subject areas, by their very nature, demand that academics, students and curricula, develop and benefit from close links with industry (Cooper, Westlake, 1998). However, it has been suggested that tourism industry linkage strategies in many education institutions are often haphazard and lack vision (Busby, 2005), focus, commitment and resources (Cooper, Westlake, 1998; Lewis, 2005).

Tourism employers often recruit non-tourism graduates (for example, graduates in business studies) who are able to demonstrate the generic skills required for a vocation in tourism (Dale, Robinson, 2001). Once recruited, the employer might have to train the graduate in specialist skills that have not been directly taught on their programme of study. Cooper and Westlake (1998, 95) recognise that curriculum planning of tourism courses "involves the need to demonstrate efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness to stakeholders". Thus, in recent years, there has been a drive towards a more coherent

approach to the content of tourism education, focusing on the need for the student to learn how to learn and be flexible (Christou, 1999).

Specialisation in tourism education would contribute towards building closer relationships between employers and institutions, enabling network management and communication between tourism stakeholders. Employers would gain from being able to recruit graduates who have acquired a combination of generic and value-adding specialist skills, thus enhancing the overall tourism experience for consumers (Dale, Robinson, 2001)

As Churchward and Riley (2002) state, commercial aspects of tourism are central to both public and private sector jobs. King, et al., (2003) observe that business-related subjects and internships are ranked by graduates as being more important to students' ability to acquire first jobs than specialised subjects. By contrast, Dale and Robinson (2001) defend the idea that tourism education should become more specialised.

Cooper (2006) stated that the informal links between the tourism industry and academic research, which prevent the efficient transfer of knowledge, should be changed. Leslie and Richardson (2000) underlined the importance and implementation of co-operative education in tourism studies.

According to Dale and Robinson (2001) students are deserving of better representation in the industry for which they are being prepared and, through their educational experience, need to develop impressions and contacts in the industry. On the other hand, educators should focus on providing quality education that prepares students for working life and furnishes employment opportunities appropriate to their level of qualification. A relationship clearly exists between the providers of education (institutions), and the end-users of this process (students, industry). This implies that a relationship management approach can be usefully applied to gain understanding about ways in which such relationships can be enhanced (Jain et al., 2003). Applying the relationship management approach to tourism and hospitality education could have a similar impact that it has had on the business world (Gronroos, 1994). Gummesson (2002) considers it important for educators to enhance their links with industry, community and government as a subsequent symbiotic relationship will occur that might serve all stakeholders indefinitely.

According to Munar (2007) relationships between education and industry must be managed, developed and nurtured. The authors stated that such relationship management approach demands a strategic decision and commitment on the part of education.

Taking these premises as a starting point, the full-time and part-time students enrolled in the University Juraj Dobrila in Pula studying three-year tourism programme were surveyed about their command of the skills required to enter the labor market.

Such a survey is one of the tools used to identify possible improvements in the education delivered by the institution. That's way we set out to answer the following questions:

1. Do students feel that their university experience enhances skills, which the tourism industry values as important and

2. Whether there are differences in this respect between full-time and part-time students. The study included the findings from the period 2010-2013.

METHODS

Participants

A longitudinal study was carried out on a total of 196 subjects (123 full-time students and 73 part-time students), majoring in tourism and culture and tourism at University of Pula. We started the research with a sample of 262 students, who were attending the first year of University, but gradually, during the years, the number of students diminished and 196 students enrolled in the third year of studying. Participation was voluntary and took place during regular class time.

Measures

The students enrolled in the University of Pula three-year tourism programme were surveyed about their command of the skills required to enter the labour market.
Taking in mind the acquisition of the skills specific to the tourist industry, professionals working in Tourist Association of Pula, Istria provided an in-depth description of professional profiles and the ideally related skills. The selection, made by the professors concerned, included the skills most closely related to the learning process in which the students would be engaged in the academic year. According to data obtained by tourist professionals and University professors the author constructed a questionnaire. The skills presented in our questionnaire (see Table 1) concurred with what a number of authors have identified as key skills for the tourist industry in other countries (Christou, 1999; Sigala, 2002) and may affect student employability and future professional development (Scott-Ladd, Chan, 2008; Cumming, 2010).
The measure was 18 structured questions self-report scale. The participants were ask to response using a five point Likert type scale ranging from 1 to 5, in which 1 meant no command and 5 a very good command.
A questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the first year and end of the third year to determine whether students felt that their command of a series of skills had increased in that period, and to what extent.
The instrument was completed with no personal identification (except type of study and code) to insure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses. The face validity of the instrument is strong. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the scale in this study is .87.

Data analysis

The results from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The differences between the acquisitions of the skills among the years and type of studies were investigated by paired t-tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results are classified in two groups: 1) differences in acquisition of the skills between the first and the third year of study 2) differences in acquisition of skills between full-time and part-time students.

Differences in acquisition of the skills between the first and the third year of study

In order to define if there are differences in acquisition of the skills between the first and the third year of study we apply a paired t - test.

Table 1. Computed mean scores for skills in first and third year of study

Skills	Academic year 2010/2011	Academic year 2012/2013	t	p
	First year	Third year		
	Mean score	Mean score		
1. Manage information	4,03	4,12	0,22	0,82
2. Communicate orally and in writing in first FL (foreign language)	3,39	4,01	**0,18**	**0,04**
3. Communicate orally and in writing in second FL	3,15	3,25	0,98	0,31
4. Communicate orally and in writing in third FL	2,89	3,01	0,45	0,65
5. Knowledge of information technology (IT)	3,31	3,31	0,00	1,00
6. Solve problems	3,34	3,62	**0,12**	**0,00**
7. Organize and plan	3,49	3,71	**0,15**	**0,03**

8. Analyse and synthesis	2,95	3,01	0,48	0,61
9. Decision-making ability	3,10	3,14	0,23	0,81
10. Reason critically	3,28	3,36	0,34	0,72
11. Learn autonomously	3,23	3,36	0,96	0,33
12. Maintain ethical behaviour	3,44	3,50	0,67	0,50
13. Work in team	3,81	3,61	**0.15**	**0,00**
14. Work in an international context	3,38	3,42	0,83	0,38
15. Adapt on new situations	3,44	3,68	**0.56**	**0,00**
16. Take initiatives and be enterprising	3,07	3,10	0,42	0,65
17. Be creative	3,79	3,87	0,93	0,30
18. Understand other cultures and customs	3,75	3,92	**0.57**	**0,00**

An examination of the data reported in Table 1 indicates large differences in mean scores among the years studied.

The items for which students indicated the strongest feelings of acquisition (those with the highest mean with a five-point scale) were *1. Manage information, 2. Communicate orally and in writing in first FL (foreign language)* and *18. Understand other cultures and customs.*

The items for which students indicated the weakest feelings of acquisition (those with the lowest mean with a five-point scale) were *4. Communicate orally and in writing in third FL, 5. Knowledge of information technology (IT)* and *13. Work in teams.*

There are significant differences between first and third year students' acquisition of the skills. In general third year students reported higher acquisition of almost all skills except of *5. Knowledge of information technology (IT)* which remains the same and *13. Work in teams* in which third year students reported statistically significant lower level of acquisition.

The skill *13. Work in teams* merits particular comment, given that the result was lower at the end of the third year than at the beginning of the first year. We suppose the reason for such result is that third year students acquired other skills such as *Learn autonomously* an *Organize and plan*. They learned how to plan, organized and take charge of their own learning. This result is consistent with the one obtained by Trung and Swierczek (2009). In their research the authors stated that skill delivery and graduate competencies, especially interpersonal skills for effective teamwork are generally low. According to Trung and Swierczek (2009) skills could be effectively developed through group assignments and learning approaches such as case studies, group discussions, and software practice.

Third year students reported statistically significant higher means of acquisition for the following skills*: 2. Communicate orally and in writing in first FL (foreign language)* $t_{(196)}$ = 0,18; p<. 001; 6. *Solve problems* $t_{(196)}$ = 0,12; p<. 001; 7. *Organize and plan* $t_{(196)}$ = 0,15; p<. 001; 15. *Adapt on new situations* $t_{(196)}$ = 0,56; p<. 001; 18. *Understand other cultures and customs* $t_{(196)}$ = 0,57; p<. 001.

These findings both confirm prior researches in a number of aspects. Zhao and Alexander (2004) investigated the impact of a compulsory business communication course on business major students' skill development and performance outcomes. Their findings showed an increase in students' perceptions (short and long term) of skills and performance in a number of areas such as communication skills, problem-solving, intercultural awareness as a direct result of the course. Metzger et al., (1995) found that teaching methods affected students' intercultural communication outcomes over time.

Sigala (2002) underlined that acquiring such skills is important, since industry employees often need to deal with customers whose cultural, economic and educational differences translate into behavior that varies from what these employees normally encounter in their own culture. Studying the acquisition of such skills at university, Downie and Moller (2002) found that students attending courses in the United Kingdom related to the tourism, hospitality and leisure industries were highly satisfied with the skills they acquired, the education delivered and course syllabi. Brookes (2003) also reported that the students enrolled in hospitality management programmes in one of the United Kingdom's oldest universities perceived skill acquisition at university as a positive experience. By contrast, the Greek tourism students surveyed by Christou (1999) felt that they had acquired no cross-curricular capacities, inasmuch as they were not included in their course syllabi. They consequently felt ill-prepared to confront the labor market.

Differences in acquisition of skills between full-time and part-time students

The empirical study was concluded with an analysis of the possible impact of type of study on skills acquisition. First, the paper analyzed, the overall mean score of skills perceived by full-time and part-time students in order to determinate whether type of study influences this perception and if the values are higher in full-time and part-time students. Subsequently, the paper considered whether there are skills that are possessed to a very different extent by full-time and part-time students.

Table 2. Computed mean scores for skills by full-time and part-time students

Skills	Students	Overall Mean score	t	p
1. Manage information	Full-time	4,01	0,28	0,59
	Part-time	4,10		
2. Communicate orally and in writing in first FL (foreign language)	Full-time	3,82	0,22	0,82
	Part-time	3,62		
3.Communicate orally and in writing in second FL	Full-time	3,28	0,96	0,33
	Part-time	3,14		
4. Communicate orally and in writing in third FL	Full-time	2,94	0,44	0,61
	Part-time	2,82		
5. Knowledge of information technology (IT)	Full-time	3,48	0,45	0,60
	Part-time	3,50		
6. Solve problems	Full-time	3,35	**0,55**	**0,00**
	Part-time	3,58		
7. Organize and plan	Full-time	3,49	**0,11**	**0,00**
	Part-time	3,69		
8. Analyse and synthesis	Full-time	3,01	0,00	1,00
	Part-time	3,01		
9. Decision-making ability	Full-time	3,10	0.96	0,34
	Part-time	3,22		
10. Reason critically	Full-time	3,15	0,88	0,36
	Part-time	3,22		
11. Learn autonomously	Full-time	3,01	0,33	0,71
	Part-time	3,17		
12. Maintain ethical behavior	Full-time	3,44	0,82	0,37
	Part-time	3,50		
13. Work in team	Full-time	3,82	**0.16**	**0,00**
	Part-time	3,65		

14. Work in an international context	Full-time	3,78	0,81	0,32
	Part-time	3,82		
15. Adapt on new situations	Full-time	3,50	1,49	0,14
	Part-time	3,41		
16. Take initiatives and be enterprising	Full-time	2,97	**0,13**	**0,00**
	Part-time	3,13		
17. Be creative	Full-time	3,73	0.93	0,35
	Part-time	3,72		
18. Understand other cultures and customs	Full-time	3,82	0.00	1,00
	Part-time	3,82		

Analyzing the results reported in Table 2 we may conclude that in ten of 18 skills studied, part-time students had a higher self-perception of acquisition of the skills than full-time; in two the results were similar.

We wanted to investigate the difference in acquisition of the skills among the years and that's why we used paired t-tests. A paired samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the years.

Self-perception of the acquisition of the skills of part-time students was significantly higher than full-time students in the following skills**:** *6. Solve problems* $t_{(196)} = 0,55$; $p<. 001$; *7. Organize and plan* $t_{(196)} = 0,11$; $p<. 001$ and *16. Take initiatives and be enterprising* $t_{(196)} = 0,13$; $p<. 001$.   These results are consistent with those obtained by King et al. (2003). In their research the authors stated that in addition to school activities, part-time experiences have been shown to enhance graduate competencies.

On the other hand, full-time students self-perception of acquisition of the skill *13. Work in teams* $t_{(196)} = 0,16$; $p<. 001$, was significantly higher than in part-time students.

The item with the highest result was 1. *Manage information*, with a score higher than 4,0 on a scale of 5. The item with the lowest result was 4. *Communicate orally and in writing in third FL*, with a score lower than 2, 95 on a scale of 5.

Carlile and Jordan (2005) underlined that understanding course objectives and course contents can also positively elaborate skill delivery. During the classes students learn to manage information, to apply communication skills of listening, perception, language usage, nonverbal communication, and conflict resolution (Kordes, 1991; Byram, 1997; Airey, Johnson, 1999; Airey, Tribe, 2005).

The finding that students did not report a comparable increase in mastery of third language may be due to the fact that they had taken these foreign languages in high school but not at university where it might be taken as an optional subject (the vast majority of students choose English as a first foreign language, Italian as a second and German as a third).

Regarding to possible implications for university degree programs we propose to further intensify the integration of the content of foreign language courses and skills with respect to intercultural communication, with the aim of promoting an active participation of students during classes and as a result, a change in attitude. We found clear effects indicating a change of attitude in students in our degree program at the time of graduation. We hope that it will impart our students with a degree of intellectual knowledge and help them to adapt in intercultural communication settings in their future professions.

CONCLUSION

Tourism is an economic activity of critical importance for the Istria region, generating demand for professionals in a highly dynamic and competitive sector. In the present survey we analyzed the university students' acquisition of the skills needed in the tourist industry and we sought empirical evidence for two questions.

First, we expected to find a shift in students' perspective over time with respect to the development of skills which the tourism industry values as important.

Our findings supported this expectation. Namely, third year students reported higher acquisition of almost all skills except *Work in teams* in which they reported statistically significant lower level of acquisition in comparison to the firs year students.

With regard to the second question, whether there are differences in acquisition of the skills between full-time and part-time students, statistical testing for relevant differences in mean scores between full-time and part-time students shows that students' mean perception of their command of this skill differed significantly. We found statistically significant differences linked to the acquisition of *Solve problems*, *Organize and plan*, *Take initiatives* and *Be enterprising* skills in favour of part-time students and *Work in teams* skills in full-time students.

Considering the results of the current study, we must conclude that the university degree program produced clear effects. Our participants, in general, manifested a marked change indicating greater development of skills, which the tourism industry values as important.

There appears to be additional room for teaching foreign languages (especially the third one). Educators should embrace the success of communicating essential skills and concepts to students while continuing to improve educational standards in teaching more interpersonal skills and concepts, especially those regarding effective teamwork.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Airey, D. and Johnson, S. (1999). The content of tourism degree courses in the UK. Tourism Management 20, 229-235.

Airey, D. and Tribe, J. (2005). An international handbook of tourism education, Elseiver Science, Oxford.

Alonso-Almeida, M. M., Rodrıguez-Anton, J. M., and Rubio-Andrada, L. (2012). Reasons for implementing certified quality systems and impact on performance: an analysis of the hotel industry. The Service Industries Journal, 32(6), 919–936.

Briggs, S., Sutherland, J., and Drummond, S. (2007). Are hotels serving quality? An exploratory study of service quality in the Scottish hotel sector. Tourism Management, 28, 1006–1019

Brookes, M. (2003). Evaluating the 'student experience': an approach to managing and enhancing quality in higher education. Journal of Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 2(1), 17–26.

Busby, G. (2005). Work experience and industrial links. In D. Airey and J. Tribe (Eds.), An International Handbook of Tourism Education, Elsevier, London.

Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.

Carlile, O. and A. Jordan (2005). It works in practice but will it work in theory? The theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy. In S. Moore, G. O'Neill, and B. McMullin (Eds.), Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching. Dublin.

Christou, E. S. (1999). Hospitality management education in Greece: An exploratory study. Tourism Management 20, 683-691.

Churchward, J. and Riley, M. (2002). Tourism Occupations and Education: an exploratory study. International Journal of Tourism Research 4 (2), 77-86.

Cooper, C. (2006). Knowledge management and Tourism. Annals of Tourism Research, 33 (1), 47-64.

Cooper, C. and Westlake, J. (1998). Stakeholders and tourism education – curriculum planning using a quality management framework. Industry and Higher Education, 12(2), 93-100.

Cumming, J. (2010). Student-initiated group management strategies for more effective and enjoyable group work experiences. Journal of Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 9 (2), 31–45.

Dale, C. and Robinson, N. (2001). The theme of tourism education: a three-domain approach. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 13 (1), 30-34.

David, F. R., David, M .E., and David, F. R. (2011). What are business schools doing for business today? Business Horizons, 54, 51–62.

Downie, N., and Moller, I. (2002). The Ramsden course experience questionnaire: a pilot study of final-year students taking hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism degree courses. Journal of Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 1(1), 77–81.

Gilhespy, I. (2005). Designing personal development modules for leisure studies: a discussion of the adoption of flexible teaching and learning approaches. Journal of Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 4(1).

Gray. B. J., Matear, S. M. and Matheson, P. K. (2000). Improving the performance of hospitality firms. International Journal of Hospitality Management, 12(3), 149–155.

Gronroos, C. (1994). From marketing mix to relationship marketing: towards a paradigm shift in marketing. Marketing Decision, 32(2), 4-20.

Gummesson, E. (2002). Total Relationship Marketing (2nd ed.), Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford.

Jain, R., Jain, S. and Khar, U. (2003). Measuring customer relationship management. Journal of Services Research, 2(2), 97-108.

Kim, D., Lehtob, X. Y., and Morrison, A. M. (2007).Gender differences in online travel information search: implications for marketing communications on the internet. Tourism Management, 28, 423–433.

King, B., McKercher, B., and Waryszak, R. (2003). A comparative study of hospitality and tourism graduates in Australia and Hong Kong. International Journal of Tourism Research, 5 (6), 409-420.

Kordes, H. (1991). Intercultural learning at school: Limits and possibilities. In D. Buttjes and M. Byram (Eds.) Mediating languages and cultures: Towards an intercultural theory of foreign language education, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.

Leslie, D., and Richardson, A. (2000). Tourism and cooperative education in UK undergraduate courses: are benefits being realized? Tourism Management, 21 (5), 489-498.

Lewis, A. (2005). Rationalizing a Tourism Curriculum for Sustainable Tourism Development in Small Island States: A Stakeholder Perspective. Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 4(2), 4-15.

Munar, A. M. (2007). Is the Bologna Process globalizing Tourism Education? Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 6 (2), 68-82.

Metzger, J. G., Olaniran, B. A., and Futoran, C. G. (1995). Varied teaching methods in intercultural communication effectiveness: promoting student outcomes in affect, expectancy, and self-reports of behavior. Intercultural Communication Studies, 2, 15-40.

Scott-Ladd, B., and Chan, C. C. A. (2008). Using action research to teach students to manage team learning and improve team work satisfaction. Active Learning in Higher Education, 9, 231–248.

Sigala, M. (2002). The evolution of Internet pedagogy: benefits for tourism and hospitality education. Journal of Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education, 1(2), 29–45.

Sigala, M., and Baum, T. (2003). Trends and issues in tourism and hospitality higher education: Visioning the future. Tourism and Hospitality Research, 4 (4), 367-376.

Szivas, E., Riley, M., and Airey, D. (2003). Labor mobility into Tourism. Attraction and Satisfaction. Annals of Tourism Research, 30 (1), 64-76.

Trung, T. Q., and Swierczek, F. W. (2009). Skills development in higher education in Vietnam. Asia Pacific Business Review, 15(4), 565–586.

Zhao, J. J., and Alexander, M. W. (2004). The impact of Business Communication Education on students' short- and long-term performances. Business Communication Quarterly, 67, 24-40.