

The Degree In Tourism At University Of Extremadura: Are Its Specific Competencies Being Highly Valued By Firms And Professionals?

Francisco Javier Ortega-Rossell, University of Extremadura, Spain
Esteban Pérez-Calderón, University of Extremadura, Spain
Patricia Milanés-Montero, University of Extremadura, Spain

ABSTRACT

In 2008, the University of Extremadura adapted their degrees in tourism in order to offer from the academic year 2009–2010 a full education in this area within which students can receive the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Degree in Tourism.

The current framework for higher education, characterised by a more open offering, has, as its main aim, a greater rapprochement of the competencies and skills achieved by students and those that are demanded by the labor market and society in general. Because of this, the paper examines whether these new degrees will provide the expected results. The methodology used consists of a questionnaire distributed among the main institutions and professionals from Extremadura about specific competencies of Tourism studies.

Keywords: EHEA; Tourism; Competencies; Labor Market

INTRODUCTION

The reform of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) within the Bologna Process is a challenge for Spanish universities, especially for a young university with very limited resources such as the University of Extremadura (UEX). But, it is also a process full of opportunities and advantages both for students and the university itself. The new working approach designed to homogenise higher education across Europe involves a sharp change in educational culture for students and teachers and it requires the adaptation of syllabi, infrastructure, and relations between the university and society.

As to the need for this reform and with reference to the specialist field - Business and Tourism Resource Management and Administration, the need was more than evident. There was a mismatch between the competencies required in the profession and those acquired by students in the educational process at the university. Accordingly, in this view, the current process of change regarding transparency, greater quality control, and monitoring in the teaching offered and the methods used will ensure that future graduates have the knowledge, competencies, abilities, and skills required to meet the educational demands of society, in general, and of tourism firms and organisations, in particular. This paper provides empirical evidence to support this thesis.

Regarding the organisation of the paper, the authors first analyse the theoretical framework and, second, they describe the empirical research objective, the used method, and the found results. To sum up, they present the conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The adaptation and implementation of degree courses in the new area involves a thorough structural and methodological reform with regard to what is to be taught and what is to be learned. Thus, undergraduates need to acquire competencies through the performance of a range of activities related to certain specific contents, and these competencies are at the heart of the design of the degree course syllabus. The concept of competencies has multiple connotations, but in the context of Bologna, it refers to a combination of knowledge, aptitudes, skills, and responsibilities as required to perform suitably in a particular professional field (González & Wagenaar, 2003; Escobar & Jiménez, 2009).

The competencies specified for the Degree in Tourism course are several and various - Basic Specific Competencies, Generic Instrumental Competencies, Generic Personal Competencies, Generic Systemic Competencies, Specific Applied Competencies, Specific Degree in Tourism Competencies, Generic Transferable Competencies, and Specific Transferable Competencies. This paper focuses on the Specific Degree in Tourism Competencies which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Detail Of Specific Competencies

CE01: Understanding the principles of tourism: its spatial, social, cultural, political, employment and economic dimensions
CE02: Analyzing the economic dimension of tourism
CE03: Being familiar with and applying information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the various spheres of the tourism industry
CE04: Analysing, synthesizing and summarizing the financial information of tourist organizations
CE05: Understanding the dynamic and evolving nature of tourism and the new leisure society
CE06: Understanding how destinations, tourism structures and tourism business sectors operate worldwide
CE07: Understanding the legal framework regulating tourism activity
CE08: Understanding the various aspects of cultural heritage management
CE09: Understanding a public plan and the opportunities arising for the private sector
CE10: Communicating orally and in writing in a second foreign language
CE11: Being familiar with procedures in the hospitality sphere
CE12: Being familiar with procedures in the catering sphere
CE13: Being familiar with the main political/administrative structures in the tourism sector
CE14: Being familiar with public objectives, strategies and planning instruments
CE15: Acquiring an understanding of operating procedures of intermediary firms
CE16: Turning an empirical problem into an object of study and analysis and drawing conclusions
CE17: Defining commercial goals, strategies and policies
CE18: Detecting technical planning needs in tourism infrastructure and facilities
CE19: Leading and managing the various types of organization involved in the tourism industry
CE20: Evaluating tourism potential and prospectively analyzing its exploitation
CE21: Managing tourism in spatial terms in accordance with the principles of sustainability
CE22: Managing financial resources
CE23: Identifying and managing tourism areas and destinations
CE24: Using communication techniques in a foreign language
CE25: Planning and managing the human resources of tourism organizations
CE26: Recognizing the main players in the tourism industry
CE27: Taking a customer-oriented approach
CE28: Working in English as a foreign language
CE29: Analyzing the impacts generated by tourism
CE30: Working in different socio-cultural environments in linguistics terms
CE31: Being able to conceptualize heritage as a tourism resource
CE32: Being familiar with and applying the processes of business formation, innovation and development; promotion of entrepreneurial spirit and entrepreneurial ethics, and stressing the importance for tourism professionals of continuing training and constant refreshing of what they have learned in their studies
CE33: Undertaking activities intended to apply the theoretical, methodological and technical know-how acquired over the course, working in a team and developing the capacities and skills of a tourism professional
CE34: Being able to prepare and defend a graduation project, bringing together the knowledge acquired over the course

METHOD AND RESULTS

Regarding the objective of this study, taking into account the previous theoretical framework, this paper analysed the importance of labour market attributes to specific competencies of the Degree in Tourism designed by the Faculty of Business and Tourism Studies (FBTS) from the UEx (Spain). Therefore, the authors’ empirical aim consists of stating in which way these competencies are being highly valued by firms and professionals from Extremadura. The obtained results will show if the designed degree complies with the EHEA objectives.

With reference to the used sample, the authors have focused their study on Caceres, which is one of the two provinces of Extremadura. The reason for this is because, in spite of in Extremadura, tourism isn’t one of the key sectors of its economy (as happens in other communities in the interior); its Cultural Patrimony makes tourists visit it more and more. In 2010, it was visited by more than five million tourists (Source: Tourism Studies Institute). The old town of Caceres was declared the third Monumental Site in Europe in 1968 and UNESCO ‘City of Human Patrimony’ in 1986.

In relation to the method used, given the objective of this study, the authors designed a questionnaire to be distributed among the main entities that constitute the labour market of Extremadura. The competencies detailed in Table 1 formed the basis for elaborating the item batteries used in the questionnaire in which the authors asked about specific competencies by means of the question: Do you consider that competencies of the Degree of Tourism at UEx have a high value for students to join the workforce? (10: I fully agree, 1 = I do not agree).

Table 2 shows the sample of entities that answered the questionnaire, which constitutes 30% of the whole population of entities that have an agreement with the FBTS from the UEx.

Table 2: Sample Of Firms By Categories

	Frequency	Percentage
Public entities	11	28,2
Private firms	28	71,8
Total	39	100,0

The statistical technique applied to the data was cluster analysis (Ward’s agglomerative hierarchical method and the non-hierarchical K-means [quick cluster] method) so as to seek to identify various positions in relation to the competencies of the degree across the Extremaduran labour market. The authors also used Logistic Regression to analyse the influence of those positions on the different categories of entities that constitute the labour market.

The most valued competencies are those related to the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the various spheres of the tourism industry (CE03) and the use of communication techniques in a foreign language (CE10, CE24). The less valued competency is related to the analysis of the financial information of tourist organisations (CEC4). It might be due to the fact that touristic entities hire specialised accounting companies when they are small or have their own accounting departments when they are big. The Degree in Tourism at UEx includes a subject about financial accounting inside the module of Basic Formation and another one inside the module of Administration of Organizations and Enterprises.

The results of cluster analysis (see Table 3) show the existence of two categories of clusters that may be distinguished according to how touristic public and private entities of Extremadura value the competencies of the Degree in Tourism - medium (C1) and high (C2) - made up of 10 and 27 entities, respectively. If one focuses on the variables that are significant in the sets, the main differences between the clusters are as shown in Table 4.

Cluster 1

This cluster includes 10 touristic entities which give a bit less value to specific competencies of the degree. The better-valued competencies are related to the use of ICTs, understanding the principles of tourism, and the new leisure society.

Cluster 2

This is a cluster of 27 touristic entities which give the specific competencies the highest value. The specific competencies with higher value are those related to communicating orally and in writing in a second language and using communication techniques in a second language, too.

Table 3: Number Of Cases By Each Cluster

Clusters	1	10.000
	2	27.000
Valids		37.000
Lost		2.000

Table 4: ANOVA

	Final Clusters Center		Clusters		Error		F	Sig
	1	2	Mean Square	DF	Mean Square	DF		
CE01	5.70	6.07	1.021	1	1.541	35	.662	.421
CE02	5.30	6.00	3.576	1	1.660	35	2.154	.151
CE03	5.50	6.70	10.573	1	.632	35	16.722	.000
CE04	4.20	5.19	7.083	1	.905	35	7.826	.008
CE05	5.60	6.26	3.172	1	.560	35	5.668	.023
CE06	5.50	5.96	1.564	1	.842	35	1.858	.182
CE07	5.40	6.15	4.084	1	.794	35	5.141	.030
CE08	4.80	5.81	7.515	1	.848	35	8.864	.005
CE09	4.70	5.81	9.069	1	.805	35	11.266	.002
CE10	5.50	6.85	13.336	1	.797	35	16.725	.000
CE11	5.20	6.19	7.083	1	1.019	35	6.949	.012
CE12	4.80	6.07	11.845	1	.899	35	13.182	.001
CE13	4.80	5.52	3.767	1	.695	35	5.417	.026
CE14	4.40	5.89	16.177	1	.945	35	17.122	.000
CE15	4.40	5.85	15.382	1	.852	35	18.061	.000
CE16	3.90	5.78	25.731	1	.959	35	26.829	.000
CE17	4.90	6.48	18.251	1	.675	35	27.021	.000
CE18	5.10	6.15	8.017	1	1.094	35	7.325	.010
CE19	4.70	6.33	19.468	1	.689	35	28.272	.000
CE20	4.70	6.00	12.332	1	.689	35	17.910	.000
CE21	4.50	6.33	24.527	1	.871	35	28.146	.000
CE22	4.80	6.30	16.338	1	.778	35	21.000	.000
CE23	5.10	6.26	9.807	1	.631	35	15.541	.000
CE24	5.10	6.85	22.395	1	.866	35	25.863	.000
CE25	4.30	6.33	30.170	1	.689	35	43.816	.000
CE26	5.10	6.11	7.460	1	.788	35	9.472	.004
CE27	5.00	6.70	21.181	1	.904	35	23.438	.000
CE28	4.90	6.74	24.726	1	.860	35	28.765	.000
CE29	4.80	5.93	9.251	1	.556	35	16.645	.000
CE30	3.70	5.70	29.297	1	.735	35	39.853	.000
CE31	4.00	6.04	30.280	1	.656	35	46.153	.000
CE32	4.60	6.26	20.090	1	.902	35	22.263	.000
CE33	4.90	6.44	17.406	1	1.130	35	15.397	.000

In order to know if the kind of touristic entity (public or private) determines its belonging to one cluster or another, the authors use the variable “category” whose value is 0 when the touristic entity is a public entity and 1 when it is a private firm of the touristic service industry. In Cluster 1, 10% of the entities are public entities and 90% are private firms. Nevertheless, in Cluster 2, 37% are public entities and 63% are private firms. The methodology used is a logistic regression that lets one predict the probability of occurrence of each situation.

Table 5 shows the resume of the Logit model proposed for each regression. As can be seen, with 70,3% of cases correctly classified in both Logit models, the variable category is only statistically significant at the 86% level. Nevertheless, the fact that this variable has been significant in both Logit and with a great power differentiator brings consistency to the clusters.

Table 5: Resume Of Logit Model

Explanatory Variables	Dependent Variables					
	C1 (Entities That Value Less The Competencies)			C2 (Entities That Value More The Competencies)		
	β	Sig.	Exp (β)	β	Sig.	Exp (β)
Category	1,667	0,139	5,294	-1,667	0,139	,189
	% De Clasificación: 70,3%			% De Clasificación: 70,3%		

C1 = β 1 (Category); C2 = β 1 (Category)

At the 86% level, there is a probability of 70.3% that a public touristic entity from Caceres gives the competencies of the Degree in Tourism a higher value instead of a lower one. Table 3 shows that Cluster 1 consists of 10% public entities and the Cluster 2 consists of 37%.

The reason why the vast majority of public entities related to the tourism industry in Caceres belong to the cluster that gives a higher value to the specific competencies of the Degree might be because these competencies related to tourism are always necessary for a graduate who wants to work in a public entity. Nevertheless, in the case of private firms in the tourism service industry, this necessity isn't always so strong. This could be due to the fact that a larger number of these firms are small hotels or restaurants which don't need so many highly qualified staff.

CONCLUSIONS

Globalisation is one of the basic characteristics of our days, which has extended to all fields, including the educational and the university ones. Universities and Centers are called to compete for students and resources and to innovate to attract the best teaching resources, encouraging the mobility of students, teachers, administrative staff, and services. Competitiveness between the different educational institutions and the globalisation of the educational process are the factors that promote the need to attract students, as well as to bring the skills, abilities, and attitudes of graduates closer to the professional demands formalised by corporations, business, and society in general.

The FBTS has redesigned and adapted the Diploma in Tourism of the EHEA by placing the student at the center of this reform, combining training and knowledge related to the administration and organisation of tourism resources with the learning of skills, abilities, and attitudes of an expert tour manager or manager in order that graduates in Tourism successfully conduct professional performance and gain access with credit and recognition to the labour market.

The empirical study developed shows that the specific competencies of the Degree in Tourism are being highly valued by firms and professionals of Extremadura. Therefore, it seems to be that the designed degree complies with EHEA objectives. This fact is even clearer in the case of touristic public entities.

The fact that graduates must be well aware of both the technical expertise tasks and the responsibilities that should come to play in the future, and that they should come to assume, is of fundamental importance. The training has to show the students that the Degree in Tourism is not an end, but a means to materialise as people, as professionals who contribute to the improvement and progress of our society.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Francisco Javier Ortega-Rossell, Ph.D., is a Professor at the Faculty of Business Studies and Tourism of the Universidad of Extremadura. He is an Auditor Member Accounts and Auditors Institute of Chartered Accountants of Spain and registered in the Official Register of Auditors (ROAC). He has been Dean of the Faculty of Business

Studies and Tourism University of Extremadura during the years 2008-2012. Email: jortega@unex.es.

Esteban Pérez-Calderón, Ph.D., (contact author) is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Business Studies and Tourism of the Universidad of Extremadura. He is the author of several studies on the European Higher Education and is a member of Quality Committee responsible for the Degree of Business Administration in the Faculty of Business Studies and Tourism. Email: estperez@unex.es.

Patricia Milanés-Montero, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Economics of the Universidad of Extremadura. She is currently Vice-Dean for inter-university relations in this Faculty and is the author of several studies on the European Higher Education. Email: pmilanes@unex.es.

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