

The high education system: The case of tourism operations and distribution curricula

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Objectives | Tourism as a sector with significant relevance in the world, which has greatly contributed to the development and growth of economies, destinations, and communities, depends on several components and integrates a vast multiplicity of players. It has been one of the most desirable and appealing to communities and human beings. However, this fact is not always reflected as a priority when looking for a job or when choosing which course to pursue in higher education. Due to its high vulnerability to the context in which it operates and to external factors, after several crises, mainly those that have occurred in the 21st century, from economic crises, pandemics, extreme natural events, terrorism, and wars, it has undergone several and considerable transformations. It has also lost many companies, jobs, and human resources. There is now an urgent need to better prepare, train, and retain talent in the sector, otherwise, its resilience and sustainability will become unfeasible.

Starting from the premise that more appropriate, adjusted, aligned, updated, enriched higher education curricula are needed, as well as properly prepared, trained, and motivated teachers, with curricular units with assertive programmatic content, not only directed in line with the real theoretical needs but also those of companies and institutions that simultaneously meet students' expectations. This study aims to analyze how the subsector of tourism operation and distribution is included in the tourism education curricula of Portuguese higher education institutions. Another purpose is to characterize the profile of the teachers of curricular units with content in the subsector and understand their main challenges and difficulties associated with teaching content of tourism operations and distribution.

Knowing that there are several studies mostly based on the hotel subsector, few on tourism operations and distribution, and none recognized that analyze the syllabus of curricular units in teaching tourism and hospitality, especially after the impacts of several crises of the 21st century, there is an urgent need to provide studies that can contribute to the development of human capital,

as well as the development of the companies operating on tourism destinations local communities, aiming to adjust to Agenda 2030 and the sustainable tourism.

Methodology | A survey of the state of the art on higher education in tourism in Portugal is undertaken, and questionnaires are submitted to teachers and directors of tourism curricular units of short cycle technological high education courses and bachelor's degrees in the public and private, on university and polytechnic subsystems. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail and the data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel software, in the first phase of the study, later a quantitative methodology should be applied, using IBM SPSS software and others. The aim is to assess their perception of the importance of the training provided, and the constraints and challenges experienced. It will be given an important focus on factors they consider have changed after several crises, especially de last ones of pandemics, war, and climate hazards, or consider necessary to introduce and adjust in tourism and hospitality high education system, aiming the improvement of the higher education and the human capital.

An analysis grid of curricular unit curricula and one for analysis of the teacher profile are prepared. Points to maximize or minimize, correct, or adjust will be highlighted.

Main results and Contributions | Previous studies have concluded and indicated that there is a need for an improvement in the quality of tourism and hospitality training and higher education provided, with more and better training offered, aligned with the business market. It must be more sustainable and humanistic, deviating from too much focus on an economic aspect of the sector and tourism high education system.

In this study, from 67 curricular units (TCU) identified with some curricula in the subsector, and 52 teachers identified, 36 respondents participated (54% of curricular units, 69.2% of the total population contacted). When designing the teacher's profile, 41.7% have a doctorate, 44.4% have between 11 to 20 years of teaching experience, 66.7% have never worked in the sector, and 66.7% of respondents teach in the polytechnic subsystem. Regarding the TCU taught, it was found that 41.7% of the TCU with content related to tourism operations and distribution has a total of 6 ECTS, and 44.4% are taught in the 3rd semester. Regarding the content taught, 44.4% of respondents classify it as "Good". Most respondents (69.4%) stated that one of the main difficulties in teaching the subsector content is the "lack of supporting materials and literature" (69.4%) and the teacher's "lack of experience in the area" (52.8%). The study also shows that the priority options for improving the teaching of content in this area are "open classes with professionals in the sector" (69.4%), "development of materials and resources to support classes" (66.7%) and "providing training for teachers" (52.8%). When asked "Do you consider that students leave your institution well prepared for the job market in the subsector, with sufficient operational skills", the results are somewhat worrying, given that 47.2% of respondents consider students to be unprepared.

The first results of surveys revealed that several teachers indicate the need to separate such generic and comprehensive content from those that require operational content with more practice, in different curricular units and suggest they should not be fully integrated into one TCU in a single semester. They feel they do not have the necessary preparation for certain topics, such as the very complex one of tourism operations and distribution, which is not even the basis of their professional training or experience. Most of them expressed having any experience within the tourism business and market, and few reported some experience connected with tourism and hospitality. Something that corroborates previous studies on student perception. The qualitative result from open questions indicates that it needs more contact and more collaboration with players in the market. They consider it difficult to access materials, updates, and dialogue with sector businesses.

This work and results contribute to a better understanding of the state of the art of Tourism and Hospitality higher education systems as well as provide a profile of teaching and learning in the subsector of Tourism Operation and Distribution. With this understanding, it would be possible to better decision-making while planning curricula courses and improving the quality of Higher education and human capital services.

Limitations | This study is based on just one subsector in Portugal, and it would be relevant to analyze whether the same is revealed in other subsectors or other countries. Future studies should include the perspective of players operating in the market.

Conclusions | This study has allowed us to understand the current state of higher education in tourism in Portugal and the importance of qualifying human resources. As higher education institutions are "education engines" that prepare the future professionals of this sector, they should include curricular units that are closer to reality and the business market needs. To this end, it is essential that there is greater coordination between educational institutions and the business community to bridge the existing gaps. Due to the constant changes in this sector, educational establishments must be prepared for these changes.

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