

The Role of Soft Skills in the Tourism Industry and the Challenges for HEI's: The Case of Portugal

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Abstract

In a context of unprecedented dynamics and rapid changes, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face the challenges of adaptation, and the need to anticipate and be prepared for the future. Despite the inherent uncertainty of the future, one can be sure that soft skills will play a critical role for the future generations in many industries, including Tourism and Hospitality. Soft skills are crucial for talented professionals, along with technical (hard) skills, and are increasingly commonplace in job descriptions, indicating that many employers recognize their importance, not only as employability criteria, but also for their businesses' performance and competitiveness. However, and despite the recognised importance of soft skills, it seems there is a gap between what market needs and what European HEIs with Tourism degrees actually offer. Traditionally, the curricula of HEI's in Tourism has been mostly narrowed to teaching and learning of hard skills and when soft skills are contemplated, the approach is limited. European HEI's are, therefore, required to contribute to graduates who are able to respond to a continuously changing and challenging workplace. Thus, concerns of HEI's about the future of education are related to the development of new learning opportunities and to the implementation of innovative teaching and learning methodologies, including the development of soft skills into higher education curricula, in strong cooperation with businesses, as they provide learning opportunities in the "real" work context, enhancing skills of future and currently working staff.

This paper aims at presenting the context of a research process in Portugal, based on a mixed method approaches, including secondary data analysis, interviews to tourism businesses stakeholders, and questionnaires to students. Results highlight the need of greater focus on soft skills and on close collaborative interaction with stakeholders and community facilitating the entry of students to labour market. It is also an objective to discuss the role of innovative teaching methodologies which are already being put into practice by some Portuguese HEI's in the specific context of T&H industries

Keywords: *Soft Skills, Tourism and hospitality, learning methodologies, collaborative approach.*

1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged, over the last years, that soft skills play a critical role for the future generations in many industries [1,3], including Tourism and Hospitality (T&H) [8]. Soft skills, along with technical (hard) skills, are increasingly commonplace in job descriptions. However, it seems there is a gap between what market needs and what European Higher Education Institutions with Tourism degrees actually offer. Traditionally, the curricula of HEI's in Tourism has been mostly narrowed to teaching and learning of hard skills and when soft skills are contemplated, the approach is limited [2]. However, education and training in tourism are considered to be increasingly important in order to prepare young professionals to meet the requirements and challenges of tourism related job descriptions, both with regard to technical (hard) skills and soft skills [6]. While the classroom context promotes the development of technical skills, work based learning approaches, as internships and the realization of projects, favour the development of both technical and soft skills. Such approaches/methodologies require a closer participation of the businesses in the education process [5].

Education and training in tourism, in Portugal, has been taking on a truly strategic importance to enable the sector to have the appropriately qualified and competent human resources, to meet the challenges of businesses' competitiveness [7]. In this sense, Portuguese HEIs have adapted their study cycles, in order to bring academia closer to the business context, to promote internationalization, to facilitate the mobility and employability of graduates [4].

This paper aims at presenting the context of a research process conducted at Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo (IPVC), developed in the context of the INCOME Tourism project (Innovative

Cooperation Business-HEI learning model for Tourism: 588476-EPP-1-2017-1-PT-EPPKA2-KA), which aims at fostering a new learning approach based on a cooperative learning process joining HEIs and tourism businesses applied to soft skills.

The results here presented are only partial, and relate to the Portuguese context, based on a mixed methods approach. Next sections will cover the methodological aspects (section 2), present the main findings (section 3), and discuss the results and conclude (section 4).

2. The research context | Methodology

The mixed methods approach adopted, includes secondary data analysis, interviews, and questionnaires. Secondary data analysis was conducted with a focus on soft skills in HEI in general, and in the Tourism education, along with a review of national policies in relation to soft skills in different working contexts. In addition, the curricula of tourism & hospitality (T&H) degrees offered by Portuguese HEIs were analysed.

As part of the primary data collection process, in-depth interviews were conducted to T&H businesses during July and September of 2018, designed to understand and analyse the perceptions of owners/managers about the importance of soft skills, and the methods they would consider best favour the learning and evaluating of soft skills.

In addition, a survey using questionnaires was also conducted, to former (graduated 3 years ago) and current Tourism undergraduate students at IPVC, between September and October of 2018. A total of 74 valid questionnaires were obtained. The objectives were mainly to understand and to analyse the importance of soft skills for their professional context and their level of satisfaction with the soft skills actually learned/acquired during their undergraduate studies.

3. Findings

3.1 Overview of National Policies on Soft Skills

On the basis of the review carried out, it was found that an attention to the soft skills, alongside hard skills in vocational education. The *attitudes*, understood as the capacity to take responsibility for their achievements and/or the achievements of others under their supervision, and the *degree of autonomy* in the achievements of the tasks and in the decision making are already consider within National Qualification Framework (NQF). However, no reference was found regarding the skills/qualifications recommended for higher education.

In Portugal, tourism has significant importance in the higher education system, although most of the tourism courses are offered by Polytechnic Institutes, particularly at undergraduate level. Portuguese tourism schools, traditionally focused on providing technical and scientific knowledge, and although the relationship between scientific and technical knowledge and soft skills is increasingly acknowledged as determining professional performance of excellence, tourism curricula still do not reflect this reality, with few exceptions. In general, we can find guidance as to which curricular units should be integrated into the courses, however, regarding soft skills and competencies there are no specific recommendations. In the same way, tourism schools, traditionally focused on providing technical and scientific knowledge, have neglected the development of soft skills necessary to respond to current challenges.

Some initiatives can be identified though aiming at contributing to the development of soft skills, such as critical thinking, communication, resilience, teamwork, overcoming frustration, the ability to solve complex problems or adaptation to change, in different contexts, namely at schools, with children and young people.

3.2 Interviews

T&H employer representatives and T&H HEI instructors were interviewed: Travel Agencies and Tour Operators, Accommodation (4* Hotel), and Tourist Animation / Maritime operators. Although the interviewees had to rank a list with 30 soft skills, they were asked to identify the ones they consider more important in the moment of recruiting. Interpersonal skills were referred as highly relevant by most of the interviewees, leadership skills were also mentioned, because as part of a team, professionals often have to lead the work and take decisions. Interviewees also referred that tourism graduates/employees should have the following skills: creativity; leadership; organization; initiative; autonomy; sense of responsibility; emotional intelligence; stress management; active listening; empathy; work as a member of a team; adopt positive stance; take the mistakes; act courteously and



respectfully; argumentative capacity; communication capacity; negotiation capacity; calm and serenity; adaptability.

In general, respondents are satisfied with the emphasis on learning soft skills in the T&H curricula today, however, they feel there is a lot of work that can be done, referring internships, role-playing, videos, study visits, oral presentations, contact with professionals, lectures and group works, as the methods that best favour soft skills development. It was also emphasised by the respondents that practical experience (through internships for example) is critical for students, as they have the opportunity to learn in a day-to-day life. Some obstacles to their participation in the learning process, by taking students as trainees, within work-based contexts, are related with financial and bureaucratic issues, along with the time / period of internships, as in many cases, it is coincident with the high season.

3.3 Questionnaires conducted to former and current students of HEIs

Most of the respondents were female (76%, n=56) and have already work experience in the industry, mainly in hotels and restaurants (74%; n= 55). In general, and although, respondents recognise the importance of the thirty different soft skills that have been grouped into the three dimensions, namely, 'Conceptual/Creative', 'Leadership', and 'Interpersonal' soft skills, the following skills stand out (with the mean values closer to five, where 1=not very important; 5=critically important): 'Consider customer needs when making decisions', 'Operate effectively and calmly under pressure or in crisis situations', 'Act courteously and respectfully', 'Employ a team approach to solve problems when appropriate' 'Develop adaptation responses to unexpected changes', and 'Listen carefully to input and concerns expressed by others'.

Also, and even though students are, in general, satisfied with soft skills acquired during the studies, findings show that current students are more satisfied than the former students. Overall, students are more satisfied with the following "Consider customer needs when making decisions", 'Act courteously and respectfully', and 'Employ a team approach to solve problems when appropriate'.

Moreover, the majority of former and current students acknowledged different opportunities that T&H Courses have given them, in particular, 'Consider customer needs when making decisions', 'Build networks with people inside and outside the company', and 'Employ a team approach to solve problems when appropriate'. This reinforces that HEIs have a critical role in creating opportunities for soft skills development.

4. Conclusions

This paper aimed at presenting the context of a research process in Portugal regarding teaching and learning soft skills, with a specific focus on Tourism Courses taught at HEIs.

The relationship between scientific and technical knowledge and soft skills increasingly assumes a determining role in the professional performance of excellence, but in the curricular plans of the courses of higher education this reality is not present yet, with few exceptions.

Results highlight the recognition of soft skills importance by HEIs' students and by T&H employers, along with the need of greater focus on soft skills and on close collaborative interaction with stakeholders and community facilitating the entry of students to labour market.

Although limited to specific contexts, innovative teaching methodologies are already being put into practice by some Portuguese HEI's in the specific context of T&H courses. While the classroom context promotes the development of technical skills, training in the work context, as internships and projects, enhances the development of both technical and transversal competences.

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