

Learning by Doing: Fostering Tourism Students' Soft Skills Through Interdisciplinarity and Collaboration

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Abstract: Having a strong affinity and interdependence with a wide range of sectors and industries, tourism is, by nature, an interdisciplinary field. However, despite this realization, there are still different barriers to the development of interdisciplinary research and active collaborative projects within Tourism Higher Education. In addition to these barriers, there is also a disarticulation between tourism curricula and what practitioners perceive as being key skills within the industry. Hence, as the context in which the tourist activity takes place becomes more competitive, resulting in a pressing need for skilled and multifaceted professionals, educational institutions and tourism educators are increasingly being challenged to overcome these barriers and come up with creative projects that can help bridge the gap between academia and the labour market. Aiming to describe an interdisciplinary project focusing on soft skills within different tourism subsectors, this paper will draw on a literature review, project outputs and two questionnaires, as to describe its implementation and overall results. Mostly based on students' perceptions and determining whether they are aligned with the industry's current demands and expectations, in addition to a general description, it will crosscut different perspectives, analysing the importance attributed to soft skills by students and prospective employers. Deriving from this analysis and the project's scope, the authors will also put forward a reflection regarding the impact of the project on not only student's perceptions regarding soft skills, but also on the affordances of the project to develop transversal competences, making a case for other innovative initiatives. As a result, the final section of the paper will include references to lessons learnt and future research directions.

Keywords: collaboration, higher education, hospitality, interdisciplinarity, soft skills, tourism

1. Introduction

Often described as a key economic driver, the tourism industry is currently facing a wide range of challenges when it comes to workers' qualifications and overall skills. Having been made more apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges are, however far more structural, ranging from the continuous integration of technological solutions to issues regarding staff training and retention. Considered to be particularly vulnerable to crisis situations (Huang & Baker, 2021), tourism and hospitality workers are often "associated with low levels of education and limited entrepreneurial and managerial skills" (Daniel *et al.*, 2017, p. 65), with recent events having led many to consider career transitions (Huang and Baker, 2021).

Described as "a labour-intensive industry" (Kong, 2015, p. 1), tourism's "multi-faceted character" and its "diverse functional areas" (Daniel *et al.*, 2017, p. 65) increasingly call for changes in how tourism professionals are trained, prompting Higher Education Institutions to take on new approaches as to rethink their programs, enhance the curricula, and foster innovative and collaborative projects and activities that address both technical and transversal skills. These approaches, which are aligned with current trends supporting the idea that "knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values are not competing competencies but rather are developed interdependently" (OECD, 2019, p. 25), also address the lingering issue of preparedness and obsolescence (Cetron, 2007), taking into account the "changing prevalence of types of tasks required for work over time" (OECD, 2019, p. 8), i.e., the increasingly significant shift from routine manual tasks, to non-routine analytic and interpersonal tasks.

As a result, and as the market is becoming ever more flexible and reliant on organizational networking and technology, which are the core of the so-called “knowledge-based economy”, there is currently a growing need for technically skilled workers who are also able to adapt to “the changing requirements of the job” (van Laar *et al.*, 2017, p. 577), i.e., people who are equipped with cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (that can be associated with learning and literacy), social and emotional skills (often paired with the concept of life skills), as well as physical and practical skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015; OECD, 2019).

Most commonly referred to as 21st century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015), this wide range of competences includes creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability and leadership and responsibility, with some authors underpinning them with the concept of digital competence, with technology and digital platforms being increasingly perceived as a common denominator and innovative cluster (van Laar *et al.*, 2017). Rather than a comprehensive list of competences, these frameworks address current demands by adding “additional layers for communication skills, technological savvy, a global view, collaborative practices, digital skills, and more innovative applications” (Geisinger, 2016, p. 245), embodying more inclusive and in-depth perspectives that are in synch with current challenges and demands of the labour market and education.

Aligned with the concept of soft skills, which can be described as “a set of skills which includes how people relate to each other by communicating, listening, engaging in dialogue, giving feedback, cooperating as a team member, solving problems, contributing in meetings and resolving conflict” (Padhi, 2014, p. 1), this new paradigm is not only cross-sectorial, but also embraces the idea of interdisciplinarity and lifelong learning (Gibb, 2014; Poszytek, 2021), thus enhancing previous models focussing on hard skills, which are considered to be “more technical, highly specific in nature and particular to an occupation and that can be (generally) taught more easily than soft skills” (UNESCO-IBE, 2013, pp. 53–54).

Despite their perceived importance in the tourism industry, with people being “the most important element in efficient operation and [its] further development” (Tfaily, 2018, p. 31), research on the importance of soft skills within this scope seems to indicate a discrepancy between how they are perceived by faculty, students and industry leaders (Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017; Sharma, Singh and others, 2020). Even though recent studies highlight how much these skills are valued by employers (Silva, Correia and Oliveira, 2020), they also point to the existence of a skills gap between current tourism and hospitality programs and stakeholders’ expectations (Fournier and Ineson, 2010; Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017; Jaykumar, 2018). As a result, even though it is possible to establish the importance of communication (Wushe, Shenje and Ndlovu, 2014; Ortiz, Region-Sebest and MacDermott, 2016; Sharma, Singh and others, 2020), creativity (Ortiz, Region-Sebest and MacDermott, 2016; Wesley, Jackson and Lee, 2017; Mareque, de Prada Creo and Gonzalez-Sanchez, 2019), flexibility (Sisson and Adams, 2013) and teamwork (Luka, 2015; Mareque, de Prada Creo and Gonzalez-Sanchez, 2019; Sharma, Singh and others, 2020), with some authors also pushing for the development of digital and entrepreneurial competences (Daniel *et al.*, 2017), there is a pressing need for innovative, competence-based approaches that can help bridge this gap and overcome these inconsistencies.

Based on these premises and on the need to augment staff qualification and retention within the industry and raising awareness towards the importance of transferable skills, this paper will focus on the current perceptions of future tourist activities management undergraduates on the concept and importance of soft skills, crosscutting them with the market’s perspective. Based on an Interdisciplinary Project (IP) involving 5 different courses (namely, Tourist Destination Management, Travel Agencies and Tour Operators Management, Hotel Management, Quality Management in Tourism and English Applied to Tourism VI) and stakeholders from different tourism subsectors, it draws from two questionnaires and interviews carried out by the students as to determine the importance of these skills, at the same time it provided them with an opportunity to develop a collaborative assignment: a short paper outlining their analysis and key findings.

As a result, this IP served a double purpose: on the one hand, it brought students in contact with stakeholders, as each group was required to meet and interview representatives of different tourism spheres (e.g., DMO, Travel Agents/Tour Operators, Events and Hospitality), as to identify the most valued soft skills by companies from each subsector and challenge students own preconceptions; and, on the other hand, by relying on a Project-Based approach which required students to “apply, synthesize, prioritize, summarize theoretical knowledge] (...) to arrive at an in-depth understanding of the important key concepts” (Ab Wahid, Lee &

Baharudin, 2020, p. 84), it enabled them to develop the ability to work in team, as well as their resilience and their communication, collaboration and project management skills.

Having aimed to promote an articulated outlook on tourism education, based on active learning methods, and bridge the gap between academia and the labour market, the impact of this two-fold approach will be described in the following sections.

2. Methodology

The research followed an exploratory, mixed methods approach, which integrates elements of qualitative and quantitative research seeking to capitalize on the complementary nature of both methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) with the aim of extending the range and depth of understanding (Johnson et al., 2007). Despite its wide application in other scientific areas, the use of mixed methods research is still emerging in the tourism field, although its relevance is recognised where context analysis and the integration of different perspectives is required (Truong et al., 2020), as in the case of this paper.

A literature review was conducted on the concept of soft skills and their importance within the tourism industry, which sought to identify the most relevant skills for tourism professionals. In addition to framing the research carried out, this review was also instrumental in developing questionnaires (Q1 and Q2) which were applied to students both at the beginning and at the end of the project, making it possible to compare their initial and final perceptions, as well as collect overall impressions on the IP's impact and main affordances.

Following a similar structure (except for questions pertaining to the specific stage of the project, i.e., students' initial expectations – Q1 – vs. their final perceptions – Q2), the questionnaires comprised 5 sections (described in Table 1). In addition to the questionnaires, the literature review was also important for designing a series of workshops to support students' assignments, hence playing a pivotal role in informing the short papers presented.

Table 1: Questionnaire structure and related research goals

Sections	Research Goals	Type of Questions
Respondents' Profile	To characterize the respondents (gender, age, student status and enrolment).	Closed-ended Open-ended
Perceptions on Soft Skills	To get a general understanding of respondents' previous knowledge on the topic of soft skills (familiarity, meaning and perceived professional/personal relevance).	Multiple Choice Likert Scale Open-ended
Perceptions on Education for Soft Skills	To identify and assess previous educational experiences related to soft skills (contexts of application and perceived curricular value)	Likert Scale Open-ended
Interdisciplinarity	To get a general understanding of respondents' previous perceptions on the concept and identify previous interdisciplinary experiences (constraints, affordances and potential).	Open-ended Closed-ended Rating Multiple Choice
Comments and Suggestions	To collect additional insights on expectations regarding the project (Q1) and its final outcomes and overall educational affordances (Q2).	Open-ended Questions

The results of the questionnaires (Q1 and Q2) were analysed, with the aim of getting to know the students' perceptions and to determine whether they were somehow changed throughout the process. Moreover, the IP's outputs, consisting of a corpus of 12 short papers, were also analysed. Overall, students carried out a total of 42 interviews with representatives of different tourism subsectors (i.e., prospective employers), making it possible to rank the soft skills most frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

The ensuing analysis aimed to triangulate students' perceptions on the soft skills they believed to be the most valued by employers (drawing from the questionnaires), those emphasized in the literature, and those highlighted by the interviewees (based on the short papers presented by the students). The triangulation method makes it possible to use different sources of information through multiple methods, contributing to the reduction of bias in the analysis and to the higher level of validity and credibility of the research (Ingram et al., 2017; Bogdan and Biklen, 2006 cit. in Mondal & Samaddar, 2020).

Based on the literature review, the soft skills mentioned by all participants were grouped according to the 21st century skills framework (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015), having been associated with one of the following predefined categories: creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability and leadership and responsibility. In addition to these, and given its relevance in previous studies (van Laar *et al.*, 2017), researchers also looked for references pertaining to digital competence.

3. Findings

As previously mentioned, two questionnaires were applied to the students taking part in the IP: Questionnaire 1 (Q1) – at an early phase of the project (following its formal presentation); and Questionnaire 2 (Q2) – at the end of the project, following the presentation of the short papers. Both questionnaires aimed to collect information on students' perceptions regarding soft skills. The figure below illustrates the respondents' profile, highlighting the lower response rate recorded in the final survey (Q1=42; Q2=35), and the prevalence of female respondents. The percentage of working students did not change significantly, nor did the average age.

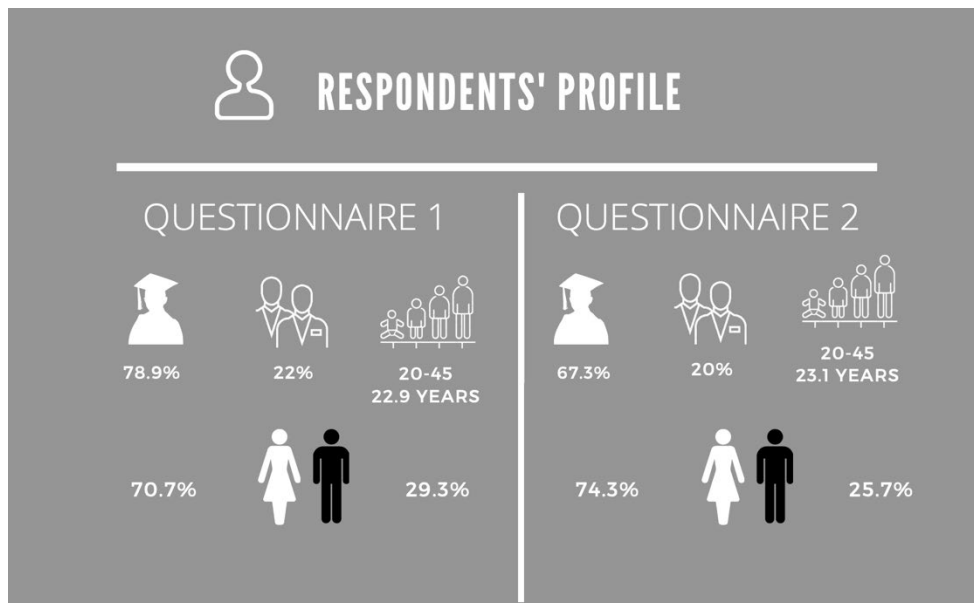


Figure 1: Questionnaire 1 (Q1) and Questionnaire 2 (Q2): respondents' profile

As mentioned in the previous section, throughout the project students were expected to carry out interviews with representatives from different tourism subsectors, with the aim of collecting information on the most valued soft skills. To complete the assignment, a total of 42 interviews were conducted and analysed, with the distribution (by subsector) summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of interviews by subsector

Subsectors	Number of Short Papers	Number of Interviews
Hospitality	3	13
Travel Agents/Tour Operators	4	8
Events	2	8
DMOs	3	13

Based on the retrieved data, students' perceptions on the most important soft skills for tourism professionals tend to be linear, despite variations when it comes to three of the analysed categories (namely, self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills and productivity and accountability), whose role is more clearly recognized in Q2. Contrarily, skills associated with the problem-solving category were initially perceived as being more important, with fewer students mentioning them in the final questionnaire. Moreover, it should also be highlighted those references to soft skills pertaining to the categories of creativity and innovation, critical thinking and digital competence were not statistically relevant in neither questionnaire

In both questionnaires, the most relevant categories and those more consistently perceived as important for professionals in the tourism sector are those associated with communication and collaboration (Q1=24; Q2=25), and flexibility and adaptability (Q1=17; Q2=17), whereas soft skills within the productivity and accountability

and social and cross-cultural categories became more evident the by the end of the IP (Q1=12; Q2=28; Q1=10; Q2=18). Even though less pronounced, there was also an increase in the skills categorized under the initiative and self-direction and leadership and responsibility categories (Q1=1; Q2=6; Q1=5; Q2=8), whereas in the problem-solving category there was a decrease in the number of references made by students (Q1=12 and Q2=2).

Drawing from the previously defined categories, of all the soft skills mentioned in the questionnaires, communication, adaptability, flexibility, empathy, teamwork and resilience stand out as those students considered to be the most important for tourism professionals. When asked to identify the skills they believed would be more valued by prospective employers (in their capacity of final-year students about to enter the labour market) the initial responses followed suit, with slight changes in ranking. In addition to soft skills within the communication and collaboration category (which continued to be the most relevant), in Q2 students highlighted the importance of

flexibility and adaptability, which was a clear departure from the initial questionnaire in which leadership and responsibility (Q1=18), and productivity and accountability (Q1=12) were perceived as being more valuable.

As the second questionnaire was applied following the conclusion of the short papers (hence, after students carried out and critically analysed the interviews with representatives of the different tourism subsectors), students' answers reflect a change in stance regarding the soft skills they perceive as more relevant. As a result, there is a parallelism between the opinions expressed by students and their individual perceptions, and the findings reported in the short papers. Ergo, skills within the communication and collaboration category (with communication standing out as the most mentioned soft skill) are the most important, followed by those related to productivity and accountability, and, in third place, flexibility and adaptability (with teamwork and adaptability standing out as the most evident). When comparing students' perceptions over time, there was a significant decrease in the number of references in the leadership and responsibility category, which was initially perceived as being the most important (Q1=18), having registered only 7 references in Q2. The number of references within the flexibility and adaptability category, on the other hand, rose from 9 (Q1) to 13 (Q2).

A cross-analysis of these responses with the soft skills presented in the short papers makes it possible to determine that the highest-ranking category is productivity and accountability (n=28), with teamwork (n=9), resilience (n=5) and organization and commitment (n=4) being the skills most valued by the representatives of the various subsectors. In second place, the short papers highlight the importance of social and cross-cultural skills (n=18), with empathy (n=10) being highlighted as the most important skill within this category. In third place, *ex aequo*, are flexibility and adaptability (n=15) and leadership and responsibility (n=15). Within these categories flexibility (n=8) and ethics (n=5) stand out as the most mentioned skills, respectively.

In sum, and considering the underlying considerations made throughout the short papers, despite the differences between the analysed subsectors, globally, the categories perceived as the most valuable are productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility and flexibility and adaptability.

When looking at each subsector independently, Travel Agencies and Tour Operators concomitantly attach more value to skills pertaining to productivity and accountability (n=16), with social and cross-cultural skills (n=8) and flexibility and adaptability (n=7) taking the second and third places, respectively. In this sector, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and flexibility stand out as key skills in each category, with communication also being highlighted under the category of communication and collaboration.

In the hospitality sub-sector, productivity and accountability and social-cultural skills are the two leading categories with n=5 references each, followed by leadership and responsibility and initiative and self-direction, both with n=4. As with the Travel Agencies and Tour Operators subsector, teamwork, emotional intelligence, flexibility and communication are the most valued soft skills within each category.

The other subsectors analysed – DMO and Events – present distinctive features in their valuation. While the first gives prominence to leadership and responsibility, social and cross-cultural skills and flexibility and adaptability (all with n=4 references), relegating productivity and accountability to a second level (n=3), the latter considers this to be the most important category (n=4), along with communication and collaboration (n=4). In this subsector all other categories are assigned minimal values. The most valued soft skills in these subsectors are

aligned with the other subsectors, with teamwork, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and communication ranking as the most mentioned skills. In short, it seems clear that these four soft skills, namely teamwork, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and communication, are the most relevant both to interviewees and students, with the latter having revisited their initial perceptions based on their experience working in the IP.

Considering one of the IP's premises, i.e., to help students develop soft skills by fostering teamwork, collaboration and project management skills, the data stemming from the questionnaires signals changes from students' initial perceptions and their final outlook on the competencies actually developed throughout this applied research activity.

Considering the responses to the initial questionnaire, productivity, and accountability (Q1=34) ranks as the highest category. However, in Q2, there are only 20 references to skills within this category. Nevertheless, despite this decrease, this remains the most prominent category. Overall, all categories registered higher rates in Q1 than in Q2, with categories such as communication and collaboration (Q1=16; Q2=8), problem solving (Q1=6; Q2=2) and leadership and responsibility (Q1=5; Q2=2) being significantly less referenced. Moreover, other categories, such as creativity and innovation (Q1=2; Q2=0), critical thinking (Q1=3; Q2=0) or initiative and self-direction (Q1=2; Q2=0) cease to be mentioned in Q2. The category flexibility and adaptability is the most linear (Q1=8; Q2=6) in both questionnaires, whereas digital competence was not mentioned by the students at either moment. Based on students' perceptions on their competence development process, the social and cross-cultural skills category differs from the previous results, as, even though it is not being mentioned by students in Q1, it is referenced in Q2 (Q2=4). These perceptions are aligned with the opinions expressed by the interviewees from each of the subsectors, who have highlighted the importance of teamwork, communication, flexibility, adaptability and empathy. In addition to these, students also considered that the IP helped them develop time management skills.

4. Conclusions

The research aimed to identify the most valued soft skills in the tourism industry, through the implementation of an interdisciplinary project developed by undergraduate tourist activities students. To this end, students' perceptions were analysed through the application of two questionnaires at the initial and final phases of the project. In parallel, students conducted a total of 42 interviews with representatives of the various subsectors to directly assess which soft skills were most valued by companies. Stemming from these interviews, they prepared a set of 12 short papers, highlighting the main conclusions of their research. The triangulation of the results obtained made it possible to profile the most relevant soft skills in the tourism sector and crosscut different perspectives, raising awareness to the role tourism education can play within this scope.

Regarding students' opinion on the most important soft skills for tourism professionals, communication, flexibility, and teamwork stand out, which is in line with previous studies by authors such as Ortiz et al. (2016), Sisson & Adams (2013), Sharma et al. (2020). Students also mentioned empathy and resilience as relevant skills. Creativity, however, was not highly valued by students, although authors such as Wesley et al. (2017) point to this competence as one of the most important, and one can be enhanced through teamwork. These skills were also perceived as the most valued in the labour market, with the IP having contributed to changing students' overall perceptions, particularly regarding the importance of communication, teamwork, and adaptability, in detriment of skills associated with leadership and responsibility.

As for the most valued soft skills in each subsector, in addition to the previously mentioned skills, those associated with the social and cross-cultural category are also perceived as relevant, particularly in the Travel Agents/Tour Operators, Hospitality and DMO subsectors.

Even though these findings are overall in agreement with previous studies (Sisson and Adams, 2013; Luka, 2015; Mareque, de Prada Creo and Gonzalez-Sanchez, 2019), with regards to digital competences, which are also perceived as key by authors such as van Laar et al. (2017) and Daniel et al. (2017), there were no direct references to specific skills, which can be explained by the fundamental nature of this competence, i.e., the fact it is deeply embedded in all the considered categories.

Additionally, the impact of the COVID'19 pandemic on Tourism Higher Education should also be mentioned, due to the challenges inherent to different teaching scenarios and contexts that have emerged. The literature

suggests that online contexts have reinforced teaching and learning processes, having stimulated deeper online interactions and discussions, with the purpose of increasing critical and creative thinking (Goh & Sigala, 2020; Ye & Law, 2021), and bridged the gap between academia and external stakeholders (Sipe & Testa, 2020; Ye & Law, 2021). Moreover, this context has also made it necessary to further develop multitasking and the ability to manage simultaneous online participations, opening perspectives for virtual internships, which also require the development of specific soft skills (Park & Jones, 2021).

As for the potential role of tourism education and this specific project, the data seem to suggest the relevance and importance of this type of interdisciplinary activity within this scope. This project is considered to have enabled students to develop applied research focusing on specific subsectors and broaden their horizons, at the same time it raised their awareness to the skills most valued by their employers. In the case of this project, this realization comes at a crucial time, as students prepare to join the labour market, paving the way to training experiences that can augment their portfolios and professional profile

5. Limitations and future research

As previously mentioned, the findings described are based on a partial analysis of the questionnaires and short papers developed by the students and focuses mostly on the intersection between their personal perceptions (before and after the IP) and the opinions of the industry representatives they have interviewed. Even though the samples, analysis and final paper have been subject to a thorough review and validation, there are different levels of proficiency in the students' work and, most significantly, differences in data representativeness from the different subsectors. On the other hand, the fact that fewer students answered the final questionnaire (vs. the initial questionnaire) also limits some of the findings. Nevertheless, the conclusions are still valid and are considered to contribute towards the discussion regarding the current skills gap and the development of soft skills in tourism education

In the future, considering the IP's replicability potential, researchers expect to collect further data which will enable a more diversified, in-depth analysis which will augment the study's range and contribution within this scope.

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