

# Students' Communication with Employers: The Competitiveness and Employability Perspective

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**Purpose** – This paper discusses the topic of the competitiveness of tourism and hospitality students on the job market. As the current economic recession continues, the tourism and hospitality industry (THI) in Slovenia faces an alarming decrease in revenue, and the employment crisis is expected to worsen. Higher education institutions (HEI) are concerned with the future of their graduates and, therefore, have to equip them with relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes, as well as raise their awareness of the importance of lifelong learning, i.e. formal, non-formal and experiential learning.

**Methods** – Our discussion focuses on students in the second and third years of their studies at the faculty of tourism. The survey evaluates data regarding the amount and the quality of their competencies as well as their job marketability in order to assess their future competitiveness on the job market.

**Findings** – The results indicate that students need to improve their competitive edge by striving to reach a higher level of competencies and to increase their competitive spirit so as to enhance their future opportunities on the job market.

**Originality of the research** – Thus far, little research has been devoted to assessing students' performances in increasing their competitiveness before graduation. This paper aims to provide a feedback tool for both students and the faculty about students' achievements and their awareness of the importance of competence development as well as the ability to demonstrate and present their competencies to employers in the THI.

**Keywords:** tourism and hospitality industry, higher education, employability, competence, competitiveness

## **Introduction**

It is widely believed that human resources are paramount for the THI, where high standards of service depend on a high-quality, motivated, devoted and enthusiastic workforce. This fact poses a permanent challenge to the educational sphere, which should respond to shortages of staff on the labour market by cooperating more closely with industry, shaping carefully their study programmes and working on the development of their students' competencies. This paper addresses the issue of the competitiveness of higher education students and their ability to obtain a job in the THI.

Contrary to the popular belief that the growth of the THI regularly generates new jobs and therefore assures employment, this is not guaranteed to happen. In fact, the question of the competitiveness of graduates in THI studies has become relevant in the current economic crisis, with its accompanying high unemployment rates and an excess flow of graduates from (too) many educational institutions. Worse yet, the rate of unemployment among young people has traditionally been significantly higher than the overall rate (Trbanc, 2007). Table 1 presents the 2013 unemployment rates in various EU countries and the USA overall and for the people aged 15 to 24.

*Table 1* Unemployment rates in general and youth unemployment, 2014

	Unemployment rate	Youth unemployment rate
EU 28	10.8	23.5
Euro area	11.9	24.0
Austria	4.9	9.2
Germany	5.3	7.9
Greece	27.5	58.3
Italy	12.2	40
Netherlands	6.7	11
Sweden	8	23.6
Slovenia	10.1	21.6
Spain	26.1	55.5
UK	7.6	20.7
USA	7.4	15.5

Source: Eurostat, 2014

At the end of 2013, the youth unemployment rate in the EU28 was 2.2 times the total rate of unemployment; consequently, it has been recognized as one of the focal problems of employment. High youth unemployment rates do merely reflect the difficulties of finding a job for young people; there is also a factor of hidden unemployment, since many young people are extending their studies, postponing their entrance into the working world.

The THI also faces structural unemployment; there is a mismatch between the skills needed on the job market and the available skills of unemployed workers. Traditionally, the industry has suffered from a shortage of skilled labour and a poor image of employment in the THI (Rok & Mulej, 2014). Baum (2006) explains this labour deficit as an unbroken cycle in which those people that the THI would like to employ will not work in the THI, but those not suitable for the THI are willing to work in it.

The question as to how to ensure employment for graduates has been widely studied (e.g., Rok, 2013; Podmenik 2012; Harkison et al., 2011; Rosenberg et al., 2012; Gault et al., 2010; Zehrer & Moessenlechner, 2009; Dacre, Pool, & Sewell, 2007). According to

Hendy Isaac (2012) the emphasis is less on “employ” and more on “ability”. In essence, the emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities, with a view to empowering and enhancing the learner. Similarly, Dacre, Pool, and Sewell (2007) highlight the fact that providing opportunities to gain necessary skills, knowledge, understanding and attributes is obviously important, but so too is providing opportunities for reflection on and evaluation of the learning experiences that have already taken place. This analysis provides empirical evidence, reflection and evaluation of students’ achievements in competence development and the manner in which they are documented and promoted in application procedures in the case of a faculty of tourism.

### Theoretical Background

Young graduates encounter serious problems when transferring from education to employment. Notwithstanding the figures highlighting the constant growth of tourism accompanied by the demand for a qualified workforce, there appears to be a range of reasons for the difficulties in finding a job in the THI. First, the ability of the economy and society to absorb and to integrate the young graduates into the sphere of work has been consistently weakening (Kramberger & Pavlin, 2007). Further, the apparent extensive range of tourism and hospitality educational opportunities on all levels has led to an over-production of graduates from the higher level of tourism and hospitality studies that far exceeds vacancies. Despite this imbalance, these study programmes continue to attract young people. Unfortunately, graduates have to tolerate jobs for which they are over-educated. Furthermore, new employability skills are required due to changing labour markets, fierce competition among destinations and businesses, technological advances, as well as emerging and likely future workplaces in tourism. Therefore, higher educational institutions must adapt their curricula to new circumstances; nevertheless, there is always a gap between what they offer and what is needed and required by the industry (Zehrer & Moessenlechner, 2009; Lo, 2005). This is one of the reasons employers also recruit graduates from other disciplines. As Amoah and Baum (1997) indicate, when the main

features of tourism education are formed through initiatives by both the tourism environment and the world of education, with no consensus between the two, problems will arise for those on the receiving end of a tourism education.

Therefore, young graduates face several challenges if they want to enter the labour market successfully. Employment and the employability of graduates are studied thoroughly by HEIs. Research reveals data useful for a continuous evaluation of current study programmes, the creation of future ones and their accreditation. By analysing their graduate employment positions, the appropriateness of the acquired knowledge and skills, as well as the missing ones, HEIs gain valuable information to use in adapting to changing circumstances on the labour market and within the tourism sector. However, as Katay and Ratz (2007) emphasize, it is definitely the responsibility of the educational institutions to inform students about the tourism industry's expectations and requirements concerning future employees, to highlight the importance of self-development in those areas where perceived and actual skills are widely divergent, and to offer students competency-based training programmes in order to improve their overall skill profile.

Recent research (Kosi et al., 2012) on graduates from the Faculty of Tourism of the University of Primorska found that of 198 respondents (faculty graduates who finished their studies between 2006 and 2011) 22% were unemployed. However, 63% of those employed stated that their position did not correspond to the level of their education.

Clearly, monitoring the employment figures of graduates is not enough. A question arises: what set of achievements (i.e. skills, knowledge and personal attributes) make graduates more likely to gain employment and succeed in their chosen occupations, with benefits for themselves and the economy? The present analysis concentrates on the attributes, attainments, experience and attitudes of candidates that can be expressed when applying for a job/placement in documents that are usually required by employers, i.e. the candidate's CV and the motivation letter.

## Empirical Study

### Methodology

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), there are several prerequisites for gaining and maintaining employment:

1. one's assets in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes,
2. the way one uses and deploys those assets,
3. the way one presents them to employers,
4. the context within which one seeks work, i.e. the labour market environment and personal circumstances.

We followed this framework and assessed students' competitiveness through these components, excluding conditions on the labour markets, which is an external factor, outside of the students' control as well as personal circumstances. Therefore, our analysis concentrated on individual capabilities, considering students' statements, perceptions and judgements of their own abilities. All individuals' engagements and investments before and during their study are recorded in documents; i.e. their curricula vitae (CVs) as well as the cover letters that they present when they apply for a job or placement. We considered the competencies of students from the cohort fulfilling their duties in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semesters of their undergraduate professional programme; the students were about to carry out a placement, most of them in the summer. Placements are a part of the faculty curricula; they are evaluated, graded (pass/fail) and credited after reviews by the faculty coordinator. Beforehand, students attend a short practicum at the faculty, a session preparing them to obtain the appropriate employer, assignments and performance. At the end of the practicum, students have to present CVs and motivation letters.

The sampling was purposive and non-random. The cohort comprised 149 students; 124 of them completed the documents (yielding a response rate of 83%), while 25 did not participate. A total of 82.2% students were enrolled full-time, 68.5% of them were females. Table 2 summarizes the general characteristics of the survey sample.

Table 2 Descriptive characteristics of the survey sample

Students	Professional study programme			Total
	Tourism Destination Management	Tourism Enterprise Management	Cross-cultural Mediation in Tourism	
2nd year	-	48	-	48
3rd year	50	-	26	76
Full-time	31	45	26	102
Part-time	19	3	-	22
Females	37	29	19	85
Males	13	19	7	39

### Research Questions

In the present study, relationships between students' competencies (skills gained, knowledge, and other abilities) and their impacts on students' competitive advantages in searching for jobs in the THI are analysed via the following research questions:

- Does the students' work corroborate their awareness that they have to continuously develop various competencies in order to be competitive in the labour market?
- Are students' work experiences predominately based on their study programme?
- What kind of approach do students adopt in motivation letters to present and promote themselves?
- Has mobility been integrated into students' study and placement performance?
- Do students' CVs reflect their diligence regarding participation in all forms of lifelong learning?

### Data Collection

Each student completed a CV and enclosed a motivation letter for an employer chosen as a target one for the purpose of a placement or a future workplace. Both texts were prepared both in Slovene and in one foreign language. One of the aims of the practicum was to enable students to form the basis of documentation for applying situations both during their studies as well as for the future. Simultaneously, they were encouraged to compose their career profile.

A CV had to follow the Europass CV structure and template, concentrating on essential information that would bring added value to the application. Motivation letters had to follow the usual correspondence structure and rules. Students were encouraged to show originality, i.e. an innovative approach, and to adapt the text to suit the post applied for and the employer's specifics. Further, it was suggested that they emphasize those of their assets that were not included in the CV. Both documents are vital if they want to attract the attention of the recruiter and receive an invitation to a job/placement interview; if applicants do not make the right impact, they waste their opportunity (Rok, 2013).

The study was carried out in order to identify areas of limited competencies. This is relevant because the students were about to finish their studies, and there was limited time to compensate for any deficits.

### Results and Discussion

Following Hillage and Page's (1998) adapted framework (Figure 1) we analysed data structured in the following groups. The findings reported in this section are:

**Assets:** knowledge (what students know), skills (what they do with what they know) and attitudes (how they do it)

In the students' CVs, we searched for data regarding students' prior vocational education and training, because employers consider these to be an advantage. We recorded only tourism and hospitality colleges and faculties since they give strong operational skills and knowledge for a career in the THI;

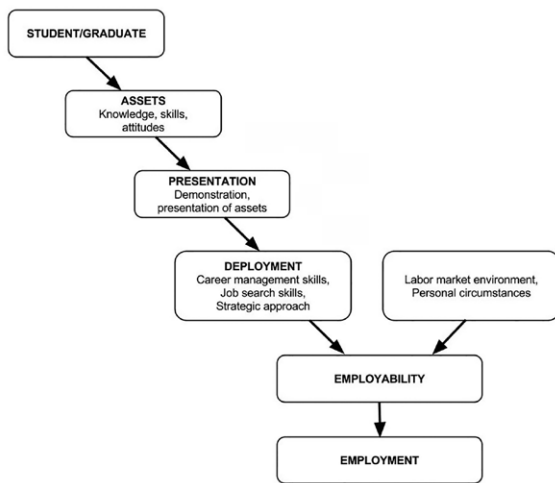


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of employability components employed in the study

Source: Adapted from Hillage and Pollard, 1998

40.7% of students had finished secondary vocational tourism and catering schools and 3.7% of them completed a two-year tourism and hospitality course.

Research (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Riley et al., 2002) reveals that the majority of employers in the THI consider only work experience to add value to an individual's competitiveness. Therefore, we placed particular emphasis on this issue. Students reported work experience in various THI areas: food and beverages (28%), front office (48%), event management (4%), travel agencies (15%), tourist information centres (4%) and casinos (4%); 41% of them had fulfilled a mandatory placement in the THI prior to faculty enrolment. The data show that 15% of students had no work experience in the THI, 18.5% had worked three months or less, 37% from three to six months, 11% from six to nine months and 18.5% for more than nine months. Other work experience was derived from students' work in shopping centres, administration, warehouse, at manual labour, etc., while 4% of students reported work experience in voluntary organizations.

We found that 3% of students had no work experience at all, which raised the question of how they expect to impress future employers. Although it has been constantly repeated that work experience is vital for their employability, some students ignore that fact. Students with prior vocational education in tourism and hospitality are endowed with a major

advantage over others. Not only because they possess several work-related skills, but they are also well-acquainted with the industry. Of further importance is the development of networking relationships. Research among Slovene employers (Rok, 2013) in the THI showed that they highly value only those candidates with professional experience in the field. In the case of experience outside the THI, work in other service jobs is also appreciated. Even performing manual, routine work sends a signal to employers, i.e. a student has working habits, shows a willingness to work, etc.

Therefore, the analysis reveals that students do not choose their work experience predominately based on their study programme. Students combine workplaces from various industries; we posit that their choice depends predominately on wage levels. However, in view of their future target work settings, they should choose businesses more carefully.

Research on employability (e.g., Andrews & Russell, 2002) always draws attention to communication skills that are considered to be essential. Katay and Ratz (2007) agree that it is an exceptionally relevant ability in the tourism and hospitality sector. In our analysis, students listed skills, such as "I possess good communication skills", "I am polite, diplomatic and patient", "I obtained these skills through various activities and competitions", "I acquired these skills at work through contacts with guests", "I am a good listener", "I possess the ability to adapt to multi-cultural environments", etc.

We believe that students could go into more detail when describing their communication skills, e.g. intercultural skills (if they host foreign students); mediating skills (from group works); experience giving presentations in class, writing reports, role plays, activities on campus, etc. Similarly, research from other institutions (Andrews & Russell, 2002) as revealed that many students had already accumulated a number of various employability skills but they were not necessarily aware of this or how to make best use of their skills when selling themselves to a prospective employer.

Regarding linguistic competencies, we considered only those with levels B1/B2 (independent user) and C1/C2 (proficient user). All students (100%) perceived their knowledge of English to be an advantage but other languages were far less common: Ger-

man (25%), Italian (15%), Croatian (12%), and Russian (4%). Definitely, these results are far from desirable; for a candidate who has chosen a career in a sector in which one constantly communicates with foreign visitors and partners, this is a rather unfavourable picture, primarily because most students recorded only two languages. Thus, the average student can communicate in English; all other second languages are in spoken only by small minorities of the students. However, the levels given are of their subjective self-evaluation.

Concerning computer skills, students listed mostly competences with the Internet, Microsoft Office programmes (Word, Excel, Power Point), Ganttproject, Photoshop, Publisher, Wordpress, Video Maker, Corel Draw, and Windows Movie-maker. Some students reported that they had mastered computer systems in travel agencies or hotel receptions.

**Presentation (the ability to demonstrate employability assets and present them to the market in an accessible way)**

The motivation letters revealed some disappointing results: the substance of students' letters was rather conservative. Although they were advised to use special, original, innovative approaches, they did not make much effort in this regard. Only two letters stood out as original, by adding a personal touch to a standard letter. However, several students seemed to have copied examples from the Internet. The author posits that this is due to a lack of initiative and demonstrates typical attempts to achieve results without effort. Therefore, though we presumed that motivation letters would demonstrate original, innovative, salient and/or striking approaches, we found hardly any outstanding ones. The students are rather inept at presenting and promoting themselves. Such skills are obviously limited and therefore should be given more attention in faculty curricula. Students have to work on their job marketability; without self-presentation and self-promotion, endeavours their job search will not be effective.

Similarly, more effort has to be made toward revealing one's attributes that match the needs of the employer. The author noticed almost no any proof that the students had concentrated on the employers' needs and specifics, e.g. "As far as I know, knowledge

and professionalism are very important in your company". Although it had been repeatedly stressed that letters have to be tailor-made in order to attract the attention of recruiters students did not make much effort in this direction.

Regarding their personal qualities, students emphasized mostly experiential skills, though research (Harkison et al., 2011) suggests that some managers are more interested in personality. We found these attributes, traits and virtues mostly in motivation letters where students had an opportunity to expose some of their qualities thus suggesting to the recruiter that they would be an asset for a company. Some (not all) students emphasized qualities such as "I am reliable and hardworking", "I am young, independent and enthusiastic", "I like working with people", "I am well-organized, flexible and kind". They also stressed attributes such as "positive approach", "work ethics", "politeness", and "loyalty". Considering the positions they applied for, these qualities could be valuable.

Employers always look for new employees with predispositions for managerial positions (organizational/managerial skills). Students listed skills like "I am goal-oriented", "I am good at motivating team members", "uring faculty seminars I am usually the head of the group", "team leader on multiple occasions", "time management is my advantage", "I organized several events for my friends and my family", "I used to guide school groups in my hometown". Although we have a sample of the second- and the third-year students with some experience in this field, we posit that there is room for improvement; such skills can be traced through activities as class representatives, team managers in school assignments, volunteers in university extra-curricular initiatives, experience at organizing events, etc.

Although the diversity of the industry and its subsectors provide working opportunities for a wide array of skills, in recent years there has been a shift within Europe from specific skills towards more generic competencies (ILO, 2001). Therefore, students should pay more attention to revealing their (eventual) team-working skills, problem-solving skills, ability to work under stress pressure or self-management, etc.

Deployment – a linked set of abilities that includes career management skills, job search skills and strategic approach

Only a few students took part in study or placement mobility exchanges; 21% studied abroad, and 13% of them fulfilled placements in other EU countries or the USA. Students' willingness to be mobile seems to be rather limited.

Although the faculty offers several non-formal trainings (e.g. communication skills seminars, successful job interviews, additional language courses, etc.), the students' documents reveal that very few of them participate in these forms of lifelong learning if they are not obligatory. We expected these knowledge and skills to be mentioned in students' documents; there were hardly any mentions of such items. We presume these students had not attended any optional workshops, seminars or other events organized by the faculty, most of which were free.

As to other certificates verifying non-formal learning, we found that 9% students had obtained local licences for guiding tourists. Further, we determined that none of the students obtained national vocational qualification (NVQ) certificates although 23 NVQs in tourism and hospitality are available in Slovenia. However, this result is hardly surprising since research reveals that NVQ certificates have not acquired the reputation of being reliable qualification indicators, neither among employers nor among actual and potential employees in Slovenia (Rok, 2013).

In sum, students' CVs reflect very limited diligence regarding participation in all forms of lifelong learning. We presume that due to limited work experience students have not gone through situations that force staff in the THI to develop and improve their knowledge and skills continuously. Nevertheless, various forms of non-formal learning and adopted skills would be a good signal for employers and would prove a strategic approach to career building.

Surprisingly, students presented a meagre of job-related skills, e.g. "experience in working at the front desk", "mixing cocktails", "reception tasks", "administration tasks", "I know how to make a SWOT analysis", "skills in event management", "marketing skills", "I am experienced in travel agency work". Given the considerable amount of their practical experience in the THI, students could ex-

press more about their skills related to their posts and tasks.

Unfortunately, due to the adopted methodology, diverse job-search techniques could not be explored in detail within this analysis (e.g. job-search patterns, job-interview skills, access to (in)formal networks, etc.)

A number of findings emerged from this study. The motivation letter and CV analysis revealed several disappointing facts. Although we presumed that students' work corroborates their awareness about the need to continuously develop various competencies in order to be competitive in the labour market, we found that students generally lack the curiosity and enthusiasm for learning and development of their capabilities. Their works show relatively poor awareness of the need to expose one's assets in order to be competitive. Clearly, they are not as yet aware of the pace of contemporary business requirements as well as of the increased youth unemployment rates. Though their work experience is limited, deficits in this area can be compensated. The data also demonstrated that some of them consider that placements provide enough work experience; in this they are incorrect, and we expect that their first placement experience will give them a push towards more proactive behaviour.

### Conclusion

This paper reports on the status of students' attitudes, achievements, and endeavours towards a competitive performance on the job market. The implications based on these findings are that the faculty is in need of new techniques and strategies of learning with the aim of improving the students' abilities to obtain work after graduation. Students need to realize that employers in the THI are looking for something in addition to a degree; they seek several additional skills and are sophisticated in identifying them in the recruitment procedures.

The faculty must assist students through raising their awareness about what employers seek in graduates, thereby helping them acquire these skills throughout their studies. The faculty can also help students gather and present their skills and experience in personal development plans and CVs, thus facilitating the articulation of students' skills at job interviews. They should be encouraged to utilise all

forms of learning provided by the university, especially optional forms of lifelong learning, specialized in various fields. In addition, university career services must work closely both with students and employers on the development of employability skills.

In order to enhance graduate employability, the faculty must introduce several new approaches: from the very beginning of their studies, students have to be presented with an overview of the labour market situation and the THI requirements. This process should enhance their motivation to work on their competencies both through formal and non-formal learning experiences. By putting their competencies into practical applications regularly, students can also verify whether the educational system provides relevant knowledge. Moreover, university career centres have to introduce students to career planning. Students need to be informed about employment opportunities so that their study and career decisions are based on choice rather than chance (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Alumni clubs must also take part in these activities.

Finally, the limitations of this analysis must be discussed. The findings cannot be generalized beyond this study group. Furthermore, this analysis provides an overall picture of the whole sample of students, while within the sample there were some individuals with excellent documents and some with several basic errors in grammar, spelling and/or business correspondence. Next, this analysis focused only on students' written presentation abilities. However, students' job interview skills should also be studied to gain a more complete understanding of this issue. A large variety of stakeholders (especially recruiters) would also provide further insight into this area. There is clearly a need for further research into the effects of measures taken to improve the situation.

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