

Analysis for the Curricular Design of Tourism Studies in the Dominican Republic: Competences and Professional Profiles to Enable the Prospective Development of Tourism

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Abstract

■ This paper presents a research project launched by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of the Dominican Republic in 2011 with the aim of drawing up a formal and methodological basis that is used as a guideline to redefine the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism.

The main strategic lines of action derived from two essential requirements: the need to cater for a wider range of professional profiles and the need for curricular touristification. On the one hand, the focus was on the development of the graduates' competences in all the cognitive areas involved in tourism to enable them to set up and manage tourist companies, products and destinations. This would generate innovative options of economic revitalization, decentralizing the current focus on the hospitality industry and incorporating new professional contexts with growth potential in the Dominican tourism sector.

On the other hand, tourism-related subjects were reinforced and close cooperation with professionals on active service was highly recommended. Given the heterogeneity of current and potential local tourist destinations, the idiosyncrasy of each regional educational setting was taken into account to encourage entrepreneurship by empowering future managers of small and medium sized companies to make the most of their resources.

Key Words:

Dominican Republic, tourism, education, competences, development

Resumen

■ La necesidad de repensar y redefinir los estudios universitarios de turismo en la República Dominicana, donde el sector turístico es clave para el desarrollo económico, provocó que el Ministerio de Educación Superior, Ciencia y Tecnología dominicano lanzara en 2011 un proyecto destinado a elaborar una base metodológica que sirva de guía para el rediseño de la Licenciatura en Turismo.

Las principales líneas estratégicas se han formulado partiendo de dos requisitos esenciales: la necesidad de cubrir una gama más amplia de perfiles profesionales y la necesidad de "turistificación" curricular.

Las competencias de los graduados en todos los ámbitos cognitivos del turismo deberían desarrollarse mediante una formación dirigida a la creación y gestión de empresas turísticas, productos y destinos. El objetivo es generar opciones innovadoras para la revitalización económica, la descentralización del enfoque actual en la hotelería y la incorporación de nuevos entornos profesionales con potencial de crecimiento en el sector turístico dominicano.

Dada la heterogeneidad de los destinos turísticos existentes y potenciales, la idiosincrasia de cada región se ha tenido en cuenta con el fin de contextualizar los planes de estudio y de fomentar el espíritu empresarial forjando los futuros directivos de pequeñas y medianas empresas, optimizando así sus recursos.

Palabras clave:

República dominicana, turismo, educación, competencias, desarrollo

Introduction

■ The Dominican Republic is one of the most important tourist destinations in the Caribbean. In recent years the current and also the preceding Dominican governments have opted for updating the local basic infrastructures and for attracting international investment. Environmentally-friendly conservationist policies have been implemented in the tourist areas, international promotional campaigns have been launched, and educational programs to train the local workforce have been devised. These factors have contributed to the economic growth and progress of this country.

Tourism studies provided by higher education institutions must nowadays cater to the needs of the fast-changing tourism industry. Thus, tourism students should master different competences to be able to face a number of challenges, such as the increased cultural diversity, a concern for sustainability, constant technological evolution and supply innovation (Sheldon, Fesenmaier & Tribe, 2011), as well as the ever-changing patterns of tourism behavior, which nowadays seem to be mainly related to experiential consumption (Morgan, Lugosi & Ritchie, 2010).

In order to prevent faculties from offering their graduates ephemeral knowledge and training rather than solid, long-lasting expertise to fit in today's professional world, educational systems require a paradigm shift in terms of form and content of curriculum design, organization and management (Wan & Gut, 2011). Educational approaches nowadays should try not to “address contemporary subjects (such as tourism) through outdated and ageing frameworks for scholarly activity and academic administration” (Coles, Hall & Duval, 2009, p.81).

A consistent educational approach, grounded on constructivist learning theories, should lead to the development of tourism students' competences and the fostering of lifelong learning to underpin their prospective careers.

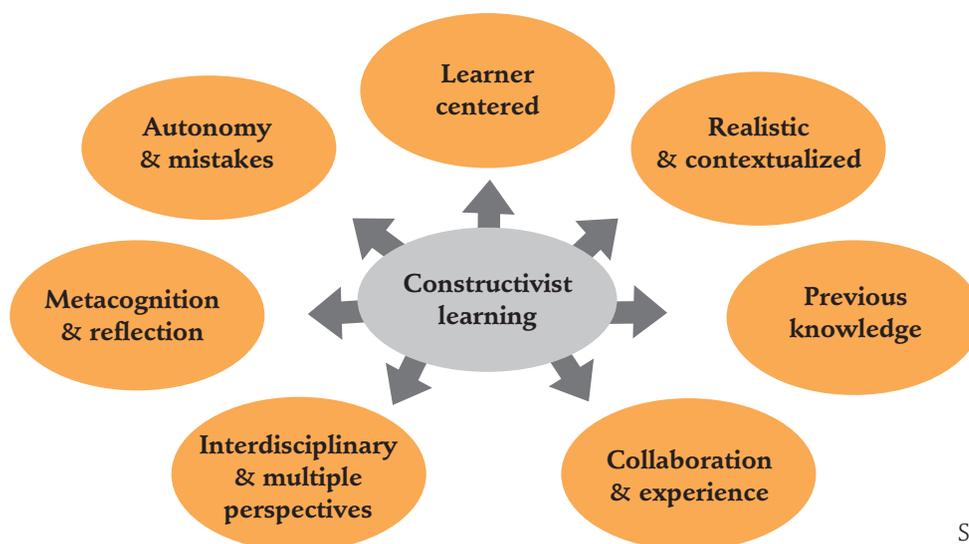
Background and Rationale

Competence-Based Education

■ Constructivist learning theory, represented by Dewey, Montessori and Kolb among others, and based on experiential learning, derives from constructivism as depicted by authors like Piaget and Vygotsky. Summing up some of the main aspects of constructivist learning and teaching according to Wilson and Cole (1991), Lebow (1993), Jonassen (1994), Ernest (1995) and Honebein (1996), learning situations, environments, skills, content and tasks are relevant, realistic and contextualized, and the learning process is learner centered, so educators rather play the role of facilitators of knowledge.

Knowledge construction sustained on the learner's previous knowledge, beliefs and attitudes takes place through social negotiation, collaboration and experience. Multiple perspectives and representations of content are presented and encouraged, and knowledge complexity is reflected in an emphasis on conceptual interrelatedness and interdisciplinarity. In addition, a wide range of activities, opportunities, tools and settings are provided to promote metacognition, reflection and awareness, sometimes through autonomous exploration and through errors, which are regarded as part of the process.

Figure 1 Constructivist learning



Source: Own study

At present, the focus on the development of the learners' competences is aimed at facilitating applicability in real-life professional environments, and preparing students for their future role in society in terms of employability and citizenship. In this sense, three outstanding projects set a valuable frame of reference: Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe and Tuning Latin America.

The proposal formulated in 2005 by the Commission of the European Communities on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning set out a Reference Framework including eight key competences. It is assumed that competences consist of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to a given context and that key competences in particular are the ones needed for personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. The key competences identified in this model are: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and finally cultural awareness and expression. Many of these competences overlap, as essential features in one domain may support competence in another, and all of them have the same value. Obviously, they incorporate a number of cross aspects, such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision-taking, and constructive management of feelings.

Tuning Educational Structures in Europe started as a project in 2000 to link the political objectives of the Bologna Process to the higher education sector. In 2004 it originated the Tuning Latin America project in order to identify and exchange information, and to improve collaboration between Latin American universities so as to enhance the quality, effectiveness and transparency of their educational systems. The main objective was to facilitate the mobility of students and professionals in Latin America and worldwide. According to Tuning Educational Structures in Europe (2005, p.1), "competences represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values". Therefore, competences involve different concepts: the production and transmission of knowledge, the relationship between education and society, the mission and values of the education system, teacher training and assessment practice, and student performance.

Different types of competences can be developed gradually from every learner's internal motivations: basic or fundamental, generic or common, specific or targeted, and career-oriented. More specifically, three kinds of generic competences can be distinguished: instrumental, interpersonal and systemic.

Competences (or competencies) are the foundation of

competence-based education (or competency-based education). As stated by Burns (1972), CBE concentrates on the specific skills and abilities that employers look for, with a special emphasis on the specification of the competences that can be acquired by the learners. Several definitions of CBE exist. Yet, all of them refer to the process that moves education from focusing on what students supposedly need to learn in an academic setting, to what they need to know and can do in various complex situations, for example in terms of knowledge transfer in a specific workplace.

Thus, the Tuning Latin America project indicates that the teaching model entailed in CBE seeks to connect academic, scientific and everyday knowledge. CBE offers comprehensive education, which encompasses the learner's cognitive capacity and know-how in life and for life, i.e. knowing how to be enterprising, how to live in the community and how to work in a team. Educational programs in CBE aim at promoting both generic competences and subject-area related competences, formed in several course units and assessed at different stages.

In a changing society, CBE provides many advantages from the Tuning Latin America project's perspective. To start with, this approach can be used as a guiding principle in identifying the professional and academic profiles of study programs. It can also foster the development of an educational paradigm which is primarily learner-oriented and geared towards knowledge management. Furthermore, CBE responds to the growing demand from society on lifelong learning, and allows for more flexibility in the organization of education. It contributes as well to the search for greater levels of employability and citizenship, while encouraging an agreed definition of a common language that should enable exchange and dialogue among all the stakeholders. Finally, a competence-based approach facilitates the construction and consolidation of the Latin America, Caribbean and European Union Area of Higher Education (UEALC/ALCUE).

Competency models have been used in a wide range of professional environments. Sandwith's Competency Domain Model is often used in the hospitality industry as a descriptive tool that makes it possible to identify and categorize competences for job performance. Such model classifies competences into five domains: conceptual/creative, leadership, interpersonal, administrative and technical (Sandwith, 1993).

The conceptual/creative domain refers to the cognitive skills required to be aware of an organization's strategies and policies, whereas the leadership domain is related to the competencies needed to empower employees and build an effective team. The interpersonal domain is concerned with relationship building within an organization, and includes oral, written and telephone communication skills, as well as conflict management

and negotiation skills. To finish with, the administrative domain involves knowing about an organization's rules and enforcing them, while the technical domain encompasses those skills which are essential in order to perform a specific job.

By following a constructivist, competence-based approach to tourism, education can be aligned with the reality of the tourism industry so that the transfer of knowledge from educational settings can benefit not only the people who are directly involved in the sector, but also the local society, by contributing to a nation's economic growth at both micro and macro levels. For many developing countries, tourism is one of the main sources of foreign income and the number one export category, creating much needed employment and opportunities for infrastructure development (UNWTO, 2011). Moreover, the social and environmental impacts of ethically-practiced tourism should have relevant consequences for regional and global progress.

The global forces driving tourism cannot be restrained, but tourism stakeholders have the opportunity to "fashion the future to their needs rather than simply to regard future events as beyond control" (Dwyer et al., 2008, p.55). Educators and administrators are thus required to assume active, responsible leadership roles in order to enable change through the power of education and the potential of tourism both as a transformational tool and as a means to a higher end. To that effect, tourism students should be trained to eventually become responsible leaders and stewards for the hospitality and tourism-related companies and organizations operating in their local destinations (Sheldon, Fesenmaier & Tribe, 2011).

This process is a particularly relevant issue in developing countries, since to become competitive they require coherent policies, effective and efficient institutions and a proactive private sector. A national tourism development strategy must address issues that affect the tourism industry and establish linkages with other sectors of the economy. Governments ought to be fully aware of the implications of different tourist developments and encourage growth models accordingly. Comprehensive tourism development ought to imply targeted support programs, investment in infrastructure and increased community involvement. In addition, stronger domestic markets should lead to benefits for the domestic economies, while at the same time integrating within global tourism networks (UNDP, 2011).

Tourism studies and the tourism industry in the Dominican Republic

■ Even though tourism is the second source of income for the Dominican Republic after the transfer of remittances from Dominican residents abroad, at present

it is regarded as the main revenue generator within the country, as well as one of the main producers of direct and indirect wealth, the largest employment provider and a top facilitator for socioeconomic interaction with other countries. The economic development of this emerging country nowadays relies on growing tourism receipts to offset the decline in the agricultural and manufacturing industries (Padilla & McElroy, 2011).

The construction of hotels on the island to host an international summit of heads of state in the mid 50's gave birth to tourism in a country immersed in a delicate political situation, further impetus for the Dominican Republic to show the world its best image. The Dominican hotel industry was gradually built up. In the 80's, a major boom took place with the arrival of Spanish and American entrepreneurs, mainly hoteliers. The Ministry of Tourism was created and the professional international promotion of this Caribbean destination began (Miolán, 1998).

The need for trained professionals was ignored until the 80's, when the international private companies operating in this country started to train the people working in the tourism industry to meet their needs for qualified top and middle management positions (Olivares, Lladó & Díaz, 1996).

In 1981 the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) initiated the Hotel Administration educational program, supported first by Cornell University, and later by the University of Nevada. The Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE) also has many years' experience in training professionals in the field of hospitality and tourism. In 1990, the bachelor's degree was created to provide the human resources of the Dominican tourism industry with the knowledge, skills and values needed to boost the economic and social development of the various regions that have based their economies on hotel, restaurant and tourism services. Tourism studies have been offered at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD) since 2005.

Market preferences currently focus on tourism which is compatible with the environment, and the local community and culture. Meanwhile, the Dominican tourism industry seeks to enhance the pattern of sustainable development across the nation by establishing rules and regulations, and strengthening social responsibility. It aims at involving the local communities in tourism activities, as well as creating social and institutional capital to foster human progress.

The Dominican economy is facing great challenges, and the country requires strong environmental preservation policies. Padilla & McElroy (2011) have identified external pressures to expand development into protected, fragile coastal areas, as well as increased pressures on already weak environmental and planning governmental structures. These authors highlight the explosive growth

of tourism in the south and east of the country, in contrast to a decline in the north. The result has been a subsequent rise in crime and pollution, followed by deep discounts that attract a lower class of tourists motivated by all-inclusive offers. Padilla & McElroy point out the heavy demands on infrastructure, but there is also a need for strong measures against to protect minors from exploitation and sexual abuse, and for institutional consolidation. Furthermore, the decentralization of the market from tour operators, increased income per tourist and hotel room, and improved labor supply are regarded as essential.

Concerning the education of human resources and the promotion of entrepreneurship in the hospitality and tourism industry, the existing academic programs do not serve the current needs. According to the Dominican Consortium for Tourism Competitiveness, this sector demands diversified, competence-based training at all levels, as the lack of appropriate skills affects not only the basic operational staff, but also the managers (Consorcio Dominicano de Competitividad Turística, 2011).

Given the increasing demand for competitiveness in the Dominican Republic, the labor market requires all levels of education and training in the areas of Tourism, Hospitality and Gastronomy, as well as the progressive specialization of professionals. Linking institutions of higher education with the production sector is a must so that today's students can have direct contact with the industry they will eventually be part of tomorrow, and curriculum design procedures need to take this into account.

Methodology

Needs analysis

■ The above-mentioned considerations and background have defined the conceptual framework underlying the redesign of the university studies of tourism in the Dominican Republic. In 2011 the Dominican Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology commissioned the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management CETT-UB (EUHT CETT-UB) from the University of Barcelona (Spain) to carry out this project with the aim of drawing up a formal and methodological basis for redefining the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism.

This project was grounded on the premise that higher education in the Dominican Republic must meet the internal needs of higher education institutions, the needs of the Dominican society, and the requirements of both national development and international integration. In this sense, the guidelines provided by the State Secretariat for Higher Education, Science and Technology (SEESCYT) must be followed.

In terms of academic needs, the Dominican universities should address the growing demand for technical and managerial expertise in tourism incorporating in the curriculum of the bachelor's degree the multi and interdisciplinary nature of this field of study with a constructivist, competence-based approach. Moreover, research and post degree studies ought to be developed to advance the science of tourism.

In order to identify the needs of the Dominican society in relation to the tourism industry, as well as the role of this sector in this country's development, a series of workshops and visits were conducted. These actions were carried out at Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo (UASD), the UASD being the pilot state institution that will serve as a model for other Dominican universities. The participants included a number of representatives from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Tourism, the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, the Association of Hotels and Tourism in the Dominican Republic (ASONAHORES) and a team of researchers from EUHT CETT-UB.

In these sessions the current situation of the Dominican tourism sector and the ministerial strategies were presented, as well as the main goals and trends within the private sector. In addition, an overview of the educational system was provided, with a special focus on higher education, the structure of the Management Schools from the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at UASD, and their curriculum of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism and Hotel Management (referred to as Plan 14). Such presentations were complemented by a number of practical workshops aimed at identifying the professional profiles that tourism studies in the Dominican Republic should target. Moreover, the syllabuses of each subject included in Plan 14 were analyzed in detail. The initial needs analysis was supplemented by visits to the regional schools where Plan 14 is offered and interviews with several teachers and students.

The growth potential of the Dominican tourism industry was forecast and taken as a baseline for future educational needs, since Plan 14 was deemed unfit and in need of urgent redesigning. Rural tourism, for example, should be fostered by generating basic accommodation in inland areas, while the complementary offers of tourism services need strengthening in both coastal and inland areas. This will require setting up transport and logistics companies, consulting firms, institutions involved in tourism planning, development and marketing, leisure centers, tour guide companies, travel agencies and catering providers.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, sustainable planning and development is a priority, and a wide range of tourism subsectors should be promoted as an alternative to the traditional sun and beach option, particularly those related to culture, cruises, sports, adventure acti-

vities, health, congresses and events, nightlife and entertainment, second homes and ecotourism. Higher education programs should cater to the diversification that these new trends reflect. The specialization could be achieved by linking specific subjects to the local development of tourism in different geographic regions of the Dominican Republic.

The needs analysis also showed some education and training deficits that the new curriculum should address. The general lack of foreign language skills underscores the need to develop the communicative competence of university students of tourism in English and at least one other foreign language. Another weakness are the inadequate technical skills at a basic operational level in different areas of the hospitality industry. Moreover, there is a shortage of qualified professionals in the fields of marketing, congress and event organization, and cultural heritage management. Finally, entrepreneurs offering complementary services -such as tour guides, tourist information officers, tour operators and transport providers- are scarce. All these shortcomings must be dealt with

Designing the curriculum

■ The next stage of the methodological procedure consisted in another series of workshops in which further work on the foundations of the new curriculum was undertaken. A team of teachers from UASD travelled to Barcelona and took part in these sessions, along with a number of teachers from EUHT CETT-UB who teach a Degree in Tourism at this school. The work carried out in Spain by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) to adapt the Spanish studies of tourism to the European Higher Education Area was taken as a foundation. The target professional profiles for the Dominican Republic were subsequently categorized keeping in mind the above-mentioned development needs of the Dominican tourism industry.

The target professional profiles related to each tourism subsector were classified into in transit profiles involved in basic operations, target profiles for tourism graduates, and complemented profiles that future graduates aiming at specialized top management positions may have eventually, provided they are specifically trained through postgraduate programs.

After taking into consideration the key competences for lifelong learning and Tuning competences, the transversal and specific competences associated to each professional profile were selected. More specifically, nine transversal competences were identified, which are connected to the five values that should be integrated in tourism education programs according to Sheldon, Fesenmaier and Tribe (2011). Assuming that mutuality is the basic principle that underlies a constructivist approach, tou-

rism students ought to develop their ability to work in a diverse, international context and to be ethically committed. They should also be able to engage actively in sustainable practices in order to achieve stewardship. In addition, knowledge as a principle is linked to managing information and to thinking critically in problem-solving and decision-making processes. Last but not least, professionalism is intertwined with several competences, such as proactivity, entrepreneurship, teamwork, customer service orientation and business vision.

Having established the transversal competences to be developed on a cross-curricular basis, thirteen specific competences were in turn related to different areas of tourism expertise. Taking into account the curriculum design of Plan 14, the various areas of expertise included in the new curriculum were defined and broken down into subjects (Table 1).

As a consequence, the main strategic lines of the redesign were validated. The first one highlighted the need to expand the target profiles of the university students aspiring to reach middle and top management positions in new areas of professional development apart from the traditional hotel and catering industry-related work contexts, such as public destination planning and management, mediation, transport and logistics, tourism products and activities, and training and research.

The second strategic line of the new curriculum design focused on the need for touristification, minimizing those basic subject matters which were not related to tourism, integrating tourism-oriented transversal subject matters and increasing the number of credits allocated to tourism-specific subjects (Figure 2).

Results and Discussion

The new Degree in Tourism

■ The redesign of the university studies of tourism was ultimately undertaken by the team of researchers at EUHT CETT-UB, who endeavored to configure a curriculum that would guarantee the homogeneous planning and development of the new Degree in Tourism. The curriculum must be consistent with global needs, and be based on standards of quality that should be manageable and achievable in any UASD Schools that offered such educational program.

By working on the same objectives and contents and using similar, coherent methodologies and assessment procedures in the classrooms of each one of the schools, the accreditation value of the syllabuses across UASD was enhanced. The new curriculum incorporated new fields of tourism-related study and restructured the credits. It also allowed for a wide range of specialization options

Table 1 Specific competences

Political and economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing the main political and administrative tourism structures • Understanding the legal framework
Research and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turning a problem into a research topic and elaborating conclusions • Evaluating tourism potential and the prospective analysis of exploiting it
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the main aspects of tourism: its environmental, social, cultural, legal, political, industrial and economic dimensions • Understanding how destinations, tourism structures and business sectors operate worldwide
Destination management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and managing tourist locations and destinations • Appreciating cultural and natural heritage
Tourism organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management: Managing different types of tourism organizations • Human Resources: Planning and managing the HR of tourism organizations • Commercial: Defining objectives, strategies and commercial policies • Finance: Managing financial resources • Operations and processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing the operational procedure of the accommodation industry Knowing the operational procedure of the catering industry Knowing the operational procedure of intermediation companies Identifying technical planning needs of tourism infrastructures and facilities

Source: Own study

Figure 2 Curriculum design process



Source: Own study

in order to meet the professional needs of the students, and to capitalize on the potential of each region's tourism industry.

As a result of analyzing the professional profiles targeted

by the new Degree in Tourism and their associated competences, twelve areas of study were considered essential: nine global areas complemented by three specialization areas. Each one of the twelve areas of study encompassed different types of subjects.

Figure 3 Curricular areas of study



Source: Own study

A specific, detailed learner-centered teaching plan for each subject was drawn up in turn, including the following sections: 1) a description of the subject (its designation, teaching period and number of credits); 2) the competences related to it; 3) the expected learning outcomes; 4) the interconnected subjects; 5) the learning-teaching methodology; and 6) the procedures devised to assess competence development following a constructivist competence-based approach.

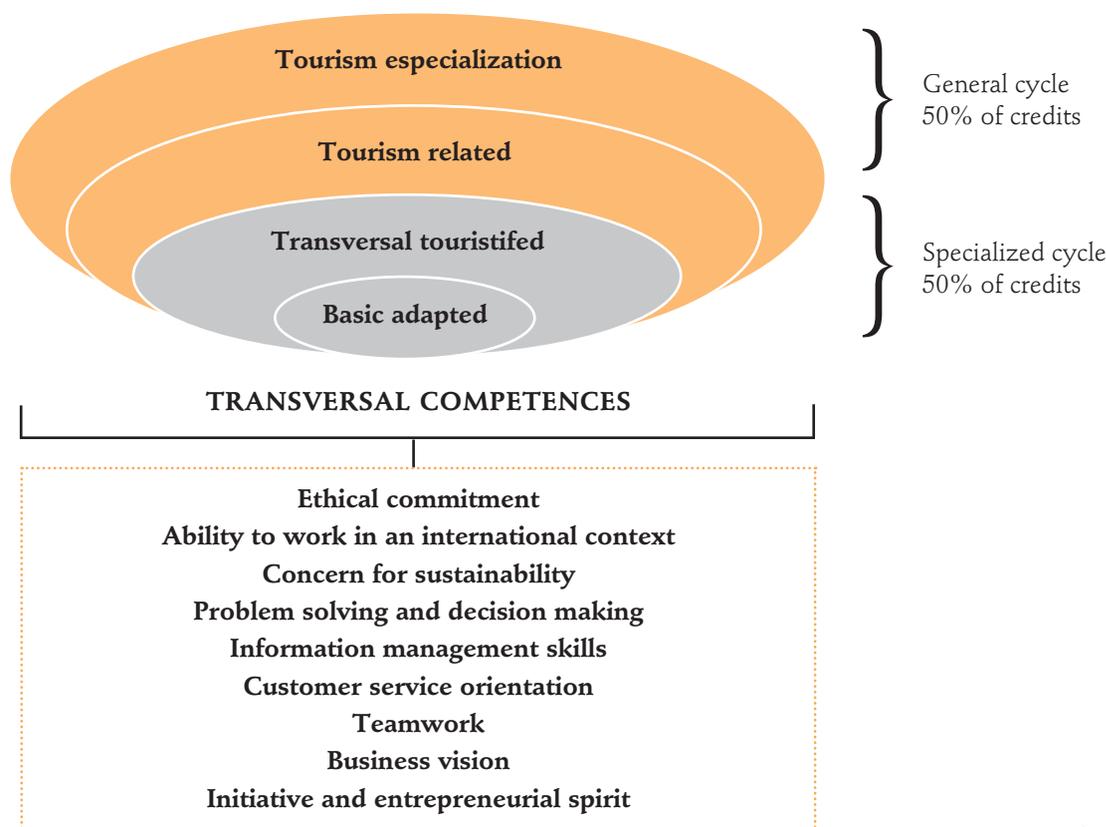
The development of the learners' key competences that may not be directly linked to tourism was enabled through basic subjects. Adapting general or transversal subjects to the reality of the tourism industry made it possible to develop transversal competences (Figure 4). Specialized education and training referring to different subsectors (depending on each school's location and the students' preferences) was provided by means of both compulsory tourism-based subjects and optional tourism specialization sub-jects dealing with specific competences. Two alternative itineraries were offered: on the one hand, hotel and catering management, focusing

on the administration of hotels, restaurants and other tourism service providers; on the other hand, tourism management, geared towards managing tourist products and destinations.

The new Degree in Tourism is meant to be a four-year program, and the total number of credits has a balanced distribution over such period of time. The interrelations between different subjects have been clearly identified and limited to allow for consistency interdisciplinarily. Even though some advanced subjects require prior knowledge acquired previously through other basic subjects, prerequisites have been kept to a minimum to make sure students can complete their degrees in four years of steady progress.

Given the importance of internships in the professional training of the students, practical placements in a real world setting are integrated in the curriculum as sources of extra-disciplinary knowledge and given specific credit value. Such internships are to be associated with the curricular specialization itinerary the students have

Figure 4 Subjects



Source: Own study

chosen. Two practical placements are included: the first period should enable the students to get in touch with the tourism industry in general, while the second period should provide the opportunity for them to gain experience in a specific area. A key issue involves standardization and consistent regulation of the intern-ship periods.

The Dominican tourism industry needs professionals who can communicate in foreign languages with tourists and customers, suppliers and other professionals, particularly in managerial positions. Being fully proficient in Spanish as a mother tongue, in English as a lingua franca, and in a second foreign language is a must. Therefore, the international scope of the new curriculum involves using three languages with different degrees of communicative competence: Spanish at a native level, English from a false beginner level and a second foreign language from an elementary level. The second foreign language could vary according to the geographical region where each school is located.

In order to improve the students' research skills, a number of credits can be fulfilled by conducting a research project which qualifies as a subject in its own right in the new curriculum. A project tutor should ensure the appropriate quality standards regarding the format and methodological approach of this work.

Recommendations

■ To optimize the new curriculum design, a number of recommendations were put forward by the team of researchers.

Higher education in tourism at UASD has been provided by Management Schools from the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. The creation of Schools of Tourism with their own identity, under the administration of the same Faculty, was highly recommended. Each school should be structured within departments based on the areas of study included in the curriculum of the new Degree in Tourism, and composed of qualified, specialized teachers, coordinated by department heads. One of the school's departments ought to be devoted exclusively to handling internships. The responsible individual for that department should be in charge of orienting the students, and should have a direct relationship with the Dominican tourism stakeholders.

In order to increase the students' professional competitiveness and employability, academic mobility must be encouraged. To support this, cooperation agreements that enable students to take part in domestic and international academic exchange programs should be considered.

Moreover, policies that raise the students' awareness of responsible behavior and environmentally-friendly practices in the educational context should be pursued. This line of action might have a positive impact on sustainability within the Dominican tourism industry and contribute to the building of a more balanced society.

The design and implementation of a consistent system to supervise academic quality standards would make it possible to assess the adequacy of the Degree in Tourism, the fulfillment of the curricular objectives and the effectiveness of the academic services. This in turn would allow for systematic review and improvement.

Some considerations must be formulated to finish with. The new Degree in Tourism intends to meet the educational needs of the Dominican tourism sector at a tactical level, providing future top and middle managers with the necessary competences to succeed. However, the employees who carry out basic operational tasks in the tourism industry also require some degree of training. Such training is not to be provided in a higher education environment, but rather at an earlier stage in the educational system. Consequently, offering technical studies in tourism, which might be followed by the new Degree in Tourism, should be seriously considered.

Furthermore, some professionals, after having obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Tourism, still require supplementary education and training that enable them to face high responsibilities at strategic levels. This fact suggests that Master's and postgraduate programs should be designed. These types of programs would facilitate the further specialization of graduates interested in pursuing careers in top management in various areas of the Dominican tourism industry. Designing a Master's degree with a special focus on research might give birth to a PhD program in tourism.

The future of the tourism sector depends heavily on initiatives derived from research projects, which therefore must be stimulated. The creation of a tourism observatory aligned with academic research should contribute to the scientification of tourism in the Dominican Republic. Resources should be devoted to research, development and innovation in the field of tourism to enable dialogue between academia and industry, so that the research skills of tourism graduates and postgraduates and the outcomes of their work have direct applicability in the sector.

Final considerations

■ To sum up, tourism is a strategic asset for the Dominican Republic and as such it must be taken care of consequently. Sufficient quality standards must be ensured so that tourism is long-lasting, it is not depleted by overexploitation, or becomes no longer efficient due

to lacking skilled workforce or management capacity. Tourism is a cross-cutting phenomenon which involves agents in several business sectors and areas of public administration. Training employees and providing them with an integrated tourism vision is the key to the success of the government policies that aim at turning tourism into a long-lasting, sustainable industry.

The above-mentioned reasons led the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of the Dominican Republic to undertake the redesign of the tourism studies at the UASD that has been presented in this article, with the underlying implication that such studies should contribute noticeably to this country's tourism strategy. A very relevant aspect in this case is that the need to train the future professionals in the Dominican tourism has been addressed by a ministry not directly related to the tourism sector.

As we have seen, the Ministry for Higher Education, Science and Technology endorsed the training of the future managers in the tourism sector and the future administrators of the Dominican tourism services through a project based on some basic principles: the transversality of the tourism industry, the need to meet the requirements of each subsector, the diversity of the local tourist areas, the need to adapt the educational programs to the tourism activities carried out locally, the need to revise the professional competences of the future tourism professionals, and the correlation with the strategic plan of tourism for the Dominican Republic.

Two questions can be raised at this point. The project of redesigning the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism used the UASD as the pilot public institution that will be a model for other Dominican universities. Therefore, the process that has been described in this article should also be carried out in the context of private higher education institutions. Assuming that the new Bachelor's Degree in Tourism is to be eventually implemented across the Dominican Republic following the government guidelines, one possible limitation of this project was the specificity of the UASD. This is why tailoring the redesign process to the specific conditions of private universities should enhance their implication to guarantee the success of this new approach.

The second issue well worth pondering is the applicability of the methodology that has been employed in this project to other areas of knowledge or other countries with similar needs. Because of the universal validity of the conceptual framework that provides the ground for competence-based education and the particularity of the detailed perspective offered by the needs analysis, the different stages of the curriculum design could be replicated in other geographical regions and could be extrapolated to educational programs in any other field. The outcomes would obviously be varied and idiosyncratic, catering to the needs of today's world.

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