

Employability Skills: the Needs of Tourism Industry versus the Performance of Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEI) are facing new challenges due to the substantial shift of higher education towards employability. Employability is a broad term which is understood as the ability to find and keep employment. Ability depends on several aspects, where the competency acquired stands as one of the most important characteristics. Conversely, skills, particularly employability skills, represent one of competency forming facets, the importance of which is growing steadily, not least in tourism. Despite the growth in importance, there still are skills which potential employees lack. Self-organizing capacity and problem-solving are the skills which are named most often in this context. The research has been developed in Latvia by conducting two surveys – a survey of tourism industry company managers and a survey of HEI tourism field graduates. The assessment of skills was performed for 67 employability skills divided into 8 groups. The theoretical background is based on the literature review. The comparison of survey results indicates a significant discrepancy between the expectations of tourism industry companies from their employees and the skills developed by graduates during their study process. In 64% of cases, the employability skills required by the industry superseded the actual performance of graduates.

Keywords: employability skills, importance, performance, tourism industry, graduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

Already since the dawn of the Bologna Process [9], the compliance with the needs of the labor market as a tool for raising the level of competitiveness and therefore, the employability of graduates, has been defined as the key facet in the European higher education area [28], [25], [19]. Despite the development spanning over twenty years, higher education institutions (HEI) are still facing challenges in forming their study programs in compliance with the needs of the labor market. The challenges include the fact that HEIs need to substantially reshape the very contents of their study programs and the form of their implementation as well as the fact that the actual needs of industries have not always been studied and defined. The term “employability” has not always been interpreted according to its essence and often understood only as of the required knowledge and professional skills necessary for getting a job. However, employability means professional competency which is formed by both knowledge and all types of skills for effective job performance. Professional competency is one of the key aspects of employability.

Employers expect that university degrees provide professional competency. They require that graduates not only exhibit knowledge but also demonstrate the most essential skills of the 21st century – employability skills [20], [24]. Scientists have

provided many definitions and clarifications of employability skills; they have also been defined in many documents of international institutions and countries. Assessing several definitions one can conclude that employability skills are generic skills which employers expect from their employees, regardless of their position and industry. These skills are related to communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, the ability to negotiate, professionalism and ethics [3], [20], [24]. Scientists and industry experts hold a common view that employability skills are crucial for employability. There are several research papers which assess the importance of particular employability skills. However, relatively little research has been conducted on their importance for specific industries and on reflecting the performance of the employability skills of graduates.

As part of this article, the authors have performed research leading to three findings – (1) the assessment of the importance of employability skills, (2) the assessment of employability skills performance based on self-evaluation of HEI graduates and (3) a comparison of the importance of employability skills and the actual performance. The authors chose to research the tourism industry of Latvia as a substantial industry for the country's economy employing every tenth employed person in Latvia. Data was acquired by surveying managers of the Latvian tourism industry and graduates of tourism-related HEIs. The surveys required assessing the importance or performance of identical skills, therefore acquiring both an opinion on a particular skill or performance and performing comparative analysis. It was the comparison that provided the most significant information to HEIs in terms of raising the competitiveness of study programs.

2. EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AS THE MAIN ASPECT OF EMPLOYABILITY

This paper explores the literature on employability and, in more details, on employability skills as one of the most important employability characteristics. Employability skills have become the most significant part of the competency needed in the labor market in many sectors, especially in the tourism industry.

The term “employability” was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century to describe the probability of being employed [29]. Employability in itself is a complex and at the same time an abstract concept. It is complex since it is formed by several factors and components. The factors related to skills and abilities have been named as the most significant [17]. Some authors also highlight factors like willingness, capacity and functional flexibility [22]. They are abstract because employability refers to a graduate's achievements and his/her ability to be employed [36], [11], [22], [2], [29], [33]. An “employable” person is not necessarily someone who has a job. They are rather people who have an opportunity to become employed. They may already be employed or someone who is just seeking a job. They may even be persons who are not job-seekers, but who possess qualities,

which make them potentially suitable for employment. According to Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth [11], it can be argued that employability is a “psychological construct that embodies individual characteristics that (...) enhance the individual-work interface”.

Although the term “employability” has been frequently used in literature, there does not exist a unified understanding of what this term implies and the ways it can be interpreted and measured. This article employs an interdisciplinary approach, which merges the understanding of employability from the perspectives of both – employers and higher education. Besides, the research is based on the competency approach which, by merging the opinions of both sides, provides an opportunity to obtain the most comprehensive understanding and definition [30]. From the employer’s perspective, employability means that the potential employee has acquired certain competencies that certify readiness for the workplace [5], [14], [4]. Some international research projects have been conducted to understand the needs of employers and therefore to make it possible to define professional competency required in the labor market of particular industries. Assessing the results of the research, one can conclude that in many industries the most expected skill by employers is the skill of employability [16]. Some researches even indicate that hard formal and technical vocational skills are considered to be of declining importance [26]. At the same time, research also reveals that according to employers, soft skills represent the weakest abilities of potential employees [1], [18], [20], [31]. From the perspective of HEIs, employability refers to a graduate’s achievements and his/her potential to obtain a graduate job [36]. However, higher education can assess only the graduate’s past performance. There will also always be some employability aspects which a student would not be capable of developing at all or in part.

It is crucial that HEIs entrusted with the duty of preparing graduates to enter the workforce [14] understand what employers need from them in terms of preparing graduates towards this goal. This way HEIs could provide students with opportunities to develop their competency to a maximum possible extent, thus improving their employability.

Hillage and Pollard [13] argue that employability depends on (a) the range of competencies obtained; (b) the approach to use them; and (c) the context in which these competencies are employed. As it follows, the key requirement for employability is to first develop the necessary competency and then to apply it accordingly. Other authors, for example Asonitou [2] and Harvey [12], also emphasize it. The primary role of HEIs is to ensure that students have an opportunity to develop a competency formed by knowledge, skills and competences [27]. When working out the contents and the process for the development of the necessary competency, HEIs are allowed to make their graduates “employable”. The main task of HEIs involves the development of study processes, their contents, forms of testing for providing each student with opportunities to develop his/her employability. Unfortunately, some literature often mistakenly stresses that employability is an institutional achievement rather than the propensity of the individual student to get employment [12]. A HEI must provide multifaceted opportunities, which are used by a student for the development of his/her competency.

As suggested before, employers in many sectors emphasize general skills, or more precisely, employability skills as the main aspect of competency.

It is believed that the term *general skills* appeared in 1979 when the *Further Education Unit* of the United Kingdom highlighted the common nature of skills [15], [32]. Since then several lists of common skills have been created, grouped and regrouped. A more

contemporary approach separates the skills which are considered as the most important for employability. This has resulted in group skills referred to as employability skills.

Employability skills are general and apply regardless of the specific nature of the work, the type of industry, the type of business or the level of the position in the overall hierarchy. Employability skills are defined and their importance is explained in many documents of international organizations (EU, ILO, OECD etc.) and national reports. Their importance has been assessed by many scientists, both in terms of employment [10], [21] and in specific sectors [8], [34], [35].

The importance of employability skills is changing from year to year. If by 1990, interpersonal or social skills were considered to be the most important skills in employment, researchers now consider the skills of critical and strategic thinking as ones of the most important employability skills. Self-organizing capacity, problem-solving [1] and management skills [6], [23] have also been defined as currently insufficient. As stated above, the development of higher education in the area of tourism requires a substantive understanding of which employability skills are required for working in the industry.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

To assess the importance of employability skills and their performance in the tourism industry in Latvia, three-stage research was conducted. The first stage involved a survey of Latvian tourist industry employers. The second stage involved a survey of graduates of Latvian tourism-related study programs of HEIs focusing on learning how graduates assess the performance of their skillset. The third stage involved a comparison of both surveys (see Table 1. Research methodology).

Table 1. Research methodology

Review of literature on employability and employability skills	
Literature review based on 34 scientific sources and 2 documents	
The importance of employability – tourism industry employers’ opinion	
A survey of managers of tourism industry companies of (N=279). The importance of employability skills measured on 6-point Likert scales with response categories ranging from 1, if a respondent considers a particular employability skill insignificant, to 6, if he/she believes it highly important.	The assessment of the importance of employability skills according to groups of skills as well as of each skill individually was performed employing the descriptive statistics method. A two-sample test was performed to assess if an affiliation with the industry sector, the size of a company and its duration of operations have a statistical impact on the results.
Performance of employability skills – tourism study programs graduates’ opinion	
A survey of graduates of HEIs in Latvia (N=276). Performance of employability skills measured on 6-point Likert scales with response categories ranging from 1, if a student considers his/her	The assessment of graduates’ performance for each of the skills was performed by employing the descriptive statistics method.

particular employability skill is very poor, to 6, if he/she considers it highly advanced.	
A comparison of graduates and employers	
A comparison of opinions of managers regarding the importance of employability skills and the opinions of graduates on the performance of employability skills of the respective study programs.	The coherence of the internal values of data stemming from the surveys of employers and graduates was performed based on Cronbach α test; Compliance of data of company employer and graduate surveys with a normal division based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was researched; The comparison of the employer assessment of the importance of employability skills and the graduate self-assessment of performance employed the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test.

Both the survey of employers of the Latvian tourism industry and the survey of graduates of tourism-related study programs of Latvian HEIs involved asking for an assessment of employability on the 6-point Likert scale, where employers assessed importance and graduates – performance. The importance of employability skills and performance were measured using 67 skill items adopted from the employability skills framework of Australia [7]. According to this framework, all employability skills are divided into 8 skill groups – communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative, planning and organizing, self-management, learning, technology. The Australian employability skills framework was selected as one of the most detailed frameworks developed by a researcher or an organization.

279 employers engaged in the tourism sector participated in the employer survey. Overall, at the time of conducting the survey, there were 737 companies engaged in tourism in Latvia. Micro-enterprises and self-employed persons were not included in the general cluster. The final sample consisted of managers who represented three various tourism industry sectors – accommodation sector, catering sector and tour operators or travel agencies – 268 respondents altogether. Respondents who represented other tourism industry sectors, for example, tourism information centers or airports were not included in the final sample, since the number of respondents was very small. The profile of respondents reflects that 17% of them represent accommodation companies, 37% – catering companies, 29% – accommodation companies, which also offer catering services and 14% – companies organizing travel services. At the time of the survey almost all companies (98%) had been operating in the market for over a year, which means that their managers had an established view on the importance of individual skills. Moreover, at the time of the survey 125 companies (46.6%) had been operating for 10 years or more.

The second survey collected data from 276 graduates of tourism-related study programs of Latvian HEIs. There is no precise data about graduates in the respective industry in Latvia, therefore all service industry graduates of Latvian HEIs were considered as a general cluster. The final sample included respondents who had graduated from one of bachelor or master study programs implemented by HEIs of Latvia. Respondents who had graduated from both – bachelor and master programs – were included in the

sample based on the highest education acquired. Overall, higher education in the field of tourism in Latvia can be acquired in 17 study programs of 10 HEIs – 5 first level programs of higher education, 8 bachelor programs and 4 master level study programs. Out of all 276 respondents of the graduate survey, 59% work in tourism sector companies. Moreover, 8% of them are company owners and representatives of senior management. Like in other countries, a part of students does not work in tourism-related companies. More concretely – at the time of the survey, 30% of respondents noted that they worked in companies of other sectors. This stands to prove that the acquired professional competency could be used in other industries as well.

(1) Analysis of the importance of employability skills

The survey results reflect that employers estimate highly the importance of employability skills for work in tourism sector companies. 63 out of 67 skills analyzed turned out with a mean average 4 and higher. Moreover, 13 skills reached a mean average of 4.5 and higher (see Table 2. Report of the means and standard deviations for variables used in the first phase of this study – research of the importance of employability skills). As reflected by the survey, the most important skills according to employers are those related to the understanding of customer needs. The low standard deviation for this skill testifies of a similarly high opinion of all employers in terms of its significance. Assessing the opinions of employers regarding the groups of skills, one can conclude that the lowest mean average (4.14) is related to the *Technology* group. None of the skills in this group has a higher mean average than 4.37. This represents a discrepancy with the dominating tendency in the global labor market – increasing use of technology in services. At the same time, the *Self-management* skill group received the highest mean average, which points to the fact the employers value the capacity of employees to evaluate own performance, to have the required knowledge and the capacity for articulating ideas as well as taking personal responsibility.

Table 2. Report of the means and standard deviations for variables used in the first phase of this study – research of the importance of employability skills.

Group of Skills	Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication skills	Listening and understanding	4.72	.499
	Speaking clearly and directly	4.77	.420
	Negotiating responsively	4.70	.475
	Understanding the needs of internal and external customers	4.85	.474
Teamwork	Working as an individual and as a member of a team	4.71	.550
Problem-solving	Showing independence and initiative in identifying problems and solving them	4.51	.684
Initiative and enterprise	Adapting to new situations	4.74	.447

Group of Skills	Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Planning and organizing	Managing time and priorities- setting timelines, coordinating tasks for self and with others	4.69	.538
	Being resourceful	4.74	.442
	Taking initiative and making decisions	4.60	.601
	Adapting resource allocations to cope with contingencies	4.66	.518
Self-management	Taking responsibility	4.82	.427
Learning	Being open to new ideas and techniques	4.52	.583

As part of the research, it was essential also to assess the existence of substantial differences between companies engaged in various sectors of the tourism industry. Since there are companies engaged in two tourism sectors offering both accommodation and catering services, the research divided them separately. Most of the companies offering both services are guesthouses in rural areas, where they have a small number of employees and their tasks and duties have not been strictly defined in one or another sector. Comparing the opinions of company managers engaged in various sectors of the tourism industry on the importance of skills based on the descriptive statistics division of skill groups, it becomes clear that employers engaged in the accommodation sector have provided the lowest rating of almost all groups of skills. *Communication skills* and *technology skills* are the only skill group where accommodation sector entrepreneurs have not provided the lowest rating (see Table 3. The assessment of the significance of skill groups according to industry sectors).

Table 3. The assessment of the significance of skill groups according to industry sectors

Employability skill groups	Mean for the Accommodation business sector	Mean for the Catering company sector	Mean for the Accommodation and catering services sector	Mean for the Tour operations and travel agencies sector
Communication	4.48	4.24	4.44	4.50
Teamwork	4.23	4.44	4.55	4.50
Problem-solving	3.98	4.12	4.25	4.39
Initiative and enterprise	3.91	4.38	4.44	4.61
Planning and organizing	4.08	4.35	4.55	4.51
Self-management	4.34	4.48	4.48	4.60
Learning	4.12	4.13	4.32	4.28
Technology	4.24	4.05	4.16	4.32

This points to the fact that compared to employers of other sectors, the employers of these companies provide a lower assessment of the importance of employability skills of their

employees. Conversely, employability skills appear to be most important to entrepreneurs engaged both in accommodation and catering sector as well as to tour operators and travel agencies. Tour operators and travel agencies have rated skills in *Initiative and enterprise* group as the most important (mean=4,61). This group includes such skills as adapting to new situations, being creative, generating a range of options, etc. It confirms that the organization and implementation of travel arrangements are the most creative of the three tourism industry sectors, where each employee must possess creative skills in finding the best solution. The differences in the importance of the skill groups among small companies (up to 16 employees) have been assessed employing the two-sample *t*-test. Statistically significant differences were established only in the *teamwork* skill group. Furthermore, they are particularly highly rated by representatives of larger companies. This stands to show that employability skills are equally important regardless of the size of a company. However, there are differences according to industry sectors.

(2) Analysis of the performance of employability skills

Based on the graduate survey, a descriptive analysis was performed for analyzing the performance of employability skills. Analysis of graduate assessment of their performance for each of the 76 skills reveals that 14 skills scored a mean average of 5 and higher. Assessing their skills, graduates rate such communication skills as listening and understanding and the skill of independent reading the highest (see Table 4. Report of the means and standard deviations for variables used in the first phase of this study – research of the performance of employability skills).

Table 4. Report of the means and standard deviations for variables used in the second phase of this study – research of the performance of employability skills.

Group of Skill	Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication skills	Listening and understanding	5.41	0.828
	Reading independently	5.38	0.924
Teamwork	Working as an individual and as a member of a team	5.28	0.941
Learning	Being open to new ideas and techniques	5.21	1.038
	Being prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills	5.23	0.989

Out of all the highest rated skills by graduates, skills like being open to new ideas and techniques and empathizing represent a high standard deviation – 1.038 and 1.129 accordingly, which reflect the mixed opinions of graduates. There are several skills where graduates assess their performance as subpar. Low mean average (lower than 3) is assigned to such skills as speaking and writing in languages other than native and English (mean=3,80), applying a range of strategies to problem-solving (mean=3,75) and using mathematics including budgeting and financial management to solve problems (mean=3,90).

(3) Analysis of performance and importance of employability skills

A comparison of importance and performance was performed to understand if there existed a difference between the necessities of

the tourism industry in respect of the employability skills of the employers and the actual skills of graduates. The comparison was made by employing the *Mann-Whitney U* test, which provides for comparing the differences between two independent groups if the conditional variable is measured on the ordinal scale. The results acquired reflect that employers rate the performances at a probability of 95% for 43 skills (64%), which is significantly higher than the own assessment by graduates ($p < 0.05$). This means that HEIs must pay greater attention to the development of almost 2/3 of skills. The biggest difference ($df > 100$) was observed for 7 skills (see Table 5. The skills, which registered the biggest differences in the comparison between the assessment of employers and graduates).

Table 5. The skills, which registered the biggest differences in the comparison between the assessment of employers and graduates

Skills	Average ranking			P-value
	Employers (UD)	Graduates (A)	The difference of average assessment ranking; $df = UD - A$	
Speaking clearly and directly	342.50	204.53	137.97	0.000
Understanding the needs of internal and external customers	327.17	218.24	108.93	0.000
Persuading effectively	340.58	206.39	134.19	0.000
Applying a range of strategies to problem-solving	333.84	211.73	122.11	0.000
Being resourceful	328.32	218.30	110.02	0.000
Adapting resource allocations to cope with contingencies	328.66	217.96	110.70	0.000
Taking responsibility	333.31	213.45	119.86	0.000

At the same time, it must be pointed out that the results reflect the fact that the assessment of skills by employers statistically was significantly lower compared to graduate assessment for four skills: 1) applying learning to “technical” issues and “people” issues ($df = -55,33$); 2) having enthusiasm for ongoing learning ($df = -26,68$); 3) reading independently ($df = -107,52$) and 4) empathizing ($df = -44,7$). Thus, in 6% of cases students assess their skills higher than it is required by the industry. Overall, the results of the research show that out of the 67 skills analyzed, the assessment of 48 skills (71.6%) reflect statistically significant differences. Taking into consideration the fact that the performance in only four skills is rated higher than their importance, one can conclude that the opportunities for the

development of skills in higher education must be significantly upgraded.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The research revealed a discrepancy between the assessment of the required employability skills by the employers and the skill performance assessment by the graduates. The highest of the industry-significant assessment established in 64% of cases in comparison with graduate performance signal insufficient development of employability skills in the tourism-related study programs of higher education. Therefore, it reflects an incompatibility of study programs with the needs of the labor market in the industry. At the same time, it is necessary to point out that this research must be continued since the differences in skills in 21 cases are not statistically significant. In the context of the changing external factors affecting the tourism industry, the significance of some specific individual skills can also change accordingly. Therefore, this research would be significant after the crisis of 2020, which particularly affected the operations of tourism companies.

The results of the research provide significant information to HEIs to form their study programs in a manner which would emphasize the opportunities of students for the development of their skills, including employability skills which are significant for the industry. In the context of HEIs, a solution can be found in two factors – the contents and the improvement of the overall study process. While the traditional goal of a HEI is providing knowledge, in this instance we encounter a necessity for a turning point in moving towards a greater development of skills.

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