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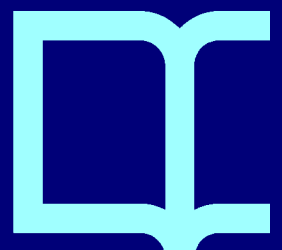
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Competences in higher education tourism internships

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the level of correspondence between the academic training received by students and the demands of the job market. This was achieved by analysing the competences that are developed in internships to provide useful information for universities, students and tourism companies.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative analysis was carried out using questionnaires administered to the supervisors of students on curricular internships. The level of tourism competences of students on the bachelor degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Sant Ignasi was assessed. A descriptive analysis and comparisons of means were carried out to investigate differences in competences between students undertaking internships, according to the hotel department and category.

Findings – The results of the study indicate that students undertaking internships improve their competences. Whether they undertake internships in one department or another does not affect the level of achievement of most competences. However, the category of a hotel does influence the level of development of the acquired competences.

Research limitations/implications – A questionnaire should be administered to students on their perceptions of the achievement of competences, as this could be compared with the supervisors' perceptions.

Practical implications – The study generates extremely valuable information for companies, universities and students, as it reveals which competences are attained and to what extent. Based on these results, universities can adapt their training activities and the hotel industry will have information on learning processes during internships.

Originality/value – The analysis provides an innovative research, a real assessment by employers of the competences attained. It also identifies the need for more research on the subject related to employers' perceptions of the level of competences that students develop in the workplace.

Keywords Competences, Knowledge, Tourism, Internship, Higher education, Scientific literature

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Today, tourism is one of the largest industries with the highest growth rates, and acts as a key global driver of economic development. The World Travel & Tourism Council's research reveals that the sector accounted for 10.4 per cent of global GDP and 319m jobs, or 10 per cent of total employment in 2018 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). Consequently, there is a need to train highly qualified professionals with knowledge and competences that ensure their employability. Hence, the role of education in the tourism and hospitality field is particularly relevant. It is vital for universities to meet the demands of the sector by forming close ties with industry and training students properly.

Curricula for the tourism and hotel industry are designed to meet the demands of the tourism sector. As stated by Raybould and Wilkins (2005), it is vital to adapt curricula and the set of competences required in the job market to both educational and industry needs. Rae (2007) noted that universities must interact effectively with industry and increase their commitment to meeting its requirements.



Scientific literature has generated an extensive debate about the quality of education and its connection with industry needs. To increase quality, greater interaction is needed between education and relevant stakeholders regarding the competences that are required (Subramonian, 2008). According to Dhiman (2012), many tourism companies are dissatisfied with graduates because their competences do not match workplace requirements, and they ask universities to generate better-trained graduates, with transferable skills that can be incorporated into the workplace (Barrie, 2006; Hofmann, 1998; Kember and Leung, 2005).

One of the aims of all higher education is to prepare students for their transition into the job market and professional world. This is an area in which internships are particularly relevant. As stated by García and Pérez (2008), in the framework of the European Higher Education Area it has been stressed that courses should focus on employability, to enable the development of students' professional competences and complete their training through the opportunity to complete internships during their training period. Mareque and De Prada (2018) and Molina *et al.* (2007) agreed that undertaking internships reinforce the theoretical and practical training received in universities and enables students to apply the capabilities and knowledge gained in their studies, and thus develop professional competences in the labour market.

Although numerous studies have analysed the competences that the tourism sector considers essential in graduates, there is a lack of research on employers' perceptions of the level of competences that students develop in the workplace. This study was designed to fill this gap in the literature by analysing the competence level of students for the bachelor degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Sant Ignasi (HTSI) through company supervisors' assessments of students on curricular internships. Internships are used in all the curricular designs of the universities that offer tourism studies. From the point of view of the research, the results obtained offer a high level of impact on the curricular improvements of tourist studies in higher education.

The main aim of this research is to analyse students' level of competences when developing internships to determine which teaching methods should be applied in the bachelor degree to improve current skills and meet the needs of the tourism industry.

To meet such an objective, an initial descriptive analysis to ascertain students' level of achievement of competences during their internships was undertaken. Then, a comparative analysis was carried out to determine whether the hotel category and department influence students' level of competences.

The conclusions of this study will be of great interest to universities, students and companies, as the results allow the suitability of the current model of teaching to be questioned and improvements to be implemented. In addition, this study will be a powerful tool for universities, as it provides a detailed analysis of students' performance from the company's perspective and of the competences that must be reinforced in students' learning to increase company satisfaction.

2. Literature review

Competences in tourism

The development of competences is one of the main objectives of the university education system. The scientific literature on the study of competences and their relationship with education is extensive and the number of studies has increased considerably in recent years (Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Ferreras-García *et al.*, 2019; Fitó-Bertran *et al.*, 2014; Gallifa and Garriga, 2010; Mulder, 2007; Mulder *et al.*, 2009; Ning and Downing, 2010; Tchiboza, 2011; Van Der Linden and Mendonça, 2006; Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2011). However, it is not easy to define the term competence from a review of the scientific literature. Several definitions have been stated during the last 40 years (Beckett, 2004; Boyatzis, 1982; Brockmann *et al.*, 2008;

Hartog, 1992; Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). For the purpose of this study, we use the definition of competence given by González and Wagenaar (2003, p. 255) in the Tuning project: "Competences represent a dynamic combination of attributes, abilities and attitudes. Fostering these competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences are formed in various course units and assessed at different stages".

As indicated by Munar and Montaña (2009), although there is relevant literature on the topic of competences in higher education (Bruce and Gerber, 1995; Gerstein and Friedman, 2016; Lum, 2004; Mileva, 2015; Singh, 2000; Suleman, 2018), the field of tourism (Churchward and Riley, 2002; Fayos-Solá, 1997; Goodenough and Page, 1993; Gunn, 1998; Hjalager, 2003; Inui *et al.*, 2006; Jafari, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Watson and McCracken, 2002) and hospitality (Baum, 1995; Christou, 2000; Gibbs and Slevitch, 2019), it is still important to research in depth the competences that are specifically related to higher education in tourism.

Despite the large number of studies on the topic, there is no consensus on which competences are most important for the tourism and hotel industry. Among the competences that are most frequently mentioned are those relating to management, the application of knowledge to practice, critical and logical thought, ethics, human resources, problem solving, decision making, customer service, addressing uncertainty, oral and written communication, interpersonal communication, command of foreign languages, addressing customers' problems efficiently, strategic planning and thinking, creativity, self-confidence and social and emotional competences, among others (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Bath *et al.*, 2004; Baum, 2002; Cervera-Taulet and Ruiz-Molina, 2008; Christou and Sigala, 2001; Luka and Donina, 2012; Maes *et al.*, 1997; Mareque and De Prada, 2018; Munar and Montaña, 2009; Raybould and Wilkins, 2005; Repetto and Pérez-González, 2007; Sheldon *et al.*, 2008; Walo, 2000; Zehrer and Mössenlechner, 2009). According to Rao (2010), the acquisition of competences improves graduates' career prospects and opportunities, and develops their self-esteem and self-confidence, which enables personal and professional development. Therefore, the development of competences should be prioritised, and university qualifications should promote their acquisition (García and Pérez, 2008).

Repetto and Pérez-González (2007) support internships as a perfect opportunity for students to develop competences through experience, training and suitable practice. It is important to focus on this point and analyse what universities can do to connect internships as closely as possible to the development of students' competences.

Internships

Internships are a supervised training space for students that complement the academic learning received in the classroom with real work situations in the sector (Cuneen and Sidwell, 1994). Many benefits for interns have been identified in the literature. These can be categorised as job-related benefits, career-related benefits and networking/job market benefits (Maertz *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, internships can be used as a successful strategy to bridge theoretical knowledge and practice and enhance graduate employability (Silva *et al.*, 2016).

The findings of Sanahuja Velez and Ribes Giner (2015) support the overall positive effects of internships and confirm that they are a win-win situation for the main three stakeholders: students, employers and higher education institutions. Internships enrich students' knowledge in a multicultural work environment, foster cooperation with the hotel and tourism sector and provide an essential experience that benefits all stakeholders: industry, university and students (Dimmock *et al.*, 2003; Mareque and De Prada, 2018; Salgado and Costa, 2011). Cooperation between universities and industry is vital to ensure that the role and importance of internships are understood (Donina and Luka, 2014). It is also essential that educational institutions plan internship programmes according to the needs of both educators and industry (Downey and De Veau, 1988).

Professional internships are highly relevant as a tool for assessing the performance of students in the job market, and for determining whether the training they have received meets market demands. A study by Ring *et al.* (2009) analysed 64 tourism study programmes worldwide and found that internships were the most significant characteristic. Mareque and De Prada (2018) analysed the relationship between students' academic training and the demands of the job market using the competences developed during internships of bachelor's degree students at the University of Vigo's Faculty of Business Sciences and Tourism. The authors concluded that the opportunity to undertake internships during university studies has many advantages for both students and companies. Other studies demonstrated how effective internships are for students' professional and personal development (Collins, 2002; Kok, 2000; Leslie, 1991; Waryszak, 1999) and for understanding how to apply theory in practical environments (Ramsgaard and Østergaard, 2018).

Hence, placements are the ideal environment for developing and evaluating the professional competences that students must gain. As stated by Donina and Luka (2014), internships have been recognised by stakeholders (industry, universities and students) as an effective tool for improving graduates' employability competences (Lowden *et al.*, 2011). In the literature, there is a consensus that internships are an important part of university studies and help to improve competences in areas such as communication, problem solving, teamwork, management, planning and decision making (Bell and Schmidt, 1996; LeBruto and Murray, 1994; Walo, 2000).

Several authors stress that it is vital to establish good training programmes. In addition, companies that accept students on internships must clearly understand the objectives, tasks and requirements of the activity. If this is not the case, students will not be able to develop competences effectively and the internship experience will not be totally successful (Donina and Luka, 2014; Singh and Dutta, 2010; Yiu and Law, 2012).

Despite the large amount of research on internships, there are still no conclusive results that confirm their utility and efficacy in terms of the real competences that are acquired, measured based on learning results and by company supervisors. Consequently, there is a need to analyse the utility of internships to assess whether they can really be considered a useful tool for improving students' performance and fostering a higher level of competence achievement.

3. Research focus

Considering this argument, the first objective of the study is to assess the effects of internships on the development of students' academic competences in a university environment.

This objective was met by answering the following research question:

RQ1. What are the most significant competences to be acquired by students through undertaking university internships?

The second objective refers to the analysis of whether the attainment of competences is influenced by the type of internship. The aim was to determine whether undertaking internships in a certain hotel department or in hotels of a certain category leads to a difference in how students acquire competences.

The second objective was met by answering the following research question:

RQ2. Do the competences acquired by students differ significantly according to the type of internship that they complete?

The analysis was undertaken from the perspective of employers, which made it easier to determine the real level of attainment of competences, as they were assessed directly by the student's supervisor in the company.

The analysis will allow a review of the current internship process and implementation of future actions to act on the learning and teaching of professional competences to students and future graduates.

4. Methodology

Data collection

To answer the research questions, the population of students on the bachelor degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the HTSI who completed curricular internships in hotels during the academic years between 2011 and 2017 were considered for the analysis.

To assess the students' internships, the University's Internship and Mobility Service sent a questionnaire to company supervisors so they could evaluate each student's competences on completion of the period. This report was filled in and returned to the teaching staff at the end of the internship. The use of a questionnaire is a common method in this kind of research (Faria and Wellington, 2004).

The questionnaire was designed to find out supervisors' perceptions of students' competences and the learning process in relation to internships. The questionnaires included a set of basic, cross-disciplinary and specific competences relating to the internships that had to be assessed by the supervisors. A total of 300 assessment reports were received, which are the totality of the population since internships are mandatory subjects of the degree and the reports are part of the evaluation of the students and they are of obligatory delivery.

The questionnaire was designed using a non-comparative ordinal four-point scale (in which 1 meant "Disagree strongly" and 4 meant "Agree strongly"). Together with the questionnaire, a rubric is provided to the supervisors, which contains a detailed description of the criteria and standards for the evaluation for each one of the different levels of achievement of competences (from 1 to 4). These rubrics with evaluation criteria are provided to supervisors in order to avoid subjectivity and to be the most objective possible in the assessment (Stevens and Levi, 2005).

The questionnaire was divided into six blocks. The first block included questions designed to gather information about the sample characteristics. The second block corresponded to basic competences, the third to personal cross-disciplinary competences, the fourth to social and relationship cross-disciplinary competences, the fifth to management cross-disciplinary competences and the sixth to specific competences. These selected competences are assessed in curricular internship subjects, according to the items included in the White Paper of the bachelor's degree in Tourism (ANECA, 2004) and the qualifications' official report at the bachelor degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the HTSI.

The below list shows the variables that were used:

- (1) Basic competences
 - B1. Acquire, understand and structure knowledge.
 - B2. Apply knowledge.
 - B3. Search for and manage information in order to solve problems, transmit reflective judgements and/or make decisions.
 - B4. Communicate information and/or knowledge in one's mother tongue, as well as in at least two foreign languages.
 - B5. Learn autonomously and continuously.
- (2) Personal cross-disciplinary competences
 - G1. A commitment to ethics.
 - G2. Orientation towards achievement.

- G3. Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit.
 - G4. Self-knowledge and emotional self-control.
 - G5. Flexibility/adaptability and self-confidence.
- (3) Social and relationship cross-disciplinary competences
- G6. Empathy and interpersonal comprehension.
 - G7. Teamwork and collaboration.
 - G9. Sensitivity and intercultural awareness.
 - G10. Service orientation.
- (4) Management cross-disciplinary competences
- G11. Planning and organisation.
 - G12. Development of organisational culture.
 - G13. Personal development.
 - G14. Change management.
 - G15. Leadership.
- (5) Specific competences
- E5. Identify and manage areas and tourist destinations in accordance with the principles of sustainability.
 - E14. Knowledge of the operating procedures.
 - E21. Know the specific vocabulary of the different areas of the tourism sector in at least two foreign languages.

Data analysis

The statistical techniques used to answer the research questions were as follows. The first research question was answered using a descriptive analysis of the competences and ranking the average scores for them. The second research question was addressed by carrying out an ANOVA test for equality of means.

A Cronbach's α test was performed to assess the measurements' degree of consistency (Cronbach, 1942). According to De Vellis and Dancer (1991) and consensus, if the α value is above 0.7, the result is reliable. The result obtained was 0.966, therefore it can be concluded that the data have a high degree of internal consistency and are reliable. Likewise, Cronbach's α was calculated for each of the competency blocks. Obtaining the following results: 0.799, 0.873, 0.903, 0.856 and 0.704, respectively.

Tables I and II show the frequency and distribution of the sample in relation to the variables "Hotel department" and "Hotel category".

Hotel department	Frequency	Percentage
Rooms	137	45.7
Food and beverage	39	13
Human resources	13	4.3
Accounting	18	6
Sales-marketing	74	24.7
Rotation	19	6.3
Total	300	100

Table I.
Distribution by
"hotel department"

5. Results

First research question

Table III shows the average evaluations of students' competences, given by company supervisors during the internships.

Students' attainment of competences was very high, with scores above 3 points given by supervisors in all cases. The competence that was attained to the highest level by students was the cross-disciplinary competence G1 (commitment to ethics) with a score of 3.8, followed by competences B1, B2, G4, G9 and G12 (competences relating to knowledge, intercultural awareness and organisational culture) with scores of over 3.7. The competence with the lowest level of attainment was the specific competence E14 (knowledge of the operating procedures) with a score of 3.05, followed by the cross-disciplinary competence G3 (initiative and entrepreneurial spirit) with a score of 3.2.

In conclusion, it was found that the level of students' competences measured at the end of the internships is very good.

Q6

Second research question

The data were analysed considering internships undertaken in hotels. For this purpose, two study variables were considered: the hotel department in which the internship was

Table II.
Distribution by
"hotel category"

Hotel category	Frequency	Percentage
3*	9	3
4*	130	43.3
5*	161	53.7
Total	300	100

Table III.
Mean and standard
deviation of
competences

Variable	Mean	SD
B1	3.72	0.57
B2	3.74	0.47
B3	3.59	0.59
B4	3.58	0.61
B5	3.41	0.77
G1	3.80	0.48
G2	3.69	0.51
G3	3.20	0.74
G4	3.72	0.54
G5	3.37	0.69
G6	3.66	0.53
G7	3.63	0.54
G9	3.71	0.46
G10	3.61	0.65
G11	3.49	0.68
G12	3.70	0.54
G13	3.56	0.56
G14	3.62	0.58
G15	3.54	0.64
E5	3.61	0.55
E14	3.05	0.86
E21	3.65	0.52

undertaken (Rooms, Food and Beverage, Human Resources, Accounting, Sales-Marketing and Rotation between departments) and the hotel category (from 3 to 5 stars).

The results in Table IV indicate that students who attained a higher score for their competences were those who undertook rotating placements in various departments (14 of the 22 competences). Notably, scores were highest for the cross-disciplinary competence G1 relating to ethics and the basic competence B2 relating to the application of knowledge. The competences with the lowest levels of attainment according to the supervisors were G3 and E14 relating to the initiative and entrepreneurial spirit and operating processes. Therefore, it can be concluded that the department in which internships are undertaken affects the level of achievement.

The differences were tested using ANOVA (Table V) to evaluate the probability of variation in these groups. The results show that at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, there were no significant differences for basic and specific competences. However, there were significant differences in scores for inter-disciplinary competence G5 relating to flexibility and self-confidence.

The analysis of students' development of competences according to the category of the hotel in which they completed their internship (Table VI) showed that the achievement of competences was highest in the hotels with a higher category; specifically, for 16 of the 22 competences.

Hotel department	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
Rooms	3.76	3.76	3.60	3.61	3.52	3.78	3.71	3.26	3.72	3.42	3.69
Food and beverage	3.64	3.74	3.46	3.44	3.26	3.64	3.71	3.05	3.51	3.36	3.49
Human resources	3.77	3.69	3.54	3.31	3.38	4.00	3.62	3.15	3.77	3.00	3.81
Accounting	3.67	3.78	3.72	3.56	3.22	4.00	3.72	3.03	3.78	3.17	3.75
Sales-marketing	3.68	3.65	3.55	3.65	3.30	3.81	3.65	3.16	3.78	3.30	3.64
Rotation	3.79	3.95	3.79	3.58	3.63	3.80	3.79	3.45	3.74	3.68	3.79
Hotel department	G7	G9	G10	G11	G12	G13	G14	G15	E5	E14	E21
Rooms	3.66	3.72	3.66	3.53	3.66	3.62	3.65	3.57	3.59	3.13	3.65
Food and beverage	3.54	3.59	3.46	3.23	3.55	3.38	3.44	3.44	3.55	2.97	3.69
Human resources	3.73	4.00	3.85	3.38	3.67	3.58	3.54	3.69	3.83	3.00	3.54
Accounting	3.61	3.85	3.72	3.50	3.80	3.50	3.56	3.56	3.85	2.89	3.56
Sales-marketing	3.56	3.66	3.49	3.54	3.77	3.54	3.65	3.45	3.60	2.91	3.66
Rotation	3.79	3.75	3.84	3.63	3.80	3.68	3.84	3.79	3.5	3.32	3.63

Table IV.
Means of the
competences for
the grouping variable
"hotel department"

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
G5					
Between groups	5.18	5	1.04	2.2	0.05
Within groups	138.48	294	0.47		
Total	143.67	299			

Table V.
Parametric statistical
tests of the
competences for the
grouping variable
"hotel department"

Hotel category	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
3*	3.78	3.67	3.67	3.56	3.44	4.00	3.72	3.00	3.78	3.22	3.67
4*	3.62	3.70	3.51	3.45	3.28	3.73	3.61	3.07	3.64	3.23	3.58
5*	3.80	3.78	3.65	3.68	3.52	3.87	3.76	3.32	3.78	3.48	3.74
Hotel category	G7	G9	G10	G11	G12	G13	G14	G15	E5	E14	E21
3*	3.67	4.00	3.56	3.56	4.00	3.61	3.44	3.56	4.00	2.78	3.67
4*	3.55	3.65	3.52	3.42	3.58	3.46	3.51	3.47	3.55	2.95	3.55
5*	3.70	3.77	3.70	3.55	3.83	3.65	3.73	3.60	3.65	3.14	3.72

Table VI.
Means of the
competences for the
grouping variable
"hotel category"

An additional analysis using ANOVA indicated that these differences in means are statistically significant for many of the competences (11 out of 22) at an $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance (Table VII). These competences are related to communication (B4 and E21), knowledge (B1), attitude (B5, G2, G3, G5, G12, G13, G14) and social and relationship competences (G6).

6. Discussion

First research question

In response to the question of how supervisors rated students' competences after their internships, it can be stated that the students had a high level of competence acquisition according to the supervisors' assessments. The average attainment levels were all above 3 points. The competence relating to ethics and competences relating to knowledge, intercultural awareness and organisational culture had the highest scores.

These results, showing a very high level of acquisition of competences, are consistent with those obtained in previous studies (Donina and Luka, 2014; Mareque and De Prada, 2018; Munar and Montaña, 2009). Business people considered that graduates had good competences and that they had highly developed employability competences (Donina and Luka, 2014). For most organisations, cross-disciplinary competences are relevant (González and Wagenaar, 2003; Munar and Montaña, 2009). Competences that have been identified as particularly important for companies that employ tourism graduates are those of communication, the application of knowledge to practice and the ability to learn (González and Wagenaar, 2003; Munar and Montaña, 2009). In a study by Mareque and De Prada (2018), the average score given by company tutors was high except for the competence relating to creativity, a competence that requires attention according to Kallioinen (2010). The same author highlighted the fundamental role of competences relating to teamwork and communication in curricula. These competences were given a high score by the company supervisors of students in the sample.

Although they received scores of over 3 points, competences relating to operating procedures and to initiative and entrepreneurial spirit had the lowest level of achievement. This result is partially in line with the results of Mareque and De Prada (2018) and Kallioinen (2010). According to Mareque and De Prada (2018), the job market is strongly focused on creativity, a competence that is closely related to entrepreneurship and the capacity to innovate. Entrepreneurship, like creativity, received one of the lowest scores from the supervisors. Kallioinen (2010) also stated that innovation and entrepreneurship capacity should be improved. The competence of flexibility/adaptability (G5) did not receive a very high score at 3.37 points. Some measures should be introduced to improve this competence. According to Sangpikul (2009), tourism graduates must gain knowledge and develop skills that improve their capacity to adapt to unpredictable situations, as they work in multicultural organisations and are in contact with international tourists from various nationalities and ethnic groups.

Ultimately, it can be stated that undertaking internships have a positive influence on the level of attainment of competences. The present study confirmed the results of Mareque and De Prada (2018) and Munar and Montaña (2009), who found that company tutors considered competences developed during internships to be important and reaffirmed the idea that students who have the opportunity to undertake internships during their studies have an advantage for competence acquisition over those who do not complete internships.

Second research question

Answering the question about the influence of factors such as hotel department and hotel category over competences, it can be stated that undertaking internships in a company have a positive effect on the attainment of competences.

Higher
education
tourism
internships

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
<i>B1</i>					
Between groups	2.16	2	1.08	3.33	0.04
Within groups	96.32	297	0.32		
Total	98.48	299			
<i>B4</i>					
Between groups	3.79	2	1.89	5.25	0.01
Within groups	107.29	297	0.36		
Total	111.08	299			
<i>B5</i>					
Between groups	3.84	2	1.92	3.26	0.04
Within groups	174.90	297	0.59		
Total	178.75	299			
<i>G2</i>					
Between groups	1.76	2	0.88	3.49	0.03
Within groups	75.08	297	0.25		
Total	76.84	299			
<i>G3</i>					
Between groups	4.78	2	2.39	4.44	0.01
Within groups	159.72	297	0.54		
Total	164.50	299			
<i>G5</i>					
Between groups	4.82	2	2.41	5.16	0.01
Within groups	138.84	297	0.47		
Total	143.67	299			
<i>G6</i>					
Between groups	1.82	2	0.91	3.31	0.04
Within groups	81.76	297	0.27		
Total	83.58	299			
<i>G12</i>					
Between groups	1.92	2	0.96	3.36	0.04
Within groups	32.03	112	0.29		
Total	33.95	114			
<i>G13</i>					
Between groups	2.47	2	1.23	3.98	0.02
Within groups	92.02	297	0.31		
Total	94.48	299			
<i>G14</i>					
Between groups	3.75	2	1.87	5.75	0.00
Within groups	96.69	297	0.33		
Total	100.44	299			
<i>E21</i>					
Between groups	2.00	2	1.00	3.69	0.03
Within groups	80.54	297	0.27		
Total	82.55	299			

Table VII.
Parametric statistical
tests of the
competences for the
grouping variable
“hotel category”

In addition, it appears that both factors affect the level of achievement of competences. The results demonstrate that undertaking internships in rotation between departments and completing internships in five-star hotels generates a higher level of attainment in most competences.

However, significant differences were only found between departments in the competence relating to flexibility and self-confidence. For the rest of the competences, the department in which internships were undertaken did not affect the level of attainment.

In contrast, there were significant differences in the level of attainment of most competences depending on the category of the hotel in which internships were undertaken. Except for the competence relating to the development of organisational culture, undertaking internships in higher category hotels led to a greater level of competence attainment, specifically for communication, knowledge, attitude and social and relationship competences. This confirms the results of other studies, which showed that students consider internships to be the main factor in gaining the ability to show a positive attitude to work and communication capacity, among other competences (Donina and Luka, 2014).

The allocation of students to internships is undertaken via an internal procedure managed by the hotels individually. Each hotel undertakes its own process of selecting students. This process is based preferably on one or more interviews to determine how well the candidate would adapt to the tasks they would be assigned in the place where they would undertake the internship. If this aspect is considered in relation to the observed differences in the results, various potential explanations emerge.

The first explanation could be that higher category hotels have systems for attracting and developing talent that are better developed than lower category hotels. The second explanation is related to how the hotel guides students in their assigned tasks. Normally, the reason why students' performance does not meet employers' expectations is a lack of training and/or ability (Yiu and Law, 2012). Other reasons may be difficulties in communication and in forming good relationships in the workplace (Collins, 2002; McMahon and Quinn, 1995), a topic that some authors include as aspects relating to coaching received during internships (Tse, 2010). Other alternatives are of a cultural nature (Austin, 2002). In this study, the cultural variables that could explain part of the differences were not considered, nor were the gender perspective and the country in which internships were completed, which could be related to the cultural aspects.

All these factors could help to explain why the achievement of competences was not affected by the type of department in which students undertook their internships but was affected by the category of hotel.

This study contributes to demonstrating that internships in companies are vital to the development and achievement of students' competences. This reaffirms the results of previous studies (Donina and Luka, 2014; Lowden *et al.*, 2011; Ring *et al.*, 2009) that highlighted the role of internships as a fundamental factor to develop competences. As mentioned by Donina and Luka (2014), cooperation between companies and the university is crucial to ensure that students can effectively develop their employability competences.

The lack of previous studies on the topic prevents direct comparisons from being made and highlights the importance of this study as the first in which such an analysis has been made to date. Other studies have dealt with the topic from the perspective of differences in graduates' and employers' perceptions of competence attainment (Donina and Luka, 2014; Munar and Montaña, 2009). In contrast, the real attainment of competences was analysed through direct assessments of students by their company supervisors, and differences in attainment according to the hotel department and category were considered.

7. Conclusions

Internships are presented as a unique opportunity to improve students' competences and career prospects. Several studies have shown that internships help students to gain experience in the labour market and therefore boost employability (Barron and Anastasiadou, 2009; Ring *et al.*, 2009; Wang and Tsai, 2014).

This study was designed to determine the level of achievement of the competences required of graduates in Tourism and Hospitality Management, from the perspective of sector professionals' perceptions of attainment.

The design of the research has taken into account the existing gap in the research carried out so far and we consider that the results obtained will allow us to improve the understanding of internships in tourism programs.

As internships in companies are an ideal environment for developing the competences that students have worked on in the bachelor's degree, the ideal sample was comprised of students undertaking internships as part of their curriculum.

The main motivation for the study was to fill in the gap in the literature referring to the analysis of competences attained by students in the tourism sector. The final objective was to provide recommendations of use to the various stakeholders: students, academics and industry in the sector. One of the key aspects of this study that differentiates it from other research is the fact that the competences were assessed by the companies. This is a relevant approach because it produces better evaluations of students' performance, as it is the supervisors who monitor students' activities during internships.

The results indicate that the HTSI's strategies to develop students' competences and adapt them to the demands of the job market in the hospitality and tourism sector have been successful. Companies in the sector perceive a significant development of most of the competences considered in this study. In conclusion, students on internships develop the competences to a good level and therefore it can be stated that the internships help in the development of students' competences.

In general, students were found to have a high level of professionalism. The results show that students performed well in terms of achievement of the competences that all tourism graduates must acquire. Particularly notable were the competences relating to ethics and to knowledge, intercultural awareness and organisational culture, which received the highest scores. However, the need to strengthen students in the areas of entrepreneurship and operations was identified, that is, the need to strengthen aspects that lead to better entrepreneurship training, as well as better training in basic and specialised operational tools in the sector.

The results show that the acquisition of competences was very high, regardless of the hotel department or category. The department in which internships were developed did not affect the level of acquisition of competences, except for the competence of attitude relating to flexibility and self-confidence. In contrast, differences were identified in relation to the hotel category. Internships completed in higher category hotels promoted better development of most of the competences.

Despite the breadth of the study, it has some limitations. A questionnaire administered to students to determine their perceived level of competence acquisition would enable comparisons with the behaviour observed by the supervisors.

The results have implications for industry in the sector, universities and students. The study generated content of value for all stakeholders, as it revealed which competences are acquired to a higher level during internships, from the employers' point of view.

For companies, the study is interesting because it reveals HTSI graduates' competences. It indicates, from the perspective of the sector, whether future HTSI graduates meet specific needs at competence level and thus it enables employers to foster the development of students' competences through work experience. This will help to promote employability, as companies know the level of competences gained by students.

This study provides a unique opportunity for academics to learn first-hand the level of development of the competences that are worked on in the bachelor's degree, and to establish which methods and teaching and learning activities are most suitable to align the needs of graduates and industry. Students benefit from participation in internships.

Internships are an ideal space for developing competences and increasing students' professional experience, which facilitates their subsequent transition to the job market.

Future lines of research have been detected that could complement this study. First, the incorporation of other variables or elements could help to explain the difference in the assessments of students by employers. Variables such as gender, cultural aspects or nationality could broaden the perspective of the results. In addition, students' perceptions could be incorporated into the study. A comparison between the supervisors' assessment and the opinions of internship participants as well as the context and environment in which internships take place could help in the analysis of internship results in greater depth and in designing programmes so that their value can be maximised for students, companies and universities.

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