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A model of graduates' satisfaction and loyalty in tourism higher education: The role of employability

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine the role of employability in the process of satisfaction and loyalty formation towards higher education institutions (HEI), when considering tourism graduates. It explores how employability has been approached within HEIs and how graduates' satisfaction and loyalty have been assessed in higher education. A structural equation model, including the employability construct, is proposed and validated, and the results confirm that the HEIs' image is strongly influenced by employability. These results might represent a valuable source of information for HEIs in the process of finding the balance between the service provided and the needs of the stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

The current competitiveness between countries is based not only on natural resources and/or the availability of cheap labour but also on the knowledge and expertise of the workforce (Kohler, 2004). Therefore, the qualification of human resources as an answer to the industry demands becomes a major aim for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These institutions find themselves under greater pressure by political and educational frameworks to prepare students to be employable individuals. HEIs are expected to use strategies that reinforce students' employability capacity. This includes preparing them to cope with the shifting of skill requirements and the constantly evolving technological advances that characterise the labour market (Harvey, 2010).

The tourism sector is no stranger to this situation. Its potential for growth, compared with other economic sectors, gives it an undeniable importance (Lee-Ross & Pryce, 2010). In fact, the need for skilled human resources in this sector is growing as companies seek to implement a culture of high quality in the provided services. One of the primary methods of accomplishing this is by improving the educational standards of the workforce (Mayaka & King, 2002; Ballantyne, Packer, & Axelsen, 2009). Since the Tourism industry is a complex system of an intensive workforce, requiring a significant number of human resources, and since the lack of professional qualification necessarily compromises the achievement of quality standards in services, several authors agree on the need for well-trained graduates, leaving this responsibility largely to the HEIs (Ayres, 2006; Barron, 2007; Baum, 2007; Busby, 2003; Catramby & Costa, 2004; Charles, 1997; Choy, 1995; Engberg, 2007; Hjalager, 2003; Tribe, 2003).

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While tourism graduates have enjoyed higher employment rates than unskilled workers in the past, the last decade has seen a considerable increase in the number of graduates wanting to enter the labour market, and finding employment is now more difficult (OECD, 2006). Graduate unemployment, along with the increase in the number of HEIs, has led to intense competition, and students' preparations for being employable individuals have become major and decisive elements in obtaining suitable employment (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011). In this context, identifying and satisfying the needs and expectations of students, by providing better learning opportunities and enhancing employability skills, are becoming key aims for HEIs (Butt & Rehman, 2010). The topic of employability in Tourism has only very recently attracted HEIs and Tourism researchers. This is possibly due to the fact that Tourism graduates have, until recently, been able to easily enter the labour market (Lockwood & Medlik, 2001), reflecting the receptivity of the sector itself and its high employment rates in past decades (Ladkin, 2011). This study addresses a gap in the literature on the role of HE in Tourism by approaching the relationship between the graduates' perception of the role of HEI in preparing students to be employable and succeed in the labour market, as well as perceptions about the HEI and received qualifications (Table 1).

The baseline to this analysis is a well-known customer satisfaction index, the European Customer Satisfaction Index (ECSI), which has already been applied to HE (Chiandotto, Bini, & Bertaccini, 2007; Martensen, Grønholdt, Eskildsen, & Kristensen, 2000). It consists of a structural equation model with six latent variables (image, expectations, perceived quality, value, satisfaction, and loyalty) which aim to provide a detailed and accurate description of the processes underlying customer satisfaction and loyalty. When carefully analysed, this consideration will contribute to the efficient performance of

Table 1
Items used to measure employability according to different authors.

Construct	Dimensions/criteria	Authors
Employability (ability to gain and retain work) Employability (having the attributes employers consider necessary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the graduate employed? ● Is the employment linked to degree subject? ● Does it involve graduate skills? ● Does it have scope to grow? ● Team working: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – leading teams – different roles in different teams simultaneously. 	Harvey (2001)
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhancing employability through programme learning environments. ● entrepreneurship in degree programmes. ● careers advice. ● producing elements such as portfolios and records of achievements. 	Knight and Yorke (2003)
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Critical analysis. ● Link between social theory/social policy discourse and work/organisational experience. ● Using students' existing paid/voluntary work or unpaid care work for academic purposes. ● Students' ability to manage their own learning. ● Flexible mode of studying. ● Assessment strategy that encourages students to reflect actively upon learning. 	Smith et al. (2007)
Employment capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Time required to enter the labour market. ● Quality of work ● Coherence of the job with studies. 	Camprotrini and Gerzeli (2007)
Match between education and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Relevance of the field of study. ● Use of knowledge and skills. ● Appropriateness of level of education. ● Reasons for inappropriate position. ● Fulfilled expectations. ● The proportion of graduates facing problems. 	Schomburg and Teichler (2006)
Differences between graduates' competences acquired upon graduation and those required some four years later	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Knowledge. ● Methodical skills. ● Intelligence. ● Socio-communicative skills. ● Organisational skills. 	Kivinen and Nurmi (2007)

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