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Key Competencies of Tourism Graduates: The Employers’ Point of View

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Several changes and developments (e.g., the changing labor market, growing worldwide competition, technological advances, and changing demand patterns in tourism) require new employability skills from graduates that enable them to cope with the changing circumstances of the tourism business world. Universities are therefore encouraged to embed key skills in their curricula, yet there is often a considerable gap between what educational institutions offer and what is needed and required by the industry (i.e., there is a need to create a hub and interface between the industry and the institutions of higher education). One attempt to actually create this interface and increase the opportunities for graduates to maintain or obtain employment is to look at diverse skills and competencies that enhance employability of graduates. Although there have been considerable efforts to specify employability skills, the question of how these could be developed within the curriculum prevails. The purpose of the present paper is to theoretically discuss the concepts of employability, skills requirements, and competencies for graduates and to present the results of a quantitative survey carried out among domestic and international Management Center Innsbruck internship partners to assess the required employability skills of the market from the employers’ point of view.

KEYWORDS curriculum design, destination partners, education, industry relations, skills and competencies
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The worldwide growth of tourism and its respective industries has also resulted in a rapid expansion of tourism education at various levels including higher education (Hudson, 2005). The interdisciplinary aspect of tourism is becoming more and more important in the labor market (i.e., recent challenges in the tourism industry have a direct impact on the expectations of the industry regarding specific knowledge and competencies of managers and employees; Zehrer, Siller, & Altmann, 2006). It has for instance been noted that when employers recruit graduates, they are typically seeking individuals with not only specific academic skills and knowledge in a certain subject, but with the capability to be proactive and to see and respond to problems creatively and autonomously (Fallows & Steven, 2000). To meet the demands of the tourism employment market both on a personal and a career level, people need to acquire competencies that enable them to cope with the changing circumstances of the business world.

Yet, there appears to be a considerable gap between what educational institutions offer as management-level tourism education and the needs and requirements as expressed by the tourism industry. This especially relates to the interpretation of which particular skills and competencies which should be developed in students or which technical knowledge and academic know-how should be taught in tourism curricula (Barrie, 2006; Drummond, Nixon, & Wilthshire, 1998). Or as Amoah and Baum (1997, p. 6) put it: “When the main features of tourism education arise through initiatives by the tourism environment on the one hand and the world of education on the other, with no consensus between the two, problems arise for those on the receiving end of tourism education.”

One attempt to actually create an interface between what is taught in tourism education and what is actually needed by the industry, and to increase possibilities for graduates to maintain or obtain employment, is to look at diverse skills and competencies that might enhance employability of graduates. It is important to add that these discussions have resulted in considerable controversy on the list of skills or personal qualities that should be developed, leading to the question of whether this should be an educational concern in higher education at all. Some feel that this might lead to a certain distraction from academic education and that corporate interests could start to play a too powerful role (Morley, 2001).

Several studies have been conducted in terms of job requirements in tourism-related fields, and a number of qualifications have been identified (Weiermair, 1999), including: communicative skills, empathy, motivation, decision-making abilities, planning abilities, and improvisation abilities. This article sets out to contribute to the ongoing debate to what extent requirements of businesses, as far as skills and competencies are concerned, can be integrated into the development of educational programs. Links between
higher education and industry occur through, for example, internship placements and guest speakers, and via field trips (Busby, 2005). Presently, internships or other forms of supervised work placement seem to be the most important link as outlined by Busby in his review. The aim of this article is to reveal the extent to which programs meet the prerequisites of the tourism industry regarding competencies of interns and graduates.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The causal connection between education and economic growth has resulted in a worldwide growth of tertiary education (Barrie, 2006). Institutes of tertiary education are increasingly feeling the pressure of having to deliver programs that meet new requirements that are characterized not only by including up-to-date factual knowledge and technology-driven skills in their curriculum design but also by the expectation to closely tie these programs to the industry and maintain strong links with practitioners from the respective fields.

In industrialized countries throughout the world, the connection between education and work has been scrutinized with the main goals being to actually enhance employability of graduates (Barrie, 2006) and to enhance the overall competitiveness of the industries. In the Western world, this has also become a concern of educational politics, mostly referred to by using the term “lifelong learning” and by pointing at an overall concept where graduates are encouraged to develop skills for working life (e.g., European Round Table of Industrialists, 1995). In projects by higher education providers in the United States, Britain, and Australia, as well as in cross-European projects, the issue of finding an interface between higher education and the labor market in terms of defining employability skills has been addressed. In Austria, this was also reflected through the introduction of Universities of Applied Sciences, a system that is characterized in particular by its close relations with trade and industry and by a strong practice orientation in all programs, a focus that is also mirrored in the curricula of the respective study programs.

Due to the relatively young history of tourism higher education, compared with other disciplines in tertiary education (Tribe, 2005), international tourism education has always had a strong vocational focus in that curricula have always to some extent included training in specific skills and competencies that are vital for the work world. One could therefore also say that tourism education curricula have to some extent been shaped by the needs of the industry, which was also reflected in syllabi and curriculum development for tertiary education in tourism. These circumstances have led to discussions focusing on an integrated approach to tourism education including contemporary, content-specific disciplines as well as training in
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skills and competencies that have been termed, for example, “employability,” “soft skills,” “personal skills,” “generic skills,” “attributes,” or “capabilities” (Atkins, 1999; Hager & Holland, 2006; Holmes, 2001). Taking into account that the tourism industry is in its core a service sector, or more informally put, a people’s business, this approach seems to be especially valuable.

SKILLS, COMPETENCIES, AND EMPLOYABILITY

Today, employers are looking for a more flexible, adaptable workforce as they themselves seek to transform their companies into being more flexible and adaptable in response to changing market and customer needs (Bennett, 2002; Clarke, 1997; Cox & King, 2006). Meanwhile, several studies have been conducted in terms of employability of graduates and job requirements in tourism-related fields, and a number of qualifications — communicative skills, empathy, motivation, decision-making abilities, planning abilities and improvisation abilities — have been identified (Bagshaw, 1996; Byrne, 2001; Cassidy, 2006; Cotton, 2001; Gaspers & Ott, 1998; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005; Verhaar & Smulders, 1999; Zinser, 2003).

There have been many attempts to “pin down” employability skills and competencies, and the discussion has also been shaped by the shortcomings and limitations these functional lists might have as they always include an element of choice (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Discussions of such lists use a variety of terms such as generic skills, graduate attributes, personal skills, capabilities, employability skills, communication and social skills, or embedded skills to describe what, in literature, are often looked at as being synonyms for similar notions and concepts (Atkins, 1999; Hager & Holland, 2006; Holmes, 2001). However, there seems to be a consensus that employability in its broadest sense is somehow establishing a closer connection between education and work (Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2002), which is one of the aims education and vocational training have. And it also has to be noted that what is listed under the above-mentioned terms often also relates to what in academia is referred to as cognitive skills such as problem-solving abilities, development of expertise, reasoning, etc. (Anderson, 2000).

Employers seem to approach the issue of employability from yet another perspective, which can also be explained through the variety of business fields and focuses. Several examples of such employer lists can be found in literature (Knight & Yorke, 2003), varying in their degree of differentiation, sometimes also over-generalizing or idealizing skills they would like to find in prospective employees and coworkers.

Therefore, the problem of variation and notation seems to also stem from distinct interpretations of particular skills and competencies and the extent to which they are rated as being significantly important and to which they should therefore be developed (Drummond et al., 1998).
Most taxonomies on competencies can be broken down into knowledge, abilities, and skills, which suggests that a set of skills or abilities can be part of an overall competency. Sonntag and Schmidt-Rathjens (2004) define these three components as follows:

- **Skills** are automated components of tasks, which are undertaken with a relatively low mind control. These skills include powered routine jobs as well as cognitive activities.
- **Abilities** are all kinds of innate skills of a person, which are necessary to perform tasks and services.
- **Knowledge** is acquired know-how that also includes propositional (knowing that) and procedural know-how (knowing how).

Literature also provides a variety of classifications of employability skills, categorizing various skills and abilities in “intellectual abilities” vs. “behavioral aptitudes” (European Round Table of Industrialists, 1997) or in “technical skills” and “nontechnical skills” (Cotton, 2001), or “internal and external employability skills” (Mallough & Kleiner, 2001). Cassidy (2006, p. 508) refers to two skill categories, which are required in industry. While technical skills refer to “subject-specific or content-specific knowledge . . . nontechnical skills are those skills which can be deemed relevant across many different jobs or professions.”

The definition of broader terms like “skills” and “competencies” seems to depend not only on interpretations influenced by culture and language but also on context. For example, in an educational context, these two terms might be defined differently compared with definitions in an employment context. Trying to find a valid definition of employability skills and competencies is therefore located between the poles of agreeing on a common definition of the terms “skills” and “competencies” and ranking these on a continuum of importance. All these problems might at times lead to the impression that lists of employability skills and competencies are somewhat eclectic, if not accidental, in nature. However, especially in the context of lifelong learning in a knowledge-driven society, most international research with regard to education and curricula development comment in varying degrees on employability and links between education and work.

Originally, the concept of core competencies was developed in the field of management by Prahalad and Hamel (1990). In the German-speaking world, it has especially been the work by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003) that has been most influential when it comes to a general concept of generic competencies which consist of several components. Heyse and Erpenbeck (2007) translated this concept into an instrument (KODEX) to assess, measure, and diagnose personal competencies. It is important to note that these competencies have to be understood as integrated tonalities of expertise and know-how, processes and interests, personal motivations,
knowledge, and affections that are important to successfully complete a task (Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2003). Competencies are usually understood as something “bigger” than just a combination of the respective knowledge, skills, attitudes, or abilities as a mere one-dimensional approach would suggest that competencies as such are easily attainable.

Therefore, in the present context, it is the multidimensionality of the concept of competencies that is especially important (i.e., going beyond merely specialist and methodological formal qualifications and including the field of often informally acquired competencies). Table 1 delineates the four competency fields as categorized by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003). Examples have been added by the authors.

**TABLE 1** Definition of Basic Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability (disposition) for self-organizational action with regard to . . .</th>
<th>Dimensions/basic competencies</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. . . exposure to objects</td>
<td>professional and methodological competence</td>
<td>the ability to fulfil profession-related tasks with methodological know-how.</td>
<td>updated and continued development of professional and methodological know-how with regard to the vocational field communication ability, social networking skills, skills for conflict resolution, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . exposure to other persons</td>
<td>social-communicative competence</td>
<td>the ability to cooperate and communicate with other people.</td>
<td>ability to work under pressure, self management, willingness and personal commitment, emotional intelligence, empathy, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . oneself as a person</td>
<td>personal competence</td>
<td>the ability to be critical of oneself, to one’s values, attitudes and ideals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . one’s own actions</td>
<td>activity- and action competence</td>
<td>the ability to implement all kinds of knowledge in terms of social communication, personal values and ideals and to thereby integrate all other kinds of competencies.</td>
<td>determination and goal orientation, innovative spirit, decision-making abilities, creativity, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has to be mentioned that there are other classifications that work with categorizing competency fields in “social-communicative,” “personal,” and “activity- and action-oriented” fields, which can also be summarized among the collective terms “extra-functional” (Dahrendorf, 1973) or “process-independent” competencies (Kern & Schumann, 1984). Professional and methodological competencies are often referred to as “functional.” From the perspective of curriculum development, the main thrust of such debates is in particular units or modules that promote the learning of these abilities. In connection with human resource management, types and approaches of competencies can basically be summarized as follows (Kauffeld, Frieling, & Grote, 2003; Kolb, 2002; Sonntag & Schmidt-Rathjens, 2004):

• **Professional competencies** comprise skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary to meet the challenges and tasks of one’s profession.

• **Methodological competencies** are universal problem-solving and decision-making competencies, which may be applied in one’s job but also in one’s personal surroundings.

• **Social competencies** are abilities to act in the social surroundings and include cooperating with other people, interacting with them, and building effective relationships.

• **Leadership competencies** are the abilities to show inspiration for a shared vision, to enable others to act, or to encourage them.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRICULUM**

Although there have been considerable efforts to define and specify employability skills and competencies as outlined above, the question of how these could be developed within the curriculum is still a problematic one. One basic question is if the respective skills and competencies can and should be taught and discussed in individual units or if they should be integrated and embedded in the traditional curriculum (Cranmer, 2006).

Drummond et al. (1998, p. 21) list three general approaches to how skills and competencies can be taught within the curriculum:

• **Embedded or integrated development**, where development takes place throughout the degree program (e.g., through project-based development).

• **Parallel development** with skills being developed in extracurricular modules offered through the institute’s career services programs, etc.

• **Work placements or work-based projects** consisting of internship programs that are an integral part of the curriculum.
Some authors argue that the development of employability skills and competencies can be addressed best by increasing employer involvement in university courses or offering more employment-based training (Atkins, 1999; Cranmer, 2006) rather than trying to add more items to the curriculum. Furthermore, taking into account that skills and competencies have both a “performance” and a “content” aspect and are only fully visible as an integrated tonality consisting of multi-dimensional aspects in students, the question remains as to how to assess such complex learning processes within higher education. Also, the attempt to develop formative and summative frameworks for such assessments might have to have a direct impact on overall curricula development and teaching methodology. The higher influx of students in higher education in advanced societies might also pose an additional problem in this context as necessary pedagogical changes regarding teaching methodology might not match with methodology used to teach larger groups.

**EMPIRICAL STUDY**

The present survey aims to assess employers’ perception of skills and competencies conveyed in the tourism degree programs at Management Center Innsbruck (MCI). The vocational field for graduates includes entrepreneurial and management challenges in key branches of the tourism and the recreational industries, positions in hotels and gastronomy, in event management, lift operation, and conference centers, in sports and recreational facilities, or positions with tour operators and tourism associations.

**Methodology**

This article presents a quantitative survey among domestic and international internship companies \(^1\) of the tourism bachelor program at MCI by

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\(^1\) The “Tourism Business Studies” bachelor’s program comprises six semesters and a total of 124 credit units of required courses, which equals a total of 1,736 hours of instruction. Attendance is mandatory in all courses. In the 3rd year (Semesters five and six), the students are required to do an internship, and they have the option to study one semester abroad. The internship takes place in the fifth semester. Students complete a 15-week professional internship at a domestic or international company or organization in the tourism and leisure sector. The goal of the study program is the development of entrepreneurs and managers for the local and international tourism and leisure industries. The special focus of this academic program lies in a distinct orientation to entrepreneurial approaches in tourism and leisure. The program is based upon a comprehensive business administration curriculum which is then specialized in the areas of marketing, finance, entrepreneurial studies, and leadership (corporate governance). A further important feature of the program is the extensive number of courses in the area of applied information management (fundamentals in information and communication technologies (ICTs), e-business in tourism, etc.). In addition to teaching a high level of social and personal skills, the development of strong active language competencies in English and another foreign language are essential parts of the program.
means of a self-administered online questionnaire attempting to understand which skills, competencies, and qualifications are essential for working in the tourism industry. The research question posed is: Which competencies are regarded to be the most essential and important ones in the tourism industry? This research question is answered based on the following assumptions, which are based on theoretical background and literature review:

A1. Professional and methodological competencies are the most important competencies graduates must possess in the tourism industry.
A2. Social and personal competencies are more important than activity and action competencies when being employed in the tourism industry.

Given the high level of access and frequent use of e-mail as a communication medium, it was felt that a web-based survey had the advantage of being relatively time efficient for respondents. The study at hand made use of an e-mail containing a link to the survey Web site (Web-based survey). The questionnaire at hand was split into four pages following the competency clusters developed by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003). The sub-skills listed in each competency field stem from: (a) skills listed in the KODEX lists developed by Heyse and Erpenbeck (2007), and (b) from a list of core skills that were identified in the accreditation papers for the MCI tourism undergraduate program. Hence, the questionnaire was structured as shown in Table 2.

The questionnaire closed with a fifth page on socio-demographic data, asking for the tourism branch the respondents are working in, their current position, length of tourism background and work experience, as well as gender and age.

Research Design

The following sections show the most important findings on competencies internship partner companies of MCI identified to be most important in university graduates. The SPSS Data Analysis System statistics and Microsoft Excel packages were used for data analysis.

GENERAL FINDINGS

Altogether, 145 questionnaires were sent out in the 1st week of July (June 30 to July 4). A reminder was sent out after the 1st week of response. The study resulted in a response of 48 questionnaires; 44 were completely filled out and 4 were only partially completed. This results in a response rate of 33.10% \( (n = 48) \).

Most (27.91%) of the respondents work in a tourism organization on a national, regional, or local level, followed by the hotel and restaurant trade (18.60%) and events and/or congress organizations (18.60%); 11.63% of
Key Competencies of Tourism Graduates

Table 2: Questionnaire Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional and methodological competencies</th>
<th>Social and communicative competencies</th>
<th>Personal competencies</th>
<th>Activity and action-oriented competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• language competencies</td>
<td>• skills for conflict resolution</td>
<td>• intercultural skills</td>
<td>• determination and goal orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fundamentals in management</td>
<td>• social networking skills</td>
<td>• ability to work under pressure</td>
<td>• innovative spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fundamentals in economics and law</td>
<td>• social and team skills</td>
<td>• emotional intelligence</td>
<td>• decision-making abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• fundamentals in finance</td>
<td>• ability and willingness to change</td>
<td>• self reflection</td>
<td>• initiative and proactiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fundamentals in information and communication technologies</td>
<td>• adaptability skills</td>
<td>• empathy</td>
<td>• assertiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• tourism-related knowledge</td>
<td>• proactive communication skills</td>
<td>• self management</td>
<td>• creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• skills and competencies in written</td>
<td>• active listening</td>
<td>• willingness and personal commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td>• persuasion skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• applying and using information to specific contexts</td>
<td>• overall communication abilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• efficient text work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• rhetorical skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• problem solving skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• conceptual skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewees are employed in the marketing and public relations field while 9.30% work as consultants (see Figure 1).

As far as the position of the interviewees is concerned, around one-third of them work in a management position (32.56%), 25.58% in a marketing department, 13.95% in human resource management, 9.30% in consulting, 8.98% in operations management, 4.65% in each event management and destination management, and 2.33% are employed in the field of infrastructure management (see Figure 2).

Another question dealt with respondents' length of tourism background. Results show that most of the respondents do have considerable tourism background: 37.20% have between 10 and 20 years of experience in the tourism sector, while others can draw on between 20 and 30 years (16.3%) of work experience in the tourism field. Another 11.6% of respondents have more than 30 years of work experience in tourism. This guarantees the reliability of responses delivered (see Table 3).

As far as gender is concerned, 46.5% of the respondents are female, 53.5% are male. Regarding age, 46.5% of the interviewees are between 30
and 39 years old, 20.9% are between 20 and 29 years of age, 18.6% are between 40 and 49 years old; 4.7% are older (50-59 years), and some 9.3% are older than age 60.

Respondents were asked to rate competencies graduates should have when choosing to work in the tourism industry. The main results are presented in the following sections.
PROFESSIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES

As already stated in the literature review, professional and methodological competencies relate to the ability to fulfill profession-related tasks with methodological know-how.

The first question asked internship partners to rate professional and methodological competencies on a scale of importance for graduates in the tourism industry. The results shown in Figure 3 (mean value and standard deviation) become apparent: The vertical black line symbolizes each item's mean, while the horizontal grey line represents the standard deviation. Hence, the shorter the grey line, the stronger the item's relevance.

The picture of professional and methodological competencies is rather heterogenic. While some competencies are rated very important with mean values of 4.75 (language competence), 4.73 (conceptual skills), and 4.71 (problem-solving skills), others are identified as important with a tendency toward the neutral scale, such as fundamentals in economics and law (4.00), fundamentals in finance (3.90), and fundamentals in information and communication technologies (3.77).

The most relevant competency according to internship partners of MCI is the language competence ($SD = 0.48$); the most relevant skills are problem-solving skills ($SD = 0.54$) and conceptual skills ($SD = 0.57$).

SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCIES

Social and communicative competencies are the abilities to cooperate and communicate with other people. The second question therefore listed social and communicative competencies and asked internship partners to rate them according to their importance for graduates in the tourism industry. The results shown in Figure 4 become apparent.

Altogether, social and communicative skills seem to have considerable importance for respondents with very high mean values between 4.79 (overall communication abilities) and 4.40 (persuasion skills).
According to respondents, the most relevant competency seems to be overall communication competencies ($SD = 0.46$), followed by active listening ($SD = 0.50$), and social and team skills ($SD = 0.58$).

**PERSONAL COMPETENCIES**

Personal competencies are the ability to be critical to oneself, to one’s values, attitudes, and ideals. The third question therefore listed these personal competencies and asked internship partners to rate them according to their importance for graduates in the tourism industry. The results shown in Figure 5 become apparent.

Altogether, personal competencies are regarded to be very important for a position in the tourism industry, as the highly service-oriented tourism industry largely depends on friendliness, hospitality, and empathy.
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toward the guests. Mean values range from 4.77 (self-motivation) to 4.05 (intercultural skills).

The most important personal competency, according to internship companies, are skills related to self-motivation and the willingness to learn ($SD = 0.42$), followed by skills related to willingness and personal commitment ($SD = 0.45$), as well as the ability to work under pressure ($SD = 0.54$).

**ACTIVITY AND ACTION-ORIENTED COMPETENCIES**

As already stated in the literature review, activity- and action-oriented competencies refer to the ability to operationalize all kinds of knowledge in terms of social communication, personal values, and ideals and to thereby integrate all other kinds of competencies. The fourth question therefore listed the respective skills and abilities belonging to this competency field and asked internship partners to rate them according to their importance for graduates to be employed in the tourism industry. The results shown in Figure 6 become apparent.

As far as activity- and action-oriented competencies are concerned, initiative and the ability to be proactive ($SD = 0.49$) and creativity ($SD = 0.49$) are evenly identified as being most important in the tourism industry.
FIGURE 5  Perception of personal competencies ($n = 43$).

FIGURE 6  Perception of activity and action competencies ($n = 43$).
INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

As already indicated, the most relevant professional and methodological competency according to internship partners of MCI is language competence ($SD = 0.48$), followed by problem-solving skills ($SD = 0.54$), and conceptual skills ($SD = 0.57$). There is little doubt that foreign language skills are invaluable when communicating with people from another country. This is nowhere more apposite than in the context of the cross-cultural interface between tourism enterprises and visitors. Furthermore, it is interesting that problem-solving and conceptual skills emerge as the second and third most relevant skills to be derived from the educational process. This might relate to the fact that tourism destinations do not simply seek employees to provide basic services to customers but to manage the service encounter.

According to respondents, the strongest social and communicative competency seems to be what was termed “overall communication competencies” ($SD = 0.46$), followed by active listening ($SD = 0.50$), and social and team skills ($SD = 0.58$). People employed in the tourism industry especially must be able to demonstrate verbal and written communication skills in a wide range of contexts. Moreover, they need to be able to actively listen and accurately note information and needs and wishes of visitors to provide high-quality service. Collaboration and networking have attracted a great deal of attention and have widened the perspective of economic systems such as tourism. It is a big challenge and responsibility for destinations to professionally collaborate and network in a sustainable way to guarantee high-quality products and services and to remain competitive toward industry competitors. Effective social networking starts with the employee’s social and team skills.

The most important personal competency, according to internship partner companies, is self-motivation and the willingness to learn ($SD = 0.42$), followed by willingness and personal commitment ($SD = 0.45$), as well as the ability to work under pressure ($SD = 0.54$). Self-motivation and willingness to learn refer to the ability to motivate oneself and to strive for further knowledge. Particularly in the tourism industry, employees must be willing to work on weekends, holidays, evenings, and long and unusual hours at times (also referred to as shift work), which might require more self-motivation than other jobs, high personal commitment, and an ability to work under pressure.

As far as activity and action competencies are concerned, initiative and the ability to be proactive and creativity ($SD = 0.49$) are evenly regarded to be most important in the tourism industry. Being proactive, initiative in reviewing, and creativity for improving systems and procedures that impact the delivered service are essential competencies in the tourism field, as tourism has to keep pace with the changing circumstances and challenges of today.
The study can be regarded as confirmatory research, as it is involved in testing against assumptions elaborated on competencies and skills of graduates. Therefore, data is now interpreted in the light of the research questions and assumptions framed (see Figure 7).

A comparison of all four types of competencies yields the results shown in Figure 8. Activity- and action-oriented competencies are rated to be most important with an average of 4.53, followed by social and communicative competencies with a mean value of 4.52, personal competencies with a mean value of 4.41, and professional and methodological competencies with an average mean of 4.32.

These results are of particular interest and relevance, as the main focus of tourism programs always seems to be a sound education relating to professional and methodological competencies. Hence, the study shows that extra-functional competencies such as social and communicative, personal, as well as activity and action-oriented competencies are far more important from the employers’ point of view. This might be a direct result

**Figure 7** Assumptions.

A1. Professional and methodological competencies are the most important competencies graduates must possess in the tourism industry.

A2. Social and personal competencies are more important than activity and action-oriented competencies when being employed in the tourism industry.

**Figure 8** Overall results.
stemming from the overall strong customer orientation within the services industries such as tourism. The customer is the focus of attention when it comes to setting up new offers, bundling multi-optional services, and hosting the guest in a destination at a very high level of hospitality and personal commitment (see Figure 9).

If this result is now translated to the field of education, it might suggest to further focus and, where possible, teach these extra-functional competencies to respond to future tourism needs.

**LIMITATIONS**

The present study has certain limitations that need to be taken into account when considering the results of the study and its contributions.

One limitation of course is that solely internship partner companies of one single higher education institution were being surveyed and more importantly, that the definitions of graduate skills and competencies include the element of choice and are also limited by the emphasis the institution puts on them. To complete the overall picture, a broader survey within each vocational field by means of in-depth interviews with company directors would be most valuable.

Another limitation arises from the low response rate. The small sample size of 48 respondents demands to apply caution on the results of the confirmatory survey. It must be admitted that the findings might not be generalized for the field of tourism and hospitality research. This is a major shortcoming that might be explored and addressed in future research. Given the high level of access and frequent use of e-mail as a communication medium, it was felt that a Web-based survey had the advantage of being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A1</th>
<th>Professional and methodological competencies are the most important competencies graduates must possess in the tourism industry.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A1 cannot be falsified</em> according to the study results, as professional and methodological competencies are regarded to be of least importance (4.32 mean) compared to the three other competencies and skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A2</th>
<th>Social and personal competencies are more important than activity and action competencies when being employed in the tourism industry.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A2 cannot be falsified</em>, as activity and action competencies (4.53 mean) rank more important than social (4.52 mean) and personal competencies (4.41) do. Overall, activity and action-oriented competencies are regarded to be the most important competence altogether.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 9** Testing of assumptions.
relatively time efficient for respondents. Yet, even though research shows that e-mail response rates are higher, the study found response rates were higher only during the first few days after the first invitation to participate in the study and after a reminder was sent to the respondents (Bosnjak, Tuten, & Bandilla, 2001). Furthermore, in electronic mailings, people can easily quit in the middle of a questionnaire and are not as likely to complete a long questionnaire on the Web, which has been evidenced in the empirical study at hand with four questionnaires being not fully completed. Although electronic studies show a wide range of advantages (cost savings, ease of editing and analysis, faster transmission time, easy use of pre-letters, more candid responses, and potentially quicker response time with wider magnitude of coverage), some disadvantages exist, such as sample demographic limitations, lower levels of confidentiality, layout and presentation issues of a computer questionnaire, missing additional orientation/instructions, potential technical problems with hardware and software, and the probability of discontinuation halfway through the questionnaire.

IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The most recent global and regional developments bring about a change in vocational education and training needs required from new recruits in the tourism industry and ask for revised training programs to be introduced for future decision-makers (Hofstetter, 2004). Students require a sound higher education that allows them to cope with the changing environment, making use of competencies such as the ability to handle conflict, creative problem solution, tolerance, social skills, and flexibility. Of course, the degree to which these skills are required by employers varies depending on the type of job role to be carried out within an organization (i.e., these skills might be of particular importance for graduates taking up management positions; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005). They must be sound in decision-making, problem-solving, troubleshooting, and conflict resolutions, which are all key managerial skills.

The study among domestic and international internship partner companies of MCI clearly indicates that all competencies are highly important for graduates. It is interesting that activity- and action-oriented competencies seem to have the greatest importance for tourism-related jobs, followed by social and communicative competencies, personal competencies, and last but not least professional and methodological competencies. This result suggests it is a big challenge and responsibility for education institutions to convey and promote not only professional but also social, personal, and activity- and action-oriented skills in a sustainable way to guarantee a high-quality program and good employability opportunities for graduates.
Furthermore, taking the strong divide concerning a general definition of employability skills and competencies into account, institutes of higher education have to clearly define these competencies for themselves and, in a second step, set clear learning and teaching goals by defining the desired outcomes.

The study also shows the importance of relatedness between industry requirements and industry partners and curriculum development at higher education institutions. The article implies the need to involve industry in curriculum design especially with regard to the definition of graduate skills and competencies being developed at education institutions.

REFERENCES


