

THE COMPLIANCE OF TOURISM EDUCATION WITH INDUSTRY NEEDS IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT: Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing global industries. Accordingly, there is an increasing need for qualified, highly educated professionals in this area possessing professional knowledge and employability skills. The present explanatory research was conducted in 2013 and it comprises a mixed-mode survey of stakeholders (91 industry employers and 95 graduates) applying questionnaires as a tool. The purpose of the research is to identify the most significant gaps by means of exploring compliance of tourism education with the industry needs and elaborate suggestions on diminishing them. The paper analyzes employability skills, the conducted survey and compares their results with the findings obtained in similar studies in other countries. The research revealed a discrepancy in the graduates' actual skills and competencies and their level to those expected by the industry employers. The study highlighted the significant role of internship in developing employability skills. A model of internship management phases has been elaborated to enhance students' employability skills. **Keywords:** tourism education, tourism curriculum, skills, competencies, employability

INTRODUCTION

Today tourism is considered as one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the global economy. According to International Labour Organization's estimations, the travel and tourism industry provides for more than 235 million jobs, which constitutes 8 per cent of global employment (International Labour Organization, 2011). World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that by the year 2023 9.9 per cent of global employment will be directly or indirectly related to tourism and hospitality industry (Travel and Tourism Economic Impact. World [WTTC], 2013). In terms of real numbers, it constitutes almost 338 million jobs and it means that the industry contributes to around one in every eleven jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2013). An average growth of tourism and travel

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jobs is estimated at 2.4 per cent; however, it is affected by considerable regional differences. The research on the travel and tourism competitiveness made public in 2013 at the World Economic Forum (Turner & Sears, 2013) shows that in the period 2012-2022 the expected growth of tourism and travel jobs in Europe is estimated at 2 437 thousand. Accordingly, there is a substantial need for an increasing number of highly qualified, well-educated industry professionals, and the role of education in the field of tourism and hospitality is increasing.

Tourism education started at the end of the 19th century (Salgado, & Costa, 2011). Initially it was training courses for staff in specific sectors, such as hotel management (Ring, Dickinger, & Wöber, 2009; Salgado, & Costa, 2011). "These courses subsequently led to the establishment of technical and vocational schools, which in turn, have evolved into undergraduate and graduate programs" (Ring, et al., 2009: 107). According to various Internet sources, e.g., Study portals for taking you further/Masters (n.d.), Study portals for taking you further/Bachelors (n.d.), Study in the USA (2014), Academia (2013), there are around 200 master study programmes and more than 1 000 bachelor study programmes in tourism and hospitality worldwide. Every study programme attempts to provide the best curriculum ensuring that graduates develop competencies and skills needed by the industry.

Meeting the industry's requirements and expectations is still the basic aim in developing tourism curricula (Raybould & Wilkins, 2005). However, there is no common definition of the term *curriculum*. Bunyi in his research refers to "the formal and informal content and processes through which learners gain knowledge, develop skills as well as appropriate attitudes and values all of which are directed towards the achievement of the objectives and goals of an education program" (Bunyi, 2013: 680). Therefore, as argued by Zehrer and Mössenlechner (2009), the aim of every curriculum developer and planner is to create such a curriculum, that graduates could develop competencies enabling them to work in the changing environment of tourism and hospitality business world. The approach used by White (1988) and Markee (2002) has been adopted in this study in which curriculum is perceived as educational philosophy, the goal and objectives of the programme, learning outcomes to be attained, criteria for the programme's evaluation and improvement and programme management.

Nowadays "graduates are expected to be competent in a broad range of areas, comprising both field-specific and generic skills" (Allen & van der Velden, 2009: 71). They need to upgrade occupation-specific skills and such transversal skills as communication, team-working, self-management, creativity, and innovation (Learning while Working, 2011). A task of university is to ensure opportunities of enhancing these skills and competencies. This is important both for university graduates to get

employment and build their careers and for the industry that needs well-educated and qualified staff. Therefore, it is crucial that tourism curricula meet the industry requirements and expectations. However, in practice there are problems that stem from different perceptions of that aim.

There has always been a question if the current curriculum and the methods of implementation correspond to students', graduates' and employers' needs and expectations. In order to improve the curriculum and adapt it as well as further apply the most adequate methods and activities to acquire knowledge and skills defined, the research was carried out in Turiba University.

The present paper studies the needs and expectations of graduates and industry and analyzes the compliance of tourism education with the industry needs to determine the most significant gaps between them and elaborate suggestions on how to diminish these gaps.

Literature review

Several studies have been conducted aimed at understanding the needs of the industry in terms of competencies and skills. Tourism industry itself is very diverse and therefore knowledge and skills needed for employees in the industry also differ from sub-sector to sub-sector (e.g., hotel companies, rural tourism enterprises, tour operators etc.) and from organization to organization (public, private, NGO etc). Tourism Education Future Initiative, where senior tourism educators and industry experts are united, have identified four categories of skills that would be important for industry – skills related to destination stewardship, politics and ethics, enhanced human resources and dynamic business skills (Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper, & Antonioli, 2007). Other scholars have discovered that skills like foreign language proficiency, communication, decision-making abilities, and others can be singled out as the most important ones for the needs of tourism and hospitality industry (Luka & Donina, 2012; Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). Equal attention should be paid to problem-solving, maintaining professional and ethical standards, and recognizing operational problems (Christou & Sigala, 2001). Raybould and Wilkins (2005) determined that the most valuable skills considered by the industry are: skills to deal effectively with customers' problems, operate effectively and calmly in crisis situations and maintain professional and ethical standards in the work environment.

The terms *hard skills* and *soft skills* have been applied in many works. Hard skills “correspond to the skills in the technical and administrative categories, and soft skills correspond to the skills in the human, conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal categories” (Weber, Crawford, Lee, & Dennison, 2013: 315). Soft skills are also associated with people's skills or behavioural skills, whereas hard skills refer to technical

skills (Rao, 2010). Soft skills may be considered as generic skills because they are basic skills necessary both for everyday life and employability.

Fallows and Stevens (2000) stressed that there is a need for university wide initiative to enhance the development of employability skills, in particular generic skills, within the university curriculum. Generic skills build self-esteem and self-confidence that enable personal and professional advancement (Rao, 2010). Acquisition of generic skills enhances graduates' employability in terms of employment opportunities and prospects (Rao, 2010; Selvadurai, Choy, & Maros, 2012). Among the more widely cited generic skills are critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, a capacity for logical and independent thinking, communication and information management skills, creativity, ethical awareness and practice, integrity, and tolerance (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004).

The term *employability skills* appeared in literature only comparatively recently. Employability or work-readiness means the ability of a graduate to ensure economic competitiveness. The Dearing report (1997) identified a set of key skills relevant throughout life, not simply in employment. Dearing defined them as communication, numeracy, IT and learning how to learn at a higher level. This partly coincides with the key competences defined by the EU – communication, mathematical competence, social and civic competences, learning-to-learn, and others (European Communities, 2006). Generic skills needed to enhance graduates' employability are now typically seen as those emphasized by Dearing (1997), as well as additional aspects such as literacy, problem-solving and team-working skills (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009). Nowadays, these defined skills form the basis for different studies regarding graduates' employability, together with specific skills or their interpretation. For example, studies in Spain emphasized interpersonal skills, management skills, problem resolution, and decision making (Cervera-Taulet, & Ruiz-Molina, 2008) and the ability to apply knowledge to practice (Munar, & Montaña, 2009). According to Andrews and Higson (2008) the most significant key transferable soft skills and competencies for graduates' employability are professionalism, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to plan and think strategically, creativity and self-confidence. Depending on the industry, the capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking, and good written and verbal communication skills can be very important.

Employability is a highly complex concept, which is both difficult to articulate and define. As it is seen from different studies, employability skills can be defined differently, but analysing them in-depth, in general, they are interpreted similarly.

The employability skills identified by different scholars vary considerably in the way they are organized (Cotton, 2008). There is a study identifying 35 different skills within one management skills category

only (Dhiman, 2012) while another scholars' group named 16 skills in five categories (Selvadurai, et al., 2012).

Therefore, it can be concluded that employability skills can be defined by a researcher, university or industry enterprises, on the basis of a general approach that a certain set of skills should correspond to the industry requirements globally.

Nowadays, employers are looking for a more flexible, adaptable workforce (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009) with transferable skills (Dhiman, 2012). Therefore, this article will concentrate on the analysis of skills graduates need to possess in order to successfully operate in tourism and hospitality enterprises. Hence, here the main attention is focused on employability skills, as they could be considered transferable.

Moreover, different countries may interpret employability differently. There are countries where special qualification frameworks or standards are developed in cooperation between academic personnel and industry representatives. Latvia is one of those countries. However, at the moment there is no profession standard approved for tourism and hospitality industry specialists in Latvia. Furthermore, taking into account that tourism is among the most global industries and graduates of Turība University build their professional career not only in Latvia but also in other countries, it was important for the authors of the present research to understand what skills are considered as most important employability skills in tourism and hospitality industry and how they could be enhanced.

METHOD

Purpose of the research

Meeting the industry requirements and expectations is still the basic aim of tourism curricula. However, practice points to problems that stem from differing perceptions of the aim by the various stakeholders (industry, educators, and students). Therefore, the present paper seeks answers to how to diminish this gap. The purpose of the research is to identify the most significant gaps by means of exploring compliance of tourism education with the industry needs and elaborate suggestions on diminishing them.

Research questions

The following research questions are addressed: 1) What are the most significant differences between different stakeholders regarding the content of tourism curriculum? 2) What challenges have to be solved to diminish the gap between the industry and sustainable tourism curriculum?

Place and period of the research

The research was conducted in 2013 in Turība University, the largest private university in Latvia, which had 4 286 students in the study year 2012/2013 and more than 12 000 alumni since its foundation in 1993. The programme under analysis in the present research – Tourism and Hospitality Management programme – is the most popular programme of the University and it has also been granted WTO Ted-Qual accreditation certificate. The Professional bachelor's study programme Tourism and Hospitality Management is developed to ensure that graduates are able to demonstrate basic and specialized knowledge relevant to the profession, make decisions and solve problems, take on responsibility and initiative, independently structure their own professional development. To ensure the development and consolidation of practical skills and abilities each study course programme has at least 1/3 of lessons conducted as practical lessons. Professional practical skills are acquired during internship which is foreseen at the end of every study year in tourism and hospitality enterprises. Studies conclude with a state examination which includes the defence of the Bachelor Thesis. Upon successful completion of the study programme, graduates are awarded professional qualification – the head of the company and institutions (Self-evaluation report, 2013).

Research paradigm and methodology

The study follows traditions of pragmatism paradigm often used in management research which “argues that the most important determinant of the epistemology, ontology and axiology to adopt is the research question” (Sounders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009: 109). Considering ontology, pragmatism enables answering the research question best because of the chosen external, multiple views. Considering epistemology, pragmatism focuses on applied research integrating different perspectives of data interpretation. Regarding axiology, values play a large role in interpreting results. Regarding data collection techniques, mixed or multiple method designs are appropriate (Sounders, et al., 2009). Another advantage of pragmatism lies in the fact that it does not require huge samples and applies a practical approach integrating different perspectives in answering the research questions.

The research is explanatory (analytical) as it investigates the situation, analyzes it and seeks to explain the reasons “by discovering and measuring causal relations among them” (Collis & Hussey, 2009: 6) searching for new knowledge in order to assess phenomena in a new light. Explanatory research was selected for the research because, as argued by Sounders, et al. (2009), the emphasis in explanatory research is on studying an issue in order to explain the relationships between variables.

Regarding the research strategy, the survey strategy was selected as it involves the structured collection of data from a created sample. Surveys are commonly used in business and management studies, because the data obtained are standardized and easily comparable and understandable. It allows analyzing the data using descriptive and inferential statistics (Sounders, et al., 2009). Therefore, the mixed-mode survey of stakeholders (face-to-face and e-mail) applying a questionnaire as a tool was conducted by addressing two samples: 91 industry employers and 95 graduates of the programme Tourism and Hospitality Management.

Sample

Cluster sampling comprising 95 graduates (75 female, 20 male) of Tourism and Hospitality Management programme of the study year 2012/2013 was selected and it involved all full time programme graduates of the respective study year. 83 respondents were aged 20-25, 12 respondents – aged 26-30. 69 respondents had employment in Latvia, 23 were not employed at the moment of the survey. 80 graduates had full-time or part-time work experience in tourism and hospitality field.

Another cluster sampling of 91 tourism employers in whose enterprises the graduates had undergone their pre-diploma internship training was selected. 41 of them were top-level managers, 40 – mid-level managers. 32 were employed in the lodging sector, 28 – in the catering sector, 12 – in travel agencies and tour operating companies. 13 represented SMEs, 25 – medium-sized tourism enterprises, 17 – large tourism enterprises and 30 very large tourism enterprises.

According to O'Leary (2010) the advantages of cluster sampling lie in the fact that it involves surveying whole clusters of definite population (in this case, university graduates of a certain programme and tourism employers offering internship training to certain students), and full population lists are not needed to obtain valid results.

Questionnaire

In accordance with Sounders, et al. (2009) questionnaires tend to be used for descriptive and explanatory research as they enable researchers to identify and describe the variability in different phenomena and examine and explain relationships between different variables.

Mixed-mode survey (face-to-face and e-mail) was administered. Graduates' survey was administered on a face-to-face basis and the graduates filled in the questionnaire after the defense of their Bachelor's Paper. Employers were contacted face-to-face and by e-mail in order to fill in the questionnaire. The employers' questionnaire was administered after students had completed their internship in the def-

inite enterprise. The questionnaires contained category questions and Likert style rating scale questions.

Graduates' survey comprised the following parts: information about the respondent (age, work experience, gender); self-assessment of knowledge, skills and competencies developed during studies and their application at work.

Employers' survey comprised the following parts: significance of certain knowledge, skills and competencies for employment in tourism and hospitality industry; assessment of graduates' knowledge, skills and competencies and their application at work; and information about the respondent (the type of enterprise, the size of enterprise, position).

Intra-group and cross-group analysis of findings applying SPSS software was performed.

Research design and research methods

The research consisted of 3 parts: the context analysis, setting up the methodological framework, empirical study (graduates' survey and employers' survey) comprising data collection and analysis, as well as designing the model and elaborating conclusions. The research design is shown in *Figure 1*.

The study uses multiple methods, namely multi-method quantitative approach, which according to Sounders et al. (2009) is increasingly used in business and management research comprising also primary and secondary data analysis. The use of multiple methods implies the application of more than one data collection technique and analysis procedures to answer the research question.

In the present research the following research methods have been applied: 1) literature review on tourism education and employability skills; 2) primary data collection methods (graduates' survey and tourism employers' survey) applying face-to-face and e-mail questionnaires; 3) secondary data collection (documentary, multiple source, and ad hoc surveys) methods; 4) data analysis and interpretation methods (analysis of descriptive statistics, inferential statistics analysis – Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics test, Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test to test empirical distribution, according to the results non-parametric methods for further data analysis). Descriptive statistics was collected in order to analyze general opinions and trends and compare the respondents' answers to the questions. This included the analysis of frequencies, means, modes and medians. Special attention was paid to means and modes as according to Collis & Hussey (2009) means reveal the arithmetic value of the responses and medians – the most frequently occurring value in a data set, thus pointing to the majority opinion. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics test was applied to test internal consistency between the questions and data validity and reliability. Next, Kolmog-

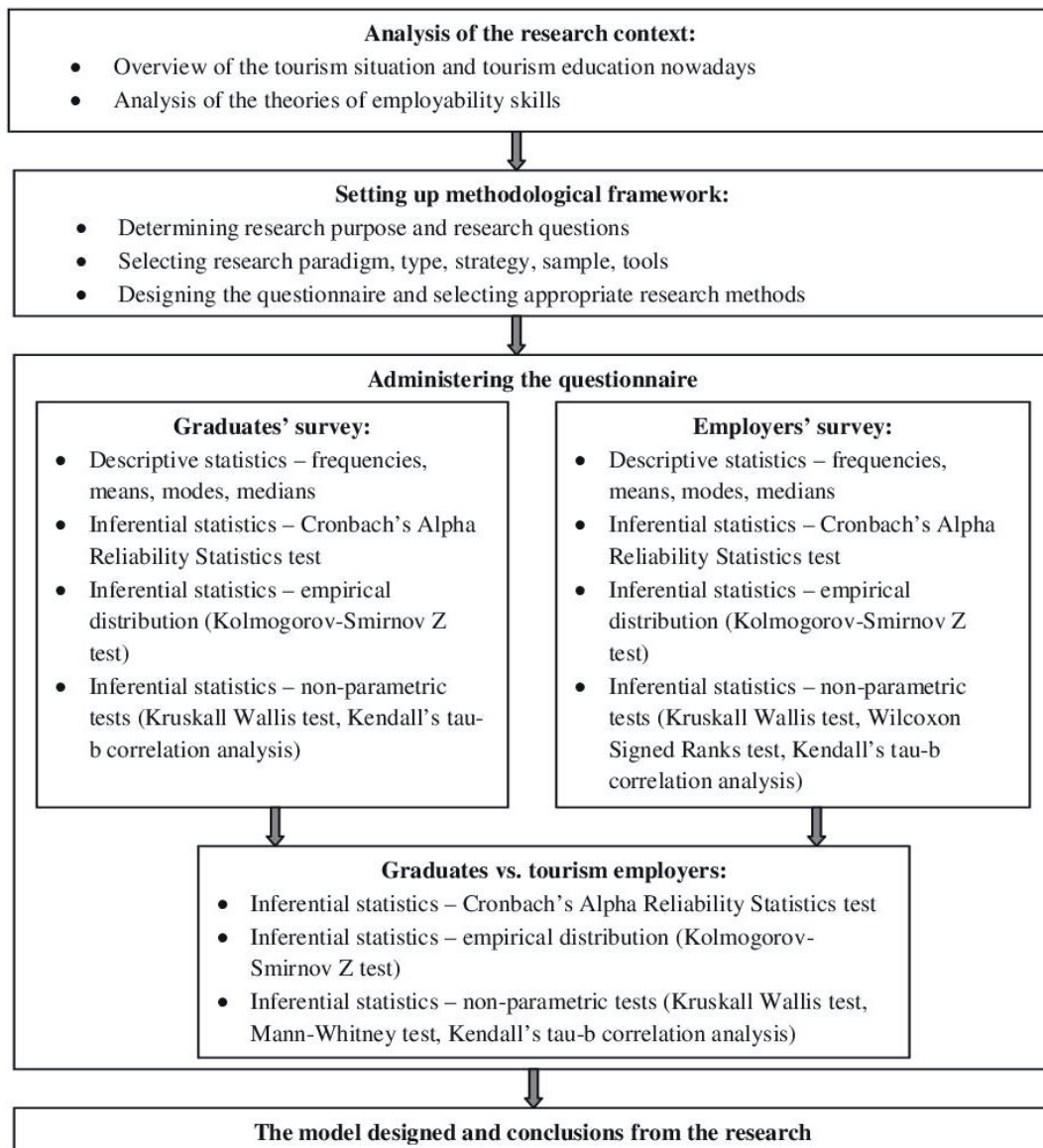


Figure 1. The research design

orov-Smirnov Z test was applied to determine empirical distribution in order to select further methods for data analysis. In accordance with the results non-parametric tests were applied to analyze the difference between two or more variables and between two and more groups. According to Baggio & Klobas (2011) Mann-Whitney U-test was applied to find out if there was a difference in the opinion between two samples, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was applied to analyze the difference between two pairs, Kruskal Wallis test was applied to analyze the difference between more than two groups and Kendall's tau-b correlation test was applied to investigate correlations. The p-value method was used for data analysis and interpretation.

RESULTS

Graduates' Survey

Applying Likert-style scale (where 1=very bad, 2=bad, 3=rather bad, 4=average, 5=good, 6=very good) graduates evaluated their knowledge acquired and skills and competencies developed during studies at Turiba University. The findings show that overall graduates evaluated their knowledge (means ranging from 3.7263 to 4.9579, medians 4.0000 and 5.0000, modes 4.00 and 5.00), skills and competencies (means ranging from 3.0105 to 5.4737, medians mostly 5.0000 and 6.0000, modes mostly 5.00 and 6.00) as average and good (refer to *Table 1*).

The highest evaluation of knowledge was given to the knowledge acquired in the courses *Personnel Management* and *Psychology* which might be referred to as general courses developing generic competencies. Regarding special professional courses the highest evaluation was given to the knowledge acquired in the courses *Hotel Operations and Management* and *Tourism and Hospitality Industry Operations*. In turn, the lowest evaluation was given to the knowledge acquired in professional courses *Economics* and *Financial Management and Accounting* both of which are significant to manage businesses successfully. Regarding self-evaluation of skills and competencies employability skills were evaluated quite high; for example, team working skills, problem-solving skills, organizational skills. The lowest evaluation was given to German/French language skills which points to the necessity to practice these skills during studies more. A similar self-evaluation of students' second foreign language skills was obtained in a study (Luka, Donina, 2012) conducted in Turiba University in 2009. Graduates admitted that they had positive attitude to work and they were able to apply theoretical knowledge in practice which is essential for any business.

Moreover, the analysis of frequencies showed that on average 60 graduates out of 95 admitted that their knowledge, skills and competencies were good and very good. In 18 parameters out of 30 the numbers exceeded 60; for example, responsibility for one's actions and decisions (88 graduates), ability to demonstrate positive attitude to work and communication abilities with colleagues and managers at different levels (87 in each position), communication abilities with guests (84), English language skills and the capability of using MS Office programs (79 in each), problem-solving skills (73), organizational skills (72), etc. These skills and competencies are both generic skills and employability skills.

Table 1. Self-evaluation of graduates' knowledge, skills and competencies

Self-evaluation of the:	Mean	Median	Mode
Knowledge acquired in the course Tourism and Hospitality Industry Operations	4.6737	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Tourism Management	4.2842	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Financial Management and Accountancy	3.7579	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Economics	3.7263	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Psychology	4.8842	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Personnel Management	4.9579	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Hotel Management and Reservation Systems	4.3158	4.0000	4.00(a)
Knowledge acquired in the course Hotel Operations and Management	4.7368	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Catering Management and Organization	4.1474	4.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course International Tourism and Globalization	4.3789	4.0000	4.00(a)
Knowledge acquired in the course Tour Organization and Management	4.4211	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course Marketing	4.5263	5.0000	5.00
English language skills	5.1895	5.0000	5.00
German/French language skills	3.0105	3.0000	3.00
Russian language skills	4.5368	5.0000	6.00
Communication abilities with guests	5.3474	5.0000	6.00
Communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels	5.3684	5.0000	6.00
Reservation system skills	4.4000	4.0000	4.00
Capability to use MS Office programs	5.3684	6.0000	6.00
Organizational skills	4.9368	5.0000	5.00
Ability to manage and control others	4.6737	5.0000	5.00
Team working skills	5.4000	6.0000	6.00
Problem solving skills	4.9684	5.0000	5.00
Ability to motivate others	4.9053	5.0000	5.00
Responsibility about one's actions and decisions	5.3368	5.0000	5.00
Capability to apply strategic approach to enterprise management	4.7053	5.0000	5.00
Ability to demonstrate positive attitude towards work	5.4737	6.0000	6.00
Ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	5.0000	5.0000	5.00
Ability to express and argument one's opinion and ideas	4.8632	5.0000	5.00
Presentation skills	4.3474	5.0000	5.00

a Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Graduates also had to evaluate factors enhancing their knowledge, skills and competencies. Top positions were taken by such integral parts of the study programme as internship (93.68%), elaboration of Study papers and Diploma paper (67.37%) and performing of independent tasks (58.95%) (refer to *Figure 2*).

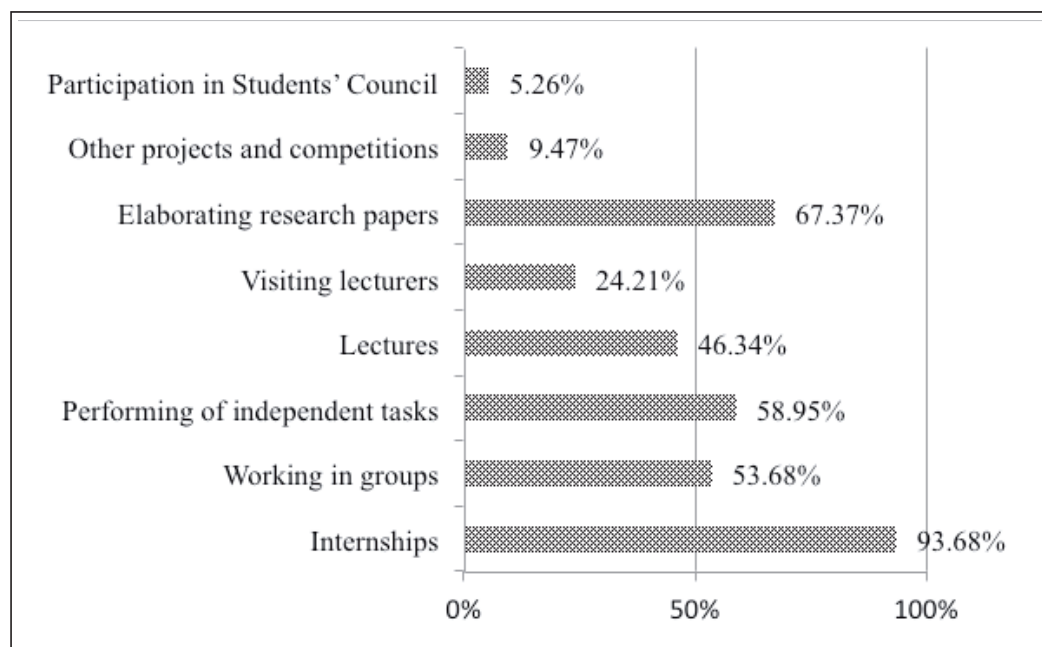


Figure 2. Factors enhancing graduates' knowledge, skills and competencies according to their self-evaluation

Tourism and Hospitality Management programme is designed in such a way that all students undergo three internships in the industry and additionally a pre-diploma placement, elaborate three Study papers and Diploma paper (Bachelor's Thesis) and the scope of independent tasks is 70%. Independent tasks or as defined in the current programme – self-dependent studies – is a compulsory part of studies at Turiba which comprises students' independent work during the study course and its scope corresponds to the amount of ECTS to be acquired during the course. Self-dependent studies include: studying of compulsory and additional literature and sources, doing regular tests, preparing for lectures, seminars, tests, final tests and examinations, and performing other tasks in accordance with the course requirements.

Internship and lectures form a considerable part of the studies; therefore, these two factors were analyzed in-depth. On average, 23 graduates acknowledged lectures and 44 – internship as a very significant factor in developing their knowledge. *Figure 3* shows the extent to which graduates, who had highly and very highly evaluated their knowledge, recognized internship and lectures as factors enhancing their knowledge acquisition.

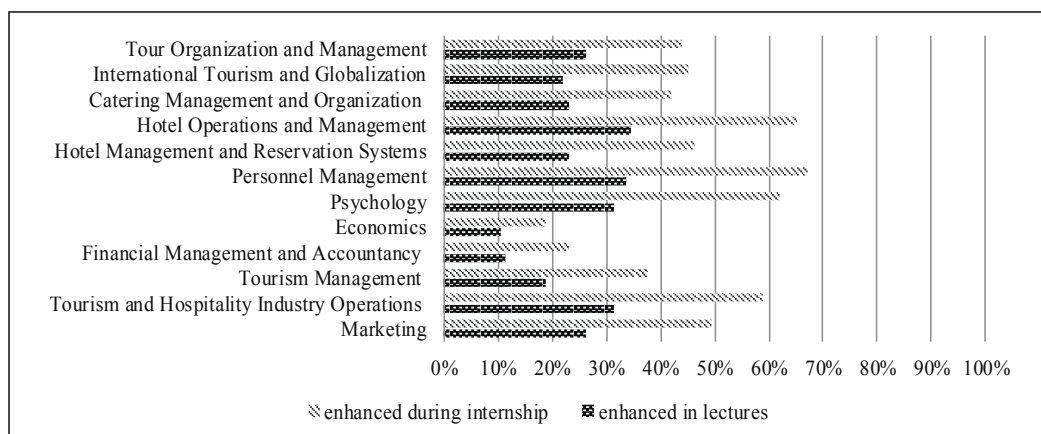


Figure 3. Graduates' knowledge acquisition and their opinion about internship and lectures

Comparing these factors 24.47% of graduates having good and very good knowledge in the courses acknowledged that they had acquired it in lectures, whereas 46.75% stressed the role of internship. In turn, on average 35 graduates acknowledged lectures and 67 – internship as a very significant factor in developing their skills and competencies. The findings show the importance of the role of internship in enhancing in particular students' professional knowledge, as knowledge in such courses as *Hotel Operations and Management*, *Personnel Management*, *Tourism and Hospitality Industry Operations* are enhanced during internship much more than in lectures. In fact, there is no study course wherein knowledge was enhanced more in lectures than during internship. Figure 4 shows the extent to which graduates, who had highly and very highly evaluated their skills and competencies, recognized internship and lectures as factors enhancing their development.

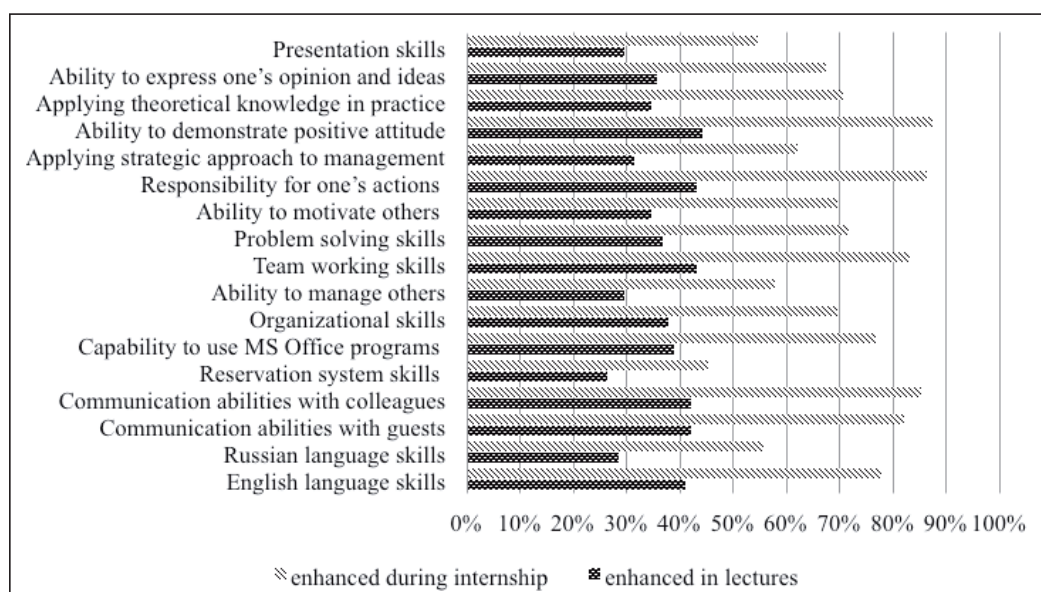


Figure 4. Development of graduates' skills and competencies and their opinion about internship and lectures

Comparing these factors 36.47% of graduates having good and very good skills and competencies acknowledged that they had developed them in lectures, whereas 70.77% stressed the role of internship.

In both cases findings indicate a predominance of the development of skills, competencies and knowledge during internship which emphasizes the significance of internship in the study process and points to the necessity of the university to work hand-in-hand with the industry in order to intensify the internship content and management.

The applied Kruskal Wallis test shows that there is no significant difference in respondents' opinion analyzing the data in accordance with their work experience (p -value=0.099-0.988) and their employment sector (p -value=0.087-0.870). Cronbach's Alpha test validates good internal consistency and very high validity (α =0.856) as well as very high data reliability (s =0.846-0.869). Thus, the results may be generalized to all graduates of the present tourism curriculum.

Employers' Survey

Applying Likert-style scale (where 1=not important, 2=not really important, 3=rather important, 4=average, 5=important, 6=very important) tourism employers evaluated the significance of certain knowledge, skills and competencies for successful operation in tourism and hospitality industry. The findings show that overall employers recognized the importance of all knowledge, skills and competencies the development of which are included in the curriculum under investigation (means ranging from 3.9780 to 5.8242, medians mostly 6.0000 and 5.0000, modes mostly 6.00 and 5.00). The only two parameters which got lower medians (4.0000) and modes (4.00) were knowledge in *Economics* and German/French language skills. Analyzing these two parameters according to the sector it is evident that employers from the accommodation sector evaluated the significance of knowledge in *Economics* slightly higher (25% very important and 18.75% important) than those from the catering sector (14.29% very important, 25% important) and employers from tourist information centres (TIC), travel agencies and tour operating companies (14.29% very important and 21.43% important). In turn, employers from the accommodation sector evaluated the necessity of German/French language skills lower (9.38% very important and 40.61% important) than employers from TIC, travel agencies and tour operating companies (28.57% very important and 28.57% important) but higher than employers from the catering sector (10.71% very important and 28.57% important). This shows that the results are sector-specific.

Applying Likert-style scale (where 1=very bad, 2=bad, 3=rather bad, 4=average, 5=good, 6=very good) employers evaluated graduates' knowledge, skills and competencies (refer to *Table 2*).

Table 2. Graduates' knowledge, skills and competencies according to the evaluation by employers

Evaluation of:	Mean	Median	Mode
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Tourism and Hospitality Industry Operations'	4.4835	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Tourism Management'	4.0989	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Financial Management and Accountancy'	3.7143	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Economics'	3.7582	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Psychology'	4.8352	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Personnel Management'	4.1648	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Hotel Management and Reservation Systems'	3.6044	4.0000	4.00(a)
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Hotel Operations and Management'	3.4286	4.0000	4.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Catering Management and Organization'	3.9011	5.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'International Tourism and Globalization'	3.8132	4.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Tour Organization and Management'	3.5824	4.0000	5.00
Knowledge acquired in the course 'Marketing'	4.2088	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' English language skills	5.1319	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' German/French language skills	3.1319	3.0000	3.00
Graduates' Russian language skills	4.6923	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' communication abilities with guests	5.1429	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels	5.3626	6.0000	6.00
Graduates' communication abilities with Latvian tourists	5.0879	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' communication abilities with foreign tourists	5.0000	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' reservation system skills	4.1099	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' capability to use MS Office programs	5.0220	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' organizational skills	4.6374	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' team working skills	5.3846	6.0000	6.00
Graduates' problem solving skills	4.8791	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' ability to motivate others	4.6813	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' responsibility about their actions and decisions	5.2637	6.0000	6.00
Graduates' capability to apply strategic approach to enterprise management	4.6264	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' initiative	4.9451	5.0000	5.00
Graduates' creativity	5.0659	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' ability to demonstrate positive attitude towards work	5.4396	6.0000	6.00
Graduates' ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	5.0659	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' ability to express and argument their opinion and ideas	4.9451	5.0000	6.00
Graduates' presentation skills	4.3187	5.0000	5.00

a Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

In general, employers evaluated the graduates' knowledge as average (means ranging from 3.4286 to 4.8352, medians mostly 4.0000, modes 4.00 and 5.00), whereas they evaluated the graduates' skills and competencies as good (means ranging from 4.1099 to 5.4396, medians mostly 5.0000 and 6.0000, and modes 5.00 and 6.00). The exception was the graduates' German/French language skills (mean 3.1319, median 3.0000, mode 3.00). According to the employers graduates have highly developed employability skills such as: communication abilities with foreign tourists, communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels, team working skills and responsibility for their own actions and decisions. In turn, more attention should be paid to the development of students' knowledge in special professional courses in which graduates received a comparatively low evaluation – *Financial Management and Accountancy, Economics, Hotel Operations and Management*.

Analyzing the data regarding the field of enterprise in most cases there were no significant differences in the opinion of employers (p -value=0.087-0.982). However, the differences appeared in the following four sector-specific parameters: importance of potential employees' knowledge in *Hotel Management and Reservation Systems* (p -value=0.000), *Hotel Operations and Management* (p -value=0.000), *Catering Management and Organization* (p -value=0.000) and in evaluation of graduates' knowledge in *Catering Management and Organization* (p -value=0.016). The first two of those parameters are more highly evaluated by employers from the accommodation sector, TIC and travel agencies than by those from the catering sector, whereas the other two parameters are more highly evaluated by employers from the catering sector and TIC than other sectors. Those data may be generalized for the sector. Differences were also discovered in the following five parameters referring to employability skills: importance of English language skills of potential employees (p -value=0.026), communication skills working with foreign tourists (p -value=0.027), the skills of applying MS Office programs (p -value=0.005), positive attitude towards work (p -value=0.037) and evaluation of graduates' English language skills (p -value=0.039). The differences were discovered in all sectors.

Analyzing the data by the employer's position at the company (top-level, mid-level, lower-level manager) in most cases there were no significant differences in the opinion of employers (p -value=0.061-0.948). However, differences were observed in the following parameters: evaluation of graduates' knowledge in *Marketing* (p -value=0.014), importance of communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels (p -value=0.016) and team working skills (p -value=0.020), evaluation of graduates' communication abilities with guests (p -value=0.042), graduates' team working skills (p -value=0.017), responsibility for their own actions and decisions (p -value=0.007) and ability to express and

argument their opinion (p -value=0.013). Evaluating the graduates' knowledge in *Marketing* top-level managers evaluated it slightly higher than knowledge in other parameters (mean 4.8049 cf. to 3.7317-4.7805, except the mean for knowledge in *Psychology* 5.1463), whereas lower level managers evaluated it comparatively lower than knowledge in other parameters (mean 3.1429 cf. to 3.2857-4.7143). The means concerning the importance of employability skills and competencies for top-level managers are 4.2439-5.8537, for mid-level managers – 3.7750-5.9250, for lower level managers – 3.8571-5.8571. Both, concerning the importance of communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels, and team working skills top-level managers evaluated them slightly lower in these parameters (mean 5.7073 and 5.5368 respectively) compared to the evaluation done by lower-level managers (mean 6.0000 for each). Regarding evaluation of graduates' skills and competencies the differences do not follow the same pattern. In some cases top-level managers evaluated a certain parameter on average higher than other parameters, for example, responsibility for their own actions and decisions (mean 5.5122 cf. to 3.2439-5.5854), in other cases – comparatively lower, for example, ability to express and argument their opinion (mean 5.2439). Lower-level managers on average evaluated graduates' competencies and skills high in these parameters: communication abilities with guests (mean 5.8571 cf. to 3.4286-6.0000), team working skills (mean 6.0000), graduates' responsibility for their own actions and decisions (mean 5.8571) and ability to express and argument their opinion (mean 5.7143).

Analyzing the data by the company size, overall, there were no significant differences in the opinion of employers (p -value=0.084-0.991). Differences were discovered only in two parameters: importance of potential employees' knowledge in *Hotel Management and Reservation Systems* (p -value=0.033, mean rank for SME 54.81, for medium-sized companies 32.56, for large companies 42.47 and for very large companies 46.88) and importance of potential employees' knowledge in *Hotel Operations and Management* (p -value=0.007, mean rank for SME 49.62, for medium-sized companies 30.70, for large companies 39.74 and for very large companies 52.33).

Cronbach's Alpha test validates excellent internal consistency and extremely high validity (α =0.958) as well as very high data reliability (s =0.957-0.959).

To conclude, as the employers' survey showed mainly some significant differences in sector-specific parameters but, overall, there were no significant differences in other parameters the employers' data may be generalized considering the specifics of the sector. This has to be taken into consideration when developing and/or improving a curriculum.

Data Comparison

The applied Mann-Whitney U-test revealed the differences between the opinion of the two samples in 19 out of 29 issues under analysis. In 4 parameters significant differences (Baggio & Klobas, 2011) were discovered ($p=0.01-0.05$), in 5 parameters – very significant differences ($p=0.001-0.01$) and in 10 parameters extremely significant differences ($p<0.001$) were revealed (refer to *Table 3*).

Table 3. Findings of Mann-Whitney U-test in terms of the respondents' group

Evaluation of:	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Tourism and Hospitality Industry Operations knowledge	4052.500	-.777	.437
Tourism Management knowledge	3753.000	-1.612	.107
Financial Management and Accountancy knowledge	3520.500	-2.259	.024
Economics knowledge	3316.500	-2.853	.004
Psychology knowledge	2802.000	-4.457	.000
Personnel Management knowledge	3905.000	-1.201	.230
Hotel Management and Reservation Systems knowledge	3862.500	-1.287	.198
Hotel Operations and Management knowledge	3654.000	-1.882	.060
Catering Management and Organization knowledge	3511.000	-2.268	.023
International Tourism and Globalization knowledge	4177.500	-.407	.684
Tour Organization and Management knowledge	4097.000	-.631	.528
Marketing knowledge	3334.500	-2.814	.005
English language skills	2624.000	-5.239	.000
German/French language skills	2279.000	-5.706	.000
Russian language skills	2526.500	-5.373	.000
Communication abilities with guests	2627.000	-5.610	.000
Communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels	2743.500	-5.138	.000
Reservation system skills	3621.000	-1.971	.049
Capability to use MS Office programs	4131.500	-.578	.563
Organizational skills	3108.000	-3.595	.000
Team working skills	3336.000	-3.124	.002
Problem solving skills	2158.000	-6.442	.000
Ability to motivate others	3841.500	-1.397	.163
Responsibility about one's actions and decisions	2606.500	-5.447	.000
Capability to apply strategic approach to enterprise management	3318.000	-2.913	.004
Ability to demonstrate positive attitude towards work	3369.500	-3.139	.002
Ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice	3441.000	-2.572	.010
Ability to express and argument one's opinion and ideas	3019.500	-3.811	.000
Presentation skills	3649.000	-1.917	.055

Overall, differences were discovered mainly in evaluating the graduates' skills and competencies, all of which might be considered as employability skills. An extremely significant difference was discovered in the following skills and competencies: English language skills, German/French language skills, Russian language skills, communication abilities with guests, communication abilities with colleagues and managers of different levels, organizational skills, problem solving skills, responsibility for one's actions and decisions and ability to express and argument one's opinion and ideas ($p=0.000$).

Regarding knowledge, differences were found in evaluating knowledge in the following study courses: *Financial Management and Accountancy* ($p=0.024$), *Economics* ($p=0.004$), *Psychology* ($p=0.000$), *Catering Management and Organization* ($p=0.023$) and *Marketing* ($p=0.005$) (refer to Figure 5).

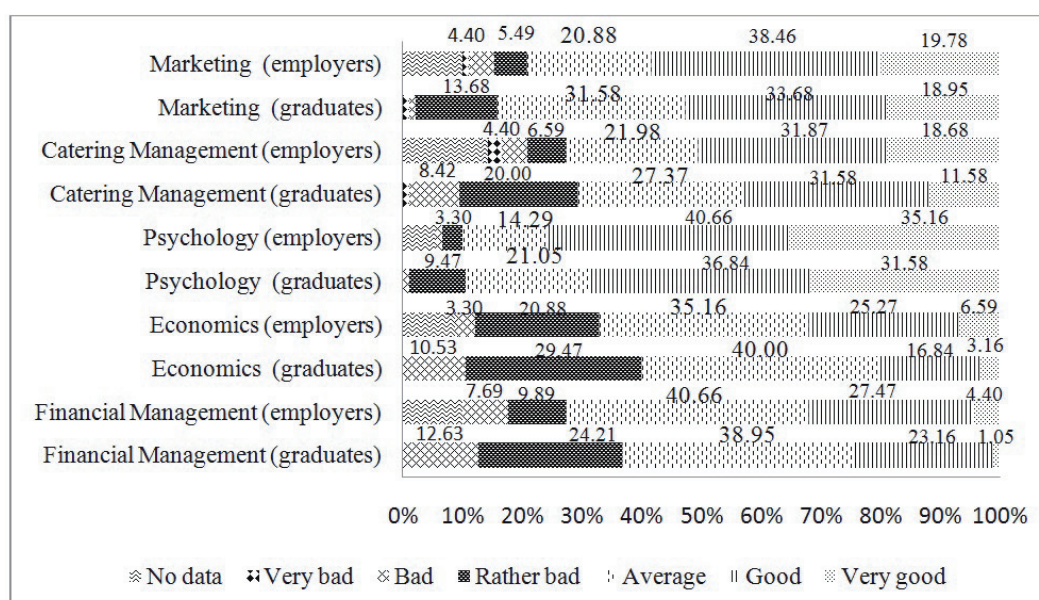


Figure 5. Evaluation of graduates' knowledge (courses where significant difference between the two groups was observed)

In majority of the cases employers evaluated the graduates' knowledge lower than graduates in their self-evaluation: knowledge acquired in the courses *Financial Management and Accountancy* (mean 3.7143 vs. 3.7579), *Psychology* (mean 4.8352 vs. 4.8842), *Catering Management and Organization* (mean 3.9011 vs. 4.1474) and *Marketing* (mean 4.2088 vs. 4.5263). Only in the course *Economics* there was an opposite situation – graduates' self-evaluation was lower than that done by the employers (mean 3.7263 vs. 3.7582).

A similar trend was observed when comparing the evaluation of graduates' skills and competencies. In most parameters graduates evaluated their skills and competencies higher than employers, except in four: evaluation of graduates' German/French language

skills (employers' mean 3.1319 vs. graduates' mean 3.0105), Russian language skills (mean 4.6923 vs. 4.5368), ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice (mean 5.0659 vs. 5.0000) and ability to express and argument one's opinion and ideas (mean 4.8632 vs. 4.9451) (refer to *Table 4*).

Table 4. Comparison of skills and evaluations by graduates and employers, %

Skills and competencies	Group	Very good	Good	Average	Rather bad	Bad	Very bad	No data
English language skills	Graduates	37.89	45.26	14.74	2.11	0	0	0
	Employers	38.46	46.15	12.09	1.10	0	0	2.20
German/French language skills	Graduates	0	9.47	25.26	32.63	23.16	8.42	1.05
	Employers	7.69	17.58	19.78	25.27	6.59	10.99	12.09
Russian language skills	Graduates	36.84	22.11	17.89	13.68	4.21	1.05	4.21
	Employers	32.97	29.67	24.18	7.69	1.10	1.10	3.30
Communication abilities with guests	Graduates	48.42	40.00	10.53	0	1.05	0	0
	Employers	48.35	37.36	8.79	0	1.10	0	4.40
Communication abilities with colleagues, managers	Graduates	47.37	44.21	7.37	0	1.05	0	0
	Employers	51.65	38.46	7.69	1.10	0	0	1.10
Organizational skills	Graduates	20	55.79	22.11	2.11	0	0	0
	Employers	27.47	38.46	17.58	6.59	0	0	6.59
Responsibility for actions and decisions	Graduates	41.05	51.58	7.37	0	0	0	0
	Employers	51.65	31.87	10.99	4.40	0	0	0
Ability to express and argument opinions, ideas	Graduates	27.37	45.26	20.00	5.26	0	0	2.11
	Employers	39.56	34.07	18.68	3.30	1.10	0	3.30

This trend might be explained by the fact that graduates still lack work experience and that the scope of internship tasks might not allow the application of the full range of knowledge acquired and skills and competencies developed during studies which consequently influences the evaluation of the graduates' potential knowledge, skills and competencies. This again points to a necessity for a closer collaboration model between the university and the industry to intensify this collaboration thereby diminishing the gap and enhancing graduates' employability.

As the applied Cronbach's Alpha test validates good internal consistency and very high validity ($\alpha=0.892$) as well as very high data reliability ($s=0.883-0.896$) the data may be generalized as to other tourism students of the present curriculum – the graduates of other study years as well as other tourism employers.

Discussion

“Employability skills have often fallen on acquisition of generic skills and development of graduates’ attributes. Since the continuum of employability skills is lifelong learning, the acquisition of such generic skills can start from personal attributes of individual graduates” (Selvadurai et al., 2012: 301).

Research, carried out in different geographical regions and occupation areas, regarding employers’ needs and graduates’ skills enhanced during studies clearly show marked differences between them. For example, a study conducted in the United Kingdom (CBI, 2012) stressed employability skills as the most important factor for graduates’ employability. Four out of five employers emphasized their significance. However, the study also pointed to a deficiency of these skills. 47% of employers were not satisfied with business and customer awareness skills and self-management skills (31%) of graduates. Similarly, the study Higher Education as a Generator of Strategic Competences (HEGESCO) conducted across Europe in 2009 (Allen, & van der Velden, 2009) pointed to the significance of collaboration skills, analytical thinking and ability to work under pressure, at the same time, revealed the lack of analytical thinking skills and ability to work under the pressure.

The current research carried out in Latvia, indicates that there is a gap between the knowledge, skills and competencies required by the industry and the level that graduates demonstrate. Compared to the previously-mentioned HEGESCO study (Allen, & van der Velden, 2009) where graduates in some cases demonstrated surplus of skills, e.g., communication abilities and IT skills, in the current study no surplus of skills was discovered. However, the gap was not very large, which points to opportunities of increasing students’ employability skills during practical work, i.e., internship.

Another trend observed in the current study – overall, graduates evaluated their skills and competencies higher than employers did it. These results coincide with the results obtained in the studies conducted in Spain (Boní, & Lozano, 2007; Munar, & Montaña, 2009) in which graduates’ employability skills also got a lower evaluation compared to their significance, the largest gap being for the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. This trend might be explained by graduates’ insufficient work experience which did not enable them thoroughly evaluate their skill level.

Another gap was discovered regarding skills required by the industry. The research revealed that the industry requires more professionals with specific knowledge and skills rather than top-level managers with strategic competencies. This is in contradiction with the objectives of

the bachelor's study programmes which according to the Qualifications Framework belong to Level 6 programmes and the level descriptors demand demonstration of a high level of general and specific knowledge, generic and subject-specific competencies (Latvian Qualifications Framework Level Descriptors, 2010). Another problem lies in the qualification awarded to graduates of the current study programme – head of the company and institutions which restricts making changes to the curriculum as the content of the curriculum is significantly determined by the qualifications acquired.

The report Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011), emphasizes that stakeholders (students, graduates, industry, university professors) recognize work-based learning, including internships, as a particularly effective approach to enhance graduates' employability skills. Productive cooperation and partnership between university and industry employers is crucial to ensure qualitative cooperation with employers that would enable students to effectively develop their employability skills and competencies. By establishing such cooperation, a better understanding of the role and importance of work placements will be achieved. This is also proved by the study analysing 64 tourism study programmes across the world (Ring, et al., 2008) in which internship was singled out as the most significant attribute.

It follows from the data obtained in the present study that there is a necessity to ensure qualitative cooperation involvement of all stakeholders and the issue of designing a practical governance model for internship phases is topical as well. The present research offers such a model that could be applied to ensure the content of internship and manage it (refer to *Figure 6*).

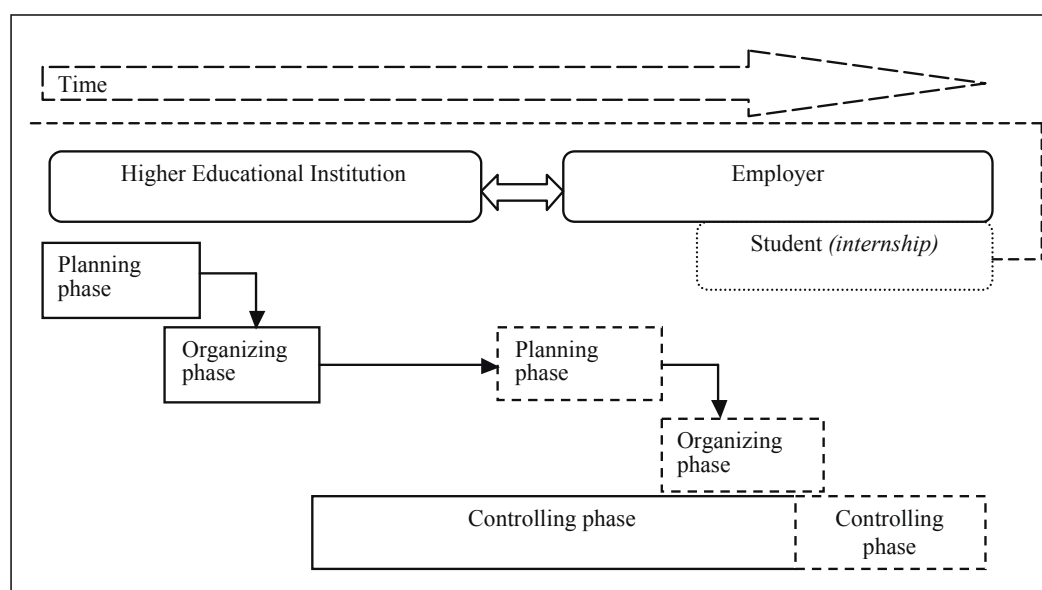


Figure 6. Model of internship management phases

The model comprises all stakeholders – higher educational institution (university), the responsibility of which includes planning, organization and controlling of internships in general; enterprise, the responsibility of which is planning, organizing and controlling of actual, particular student's internship and the student, who is responsible for fulfilling the internship requirements and other regulations thus improving their employability skills. It is essential that any company, agreeing to accept students on internship, clearly understands the goal, tasks and requirements worked out for student placement. Only in such cases the company provides opportunities for students to develop the relevant skills. University's planning task is to provide companies with such information. The more accurate, clear and specific the university is at the planning phase, the better results can be expected. It helps employers to plan better internship for each particular student. In the organisation phase the task of university is to clearly communicate with the company and understand if the company or organization can ensure not only acquisition of the knowledge needed, but also the enhancement of employability skills, which are not always included in the syllabus of internship. The syllabus is the main document at that stage that informs the employer about the aims, tasks and expected learning outcomes, as well as administrative requirements, such as, time, necessary documents etc.

The designed model of internship management phases clearly indicates steps in students' internship planning and implementation. The first planning phase requires a clear, precise internship description, wherein objectives and learning outcomes are explicitly defined. The internship content and tasks allow the enterprise to identify definite tasks for the student and organize students' internship in the way that specified tasks are completed. The organizational phase implemented by the university, requires cooperation and congruence between employers and university to ensure that there are possibilities for a student to accomplish the established tasks. When such an agreement is reached, the enterprise can start planning and organizing the internship. Employers should make an extra effort to address issues such as task orientation, autonomy, supervisor support, co-worker cohesion, and remuneration – all of which students will experience firsthand when they join the organization. Establishing good training programs for students, giving them meaningful tasks, and empowering them to manage those tasks in a more creative way could all enhance the internship experience (Yiu & Law, 2012, Singh & Dutta, 2010). Controlling or monitoring is a function done by both – the university and the enterprise. The company monitors each student's performance and his/her ability to fulfill the defined tasks and the university in turn monitors both – the enterprise's interest and the student's ability to exercise the func-

tions. In case of any discrepancy, the university is the one which reacts first by communicating with the enterprise and the student.

CONCLUSION

The research, conducted within this study, revealed certain differences between views of employers and understanding of graduates regarding knowledge and skills needed for the tourism and hospitality industry. The findings demonstrate that graduates of Turiba University, where research was conducted, evaluated their knowledge and skills as average and good. Graduates evaluated their employability skills, which were mostly acquired during internship, comparatively higher than employers. Internship was also mentioned as the main factor for acquiring the ability to demonstrate positive attitude towards work, responsibility for one's actions and decisions and communication abilities with colleagues. Graduates evaluated quite high the development of research papers, during which knowledge in marketing, tour operations and personal management was acquired.

Lectures, visiting lecturers and participation in various projects were evaluated substantially lower as factors affecting the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for their future employability. This proves that the trend to reduce lectures and increase self-learning is indeed the proper way. Changing the way how students acquire their knowledge and skills from the traditionally applied to more contemporary, requires the development and modernization of curriculum, study processes and the overall management of all study programmes. Among other changes, qualitative cooperation with industry is essential, particularly, for providing internships as it is the most important element of the study process. All stakeholders will benefit from such fruitful cooperation – higher education institutions can therefore fulfill their mission of providing education meeting the requirements of the industry; industry enterprises can benefit from both professors' and students' intellectual capital, and students have the possibility of acquiring knowledge and skills needed for their employability thereby furthering the mission of higher education and the graduates themselves of the development of the industry and the society at large. As "the knowledge of tourism and tourism education has the opportunity to influence and change the phenomenon of tourism" (Salgado, & Costa, 2011: 147) the programme management has to use this opportunity for the benefit of all. So, the results of the current research contribute to it as well. The suggested model of internship management provides comprehensive view on organization, planning, as well as controlling of internships, thereby

ensuring mutually beneficial cooperation among HEI, company or organization and the student.

Limitations and future research directions

The present study was conducted analyzing one tourism study programme at one university. Although the research findings showed that the data may be generalized as to all graduates of the given study programme of Turiba University, they cannot be generalized as to other tourism curricula, with differing content, goals, objectives and learning outcomes. Another limitation lies in the fact that only quantitative approach was selected for the present stage of analysis. The results demonstrate trends which will be researched further and tested applying a qualitative approach which requires collection of additional qualitative data – stakeholders' interviews.

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