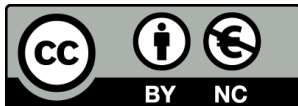


## PERCEPTIONS AND CAREER GOALS OF UNDERGRADUATE TOURISM STUDENTS

**María José Ortiz Zurita**



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DOCTORAL THESIS

**PERCEPTIONS AND CAREER GOALS  
OF UNDERGRADUATE TOURISM STUDENTS**

**MARÍA JOSÉ ORTIZ ZURITA**

2025



DOCTORAL THESIS

**PERCEPTIONS AND CAREER GOALS  
OF UNDERGRADUATE TOURISM STUDENTS**

Compendium of publications

**María José Ortiz Zurita**

2025

DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN TOURISM

Supervised by:

Dr. Lluís Coromina Soler

Presented to obtain the degree of PhD at the University of Girona



Dr. Lluís Coromina Soler, of Universitat de Girona, I DECLARE:

That the thesis entitled “Perceptions and Career Goals of Undergraduate Tourism Students”, presented by María José Ortiz Zurita to obtain a doctoral degree, has been completed under my supervision.

For all intents and purposes, I hereby sign this document.

Signature

Dr. Lluís Coromina Soler

Girona, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2025

## **List of publications derived from the Doctoral Thesis**

This doctoral thesis, entitled “Perceptions and Career Goals of Undergraduate Tourism Students”, is a compendium of publications comprising three articles following the same line of research. These publications have been previously accepted for publication or sent to the respective journals and their quality indexes are indicated below.

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**Authors:** Ortiz, M., & Coromina, L.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Several universities worldwide offer degrees in tourism studies to meet the demand of students interested in making tourism their profession. Researching whether this academic offer meets the expectations of future tourism professionals is important as this is pivotal to students' decision on whether to enter this sector or not. This doctoral thesis seeks to contribute with an integral study that allows tourism degrees to offer study programs in accordance with the needs of the tourism sector.

The first article explored the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, at the Universidad Estatal de Milagro, in Milagro, Ecuador. The study is based on a quantitative approach. The sample is made up of 207 students in 2018 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) and 161 students in 2020 (during COVID-19). The questionnaire included questions about professional perceptions and professional goals that students have in the short and long term. Finally, perceptions exclusively related to COVID-19 were measured. The results showed that the vast majority of the students are highly motivated and committed to pursue a career in the tourism industry. A high percentage of the participants expressed their desire to achieve a Tourism master's degree and undertake their tourism businesses, despite the uncertainty generated by COVID-19.

Employing a quantitative approach, the second article aims to examine and compare the perceptions of tourism degree studies, and their goals to pursue further education and a career in the tourism sector. Two universities in two different countries

were analyzed: The University of Girona (Spain) and the Universidad Estatal de Milagro (Ecuador). The questionnaire design included questions related to professional perceptions and students' short- and long-term career goals. An Exploratory Factor Analysis of the career perceptions was carried out in both universities to determine the underlying factors determining the students' professional perceptions. Findings show differences in perceptions of tourism studies between the countries. In Ecuador, the studies are perceived as a single factor: "General perception about the career", while in Spain they are perceived as two factors: "Perception of social pressure", based on what society expects, and "Personal perception", based on individual achievements or goals related to a tourism degree and the profession.

With the third article, it was necessary to study from the perspective of the tourism labour market what competencies tourism businessmen consider necessary to perform efficiently in this industry. This study is based on a qualitative analysis and it was carried out at the Ecuadorian national level with businessmen from different areas of the tourism industry. Data used for the research were collected from semi-structured interviews, using a question guide. The method used for analysing the semi-structured interviews was thematic analysis. The results show that the "Professional and methodological competencies" and also "Social and communicative competencies" are the most relevant for the tourism businessmen interviewed. These clusters include aspects such as language competencies, fundamentals in management, fundamentals in economics and law, fundamentals in finance, fundamentals in information and communication technologies, Tourism-related knowledge, problem-solving skills, social

networking skills, ability and willingness to change, adaptability skills, proactive communication skills, active listening, persuasion skills, overall communication abilities, and customer service/awareness.

This doctoral thesis reaffirms the importance of guiding improvements in tourism higher education and the tourism industry. The findings will enable higher education curriculum developers, tourism employers, and public institutions to work together to offer programs that reduce the gap between expectations and the reality of the tourism labour market by examining the personal, professional, and social perceptions of future tourism professionals.

## RESUM

Diverses universitats arreu del món ofereixen titulacions en turisme per satisfer la demanda d'estudiants interessats en el turisme per desenvolupar la seva carrera professional. És rellevant estudiar si aquesta oferta acadèmica està complint amb les expectatives dels futurs professionals, ja que seran ells els qui decidiran formar part d'aquest sector. Aquesta tesis doctoral busca aportar amb un estudi integral que permeti a les carreres de turisme oferir programes d'estudi en concordança amb les necessitats del sector turístic.

El primer article explora les percepcions i objectius professionals que tenen els estudiants del grau de Turisme, abans i durant la pandèmia COVID-19, a la Universitat Estatal de Milagro, a Milagro, Equador. L'estudi es basa en un enfocament quantitatiu. La mostra es compon de 207 estudiants durant el 2018 (abans de la pandèmia COVID-19) i de 161 estudiants el 2020 (durant el COVID-19). El qüestionari incloïa preguntes sobre percepcions professionals i preguntes sobre els objectius professionals que tenen els estudiants a curt i llarg termini. Finalment, es van mesurar les percepcions exclusivament relacionades amb el COVID-19. Els resultats van mostrar que la gran majoria d'estudiants estan altament motivats i compromesos a seguir una carrera en la indústria del turisme. Un alt percentatge dels participants va expressar el seu desig de fer un màster en turisme i emprendre els seus propis negocis turístics, malgrat la incertesa generada pel COVID-19.

Des d'un enfocament quantitatiu, el segon article té com a objectiu examinar i comparar, entre universitats internacionals, les percepcions professionals dels estudiants universitaris de turisme i els seus objectius professionals per continuar la seva educació i ocupació en aquest camp. L'estudi es porta a terme a la Universitat de Girona (Espanya) i la Universitat Estatal de Milagro (Equador). El disseny del qüestionari incloïa preguntes sobre percepcions professionals i sobre els objectius professionals a curt i llarg termini dels estudiants. Es realitza una Anàlisi Factorial Exploratori de les percepcions professionals en el camp del turisme en ambdues universitats per determinar els factors subjacents de les percepcions professionals dels estudiants universitaris de turisme. Els resultats mostren diferències en les percepcions dels estudis de turisme entre països. A l'Equador es perceben com un sol factor "Percepció general sobre els estudis", mentre que a Espanya es perceben com dos factors, "Percepció de pressió social", basat en el que la societat espera d'un estudiant, i "Percepció personal", basada en assoliments o metes individuals en relació amb la carrera i professió turística.

Amb el tercer article, va ser necessari estudiar des de la perspectiva del mercat laboral turístic, quines competències consideren necessàries els empresaris turístics per desenvolupar-se eficientment en la indústria del turisme. Aquest estudi es basa en una anàlisi qualitativa i es va realitzar a l'Equador amb empresaris de diferents àrees de la indústria turística a nivell nacional. Les dades utilitzades per a la investigació van ser recollides a partir d'entrevistes semiestructurades, utilitzant una guia de preguntes. El mètode utilitzat per a l'anàlisi de les entrevistes semiestructurades va ser l'anàlisi

temàtica. Els resultats mostren que les "Competències professionals i metodològiques" i també les "Competències socials i comunicatives" són les més rellevants per als empresaris turístics entrevistats. Aquests grups inclouen aspectes com competències lingüístiques, fonaments en administració, fonaments en economia i dret, fonaments en finances, fonaments en tecnologies de la informació i la comunicació, coneixements relacionats amb el turisme, habilitats per resoldre problemes, habilitats per establir xarxes socials, capacitat i voluntat de canviar, habilitats d'adaptabilitat, habilitats de comunicació proactiva, escolta activa, habilitats de persuasió, habilitats generals de comunicació i servei al client/coneixement del client.

Amb aquesta tesis doctoral, es reafirma la importància d'orientar millores en l'educació superior del turisme i en la indústria del turisme. Aquests resultats permetran als creadors de currículums d'educació superior, ocupadors del turisme i a les institucions públiques responsables a treballar junts i oferir programes que redueixin la bretxa entre l'expectativa i la realitat del mercat laboral, considerant les percepcions personals, professionals i socials dels futurs professionals del turisme.

## RESUMEN

Varias universidades en todo el mundo ofrecen títulos en turismo para satisfacer la demanda de estudiantes interesados en convertirlo en su carrera profesional. Es relevante estudiar si esta oferta académica está cumpliendo con las expectativas de los futuros profesionales, ya que serán quienes decidan formar parte de este sector. Esta tesis doctoral busca aportar con un estudio integral que permita a las carreras de turismo, ofertar programas de estudio acordes a las necesidades del sector turístico.

El primer artículo explora las percepciones y objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo, antes y durante la pandemia COVID-19, en la Universidad Estatal de Milagro, en Milagro, Ecuador. El estudio se basa en un enfoque cuantitativo. La muestra se compone de 207 estudiantes durante el 2018 (antes de la pandemia COVID-19) y de 161 estudiantes en el 2020 (durante el COVID-19). El cuestionario incluyó preguntas sobre percepciones profesionales y preguntas acerca de los objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes a corto y largo plazo. Finalmente, se midieron las percepciones exclusivamente relacionadas al COVID-19. Los resultados mostraron que la gran mayoría de estudiantes están altamente motivados y comprometidos con seguir una carrera en la industria del turismo. Un alto porcentaje de los participantes expresó su deseo de hacer una Maestría en Turismo y emprender sus propios negocios turísticos, a pesar de la incertidumbre generada por el COVID-19.

Desde un enfoque cuantitativo, el segundo artículo tiene como objetivo examinar y comparar, entre universidades internacionales, las percepciones profesionales de los estudiantes universitarios de turismo y sus objetivos profesionales para continuar su educación y empleo en este campo. El estudio se lleva a cabo en la Universidad de Girona (España) y la Universidad Estatal de Milagro (Ecuador). El diseño del cuestionario incluyó preguntas sobre percepciones profesionales y sobre los objetivos profesionales a corto y largo plazo de los estudiantes. Se realiza un Análisis Factorial Exploratorio de las percepciones profesionales en el campo del turismo en ambas universidades para determinar los factores subyacentes de las percepciones profesionales de los estudiantes universitarios de turismo. Los resultados muestran diferencias en las percepciones de los estudios de turismo entre países. En Ecuador se perciben como un solo factor “Percepción general sobre los estudios”, mientras que en España se perciben como dos factores, “Percepción de presión social”, basado en lo que la sociedad espera de un estudiante, y “Percepción personal”, basada en logros o metas individuales en relación con la carrera y profesión turística.

Con el tercer artículo, fue necesario estudiar desde la perspectiva del mercado laboral turístico, qué competencias consideran necesarias los empresarios turísticos para desempeñarse eficientemente en esta industria. Este estudio se basa en un análisis cualitativo y se realizó en Ecuador con empresarios de diferentes áreas de la industria turística a nivel nacional. Los datos utilizados para la investigación fueron recolectados a partir de entrevistas semiestructuradas, utilizando una guía de preguntas. El método utilizado para el análisis de las entrevistas semiestructuradas fue

el análisis temático. Los resultados muestran que las “Competencias profesionales y metodológicas” y también las “Competencias sociales y comunicativas” son las más relevantes para los empresarios turísticos entrevistados. Estos grupos incluyen aspectos como competencias lingüísticas, fundamentos en administración, fundamentos en economía y derecho, fundamentos en finanzas, fundamentos en tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, conocimientos relacionados con el turismo, habilidades para resolver problemas, habilidades para establecer redes sociales, capacidad y voluntad de cambiar, habilidades de adaptabilidad, habilidades de comunicación proactiva, escucha activa, habilidades de persuasión, habilidades generales de comunicación y servicio al cliente/conocimiento del cliente.

Con esta tesis doctoral, se reafirma la importancia para orientar mejoras en la educación superior del turismo y en la industria del turismo. Estos hallazgos permitirán a los creadores de currículos de educación superior, empleadores del turismo y a las instituciones públicas responsables a trabajar juntos y ofrecer programas que reduzcan la brecha entre la expectativa y la realidad del mercado laboral, considerando las percepciones personales, profesionales y sociales de los futuros profesionales del turismo.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been described as the world's largest and largest-growing industry (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009, as cited in Marneros et al., 2020). The growth of tourism worldwide and the importance of this industry in each territory are evident, in this sense, education in hospitality and tourism is essential for a tourist destination to prosper and achieve a certain degree of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, making it competitive (Gándara, 2004). As highlighted by Baum et al. (2016), tourism education must align with the dynamic needs of the industry to ensure that future professionals are equipped to manage evolving challenges and opportunities.

Several universities worldwide offer degrees in tourism studies to meet the demand of students interested in making tourism their career. Since the quality of service of tourism operations relies on people, it is worthwhile to study the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students. Rosyidi (2021) mentions that studying and assessing students' attitudes toward tourism industry careers is essential to predict and plan the tourism workforce in a country or tourism destination. A positive attitude coupled with a desire to continue a career in the tourism industry is an excellent precondition for a country to have a high-quality, competitive tourism sector (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Moreover, recent studies underscore that students' career expectations are influenced not only by personal interest but also by perceived job security and industry resilience (Kim, Choi, & Lee, 2022). Researching whether this

academic offer meets the expectations of future tourism professionals is important as this is pivotal to students' decision on whether to enter this sector or not. This thesis contributes importantly by also studying the competencies of tourism graduates from the perspective of tourism labour market demand.

It is important to mention that the study of perceptions and professional goals of undergraduate tourism students is relatively new, and much newer, to make comparisons between seasons and universities worldwide. However, this work recognizes the vital importance of doing it constantly, to ensure the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry, and to have congruence between what higher education institutions offer their students and what the tourism labour market needs, besides meeting the expectations of future professionals in this sector. In line with this, Zopiatis et al. (2014) emphasize the necessity of longitudinal and comparative studies in tourism education to track changes in student motivations and align curricula with international standards.

Thus, the first article focuses on studying the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, at the Universidad Estatal de Milagro, in Ecuador. Although the hospitality and tourism industry, was negatively affected by many health-related crises in the past, such as SARS, Zika Virus, Ebola, none has reached such broad and deep adverse effects as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021), for that reason this study is relevant considering the boom in the tourism sector before the COVID-19 in South America, and considering the impact of the pandemic. As reported by Gursoy and Chi

(2020), the pandemic fundamentally altered both tourist behavior and employment prospects in tourism, affecting students' perceptions of career stability.

In this era of increasingly globalized higher education, with academic institutions around the world competing for students and funding, the lack of data hinders comparison of international tourism institutions and programs (Airey et al., 2015). Accordingly, the second article then finds out the perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals, making a comparative analysis between the University of Girona (Spain) and the Universidad Estatal de Milagro (Ecuador). Previous research focusing on tourism and hospitality students addresses various topics including students' professional intentions and attitudes, perceptions of education quality, career planning behavior, self-efficacy, academic performance, among others (Chen et al., 2021, as cited in Cuneyt and Demirdelen, 2021; Choi & Kim, 2013; Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Lee et al., 2019; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). But none compares universities with similar realities from two different continents. In this study, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with nine statements to measure perceptions of a tourism career. In line with the findings of this research, Lu and Adler (2009) studied the career goals and expectations of hospitality and tourism students and observed that most undergraduate students were interested in a master's degree and pursuing a career in the tourism industry. Additionally, Martínez-García and Raya (2023) argue that cross-cultural comparative research allows for the identification of context-specific barriers and facilitators to tourism career development, which is crucial in today's interconnected global job market.

The third article focuses on the competencies of tourism graduates from the perspective of tourism labour market demand, because they will be hiring the workforce in the near future, so it is important to evaluate the ideal competencies for the positions offered and for recruiting, training, and retraining, according to the true needs of this industry. According to Richardson & Butler (2012), labour shortages highlight a mismatch between skills required by employers and those offered by graduates, revealing skills gaps. In this sense, Dominique-Ferreira et al. (2021) emphasize that education, combined with the growing demand for academic skills and the importance of obtaining practical experience through internships, social engagement, or volunteering, plays a vital role in the tourism and hospitality industry. Moreover, according to Solnet et al. (2023), employers increasingly seek graduates who demonstrate soft skills such as adaptability, intercultural communication, and critical thinking, which are often underdeveloped in traditional academic settings.

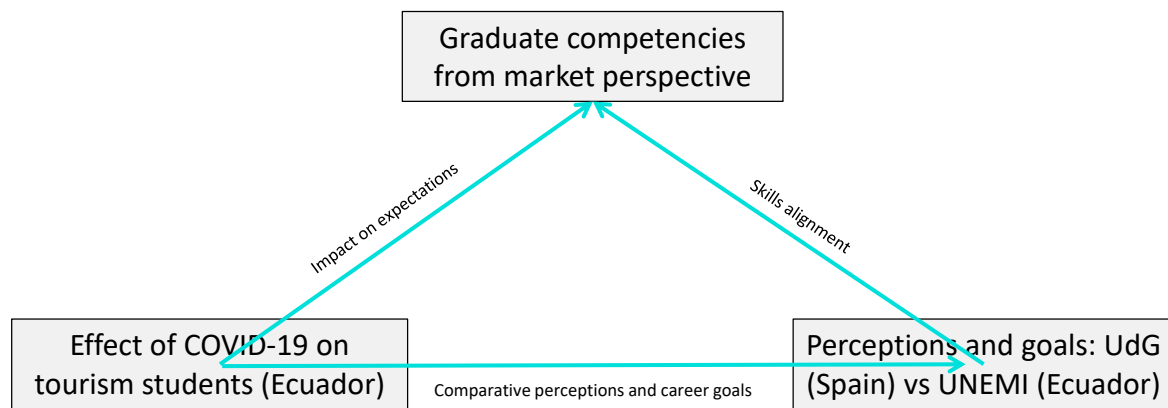
Furthermore, the post-pandemic context has accelerated the integration of digital innovation and intelligent technologies into tourism education. Emerging practices such as virtual and augmented reality, 3D immersive environments, and gamification are being increasingly adopted to enhance learning experiences and simulate real-world tourism scenarios (Alonso-Almeida, Bremser, & Llach, 2023). Additionally, artificial intelligence is enabling personalized learning, curriculum adaptation based on labour market trends, and real-time engagement with industry problems, better preparing students for future challenges (Syme, 2023). These transformations demand an urgent rethinking of curricula and educational policies, where ICT and AI are seen not as

complementary tools but as essential components of innovative, inclusive, and competitive tourism education (Teachflow, 2024). As emphasized by Ritalahti and Dredge (2019), the digital transformation of tourism education must be accompanied by pedagogical innovations and institutional readiness to truly bridge the gap between technological potential and student employability.

To sum up, the findings from this study provide valuable contributions for tourism higher education providers, tourism employers, and the government to work together to offer programs that reduce the gap between expectations and the reality of the tourism labour market by examining the personal, professional, and social perceptions of future tourism workforce.

The figure 1 illustrates the conceptual and thematic relationships among the three scientific articles that comprise this thesis. Each article addresses a distinct yet interconnected dimension of undergraduate tourism education: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' perceptions and career goals (Article 1), a comparative analysis of student perceptions and professional goals between two cultural and educational contexts (Article 2), and the competencies required by the tourism labour market from the perspective of industry professionals (Article 3). Together, these studies form a comprehensive framework that connects student perspectives with educational strategies and market demands, offering valuable insights for improving academic programs in tourism.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual relationship between the three articles of the thesis.



**Source:** Own elaboration.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

This doctoral thesis entitled “Perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students” presents three articles studied in the same research line where the general objective is:

- To identify the perceptions and professional goals of undergraduate tourism students about their profession in order to determine improvements for their study programs and thus achieve a good fit for future professionals in the business tourism world.

This doctoral thesis focuses on the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students about their careers. As this research has been elaborated in three articles, each paper focuses on a specific topic, contributing to achieving this thesis' general objective. The specific research objectives and an overview of each article are described below.

The first article, entitled “Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students in Ecuador”, explored the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, in the Universidad Estatal de Milagro, Ecuador. This study was relevant considering the boom in the tourism sector before COVID-19 in South America and considering the impact of the pandemic.

The research was designed to achieve the following three objectives:

1. To determine the perceptions of undergraduate tourism students about their careers, comparing the situation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To identify the professional goals of undergraduate tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To identify the level of commitment that undergraduate tourism students have with their professional preparation facing the context generated by COVID-19.

The second article entitled “Perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals: A comparative analysis between the University of Girona (Spain) and the State University of Milagro (Ecuador)”, examined and compared the perceptions of tourism degree studies, and undergraduate students’ goals to pursue further education and a career in the tourism sector in the Universidad de Girona (UdG), in Spain, and the Universidad Estatal de Milagro (UNEMI), in Ecuador. Both universities are medium-sized, public institutions, and well-regarded in their respective countries.

This research was designed to achieve the following three objectives:

1. To determine the perceptions students from universities in two continents have about their careers.
2. To identify the career goals of students in different contexts.
3. To compare the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students in Spain and Ecuador.

The third article, entitled “Tourism graduate competencies: a tourism labour market perspective”, studies the competencies of tourism graduates, but from the perspective of labour demand in the tourism market. This study is based on a qualitative analysis, and it was carried out at the Ecuadorian national level with businessmen from different areas of the tourism industry.

The general objective of this research is:

- To study the competencies of tourism graduates from the perspective of labour demand in the tourism market.

Through these three articles, we can have a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions that undergraduate tourism students have about the career and if they have the intention to pursue a career in this work field over time. This thesis not only addresses the students' perspective but also the perspective of tourism businessmen, to understand what competencies are necessary for future tourism professionals to integrate into the tourism labour market. Below are the three articles that confirm the compendium of scientific papers of this doctoral thesis.

## **ARTICLE 1**

**Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on perceptions and career  
goals of undergraduate tourism students in Ecuador**

# Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students in Ecuador

María José Ortiz Zurita<sup>1\*</sup>; Lluís Coromina Soler<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper explored the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro, in Milagro, Ecuador*. The study is based on a quantitative approach. The sample is made up of 207 students during 2018 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) and 161 students in 2020 (during COVID-19). The questionnaire included questions about professional perceptions and questions about the professional goals that students have in the short and long term. Finally, perceptions exclusively related to COVID-19 were measured. The results showed that the vast majority of the students are highly motivated and committed to pursue a career in the tourism industry. A high percentage of the participants expressed their desire to do a Tourism master degree and undertake their own tourism businesses, despite the uncertainty now generated by COVID-19. The findings also reaffirmed the importance of guiding improvements on tourism higher education and tourism industry, with the aim of ensuring the quality of the tourist services, with highly skilled professionals, especially in emerging tourist destinations as Ecuador.

**Keywords:** undergraduate Tourism students, perceptions, tourism career, tourism career goals, COVID-19.

## Efecto de la pandemia COVID-19 en las percepciones y objetivos profesionales de estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo en Ecuador

## Resumen

Este artículo explora las percepciones y objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo, antes y durante la pandemia COVID-19, en la *Universidad Estatal de Milagro, en Milagro, Ecuador*. El estudio se basa en un enfoque cuantitativo. La muestra se compone de 207 estudiantes durante el 2018 (antes de la pandemia COVID-19) y de 161 estudiantes en el 2020 (durante el COVID-19). El cuestionario incluyó preguntas sobre percepciones profesionales y preguntas acerca de los objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes a corto y largo plazo. Finalmente, se midieron las percepciones exclusivamente relacionadas al COVID-19. Los resultados mostraron que la gran mayoría de estudiantes están altamente motivados y comprometidos con seguir una carrera en la industria del turismo. Un alto porcentaje de los participantes expresó su deseo de hacer una Maestría en Turismo y emprender sus propios negocios turísticos, a pesar de la incertidumbre ahora generada por el COVID-19. Los hallazgos también reafirmaron la importancia para orientar mejoras en la educación superior del turismo y en la industria del turismo, con el objetivo de asegurar la calidad de los servicios turísticos, con profesionales altamente calificados, especialmente en destinos turísticos emergentes como Ecuador.

**Palabra clave:** Estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo, percepciones, carrera de Turismo, objetivos profesionales en Turismo, COVID-19.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors that plays an important role in creating jobs, driving exports and generating prosperity across the world (WTTC, 2018). Over the decades, this industry has shown a sustained and consistent trend of growth and deepening diversification (UNWTO, 2018). However, the strong negative impact that this industry has had with the arrival of COVID-19 is indisputable, not only in Ecuador but worldwide.

The growth of tourism worldwide and the importance of this industry in each territory are evident, since tourism provides economic and social development, while managed with knowledge. In this sense, education in hospitality and tourism is essential for a tourist destination to prosper and achieve a certain degree of economic, social and environmental sustainability, making it competitive (Gándara, 2004).

The education of human resources is the key to sustainability, productivity and survival of the companies and institutions that make up the tourism sector. In a nation, the role of higher education is indisputable for its socioeconomic development (Lindong, 2007; Celis, 2017). This background makes the study of perceptions that the undergraduate students have about this profession indispensable to know whether they have uncertainty about their career, since they have witnessed the effects of COVID-19 in their future professional field.

Limited studies have been done about undergraduate tourism students' perceptions toward the career and the industry, few have been made in Latin America, and unfortunately no one in Ecuador. Of the studies carried out, few of them have attempted to detect students' different career perceptions according to their individual characteristics such as gender, years of study in college, work experience, specific major, and their willingness to choose the major (King & Hang, 2011).

This study is relevant considering the boom in the tourism sector before the COVID-19 in South America, and considering the impact of the pandemic. These issues are also important for the tourism industry professionals and for the education providers that is why the purposes of this research were to examine the perceptions that undergraduate tourism students have about the profession and if they have the intention to pursue a career in this work field through the time. The

research was designed to achieve the following three objectives:

1. To determine the perceptions of undergraduate tourism students about their career, comparing the situation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To identify the career goals of undergraduate tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To identify the level of commitment that the undergraduate tourism students have with their professional preparation facing the context generated by COVID-19.

This study was developed with the students who were enrolled in *Licenciatura en Turismo in the Universidad Estatal de Milagro* (Ecuador) during 2018 (pre-pandemic) and 2020.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is the service industry where the customers and the personnel have frequent face-to-face interactions. "Since the tourism industry relies so heavily on people to deliver a service, this would result in a negative impact on service quality and consumer satisfaction, which might then hinder the competitiveness of the industry" (Roney & Öztin, 2007). A positive attitude of tourism employees toward their works is fundamental to get satisfied and loyal customers. In this sense, Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000); Richardson (2008) claim the importance of examining students' attitudes toward the industry because this lies in the fact of having a skilled, enthusiastic, and committed workforce in the hospitality industry.

For a long time, the tourism industry worldwide has been confronted with the problem of attracting and retaining high-quality employees (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Students are the potential supply of labor in the market, and having positive attitudes will more likely lead to greater attraction and retention of these graduates in the industry (King & Hang, 2012).

Even when it is recognized that tourism has become a fundamental piece for the socio-economic development of countries, the education in tourism and its importance is still not fully recognized and valued (Jafari & Ritchie, 1981; Zagorani, 2009; Celis, 2017). In this era of increasing globalization of higher education, in which academic institutions around the world compete for students and funding, the lack of data does

not allow comparing international tourism institutions and programs, which implies an important problem (Airey et al., 2015).

Tourism as an academic discipline was not established in the United States until the 1960s, with the first tourism program in 1963, at Michigan State University, followed by the University of Wisconsin, with the first tourism course in 1973 (Jafari, 2003; Celis, 2017). As time goes by, changes in education, driven by the labor market and the development of a service economy, have led tourism studies to reach the age of majority (Airey & Tribe, 2006; Celis, 2017). Despite this, tourism is a newer field of study compared with other research in social sciences as Psychology, Political Sciences, Sociology, etc. Although it is recognized that the tourism sector represents high economic values, research on education in tourism is relatively new (Ring et al., 2009).

This research ascertained undergraduate student's perceptions about a career in the tourism industry before and during the pandemic COVID-19. Wang and Huang (2014) expand and support an explanation of why is important to analyze the perceptions of Tourism students towards their career. They mention that several centers of higher education include different specializations of tourism among their academic offer, so it is essential for them to understand the perceptions that students have towards this career and their future work field. Besides, they say that for tourism educators is important to know these perceptions in order to recruit a greater number of students in their educational establishments. In the same way, Wang & Huang (2014) think it can help to improve study programs and made them more realistic for students. Also, they state that the tourism and hospitality industry definitely influence positively or negatively on the perceptions and career goals of the students, making it more or less attractive for them. Therefore, they say that working on this kind of study it will also allow employers to know how to attract professionals with projection in the industry to work for their companies.

Concerning the attitudes of young people to tourism careers, Airey & Frontistis (1997) claim that while tourism is held out as one of the world's major industries and sources of employment it would be suitable to know more about what potential recruits think about it, in order to provide a basis for attracting the best possible work force. Although there is

substantial literature about tourism employment, only a limited number of studies were done to highlight the perceptions of students towards careers in the tourism industry (Roney & Öztin, 2007). For them, this means that more empirical studies focusing on this topic are required in order to evaluate the status of tourism jobs in the human resources planning process for the tourism sector. They say that usually, human resources plan focus on the employment needs of large international tourism companies, especially in hospitality, and neglect perceptions of students.

Some researchers since the new century began to study the perceptions of undergraduate tourism students. Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) carried out a study about the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate tourism students towards working in the tourism industry. They tested a sample of four-year tourism and hotel management students, in seven different schools in Turkey and reported unfavorable perceptions towards different dimensions of working in the tourism industry. Roney & Öztin (2007) worked on the career perceptions of undergraduate tourism students. This paper focused on a sample of 450 Turkish students studying tourism at university level. The results showed that the respondents' perceptions were neither positive nor negative. The findings also indicated that: willingness to study tourism; willingness to work in tourism after graduation; and work experience; were important factors in shaping their image of tourism careers. Richardson (2010) examined the Tourism and Hospitality students' perceptions of a career in the industry. The finding of his research showed that the international students were more likely to believe that the tourism and hospitality industry offers the factors they find important when choosing a career. Richardson (2010) focused on generation Y's perceptions and attitudes towards a career in Tourism and Hospitality. This exploratory study based on a quantitative approach found that more than 50% of Australian respondents were contemplating careers outside the industry. Of those with work experience in tourism, 38.1% stated that they will not work for this industry after graduation, with 91.7% of these respondents' citing working experience in the industry as the main reason for their decision.

Although the hospitality and tourism industry, was negatively affected by many health-related crises in the past, such as SARS, Zika Virus, Ebola, none has

reached such broad and deep adverse effects as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Scholars suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic is amplifying the vulnerability of the hospitality and tourism workforce, manifested in issues of precarious work contracts, inequality, and exploitation of minimal criteria for employment (Baum et al., 2020). Tourism students, as future industry employees, are witnessing terrible consequences of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, such as business shutdowns, dwindling travel demand, employee layoffs, etc., and all these adversities could dampen students' confidence and commitment to their academic program and future industry career (Zhong et al., 2021).

### III. CASE STUDY

As mentioned before, tourism education offers have increased around the world. Authors such as Hannam et al. (2004) and Suvantola (2004) concluded that the number of Hospitality and Tourism programs at higher level would continue to increase because of the students' demand, better employment opportunities, better salaries and greater professional promotion, this accompanied by the demand of the tourist industry, which seeks to obtain well-prepared workers. In Ecuador, the situation is not different. The fastest and important growth of the Tourism sector in Ecuador and worldwide brought about that, since 2004, the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro* started to offer a degree in Tourism, as part of the formative options of the School of Administrative and Commercial Sciences. The students who choose the "*Licenciatura en Turismo*" program have to study eight semesters (four years), do 96 hours of community work and 240 hours of pre-professional internships. In total, they have to comply with 120 credits to get their professional degree.

## IV. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS.

### IV.1. Questionnaire design.

This study is based on a quantitative approach. A questionnaire was prepared to measure tourism students' career perceptions. The statements and questions used were taken from previously published studies (Roney & Oztin, 2007; Lu & Adler, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Richardson & Butler, 2012; Wang & Huang, 2014). Some modifications were made and certain additional details were considered according to

the reality of the case studied.

The questionnaire was composed of four sections. The first section contained 6 questions, 5 of them multiple-choice questions and 1 open-ended question. These questions considered general information of the respondent such as gender, year of study in the career, willingness to choose the career, work experience in tourism and current occupation. The second section contained 18 statements about career perceptions. These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant "Strongly disagree", 2 meant "Disagree", 3 meant "Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)", 4 meant "Agree" and 5 "Strongly agree". The third section contained 6 multiple choice questions about their career goals in the short and long term. In this section, some open-ended questions were included with the objective that the respondents expand their answers. The fourth section contained 3 questions focused exclusively on perceptions related to COVID-19. This survey could be completed in a maximum of 10 minutes.

Before sending the survey to the degree program students, ten pilot tests were conducted among 6 Professors, 2 PhD tourism students and 2 undergraduate tourism students. This is to check the relevance and clarity of the questions. Changes were done at the end of these pilots, and then it was sent to the students.

### IV.2. Sampling design.

The first time (before COVID-19) the survey was done at the beginning of the month of June, specifically from the 1st to the 10th of June, 2018 with 1st to 4th year tourism students of the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro*. It was carried out via web survey and the respondents were invited to fill out the survey from their institutional emails. The study population was finite, of the total of 220 students enrolled in the Tourism career, 207 participated - response rate 94%. A total of 207 surveys were found valid. During the pandemic, the survey was carried out from the 14th to the 23rd of September 2020. All the students enrolled in the semester from May to September 2020 were invited resulting in 161 responses - a response rate of 93%.

The data were collected by an online survey program and ANOVA test analyses were carried out to determine the differences pre and during COVID-19.

#### IV.3. Profile of the Survey Sample.

Results show that in 2018 the respondents were mostly females. 159 women filled out the survey, which represents 77%. While the men were 48, which means 23%. Also, it can be seen that in 2020 -during COVID-19- the situation was similar, where 132 women and 29 men participated. This allows us to observe that this career has been more selected by women. The analysis of the distribution of respondents according to the year of study in 2018 revealed that the number of students who are in the first year (first or second semester) is higher (39%) than the other three years. In 2020, we could see a variation where the most representative percentage was 37% of the students who are in the second year (third or fourth semester).

#### V. RESULTS.

The following section includes the analyses of variables willingness to choose the career, work experience, and current activity, besides of the Tourism career's perceptions included in the second part of the questionnaire. Then, they are going to be examined the research findings of the career goals in short and long-term asked in the third section of the questionnaire. And finally, the study is going to include an analysis of questions related exclusively to the COVID-19.

In 2018, 69% of students (142 of 207 respondents) chose the Tourism program as their first option to study. The 31% indicated that this program was not their first option. To go deeper into this question, in the survey, a brief explanation about why the students chose the Tourism career was asked. The responses of this open-ended question were codified in ten representative items. The highest percentage (24%) was for "for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures". Unfortunately, with an important percentage (14%) 30 students explained that they chose the Tourism program "because it was the one assigned to them and since they wanted to study something, they are studying it." It means that actually, they were not willing to study this degree program. Some of them said that they accepted to study Tourism with the idea of changing their studies in the second semester. Other students explained that they did not think about this career as their first option to professionalize themselves, but through time they were keened on the career and now they feel very well with the program. Happily, in 2020, during COVID-19 the survey results

show that there was no difference with the previous study since the vast majority (70%) of the students chose the Tourism degree program as their first option. Also, the most important percentage of students attributes the selection for the Tourism program "for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures." This matched with the 2018 study. On this occasion, it is necessary to emphasize the interest of the students in "knowing and promoting Ecuador's tourism", as the percentage grew from 9% to 20%. Surely, many students have already evidenced the crisis in the tourism sector in our country, due to COVID-19, and would like to contribute to its improvement.

Tourism and hospitality employers seem to consider work experience as more important than a degree when they hire a new employee; however, the hospitality degree qualification is needed for entering management levels (Harkison, 2004). The case study in 2018 showed that the higher percentage (48%) of the students enrolled in the program have not had any kind of experience in the tourism sector, they have not worked nor done pre-professional practices in this work field. During COVID-19, it is remarkable to see the growth of the percentage (from 17% to 32%) that represents the students who have worked in a different area other than tourism. This situation is probably an effect of COVID-19 since it made students look for any work in order to earn money to help their families. The fact of being studying virtually allows the combination of the two activities.

The study results in 2018 showed that the vast majority of the Tourism career students in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro* (79% of the respondents) just dedicate themselves to study the Tourism career. The results also showed that although with a small proportion, 13% of the respondents share their time between studying Tourism and doing another career or specialization course. In this case, the survey required that these students answer which career or specialization course they also study, resulting the following ones: English, Cosmetology, Gastronomy, Nursing, Language and Literature, Business Administration and Laws. In 2020 (during the COVID-19 survey), the situation is repeated, most of the students (71%) of the career only dedicate themselves to study Tourism. The interest in studying another career or specialization course is almost nil (1%), perhaps due to the situation generated by the pandemic, including

the lack of financial resources. Surprisingly, it can be observed that in 2020 the percentage which represents students who study Tourism and also work in a different sector now is the second most representative with a 24% (in 2018 was 4%), this due to the need for money.

### V.1. Perceptions of undergraduate tourism students.

Table 1 shows data of 18 statements provided about Tourism career perceptions considered in the second part of the survey. The overall mean value ( $\bar{x}$ ) was 3,88 out of 5, which means the perception of the tourism students towards their career, in general, was neither positive nor negative.

In this Table, it can be seen that before of COVID-19 (in 2018) the 36% were agreed with the statement "Tourism offers me a stable job" ( $\bar{x} = 3,75$ ), but we can see that also a high percentage (25%) is neutral concerning this. The seasonality factor influenced this, according to Jolliffe & Farnsworth (2003), seasonality dramatically influences tourism industry employment, leading to widespread seasonal employment, underemployment, and unemployment.

Also, it is possible to see that the highest percentage (39%) of the students strongly agreed with the statement "It is necessary to have a university degree in the field of tourism to work in this industry" ( $\bar{x} = 3,85$ ). These perceptions are encouraging since it means that students trust that professionalization in tourism is essential to enter the labor field.

Also, Table 1 shows some data about the Tourism career perceptions during the COVID-19 where the overall mean value was 3,74 out of 5, which as in the

previous study, was neither positive nor negative. The results of this section, as can be seen also in Table 1, are similar to the 2018' study. Both show the same trend. It can be highlighted who students (57%) strongly agreed with the statement "Working in tourism will allow me to contribute positively to society" ( $\bar{x} = 4,17$ ), something that must be valued, since this perception is important to generate positive impacts on a population that has been affected in various ways, due to COVID-19.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were used to compare the statistical difference between the pre-pandemic and during pandemic periods. For these tests, an alpha level of 0.05 was used, where a significance level (p-value) lower than 0.05 suggests that there was an important difference at 95% confidence level; while a significance level (p-value) higher than 0.05 points out that there was no statistical difference between the two analyzed periods. Results show that the mean for those who thought in 2018 tourism offers a stable job was higher than in 2020. This is probably because the COVID pandemic caused many closures of tourist businesses, and therefore layoffs of personnel. Unfortunately, the tourism industry was one of the most affected. Likewise, as can be seen in Table 1 the ANOVA indicates that the perception that the workload in the tourism field is reasonable between 2018 and 2020 had also a statistical difference. The mean of who thought in 2018 that the workload in the tourism field is reasonable, was higher than in 2020. This is probably because in time of COVID people started teleworking. It may also be due to the layoffs of personnel causing them to overload the functions of those who continue to be hired.

Table 1: Tourism career's perceptions

	year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	ANOVA
					p-value
The labor supply in the field of tourism is wide, diverse and interesting for me.	2018	207	4.15	1.12	0.157
	2020	161	3.97	1.34	
I am proud for having chosen the Tourism career in front of relatives and friends.	2018	207	4.22	1.15	0.671
	2020	161	4.16	1.33	
Tourism is a respected profession in society.	2018	207	3.74	1.17	0.108
	2020	161	3.52	1.37	
Tourism career presents intellectual challenges.	2018	207	4.13	1.19	0.182
	2020	161	3.96	1.27	

Tourism offers me a stable job.	2018	207	3.75	1.12	0.034
	2020	161	3.49	1.22	
You can earn a lot of money working in tourism.	2018	207	4.00	1.18	0.300
	2020	161	3.87	1.28	
Since you start working in the tourism sector, this profession allows you to earn competitive salaries.	2018	207	3.77	1.08	0.100
	2020	161	3.58	1.16	
The work environment in tourism is pleasant.	2018	207	4.19	1.13	0.307
	2020	161	4.06	1.31	
Tourism is a profession that gives you the opportunity to grow at work.	2018	207	4.19	1.14	0.558
	2020	161	4.12	1.28	
There is gender discrimination in the labor sector of tourism.	2018	207	2.82	1.31	0.206
	2020	161	2.65	1.32	
The workload in the tourism field is reasonable.	2018	207	3.80	1.04	0.043
	2020	161	3.56	1.21	
Working in tourism allows using modern technology, equipment and resources.	2018	207	4.26	1.14	0.383
	2020	161	4.15	1.28	
In tourism, it is easy to get a job anywhere (even abroad).	2018	207	3.59	1.19	0.107
	2020	161	3.39	1.21	
It is possible to combine the tourism profession with maternity/paternity.	2018	207	2.99	1.12	0.512
	2020	161	3.07	1.14	
In tourism, jobs offer opportunities for constant training.	2018	207	4.00	1.11	0.419
	2020	161	3.90	1.22	
Working in tourism allows you to obtain transferable skills (judgment and decision-making, solving complex problems, time management, active listening, etc.).	2018	207	4.14	1.14	0.402
	2020	161	4.03	1.31	
Working in tourism will allow me to contribute positively to society.	2018	207	4.29	1.10	0.359
	2020	161	4.17	1.30	
It is necessary to have a university degree in the field of Tourism to work in this industry.	2018	207	3.85	1.22	0.090
	2020	161	3.61	1.39	

Source: Survey results.

## V.2. Career goals of undergraduate tourism students.

Career goals are very important to know what the students consider about their future in the tourism industry. This information is valuable for developing successful human resources strategies in the tourism labor field and offering postgraduate studies according to the interests and needs of the market.

As can be seen in Table 2, before the coronavirus, the vast majority of the study's respondents (98%) have the intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation. Among the preferred sectors of the tourism industry for future careers, the most favored area was "Transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.)" with 51%. It is important to mention that in the survey,

this question allowed to choose more than one option as a response if the student wanted it. The second preferred sector was "Intermediation (travel agency, tour operator, wholesaler, retailer, etc.)" with 42%. The third preferred area was "Planning and tourism management (Municipality, Prefecture, Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Organization or Association, etc.)" with a 38%.

In the same table (in 2020 during the COVID-19) also the majority of the students (99%) answered they have the intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation, which means that despite the pandemic, they continue to project themselves working in the tourism sector. The students still want to work in sectors such as Transportation (63%), Intermediation (51%) and Planning and tourism management (48%).

**Table 2:** Preferences for working in the tourism industry upon graduation

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation</b>				
Yes	202	98%	159	99%
No	5	2%	2	1%
<b>Preferred Sectors of the tourism Industry for working upon graduation*</b>				
Transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.)	105	51%	100	63%
Intermediation (travel agency, tour operator, wholesaler, retailer, etc.)	86	42%	81	51%
Planning and tourism management (Municipality, Prefecture, Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Organization or Association, etc.)	79	38%	76	48%
Accommodation	71	34%	68	43%
MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions)	69	33%	65	41%
Tourism products (recreational centers, tourist farms, etc.)	63	30%	71	45%
Food and beverage sector (restaurants, cafeterias, etc.)	56	27%	55	35%
Tourism Education, Consulting and Research	32	15%	26	16%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	2	1%

\* Response categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Survey results.

Table 3 refers to expected job positions upon graduation and after five years working in the tourism work field. In 2018, concerning expected positions for future graduates, 20% expected to start as "Tour guides", 17% "Hotel receptionists" and 15% "Emissive or receptive assistants in a travel agency". Remarkably, 14% of the respondents chose the option "Manager of my own company". In this case, the students were asked what kind of company they want to undertake, to which they replied: travel agencies, tours operators, hotels, restaurants, cafeterias, bars, agrotourism farms, recreational centers, event planning and tourist transportation companies.

In the case of expected job positions after five years, it was interesting to know that the percentage of students wishing to start their own businesses grew and was the highest percentage between the options (19%). Among the business options that they considered were the same ones cited in the previous question, adding hostels and resorts. During the COVID-19, in 2020, there was a notable change, the vast majority of students (23%) chose "Cabin crew" as their expected starting job position. It is followed by "Tour guide" 18% and "Hotel receptionist" 17%. And, as the expected job position after five years, 18% of the respondents selected to want to be Managers of their own companies.

**Table 3:** Expected job positions in the Tourism work field

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Expected starting job positions</b>				
Tour guide	41	20%	29	18%
Hotel receptionist	36	17%	27	17%
Emissive or receptive assistant in a travel agency	31	15%	27	17%
Manager of my own company	29	14%	23	14%

Cabin crew	29	14%	37	23%
Tourism Technician of a public institution	26	13%	9	6%
Waiter/Waitress	5	2%	3	2%
Bartender	3	1%	4	2%
Other	2	1%	0	0%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	2	1%
<b>Expected job positions after five years</b>				
Manager of my own company	39	19%	29	18%
Hotel General Manager	29	14%	23	14%
Travel agency General Manager	23	11%	22	14%
Event planner	19	9%	5	3%
Director of a department in a public institution	18	9%	8	5%
Head of a department in a travel agency	18	9%	24	15%
Professor in Tourism careers	19	9%	9	6%
Head of a department in a hotel	15	7%	18	11%
Recreational center Administrator	11	5%	9	6%
Bar / cafe / restaurant General Manager	5	2%	6	4%
Bar / cafe / restaurant Supervisor	3	1%	2	1%
Other	3	1%	1	1%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	5	3%

Source: Survey results.

The results of the 2018 study showed that the majority of the study's respondents (93%) have the interest to perform their tourism profession in a different region or even country than their usual residence. Just the 5% (10 students) answered that they did not want to work in another region or abroad because of different reasons as: for not leaving his/her son/daughter alone, for not leaving his/her mother alone, for not separating from his/her family, because he/she believes in the tourist potential of Ecuador and he/she wants to contribute in the development of his/her country, because he/she wants to undertake a tourism business in his/her region, because he/she thinks that he/she would not get used to the different weather in other countries. In COVID-19 times (2020) the survey' results show that the vast majority of the students (92%) are willing to perform the tourism profession in a different region or country than their usual residence.

Considering that the desire to seek greater professionalization is a career goal, questions about

this intention were included in the survey. The answers of the 2018 study are showed in Table 4 where we can observe that 92% of the respondents answered that they would like to do a Tourism Master degree, while in 2020 it was 88% of respondents. Those who would like to study a postgraduate in tourism indicated that they would like to study preferably the following master degrees: Tourism Management (48% in 2018 and 43% in 2020), Hotel Management (36% in 2018 and 53% in 2020), Tourism Marketing (26% in 2018 and 35% in 2020) or Event Management (22% in 2018 and 30% in 2020). Is important to quote that this question allowed the students to choose the options they wanted, without excluding another selection. In addition, they could indicate the topic of Master they would like if it was not on the list. The respondents provided the following: Sustainable tourist destinations and Territorial tourism planning, Travel agencies management, International tourism management, Food and beverage, Gastronomic Tourism, Culinary Arts, Business Management and Foreign languages.

**Table 4:** Interest in a Tourism Master degree

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Interest in studying a Tourism Master degree</b>				
Yes	190	92%	142	88%
No	5	2%	6	4%
Maybe	12	6%	13	8%
<b>Which Tourism Master degree offer*</b>				
Tourism Management	100	48%	70	43%
Hotel Management	74	36%	86	53%
Tourism Marketing	53	26%	57	35%
Event Management	45	22%	48	30%
Cultural tourism	41	20%	42	26%
Sustainable tourism	34	16%	42	26%
I do know yet	12	6%	-	-
Other	8	4%	3	2%
Not answer (because he/she does not want to do a Tourism Master degree)	5	2%	16	10%

\* Response categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Survey results.

### 5.3. Level of commitment generated by COVID-19.

Finally, results of perceptions exclusively related to the COVID-19 are shown in Tables 5 and 6. This information is important because we can know if this pandemic generates uncertainty in the students about their future professional career, and if they are going to continue committed to their preparation, or if they are considering giving up studying this program.

As seen in Table 5, the majority of the 161 respondents (40%) recognized to have a medium uncertainty about the future of Tourism career because of the situation generated by the COVID-19. Besides, it can be seen that 25% of the students mentioned having

high uncertainty, and 20% selected to have very high uncertainty, which means that the vast majority of the study's respondents have uncertainty about their careers. These results are not positive because this uncertainty can cause students to drop out of their studies.

Table 5 also shows the level of commitment to professional preparation. Results were really encouraging because despite the great uncertainty that students have about the future of their professional careers, the vast majority (66%) selected to be very highly committed to their professional preparation, regardless of the context generated by the COVID-19.

**Table 5:** Level of uncertainty about the future and level of commitment to professional preparation facing the COVID-19 context

	No	Little	Medium	High	Very high
Level of uncertainty	7% (11)	7% (12)	40% (64)	25% (41)	20% (33)
Level of commitment	2% (4)	1% (2)	3% (5)	27% (43)	66% (107)

Source: Survey results.

In Table 6, it can be observed that 93% of the students who participated in this study consider that the Tourism career continues and will continue to be a career with great job opportunities despite the

COVID-19. 61% of those who are convinced of this, attribute it to the fact that these times of pandemic will allow tourism professionals and businesses to reinvent themselves to meet the needs of demand. On the

contrary, 7 of the 12 people who do not consider that the career will continue offering great job opportunities,

support their answer because they believe that it will be more difficult to get a job or start a business.

**Table 6:** Perception if the career gives great job opportunities despite COVID-19

Profile	Frequency (n=161)	Little
<b>Despite COVID-19, do you consider that the Tourism career continues and will continue being a career with great job opportunities?</b>		
Yes	149	93%
No	12	7%
<b>If the answer was "yes", which was the reason selected</b>		
Because it will allow tourism professionals and businesses to reinvent themselves to meet the needs of demand.	91	61%
Because people continue and will continue to do tourism and nothing will change.	31	21%
Because it is the opportunity to make domestic tourism grow.	17	11%
Because tourism activity can give more attention to specialized tourism.	7	5%
He/she did not answer.	3	2%
<b>If the answer was "no", which was the reason selected</b>		
Because it will be more difficult to get a job or start a business.	7	58%
Because many tourism businesses closed or will close their activities.	2	17%
Because people will not do tourism for a long time.	2	17%
Because companies do not hire new staff.	1	8%

**Source:** Survey results.

In summary, we could observe that the vast majority of the respondents before or during the pandemic of the COVID-19 have chosen the Tourism career as their first option to study, supporting this decision on their motivation for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures. In the COVID-19 times it could be observed that the interest in knowing and promoting the tourism of Ecuador increased (from 9% to 20%), perhaps because of the economic crisis that motivates professionals to work for the reactivation of productive sectors such as tourism. Besides, these results demonstrated that it is necessary to generate strategic alliances with companies in the tourism industry with the aim of allowing students to do pre-professional practice since a high percentage of them do not have any kind of work experience. Also, we could see that the majority of the respondents said that they just study Tourism at the university.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be observed that many students (from 17% to 32%) are combining their tourism studies with work, and unfortunately, the work they do is not in this professional field. Concerning the 18 statements related to the perceptions

that the tourism students have about their career; this section got as an overall mean value a 3,88 out of 5 before the COVID-19 study and a 3,74 out of 5 during the COVID-19 study, which means the perception was neither positive nor negative. Satisfactorily we could see that the majority of the students want to work in the tourism industry upon graduation. The expected starting job positions are as Cabin crew or Tour guides and after five years the respondents hope to have their own Tourism businesses. In both studies, the highest percentage of the respondents affirmed their availability to perform the Tourism profession in a different region or country. Also, it could be seen that the majority of the respondents showed interest to study for a Tourism Master degree. Preferably, they would like to specialize in Tourism Management and Hotel Management. Finally, the second study revealed that students are uncertain about the future of their Tourism career, due to the context generated by the COVID-19. Fortunately, the vast majority acknowledge that they are very highly committed to their professional preparation despite this pandemic.

## VI. Conclusions.

This study explored perceptions and career goals of tourism undergraduate students enrolled in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro – Ecuador* before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interesting results were found with this research. The vast majority of the undergraduate students expressed their desire to work in the Tourism industry upon graduation (98% before the COVID-19 survey and 99% during the COVID-19 survey) and their interest in studying a Tourism Master degree (92% before the COVID-19 survey and 88% during the COVID-19 survey).

The respondents of this study were asked to agree or disagree with 18 statements to measure different perceptions about the career. The results showed that the undergraduate tourism students who participated in this study have good perceptions about their career (the overall mean value was 3,88 out of 5 in the first survey and 3,74 in the second one), they are motivated and they want to pursue a career in this industry. Even the majority of the students who participated in the survey carried out during COVID-19, reaffirmed their very high commitment (66%) to their professional preparation, despite the complex situation that the scenario of this pandemic is presenting.

Satisfactorily, the study respondents anticipate that the labor supply in the field of tourism is wide, diverse and interesting. They believe that this career is going to present them with intellectual challenges. They also think they could enjoy a pleasant work environment, have the opportunity to grow as professionals, use cutting-edge technology and contribute positively to society.

The research conducted by Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) found that some of the concerns that seemed to account for the negative attitudes towards tourism career were stressful jobs, lack of family life because of the nature of the work, long working hours, exhausting and seasonal jobs. Agreeing with their findings, we could see that just the 8% (before the COVID-19 survey) and the 9% (during the COVID-19 survey) of the respondents strongly recognized that working in the tourism sector will allow them to combine their profession with maternity and paternity, which means that the majority of the respondents, unfortunately, think that their future jobs are going to take a lot of their time; a factor which demotivates them.

The result of the study demonstrated that

transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.) sector was preferred for a career in the industry. The highest percentage of respondents expect that they are going to start working as “Tour guides” or “Cabin crew” upon graduation. In the case of their expected job position after five years working in the industry, it was gratifying to find that the highest percentage of the students is planning to start their own business. They mentioned between their preferences the following: travel agencies, tour operators, hotels, hostels, resorts, restaurants, cafeterias, bars, agrotourism farms, recreational centers, event planning and tourist transportation companies. Likewise, it was encouraging to see that the majority of the respondents affirmed being interested in studying for a Master degree. The preferred ones were Tourism Management and Hotel Management.

If this industry wants to maintain highly motivated students and recruit and retain highly skilled professionals, it will be necessary that educators and the industry work together to improve the tourism work field. From the perspective of tourism higher education providers, it is important to be studying the perceptions that potential students and current students have about the career because it will affect positively or negatively the number of students they will receive and retain in their educational establishments. When the tourism career is promoted to attract potential students, it will be fundamental to provide the correct information about the future job careers that students can pursue in the tourism sector. This will make them know in advance the tourism work field and avoid wrong expectations and future negative perceptions about the career. It will be also indispensable to create methods that improve the image that current students have about the profession and future work field. Besides, it will be very important to design updated and high-quality study programs, offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in concordance with the interests and needs of the market, organize academic events and provoke the approach of students with recognized tourism professionals who with their experience help the students to feel the reality of the sector and motivate them to be part of it.

From the perspective of the tourism industry, it will be crucial to develop successful human resources strategies and improve issues related to working hours, salary levels, career promotions, gender discrimination and job security in order to help to create a better

tourism work field and therefore a good perception of this career. Besides, it is important to mention that according to the results of this research, the students believe that it is necessary to have a university degree for working in this industry. In this sense, it would be significant that employers implement and respect the selection processes to hire the most qualified professionals for working with them. It is also relevant to quote that this study showed an important result related to the intention of tourism entrepreneurship, thus the facilities that the government provides to the tourism sector will also be taken into consideration by many future entrepreneurs who want to undertake in tourism, despite feeling uncertainty in the sector, as a result of COVID-19.

Educators and the tourism industry cannot be working separately. It is necessary that universities make strategic alliances with tourism businesses that will favor both parties, either by providing a trained workforce that ensures the success of the company or allowing students to put their knowledge into practice. Unfortunately, we could see that the vast majority of this study's respondents did not have any type of work experience or if they have experience, this is not in the field of tourism; so, it is urgent to generate these alliances that allow them to do pre-professional practices. But this relationship will have to provide internships in relation to the student's level of education, just in this way it will be achieved the implementation of the students' knowledge, and the university and company's success. Only by working together and being aware of undergraduate tourism students' perceptions, it will be possible to have an excellent and competitive tourism industry, where motivated and well-prepared tourism professionals offer the best experiences to their customers.

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## **ARTICLE 2**

**Perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals:  
A comparative analysis between the University of Girona  
(Spain) and the State University of Milagro (Ecuador)**

**Perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals: A comparative analysis  
between the University of Girona (Spain) and the State University of Milagro  
(Ecuador)**

**Abstract**

Several universities worldwide offer degrees in tourism studies to meet the demand of students interested in making tourism their career. Researching whether this academic offer meets the expectations of future tourism professionals is important as this is pivotal to students' decision on whether to enter this sector or not. Taking a quantitative approach, this paper aims to examine and compare the perceptions of tourism degree studies, and their goals to pursue further education and a career in the tourism sector. Two universities in two countries were analyzed: the University of Girona (Spain) and the State University of Milagro (Ecuador). The questionnaire design included questions related to professional perceptions and students' short- and long-term career goals. An Exploratory Factor Analysis of tourism career perceptions was carried out in both universities to determine the underlying factors determining the students' career perceptions. Findings show differences in perceptions of tourism studies between the countries. In Ecuador the studies are perceived as a single factor: "General perception about the career", while in Spain they are perceived as two factors: "Perception of social pressure", based on what society expects, and "Personal perception", based on individual achievements or goals related to a tourism degree and the profession. These findings will enable higher education curriculum developers, tourism employers and the government to work together to offer programs that reduce the gap between expectations and the reality of the labor market by examining the personal, professional, and social perceptions of future tourism professionals.

**Keywords:** Undergraduate tourism students, perceptions, career goals, comparative analysis, quantitative approach

## Resumen

Varias universidades en todo el mundo ofrecen títulos en turismo para satisfacer la demanda de estudiantes interesados en convertirlo en su carrera profesional. Es relevante estudiar si esta oferta académica está cumpliendo con las expectativas de los futuros profesionales, ya que serán quienes decidan formar parte de este sector. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar y comparar, entre una universidad española y otra ecuatoriana, las percepciones de sus estudiantes de turismo y sus objetivos profesionales para continuar su educación y empleo en este campo. El estudio se lleva a cabo en la Universidad de Girona (España) y la Universidad Estatal de Milagro (Ecuador). El estudio se basa en un enfoque cuantitativo. El diseño del cuestionario incluyó preguntas sobre percepciones profesionales y sobre los objetivos profesionales a corto y largo plazo de los estudiantes, y compara las percepciones y objetivos profesionales de los estudiantes universitarios de turismo de dos universidades. Se realiza un Análisis Factorial Exploratorio de las percepciones profesionales en el campo del turismo en ambas universidades para determinar los factores subyacentes de las percepciones profesionales de los estudiantes universitarios de turismo.

Los resultados muestran diferencias en las percepciones de los estudios de turismo entre países. En Ecuador se perciben como un solo factor “Percepción general sobre los estudios”, mientras que en España se perciben como dos factores, “Percepción de presión social”, basado en lo que la sociedad espera de un estudiante, y “Percepción personal”, basada en logros o metas individuales en relación con la carrera y profesión turística. Estos hallazgos permitirán a los desarrolladores de currículos de educación superior, empleadores del turismo y al gobierno trabajar juntos y ofrecer programas que reduzcan la brecha entre la expectativa y la realidad del mercado laboral, considerando las percepciones personales, profesionales y sociales de los futuros profesionales del turismo.

**Palabras clave:** Estudiantes de grado en turismo, percepciones, objetivos académicos y profesionales, análisis comparativo, metodología cuantitativa

## I. INTRODUCTION

The motivations and desires of customers in the tourism industry are changing and becoming ever more demanding. Richardson & Butler (2012) stated that one of the main concerns of the tourism industry is the challenge of attracting and retaining quality employees, which has led to a shortage of skilled personnel. Walmsley et al. (2020) agree that hospitality businesses frequently face recruitment and retention challenges regarding the quality and quantity of available workers.

When staff is content at work, this is reflected in the quality of services offered and subsequent customer satisfaction. Previous studies on the service industries point out that it is only possible to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty when employees' attitudes toward their jobs is positive (Rosentbluth, 1991; Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996, as cited in Richardson, 2009). Gruescu et al. (2008) argue that the story of successful tourism enterprises is largely about the staff – how they are trained, valued and rewarded, and how they are supported through a process of continuous learning and career development. In short, increased competitiveness in the tourism industry largely depends on improving the quality of human resources (Milic et al., 2011:435).

The growth of the tourism sector in developing countries has increased the need for professional skilled labor (Rosyidi, 2021). Labor shortages highlight a mismatch between skills required by employers and those offered by graduates (Richardson & Butler, 2012), revealing skills gaps. In this era of increasingly globalized higher education, with academic institutions around the world competing for students and funding, the lack of data hinders comparison of international tourism institutions and programs (Airey et al., 2015).

Although some research has been conducted on students' perceptions and career goals in recent decades, few studies have compared their results with other universities, particularly universities from two different continents.

Rosyidi (2021) mentions that studying and assessing students' attitudes towards tourism industry careers is essential to predict and plan the tourism workforce in a country or tourism destination. A positive attitude coupled with a desire to continue a career in the tourism industry is an excellent precondition for a country to have a high-

quality, competitive tourism sector (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). To this end, it is vital that universities constantly monitor the perceptions tourism students have of their degree in order to create an academic offer in line with the needs of both the market and future professionals.

Thus, the aim of this study is to examine and compare the perceptions of tourism degree studies, and undergraduate students' goals to pursue further education and a career in the tourism sector in the University of Girona (UdG), in Spain, and the State University of Milagro (UNEMI), in Ecuador. Both universities are medium-sized, public institutions, and well-regarded in their respective countries.

This study provides insights into tourism students' perceptions of their degree and whether they plan to broaden their knowledge in this area in the future and work in the industry. The study seeks to compare university students' perceptions to determine differences between universities located within different contexts on different continents.

In the case of Spain, it is an established tourism market in Europe, where tourism is one of the major drivers of its economy (Statista, 2023). In 2022, Spain registered more than 100 million international visitors, recovering by 187.2 percent and 102.6 percent versus 2020 and 2021, respectively. In 2019, the gross value added (GVA) of industries related to tourist accommodation and food services in Spain reached over 70 billion euros (Statista, 2023). In the first five months of 2024, Spain received 33 million international travellers, 13.6% more than in the same period last year (Ministerio de Industria y Turismo, 2024).

On the other hand, the unstable economic and political situation in many Latin American countries has impeded the expansion of the travel and tourism sector in the region (Statista, 2024). Ecuador is a South American developing tourism destination, where tourism represents the third source of non-oil income, generates employment for more than half a million people and contributes approximately 2 billion dollars to the local economy, with 46% of employment for young people and 67% for women (Asamblea Nacional, 2024). In a post-pandemic world, Ecuador continued to recover; Ecuador visitor arrivals recorded 1,426,725 arrivals, compared with 1,264,913 arrivals in 2022, which represents 13% of positive variation (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2024).

Thus, this research was designed to achieve the following three objectives: a) to determine the perceptions that students of two universities located on different continents have about their degree studies; b) to identify the career goals of students in different contexts; and c) to compare the perceptions and professional goals of tourism students from the University of Girona (Spain) and the State University of Milagro (Ecuador).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research focusing on tourism and hospitality students addresses various topics including students' career intentions and attitudes, perceptions of education quality, career planning behavior, self-efficacy, academic performance, among others (Chen et al., 2021, as cited in Cuneyt and Demirdelen, 2021; Choi & Kim, 2013; Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Lee et al., 2019; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020). But none compares universities with similar realities from two different continents. This section defines perceptions of bachelor's degrees and career goals, and outlines findings from recent studies on perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, carried out in countries with significant cultural and socio-economic differences.

First of all, it is important to define what career perception is, considering that this is what this work studies. The word perception has been defined as the cognitive process of the conscience that consists in the recognition, interpretation and signification for the elaboration of judgments around the sensations obtained from the physical and social environment, in which other psychic processes intervene among which are the learning, the memory and the symbolization (Vargas, 1994). Career perception is an individual's aspirations regarding the career pursued (Benaraba et al., 2022), while career orientation is the perception people have about a successful career (Anthony, Mensah and Amissah, 2023). This means that career perception is an appreciation that the student configures itself (for different reasons) about that professional career. If the perception is positive and that student considers that this career will lead him or her to be a successful professional, the student will study that career or will continue with it. However, if perceptions are mostly negative, the student will surely not choose that career, or will give up those studies. This concept also refers to a process whereby students organize, select, and interpret their interests in order to

develop a meaningful career choice for the future (Bordean & Sonea, 2018). In this study it is also important to know what a career goal is, which is the intention to engage in particular activities or produce particular outcomes (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Lu & Adler, 2009). This means that a student is committed to continuing his or her professional life linked to activities and studies related to that particular career, in this case, tourism.

It is important to analyze the perceptions tourism students have of their degree, pointing out that higher education centers offer different tourism degree specializations. It is essential to understand students' perceptions of this degree course and how they see their future in the tourism industry (Wang and Huang, 2014). Career goals and students' expectations provide industry with a clear picture of the preferences and demands of future employees. Through discovering interests, skills, career values, and the needs of the recruitment, employers can gain a competitive advantage and develop successful human resource strategies (Baum, 2007).

Some have attempted to detect students' different career perceptions according to their individual characteristics such as gender, years of study in college, work experience, specific major, and their willingness to choose the major (King & Hang, 2011). Perceptions are very variable and different factors play important roles such as environment, promotion opportunities, salary (Richardson & Butler, 2012), which makes interesting to continue studying the trends that engage the future professional in tourism. Even, in certain studies, the career perceptions were neither positive nor negative for undergraduate tourism students (Roney & Oztin, 2007). Their findings also indicated that willingness to study tourism, willingness to work in tourism after graduation, and work experience were important factors in determining the tourism career image.

Some of the results obtained in various studies relate their findings with work conditions in tourism. For example, Wen et al. (2019) found that respondents were aware of the stress, low starting salaries, long working hours and limited opportunities for promotion. Their findings showed that although compensation, benefits, and promotion opportunities in the hospitality industry were below students' expectations and in need of improvement, they still wanted to work in the hospitality industry after graduation and "participants expected to be promoted equitably to management

positions based on their capabilities" (Wen et al. 2019, p.8).

Concerning with job opportunities, Singh Jaswal (2020) found that students understood the potential job opportunities and stated that most final year students held the same optimistic goal, proving that students are focused on their job plans.

Rosyidi (2021) highlights the importance of career advancement and salaries; however, these are not well perceived by respondents. Despite this, the tourism industry is still seen as an enjoyable and fun environment due to the nature of the work, and this was seen as important and perceived positively. Tuzunkan (2018) examined the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate tourism students, finding that a job in tourism was perceived as interesting, worth doing, and students could employ their ability and skills, and enjoy their job. However, respondents also mentioned negative aspects of working in the tourist sector; for example, related with family life, due to the long working hours spent, which bring a dissatisfaction serving tourists, feeling that society looks down on tourism jobs, and the feeling that uneducated employers are jealous of higher-level employees. In contrast, Singh Jaswal (2020) findings conclude that students were aware of the sort of work they had to do, but nevertheless decided to continue in the industry even after experiencing the lengthy working hours in hotels.

In relation with work experience on the career in the tourism and hospitality industry upon graduation, Richardson (2010a) found that more than 50% of respondents were looking for careers outside the tourism and hospitality industry. Of those with work experience in tourism, 38% indicated that they will not work for this industry after graduation, with 92% of these respondents mentioning the working experience in the industry as the main reason for their decision. Lee Bamford (2012) highlighted tertiary students' perceptions of working in the tourism and hospitality industry. Using a mixed method approach, the study searched for differences among students' perceptions based on the type of institution they are enrolled at. Findings revealed that students from the different institutions have very similar perceptions of the tourism and hospitality industry. However, their work experiences, whether part of their curriculum or not, have a much greater influence on their perceptions. Shroder (2020) analyzed how variables such as students' industry attitudes, career goals, demographics, or career decision self-efficacy and industry exposure, influenced on the student's perceptions, engagement, and retention. Results of an online survey of

hospitality students suggested that students' prior industry exposure was a factor in self-efficacy and attitudes. Results also indicated that elements of students' socioeconomic status and race were factors in students' attitudes, self-efficacy, and industry exposure.

Other studies consider that personal growth factors like having your own business are considered by students as determining factors in their perceptions of the career. Amissah et al. (2019) explored students' perceptions of careers in the hospitality and tourism industry. Their findings showed that student perceptions were negative and important factors when considering career choices were the opportunity to care for others, become self-employed, gain transferable skills, and access further training and education. However, most students believed they would not find these factors in a tourism career. Later in 2023, Anthony et al., (2023) analyzed the factors that influence students' intentions to choose careers in the hospitality industry. The results showed that intention to operate one's own hospitality business, interest in hospitality careers, having a personality fit for careers in the industry and peer influence were the best predictors of students' choice of hospitality careers.

The desire to obtain a postgraduate degree in the tourism field reaffirms the interest in developing professionally in this industry. However, in the study carried out by Kahraman & Alrawadieh (2021), the results showed that, although the quality of education is positively associated with tourism and hospitality students' intention to join the industry, students do not pursue a postgraduate degree. Their findings also confirmed the mediating role of academic self-efficacy on the relationship between perceived education quality and tourism and hospitality students' intention to pursue postgraduate degree.

Lately, research in such critical times, such as COVID-19, has also been carried out to study whether the perceptions of tourism students change regarding their professional career. For example, Ortiz and Coromina (2021) explored the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, in an Ecuadorian university. The results showed that the vast majority of the students were highly motivated and committed to pursue a career in the tourism industry. Besides, a high percentage of the participants expressed their desire to

continue with education enrolling in a tourism master's degree and starting their own tourism businesses, despite the uncertainty generated by COVID-19 pandemic. In the same COVID scenario, Abou-Shouk et al. (2023) examined the predictors of work in the tourism sector post-COVID-19, taking into account the moderating impact of cultural factors. Findings show that students were motivated and resilient to work in a tourism career after graduation despite the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism jobs. However, cultural factors negatively affect the relationship between work intentions.

Tourism career intentions is another key variable of interest for students on tourism and hospitality. Lu & Adler (2009) conducted a research on career goals and expectations of hospitality and tourism with undergraduate tourism students in four universities, considering valuable topics for their future careers, such as: management, marketing, economics, tourism psychology, introduction to tourism, traineeship, English, service attitude, and communication. They found that most of the students were interested in pursuing a career in the hospitality and tourism industry and expressed their desire for doing an advanced degree. For his part, Richardson (2010b) made a comparison of domestic and international students about their perceptions of a career in tourism and hospitality industry. He made a quantitative study investigating different factors that students found fundamental in choosing a career, as well as their perceptions of different aspects of a career in this industry. Results showed significant differences between these two groups. International students were more likely to believe that the tourism and hospitality industry offers the factors they find important when choosing a career. While domestic graduates were less likely to join the industry upon graduation. A study carried out by Liu et al. (2022) used a meta-analysis approach to analyze relationships between hospitality and tourism management students' career intentions from 34 studies. A total of 13 factors (nature of work, salary, environmental conditions, interpersonal relationship, social status, career prospect, education quality, internship, employability, self-efficacy, person-organizations fit, job satisfaction and outcome expectations) were classified into 4 categories (work conditions, social identity, school education and self-perception). Findings revealed social identity and self-perception were more important, followed by school education and work conditions. Gong and Jia (2022) carried out a systematic review of students' career intentions for hospitality and tourism sector, they found that factors influencing students' career intentions were external factors (internships and on-the-job training

perceptions, superior–subordinate relations, school education, religion, parents and families) and internal factors (social cognitive career theory, career values, work experience, demographic differences, learning styles).

As we can see, many research works have studied different variables that, positively or negatively, affect perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals. Although there is not much research of this type in Latin America, this work with its theoretical framework summarizes some of the work carried out in different parts of the world. Factors such as salary, nature of work, schedules, opportunities for promotion, interpersonal relationship, environmental conditions, social status, education quality, internship, work experience, employability, self-efficacy, job satisfaction and others have demonstrated a close relationship with undergraduate tourism students' career perceptions and their willingness to pursue a postgraduate degree and to work in this industry after graduation. The results of previous works have shown that variables that may be positive for one study (for instance, students understand the potential job opportunities that tourism industry offers and that is what highly motivates them, intention to pursue a postgraduate degree, etc.) turns out to be negative for another (for instance, not to continue a career in tourism after their graduation, due to lack of employability, insufficient salaries, bad internship experiences or unfavorable working conditions, etc.), so it is central to compare and cover larger populations.

In accordance with the objectives of this study, the following research questions are proposed:

Q1: What are the main career perceptions of tourism undergraduate students from the two universities?

Q2: What career goals and preferences for further education and employment are important for tourism undergraduate students from the two universities?

Q3: Are there differences in career perceptions and career goals between the two universities?

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The study compares the University of Girona (UdG), Spain, and the State University of Milagro (UNEMI), Ecuador. Both higher education institutions are located close to large international cities: Barcelona (Spain) and Guayaquil (Ecuador), which are well-known national and international economic benchmarks. Both universities offer a degree in tourism studies. The target population was first-, second-, third- and fourth-year undergraduate students tourism enrolled in each university. The number of students enrolled at the UdG was around 420 students, and at UNEMI, around 200. UdG offers a four-year bachelor’s degree and three tourism master’s programs. UNEMI also offers a four-year bachelor’s degree in tourism as well as master’s studies.

3.2. Data collection instruments and methods

Two people cannot have the same personality, however, there are some commonalities in the way people behave, which allows for some classification and categorization. People can be categorized into various personality traits due to the dominant similarities in their behavior, feeling, and thinking (Anthony et al., 2023). According to this, a questionnaire on career perception and career goals was designed by reviewing the most frequently repeated variables found in previous research on this topic (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Variables found in previous studies on students’ perceptions and attitudes towards a career in the tourism industry.

Researchers/Country	Variables
Roney & Oztin (2007)	<div>- Profile of the survey sample.</div> <div>- Preferences for working in specific tourism sectors after graduation.</div> <div>- Perceptions of tourism careers, e.g., good salary working in tourism, opportunities for promotion, need for a university degree to work in the tourism industry, secure future, no sexual discrimination</div>

in tourism, respected job, easy to find a job in tourism.

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Lu & Adler (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Level of educational preparation that students expected for future careers.</li><li>- Student industry expectations.</li><li>- Students' personal expectations and goals for personal and professional advancement, e.g., holding a powerful high-level job, earning a high salary, having time to pursue their own interests, undertaking a further degree, traveling to China and internationally, getting married and having a family, etc.</li><li>- Demographic characteristics such as gender and academic course.</li></ul>
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Richardson (2010a)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Demographic data from students.</li></ul>
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Richardson (2010b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Multi-item attitude scale that includes dimensions such as: nature of work, social status, working conditions, opportunities for promotion, commitment to the industry, etc.</li></ul>
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Richardson & Butler (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Factors such as working environment, promotion prospects, earnings, having a well-respected job, opportunity to travel abroad, reasonable workload, good starting salary, etc.</li></ul>
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Wang & Huang (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Characteristics of survey respondents.</li><li>- Students' career perceptions such as contribution to society, tourism jobs are enjoyable, variety of job opportunities, opportunities for promotion, good environment, good starting salary, etc.</li></ul>
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Ortiz & Coromina (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Profile of the survey sample.</li><li>- Career perceptions such as well-respected profession in society, intellectual challenges, employment stability, competitive salaries, good environment, reasonable workload, requirement to have a university degree to work in the tourism industry, etc.</li><li>- Career goals in the short and long term such as preferred sectors of the tourism industry on graduating, expected starting job</li></ul>
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positions, expected job positions after five years, interest in studying a master's degree in tourism, etc.

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Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, the statements and questions selected for the questionnaire were organized into three sections. Section one contained general information of the sample such as gender, year of study, career preference, work experience and current activity. Section two had nine statements about career perceptions which were measured through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Section 3 comprised four multiple choice questions on career goals upon graduation. The surveys could be completed in a maximum of 10 minutes.

A survey pretest was carried out by six undergraduate students, two post-doctoral researchers, and eight professors from the institutions analyzed. Subsequently, some questions were rewritten at the participants' request. The questionnaire was designed in Spanish to be answered online. In both universities the sample was chosen from the list of students on undergraduate tourism degrees and data were collected using an online survey program. The survey started with a brief introduction outlining the purpose of the research and students were informed that their participation in the survey was anonymous.

The survey was carried out during the same academic year: September 2020 at UdG; and March 2021 at UNEMI. The final response comprised 283 participants; 122 from UdG and 161 from UNEMI.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

The analysis of career perceptions and career goals took a quantitative approach, using Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). EFA was used to determine the factors underlying career perceptions of undergraduate tourism students. Reducing the items to a smaller number of factors helped understand the general perceptions in both universities and compare possible differences among them. EFA is performed, using principal

component as the extraction method, as well as varimax rotation. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS 28.

## IV. RESULTS

This section includes the respondents' profile, career perceptions and career goals of undergraduate students, including preferences for pursuing further education programs and employment.

### 4.1. Sample profile

Table 2 shows the profile of respondents for both UdG and UNEMI students respectively. Most respondents in the sample were female in both universities: 82% at UNEMI, and 89% at UdG. This indicates that a degree in tourism is selected by more women than men. This is verified by the number of students enrolled on the tourism degree in the periods studied: UdG 131 men (30%) and 311 women (70%) at the UdG in the period 2020 – 2021; and 35 men (20%) and 139 women (80%) at UNEMI in the period May to September 2020.

Regarding the year of study, most students were first and second year students at UNEMI (68%), while at UdG the majority of respondents were in the fourth year (43%).

**Table 2.** profiles of UdG and UNEMI respondents

Profile	UdG		UNEMI	
	Frequency (n=122)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
Gender				
Female	108	89%	132	82%
Male	14	11%	29	18%
Year of study				
First year (first or second semester)	21	17%	50	31%
Second year (third or fourth semester)	23	19%	59	37%

Third year (fifth or sixth semester)	25	20%	27	17%
Fourth year (seventh or eighth semester)	53	43%	25	16%

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results

Table 3 shows participants' motivations for choosing to study a tourism degree. Students responded 'yes' or 'no' to each statement regarding their reasons for studying tourism. Results show that "Learn new languages and about cultures" was the main reason for most students at both universities. "Employment Opportunities" was another top option selected by students from both universities (UdG 51% and UNEMI 22%). This was followed by the "Opportunity to travel" offered by a tourism degree, indicated by 43% of UdG undergraduates, and 28% of students at UNEMI. At the UdG, 41% chose "Opportunity to work abroad", while this was 9% for UNEMI students. UdG students pointed to "Growth of this sector" as a motivating factor (16%), while this was only 4% for UNEMI students.

These five major reasons for choosing a degree in tourism show statistically significant differences between universities ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ). UdG students score particularly higher in these motivations than UNEMI students.

The statement "I was advised to do it by my friends and family" followed the same trend. A degree in tourism was recommended to 14% of UdG participants, but only 1% of UNEMI students. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were observed between the percentage of students who selected the options "I was unable to access the degree program I had listed as my first choice" ( $p\text{-value} = 0.46$ ) and "Ease of study" ( $p\text{-value} = 0.28$ ). Only a small percentage of students gave these reasons for pursuing a bachelor's degree in tourism.

**Table 3.** Respondents' motivations for studying a degree in tourism\*

	UdG		UNEMI		p-value
	Frequency (n=297)	Percentage	Frequency (n=193)	Percentage	
To learn new languages and learn about cultures	73	60%	59	37%	<.001
Employment opportunities	62	51%	35	22%	<.001
Opportunity to travel	53	43%	45	28%	.009
Opportunity to work abroad	50	41%	15	9%	<.001
Growth of this sector	19	16%	7	4%	<.001
I was unable to access the degree I had as my first choice	18	15%	19	12%	.462
I was advised to do it by my friends and family	17	14%	2	1%	<.001
Ease of study	5	4%	11	7%	.0282

\* Response categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results.

Regarding work experience, most students from UdG (38%) and UNEMI (81%) selected the option "I have not worked or done an internship in the tourism sector". At UdG, 33% of the students have worked in the tourism sector, while at UNEMI this figure is only 7%. The same applies to the option "I have worked and I have also done an internship in the tourism sector", with 22% of UdG students having done so, compared to only 3% of UNEMI students. These results are shown in Table 4. Thus, as can be seen, statistically significant differences between both universities exists on students' work experience ( $\chi^2 = 53.159$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ). This difference may be due to the fact that most students who answered the survey in the UdG were in their fourth year of study, while in the UNEMI, students were only in their first or second year.

**Table 4.** UdG and UNEMI respondents' work experience in the tourism sector

Work experience	UdG		UNEMI	
	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage	Frequency (n=110)	Percentage
Not employed nor internship	46	38%	89	81%
Internship only	8	7%	10	9%
Employed only	40	33%	8	7%
Employed and internship	26	22%	3	3%

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results

Table 5 shows the current activity of respondents. Most UdG (57%) and UNEMI tourism degree students (71%) choose the option “I only study”, which means that they still do not have any work experience. It was also observed that there is a statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 15.272$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ) in the number of students who chose the option “I study a tourism degree and I also work in the tourism sector”. In the case of UdG students, this was 16%, compared to 3% for UNEMI students. There was no significant statistical difference between the two universities in results for the statement “I study a tourism degree and I also work in another sector”. It should be noted that both results (UdG, 27%, and UNEMI, 24%) were not low, which means that many students work in another sector while studying tourism.

**Table 5.** Current activity of UdG and UNEMI respondents

Current activity	UdG		UNEMI	
	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage	Frequency (n=158)	Percentage
I only study	69	57%	115	71%
I study a tourism degree and I also work in the tourism sector	19	16%	5	3%
I study a tourism degree and I also work in another sector	32	27%	38	24%

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results.

## 4.2. Students' career perceptions

Students' career perceptions were examined through nine statements (see Table 6), where they had to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were used to compare the statistical difference between UdG and UNEMI students' perceptions.

Table 6 shows the perception "I am proud to have chosen a tourism degree despite relatives and friends" is statistically different between UdG and UNEMI, with a higher average at UNEMI than at UdG. Likewise, for "Tourism is a respected profession in society" UNEMI students had a higher average than UdG students.

Table 6 also shows a statistical difference in results related to the perception "Tourism offers me a stable job". Furthermore, the UNEMI average is higher than that of the UdG. This is likely because tourism is indisputably a seasonal industry, and this may cause job opportunities to shift to other sectors in Spain. Additionally, as noted by González (2021), the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry has increased concerns about the sector's potential to offer stable employment. This has affected the industry's image, which before the pandemic was seen as providing labor opportunities—a change in perception that is perceived among students at UdG.

Regarding the perception "There is gender discrimination in the tourism employment sector" the results from UdG and UNEMI students also showed a statistical difference, but in this case, the perception of UdG students was higher than that of UNEMI students. The statement "Having a university degree in the field of Tourism is essential to work in this industry" shows low or medium agreement in both universities; however, it is higher for UNEMI students.

In addition to perceptions statements, this study also contributes to determining the factors determining perceptions of tourism a degree in both universities, which is carried out by performing an Exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Table 7 shows adequate results for EFA, given that communalities are greater than 0.4, factor loadings greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2011), the measure of reliability Cronbach's alpha for each factor 0.7, or higher, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test measured acceptable validity.

**Table 6.** Perceptions of a tourism degree

	UdG (n=122)	UNEMI (n=161)	
	Average (sd)	Average (sd)	p- value
I am proud to have chosen a degree in tourism, despite the opinions of my relatives and friends	3.21(1.3)	4.16(1.3)	<.001
Tourism is a respected profession in society	2.48(1.1)	3.52(1.4)	<.001
A tourism degree presents intellectual challenges	3.43(1.1)	3.96(1.3)	<.001
Tourism offers me a stable job	2.50(1.0)	3.49(1.2)	<.001
The work environment in tourism is pleasant	3.61 (.9)	4.06(1.3)	.001
Tourism is a profession that gives you the opportunity to professionally in the workplace	3.65 (.9)	4.12(1.3)	<.001
There is gender discrimination in the tourism employment sector	3.10(1.2)	2.65(1.3)	.003
It is possible to combine a profession in tourism with maternity/paternity	3.22(1.1)	3.07(1.1)	.260
Having a university degree in the field of tourism is essential to work in this industry	2.36(1.3)	3.61(1.4)	<.001

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results.

In the case of UNEMI, “There is gender discrimination in the tourism employment sector” was eliminated as it was considered a factor with a single item. EFA results from the remaining eight items determine a single factor solution, eigenvalue for the factor was higher than 1 and the cumulative explained variance for this factor was 68.35%. All factor loadings were higher than .65 and the reliability, measured with Cronbach’s alpha, was .930. According to these results, a unique factor namely “General perception about the career” was found.

In the case of UdG, the item “There is gender discrimination in the labor sector of tourism” was also taken out since the item created a single factor. EFA results from the remaining eight items determine two factors: eigenvalue for both factors is higher than 1 and the cumulative explained variance is 53.34% (40.03% for the first factor, and 13.31% for the second). All factor loadings are 0.5 or higher and reliability is .65 and .70, respectively. According to the results, the first factor can be named as “Perception of social pressure” (composed by respected, maternity, pleasant and stable job items) and is based on what society expects from a student and the importance of the job career at society. The second factor is labelled “Personal perception” (composed of

intellectual challenges, having a university degree, proud of choosing a tourism degree, and opportunity to grow professionally) and it is based on individual achievements or goals related to the tourism degree and career.

**Table 7.** Exploratory Factor Analysis results

Construct/items	UNEMI		UdG	
	Commu- nality	Factor loading	Commu- nality	Factor loading
F1: General perception about the career ( $\alpha=.93$ )			F1: Perception of social pressure ( $\alpha=.65$ )	
Tourism is a respected profession in society.	.577	.760	.579	.750
It is possible to combine a profession in tourism with maternity/paternity.	.427	.654	.536	.731
The work environment in tourism is pleasant.	.801	.895	.435	.611
Tourism offers me a stable job.	.733	.856	.421	.515
			F2: Personal perception ( $\alpha=.70$ )	
A tourism career presents intellectual challenges.	.757	.870	.658	.809
Having a university degree in the field of tourism is essential to work in this industry.	.432	.657	.559	.745
I am proud to have chosen a tourism degree despite relatives and friends.	.865	.930	.576	.569
Tourism is a profession that allows you to grow professionally.	.874	.935	.504	.530

Note: UdG: KMO = .826; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, p-value <0.001; UNEMI: KMO = .912;  
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, p-value <0.001

### 4.3. Students' professional goals

The third subsection gathers data related to career goals, and identifies students' opinions regarding the future of this field of work. Results will help develop human resource strategies that enable good workforce structure. Moreover, this information is essential to design master's degree programs as data regarding future studies is also gathered.

Preferences for working in the tourism industry upon graduation are significantly different between both universities (Table 8). The highest percentages of respondents (UdG 73% and UNEMI 99%) want to work in the tourism industry when they graduate; however, 13% of UdG students have no intention to work in the tourism industry after graduation. These results are coherent with González (2021), recognizing that pandemic-related job cuts damaged the confidence in the tourism sector, resulting in staff shortages. Comparing the summer seasons of 2019 and 2021 (April to September), confirming this trend, it existed a difference between job offers and applications. While companies increased their demand for workers by 3%, the number of applications dropped by 24% (González, 2022).

**Table 8.** UdG and UNEMI respondents' preferences for working in the tourism industry upon graduation.

	UdG		UNEMI		p-value
	Frequency (n=102)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage	
<b>Yes</b>	89	73%	159	99%	<.001
<b>No</b>	13	13%	2	1%	

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results

The willingness to work in a different place is significant in both cases. Table 9 indicates that the vast majority (UdG 95% and UNEMI 94%) are willing to work in a different place to their habitual residence, and no statistical differences exist between universities. Only 5% of UdG students and 6% of the UNEMI students responded that they would not work in a different place after their graduation.

**Table 9.** UdG and UNEMI respondents' willingness to work in a different place.

	UdG		UNEMI		p-value
	Frequency (n=106)	Percentage	Frequency (n=157)	Percentage	
<b>Yes</b>	191	95%	148	94%	.719
<b>No</b>	5	5%	9	6%	

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results

Table 10 show respondents' interest on pursuing a master's degree in the field of tourism. A total of 62% of UdG respondents and 88% of UNEMI respondents expressed a desire to continue their studies in the area of tourism in the future. Of the UdG respondents, 16% showed no interest in pursuing a master's degree in tourism, and for UNEMI students, this was and 4%. Of the UdG students surveyed 22% stated they were undecided regarding taking up a master's in tourism after their bachelor's degree, and for UNEMI students, this was 8% .

**Table 10.** UdG and UNEMI respondents' interest in pursuing a master's degree in tourism

	UdG		UNEMI		p-value
	Frequency (n=122)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage	
<b>Yes</b>	76	62%	142	88%	<.001
<b>Maybe</b>	27	22%	13	8%	
<b>No</b>	19	16%	6	4%	

Source: Own elaboration. Survey results

In sum, when comparing the responses of students from the University of Girona (UdG) and the Universidad Estatal de Milagro (UNEMI), a notable trend emerges regarding their interest in pursuing a master's degree in tourism and the intention to work in the tourism industry after graduation. These findings suggest that a large proportion of students at both institutions are interest in the tourism sector, however, a

portion of students from both institutions had an unfavorable perception of the tourism sector.

The differing percentages between the two countries may be influenced by the varying economic impacts of tourism in each region. According official statistics, in 2022, tourism activity contributed 11.6% to Spain's GDP and accounted for 9.3% of total employment. In contrast, Ecuador's tourism sector contributed only 4.2% to its GDP, representing 6% of the country's total employment.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to determine and compare degree perceptions and the professional goals of students studying undergraduate degrees in tourism from the University of Girona, Spain and the State University of Milagro, Ecuador.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with nine statements to measure perceptions of a tourism career. Findings showed that more undergraduate UNEMI tourism students who participated in the study had the perception “I am proud to have chosen a degree in tourism studies despite relatives and friends” than those at UdG. Along the same lines, UNEMI students had a higher level of agreement than UdG students regarding the statement “Tourism is a respected profession in society”. Related to “Tourism offers me a stable job”, UNEMI students had a higher level of agreement than UdG students. In contrast, in the case of “There is gender discrimination in tourism sector employment” the UdG mean was higher than UNEMI’s. Furthermore, the study revealed that students from both universities feel that it is not essential to have a university degree in tourism studies to work in this industry.

Findings from the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) carried out for both universities showed that UNEMI students perceive a single factor regarding perceptions of a degree in tourism, namely “General perception about the career”, whereas UdG students perceived two dimensions. One labelled “Perception of social pressure”, which is based on what society expects from students and the importance of the job in society. The second factor was “Personal perception”, based on individual achievements or goals associated with a tourism degree and a profession in the industry. In conclusion, these findings enable higher education institutions and future

employers to convince future tourism professionals that a tourism degree will meet their expectations regarding both factors. If this is not the case, there will be no interested parties committed to forming part of the tourism industry workforce, as deciding to study this degree would risk social factors considered important to students, as well as factors related to their personal and professional lives.

This study identified and compared the career goals of tourism undergraduate students enrolled in two universities. The vast majority of undergraduate students showed a desire to work in the tourism industry after graduating and an interest in studying for a master's degree in tourism. Furthermore, results revealed that most students are willing to work in a location different from their usual residence.

In line with our findings, Lu and Adler (2009) studied the career goals and expectations of hospitality and tourism students and observed that most undergraduate students were interested in a master's degree and pursuing a career in the tourism industry. The main motivation for choosing a tourism degree in the two universities was to "Learn new languages and learn about cultures". In both universities, most students state they have neither worked nor undertaken an internship in the tourism industry and are only studying a degree.

Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that it is crucial to study the perceptions and professional career goals of students regarding tourism degrees at any university offering these studies worldwide. It enables us to know whether students plan to work in the tourism sector, or continue their training in this area, and what factors influence their perceptions, either positively or negatively.

Furthermore, this study contributes to closing the gap between expectations and reality. The importance of collaboration between academia, tourism employers, and governments is reaffirmed and ensures the sustainability of the tourism industry by designing academic programs and training for those entering the labor market.

The findings of this study are based on students enrolled in tourism degree programs in two universities. Expanding this knowledge to other universities or fields of study would provide a broader picture of students' perceptions and professional goals. However, a limitation of the study is the unbalanced proportion of students in the different academic years in the two universities, in the case of UdG a higher proportion concerns to the last

academics years while for UNEMI this proportion is higher for initial courses. Another limitation, due to the time of this study (academic course 2020-21), is that students' perceptions may have been influenced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Future studies should also consider examining the labor market perspective to identify the key skills employers consider students need to master in order to become significant contributors in the tourism industry. This would help universities to assess the current relevance of their curricula and provide clear guidance for future research to make informed curricular decisions. Moreover, topics such as professional intrusion and the dignification of tourism professionals' status should be explored, as they directly impact the reputation and sustainability of the tourism sector.

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## **ARTICLE 3**

### **Tourism graduate competencies: a tourism labour market perspective**

## Tourism graduate competencies: a tourism labour market perspective.

### ABSTRACT

One of the most important issues in the tourism industry is developing initiatives to improve revenues and business performance in the face of environmental uncertainty, particularly in developing countries. Universities must be able to provide the tourism sector with competent graduates able to perform their jobs efficiently. This raises questions such as *what type of manpower is required in the tourism industry?* and *what competencies do universities need to develop and improve for their graduates to work successfully?* This paper aimed to study tourism graduate competencies from the perspective of tourism labour market demand. Taking a qualitative analysis approach, the study was carried out in Ecuador with professionals working in a range of tourism businesses. The research data were collected from semi-structured interviews, using a question guide. The interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that “Professional and methodological competencies” and “Social and communicative competencies” are the most important competencies for the interviewees. Findings will enable allow higher education curriculum developers to compare and analyse their current student offer, with the aim of attaining an academic offer linking their programs to the specific competencies that future tourism graduates need to acquire according to tourism labour market demand.

**KEYWORDS:** competencies, education, tourism graduates, tourism professionals, tourism labour market perspective.

### Introduction

A country needs a high-quality workforce in order to develop, and this can only be ensured by an excellent education system. This also extends to the tourism sector, and Liu et al. (2022) emphasize that education plays a fundamental role in providing well-trained, qualified staff with a wide range of expertise, particularly in the hospitality and tourism industry.

There is a wide agreement that the tourism and hospitality industry is labour intensive; thus, successful tourism service delivery is largely dependent on quality human resources (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000; Unguren & Huseyinli, 2020, as cited in Cuneyt and Demirdelen, 2021). Academia has increasingly paid attention to measuring the relationship between destination performance, tourism businesses and human resource management (Madera et al., 2017).

Education is a key priority for the UNWTO (World Tourism Organization, 2023). From high school to university and then into the workplace, education equips people with the relevant skills and knowledge to build a more resilient, sustainable sector and further enhance tourism's role in economies and societies. Education relates to the fourth and eighth United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to ensure educational quality and promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (United Nations, 2015).

Universities worldwide offer degrees in tourism as a professional career path, and there are a significant number of programs in Ecuador, where tourism represents the third largest source of non-oil income. In the period January-September 2023, tourism was the third source of non-mining exports, contributing \$1,491.60 million dollars (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2024). Furthermore, tourism currently ranks first in the balance of services (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2024). In Ecuador, tourism generates employment for more than half a million people and contributes approximately 2 billion dollars to the local economy, providing 46% of employment for young people and 67% for women (Asamblea Nacional, 2024). Ecuador has continued to recover post-pandemic, recording 1,426,725 visitor arrivals in 2023, compared to 1,264,913 arrivals in 2022, showing a 13% rise. Regarding domestic tourism, tourism expenditure during 9 national holidays celebrated during 2023 reached 541 million dollars (Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2024).

This research aimed to study tourism graduate competencies from the perspective of tourism labour market demand. This segment will be hiring the workforce in the near future, so is best equipped to evaluate the ideal competencies for the positions offered and for recruiting, training and retraining, according to the true needs of the sector.

This research contributes to the literature by evaluating the perceptions of employers regarding the skills and competencies tourism professionals need to be successful in

their future careers. These findings will help provide future tourism degree students with better training, thus better matching the demands of the tourism labour market.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the literature review provides an overview of the main topics of the paper, and defines the terms “knowledge”, “abilities”, “skill” and “competence”. This is followed by the methodology section, which presents qualitative data gathered from 10 professionals who work in different tourism businesses. This includes the study method, research instrument used, data collection method and sample profile. The results section divides the competencies into four clusters (professional and methodological competencies, social and communicative competencies, personal competencies, and activity and action-oriented competencies) as developed by Erpenbeck and Von Rosenstiel (2003). The conclusions are presented in the final section.

## **Literature review**

Huang and Lin (2010) demonstrated that in the often-debated gap between industry and education surrounding practical operational skills and management knowledge (Cheung, Law, & He, 2010; Wang & Tsai, 2014), there are significant differences between industry expectations and academic perceptions of the most valuable skills for hospitality graduates. Education, combined with the growing demand for academic skills and the importance of obtaining practical experience through internships, social engagement, or volunteering, plays a vital role in the tourism and hospitality industry (Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2021). In this sense, the university’s role in providing students with different skills in order to prepare them for future scenarios will be relevant in contributing to increasing the capacity of future professionals in the sector (Cimatti, 2016).

Sisson and Adams (2014) noted that while hard competencies remain important for entry-level hospitality managers, key competencies for hospitality graduates fall into the category of soft skills. Research on the actual management competencies favored by employers provides more conclusive and robust evidence-based data. Since education should focus on equipping students for future leadership positions instead of merely focusing on their initial employment opportunities (Gray, Ottesen, Bell, Chapman, &

Whiten, 2007, as referenced in Jiang & Alexakis, 2017), hospitality program curricula must reflect the management knowledge and skills currently favored by employers (Jiang & Alexakis, 2017).

Derco and Tometzová (2023) examined education, experience, personal qualities, language, and other skills and knowledge required by the tourism industry in the recruitment process. Their research processed 978 online job advertisements (569 tourism companies), and results indicated that the Slovakian labour market has a dearth of job opportunities explicitly requiring higher education. The research also showed that employers prefer the soft version of personal qualities and skills.

A study on hospitality management competencies and use of competencies in three hotel areas (food and beverage, front desk, and sales) indicated 18 competencies: twelve grouped under leadership, four under interpersonal, one under technical, and one under conceptual-creative (Kay & Russette, 2000). Huang and Lin (2010) found that both hospitality managers and scholars viewed communication skills among the most important core management skills for hospitality management trainees.

Several researchers have established the competencies hospitality management programs should teach to prepare students for successful careers in the industry. These studies focus on knowledge, skills, and attitudes in written and oral communication, customer service, problem-solving, and leadership (e.g., Cheung et al., 2010).

For this study, it is crucial to identify the types of knowledge, skills, and other employability attributes required by the tourism industry and compare these with those graduates possess (Cranmer, 2006; Rigby, Wood, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Leveson, Petocz, Thomas & Vu, 2010; Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Most competency taxonomies can be classified into three main categories: knowledge, abilities, and skills. This implies that a range of skills and abilities is essential to achieving overall competence (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). Basic definitions related to this are outlined below.

Knowledge refers to factual or theoretical information a student possesses in a particular content area (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Knowledge of an academic subject field is no longer sufficient in today's perplexing world of work; it is more

important for graduates to develop skills that will increase their chances of finding employment (Fallows & Steven, 2000). Knowledge is acquired know-how that can be both propositional (knowing what) and procedural (knowing how) (Sonntag and Schmidt-Rathjens, 2004).

Abilities are all kinds of innate skills of a person, which are necessary to perform tasks and services (Sonntag and Schmidt-Rathjens, 2004). Having the ability to work means having the occupational competence, the health required for the competence, and the occupational virtues that are required to manage the work tasks, assuming that the tasks are reasonable and the work environment is acceptable (Tengland, 2011).

A skill is defined as a person's ability to apply knowledge to complete a specified task or to show a particular behaviour (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Skills are automated components of tasks, which are undertaken with relatively low mental control. These skills include both powered routine jobs and cognitive activities (Sonntag and Schmidt-Rathjens, 2004). This application of knowledge becomes less conscious, that is, with time and practice, a student becomes capable of demonstrating skills without constantly thinking about the knowledge underpinning them (Lather, Garg & Vikas, 2014).

Competence is defined as the ability and skill to integrate education and training, aligning both with the needs of the labour market and fostering the mobility of individuals (Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005; Shariff et al., 2014). Notably, these competencies must be understood as integrated tonalities of expertise and know-how, processes and interests, personal motivations, knowledge, and affections that are critical to completing a task (Erpenbeck & Von Rosenstiel, 2003). Thus, the present paper considers the multidimensionality of the concept of competencies according to the four competence fields categorized by Erpenbeck and Von Rosenstiel (2003) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Definitions of basic competencies

Ability (disposition) for self-organizational action with regard to...	Dimensions / basic competencies	Definition
... exposure to objects	Professional and methodological competence	The ability to fulfil profession-related tasks with methodological know-how.
... exposure to other persons	Social-communicative competence	The ability to cooperate and communicate with other people.
... oneself as a person	Personal competence	The ability to be critical of oneself, of one's values, attitudes and ideals.
... one's own actions	Activity – and action competence	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.

Source: Adapted from Erpenbeck & Von Rosenstiel, 2003.

## Methodology

The methodology used in the study is detailed in the following two subsections; the first describes qualitative methodology and the research instrument used, and the second outlines the data collection and sample profile.

### *Study method and research instrument*

A qualitative analysis was used to gain an understanding of the topic as it employs subjective judgment based on non-quantifiable data.

The data used for the research were collected from semi-structured interviews. The interview questions enabled participants to give detailed responses about their opinion based on perspectives of their field of work in the tourism market. Interviewees were able to give their points of view, focus on what is most relevant to them, and expand their answers. Participants were encouraged to talk about the most important

competencies and skills they consider essential for new tourism professionals. This created an opportunity to identify different approaches to the topic.

Findings by Zehrer and Mössenlechner (2009) using competence clusters developed by Erpenbeck and Von Rosenstiel (2003) were employed to design the questions for the semi-structured interviews together with the sub-skills listed in the KODEX recording system developed by Heyse and Erpenbeck (2007). Research by Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere and Spowart (2018) also underpins this study, as the most valuable knowledge and skills required in the tourism industry are customer service/awareness, ethical conduct at work, verbal communication, acceptance of responsibility, attention to detail, ability to work under pressure, integrity, time management skills, written/business communication and motivation. Table 2 shows the question guide.

**Table 2.** Tourism graduate competencies and skills mentioned in previous studies

Professional and methodological competencies	Social and communicative competencies	Personal competencies	Activity and action – oriented competencies
Language competencies	Social networking skills	Intercultural skills	Determination and goal orientation
Fundamentals in management	Social and team skills	Ability to work under pressure	Innovation spirit
Fundamentals in economics and law	Ability and willingness to change	Emotional intelligence	Decision – making abilities
Fundamentals in finance	Adaptability skills	Empathy	Initiative and proactiveness
Fundamentals in information and communication technologies	Proactive communication skills	Self-management	Creativity
Tourism-related knowledge	Active listening	Willingness and personal commitment	Attention to detail
Skills and competencies in written communication	Persuasion skills	Self-motivation and willingness to learn	Motivation
Problem-solving skills	Overall communication abilities	Ethical conduct at work	

Customer service/awareness	Acceptance of responsibility
	Integrity
	Time management skills

Source: Own elaboration based on Zehrer and Mössenlechner (2009) and Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere and Spowart (2018).

The semi-structured interviews were divided into three sections. The first, introductory section disclosed the academic purposes of the research. Participants were asked to give their consent to record the interview, making them aware that their data would be only used for this investigation. The interviewer then focused on designing questions related to the interviewee's professional background and tourism work experience. The second section focused exclusively on the competencies and skills interviewees wanted to address, and the third section thanked participants for their valuable contribution.

The method used to analyse the semi-structured interviews was thematic analysis as the aim of this research was to identify the competencies and skills tourism businessmen consider the most fundamental in the future tourism graduates. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and recorded using videoconference software, then translated into English for the purposes of this article.

### ***Data collection and sample profile***

The research sample comprised professionals working in a range of tourism businesses such as hotels, gastronomy, tourism press, tourism education, tour operators, travel agencies and tourism associations. The interviewer first asked individuals to contribute to the study, sending the request and general information about the interview by e-mail. Those who agreed to take part in the study were then sent an invitation to a videoconference, with the meeting link and connection details. The interviews were conducted between July 10<sup>th</sup> and September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2023, on ten tourism professionals, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each.

Table 3 lists the participants. All participants gave their informed consent to participating in the study.

**Table 3.** Sample profile

<i>Name</i>	<i>Enterprise</i>	<i>Position</i>
Karem	Hotel	General Manager
Ailin	Tour Operator and Travel Agency	General Manager
Jorge	Tour Operator Destination development and promotion agency	General Manager Director
Karla	Travel Agency	General Manager
Andrea G.	Hotel	General Manager
Holbach	Hotel Chamber of Tourism National Federation of Tourism Chambers	General Manager President President
Carlos	Restaurant Association	President
Raúl	Tourism Magazine	Director
Joseph	University	Tourism Consultant. Founding Director of Tourism degree studies in an Ecuadorian University. First Tourism Director of the Municipality of Guayaquil. General Consul of Ecuador in Miami.
Andrea C.	Hotel	Room Division Manager

Source: Own elaboration.

## Results

The results relate to the competence clusters in Table 2: professional and methodological competencies, social and communicative competencies, personal competencies, and activity and action-oriented competencies.

### *Professional and methodological competencies*

In the context of “*Professional and methodological competencies*” information and communication technology skills (Kim et al., 2017, as cited in Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2021), communication skills focus on oral and written communication (Aasheim et al., 2009; Ferreira et al., 2010; Jiang & Alexakis, 2017; Neves et al., 2015; Robles, 2012, as cited in Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2021) and foreign language skills, particularly speaking and writing English, deemed essential skills for the employability of tourism professionals (Costa et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Pimentel et al., 2016, as cited in Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2021). In this study, interviewees who mentioned “*Professional and methodological competencies*” highlighted contributions such as the importance to have “*Language competencies*”. Table 4 shows participants’ opinions, reaffirming the importance of tourism professionals being proficient in several languages, particularly English.

**Table 4.** Language competencies.

Participant contributions
“Speaking more than two languages opens many doors for you in the workplace. Having a good level of English is essential”.
“In the case of booking systems, the commands are in English, and if you need to respond to a foreign client, you need to know how to write in English”.
“... regarding languages, knowledge of English is essential. Although she has had good job candidate profiles, if a candidate doesn't speak English, she doesn't hire him, because knowing English is definitely a differentiator in the labour market”.

Source: Own elaboration.

Some of the interviewees remarked on “*Fundamentals in management*”. One participant said that attitude and willingness to manage is important for future tourism professionals, adding “action is what makes the difference between planning and executing. The public and private sectors need professional tourism managers who can come up with a plan and have the ability to implement it. Even if there is no pre-prepared plan, they should be able to make one and implement it”. This contribution

evidences the importance of management skills in the tourism sector. Another interviewee mentioned that future tourism professionals must know how to plan, organize, direct and make decisions, adding that the tourism professional must have a clear understanding of key elements of tourism from the social, environmental, economic and sustainability spheres. According to Cannas et al. (2019), integrating all destination stakeholders constitutes a valuable, multi-stakeholder, co-creation process and that goes beyond a standard business-client relationship pattern and merges commercial benefits with the local community. Another participant said “it is key that the tourism professional knows how to follow processes and to be efficient and organized, right from the small things, such as managing and organizing documents”.

Based on knowledge and experience, another participant commented on the *“Fundamentals in economics and law”*, indicating that the more knowledge employees have of various areas of economics, accounting, mathematics, physics, history, natural sciences, etc. the better. This is in line with Varra et al. (2021), who states “In fact, and at least in Italy, the complexity of the tourism sector that calls for professionals with cross-sectoral skills has led to the design of academic programs permeated by economic, historical, humanistic and socio-psychological subjects”.

Other participants pointed out the importance of *“Fundamentals in finance”*. ‘Understanding numbers, budgets, and commission margins is as important as knowing how to put together a tourist package’, stated one interviewee, while another said “Accounting skills, particularly for tourism, is paramount”. This highlights that future tourism professionals also need honed skills in numeracy, accounting, and finance; thus, tourism study programs need to consider subjects related to imparting this type of knowledge that the labour market demands.

*“Fundamentals in information and communication technologies”* was another required competence. The arguments presented view ICT management as a core competence for handling digital marketing in tourism as well as tourism planning and management. Participants mentioned some of the many planning, georeferencing, organization, e-commerce, marketing and sales tools that future tourism professionals ought to be familiar with. They emphasized that this competence not only applies to digital marketing, and that technology is also used in planning, organization, and structuring teamwork. Another participant mentioned that future tourism professionals must have

skills in managing big data, stating “knowing how to analyse and manage the information obtained is important for good decision making”. The importance of digital skills for the future was mentioned by another interviewee who explained that this has revolutionized the travel industry: “We currently use OTAs, we read reviews, we need to manage chatbots, artificial intelligence, know how to use digital platforms and GDS”.

General and specific knowledge is essential for tourism professionals; it gives them the flexibility to work in different tourism contexts and professional realities (Fernandes, 2005; Oliveira, 2011, as cited in Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2021). “*Tourism-related knowledge*” was considered an obvious, key competence, as stated in participant opinions in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Tourism-related knowledge

Participant contributions
“If they are tourism professionals, they obviously must know concepts from the receptive and international field, and even know how to manage reservation systems”.
“I consider is very important to teach gastronomy. In other countries, especially European ones, hospitality is important, as is gastronomy, because hotel management blends with gastronomy in the tourism offer”.
“Tourism professionals must know in depth what they offer, whether that is a tourist product, tourist destination, city or country. They should know about seasons, currency, weather, clothing recommendations, language, geographical location, attractions and activities, etc. To be a good tourism professional, you first need to be a client, tourist, diner, visitor, and passenger. If future tourism professionals have not had both personal and travel experiences, they will not understand the reality of tourism activity”.
“Tourism professionals need to be highly trained, technical and provide good services”.
“Tourism professionals have to be like a doctors who know how to answer everything that the client asks or requests”.
“Future tourism professionals must be environmentally aware, since travellers themselves are more aware of the environment and there is a tendency to choose establishments that work with fresh, local produce and plastic free, biodegradable products”.

Source: Own elaboration.

One of the interviewees in the study also referred to the *“Problem-solving skills”* tourism professionals need to resolve unforeseen events. Another participant focused on the importance of solving problems related to guaranteeing adequate safety measures, as this is what hits the country's business tourism sector the hardest.

### ***Social and communicative competencies***

In their study “Developing an index of the Malaysian tourism and hospitality graduates competencies”, Shariff and Abidin (2015) developed a competencies index with eight domains. Among the top-rated competencies were communication skills, business fundamental skills, and interpersonal skills. These results are congruent with *“Social and communicative competencies”*, the second group of competencies in this research. One interviewee mentioned *“Social networking skills”*, highlighting the pertinence of communication skills for the tourism professional, and that current, in-depth knowledge of social media management, content generation, investment in advertising and user qualification was essential.

Regarding *“Ability and willingness to change”* one interviewee believes that all future tourism professionals have to be prepared for change and know how to adapt their strategy and approach according to new needs and the capacity to remain relevant and successful. This is highly relevant today, given the ongoing unprecedented changes that generate constant uncertainty in business. This also calls for *“Adaptability skills”*. For example, another participant stated that “adaptability and flexibility are essential skills for tourism professionals; tourism is constantly evolving, especially in emerging trends”. Another participant said “as professionals who work closely with people, we need to be able to adapt to guests/clients’ characters and personalities so as to understand them better and make them happy”.

Regarding *“Proactive communication skills”* a participant mentioned that it is important for professionals to be empathetic, proactive, and manage assertive communication, and also mentioned the importance of *“Active listening”*, saying that “employees must know how to listen, value and put themselves in their clients' shoes; in short, they must like to serve”. This is in line with Jackson’s (2014) research “Business graduate performance in oral communication skills and strategies for improvement”, where

listening skills also feature as a highly rated sub-behaviour, with a mean score of 5.21. These skills are highly valued by employers as they are seen as a vital aspect of the business communication skill set.

Other main skills include the ability to negotiate, communicate effectively and actively participate in the development and maintenance of social networks with colleagues and customers (Akrivos et al., 2007; Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994; Kay & Russette, 2000; Ladkin & Juwaheer, 2000; Munar & Montano, 2009; Ng & Pine, 2003; Sewell & Pool, 2010; Wessel, Du Plessis & Slabbert, 2017, as cited in Varra et al., 2021). Many authors define persuasion as the ability to convince someone to do or believe something. Following on from this, our research relates *"Persuasion skills"* to a future tourism professional's ability to be a good salesperson. In their study "Destination competitiveness in Russia: tourism professionals' skills and competences", Andrades & Dimanche (2019) found discouragingly low competence scores. Employees appeared to lack knowledge of tourism product sales strategies and were unable to recognize the needs of specific segments; for example, older visitors, or people with disabilities. Persuasion skills were highlighted by several study participants (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Persuasion skills

Participant contributions
“I believe it is important for future professionals who work in a travel agency or tour operator to be a good salesperson”.
“In my opinion a tourism professional should also have the negotiation skills to manage suppliers”.
“Tourism professionals need communication skills and knowledge of sales psychology. It is vital that they are strategic, know how a person thinks and acts, can build good relationships with clients and can identify the most profitable ones. Having the power to speak and convince is very important”.
“Future tourism professionals have to know about marketing and sales”.

Source: Own elaboration.

The tourism sector is a service industry with intangible products. It requires employees to have writing and communication skills in order to complete forms and other

documents that are essential components of travel processes (Page & O’Connell, 2014, as cited in Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere, & Spowart, 2018). Data obtained by Zwane, Du Plessis and Slabbert (2014) in their study “Analysing employers’ expectations of employee skills in the South African tourism industry”, points out that a career in tourism requires good communication skills. Participants of this research mentioned the importance of “*Overall communication abilities*” (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Overall communication abilities

Participant contributions
“The tourism professional is someone with communication skills, who likes talking, who is forthcoming and not shy. I also believe that they should be open-minded”.
“For me is important that a tourism professional knows about content marketing, positioning, and communication, not just commercial marketing. They must have knowledge of the transversal communication and vertical marketing components. Communication is vital for everything”.
“I also believe that the tourism professional should be constantly learning, reading widely, and developing a good vocabulary and communication skills, because words have power”.

Source: Own elaboration.

Human resources are vital elements of the tourism industry as they are essentially customer driven (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). Any indication of poor service delivery towards customers may result in distrust of a tourism business, and could provoke a loss of clients. Therefore, offering high quality services is crucial for the development of tourism industry professionals and graduates (Wakelin-Theron et al., 2018). According to Marneros et al. (2020), the industry’s current competitive environment demands that hotel companies strive to discover new ways of doing business to better serve customers, while simultaneously pursuing their profit goals. This is in line with the findings of our study, which identified the following viewpoints related to “*Customer service/awareness*” (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Customer service/awareness

Participant contributions
"I believe that professionals must be able to provide services".
"Building your character for customer service is basic".
"In the hotel sector, being welcoming, offering a smile and being friendly will encourage guests to return".
"Having a vocation for service is key. Future professionals should not only know how to sell, but also give advice, so that the client experiences the best trip".
"To work in tourism you must first like customer service, be friendly and know how to interact with people".
"It is important that our staff has customer service skills, a good attitude, and know how to express themselves and offer services and products when serving clients".
"In the accommodation business I work for, we interview candidates according to skills. We have already defined the competencies required for each position. The first thing I evaluate when selecting staff is their capacity for empathy and customer service skills".
"I believe this is definitely the most important skill, given you are working with people and offering them personalized experiences".

Source: Own elaboration.

### ***Personal competencies***

Other employability attributes are personal qualities such as motives, traits, self-concept, attitude, and values. Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018), Kuo et al. (2012) (as cited in Choy & Yeung, 2024) suggest that a favourable attitude in the tourism industry combines problem-solving skills, empathy, enthusiasm and friendliness, meaning that attitude may partly constitute self-efficacy in certain skills and knowledge.

There is ample evidence that having a personality that matches a career is critical. Lu and Adler (2009) stated there is a relationship between personality, career choice, and success. According to Kemboi et al. (2016) (as cited in Anthony, Mensah and Amissah, 2021), the wrong personality type in the wrong career leads to dissatisfaction, poor performance, and, subsequent abandonment of that career.

Findings from a study by Wakelin-Theron et al. (2018) entitled "Perception of tourism graduates and the tourism industry on the important knowledge and skills required in

the tourism industry” mentions the importance of *“Integrity”* in the tourism industry as it requires graduates to be honest and trustworthy. This fully supports the opinion of one interviewee who stated “a tourism professional must be someone with deeply ingrained values, morals and ethics”.

Several studies point out that emotional intelligence is linked to success in the workplace and accompanies academic intelligence (Gómez, S., 2017). According to research by Daniel Goleman, emotional intelligence is key to excelling both professionally and personally (Gómez, S., 2017). Goleman highlights 5 personal skill areas of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Gómez, S., 2017). *“Empathy”* was a personal skill discussed by one interviewee, who said “it is important for tourism professionals to be empathetic with customers and know how to handle communication with them assertively”.

Another participant mentioned the importance of *“Self-management”* for tourism professionals, saying “tourism professionals need to have self-control to be able to respond appropriately to a difficult situation in the workplace”. According to Gomez, S. (2017), self-management skills are good general indicators of a person’s employability and having these affective skills plays a far greater role in better job performance than technical expertise. Self-management strategies help structure the work/study environment, increase self-motivation, and facilitate behaviours that contribute to the achievement of performance standards (Gómez, S., 2017).

Among these competencies, it is noteworthy that one interviewee addressed *“Willingness and personal commitment”*, specifically highlighting the importance of the tourism professional being flexible with schedule adjustments and showing considerable willingness to collaborate with the company he/she is working for.

### ***Activity and action-oriented competencies***

As mentioned in the literature review, *“Activity and action-oriented competencies”* refer to the ability to put into practice all kinds of knowledge in terms of social communication, personal values, and ideals, thus integrating all other kinds of competencies (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009). In this case, one research participant mentioned *“Determination and goal orientation”*, a competence that had not yet been

broached. The interviewee stated that “professionals have to project themselves into a very competitive world”, which means they have to focus all their attention on reaching their goals. This can only be achieved by integrating competencies in order to survive in a tourism labour market that is very diverse and susceptible to sudden changes.

### ***Summary of findings by competencies***

Findings showed that for the ten participants in this study, “*Professional and methodological competencies*” and “*Social and communicative competencies*” were the most important. The vast majority of responses addressed competencies and skills within these clusters, and “*Personal competencies*” and “*Activity and action-oriented competencies*” were mentioned to a lesser extent. Table 9 shows the competencies and skills participants mentioned specifically.

**Table 9.** Tourism graduate competencies and skills identified by respondents

<b>Professional and methodological competencies</b>	<b>Social and communicative competencies</b>	<b>Personal competencies</b>	<b>Activity and action – oriented competencies</b>
<b>Language competencies</b>	Social networking skills	Empathy	Determination and goal orientation
<b>Fundamentals in management</b>	Ability and willingness to change	Self-management	
<b>Fundamentals in economics and law</b>	Adaptability skills	Willingness and personal commitment	
<b>Fundamentals in finance</b>	Proactive communication skills	Integrity	
<b>Fundamentals in information and communication technologies</b>	Active listening		
<b>Tourism-related knowledge</b>	Persuasion skills		
<b>Problem-solving</b>	Overall		

skills	communication
	abilities
	Customer
	service/awareness

Source: Own elaboration.

## Conclusions

The tourism industry requires a skilled team to maintain high standards of service excellence with admirable knowledge, diverse additional skills and the necessary experience (Wakelin-Theron, 2015). This study was conducted in Ecuador in the context of a developing tourism destination. It focuses on the competencies tourism graduates need to perform well from the perceptions of tourism businessmen. Participant responses were collected from semi-structured interviews. The question guide used was based on the following competence clusters: professional and methodological competencies, social and communicative competencies, personal competencies, and activity and action-oriented competencies. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the semi-structured interviews.

Findings show that the vast majority of responses addressed “Professional and methodological competencies” and “Social and communicative competencies”. “Personal competencies” and “Activity and action-oriented competencies” appeared to be largely irrelevant and were mentioned less by the interviewees.

Regarding “Professional and methodological competencies”, interviewees highlighted the importance of language skills, and of competencies such as fundamentals in management, fundamentals in economics and law, fundamentals in finance, fundamentals in information and communication technologies, as well as tourism-related knowledge and problem-solving skills.

Regarding “Social and communicative competencies” interviewees mentioned social networking skills, ability and willingness to change, adaptability skills, proactive communication skills, active listening, persuasion skills, overall communication abilities and customer service/awareness.

Although "Personal competencies" and "Activity and action-oriented competencies" were less selected, in these clusters, empathy, personal commitment and determination and goal orientation skills stand out.

These findings indicate that higher education institutions face a major challenge in that they are responsible for comparing and analysing what they currently offer their students, with the aim of achieving an academic offer that links their programs with the competencies future tourism graduates really need to acquire from a tourism labour market perspective. These institutions need to foster and develop professional and social skills as well as personal and activity and action-oriented skills in their students in a sustainable way in order to boost good employability opportunities for tourism graduates. This will only be possible by involving tourism directors and businessmen in the design of study programs for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

The results of this study provide useful conclusions, however there are limitations. Although the current study was carried out with tourism directors and businessmen from Ecuador, findings suggest it can be generalized to countries with similar characteristics.

Future research in other countries should be undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of tourism graduate competencies from the perspective of tourism labour market demand, and make comparisons between countries. Finally, it is worth noting that the outlook for labour demand in the tourism market may change over time, so this is a topic that should be continually explored in order to analyse its evolution.

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## CONCLUSIONS

This doctoral thesis entitled “Perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students”, aims to identify the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students about their career, in order to determine improvements for their study programs, and thus achieve a good fit for future professionals in the business tourism world.

This thesis has been structured as a compendium of three articles, with each article focusing on a specific approach to achieving its objectives. By examining multiple perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. When taken together, all three articles accomplish the general objective of this research, as well as the specific research objectives of each article described below.

The first article explored perceptions and career goals of tourism undergraduate students enrolled in the Universidad Estatal de Milagro – Ecuador before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research revealed several interesting results. The vast majority of the undergraduate students expressed their desire to work in the Tourism industry upon graduation (98% before the COVID-19 survey and 99% during the COVID-19 survey) and their interest in studying a Tourism Master degree (92% before the COVID-19 survey and 88% during the COVID-19 survey). The respondents of this study were asked to agree or disagree with 18 statements to measure different perceptions about the career. Satisfactorily, the study respondents anticipate that the

labour supply in the field of tourism is wide, diverse, and interesting. They believe that this career is going to present them with intellectual challenges. They also think they could enjoy a pleasant work environment, have the opportunity to grow as professionals, use cutting-edge technology, and contribute positively to society. The result of the study demonstrated that the transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.) sector was preferred for a career in the industry. In the case of their expected job position after five years working in the industry, it was gratifying to find that the highest percentage of the students is planning to start their own businesses.

The second article builds on the first by comparing perceptions across two different cultural and educational contexts. This examined and compared the perceptions of tourism degree studies, and undergraduate students' goals to pursue further education and a career in the tourism sector at the Universidad de Girona (UdG), in Spain, and the Universidad Estatal de Milagro (UNEMI), in Ecuador. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with nine statements to measure perceptions of a tourism career. Findings showed that more undergraduate UNEMI tourism students who participated in the study had the perception "I am proud to have chosen a degree in tourism studies despite relatives and friends" than those at UdG. Related to "Tourism offers me a stable job", UNEMI students had a higher level of agreement than UdG students. In contrast, in the case of "There is gender discrimination in tourism sector employment" the UdG mean was higher than UNEMI's. Furthermore, the study revealed that students from both universities feel that it is not essential to have a university degree in tourism studies to work in this industry.

Findings from the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) carried out for both universities showed that UNEMI students perceive a single factor regarding perceptions of a career in tourism, namely “General perception about the career”, whereas UdG students perceived two dimensions. One labelled “Perception of social pressure”, which is based on what society expects from students and the importance of the job in society. The second factor was “Personal perception”, based on individual achievements or goals associated with a tourism degree and a profession in the industry. This study identified and compared the career goals of tourism undergraduate students enrolled in two universities. The vast majority of undergraduate students showed a desire to work in the tourism industry after graduating and an interest in studying for a master’s degree in tourism. Furthermore, results revealed that most students are willing to work in a location different from their usual residence.

The third article studied the competencies of tourism graduates from the perspective of tourism labour market demand. This study focuses on the competencies tourism graduates need to perform well from the perceptions of tourism businessmen. Findings show that the vast majority of responses addressed “Professional and methodological competencies” and “Social and communicative competencies”. Regarding “Professional and methodological competencies”, interviewees highlighted the importance of language skills, and of competencies such as fundamentals in management, fundamentals in economics and law, fundamentals in finance, fundamentals in information and communication technologies, as well as tourism-

related knowledge and problem-solving skills. Regarding “Social and communicative competencies” interviewees mentioned social networking skills, ability and willingness to change, adaptability skills, proactive communication skills, active listening, persuasion skills, overall communication abilities, and customer service/awareness.

The findings gathered in this study have practical implications for the tourism industry. If the industry wants to maintain highly motivated students and recruit and retain highly skilled professionals, it will be necessary that educators and the industry work together to improve the tourism labour market. From the perspective of tourism higher education providers, it is important to study the perceptions that potential students and current students have about the career because it will affect positively or negatively the number of students they will receive and retain in their educational establishments. From the perspective of the tourism industry, it will be crucial to develop successful human resources strategies and improve issues related to working hours, salary levels, career promotions, gender discrimination, and job security to help create a better tourism work field and therefore a good perception of this career.

The comprehensive analysis of the three studies presented in this thesis reveals several interconnected conclusions regarding undergraduate tourism students' perceptions and career goals, as well as the alignment between educational outcomes and industry expectations.

### **- Strong student commitment to the tourism industry**

Across both Ecuador and Spain, undergraduate tourism students consistently demonstrate a strong commitment to building their careers in the tourism sector. The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed a desire to work in the tourism industry upon graduation, and a significant portion also showed interest in pursuing postgraduate education, particularly a master's degree in tourism. This reflects a high level of motivation and dedication among students, regardless of contextual differences such as country, institutional setting, or the external challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **- Perceptions of the career are generally positive, but culturally nuanced**

The findings show that students generally perceive a career in tourism positively. They associate it with diverse opportunities, intellectual stimulation, professional growth, and a chance to contribute to society. However, some differences were found in the way students from different institutions interpret and prioritize these perceptions. For instance, Ecuadorian students placed greater emphasis on job stability, while Spanish students expressed greater awareness of social issues such as gender discrimination in the sector. These cultural nuances suggest that while the overall perception of tourism as a viable and fulfilling career is consistent, the underlying factors shaping these perceptions may vary by region and context.

**- Entrepreneurship is an emerging career goal**

An important insight emerging from the first article is the high percentage of students who envision themselves as entrepreneurs within five years of entering the workforce. This entrepreneurial aspiration underscores the need for tourism programs to include practical and theoretical training in business development, innovation, and self-employment strategies. Encouraging and supporting entrepreneurship could significantly enhance career readiness and align with the evolving structure of the global tourism market.

**- Academic preparation and industry expectations must be better aligned**

The third article brings valuable input from tourism industry professionals regarding the competencies expected from graduates. The results indicate a strong demand for both professional and methodological competencies (such as language proficiency, managerial and legal knowledge, ICT skills, and problem-solving abilities) and social and communicative competencies (such as adaptability, teamwork, active listening, customer service orientation, and persuasive communication). The emphasis placed on these competencies by employers highlights the importance of continuously updating tourism curricula to reflect labor market demands and ensure that students are equipped with both technical and soft skills.

### **- Perception of the necessity of a degree is ambivalent**

Interestingly, many students, regardless of institution, do not perceive a university degree in tourism as essential for success in the field. This perception could pose a challenge for higher education institutions, potentially affecting student recruitment and retention. It points to a need for universities to more clearly communicate the added value of formal education in tourism, particularly in relation to employability, long-term career development, and access to leadership positions.

### **- Need for collaboration between academia and the industry**

To bridge the gap between students' expectations, academic offerings, and industry realities, collaboration between educational institutions and the tourism sector is crucial. Such collaboration can take the form of internships, guest lectures, curriculum co-design, and joint research initiatives. Engaging the industry in shaping tourism education will not only ensure greater relevance of academic programs but also foster a smoother transition from education to employment.

### **- Improving working conditions is key to attracting and retaining talent**

Lastly, while students are motivated and optimistic, the tourism industry still faces structural issues—such as low salaries, long and irregular working hours, limited career progression opportunities, and gender disparities—which can negatively affect the long-term attractiveness of the field. Addressing these challenges is essential if the industry

is to retain qualified graduates and maintain a positive image among current and prospective tourism students.

In summary, this research highlights the importance of aligning educational programs with student expectations and market demands. It suggests that collaboration between academia and the tourism industry is essential to cultivate motivated, well-prepared professionals. Based on the findings from the three articles included in this thesis, the following recommendations are proposed to guide informed decision-making among coordinators, designers, and managers of academic programs in tourism:

**- Update curricula according to labor market demands**

Academic programs should be periodically reviewed and updated to reflect the competencies most valued by tourism industry employers, such as:

- Foreign language proficiency
- Fundamentals in management, economics, law, and finance
- Information and communication technologies applied to tourism
- Problem-solving skills
- Social and communicative competencies (teamwork, proactive communication, adaptability, persuasion, and customer orientation)

Incorporating these competencies will ensure that graduates are better prepared to meet the current and future demands of the tourism sector.

### **- Promote entrepreneurial skills and mindsets among students**

Given the high percentage of students expressing the intention to start their own businesses within the tourism sector, it is recommended to integrate courses or modules on:

- Innovation and entrepreneurship in tourism
- Business creation and management
- Real-world case studies of successful tourism entrepreneurs

Additionally, partnerships with business incubators and youth entrepreneurship support organizations should be encouraged.

### **- Strengthen vocational guidance and links with the tourism industry**

Efforts should be made to enhance vocational orientation early in the program to reinforce students' sense of belonging and commitment to the tourism profession. At the same time, stronger links with the professional sector are encouraged through:

- Internships and work placements
- Collaborative classroom projects with tourism businesses
- Guest lectures and networking events with industry professionals

These initiatives will help bridge the gap between academic training and real-world practice.

### **- Raise awareness of the value of a university degree in tourism**

Academic institutions should communicate more effectively the added value of obtaining a university degree in tourism, emphasizing benefits such as:

- Greater opportunities for leadership and management positions
- Stronger preparation for the sector's challenges
- A comprehensive understanding of the tourism value chain

Addressing this perception is essential to attract and retain motivated students in tourism studies.

### **- Integrate a critical and socially responsible perspective into training**

As cultural contexts influence perceptions and some students identify issues such as gender discrimination or job instability in the sector, programs should incorporate content that allows students to:

- Reflect on the social dimension of tourism
- Identify inequalities and promote good practices in human resource management
- Critically assess working conditions in the tourism sector

This will contribute to developing not only highly skilled but also socially responsible tourism professionals.

These recommendations not only serve as guidance for program-level improvements but also provide valuable input for broader educational policy-making in tourism. By addressing structural and systemic aspects of curriculum design and student preparation, this thesis contributes to the development of more responsive, inclusive, and future-oriented educational frameworks in tourism.

The results of this doctoral thesis provide useful conclusions, however, there are limitations. Future research should be undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions of degrees in tourism and professional goals from the perspective of tourism undergraduate students and tourism graduate competencies from the perspective of tourism labour market demand, and make comparisons between countries, because they may change over time, so this is a topic that should be continually explored in order to analyze its evolution.

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