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Motivation and prior knowledge as determinants of knowledge assimilation: Explaining the academic results of tourism students

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in most European countries has experienced major changes in the last years, and tourism studies have not been an exception. In an attempt to understand more about tourism education in order to better face the new academic framework, the specific goal of this work is to know the influence of students' motivation and prior knowledge on successful knowledge assimilation. After gathering and analysing data from tourism students, results show that both variables are relevant to explain academic results. Nevertheless, they have a different influence pattern regarding the grades in the final exam and the grades in the learning activities organized during the course.

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1. Introduction

In most European countries higher education has been recently adapted to the new European educational framework. The homogenization guidelines that stemmed from the Bologna declaration to create the European Space for Higher Education have forced national university educational systems to adapt to the new reality. In Spain, tourism studies have not been an exception in the general trends that higher education in Europe has shown. When considering that all policies implemented under Bologna imply the construction of a whole new system of higher education in Europe (Munar, 2007), this study has been undertaken in order to gather further insight that can be later used in planning the new courses on the Bachelor programmes in tourism and hospitality management.

As part of the design of the new curricula in the tourism studies, the present study attempts to provide information on the factors that determine knowledge absorption by the student. Two possible determinants are the axis of this work: the student's motivation and his/her prior knowledge. The academic results are used as a proxy of knowledge assimilation, but in order to adapt to the spirit of the European Space for Higher Education, these results are measured not only with the grades of the traditional final exams but also with the grades of participative, learning activities organized during the courses.

The Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 launched the process of convergence across different national European systems of higher education – the so called Bologna Process – that led, in March 2010, to creating a European Higher Education Area which currently comprises 47 country members and various consultative members. Apart from governments and higher education institutions, all major higher education stakeholders in Europe are involved in the planning and implementation

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of the Bologna Process, such as the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the Council of Europe, and BUSINESSEUROPE.

The country members committed to the creation of this European Space for Higher Education have embarked upon processes of harmonization of both academic degree and quality assurance standards by modifying their undergraduate/postgraduate degree structure into a three-cycle system (Bachelor, Master, PhD) with easily readable, comparable and compatible programmes and degrees. In order to improve transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications in Europe (Cort, 2010), the Bologna Process has moved European higher education in a competence-oriented direction through the establishment of the European Qualification Framework (EQF). It is a competence framework that defines standards to all levels of qualifications through the use of curricula descriptors in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

Thus, higher education in most European countries has undergone major changes in the last few years (Masjuan & Troiano, 2008). The main reason for these changes has been the need to adapt to the homogenization guidelines of the Bologna declaration to create the European Space for Higher Education. In Spain and due to this adaptation process, Master and Doctoral programmes were implemented some years ago, but in most universities Bachelor programmes have only been implemented during the academic year 2010–2011. The whole process has not been either easy or problem-free (Munar & Montaña, 2009). For Masjuan and Troiano (2008), this overhaul of programmes should entail a shift from the focus on the traditional teaching of contents, towards the emphasis on students' own learning.

Tourism studies have not been an exception in the general trends that higher education has witnessed in Europe (Munar, 2007), and specifically in Spain. The globalization of the tourism and hospitality industry requires the improvement of the quality of the human resources in order to increase and maintain industrial competitiveness (Chang & Hsu, 2010). Tourism degrees are taught broadly throughout the European Space for Higher Education, but the possibilities for further development of programmes are still high in Europe (Munar, 2007). Though the adoption of common tourism programmes and qualifications across national boundaries in Europe have been hampered by institutional and cultural barriers (Baum, 2007), the Bologna agreement has been a strong impulse in that direction.

In the case of Spain and the tourism studies, in terms of curricula reforms there have been some relevant changes from the previous system. The main one being the extension of the Bachelor programmes, which previously composed of 3-year courses and have now been designed to cover 4 years. Apart from this, the improvements in the system also reside in the focus on competences, and particularly on the know-how that may be transferred to any field of knowledge (Caribaño, 2008) and the implementation in the Spanish higher education system of new teaching/learning methods with a student-centered approach (De Juan et al., 2011). For northern European higher education systems where there is a tradition of a student-centered approach, the Bologna reforms have not greatly transformed their higher education as much as in southern European countries (García-Gallego & Blanco-Alonso, 2007).

In this study students' motivation and prior knowledge are reviewed and tested to determine their potential impact on knowledge assimilation. Their analysis of tourism and hospitality management education could fill a relevant research gap. In the next section we review the appropriate literature used to underpin the possible role that students' motivation and students' prior knowledge can play in learning and academic success. The discussion in the theoretical part of the work leads to the presentation of the research hypotheses, considering that success in the assimilation of knowledge and in the learning process can be associated to academic results. As the new Bachelor philosophy of the higher education models in Spain fosters the implementation of activities during the course to assess the development of competences along with the (possible) use of final exams, we specify two sets of hypotheses: one considering the influence that these variables can have on final exams, and another where the impact is analyzed on the activities conducted during the course that are subject to formal evaluation. With this approach knowledge assimilation is addressed through two processes: one (the preparation for the final exam) is more related to the assimilation of theoretical knowledge, and the other (the activities during the course) is strongly linked to the development of practice-oriented skills and the assimilation of practical knowledge.

2. Knowledge assimilation in the new European educational framework: the role of motivation and prior knowledge

Knowledge assimilation and development of competences are traditional goals of the university education system. The study of personal determinants of success in the university has always been an important question for researchers and educators (Larose, Robertson, Roy & Legault, 1998). In fact, the prediction and explanation of undergraduate student success and knowledge assimilation is a relevant research topic in educational psychology (Breen & Lindsay, 2002). According to Larose et al. (1998), it is not only the specific interest in success but also the desire to improve university acceptance and placement of students. Moreover, the practical implications of this stream of research are relevant, not only for improving students' competence development, but also because there is an increasing competitive environment in higher education (King, Morison, Reed & Stachow, 1999; Brookes, 2003).

For Breen and Lindsay (2002), attempts to explain undergraduate student success are relevant due to a wide range of issues, including financial and psychological costs that the students who drop out or fail cause and suffer, the bad reputation that universities can obtain, and the demoralization of students who do not leave and the academics who teach them. As many countries realize the impact of having a qualified managerial and operational workforce can have in the national competitiveness of the tourism industry, an additional pressure is suffered by many higher education institutions

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