

## UNDERGRADUATE TOURISM EDUCATION IN GREECE: GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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*In this study the authors examine the public tourism education system provided at the tertiary level in Greece by: (a) the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) supervised by the Ministry of Education and (b) the Advanced Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE)s supervised by the Ministry of Tourism. The aim of the study is to examine whether tourism education graduates are well-qualified, and the extent to which the hospitality industry recruits tourism higher education graduates. For this purpose, a primary research focused on the upscale hotel enterprises in Crete was carried out. The managers of 60 hotels were contacted and were asked to fill a questionnaire that was sent to them by email. Among the issues surveyed were the extent to which these hotels are staffed by higher education tourism graduates and whether the graduates' education meets the industry's needs. In addition, the participants were asked to evaluate the industrial placement which is incorporated in all tertiary-level programs of study. The results of the research indicate that, although tertiary education graduates are considered to be well qualified, they lack certain 'soft skills' which are considered to be very important in this sector.*

*Moreover, the study reveals that only a minor percentage of hospitality employees (24%) are tourism graduates, an issue that requires further examination. Finally, it is suggested that education providers develop a close and effective cooperation with the tourism bodies, in order to keep track with the new developments in the tourism business, and update the academic curricula constantly to fit the industry's needs.*

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**Keywords:** *Greek tourism education, graduates skills, demand for tourism graduates, industrial placement, hospitality industry*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism education in Greece, as in most other countries, is provided by a number of state and private-sector bodies at the secondary, post-secondary and tertiary educational levels. At the tertiary level in particular, public tourism education (undergraduate studies) is provided by: (a) the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) supervised by the Ministry of Education, and (b) the Advanced Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE)s supervised by the Ministry of Tourism. The Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) offer a 4-year broad academic program in tourism management, that includes a 6-month compulsory industrial placement, while the Advanced Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE)s offer a curriculum focused on hotel management, that includes a 3-year coursework and 3-month compulsory summer-time industrial placement at the end of each academic year.

Tourism education in Greece is a field that has attracted the interest of few researchers since the late 1990s. In particular, previous studies have focused on managers/ employers' opinions on what skills are required in order for the workforce to provide valued service to their customers (Christou, 1999; Christou & Eaton, 2000). Other studies examine tourism curricula effectiveness measured through graduates' evaluation by their employers' as well as by the investigation of employers' needs for qualified personnel (Christou, 1999; Pitsouli, 2005; Zacharatos, *et. al.*, 2006). Along these lines Dimou and Diplari (2010) examined the necessity for restructuring the Greek public tourism educational system. Finally, Stergiou & Airey (2012) focused on the assessment of Greek students' satisfaction with the curricula provided by tourism-related undergraduate programs of study. There are also studies that have been undertaken as part of governmental projects, or have been funded by tourism-related bodies, which aim to assess effectiveness of tourism and

hospitality degree programs and the need for tourism education reform; however the results of such studies are not easily accessible. Thus, the current study is expected to provide significant input in the debate over the ability of the Greek tourism education system to develop hospitality professionals. The study involves the hospitality industry, since the sector is considered to be the major employer for tourism education graduates in Greece and one of the major employers altogether (Institute for Economic and Industrial Research, 2013).

The objective of this research was to examine whether tourism education graduates are well-qualified when they enter the hotel labour market, and the extent to which the hospitality industry recruits tourism higher education graduates. Along these lines three research questions were identified: a) Do hoteliers prefer to employ tourism graduates as opposed to non-graduates? (b) Do graduates' competencies obtained through their studies meet industry needs and especially in regard to the skills that are considered to be of particular importance? (c) What is the perceived importance of industrial placement by hospitality employers? In particular, the participants were asked to evaluate the industrial placement which is incorporated in all the relevant programs of study. Additionally, participants were asked to state their suggestions for further improvement of the undergraduate tourism curricula provided in Greece.

This paper is organized as follows. Initially, a literature review of previous studies on competencies needed by the hospitality industry is provided, as well as a review of studies on the importance of internship (i.e. industrial placement) for the development of those competencies. An overview of the Greek public tourism education system is being presented later on, focusing on the tertiary-level institutions. Finally, the methodological approach followed in the paper is being described and the results of the research are being presented. Conclusions and suggestions for future research are provided in the last section.

## **Graduate skills and competencies in tourism**

There have been numerous studies that aim to identify the most important skills and abilities tourism graduates should possess in order to start a successful career in the tourism and hospitality industry (Agut, *et.al.* 2003; Christou, 2002; Dhiman, 2012; Huang & Lin, 2011; Kay & Moncarz, 2004; Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla 2014; Phelan & Mills, 2011; Rodriguez-Anton, *et.al.*, 2013, Suh, *et. al.* 2012; Testa & Sipe, 2012; Weber. *et.al.* 2012). The ultimate goal is the development of academic curricula which would provide graduates with the necessary competencies for the highly demanding jobs within the tourism sector. The tourism and hospitality industries have experienced tremendous alterations through the widely applied new technologies in most of their functions (DiPietro & Wang, 2010), and the emphasis on sustainability and green procedures (Johanson, *et.al.*, 2010; Ruiz-Molina, *et. al.* 2012), as a result, the skills required for a graduate to be successful have changed over time. For example, technical competencies, such as computing and languages, were found to be important managerial competencies by an early study (Agut, *et.al.* 2003), however there was less attention paid on those competencies later on, as most graduates are competent with computers and languages long before they enter tertiary education. Thus, the literature review of the studies on skills and competencies focuses mainly on studies carried out over the last ten to fifteen years.

A great emphasis is given by several studies on the importance of “soft” skills (Zehrer & Moessenlechen, 2009) for a successful career in the tourism and hospitality industry (Christou & Eaton, 2000; Kay & Russette, 2000; Weber, *et.al.*, 2012). Weber *et. Al.* (2013) developed a framework that consisted of five key soft skills competencies that were found to be of utmost importance for entry-level hospitality managers. These included managers' ability to develop and coordinate a team, their ability to develop, motivate and evaluate their subordinates, the need to be “problem solvers” and leaders, in the sense of influencing employees' behavior towards goal achievement. Along these lines, studies in the Taiwanese hospitality industry indicated communication skills, adaptability to environmental changes and problem solving capabilities as the most critical competencies (Huang & Lin, 2011; Lin, 2002). Connolly

& Mc Ging (2006) emphasized the preference of recruiters for practical skills, problem solving and decision making skills, rather than analytical skills, while their study also indicated that some tertiary hospitality degrees in Ireland did not meet industry's requirements. A more recent study by Testa & Sipe (2012) revealed the importance of a balance between business-oriented, people-oriented, and self-savvy skills, that included time management, self development and professionalism, while Sigala (2002) commented on the importance of cultural skills due to the multicultural characteristics of the tourism industry.

An interesting point came out from Ricci's study (2010) among lodging managers in the U.S., in order to identify whether hospitality degrees equip their graduates with the necessary qualifications to meet industry's requirements. He suggested that, due to significant inconsistencies among college hospitality programs, employers were urged to verify the level of graduates training before hiring and at the same time highlighted the need for more standardized hospitality curriculum.

### **Importance of Industrial Placement**

Another issue than has attracted the attention of researches is the importance of internship in the educational process; most studies have acknowledge the catalytic impact of industrial placement on the development of the skills that have been identified as important by the tourism and hospitality practitioners (Connolly & McGing, 2006). However, Yiu and Law (2012) asserted that, in order for internship to be successful, it requires the cooperation of students, educators and employers, since its main drawback is that students may become frustrated by the requirements of their employers and this can lead them to withdraw from their decision to enter the hospitality industry. Along these lines, Zopiatis and Theocharous (2013) examined the perceived impact of internships on students' intention to pursue a career in hospitality, while the results of a study by Koc, *et.al.* (2014) among tourism and hospitality students in Turkey, revealed that, almost one in

five interns, do not wish to work in the tourism sector after their graduation. According to Tse (2010, p. 260) “knowing what students perceive to be important and valuable in their workplace experiences is vital to ensuring the success of internships”.

Finally, a common conclusion in the studies reviewed is the need for cooperation between industry and education, in order to overcome skill shortages in the hospitality and tourism sector (Azim, 2012; Diplari and Dimou, 2010; Huang & Lin, 2011; Pitsouli, 2005; Suh, *et.al.* 2012, Tesone & Ricci, 2006; Zehrer & Moessenlechner, 2009). In particular, in their study, Beesley & Davidson (2013) revealed the importance of collaboration between government, industry and academia, if it were to combat the shortage of skilled workforce in the Australian hospitality industry and suggested various ways this cooperation could be achieved. In addition, Nolan, *et. al* (2010) asserted that partnerships between industry and academia are imperative not only in order to provide students with the necessary skills to meet industry's demands, but also as a means to boost graduates' level of job satisfaction.

In Greece, research on the effectiveness of tertiary tourism and hospitality education started in 1995, when Goldshmith and Smirli acknowledged the importance of public tourism education restructuring. The same conclusion came up through the field research conducted by Christou (1999), on hospitality graduates' satisfaction with the educational process and outcomes. The results revealed that graduates were not prepared to deal with the requirements of the tourism industry. Furthermore, an earlier study by Eaton & Christou (1997) among hotel managers, had identified “soft” skills to be of utmost importance, which included, leadership and communication skills, human resources management and total quality management. It is quite disappointing the fact that, a decade later, a study conducted by Diplari and Dimou (2010) brought up again the urgent need for tertiary tourism education restructuring, through a study they performed on both the tourism graduates and the tourism executives (directors and personnel managers). In particular, the lack of practice-oriented elements in the curricula was highlighted, including better structured internship programs, and

educational visits. It was also suggested that tourism-related bodies be encouraged to collaborate with educational institutions in the development of their new programs of study. An earlier study by Pitsouli (2005) concluded that one of the main drawbacks of the Greek tourism education system is the lack of planning and organization. Tourism education and training is provided by various institutions at different levels (secondary, post-secondary, vocational, tertiary), which are supervised by different authorities (e.g. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Tourism). As a result there is no strategy or clear direction for the Greek tourism education.

## **THE GREEK PUBLIC TOURISM EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Tertiary Public Education in Greece is divided into (a) University Education, which is provided by the Universities, the Polytechnics, and the Hellenic Open University, and (b) Technological Education, which is provided by the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs). The Universities and the TEIs usually consist of several faculties which in turn are divided into departments. There exist two TEI departments of 'Management of Cultural and Tourism Enterprises', and eight 'Tourism and Hospitality Management' Programs of Study hosted at Business Administration TEI departments. (So far, there is no undergraduate program of studies on tourism or hospitality provided by Universities). On the other hand, tertiary vocational education in tourism is also provided by two 'Higher Education Institutes' supervised by the Ministry of Tourism, i.e., the Advanced School of Tourism Education of Crete (ASTEK) and the Advanced School of Tourism Education of Rhodes (ASTER).

Additionally, tourism education is also provided by several private Institutions and Colleges. The following table presents the map of the public tourism education system at the tertiary level.

**Table 1** Public Tourism Undergraduate Programs

Ministry of Education	
TEIs' Programs of Studies in Tourism and Hospitality Management (Business Administration Departments)	TEI of Athens
	TEI of Piraeus
	TEI of Thessaloniki
	TEI of Crete (Iraklion)
	TEI of Epirus (Igoumenitsa)
	TEI of Western Macedonia (Grevena)
	TEI of Ionian Islands (Lefkada)
	TEI of Thessaly (Larissa)
TEIs' Departments of Management of Cultural and Tourism Enterprises	TEI of Western Greece (Pyrgos)
	TEI of Central Greece (Amfissa)
Ministry of Tourism	
(ASTE)s Advanced Schools of Tourism Education	ASTE of Crete
	ASTE of Rhodes

Source: Ministry of Education, 2013

The TEIs offer a four year broad academic program in tourism management which includes a semester of placement and thesis preparation, whereas the program of studies at the ASTEs is more practice-oriented and focused on hotel management. The latter consists of 3 academic years of course work and nine months of practical training. However, the programs of the TEIs and the ASTEs exhibit many similarities. In all cases, the academic year consists of two semesters, each with thirteen full weeks of coursework and two weeks of examinations. Moreover, requirements for graduation include the successful examination in about 40 subjects, compulsory and electives, the preparation of a thesis and participation in an industrial placement program. The current, updated TEI's curricula contain between 43 and 58 subjects (including electives) while ASTES's curricula contain 43 subjects. Many of these subjects are identical or cover the same area of study. However, there also exist major differences between the programs of study of the TEIs and the ASTEs. The most important difference is related to the academic recognition of the degrees offered. Namely, although the ASTEs are accredited as higher educational institutions and their graduates have the same professional rights with the graduates of the

TEIs, academically the degrees offers by the ASTEs are not considered equivalent. In particular, ASTEs graduates are not accepted in Master's and Doctoral programs offered by Greek Universities. Actually, in order to overcome this difficulty the graduates of the ASTEs that wish to pursue postgraduate studies can register, for two more semesters of course work and thesis composition, in a Tourism and Hospitality Management department at a TEI, and earn the TEI's degree.

Another difference is related to the industrial placement scheme incorporated in both the TEIs and the ASTEs curricula. Namely, the students of the ASTES have to complete three months supervised placement at the end of each academic year exclusively in hotel companies (5 star or 4-star and 3-star hotels under certain restrictions) while the students of the TEIs can choose between hotel companies, travel organizations or public sector organizations related to tourism (e.g. GNT0) and they are placed for six months during the last semester of their studies. According to the data obtained by the Industrial Placement Office of the TEI of Crete, 30% of its students are placed in public sector organizations, 50% in hotels & 18% in Tourism Agencies. Evaluation of the existing Industrial Placement systems is among the objectives of this paper.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Primary data were collected from 4 and 5 star hotels and hotel chains in Crete. Restricting the research to regional hotels, was not considered a limitation, as Crete is one of the most significant tourism destinations in Greece, hosting some of the best luxury hotels, and accepting more than 3 million visitors every year. On the other hand, in Crete there exist both the TEI department of Tourism and Hospitality Management in the city of Iraklion and the ASTE of Crete in the town of Aghios Nikolaos. Both Institutes' senior students realize their internship at Cretan Hotels and quite a few of them find their first work placements in these hotels. Thus, managers of regional hotels were expected to have worked with quite a few of these graduates, and to be more enthusiastic to participate to our

research. At the time of the research there were 60, 5 star and 120, 4 star hotels operating in the region of Crete, and the one third (1/3) of them were included in our sample. Thus, the sample consisted of 60 hotels in total, i.e., 20, 5 star and, 40, 4 star hotels which were randomly selected from the original list. The reasons why luxury (4 and 5 star) hotels were chosen for this study are the following: (a) Luxury hotels are usually the largest with many different departments, employing graduates in various positions and have employed a large number of graduates throughout the years; as a result directors / managers can provide a more thorough opinion of whether graduates are competent enough to match the hotels' needs. The assumption is that when a graduate is well qualified to meet the requirements of a position in the demanding hotel environment of a luxury hotel, they are competent enough to be employed by a smaller, mid-market or budget hotel. (b) The extent to which they employ students for their industrial placement. Small hotels and self-catering establishments are not allowed to participate in the industrial placement programs, while middle-size hotels (3 star hotels with more than 150 beds capacity) do participate but to a lower extent).

The questionnaire of the research was divided in four sections, and consisted mainly by closed-ended questions. In the first section information about the hotel and the person who filled the questionnaire was requested. Specifically, the participants were asked to provide data about their hotel's capacity and star rating, as well as their position in the company and their contact information. The second section included a table to be filled with the number of tourism and other graduates employed in the different departments, i.e. the Rooms Division, the F&B department, Accounting, Sales & Marketing, and other. Next, the managers were asked to characterize the TEIs' and ASTEs' graduates, as 'well', 'under', or 'over' educated for the positions they occupy in the hotel, and furthermore to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale, the degree to which these graduates possess the necessary theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and skills (computer skills, foreign languages, communication, administrative, or other). The third section was intended to monitor participants' opinion on the overall effectiveness of industrial

placement programs (internships) realized by the TEIs and the ASTEs. The participants were asked to report the extent to which they take interns from the Universities, the TEIs, the ASTEs, and/or other vocational and post secondary institutes, and to evaluate internships in general. Next, they were asked to state which scheme of internship (TEIs' one academic semester vs. ASTEs' nine calendar months) they prefer, in terms of the objectives of both the student's training and the hotel's operation. Finally, in the last section of the questionnaire, an open-ended question was asking participants' opinion on how graduates' competencies and education effectiveness could be further enhanced.

The questionnaire was distributed by email to the sixty hotels of the sample in April 2013. At the same time, the directors or the personnel managers of all the hotels were contacted by phone, they were informed of the objectives of the research and kindly invited to participate in the study.

## **THE RESULTS**

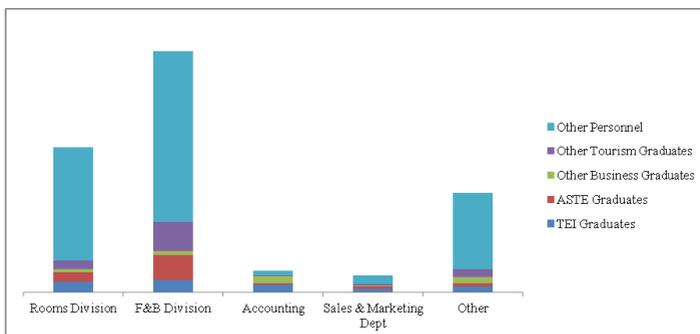
Thirty two filled questionnaires were collected, a number that corresponds to a 53% response rate. Fourteen of them (44%) were from 4-star hotels, and eighteen (56%) from 5-star hotels. Evidently, 5 star hotels' managers were more helpful and the response rate for the category was 90%, while the response rate of 4-star hotels was 35%. With respect to capacity, only 13% of the participated hotels could be classified as fairly small hotels, having a capacity of less than 200 beds, 40% of the hotels of the research had between 200 and 500, 20% between 500 and 700, and 27% had more than 700 beds.

### **Hospitality Industry's Demand for Tourism Graduates**

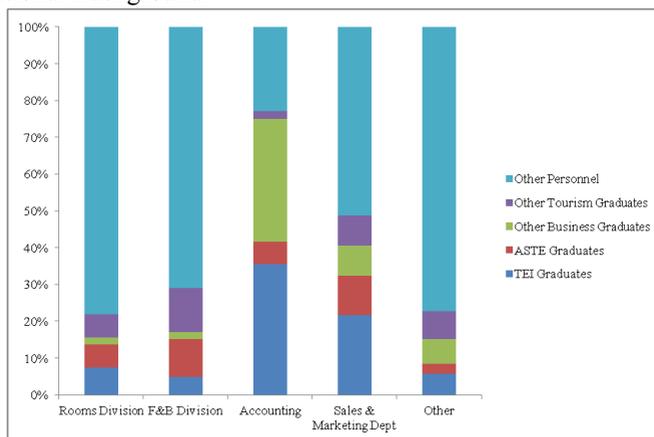
The managers were asked to report the number of ASTE and TEI graduates employed in their major departments (Rooms Division, F&B, Accounting, Sales & Marketing). Our intention was to investigate how this number compares to the number of (a) graduates from other Business

and Finance Schools, (b) tourism graduates of private institutions (private colleges), and (c) other personnel employed. Unfortunately, the findings were discouraging. In around 2500 employees, only a small percentage (15%) were TEI or ASTE graduates (7% and 8% respectively) whereas 9% were graduates from private tourism education institutions, and 4% were graduates of business or finance departments. The vast majority (72%), of the personnel of the 4 and 5 star hotels of the research had only secondary school or lower qualifications, or had not tourism education or training whatsoever. Furthermore, Figure 1 exhibits the number of employees of different educational backgrounds employed in the four major hotel departments. Apparently, the Rooms Division and the F&B Division are the two larger hotel departments with respect to the staff size, and the vast majority of their personnel, specifically more than 80% of the staff of the Rooms Division and 70% of the staff of the F&B Division did not have any tourism education or training (Figure 2). This is a clear indication that until today, hotel managers/owners have not yet realized the importance of having highly qualified front-line personnel. Figure 2, presents the distribution of the personnel in each one of the major departments according to their educational background. It appears that the ASTE graduates outperform the TEIs' in the F&B Division while TEI graduates slightly outperform the ASTEs' in the Rooms Division. On the other hand, as one would expect, TEI tourism graduates represent the majority of employees in Sales & Marketing as well as Accounting departments. Actually, Accounting departments were staffed almost exclusively by TEI tourism and business graduates. Furthermore, the majority of the higher education tourism graduates (both TEI and ASTE) work in the F&B department followed by the Room Division, the Accounting and the Sales & Marketing departments. Finally, the majority of F&B workforce comes from private tourism-related educational institutions, followed by ASTEs' graduates, whereas, graduates from all types of tourism-related institutions compete almost evenly for a position in Rooms Division departments.

**Figure 1** Hotel employees according to their educational background



**Figure 2** Distribution of Employees in each Department according to Educational Background



## Education Effectiveness

The following table presents hotel managers' opinion on the effectiveness of the education provided by the TEIs & the ASTEs' to their graduates. 75% of the managers find that these graduates are considered well educated in relation to the job positions they occupy. Moreover, both their theoretical and their practical knowledge and training are considered

from ‘enough’ to ‘very much’ satisfactory by more than 82% of the managers, although 19% of them apparently require more practical training. On the other hand, 31% of the managers reported that the graduates do not have any or have only ‘a little’ computer and foreign languages skills, and 50% of the participants stated that graduates lack communication skills which are considered very important in the sector. Furthermore, when participants were asked to state, in an open-ended question, their opinion on how graduates’ competencies and education effectiveness could be further enhanced, they stressed out that in order to further improve the academic curricula, faculty should also teach certain ‘soft skills’, such as: responsibility, professionalism, decision making skills, team working, ability to develop positive customer relations, critical thinking, and love of the profession.

**Table 2** Satisfaction with Graduates’ Education and Skills

Overall Level of Education	
	Percent
Under-educated	25%
Well-educated	75%
Theoretical Knowledge	
A little	6%
Enough	38%
Much	56%
Practical Knowledge & Training	
A little	19%
Enough	44%
Much	25%
Very Much	13%
Computer Skills	
Not at all	6%
A little	25%
Enough	44%
Much	19%
Very Much	6%
Foreign Languages	

Not at all	6%
A little	25%
Enough	44%
Much	6%
Very Much	19%
<b>Communication Skills</b>	
Not at all	19%
A little	31%
Enough	13%
Much	25%
Very Much	13%

## **Industrial Placement**

Industrial placement (internship) is a degree requirement in all public tourism programs of study in Greece. Participants in this research were asked to state whether during the last three years they had accepted any interns in their hotel and if so, from which Institutions, and of which educational level. It turned out that all the respondents had hired interns during this period. In particular, seven out of ten of the hotels had accepted interns from the ASTESs at some point during the last three years, while three out of 10 hotels had recruited an intern from a Technological Educational Institution. Additionally, 56% had accepted trainees from Vocational Training Institutes (post secondary, two year training schools) and half of the hotels had employed students from Secondary Vocational Tourism Schools as practitioners. Therefore, it turned out that all hospitality employers that participated in the research systematically take advantage of the industrial placement program, since they hire interns from all different tourism education institutions. Moreover, all the respondents had positive perceptions about industrial placement, and interestingly, the 9-month placement scheme of the ASTEs (three months at the end of each academic year, during the summer season) was considered preferable by 80% of the participants,

compared to the 6-month placement of the TEIs. However, hotel managers underlined that placements should start earlier in the season (ASTE placements start July 1), or even be extended by a month, to allow time for the students to adapt and for their supervisors to train them and treat them as students and not just as workforce.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In an attempt to highlight the most important findings of the research one has to point out that although the majority of the hotel managers find that both the TEIs and ASTEs graduates are well educated for the positions they occupy, half of them stated that graduates lack ‘communication’ as well as other ‘soft skills’, which are considered very important in the sector (Christou & Eaton, 2000; Zehrer & Moessenlechen, 2009). Participants emphasized that academic institutions should teach the pursue of innovation, creativity, enthusiasm along with a clear understanding of the nature and the importance of the job. Additionally, managers highlighted the need for more foreign language teaching in the programs of studies, emphasizing on new markets’ languages (e.g. Russian), while modules aiming to enhance students’ computer skills, particularly on handling the different hotel management applications, were also considered to be of importance.

Moreover, it was suggested that education providers keep a close and effective cooperation with the tourism bodies, in order to keep track of the new developments in the tourism business, and update the academic curricula constantly to fit the hospitality industry’s needs. This is in accordance with previous studies that suggested the establishment of closer links between tourism curricula and the industry (Diplari & Dimou, 2010; Huang & Lin, 2011; Nolan, *et.al.*, 2010).

The main limitation of the study is that the response rate was significantly lower than expected, considering the close cooperation between the authors' institutions and the Cretan hoteliers. This was probably due to the fact that the research was carried out during the beginning of the summer season in Crete.

Issues that require further investigation are (a) the hoteliers' view on how cooperation between education and industry could be enhanced and how the development of employability skills could be incorporated in academic curricula, (b) a more in-depth research on the effectiveness of industrial placement, as viewed by employers, academic institutions and students, (c) the reasons hospitality employers prefer to hire unskilled personnel and (d) comparisons between TEIs' and ASTEs' graduates, in terms of employability competencies, hierarchy positions at the hotels, etc. The current study could indicate the areas that need to be improved in future curricula.

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