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**REQUIRED AND ACQUIRED LEVEL OF GRADUATES' SKILLS
IN HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT**

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Abstract

The concept of competencies have been widely documented, however little research has been done about required and acquired level of competencies in hospitality management. In this study, the competencies that are required of a hotel manager have been combined and grouped into several dimensions, we consider nine main competencies: teamwork, effective communication, enthusiasm, strategic thinking, problem solving, customer service focus, leading for results, planning and organizing and financial awareness. This paper has two major purposes: 1) to identify the level of self-confidence of the graduates about the competencies required by the labour-market at the end of their higher education studies and at the present moment; 2) to identify differences in graduates' perceptions, in these two moments, about their competencies and skills. This study was based on a quantitative methodology. The study relied on an on-line survey research, applied to hospitality management graduates from six Portuguese Higher Education Institution. The data were analysed regarding their level of self-confidence in several competencies. We concluded that all competencies considered and required by the labour market have been considered relevant by graduates although at some of them with lower self-confidence than others. The soft competencies are those with higher level of self-confidence and the diverse contexts of learning seem to promote a level of greater confidence on the graduates.

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Keywords: Competencies, Labour Market, Hospitality Management, Higher Education.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The centrality of competencies nowadays

In social sciences, the focus on competencies has occurred especially in the areas of work, education and training. The importance of the concept of competencies, particularly in sociology, does not correspond to a refusal or subordination of other concepts, such as qualifications. "We recognize that in social sciences there is no unitary use of the concept of competence, no broadly accepted definition or unifying theory" Rychen & Salganik (2000, p. 66). However, those who dispute the "increasing importance attributed to competencies claim that these ignore and devalue disciplinary knowledge and over-value practical use, in addition to putting pressure on the economic field" Avila (2005, p. 117). Opposing this view, Philippe Perrenoud emerges as one of the main defenders of a guidance by competencies in the school, arguing that learning has to be useful and that there are no competencies without knowledge. In his opinion, "the recent preoccupation with competencies must be understood as an added value, that is, how do I add, instead of removing, a new dimension, in other words, the capacity to use knowledge to solve problems, build strategies or make decisions" Perrenoud, (2003, p. 13). Developing competencies "from school" is, above all, a return to its origins, the reason of the own school's being.

As mentioned by Rychen & Salganik (2000), Le Boterf (2002), Parente (2004), Cabral-Cardoso, Estevão, & Silva (2006) and Esteves (2009), the concept of competencies varies according to different disciplinary approaches. First of all, we consider that competence should not be confused with knowledge, since there is no competencies without knowledge. "While the concept of competence refers to the ability to meet demands of a high degree of complexity, and implies complex action systems, the term knowledge applies to facts or ideas acquired by study, investigation, observation, or experience and refers to a body of information that is understood. The term skill is used to designate the ability to use one's knowledge with relative ease to perform relatively simple tasks" Rychen & Salganik (2000, p. 67).

In this sense, competencies are resources Le Boterf, (2000) or "knowledge in use" Malglaive (1994, p. 125) and for Anibal (2014, p.47), these "result from the conjugation of different knowledges learned in different ways and their use as resources in the realization of a particular action ". For Perrenoud (2003), competence is the added value of knowledge, the capacity to use it and solve problems, and is related to the process of mobilizing or activating resources, such as knowledge, capabilities and strategies in different types of situations.

In this sense, for Le Boterf (2000), competence is much more than a set of capabilities, knowledge, abilities and attitudes. All these elements, with different combinations, can generate different configurations since competence is "organized" as a system and because it is done in action. According to Roldão (2002), competence is knowledge in use that requires a certain amount of integration and mobilization of knowledge. Hence, it is important to underline that "competences can, and should be understood as a willingness to act and not merely as a set of atomized behaviours or action schemes" Avila (2005, 115). Thus, competence emerges when, faced with a situation, the individual is capable of adequately mobilizing knowledges prior to taking action, selecting them and integrating them in a way adjusted to the situation in question.

On the other hand, competences result from processes developed gradually, throughout the entire educational process and that are evaluated in different stages and contexts. "Acquiring competencies is viewed as an on-going, lifelong, learning process. "This process occurs in multiple settings. The settings and social institutions relevant for the development of competencies besides school are family, peers, work, political life, religious life, cultural life (...) It is also dependent on the quantity and quality of learning opportunities Rychen & Salganik (2000, p. 67).

Assuming that competences refer to specific learned activities, which range widely in terms of complexity, technical and specific skills (also call hard), have to do with the specificity of the knowledge and techniques of a given profession/given function. These can be acquired through education and technical training programs, through contexts of training or simulating of professional reality, like internships. Dortch, cited by Rok (2013), considers that internships allows a structured apprenticeship experience in a particular field of work. According to the author, the internship enables the student to apply the knowledge learned, in today's labour market, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In another perspective, Brandenburg (2014) says that the experiences with international context, like Erasmus mobility, participation on international events, focus on the opportunity to live a new experience, meet different people, promote language proficiency, develop soft skills and enhance their employability in international terms.

Hence, transversal competencies are usually acquired outside the educational context and are essential for the adaptation to different work environments. According to Villa & Poblete (2008), a dual position emerges, in other words, the competencies can be either seized throughout the academic course or in the professional market, both are considered highly relevant for the professional future of the students, both in terms of employability and citizenship. Transversal or soft competencies "can be triggered in a multiple number of situations, from a professional domain to a personal domain, and therefore, they are "transversal" or common, to different domains (by contrast, for example, specific or hard competencies are limited to a certain professional activity), recognizing their importance, and even the "fundamental" character, in different spheres of life "Ávila, (2005, p 123). Valente (2014) exemplifies this type of competence by referring to the knowledge and know-hows that allow, in particular, to demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively, the initiative and the entrepreneurial attitude, even when working for others, the availability to work and "will to volunteer help". Hence, we can conclude that "soft competencies have more to do with who we are than what we know" Robles (2012, p. 458). In addition, according to Coke (1999), practical or hard competencies can quickly become obsolete when facing sudden technological and social changes, so it will be important for organizations to invest in someone who has learned to manage their knowledge and who is better prepared to adapt to change. According to Valente (2014), these are aspects with increased value to companies.

1.2. The competencies in Hotel management

Cited by Brophy & Kiely (2002), Boam and Sparrow suggest that the two main factors that led to the rise of an approach by competencies in organizations were, on one hand, the large-scale failure of the programs of necessary changes about individual behaviour, and on the other hand, the increasing bond between employee skills and business performance. In recent years this business world has been

pressuring society about the development and creation of new skills in companies. "Standing out from this pressure are new technologies, concern for quality, greater flexibility and agility, the provision of resources, new competition agreements, the internationalization of business and the power of information" Brophy & Kiely (2002, p. 165). For Van der Klink, Boon, & Schlusmans (2007), the labour market, is characterized by an increasing unpredictability of the future and the associated uncertainty regarding the relevant skills. Brophy & Kiely (2002) describe skills as the glue that binds the organization as a whole, in a holistic view about people, purpose, processes, and performance.

Since the tourism industry is considered by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), the peace industry, tourist activity in general and hotel industry, in particular, are bound to promote the relationship between individuals, the provision of quality services to which the level of skills and training of its human resources plays a decisive role. In addition, tourism is an intensive work activity and, as such, training plays a decisive role in the preparation and qualification of the people involved in tourism and in the quality of tourism. Thus, according to Henriques (2005), the institutions of higher education have the responsibility to establish curricular programs that contribute to building profiles and competences that are adequate to the present and future needs of the labor market. However, for Baum (2002), tourism schools, traditionally focused on providing technical and scientific knowledge, have neglected the development of transversal competencies and skills. Chimutingiza, Mwando, & Kazembe (2012), referring specifically to Hotel Management, consider that graduates need a set of transversal competencies, namely, decision-making and problem-solving skills, teamwork, initiative and interpersonal skills, so that they can work effectively in the workplace. Baum (2002) argues that, historically, hospitality skills were mainly associated to technical requirements, and this was the basis for defining the curricula taught in different European institutions. However, the changes in the contemporary society and in the current labour market, where the impact of technologies, expectations and the current customer's typology of needs, provoked a reassessment of the role of technical and transversal skills in hospitality.

In this study, we adapted the typology used by the "Hotel Management Skillnet" project developed by Brophy & Kiely (2002)), in which, the competencies that are required of a hotel manager have been combined and grouped into several dimensions. Since "many skills are needed to perform more than one aspect of the profession" Brophy & Kiely (2002, p. 168), we consider nine main competencies (Brophy & Kiely's dimensions) - teamwork, effective communication, enthusiasm, strategic thinking, problem solving, customer service focus, leading for results, planning and organizing and financial awareness. Each competence comprises two examples of skills required by the education-training system and required for the job-work system, a hard skill and a soft skill (Table 1).

This systematization brings together the contributions of Brophy & Kiely (2002), on the dimensions of competencies required for hotel management as well as the contributions of Baum (2002), Benitone, et al. (2007), Hoffmann (1999), Robles (2012), Valente (2014) and Van der Klink, Boon, & Schlusmans (2007) as to the type of competencies required of a hotel management graduate.

Table 01. Required competencies for hotel management

Competencies	Hard Skill - example	Soft Skill- example
Teamwork (Work effectively with others to achieve shared goals)	Demonstrate technical knowledge and skills to raise the quality of service of a front-office team	Integrate any work team, in any type of hotel, regardless of its category
Effective communication (Appreciate communication needs to achieve results and stay motivated)	Attending clients and providing a service in at least two languages	Mastering information and communication technologies from the user's perspective
Enthusiasm (Being committed to your own role, team and business)	Adapt to the seasonality of the activity and comply with irregular work schedules	Define objectives and results to be achieved by the organization
Strategic thinking (Have a vision of the future about your department or business and communicate it to others, making sure the company is working towards that)	Identify future trends and needs of guests and customers	Be aware that the competitiveness of the sector forces constant updating
Problem solving (Serve calmly and effectively with difficulties and unforeseen situations)	Organize schedules, work shifts, holidays and employee vacations	Dealing with complaints and unsatisfied customers
Customer service focus (Concern about exceeding customer expectations. Make a strong and positive impression on customers)	Evaluate and promote guest and customer satisfaction	Analyze compliance with customer service standards by employees
Leading for results (Get the best of human resources. Encourage them to take responsibility for their own work)	Analyze and control the costs and revenues of hotel operation	Conduct "mystery client" audits to assess the quality of service provided
Planning and organizing (Planning to make sure things happen at the right time)	Mastering some of the specific hotel management software	Find new ways of accomplishing tasks by employees
Financial awareness (Stay alert and aware about the financial impact of your actions and the actions of others)	Elaborate and implement technical sheets of production and services for the food and beverage department	Make comparisons of rates and sales prices to customers, by the competition

2. Problem Statement

The competencies required to the higher education graduates is a relevant issue today as well as an important research subject (Anibal, 2014; Ávila, 2005; Beneitone, et al., 2007; Cabral-Cardoso, et al, 2006; Esteves, 2009; Le Boterf, 2000; 2002; Parente, 2004; Perrenoud, 2003; Roldão, 2002). However, it is still little explored in scientific research on the specific case of activities linked to hospitality management graduates (Baum, 2002; Brophy & Kiely, 2002; Gata et al, 2014; Robles, 2012, Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011).

3. Research Questions

For this study, we designed the following research question: How do hospitality management graduates face their competencies at the end of their higher education studies and at the present moment?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study has two major purposes: 1) to identify the level of self-confidence of the graduates about the competencies required by the labour-market at the end of their higher education studies and at the present moment; 2) to identify differences in graduates' perceptions, in these two moments, about their competencies and skills.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The participants are graduates in Hotel Management of six Portuguese public institutions of politecnical higher education, between 2006/2007 and 2013/2014 exceeds 1800, as can be seen in table 2. The number of respondents was 398, which represents 24.14% of the universe (Table 2). 219 are women and 179 are men; they are aged between 21 and 60, with an average age of 27 years old; almost all (388 – 97.5%) are Portuguese.

Table 02. Required competencies for hotel management

HEI	Graduates	%	Respondents	%
A	302	16,5	44	11,1
B	722	39,4	47	11,8
C	155	8,5	42	10,6
D	197	10,8	176	44,2
E	226	12,3	40	10,1
F	229	12,5	49	12,3
Total	1831	100	398	100

5.2. Data collection and analysis

This study, framed in a wider research that we are developing in our PhD thesis in Education, was based on a quantitative methodology. The study relied on an on-line survey research, applied to hospitality management graduates, between 7th of January and 6th of March of 2016. The data were statistically processed using the SPSS software and a descriptive analyses was done.

6. Findings

The results demonstrate that at the present time the professionals show levels of confidence in their competencies significantly higher than those at the end of their graduation. The self-confidence about soft

competencies is higher than the hard one. In global terms, that is, by analysing the set of hard skills and soft skills, graduates demonstrate a significant increase in their confidence levels (Table 3).

Table 03. Comparison of the self-confidence evidenced by the professionals in their skills at the end of the course and in present time

Competencies	At the end of the course		In present time		t	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Hard	3,25	0,76	3,89	0,62	-16,034	<0,001
Soft	3,42	0,76	4,11	0,58	-18,125	<0,001
Global	3,33	0,73	4,00	0,57	-17,646	<0,001

As shown in table 4, all competencies demonstrate an increase in the level of trust and among them, stand out the customer service focus and enthusiasm with higher values. Problem solving is the competence that has the highest increase in the level of confidence, among two moments. In all required competencies, the mean of level of trust is higher than 3 in a scale between 1 and 5. The highest level of trust is on customer service focus and the lowest is on the financial awareness. At the end of the course none competence have a mean up than level 4 but at the present time just the competencies Leading for results, planning and organising and financial awareness have lower than that level.

Table 04. Comparison of the self-confidence evidenced by the professionals in their competencies at the end of the course and in present time

Competencies	At the end of the course		In present time		t	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Teamwork	3,34	0,81	4,04	0,64	-15,759	<0,001
Customer service focus	3,65	0,76	4,34	0,60	-17,229	<0,001
Problem solving	3,18	0,87	4,05	0,68	-19,040	<0,001
Enthusiasm	3,43	0,82	4,16	0,66	-17,176	<0,001
Leading for results	3,29	0,82	3,98	0,69	-16,102	<0,001
Effective communication	3,37	0,74	4,00	0,59	-16,848	<0,001
Planning and organising	3,28	0,80	3,79	0,70	-11,990	<0,001
Financial awareness	3,08	0,87	3,60	0,82	-11,749	<0,001
Strategic thinking	3,36	0,78	4,05	0,62	-17,050	<0,001

Internships are significant contexts of learning, so it is important to analyze the influence of them on the self-confidence of the graduates at the end of their course. It was expected that the graduates with experiences of internships (curricular or extracurricular) during their higher education training would reveal higher levels of trust in their competencies, when compared to those who did not have such experience. The results show that paradoxically, in present time, all levels of confidence had a higher level for the respondents who had no experience of internship (Table 5).

Table 05. Graduates levels of confidence in their competencies according to the learning experience in the context of internship, at the moment they finished their course

Competencies	Curricular Internship		Extracurricular and Curricular Internship		None	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Hard	3,25	0,72	3,12	0,80	3,77	0,64
Soft	3,42	0,72	3,31	0,84	3,92	0,62
Teamwork	3,37	0,78	3,19	0,88	3,83	0,65
Customer service focus	3,68	0,70	3,53	0,87	4,01	0,60
Problem solving	3,18	0,83	3,02	0,89	3,88	0,72
Enthusiasm	3,42	0,76	3,34	0,93	3,86	0,61
Leading for results	3,29	0,79	3,19	0,87	3,82	0,65
Effective communication	3,36	0,70	3,28	0,79	3,80	0,64
Planning and organising	3,27	0,77	3,16	0,84	3,79	0,74
Financial awareness	3,07	0,85	2,95	0,87	3,74	0,77
Strategic thinking	3,36	0,73	3,27	0,84	3,86	0,66

At the end of their course, the students who worked during the last year of their course demonstrated a higher level of confidence in their competencies and amongst them the lowest confidence level is in the financial awareness and planning and organization dimension meanwhile the highest level is in customer service focus (Table 6).

Table 06. Graduates confidence level in their competencies according to their status as student-worker or solely student

Competencies	Student-Work		Student	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Hard	3,46	0,79	3,19	0,74
Soft	3,54	0,85	3,39	0,73
Teamwork	3,46	0,86	3,31	0,80
Customer service focus	3,76	0,79	3,62	0,76
Problem solving	3,49	0,94	3,10	0,83
Enthusiasm	3,54	0,88	3,40	0,80
Leading for results	3,49	0,87	3,24	0,79
Effective communication	3,47	0,74	3,34	0,74
Planning and organising	3,39	0,89	3,25	0,78
Financial awareness	3,33	0,92	3,01	0,85
Strategic thinking	3,54	0,87	3,32	0,75

Experiences in international contexts are, also, significant contexts of learning and the graduates who had those demonstrate lower levels of confidence when they have finished their course, but at present time they are the ones with the highest levels of confidence in the various dimensions of competencies required. The financial awareness competence has the lowest level of confidence

demonstrated by graduates and customer service focus is the one that demonstrates the greatest level of confidence in both moments (Table 7).

Table 07. Graduates level of confidence in their competencies according to their participation in international activities, in each moment

Competencies	At the end of the course				At the time of the answer			
	With international experience		Without international experience		With international experience		Without international experience	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	Mean	S.D.	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Hard	3,20	0,78	3,27	0,74	3,95	0,51	3,86	0,67
Soft	3,38	0,78	3,44	0,75	4,18	0,46	4,06	0,63
Teamwork	3,35	0,84	3,33	0,80	4,17	0,53	3,98	0,69
Customer service focus	3,60	0,82	3,68	0,73	4,42	0,47	4,30	0,66
Problem solving	3,08	0,89	3,24	0,85	4,09	0,58	4,02	0,73
Enthusiasm	3,41	0,82	3,44	0,83	4,23	0,51	4,11	0,69
Leading for results	3,23	0,88	3,32	0,78	4,05	0,64	3,94	0,72
Effective communication	3,35	0,76	3,38	0,73	4,05	0,50	3,98	0,64
Planning and organising	3,28	0,83	3,27	0,79	3,90	0,59	3,74	0,75
Financial awareness	2,99	0,89	3,13	0,86	3,60	0,78	3,60	0,84
Strategic thinking	3,31	0,80	3,39	0,76	4,10	0,55	4,02	0,65

7. Conclusion

Graduates confidence levels in the various competencies required by the labour market is higher at the present time compared to when the graduates finished their course. The soft competencies are those with higher level of self-confidence.

At present time the level of confidence is higher than 4 in all the required competencies. Customer service focus, effective communication and problem solving are those competencies that reveal highest increase at the level of self-confidence at this moment.

Professional experience demonstrates being a context of development of confidence level by the graduates, which is in line with the postulated by Roldão (2002), Perrenoud, (2003) and Rychen & Salganik (2000).

Like the studies by Beneitone, et al. (2007), Rok (2013) and Villa & Poblete (2008), the internships are contexts of learning however, and paradoxically those who did not participate in such experiences demonstrated higher levels of confidence in their competencies. This results need further research in order to understand the reason of that.

At the same time, graduates with mobility experiences and experiences in international contexts demonstrate higher levels of confidence, at the present time, compared to those who did not have it during their training course, in accordance of Brandenburg (2014), specifically in relation to soft competencies,

which agrees with Chimutingiza, Mwando, & Kazembe (2012) and Valente (2014), although at the end of their course they had a lower level of self-confidence in their competencies.

Graduates who had the status of worker-student during the last year of graduation are those who demonstrate a superior level of confidence in all competencies and at the both analysed moments.

Globally, soft competencies are considered the most required and those that the graduates demonstrate to have a superior level of confidence in the present time, compared to the moment of the end of its course, this fact complies with what was defended by (Baum, 2002), who argues that the fundamental competencies in hospitality are the transversal ones, since techniques can quickly become obsolete.

As in the Skillnet project, developed by Brophy & Kiely (2002), all competencies considered and required by the labour market have been considered relevant by graduates, although the competence of financial awareness is the one where confidence levels are low at the present time and at the end of the hospitality management degree.

This research shows, also, that the competencies required to the labour market of hospitality management are of great diversity and the graduates consider all of them with positive self-confidence in the end of their course and with highest level of confidence at present time.

The diverse contexts of learning seem to promote a level of greater confidence on the graduates. The professional experience is the context of greater enrichment, which is in agreement with the postulate by Rychen & Salganik (2000).

Additionally, this research is important, also, for the field of higher education because they can improve those competencies in their curricula and promote them for the future graduates.

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