

Redesigning the BSc. in tourism of HES-SO Valais-Wallis to address the future challenges of the touristic economy

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Abstract

Since 2018, the University of Applied Sciences HES-SO Valais Wallis has been working on the development of a new undergraduate degree in tourism with professional fields of competency as its main structuring principle. Its design relies on competency-based learning outcomes, an integrated assessment strategy, a digital portfolio of competencies, the embedment of soft skills throughout the program and the adoption of applied summative assessments in third-year modules.

1 Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industry worldwide and there is no sign this trend will change anytime soon (OECD, 2018). Tourism is also highly exposed to disruption and digitalization and thus in constant transformation. Tourism education has therefore to embrace this evolution in order to remain relevant (Deloitte, 2018; Rennfors, 2017; UNWTO, 2019; WEF, 2018). In this context, the University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland initiated in 2018 the development of a new competency-based bachelor's degree in tourism that is to be offered for the first time in September 2020.

The question leading this development has been how to design a curriculum enabling students to develop the competencies required to be competent as future tourism professionals while also allowing them to construct their profile and expertise based on their motivations and interests.

If the approach of structuring degrees around competencies in order to improve the employability of graduates is well covered in the literature, its application to specific professional fields like tourism is far less discussed (Blömeke, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Kuhn, & Fege, 2013; Cecil & Krohn, 2012; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016). The aim of our institution was therefore to document the development of this new curriculum, the challenges encountered along the way and the application of key principles guiding this development. The overall approach for defining this new curriculum has been co-creative by involving internal and external stakeholders at different stages of its design.

In order to prepare our graduates for the tourism industry of tomorrow, profiles of future tourism professionals and fields of competency were defined based on data collected by survey between June and July 2018. This survey was distributed to alumni as well as a panel of around 60 participants composed of Swiss and international tourism scholars, industry professionals and higher education experts. These profiles and fields of competencies would become the backbones of the new program. The integration of these fields of competency in the curriculum has been coordinated by both module and competency leaders working together to insure consistency across the degree. The 13 fields of competency incorporated into the new program as well as the approach and principles adopted to undertake its development are presented next.

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2 Developmental approach and key structuring principles

The mission of a university of applied sciences is to support students in developing professional competencies in order to ensure high employability and professional success. Moreover, it strives to maintain a close relationship with the industry by undertaking applied research and offering study programs closely responding to the needs of the labor market.

The development of a new bachelor program in tourism adhered closely to this mission by relying on 13 fields of competency, co-defined by scholars and industry professionals, and around which modules and learning outcomes have been designed. As the institution would for the first time develop a program around competencies, a few principles were adopted to guide this process and are presented next.

2.1 Defining competency-based learning outcomes

The 13 fields of competency that would be developed throughout the new program are:

- Tourism
- Finance
- Digitalization
- Marketing
- Management
- Communication
- Sustainability
- Languages
- Entrepreneurship
- Soft skills (emotional intelligence- leadership-cognitive flexibility)
- Polity and society

Based on these 13 fields of competency, a designated group of professors and academic staff representatives defined module titles and their respective ECTS credit allocation using data on skills and activities collected by survey. They also determined the fields of competency to be included in each module. The result of this work indicated for each module what fields of competency to be included, their respective weight and the type of learning to provide (acquisition / application / analysis & creation) as per the example below:

Introduction to Management (6 ECTS)

Fields of competency developed:

- Management (Mgt) 40%
- Soft Skills (Ss) 40%
- Digitalization (D) 10%
- Sustainability (S) 10%

Type of learning:

- Acquisition 95%
- Application 5%

The next design phase involved the nomination of module and competency leaders who would lead the elaboration of learning outcomes, module descriptions, assessment strategy and later on schemes of work. The main challenge of this phase would be to move away from subject-oriented learning outcomes to instead formulate them as components of competencies to be acquired and assessed. For the module *Introduction to Management* exemplified above, it resulted in the following learning outcomes:

- Mgt1: Understand the role of management in a corporate system.
- Mgt2: Acquire the basic concepts of the functional structures of a corporate system.
- Mgt3: Understand the market concept in relation to the company, the competition and the suppliers.
- Mgt4: Classify management approaches based on different business models.
- Ss1: Know the main concepts and ideas related to terms such as multiple intelligences, knowledge, know-how, social competence and skills.

- Ss2: Know the personality types and the challenges and principles related to group dynamics.
- Ss3: Follow a personal program to develop a social competence related skill using the e-portfolio.
- D1: Describe the impact of the digital transformation on corporate management.
- S1: Define the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

As learning outcomes were progressively defined, a matrix of learning outcomes was generated in order to insure their complementarity per semester of study (horizontal coherency) as well as throughout the program (vertical coherency). This matrix would become essential to keep track of how the 13 fields of competency were incorporated across modules, to review their complementarity and to avoid any overlap or duplication.

2.2 Adopting an integrated assessment strategy

Another principle structuring the design of the program was the adoption of an integrated assessment strategy where in each module all competency-based learning outcomes would be incorporated into a unique assessment. Here as well, the challenge was to move away from an assessment per subject or theme to instead assess how competencies would have been developed in combination with each other in a module.

2.3 Implementing an E-portfolio of competencies

As the purpose of the program is to develop professional competencies, keeping track of how students are acquiring and mastering them is essential. Therefore, new students will be introduced to a digital platform entitled e-portfolio that will enable them to monitor and reflect upon the development of their competencies while enrolled in the program. The e-portfolio will also serve as a tool for faculty to assess this development (see in 2.1 learning outcome Ss3 as example).

2.4 Developing soft skills and linguistic flexibility

The importance of soft skills and languages for tourism professionals is undeniable (Rennfors, 2017; UNWTO, 2019). The presence of soft skills in the program has therefore been emphasized and articulated around three dimensions: emotional intelligence, leadership and cognitive flexibility. These dimensions have been translated into learning outcomes embedded in a series of modules throughout the program. As the program would be delivered in 3 languages (French/German/English), cognitive flexibility was coupled with linguistic flexibility to design language modules in which students of different mother tongues would be working together on tasks specifically defined to practice and assess such skills.

2.5 Embedding applied projects and external collaborations

While the program it replaces had an internship semester, the new bachelor's degree in tourism does not and will instead embed as assessments applied projects tied to external private or public partnerships in all third-year modules. This principle has been adopted to allow a more rigorous supervision of how competencies are developed in a professional context. It will also better support students' learning of how to analyze and create within the defined framework of an applied project using skills acquired during their studies.

3 Conclusion

As mentioned in introduction, the new undergraduate program in tourism is to welcome its first students in September 2020. To ensure its successful implementation, module and

competency leaders will play an essential role in listening to students and peers during the semesters to come. Through its design and the principles it relies upon, this new program represents an important change in how faculty approach their teaching, in how students should be assessed and in how these students will learn and grow. While it will be regularly reviewed, the outcome of this process will ultimately with students graduating and starting their career in the tourism industry. Their level of professional success as well as their feedback to our institution will then become precious indicators of the relevancy of our new degree.

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