

# **EMPLOYABILITY: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEPTION OF TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS AND TOURISM GRADUATES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of employability plays a significant emphasis in the current context of higher education, considering the high numbers of unemployed graduates and the current socioeconomic situation of Portugal. This paper presents the findings of a study conducted considering higher education students and graduates in the field of Tourism towards the concept of employability. Results give a set of views that allows understanding the knowledge or lack of it of this dimension for individuals whose entry into the labor market is a future reality, in the case of students, or a pressing issue in the graduates' situation. It also provides information on the approach to this concept as training in tourism is concerned and consequently the preparation of professionals for entering the labor market. Using the content analysis technique, and from data collected in the academic year 2011/12 and 2012/13, the results show that the concept of employability is understood by students as a synonym of jobs, serving mostly issues related to entering the labor market rather than the dynamics of the market itself. For graduates, this dimension is associated with concepts such as entrepreneurship, innovation, responsibility and experience, revealing a more comprehensive and knowledgeable of the main requirements imposed by the labor market. This study reflects on the relevance of the dimension of employability in the context of higher education, particularly from the immediate perception of its users and considering the improvement of professional qualification in the Tourism sector.

## **KEYWORDS**

Employability, Higher Education, Tourism, Qualitative Analysis

## **1. Introduction**

Tourism has developed rapidly in Portugal, due to its abundant resources linked mainly to sun and sea and it has matured into an industry of a considerable scale. This has pushed forward an increasing number of study programmes in Tourism at Higher Education Institutions, answering directly to the need of qualifying human resources for this sector. Characterized by an increasing competitiveness among countries, the Tourism industry demands skilled human resources that may address challenges that come with economic, socio-cultural, political and environmental development of tourist destinations (Zagonari, 2009).

The number of Tourism students and graduates has increased considerably and if in the past graduates faced no problems when trying to enter in the labour market compared to unskilled workers, finding employment is now more difficult even in the Tourism sector (OECD, 2006).

Employability and being employable have gathered students, graduates and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) attention and enhancing employability skills is now a major concern and an important aim of these institutions. In fact, in order to follow political pressures and agenda, HEIs have been adapting strategies that account for a better preparation of graduates for the world of work (Little, 2001).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to report on a study of Portuguese students and graduates' perceptions of employability, considering these two perspectives that may provide insights for future strategic planning regarding the enhancement of employability skills in Tourism programmes.

## **2. Employability**

A brief overview of the concept of employability leads us straight forward to the need to distinguish it from the concept of employment. Employability is not just about getting a job, it is a continuing process which goes beyond the number of graduates that have "graduate-level" jobs six months post-graduation, which is a variable commonly used to judge the performance of HEIs (Hillage & Pollard, 1998) regarding employability issues.

The distinction of the two has been a source of confusion, particularly when it comes to the interpretation of data resulting from institutional practices (Eurico, 2011). According to Hillage & Pollard (1998) the concept of employability is based on the ability to adapt to recent professional needs and dynamics of new labour markets. It means not only getting a job, but also maintaining it, as well as obtaining new employment if needed. It means meeting the needs of the market self-sufficiently, promoting one's own knowledge, skills and attitudes as key factors for being employable (Rothwell *et al.*, 2009).

Thus, the term alludes to the knowledge, skills and attitudes of each individual and how he/she uses them to meet the needs of the labor market, promoting sustainable employment.

### **2.1. Employability and the Educational Agenda**

The concept of employability is recent within the scientific discussion and its relationship with the HEIs has been reinforced due to several aspects that have to do, firstly, with the need for a reorientation of this educational level for those which are the actual needs of the current job market, secondly with the fact that employability has become a key feature of the Bologna process, thirdly with governments' demands for including employability issues on Higher Education (HE) curricula and fourthly with the increasing number of unemployed graduates (Harvey *et al.*, 2002; Dam, 2004; Schomburg & Teichler, 2006; Mestre, 2012).

HEIs have therefore endeavor to respond assertively to these issues as a way of projecting their image and prestige in training professionals who have the characteristics that employers look for and can therefore enter with less difficulty in the labor market. By doing this, HEIs are reinforcing their institutional image as far as future students are concerned, as they will be recognized by producing graduates who are fully equipped to achieve the highest personal and professional standards, and are able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout their life (Yorke, 2004).

Moreover, this is also a way to encourage and respond to the concept of lifelong learning, perspective put forward by the guidelines of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) since 1996. A set of challenges are launched

within these guidelines that enhance the individuals' skills for a rapidly changing society, where a continuous updating of knowledge, building a career, mobility and internationalization of professional careers, adaptability and flexibility requirements, among other variables constitute the current professional scenario that young graduates have to face (Crossman & Clark , 2010).

The issue of employability thus gains considerable importance for the Educational Agenda, particularly in countries, as it is the Portugal case, where being graduated no longer represents being employable or simply getting a job.

### **3. Employability attributes**

The concept of employability, as discussed previously, is reflected in the context of HE by a set of attributes that can be enhanced and encouraged to properly fit the professional context. The promotion/development of specific skills related directly to specific jobs' needs intersected with communication, team, leadership, innovation and adaptation to change skills are pointed out as key features for the development of employability (MCES, 2005).

Literature review made it possible to identify different approaches with regard to the concepts of attributes and employability skills. In some studies generic skills are identified to refer to transferable skills independent of particular sectors or occupational organizations that contribute to overall employability of the individual increasing their ability to adapt, learn and work independently (CDELL, 2007). However, a variety of other names such as key skills, core competencies/skills, transferable skills, employability skills, functional skills and business skills are also found. According to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2003), the terms used to refer to generic skills vary across countries presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Terms used in several countries to describe the generic skills

Countries	Terms used in several countries to describe the generic skills
United Kingdom	Base/nuclear skills, key skills, common competencies
New Zealand	Essential Skills
Australia	Key skills, employability skills, generic skills
Canada	Employability skills
USA	Basic skills, required skills; Knowledge of the workplace
Singapore	Skills that encourage critical sense
France	Transferable skills
Germany	Key qualifications
Switzerland	Transdisciplinary goals
Denmark	Qualifications independent from the process

**Source:** National center for vocational *Education Research (2003)*

The understanding of generic skills has been developed in a systematic way in order to better understand and explore the field of employability, allowing categorizing and classifying procedures. Table 2 gathers information on skills and respective components identified in the majority of the studies conducted primarily in North America, Australia and Europe (particularly the UK), regions that have been evidenced in the research of this topic.

**Table 2.** Skills and employability components according to the literature review

Skills types	Examples of components
Fundamental Skills	Literacy, numeracy, technological skills
People related Skills	Communication skills, interpersonal skills, influence competence, negotiation skills, teamwork skills, customer service skills and leadership competencies
Conceptualization and thinking/ reflection skills	Information management, problem solving, organizational and planning skills, learning skills, innovative, creative and reflective thinking skills
Personal skills and attributes	Be enthusiastic, adaptable, motivated, reliable, responsible, honest, resourceful, committed, loyal, flexible, well presented, sensitive, able to manage one's time and handle pressure
Skills related with the labor market	Innovation skills, entrepreneurial skills, commercial and business awareness
Community related skills	Citizenship skills

**Font:** CDELL (2007)

From the information gathered in Table 3, there is a plurality of aspects leading to employability which, according to different authors (Bowden et al., 2000, Hager & Holland, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009), enlarge it into a broader concept that includes skills,

concepts related to personal traits, values, individual capabilities, among other determinants for the formation of employable individuals.

Thus, the concept of employability attributes in the HE framework is understood as “the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, consequently, shape the contribution they are able to make to their profession and as a citizen” (Bowden *et al.*, 2000: 1). This perspective suggests an holistic approach of employability that cover more general and also more specific aspects in the process of training for employability.

Table 3 thus emerges as a proposal for identifying employability attributes, considering literature review and that attempt to encompass various concepts mentioned above.

**Table 3:** Employability attributes based on literature review

Literature review	Attributes	
	Categories	Itens
ACCI/BCA (2002) Hager & Holland (2006) Harvey (2010) Hincliffe (2006)	Learning	- Managing own learning - Having enthusiasm for ongoing learning - Being willing to learn in any setting – on and off the job - Being open to new ideas and techniques - Being prepared to invest time and effort in learning new skills - Being prepared to interact in different cultural contexts - Being able to conduct research
Kohler (2004) UKCES (2009)	Self-management	- Having a personal vision and goals - Evaluating and monitoring own performance - Having knowledge and confidence in own ideas and vision - Articulating own ideas and vision - Taking responsibility
Harvey (2001) Kiniven e Numi (2007) Knight & Yorke (2003) Little (2001) Mason et al. (2009)	Communication	- literacy - numeracy - Speaking clearly and directly - Writing to the needs of the audience - Negotiating responsively - Empathising - auto-promoting skills - Persuading effectively - Establishing and using networks - Being assertive - Sharing information - Speaking and writing in languages other than Portuguese - Creating CV and portfolios
Nicolescu & Pun (2009) Saraiva et al. (2008) UKCES (2009)	Initiative and enterprise	- Adapting to new situations - Developing a strategic, creative, long-term vision - Being creative - Translating ideas into action - Generating a range of options - Initiating innovative solutions - Identifying opportunities not obvious to others
Watts & Van Esbroeck (2000) Wilton (2008) Yorke (2004)	Organizing	- Managing time and priorities – setting timelines, coordinating tasks for self and with others - Taking initiative and making decisions - Allocating people and other resources to tasks - Planning the use of resources including time management - Being methodic and organized - Self-discipline
	Personal	- adaptability - personal presentation - balanced attitude to work and home life - positive self-esteem - resistance to pressure - commitment - reliability - creativity - motivation - engagement - honesty and integrity - imagination - loyalty - resilience - concentration - pontuality - intellectual seriousness - common sense - sense of humour - lidership
	Problem solving	- Developing creative, innovative solutions - Showing independence and initiative in identifying problems and solving them - Applying problem-solving strategies across a range of areas - Defining priorities - Solving problems in teams - Developing practical solutions
	Technology	- Having a range of basic IT skills - Applying IT as a management tool - Using IT to organise data

		- Being willing to learn new IT skills - Having the occupational health and safety knowledge to apply technology - Having the appropriate physical capacity
	Teamwork	Working with people of different ages, gender, race, religion or political persuasion - Working as an individual and as a member of a team - Applying teamwork skills to a range of situations, eg. Futures planning, crisis problem solving - Identifying the strengths of team members - Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback
	Values	- integrity - perseverance - ethics - tolerance

**Source:** Authors

The analysis of Table 3 allows us to elect ten major areas of categorization of the attributes of employability, which are related to communication issues, personal characteristics, emotional and social needs of individuals (personal values , self-management), new technologies, the motivation for training (learning) and the performance of the employee in the job context (problem solving , teamwork, initiative and entrepreneurship, learning, organization) .

For each of these areas components have been pointed out that that must be addressed in an holistic conception of the education for employability. This intensive survey is not finished, as the dynamics of the markets as well as the requirements of new professional profiles must be updated to train students so that they may respond to the actual needs of the market.

#### **4. Methodology**

After detailed secondary research, a questionnaire was developed. The target population consists of third year students and graduates Tourism education of a Portuguese HEI. The population of the study was therefore composed entirely by all the third year Tourism students in 2012\_2013 school year and all the Tourism graduates of the HEI. The sample comprised a random selection of students and graduates of Tourism programmes of a Portuguese HEI and was defined using the most conservative estimate for a single proportion (0.5), a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5,6% for graduates and 8,8% for students.

Students answered the questionnaire on April 14, 2011 during class time and graduates received the questionnaire by e-mail in this same day via online website EncuestaFacil and a period of 3 months was given to answer it. This study considers data generated from a questionnaire completed by 121 Tourism students and 194 Tourism graduates, a

response rate of 43,4% of the target population from Tourism students and 20,1% from the Tourism graduates.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part focuses on the socio-economic characteristics of respondents, their educational background and work experiences. In graduates survey, this part is complemented by a set of questions that can characterize what happened to each respondent in professional (access to employment, conducting professional training) and academic terms (attending other study programmes such as post graduating, MSc and Ph.D), after completing his/her degree in the HEI in question. The second part is about the reasons for choosing the degree and HEI attended, as well as their assessment of a set of items related to the factors that influenced their choices. We used descriptive statistics to address socio-economic data that characterize the two samples. Finally, the last section aims to perceive the contribution of the HEI and course chosen in terms of training for employability of its students and graduates. It includes an open-ended question about the concept of employability which will be treated and analyzed in depth in the next topic. All the questions were adjusted from similar research developed in Eurico & Oliveira (2012). The privacy of this data was closely guarded.

This research adopted a qualitative approach as this study focuses exclusively on the responses to the open questions about five words/expressions that the respondents associated to the concept of employability. In total, we analyzed 881 responses from the graduates' sample and 581 of the students' sample, corresponding to a response rate of 90.8% and 84%, respectively.

The treatment and analysis of this qualitative data was based on the quasi-statistics method (Dey, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2003), a quantitative solution for the treatment of a large number of summary data, based on estimatives of words/expressions relative frequencies, mainly used to support categories. In terms of categorization, we followed the scheme of organization and categorization/codification of qualitative data proposed by Bogdan & Bilken (1994) and explained and justified in Eurico & Oliveira (2012).



## 5. Results and discussion

### 5.1. Socio-demographic characterization of the interviewees

The main socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 4. Both samples show a larger number of responses from female respondents, respectively 67.8% and 75.3% for the final year students and graduates. In terms of age, students are mostly between 20 and 23 years (70.3%) and graduates, more than 25 years (43.8%). Analyzing the two samples, respondents' main district of origin is Leiria, which is the district where it is located the HEI in focus. The other two districts with the highest concentration of responses represent the entire region surrounding the Leiria district showing the proximity as a determining factor in the choice of HEI in question and their training offer.

**Table 4:** Socio-demographic profile of interviewees

	Students		Graduates	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Female	82	67,8	146	75,3
Male	39	32,2	48	24,7
Age				
< 20 years	8	6,6	-	-
20 years to 23 years	85	70,3	65	33,5
23 years to 25 years	13	10,7	44	22,7
> 25 years	15	12,4	85	43,8
Origin (by district)				
Leiria	51	42,1	79	40,7
Lisboa	36	29,8	53	27,3
Santarém	10	8,3	17	8,76
Others	24	19,8	45	23,2

**Source:** Authors

In both samples, the distribution of respondents for each course matches with the courses with the highest number of vacancies and also the entrance rate in the attended HEI, ie, Tourism and Hotel Management and Tourism. It's also important to observe that the degree of Tourism and Sea corresponds to the previous name of the current degree of Tourism, change that occurred in (mention year) justifying the fact that there aren't respondents in the sample of final year students of this degree (table 5). The chosen course was the 1<sup>st</sup> option for 71.9% of the sample of students and 38.7% for the graduates. Regarding their performance of internships during the three years of the course the percentages are 39.7% for students and 54.1% for graduates. Moreover, data showed that the average grade of the degree finalization, relative to the graduates sample is approximately 14,7 values.

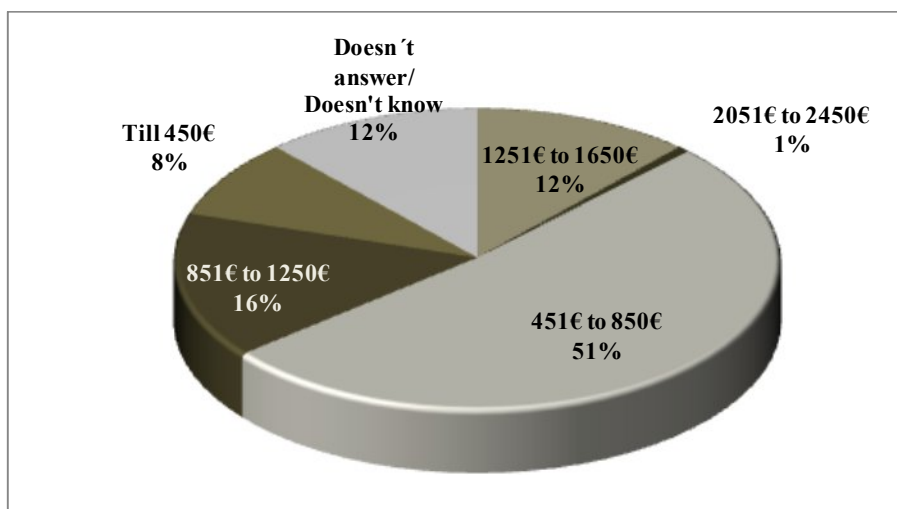
**Table 5:** Samples' characterization according to the attended degree

Course Degree	Students		Graduates	
	n	%	n	%
Tourism Recreation	17	14,1	4	2,1
Leisure Management and Business Tourism	18	14,9	10	5,2
<b>Tourism and Hotel Management</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>22,3</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>46,4</b>
Marketing for tourism	6	5,0	25	12,9
Marketing for tourism – Evening classes	10	8,3	11	5,7
Restaurant Industry and Catering	15	12,4	20	10,3
<b>Tourism</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>23,1</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>16,5</b>
Tourism and Sea	-	-	2	1,0

**Source:** Authors

Some of the data that exclusively characterize the condition of graduates' sample and their relationship to the labor market shows that 71.1% (138) are employed. Regarding the 56 (28.9%) who are unemployed, 17 were never employed. With regard to current (or last) job we intended to assess if this was related with the degree area of study. Eliminating non-respondents (13) and those who have never been employed (17), more than half of the respondents (51.5%) answered "Yes" and 32.9% answered "No". Those who work in the degree's area of study are mainly in the hospitality sector (42 responses) and restaurant (26 responses). From the point of view of earned income (Figure 1), more than half of the respondents (51%) answered to this question, 59% of them earn up to € 850 and 29% above € 850.

**Figure 1:** Graduates Individual Net Income (monthly), n=153

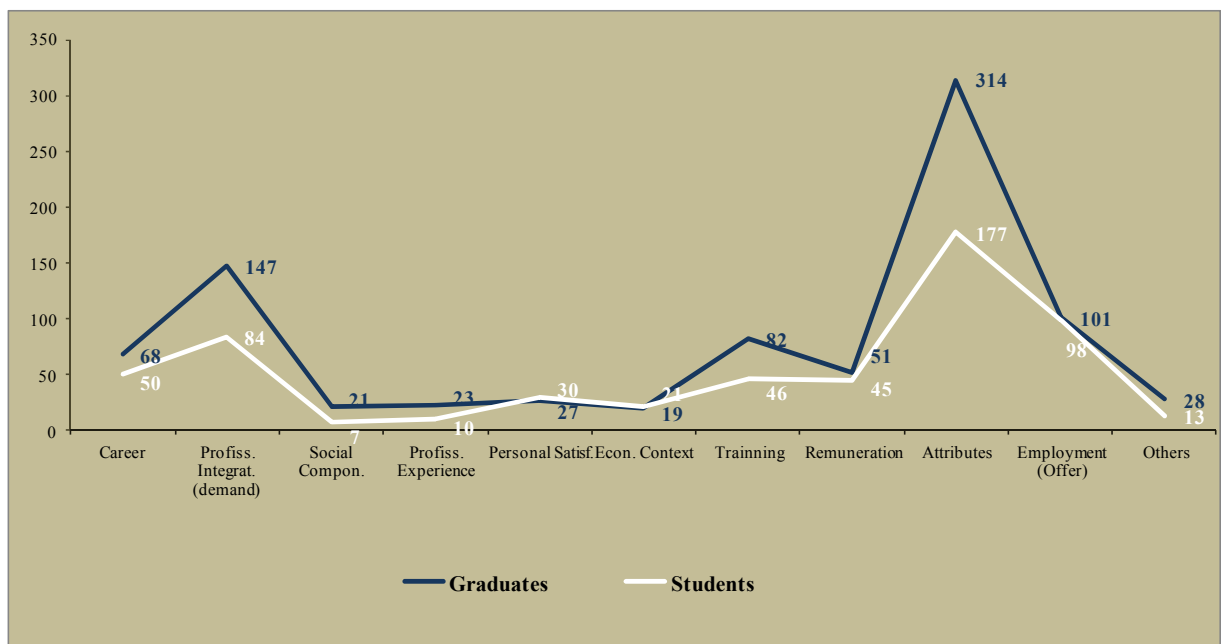


**Source:** Authors

## 5.2. Students' and graduates' perception of employability

In this context the responses were distributed through the system of 11 categories (Figure 2): one directly related to employability attributes (ATTRIBUTES). Eight refer to dimensions related to work context and not specifically to training for employability (PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION - DEMAND, SOCIAL COMPONENT, PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, PERSONAL SATISFACTION; ECONOMIC CONTEXT; TRAINING; REMUNERATION, EMPLOYMENT - OFFER), one other, relates to the notion of CAREER, meaning the path students and graduates are willing to go through in the professional field, giving it mostly a notion of continuity, progression and stability, and finally the category OTHER (Eurico & Oliveira, 2002).

**Figure 2:** Perception of employability - Responses to the open question, both by students and graduates



Source: Authors

The frequency distribution of responses for students and graduates' understanding of employability is statistically very similar. The exception is verified in the second category with the highest number of responses, which in the case of final year students was EMPLOYMENT and in the case of graduates was PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION. However, if we look at all the words and expressions that make up each category of Figure 2, there are significant differences in the understanding that each sample shows towards the concept of employability and categories that explain it.

For the category CAREER, graduates present expressions that focus more practical issues and resulting from experience. Graduates show a more critical point of view and closest to the difficulties of those already working. Both samples have similar answers regarding the training of management skills, strategy and continuous progression. Words like "Future" and "Success" are the most frequently mentioned by both groups.

As for the category PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION, it includes aspects related to the respondents' integration in the labor market, revealing firstly concerns in terms of acceptability, competition, capacity and facility of integration and secondly the recognition of the possibility of creating their own job which entails concerns in terms of choices, the challenges and the increasing openness of the market to this reality. In this case, the differences between the two samples highlight graduates' recognition of the difficulties that characterize getting into the labor market.

Both emphasize the importance of "Innovation" and "Entrepreneurship" stressing the current dynamics of the labor market and policies to encourage self-employment. The training received at these two components are visible here. The real knowledge of the requirements that arise from the process of labor market integration justifies the response rates of graduates which are relatively higher in words like "Dynamic" (5 answers from graduates and 1 answer from students), "Competitiveness" (6 opposite to 1) and "Practice/Technical preparation/Qualification" (15 opposite to 1).

The categories SOCIAL COMPONENT and PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE have an incidence of responses very similar in both samples. In the case of SOCIAL COMPONENT, the answers show an association of employability to the quality of life and interpersonal relationships that the work context allows to develop, either in the perspective of socialization and considering the inter-professional relationships. In the PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, the responses are mainly expressed with the word "Experience" and its importance to get into the labor market.

In the category PERSONAL SATISFACTION, the students' expressions are placed in terms of "Future" and what is still unknown, revealing expectations ("Dream", "Success") and desires ("satisfaction / accomplishment / achievement" and "Meet

purpose"). The graduates are more pragmatic and expressions such as "Happiness," "Life," "Personal Enhancement" are presented.

The categories ECONOMIC CONTEXT, REMUNERATION and EMPLOYMENT display very similar perspectives in the two samples, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The responses reflect a pessimistic and negative attitude regarding the economic environment and the direct consequences of it as far as the [lack of] jobs is concerned and the fragility of remuneration issues. There are several expressions that reflect the difficult conditions associated with these themes, such as: "Lack of opportunities", "Precarious", "Temporary work", "Hard", "Low wages", "Emigration" and "Uncertainty".

Regarding TRAINING, the quantitative difference between the responses of graduates and students is quite clear and can also be observed in the diversity of expressions used by graduates, highlighting the recognition and importance they attach to this category. This one is clearly valued by the graduates, possibly due to the longer time period that has passed since they left the HEI and also due to training requirements that are imposed by the market. Expressions like "Expertise", "Training", "learning", "Internships" and "Languages" are some of the most frequent answers given by graduates.

The category ATRIBUTTES is the one with the highest frequency of responses for the two samples. A total of 85 different words/expressions were given by the respondents (29 of them were presented by both groups of respondents). The word with the highest rate of responses for both samples is "Skill(s)." Regarding the students' sample, 'Creativity' is the word that gets the second highest number of responses, which can be read as a reaction to today's society, that values those who manage to be different/original. On the other hand, graduates indicate characteristics that result from the professional performance/experience, such as "Responsibility", "Adaptability", "professionalism" and "Capacities", attributes required by those who want to be employable in a competitive way.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

The perception of employability for both graduates and students is directly related to the issues of getting into the labor market and to the specific attributes of those already working in it. Furthermore, there is a secundarization of aspects related with the social component, the professional experience, the individual satisfaction and the economic context when analyzed in the employability perspective. These results reveal a visible closeness between the two groups of respondents - students and graduates - reflecting a direct association between employability and getting a job.

Respondents' employability perception is quite different from that presented in the literature review and reflects a way of being congruent with the social parameters in which they belong. In fact, the association of career to a job for life, with no intention for changing or being proactive towards continuous learning is still the paradigm of the respondents. These results cause some surprise since they do not represent the reality of the labor market, particularly in the tourism industry, considering its inherent demands and dynamics and the new profiles impose to tourism professionals.

These results represent guidelines for HEI future actions with regard to training programs for employability since the respondents' answers reveal a considerable distance from the holistic approach that this same concept should have. Part of the responsibility of institutions is to update the provided training, contributing to inform and educate individuals with more realistic views and closer to the actual labor market. They should be prepared to face the impositions placed at the internationalization level, the knowledge of foreign languages, new technologies applied to the Tourism industry and mobility. When analyzing all the obtained results, it's that those aspects were of undervalued revealing the lack of knowledge of the labor market reality and its new trends and tendencies.

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