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## Higher education and the sustainable tourism pedagogy: Are tourism students ready to lead change in the post pandemic era?

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### ABSTRACT

The present context of COVID19 pandemics has highlighted the vulnerability of tourism. Sustainable tourism needs to be thoroughly implemented to confront this and other crises; and sustainable tourism pedagogies must accompany the process, especially in terms of students' professional skills essential for overcoming crisis situations. This paper seeks to evaluate the Degrees of Tourism in Spain from the perspective of both students and teachers in order to show to what extent they consider students to be sufficiently qualified so as to address the challenges required in the tourism sector to deal with this and other crises. To answer this question, we have turned to Sustainable Tourism Pedagogy (STP), a framework for the critical analysis of tourism studies based on six areas of literacy that this article will use for empirical analysis. The STP core literacies have been evaluated in a statistically validated questionnaire addressed to 393 respondents and data analysis has been performed with analytical descriptive techniques. The results show: i) that Tourism Degrees do not meet the needs of today's students, especially because of a major lack of sustainability issues, ii) significant gaps between the perception of teachers and students, iii) that there are calls for a more sustainable tourism pedagogy in Higher Education. This paper concludes by highlighting the urgent need to revise official national programmes.

### 1. Introduction

Tourism activity is subject to constant change and the professionals in the sector must adapt to this change and its possible impacts by being prepared to act, think and plan differently (Sheldon, Fesenmaier, Woeber, Cooper, & Antonioli, 2007). More and more, these changes are caused by crises, of natural or human origin, which require a response from the university, which must include them in its research agenda but also in the training of future professionals of this sector (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Therefore, it is essential that Tourism training must include different pedagogical approaches that favour the development of skills, aptitudes and values (Belhassen & Caton, 2011). Only in this way will today's students become future professionals capable of adapting to a very dynamic, fragile and extremely vulnerable sector, which has been made evident by the COVID-19 crisis (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020).

In the first months of 2020, a major debate has arisen on a global level, which particularly affects the main tourist destinations and which raises the need for restructuring the sector whose model is considered to be unsustainable by many experts (Benjamin, Dillette, & Alderman, 2020). Until now, sustainable tourism has been contemplated in the training of tourism professionals, especially in the framework of the "Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014" promoted by the Education for Sustainable Development initiative of the United Nations or more recently with the Sustainable Development Goals. However, different experts

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have shown the lack of accomplishment, the need for a more critical view, weak methodologies, or the lack of further curricula assessment (Ayikoru, Tribe, & Airey, 2009). New pedagogical techniques have been requested in order to develop students' capacity to solve complex problems (Hales & Jennings, 2017). And there is also the need nowadays to develop new pedagogical strategies that contemplate online education or e-learning. This teaching model, which has certain limitations, also provides some opportunities, such as personalization and flexibility (Adel, 2017).

In light of the COVID19 pandemic, which has led to the closure of borders and numerous changes in the ways in which destinations are adapted and tourism services are offered, problems that are already well-known have emerged again (job insecurity; ecological pressure and the effects of climate change; pressure from global economic interests and the loss of identity and heritage, etc.). According to several authors, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis may offer an invaluable opportunity to reset tourism toward a better pathway for future activity under principles of sustainability, authenticity, social justice and security (Benjamin et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a; Niewiadomski, 2020). An academic debate has emerged where advocates of industry's rapid recovery are reluctant to make wider efforts to reform tourism to be more ethical and sustainable (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020b). The consequences for the development of the discipline, the education of tourism students and the future of tourism practices are critical since a mishandling could lead to a business as usual scenario.

The opportunity to modify university curricula has been contemplated timidly and in very general terms by the mass media, the public administrations, and the universities. This responds to a call for value-based education as a part of a future path towards sustainable tourism and education (Edelheim, 2020). However, until now, the role of tourism studies, whether or not students are provided with the skills required by the current labour market and the context of the manifold crisis has not been discussed in depth.

This paper seeks to evaluate the Degrees of Tourism in Spain from the perspective of both students and teachers in order to show to what extent they consider students are sufficiently qualified to address the challenges required in the tourism sector to face this and other crises. To answer this question, we have turned to the Sustainable Tourism Pedagogy (STP), a framework for critical analysis of tourism studies based on six areas of literacy that is reviewed in section 2. Spanish Tourism Degrees have then been evaluated in a statistically validated questionnaire addressed to 393 respondents and data analysis has been performed using analytical descriptive techniques explained in section 3. The results are shown in section 4 and general trends are identified regarding the teaching of tourism degrees in all Spanish universities. Finally, the discussion and conclusion can be found in section 5.

## 2. State of the art

### 2.1. Research perspectives of sustainable tourism in higher education

Tourism degrees have only recently started to be offered by universities around the globe following calls from the industry for better qualified professionals from the 1980s (Fidgeon, 2010). Research has largely shown the impacts of neoliberalism and managerial ideology in tourism curricula and how much influence industry has on them. Industry-led tourism curricula have been strongly criticised as critical thinking is suffocated and replaced with market-oriented learning (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Slocum, Dimitrov, & Webb, 2019; Tribe, 2002a). As a result, these curricula place an emphasis on job-skills and industry training in order to address the preferences and expectations of students as customers (Slocum et al., 2019), ignoring the mission of the contemporary university, which, as stated by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, consists in transmitting culture, teaching professionalism and conducting scientific research (1930). It also causes imbalances between liberal and vocational education (Dredge et al., 2012; Ring, Dickinger, & Wöber, 2009; Tribe, 2002b; Zagonari, 2009), resulting in a mismatch between education and job perspectives (Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2015). Also, market-oriented curricula favour a discourse on tourism as an industry that overshadows other conceptualisations of the tourism phenomenon (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Leiper, 2008). Therefore, it seems that universities not only fail at educating humans as "res cogitans" but also fail at addressing tourism as a complex phenomenon, especially as a contributor to sustainability.

As systematic changes within tourism can lead to mitigating the impacts of climate change, reducing world poverty and promoting steady, inclusive and sustainable economic growth (Wilson & von der Heidt, 2013), education in tourism is of major importance. Education for sustainability draws on transformative ways of teaching and learning, emphasising critical reflection on values and the active empowerment of students to make change towards real sustainability (Boyle, Wilson, & Dimmock, 2015). Hence, Sustainable Tourism Education has a double role in, first, directing tourism towards sustainability awareness, and second, targeting quality education that instils critical thinking: using research-informed teaching that emphasises critical thinking in real world situations can help students overcome the challenges facing society and encourage sustainable business practices that also stimulate tourism success (Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Slocum et al., 2019).

Research in tourism education has shown how attitudes of students can be influenced through sustainability programmes only if they are integrated throughout the curriculum, instead of being a separate component, such as a single course (Slocum et al., 2019). Although there is abundant research on the teaching and learning of single experiences in sustainable tourism (Benckendorff, Moscardo, & Murphy, 2012; Boyle et al., 2015; Hales & Jennings, 2017; Jennings, Kensbock, & Kachel, 2010; McGrath et al., 2020), there has also been an attempt to provide insightful views on how to achieve a transversal education in sustainable tourism from a conceptual perspective (Boley, 2011; Farber Canziani, Sönmez, Hsieh, & Byrd, 2012). There is growing concern about the need for alternative pedagogies that foster sustainable tourism drawing upon "progressive research" (Barnett, 1990) in tourism higher education, ranging from a series of competencies, a network of international tourism educators (Sheldon et al., 2007; Sheldon, Fesenmaier, & Tribe, 2011) and pedagogical frameworks based on critical thinking (Belhassen & Caton, 2011; Mair & Sumner, 2017) and the philosophic practitioner (Dredge et al., 2012; Jamal, Taillon, & Dredge, 2011; Tribe, 2002b). Drawing on Tribe's works, these

discussions share the common objective of pursuing fundamental change in tourism education, from one with a vocational emphasis to one that produces a mindful, reflective, responsible, and ethical practitioner (Tribe, 2002a, 2002b).

Initially, the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI), an international tourism network, defined a set of foundational values for tourism education programmes worldwide (stewardship, ethics, knowledge, mutuality, professionalism). Further development has led some authors to advocate for a Sustainable Tourism Pedagogy model that has partially been subjected to experimentation in Calvert (Texas, USA) with undergraduate students (Jamal et al., 2011). The STP is an action and change oriented pedagogy that addresses sustainability not only in environmental terms but also from socio-cultural and political perspectives. It moves away from the theoretical self-oriented liberal education model towards one that produces a progressive learner who is oriented towards social action, has practical knowledge and problem-solving skills and is especially sensitive to marginalised groups and power structures. The STP is based on six core literacies (technical, analytical, ecological, multicultural, ethical and political) (Table 1). Literacies are defined as the integration of different types of knowledge embracing the processes through which it is accumulated, processed, and applied.

In the case study in Texas, a collaborative community service-learning activity was proposed and the results showed effective proactive planning (including awareness of political issues and challenges of problem-solving and consensus decision making), corporate social responsibility, ethics, and stewardship of natural and cultural resources. A content analysis has also been performed at Master degree level in Sweden to examine the progress in terms of a Pedagogy for Sustainable Tourism (Farsari, 2017). Dredge et al. (2012) have argued how such sustainable tourism pedagogies may be hindered by the international and national contexts that constrain their development.

Despite the magnitude of the change occurring over the last decade, tourism education has not been subjected to the same level of reflective and self-critical debate. Innovative and creative pedagogies and curricula blending higher order knowledge (liberal) and reflective skill development (vocational) have been widely conceptualised but have not been adequately assessed, leaving a gap for future applied research. Also, tourism education outside the English-speaking world remains scarce (Farsari, 2017). This paper seeks to partly fill this gap by questioning the extent to which alternative pedagogies are achieved by interrogating Tourism Education in Spain. The STP framework has been used by this study to conceive ideal-typical competencies to evaluate the distance between the perceptions of the students and teachers and the model.

## 2.2. Spain as a specific context

Tourism education in Spain was initially considered as a professional training programme which began with the first private Tourism School founded in 1957. This school was opened with a delay of more than two decades with respect to other European countries (Pedreño Muñoz, 1996). Until then, training consisted in the experience gained from working in companies. The first Official School of Tourism was founded in 1963, as were the official professional training studies in tourism (ANECA, 2004).

As a result of the growth of the sector, in 1980 the qualification “Tourism Business and Activities Specialist” was created. It was soon regarded as being insufficient, incomplete, obsolete and too diverse as the business component eclipsed the rest of the content (Torres Bernier, 1993). Furthermore, the tourism activity, which was continuously growing and having a greater social impact, highlighted the need to improve the training system (Vera Rebollo & IvarsBaidal, 2001) and in 1996 a university qualification was created for tourism. At that time, a three-year programme was established which was adapted in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), following the models of the Spanish 4 + 1° qualifications system with a rigid graded and linear structure (Huete, 2007). The adaptation to the EHEA has favoured the mobility of students and generated a framework for acquiring competencies, without excluding the acquisition of contents (Ceballos Hernández, Arias Martín, Ruiz Jiménez, Sanz, & Vázquez, 2010). Of these, the transversal competencies are particularly relevant. They are related to innovation, oral communication, teamwork or analytical capacity (Cárdenas-García, Ignacio, & Isabel, 2016).

From the outset, it was acknowledged that the qualification had to provide both theoretical and practical training, which is basic for the management of tourism-related organisations and institutions. It also had to enable students to acquire competencies for their

**Table 1**  
STP six core literacies.

Core literacies	Definition
Core literacies	Definition
Technical literacy	Theories, concepts and frameworks that provide foundational, technical knowledge related to the sustainable development of tourism, inclusive of planning, management and marketing techniques (including community involvement and conflict management).
Ecological literacy	Awareness of the connections between people and their environment, and the consequences that decisions and actions have on these relationships. These connections extend beyond ecological relationships to community, social and cultural connections to build natural environments.
Ethical literacy	Development of values and ethical positions within students' thinking, and how these values may be gained not only through theoretical learning (in the classroom), but also as practical wisdom [phronesis], through experience and collaborative learning in a community service learning context.
Multicultural literacy	Appreciation of the different cultures, values, interests and power relations that exist between stakeholders with an interest in sustainable tourism. Of particular consideration here are the voices, values, and knowledge of ethnic minorities, marginalised groups or individuals who are discriminated against for reasons of ethnicity, gender or other.
Analytical literacy	Skills, techniques and personal qualities necessary to engage in problem-solving, issue identification and critical inquiry, for example, to be able to critically examine the content and values related to various sustainability discourses in addressing sustainable tourism development.

Source: Jamal et al., 2011, p: 138–139.

professional development (Cárdenas-García, Pulido-Fernández, & Carrillo-Hidalgo, 2016; Ceballos Hernández et al., 2010). Therefore, three itineraries were established: “a highly business-oriented line”; “tourist guide” and “tourism planner” (Huete, 2007). They are characterised by a strong business approach which can be seen in the number of subjects taught, the orientation of the qualifications, the places where work experience is carried out and the career opportunities achieved.

Since the approval of the White Paper on Tourism Degree in 2004, the different degree programmes, which have different names, have been modified, despite the abundant and diverse criticism received. On the one hand, it has been shown that there is a growing need for tourism studies to address the major global challenges and to take a critical view (Cladera, Vich-i-Martorell, Rejó, Hales & Jennings, 2017) which would generate significant benefits for tourism as it has positive results on three levels: individual freedom, social justice and business productivity (Belhassen & Caton, 2011). This is related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills which enable the students to solve problems and make decisions based on reflection and analysis (Cladera et al., 2019; Connolly & Begg, 2006). These gaps are filled individually in the classroom, representing a challenge for educators who need to identify the difficulties of the learning process and search for alternative methodologies that adapt to the new needs and trends of the tourism sector and, as a result, the professional profiles. This means that certain important aspects in the training of the students and future professionals are lacking in terms of knowledge and depend on the willingness of the teachers. This generates inequalities between students of different universities but also in the same degree course.

On the other hand, a failure to adapt to the labour market can be observed (Vera Rebollo & IvarsBaidal, 2001), together with a strong misalignment between education or over-education and the professional salary, showing that the professionals in the tourism sector in Spain have a higher educational level than that required for the positions that they hold with respect to other economic sectors (Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2015). This does not benefit the employees, employers or the sector in any way. In fact it is harmful as, contrary to expectations, studies have shown that over-education leads to lower productivity (McGuinness, 2006), a loss of significant potential and generates frustration among students.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Methodological design

The current educational paradigm is one based on learning through the acquisition of competencies. It is implemented in the curricula throughout Europe by way of the EHEA with a structure based on university degrees. The incorporation into the EHEA, which in Spain is regulated by Organic Law April 2007 of 12 April, has led to a change of paradigm in university education whereby the student has become the protagonist of the teaching-learning process in order to acquire professional competencies (López Pastor, 2011). In higher education, competencies refer to the professional skills of each area of training, taking into account the working, business, research and individual capacities that lead to success (Kallioinen, 2010).

In Spain, in accordance with the criteria established by the Spanish National Quality Assessment and Accreditation Agency (ANECA), each degree course establishes how to realise its own competencies. Higher education in tourism is basically carried out through Degrees in Tourism and the territorial distribution of the university supply is broad.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing the perception of how competencies are developed in the Tourism Degrees allows us to focus on the essential aspects of the initial training of the future tourism professionals. Therefore, in this training context of learning through competencies, our research objectives can be achieved through learning about the assessment made by the teachers and students of the competencies that are promoted related to sustainable tourism (Jamal et al., 2011). To do this, the tenets of sustainable tourism pedagogy are taken as a starting point. In order to adapt them to learning through acquiring competencies, the areas of tourism literacy have been related to competencies (Table 2).

#### 3.2. Data-collection tool and participants

The opinion that teachers and students of Tourism Degrees have of the competencies in Table 2 and the rest of the research data have been obtained using a quantitatively designed survey, more specifically, a data-collection instrument in the form of a Google online questionnaire (<https://forms.gle/gFBfRoVPU1YxEqbE6>). This methodology allowed massive and systematized research information collection. The questionnaire comprises items corresponding on the whole to Likert scale questions with a range from 1 to 5 (in agreement from “very little” to “a lot”) and other multiple choice questions and some open-ended questions. The questionnaire is structured into four sections (one per page) in order to facilitate the contextualisation of the items and the data collection: (i) presentation of the questionnaire and the research; (ii) anonymous personal information; (iii) assessment of the competencies, without explicitly relating them to the STP literacy areas so as not to introduce noise in the completion of the questionnaire; and (iv) conclusion and open opinion questions regarding training in sustainability.

The questionnaire was sent by email to 35 coordinators of the Tourism Degrees in Spain, requesting their collaboration to resend it to all of the teachers and students. Over the course of five weeks, the questionnaire received 393 valid responses (Table 3), from 33 different Spanish universities. A total of 99% of the responses were considered valid and the participation reached 94.3% of the contacted universities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://red-intur.org/>.

**Table 2**  
Competencies within the STP core literacies.

Core literacies	Competencies
<i>Technical literacy</i>	Competitiveness adapted to sustainable development Subject area/Disciplines (Learning of knowledge areas)
<i>Ecological literacy</i>	Socio-ecological
<i>Ethical literacy</i>	Diversity management and social inclusion
<i>Multicultural literacy</i>	Humanitarian and multicultural
<i>Analytical literacy</i>	Communicative Resilient Enterprise. Creativity and initiative Digital Emotional Research capacity
<i>Political literacy</i>	Social and political awareness

Based on an unknown universe and population, which tends to infinity, the sample is considered to be significant (>384.16) with a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of 5% according to the following formula (Barlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2001).

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \times P \times Q}{D^2} = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{0.05^2} = 384.16$$

Where Z = level of confidence; P = probability of success or expected proportion; Q = probability of failure; D = margin of error.

### 3.3. Statistical data analysis

The data-collection instrument was subject to a validation process (Zapf, Castell, Morawietz, & Karch, 2016). Experts in the research field of tourism and Social Sciences Teaching, with direct or indirect experience in Tourism degrees, completed an assessment form regarding the level of adequacy and relevance of each item on the questionnaire, through a Likert scale with a range from 1 to 4 (from “very little” to “completely”) with the possibility of including qualitative observations. From this assessment, statistical descriptors and an index of concordance were calculated from the responses of the experts using the Kendall’s W coefficient, which is efficient for scaled (not parametric) data and for three or more classification levels (Spooren, Mortelmans, & Denekens, 2007). The normal distribution of the data was previously ruled out through the Shapiro-Wilk test. Therefore, the questionnaire was widely validated, with an average score for its adequacy of 3.49 over 4 (SD = 0.63) and for its relevance of 3.52 over 4 (SD = 0.50) (Table 4). The statistical validity of these data is assured by the level of concordance between judges in the moderately high sections (Kendall’s W coefficient = 0.617 and p-value <0.01).

**Table 3**  
Percentage of the sample in accordance with the classification variables.

Gender	Female	63.4
	Male	36.6
Age	Less than 30 years old	56.7
	Between 30 and 50 years old	26.2
	Between 51 and 70 years old	16.8
	Over 70 years old	0.3
Type of university	Public or associated centre	96.7
	Private	2.8
	Blank	0.5
Connection with the Degree	Student	66.4
	Teacher	33.6
Situation of the students	Degree student	60.9
	Graduated and unemployed	8.8
	Graduated and studying a post-graduate course in tourism (Master/Doctorate)	10.3
	Graduated and studying in a different field to tourism	3.1
	Graduated and working in the tourism sector	10.3
	Graduated and working outside the tourism sector	5.4
Training in a double degree	Other	1.1
	Yes	17.2
	No	82.8
Subject area of the teachers	Humanistic	42.4
	Sociology	12.9
	Law	6.1
	Economics/Marketing	30.3
	Linguistic	3.8
	Mathematics/IT	4.5

Before its launch, the questionnaire was also subject to a pilot test among reliable students and teachers of the Tourism degrees who were asked to quantitatively (Likert scale from 1 to 4) and qualitatively evaluate a series of items regarding the adequacy of the completion of the questionnaire according to their own experience. In order to validate their assessments, the Cronbach's Alpha of their responses to the questionnaire was calculated. The responses were reclassified in ordinal values and their reliability was estimated (Taber, 2018). The adequacy of the questionnaire was approved with an average score of 3.85 over 4 ( $SD = 0.30$ ) (Table 5). The statistical value of this high level of validation is guaranteed by the high level of reliability of the answers (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.85).

Based on the assessments of the experts and the experiences of the pilot test, the questionnaire was improved and launched. After the data collection, the reliability of the responses received was measured with Cronbach's Alpha. The responses were reclassified into ordinal values giving rise to a very high level of consistency (0.94). Subsequently, the open answers were manually categorised and coded in accordance with types of common response/opinion (affiliations and opinions about the structure of the degree). A descriptive statistic was applied and it was determined whether there were significant relationships between the assessment responses and the list of respondents and the Tourism Degrees (students or teachers) as this is the independent variable of identification that best adapts to the objectives of the research. Normality tests were carried out through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ( $n > 50$ ). As the classification variable was for two groups, T tests were carried out for students with the normally distributed dependent variables and Mann-Whitney U tests with those of the non-normal distribution. In short, the research is based on an analytical-descriptive and quantitative methodology. All of the exploratory and inferential statistical calculations have been carried out on Excel (Microsoft) and SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, IBM), v.25.0.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. STP assessment: a weak perception of STP achievement in tourism degrees

The study reveals assessments that are below average in all literacies, but there is a certain level of inequality in the assessment of each area and in the dispersion of the responses (Fig. 1). The areas considered to be the least developed in Spanish Tourism degrees are ethics and politics, with very low average scores and a very wide dispersion in both cases. At the other end of the spectrum, the highest rated area is technical literacy. As well as having average scores close to 3, the responses are also more concentrated. The second highest rated area is ecology, although its degree of dispersion is high including very positive assessments and also negative evaluations.

The STP literacies are defined based on a series of competencies (Table 2). In Fig. 2 we can observe the score given to each of them by teachers and students, which enables us to understand in greater depth which aspects of each area are perceived as being more or less developed in the Tourism Degrees. Therefore, the most developed are those related to theoretical learning, research capacity, communication and enterprise. All of them have a similar degree of dispersion at around 1. The competencies considered as being less developed are those related to diversity, digital competencies, politics and emotions.

Although the theoretical competence is the best rated, the analysis by items reveals a clear contrast between the literacies related to economics and law which are highly scored, and those related to sociology and the humanities, with lower scores (Fig. 3).

Of all the areas, the best rated items are those referring to the traditional competencies of the tourism sector such as the weight of economic aspects (Table 6), the reinforcement of the entrepreneurial spirit and the development of communication skills, which reinforces the technical literacy and parts of the analytical literacy. However, the lowest rated areas refer to less tangible aspects and those related to the development of transversal competencies, such as emotions management and also the updating of competencies through digital skills which complement analytical literacy.

Finally, although the trends in the scores given to the areas are clear (lower score trend), we can observe that there are significant differences depending on the status of the participant, whether they are students or teachers (with  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ), in all areas except the ecological literacy (Table 7). We can confirm that students tend to be more critical than the teachers and that the difference is greater in the assessments referring to the political and ethics literacies (Fig. 4).

### 4.2. Perception of preparedness for crisis situations: a low perception in the undergraduate degree compensated in the postgraduate degree

The assessment given by the respondents in terms of the capacity of the students to adequately exercise the tourism profession in unexpected crisis situations that generate uncertainty, such as the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, is far from sufficient with 2.47 on average over 5 (Fig. 5).

**Table 4**

Assessment by judges of the adequacy and relevance of the items of the questionnaire (range 1:4).

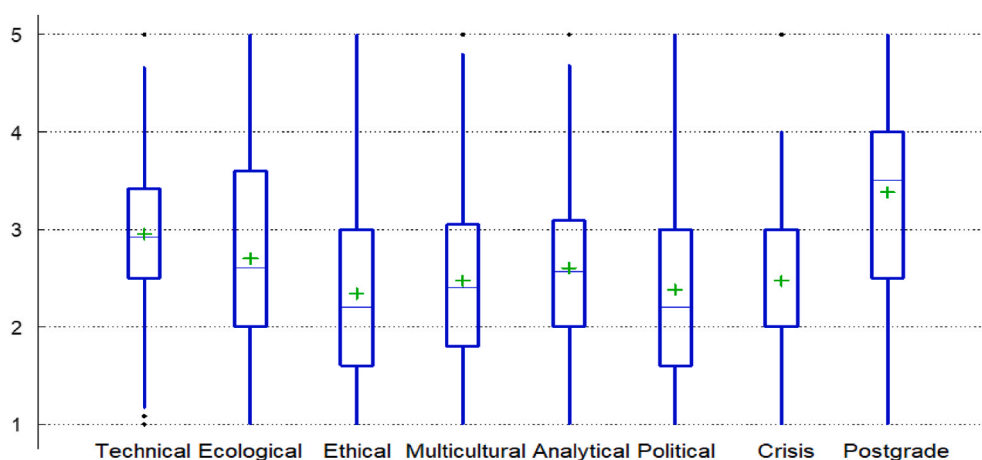
Sections	Adequacy		Relevance	
	M	SD	M	SD
1.- Presentation	3.30	0.50	3.50	0.50
2.- Identification	3.40	0.80	3.33	0.82
3.- Competencies	3.42	0.60	3.50	0.50
4.- Conclusion	3.77	0.52	3.77	0.52
TOTAL	3.49	0.63	3.52	0.58



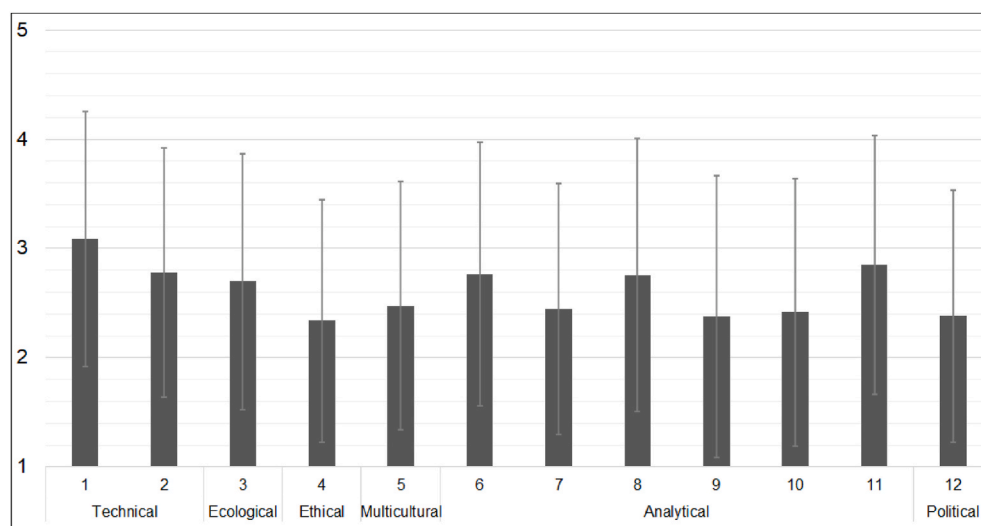
**Table 5**

Assessment of the adequacy of the questionnaire (range 1:4) by some of the participants in the pilot test.

Items	M	SD
Time for completion	3.50	1.00
Structure of the contents	3.75	0.50
Aesthetic design	4.00	0.00
Comprehension of the items	4.00	0.00
Capture of motivation	4.00	0.00
TOTAL	3.85	0.30



**Fig. 1.** Distribution of the assessment of the development of the different STP literacies in Tourism degree courses.



**Fig. 2.** Assessment (average and dispersion) of the development in Tourism Degrees of the different competencies related to STP literacies. Legend: 1. Theoretical learning, 2. competitiveness, 3. ecology, 4. diversity, 5. multiculturalism, 6. communication, 7. resilience, 8. enterprise, 9. digital, 10. emotions, 11. research capacity, 12. political awareness.

As in the case of the majority of the literacies, there are also statistically significant differences between students and teachers in their assessment regarding the degree to which a Tourism Degree prepares its students for crisis situations, with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  ( $\text{sig} = 0.006$  using the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test). It is noteworthy that once again the students are much more critical of the training received with  $2.37 \pm 1.09$  on average as opposed to an average score of  $2.77 \pm 1.16$  given by the teachers (Fig. 6). In fact, a little over half of the students rate the level of preparation of the degree in this sense between low and very low while over half of the teachers rate it as being between sufficient and high (Fig. 6).

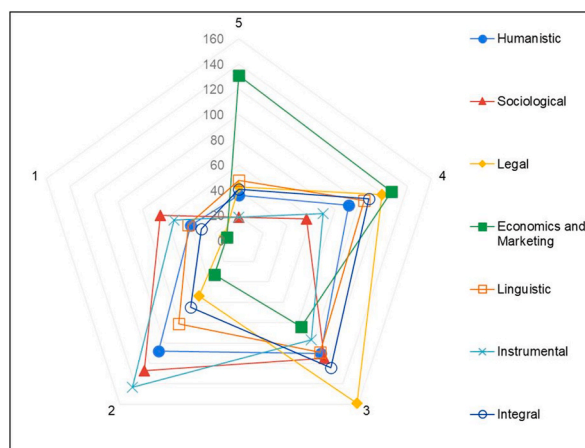


Fig. 3. Number of responses of each value for the items in the theoretical literacy.

**Table 6**

The five highest and five lowest rated items.

	Item	Competence	Literacy	Average	SD
Higher scoring	Economic learning.	Theory	Technical	3.87	1.06
	Use of IT programmes and basic general applications.	Digital	Analytical	3.62	1.11
	Freedom in the choice of topics of academic studies and end-of-degree dissertation.	Enterprise, curiosity and creativity	Analytical	3.46	1.15
	Legal learning.	Theoretical	Technical	3.33	0.95
	Oral speeches or presentations with or without audiovisual support.	Communication	Analytical	3.30	1.19
Lower scoring	Programming and web development.	Digital	Analytical	2.05	1.15
	Use of IT programmes and advanced spatial data applications (GIS, GPS ...).	Digital	Analytical	2.04	1.09
	Simulation of action protocols in cases of diversity in the tourism field.	Diversity and social inclusion	Ethics	2.04	1.01
	Use of IT programmes and advanced statistics applications (SPSS, MatLab, R ...).	Digital	Analytical	1.97	1.10
	Use of IT programmes and advanced design, virtual and augmented reality applications.	Digital	Analytical	1.85	1.05

**Table 7**

Significance tests among the “student/teacher” groups and the variables that group the assessment data referring to the development of the STP literacies in Tourism degrees.

Variables	Hypothesis Contrast	Significance
<b>Technical</b>	T-Student	.000
<b>Ecological</b>	U-Mann-Whitney	.784
<b>Ethical</b>	U-Mann-Whitney	.000
<b>Multicultural</b>	U-Mann-Whitney	.025
<b>Analytical</b>	T-Student	.000
<b>Political</b>	U-Mann-Whitney	.000

The students and teachers who have participated in Postgraduate studies in Tourism consider that they sufficiently contribute to compensating the weaknesses of the Degrees in terms of both theoretical and practical training, with the former being given a higher score (3.45 and 3.28, respectively) (Fig. 7).

In this respect there are no statistically significant differences, with  $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ , between being a student or a teacher ( $\text{sig} = 0.798$  through the Mann-Whitney  $U$  Test). Therefore it may be assumed that there is consensus in the perception of the Postgraduate course as an opportunity to sufficiently compensate for the weaknesses of the Degree.

#### 4.3. Open opinions regarding tourism degrees

More than half of the respondents (55%) gave their opinion regarding the undergraduate education in Tourism that they had received or taught in Spain. Table 8 includes all the issues and their frequency as percentages. It highlights how the experiences with real cases are considered as being insufficient for almost 36% of the respondents and how there is a deficiency in the training in all aspects related to sustainability (26.6%). “More fieldwork”, “use of real cases” and “practical experiences” are systematically



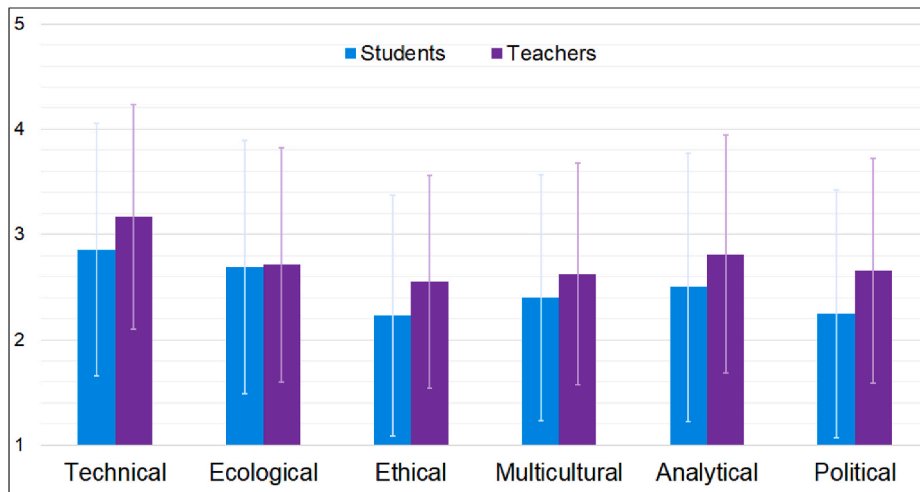


Fig. 4. Assessment (average and dispersion) of the development in Tourism Degrees of the STP literacies according to students and teachers.

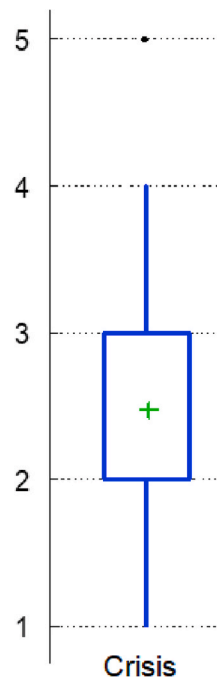
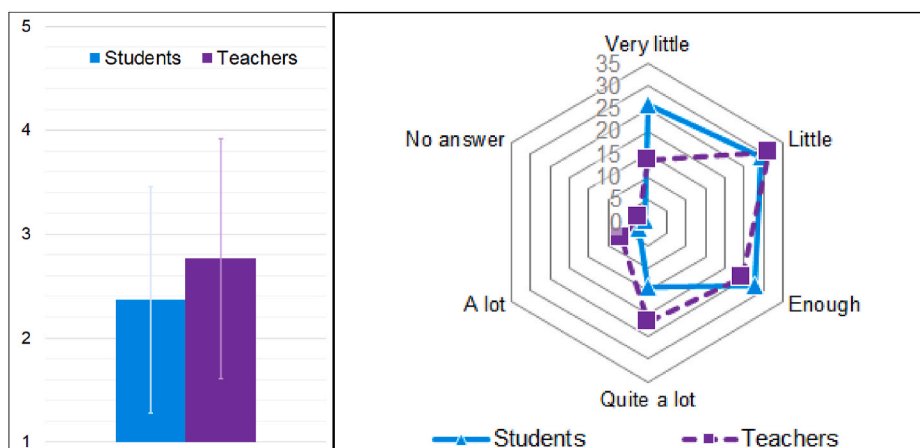


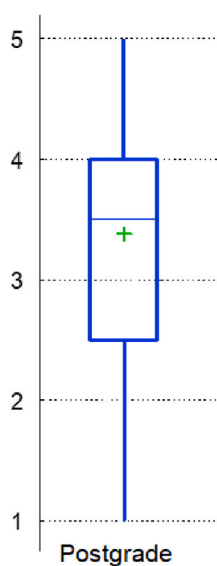
Fig. 5. Assessment of academic preparation provided by the Tourism degrees for unexpected situations of crisis in the sector.

mentioned. Languages and technology are two components of analytical literacy that are clearly deficient for 40.6% of those who expressed their opinion. The contents of the curriculum are perceived by 64.7% of the participants as out-of-date, too general, superficial, not integrated, having an excessive economic orientation, lacking in transformative learning elements such as empathy or emotions and giving very little emphasis to sustainability. In fact, the comments call for greater depth in the knowledge of many subjects, particularly those related to languages, geography and sociology.

For example: "The subjects taught should be studied in depth and not just touched on. I also consider that we should learn more about geography, art, sociology and psychology, and less about economics. And, very important, more and higher quality language learning". Similarly: "The Tourism degree should focus much more on the professional activity. The classes should be more practical and the theory more up-to-date. There is a lot of theoretical material which is completely obsolete today and is still taught." There are also many respondents who call for the inclusion of current issues such as the risks that our society is exposed to in relation to climate change and also health risks. Several participants commented that while completing the questionnaire they realised that there were gaps in tourism training. For example: "[...] At the university where I study, the teaching of tourism is too theoretical and there is a



**Fig. 6.** Assessment (average and dispersion) of the level of preparation of the Tourism degrees for crisis situations, according to students and teachers: average and dispersion (left) and percentage of responses of each level (right).



**Fig. 7.** Assessment of the extent to which Tourism Postgraduate courses compensate for the theoretical and practical training deficiencies of the Degrees.

**Table 8**

The most frequent types of opinion and the percentage of participants expressing them.

Type of opinion	%
Lack of practical real-life training (resolution of conflicts, crisis adaptation, international experiences, policy learning)	35.7
Deficit in aspects related to sustainability	26.6
Insufficient language training	21.3
Little and/or out-of-date technological training that needs to be updated	19.3
Out-of-date and inadequate topics and procedures which need to be updated	15.9
The material is too general and not specialised in tourism	14.5
Lack of transformational learning strategies (in ethics, empathy, emotions, creativity and critical vision)	11.6
Economic orientation and excessively dependent on the market	11.6
The contents are not connected or integrated	8.7
Childish students with a passive attitude	2.4
Lack of acknowledgement of tourism training by society as a whole	2.4
Need for greater theoretical and in-depth content	2.4

great need to implement more knowledge associated with the previously mentioned points [in the questionnaire] which are also studied with a large practical component.” Finally, many of the respondents consider that higher education in Tourism in Spain is not sufficiently valued by society and particularly by the sector.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The design of the Tourism Degrees approved at the end of the twentieth century conferred academic value and recognition to tourism as a discipline. The objective of the Tourism Degree was for students to acquire the necessary knowledge to be employed as professionals in the sector (Ceballos Hernández et al., 2010). However, as this study shows, the effectiveness of this aspect is being questioned almost two decades later because the curricula is lagging behind the current needs of sustainability in order to face the challenges in the tourism sector brought by COVID-19 and the climate change crisis.

In light of the initial considerations, it was evident that a general and updated assessment of higher education in tourism in Spain was required. As a new approach, the STP draws a clear and integrated map of the pedagogic literacies necessary to develop. However, the areas have been conceived on mainly theoretical levels. One novelty of this article is that it provides a breakdown by competencies of the STP literacies, making this pedagogic approach manageable for empirical analysis.

The results show how in Spain, higher education in tourism is essentially theoretical, unlike other countries, as we can see in the English-language literature which reveals that higher education in tourism continues to be too practical (vocational training) (Gross & Manoharan, 2016). *A priori*, this would not be a drawback if it was not because, as noted by the participants in the study, the theoretical training is out-of-date, too general and not always focused on tourism. They also consider that it is too superficial, insufficiently integrated and has an excessive economic orientation. Some of these problems are derived from the design of the programmes (already crowded), which have a battery of highly diverse subjects, fruit of the opportunity and even the opportunism (Vera Rebollo, 2001, pp. 663–672) of many departments seeing this qualification as an occasion to reconvert rather than streamline themselves in terms of the number of teachers and research lines. In fact, staff resistance to sustainability and a crowded curriculum are impediments mentioned also in other countries (Wilson & von der Heide, 2013).

The original programmes, which are still in place today, take a distinct business approach, with a large presence of subjects related to marketing, accounting or business management, reflecting the importance of tourism, understood as an economic activity in its own right of the neoliberal contemporary society (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Slocum et al., 2011; Ndou, Mele, & Del Vecchio, 2019). In them, as Ayikoru et al. point out, ideas such as competition, markets, performativity and quality assurance typical of tourism companies are imposed, leaving other important ones in the background such as the values of sustainable and ethical development, which are defended in this article. As a result, it can be concluded that tensions have not yet been solved between, on the one hand, the neoliberal focused industry principles revolving around growth that are taught profusely and, on the other hand, the need to consider the complexity brought by climate change and other crises that would distort an ideal growth of tourism and the tourism industry. Students in the Spanish Tourism Degrees feel the curricula leans towards the former.

In fact, neoliberal principles have been progressively coined by the educational system throughout structural reforms. Values such as marketization, managerialism, metricization and the accompanying elevation of performativity have not only incorporated business principles into curricula but have also increased competitiveness in the educational options available and, therefore, among departments that struggle to gain a foothold in the new degrees, even among the academic staff (Deem, 2001; Hall and McGinity, 2015). Global trends of neoliberalism and education accentuate the commodification of the current university system (Cooper & Shepherd, 1997). The situation of the Tourism degrees in Spain is not an exception (Troiano, Masjuan, & Elias, 2007).

All of this shows that an updating of the degrees is required and there is a need to address current topics of a greater social interest, as outlined in the research agenda (Navarro et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). However, other aspects should also be addressed related to the career opportunities for the students which are characterised by mobility. Therefore, it is increasingly more appropriate to adopt an international and inter-cultural perspective (Jamal et al., 2011; Luka, Vaidesvarans, & Vinklere, 2013). It would also be advisable to incorporate approaches such as the STP, which would be coordinated based on the contents and not on departmental distribution. Furthermore, adopting a methodology based on the principles of transformative learning would favour the acquisition of this knowledge and these competencies, as shown by Boyle et al. (2015), without depending on the will of the teachers or on the research lines that they are conducting and wish to develop in the classroom.

It is precisely the fragmentation of the programmes into a high number of subjects related to such diverse materials that would explain the differences found in the study between the perception of the teachers and that of the students. The teachers have a partial vision of the contents of the degree course, limited to the material that they teach or that belong to their area of knowledge. Furthermore, they form part of this system based on defending the interests of the departments, which is a recognized problem in EHEA implementation (Pozo Muñoz & Bretones Nieto, 2015). However, the students, who are more critical than the teachers, have an overall view of the degree programme, particularly those who have finished their studies or are in the last year of their training.

Throughout the Degree, the students' perception of the practical training (understood as work experience in companies and institutions and also practical activities conducted in the classroom, case studies and fieldwork) is that it is insufficient. These deficiencies translate into a failure to acquire digital competencies or those related to analytical and critical capacity. These transversal competencies enable the students to access management positions in companies or public institutions through which they can direct the path of the sector, and there is precisely a high demand in the current labour market for these (Cárdenas-García et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the current overall labour market is uncertain and highly versatile, and was as such even before the pandemic. Especially nowadays, when innovation, creativity, co-creation and knowledge acquired through the big data generated and analyzed by ICT are fundamental for the reactivation of the sector, with sustainability as the foundation (OMT, 2020). This means that many

graduates do not work in the sectors for which they have trained at any time in their professional lives. Also, the tourism sector is very broad and amply covers the three lines contemplated in the study plans “a highly business-oriented line”; “tourist guide” and “tourism planner” (Huete, 2007) which requires a reinforcement of the knowledge of transversal competencies that enable a better adaptation to the labour market, making the students more versatile. The study participants deem this lack of adaptation, identified as a result of traditional programs, obsolete and inappropriate for today’s reality, due to a level of overqualification bordering on dysfunctionality. Therefore, the comments made by the students reveal that they feel demotivated with few job opportunities arising from their training. For example: “you are condemned to be an over-qualified receptionist”. The over-qualification of the students is a well-known problem of the Spanish university system, which for decades has failed to place all of its graduates in the sector year after year (Lillo-Bañuls & Casado-Díaz, 2015). However, this affects other countries as well (Denny, Shelley & Ooi, 2009). The problem is even greater as the sector is highly sensitive to economic crises and unemployment (Gössling et al., 2020).

The low perception of the preparation for crisis situations in university courses and its compensation with the idea that the postgraduate courses provide an opportunity to correct the weaknesses and lack of coherence of the degrees correspond to the current model of the study plans of the EHEA (Hatzakis, Lycett, & Serrano, 2007; Bergan, 2019). This general base, comprising four years of broad training which is highly fragmented into diverse subjects, obliges students to specialise. This is often insufficient and requires them to study complementary courses offered by the public institutions but also, and increasingly so, by the private sector (Algaba Garrido, 2015).

In conclusion, the tourism degree not only fails at teaching a value-based education towards sustainable tourism as it has been shown through the STP framework, but also it has been noticed that it is not giving students the practical skills they need to enter the labour market.

The COVID crisis has shown that tourism is very fragile and vulnerable, even more so in Spain where there is a strong economic dependency on this sector. This fact has generated an important debate on the need to change the model to one that is balanced, resilient, inclusive, fair and based on more sustainable values (Benjamin et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020a; Niewiadomski, 2020; Rastegar, Higgins-Desbiolles, & Ruhanen, 2021; Gibson, 2021). In this regard, the Agenda 2030 also establishes a framework for the recovery of the sector (Hall, 2019; Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019). The future of tourism in terms of COVID-19 and climate change crises is uncertain. Confronting climate change is urgent. It was more obviously revealed after the COVID-19 crisis as it is an important factor in the spread of the virus (Prideaux, Thompson, & Pabel, 2020). This urgency is recognized and addressed in the questions presented by the students participating in our research. Some authors advocate building inclusive resilience based on innovation (Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021). Subsequently, the shift towards a new tourism model requires a higher education system to train the students in specific skills -as those defended in this paper-such as innovative thinking about these issues that do not seem to be contemplated in the current training plan.

This reflection on the need for change has been expressed in the year 2020 in scientific publications and in academic discourses but has not been so clear in business or political reports. It seems necessary to embody these changes in the study plans for them to truly adapt to the principles and mission of the university, in a humanistic way, rather than constituting an opportunistic instrument. In this way, the “philosophic practitioners” as dubbed by Tribe (2002a), will be able to lead the necessary change.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100329>.

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