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The impact of successful cross-competencies on a career in tourism in Italy: the meeting point between the students' perceptions and the requirements for professionals

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to understand how the changes occurring in the tourism sector are affecting the labor market in Italy, with a special focus on the relevance of successful cross competences (SCC). It focuses on comparing the relevance of these competencies in the perception of both students preparing to enter the tourism field and tour operators. The two-step study combined qualitative analysis that put forth specific characteristics of the tourism labor market in Italy through interviews with experts, and quantitative analysis that correlated the requirements of the tour operators to the ideas students have of what competencies tour operators entering the field should have. The results evinced differing perceptions of SCC and their relative importance in professional fields. Students manifest to miss awareness of the importance of SCC for their future careers. Furthermore, organizational ability, self-control and self-esteem were perceived by tour operators as the most important competencies to be acquired.

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Soft skills; tourism management; higher education; learning; career

1. Introduction

Today the tourism industry and its market are undergoing a significant change overall, strongly influenced by general social and economic trends (Richards, 2011; Bustreo, 2013). These include global mobility, differentiation of demand, offer integration, social and environmental sustainability, broad mobile internet access and sharing economies, among others (Quaratino, 2013; Tovmasyan, 2016). A change like this, which involves players in tourism, ways of operating and behaving needs to be carefully analysed as far as Italy, is concerned because subsequent changes will then need to be made to the professional roles within this industry.

This change, in fact, begs the question: what does a young manager need to possess in the tourism industry today? He/she needs to have talent, passion, specific knowledge and technical competencies (Christou & Eaton, 2000). But he/she also needs to be skilful in self-management, personal relations, effective communications and must possess those skills necessary to improve empathy as an instrument to achieving sustainable professional relationships and successfully handle unexpected and challenging

interactions (Bustreo & Russo, 2012; Bustreo, 2015; Chuang, Goh, Stout, & Dellmann-Jenkin, 2007; Franco & Tappatà, 2007; McClelland, 1973; Russo & Bustreo, 2015; Weick, 1995; Wesley, Jackson, & Lee, 2017; Whitla, 1975). In particular, as the hospitality world continues to change, tourism professionals seek young workers who have soft skills that support their knowledge base (Wesley et al., 2017). In this sense our research aims to illustrate how soft skills need to be emphasized at the higher education level – as it is done in other countries (e.g., in Portugal: Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011) – so that students can acquire the expertise necessary to be successful in this changing industry and its market. By the way, the term “skill”, used alternatively with the term “ability” in this paper, is intended as «a measure of something that people do well by integrating their knowledge, abilities, attitudes and personal traits» (Rodríguez-Antón, Alonso-Almeida, Rubio-Andrada, & Celemín, 2013, p. 26).

The current change thus involves either traditional career models or psychosocial dimensions of personal and professional achievement of all students who obtain a higher education degree (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1998; Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). In fact, it is generally recognized that educational practices should be based on a clear understanding of the competencies the industry and employer expect graduates to acquire during higher education curricula (Weber, Crawford, Lee, & Dennison, 2013; Wilks & Hemsworth, 2011; Sheldon, Fesenmaier, & Tribe, 2011).

Today, according to Boyatzis (1982, 2008), competencies which are defined as «an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job» (1982, p. 97) and also as a driver of performance and its development (2008), and that are necessary for future success, are defined through a type of framework made up of: qualifications, one’s own organizational abilities and professional management of organizational processes, efficient and creative learning abilities, experiences, empathy, self-control, emotion and self-management (Bustreo & Russo, 2012, Russo & Bustreo, 2015). *Competency* is multidimensional: it is never one single dimension of knowing, knowledge or know-how on a specific procedure (Boyatzis, 1982). The skills, as required, are an individual attitude that gives direction to the strategies, identifies values and motivations, which contribute to the accomplishment of a *competent behavior* (Guasti, 2001). Therefore, we will refer here to these characteristics or *cross-curricular skills* as *Successful Cross-Competencies* (SCC). In fact, the skills that we deal with in our work are *cross-skills* because of the possibility for them to be transferred from an academic frame of study to a professional one. Each practitioner can acquire these cross-skills as a pool of resources regardless of their specific professional domain. Currently, studies about SCC often try to define them. In general terms they are considered a key issue within the Intellectual Capital for leading companies and global economies (Massaro, Bardy, Lepeley, & Dal Mas, 2013) and more specifically they are intended as «general skills which can be taught and practiced in curricula for different disciplines» (Meijer, Elshout-Mohr, & van Hout-Wolters, 2001) or as related to personal qualities that are behind people’s rational behavior (Robotham & Jubbb, 1996).

2. Literature review

Cross-curricular and successful cross-competencies seem to be the key for the new higher education projects. This was brought on by the change occurring in professional contexts. Therefore, the effective management of SCC is necessary for graduates in order to increase

their employment opportunities and improve business performance (Massaro et al., 2013). In fact, this field is affected by globalization and mass access, influenced by portable knowledge and conditioned by the changing relationships between tourists and tourism professionals, among others. And today, «hospitality and tourism education programs can increase their internationalization efforts to compete in the global environment» (Ayoun, Johnson, Vanhyfte, & O'Neill, 2010, p. 335). The role played by education and professional training takes on an ever-more central role in the road to a future job, even beyond technical and hard skills (Bynum Boley, 2011; Kehm, 2006, 2009).

Previous studies not only point out how much SCC are functional in the tourism industry and its management, but also indicate how educational programs should stress teaching students soft competencies in favor of hard competencies (Sisson & Adams, 2013). As defined by Boyatzis (1982, 2008), Parry (1998), and Lowry and Flohr (2005), competencies are related to attitudes, knowledge and skills that interact with performance and can be improved through educational practices.

In fact, a focus on domain exceeding SCC – or soft skills (Meijer et al., 2001) – is important because, in educational practices, usually domain specific – or hard skills – have received much more attention within curricular programs for a very long time. In fact, in all of the SCC research related to tourism management, a comprehensive analysis of these SCC has not yet been well identified or listed (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009).

Conversely, the knowledge of SCC and the ability to manage them through a responsible use of emotional intelligence is fundamental in the training and development of a professional identity for the new professionals in the tourism area (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). As Goleman largely demonstrated, with regards to the ingredients necessary for success in both work and life, helping students improve their self-awareness, confidence and management of emotions and increase their empathy, pays off not only in improved behavior, but also in measurable academic achievement (Goleman 1995, 1998, 2006). Managing social interactions or coping with interpersonal relationships resulting from the responsible use of emotional intelligence is something that must be taught in academic contexts and become part of one's expertise independently from one's own specific career. In this sense, as said by Franco and Tappatà (2007) work performance, therefore, involves cognitive aspects, but it is not separable from the development of the affectivity and emotional awareness. Emotional social intelligence is defined as a meeting point between emotional and social competencies by Bar-On (2000). Or rather, a cross section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands (Bar-On, 2005).

For these reasons, specific educational paths must, today, accompany the development of a young manager's professional identity. As defined by Lemoine (2002), such paths must include learning and educational themes as well as those successful cross-curricular competencies that allow students to stand out and create projects with a special focus on innovation and competition. These projects should enhance their organizational and strategic skills – relational, emotional and communication competencies – and the students' responsibilities on both personal and professional levels (Cammass & Thionville, 2000).

Boyatzis (1982, 2008) and (Meijer et al., 2001) sought to identify how the SCC are part of each individual's flexible assets. These assets can be developed through intellectual and experiential learning. The skills can be learned in a formal or informal way, unknowingly or intentionally. They are developed through practice that includes structured experiences which should be accompanied by moments of reflection on the learning itself. In fact, the existing literature on the topic leads us to assert that intellectual comprehension is a necessary component of the learning process, though it does not fully guarantee an improvement of professional development (Boyatzis, 1982). Instead, a coherent and decisive re-organization of the cognitive, emotional and acquired behaviors is needed to go beyond the job-specific skills.

Tourism management and its relationship with tourists, and with their needs and wishes, have changed (UNWTO, 2009). This change has involved social, cultural, economic and professional dimensions of the market stakeholders (Briggs, Sutherland, & Drummond, 2007; Kim, Lehtob, & Morrison, 2007; Rodríguez-Antón et al., 2013) as well as the traditional educational models and the complex dimensions of personal and professional success (Brennan, Enders, Musselin, Teichler, & Valimaa, 2008). Historically, there have been studies that have investigated the competencies (human relation and managerial skills) needed for graduates in Food and Beverage management (Okeiyi, Finley, & Postel, 1994), or interpersonal, leadership and conceptual-creative competencies needed by hotel manager trainees (Tas, LaBrecque, & Clayton, 1996; Sandwith (1993); or a mixed tool set of skills considered important through ratings from industry professionals (Su, Miller, & Shanklin, 1997). These studies included competencies in interpersonal communication, management information systems, time management, emotional intelligence and social ability.

Success in the field of management education depends not only on technical competencies, but also on the student's ability to organize themselves and manage the competencies that allow for better relationship/interaction between themselves and the other players within the domain (Dale & McCarthy, 2006). In this manner, knowledge-based innovation and economic and cultural growth (Caruana & Mcpherson, 2015; Sisson & Adams, 2013) is granted and provided.

As other studies have pointed out, tourism schools find themselves in this situation because they are still focusing their programs on technical expertise rather than on the soft skills that are actually needed in order to face today's real market challenges (Baum & Odgers, 2001; Rodríguez-Antón et al., 2013; Sigala & Baum, 2003).

3. Research objectives

An accurate analysis which takes into consideration the changing skillset required of tour operators is still missing in Italy. Therefore, the purpose of the research presented in this paper is to understand how the changes that are currently occurring in the tourism sector are affecting the labor market in Italy, in terms of competencies required for a young professional entering the field with a special focus on the relevance of SCC. The research further aims to compare the relevance of these competencies with the perception of both students and tour operators. Finally, it tries to draw conclusions from the evidence in terms of designing higher education programs.

The fieldwork combined qualitative and quantitative methods in a two-step study, and employed triangulation between the different data collection methods used

(Eisenhardt, 1989). The exploratory-qualitative analysis made it possible to delve deeper within the matter and put forth the specific characteristics of Italy's tourism labor market through in-depth interviews with a select panel of experts. The quantitative analysis, instead, was where the requirements and needs of the tour operators were compared and correlated with the ideas students have of what competencies a tour operator or manager entering this field should have.

Thus, the study herewith described has the following four objectives:

- To understand the main trends in the tourism labor market in terms of emerging jobs and competencies required by tourism professionals (exploratory-qualitative analysis);
- To identify the range of soft skills required by public and private employers today (exploratory-qualitative analysis, preparatory to the quantitative analysis);
- To provide a comparison between what employers require and what young professionals (at the beginning of their careers) perceive they need to possess in order to work in the field (quantitative analysis) and
- To propose pragmatic activities to reduce the gap between supply and demand for qualified labor, during the educational path of tourism studies and at its end (research implications and conclusions).

The two steps of the research are presented separately in terms of methods and results. They are then discussed together in terms of research and practical implications.

4. New trends in Italy's tourism industry and labor market: the study's first step

The aim of this first step of the research was to understand the on-going trends in Italy's tourism labor market, given the significant economic, social and technological changes that are affecting the industry overall.

The questions we started with were the following: what are today's emerging jobs and what skill set is needed to effectively perform them? What are the ideal skills a young student entering the labor market should master? What type of social skills and attitudes, integrated along with technical ones, would enable someone to achieve success and excellence in the workplace, both now and into the future? What gaps exist between the preparation students currently obtain during their studies compared to what employers require and need in terms of competencies?

The specific objective of this step is, therefore, to understand the relationship between the educational experiences of students in the tourism sector (high schools, universities, business schools, etc.) and the needs of the labor market.

In fact, the didactic design of the education/training programs aimed at developing tourism professionals in Italy, have traditionally, been too self-referential. The Italian academic and training centers themselves have too often adopted a top-down perspective rather than focusing on the real needs of the territory, the market and its operators (bottom-up perspective). This lack of alignment between the labor market and the educational system has led to an increased gap between the skills required by tourism sector employers and the skills developed by young graduates at various levels of

tourism management programs (Quarantino, 2013). This gap might further increase in the near future due to the above-mentioned changes occurring in the industry.

4.1. Methods

This step of the research was based on a qualitative approach, given its exploratory purpose (Yin, 1994). The field work consisted of 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with private and public tour operators and experts, working in the north-western area of Italy (overall, representing employer demand for jobs in the market). The criterion for choosing the interviewees was to be able to comprehensively cover the “labor demand”, of private and public employers, intermediaries and labor market experts and representatives from local government bodies operating in the tourism industry.

The interviews were conducted using a checklist – with open questions – of precisely defined items in order to be able to compare and cross-analyse the different responses. Specific questions were asked with regards to the following items: 1) main trends currently influencing the tourism sector and labor market in Italy; 2) emerging jobs in tourism; 3) new future jobs for the industry; 4) ideal competencies of a young graduate in tourism (with a specific focus on SCC); 5) existing gaps compared to the profiles of those coming from the higher education system; 6) possible inputs for designs of training programs offered.

The development of the formal check-list used by researchers in the field was based on a systematic analysis of the existing Italian literature on these topics (EBNT, 2015; ISFOL, 2011; Manpower, 2015; Unioncamere, 2015, 2016)

The researchers grouped the contents of the interviews according to their significance to the research questions (relevance), the number of occurrences (prevalence) and originality. All findings were anonymized. The analytic strategy was based on the literature regarding qualitative data analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994) using various techniques: 1) making a matrix of categories and placing the evidence within such categories; 2) tabulating the frequency of different events; 3) listing similarities and differences among interviews.

What follows is a synthesis of the results that is focused on the issues more directly related with the second step of the research.

4.2. Results¹

The respondents agree that today’s labor market is strongly affected by five general trends, which are significantly changing the industry (Figure 1): 1) change in tourism demand; 2) integration of tourism offer; 3) spread of new information and communication technologies; 4) market globalization; 5) increasing attention to environmental issues.

The relevance of these phenomena/drivers implies the need to “work both on the definition of new indispensable job profiles and career paths to operate competitively; and on the rethinking of existing jobs in terms of skill sets and training programs”. On the one hand, the main jobs and skills that are emerging are related to the impact of new technologies and media (“here we are facing a huge skill shortage, we look for these profiles, but we cannot find them anywhere...we would be ready not only to hire such people, but also to pay them well!”); and on the other, the need to work on the

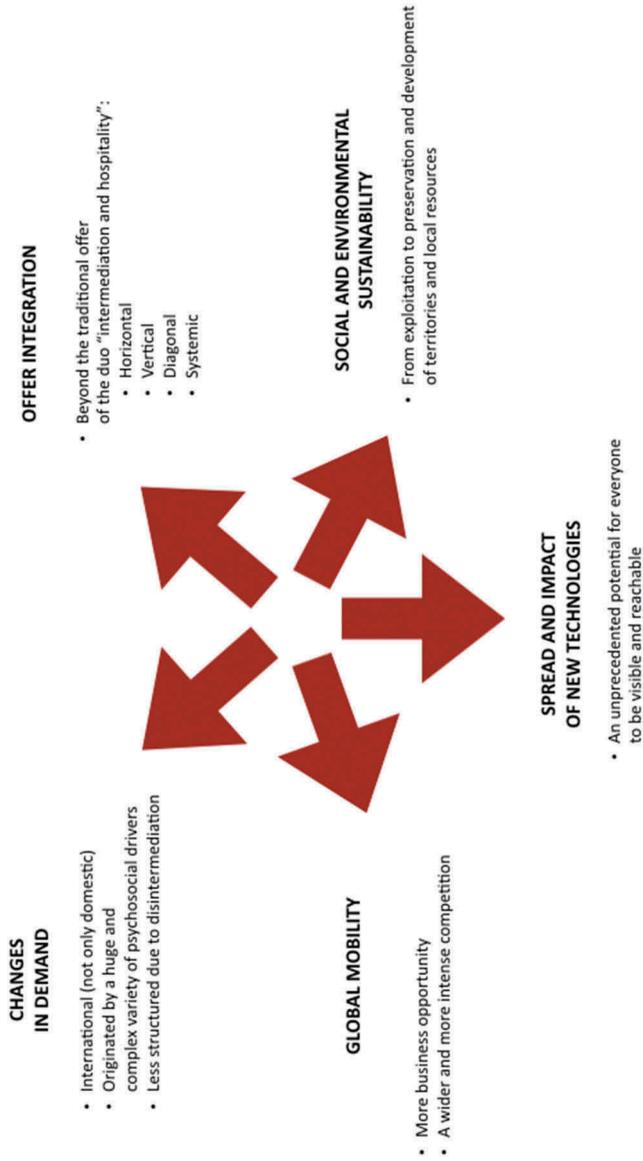


Figure 1. Main vectors of change in the Italian tourism industry.

integrated promotion of local areas and territories, where competencies to invent, build and govern local networks is crucial (“for young people mastering skills in cooperation, negotiation and networking is crucial”).

As an impact of globalization, the development of profiles able to adequately manage the increasing flow of tourists that arrive from every corner of the world is becoming essential. It is not enough to simply be able to speak different languages, but it is also necessary to exhibit different and unexpressed socio-emotional needs (“perceptions vary a lot among national cultures and what makes a European customer satisfied perhaps might not work with a Chinese”). Fluency in foreign languages and multicultural awareness are key competencies in the opinion of the interviewees.

As far as the ideal profile of a young graduate is concerned, the respondents agreed that the area of “knowledge” is the one showing smaller gaps. With the exception of language skills, Italian trainers and educators must ensure what is perceived as “a sound and complete preparation of the industry and its main compartments, marketing and HR, basic economics and so on”. The most critical gaps emerge among skills and attitudes, where employers declare that it is much more difficult to work: “if a candidate lacks in functional skills, we are able to cover the gap in a couple of years, while when it is a matter of social skills the work is much harder”.

First of all, they are related to those skills needed in a work environment characterized by high emotional intensity, such as tourism: “young people need to be able to understand others people’s feelings and thus behave consequently... in what is called in one word, emotional intelligence”. The respondents grouped these skills in two blocks: the first focused mainly on internal organizational behaviors, such as working in a team, interpersonal communication and influence (“young people should know how to contribute not only in terms of technical performance, but also in social relations”); the second focused on external behavior such as, the ability to host, to listen to needs expressed, manage complaints and exhibit expressions of caring: “in our companies, we have an extended front-line where everyone must feel accountable for customer satisfaction and loyalty”).

Secondly, they refer to managerial skills such as the coordination of complex organizational/inter-organizational systems, networking among different stakeholders, problem-solving and negotiation. These are “becoming crucial in the tourism sector, which is increasingly complex and changing almost daily”.

Finally, the interviewees mentioned a set of “individual attitudes” they believe essential for a young student entering the labor market (“without which it becomes very hard to achieve professional success”): self-control, accountability, flexibility and adaptation, openness to change, proactivity and willingness to learn.

Overall, the first step of the research highlighted a wide set of skills required by private and public employers. On the one hand, education and training providers should take this set of skills into account when designing their programs, to ensure future employability and professional success. On the other hand, students should be increasingly aware of their own knowledge and competencies.

5. SCC between market requirements and students’ awareness

These observations demonstrated a need for better understanding of how to organize the curriculum of tourism management courses. The objective was to enhance the cross-sectional

skills that are important for entry into the labor market and which facilitate one's personal and professional success. What should be mentioned is that among these abilities was the capacity to be "one's own manager" both in the labor market and within the smaller but significant activities that characterize the Italian entrepreneurial field.

Soft skills are part of an individual's intangible assets. They are developed through one's experiential and intellectual learning. They are acquired through both formal and informal learning, in unaware and/or intentional processes. They are improved through continuous practice in structured experiences that can be combined with moments of reflection on one's own learning and with situations already integrated in the professional training.

The starting point was, in fact, the gap between the skills that the market requires and the skills developed as part of the training path of students. Such awareness has triggered the need to reflect on the SCC as they are pursued by the qualified labor market in the tourism field (firms, public administration, institutions, operators in the services field, trade associations and local organizations) and as they are referred by students of the field (first-level degree, bachelor's degree, first- and second-level post-graduate students).

Starting therefore from "non original" reflections on professional efficacy, we moved to a programmatic integration in the training paths for new young professionals in the field.

5.1. Method

5.1.1 Participants

Data collection took place from February 2016 to September 2016. Participants included 101 students (mean age = 25.45 yrs., SD = 7.255) attending 320 tourism courses in Northern Italy at IULM University of Milan, UET Milan, Padua University and Ca' Foscari University of Venice and 42 tour operators (mean age = 42.88 yrs., SD = 14.500), see [Table 1](#) for further details.

Students were asked during class lessons to complete an online questionnaire at home. 142 students in total were asked to complete the questionnaire. From this total, 41 of them did not complete the entire questionnaire and therefore their results were partial and had to be rejected. The group of tourist operators were contacted in the same area and selected as a sample of professionals (executives and managers), working in the categories of "Guest services" and "Retail and Catering Businesses" that according to EBNT (2015) represent 96% of the total tourism activity developed in Italy.

The breakdown of the tour operators was as follows: 24.39% of them have been working in the field for 1 to 5 years, 21.95% for 6 to 10 years, 14.63% for 11 to 15 years, 7.32% for 16 to 20 years and 31.71% for more than 20 years. In the same sample, 43.90% have less than 10 co-workers, 21.95% have 11–20 co-workers, 4.88% between 21 and 30 and 29.27% more than 30.

In the group of students, 69.31% have a first-level university degree, 29.70% a second-level university degree (Master) and 0.99% a third-level university degree (Ph.D.).²

The professionals were asked to answer each question reasoning as they would like students entering the field of tourism to answer, which means both that the answers should express what they mean the students should have or feel as relevant to be

Table 1. Description of the samples.

	Students	Tour operators
Gender		
M	26.51	50.00
F	73.49	50.00
Age		
Mean	25.45	42.88
StDev	7.26	14.50
Area		
Lombardy	74.25	69.31
Veneto	12.87	30.69
Cycle		
Undergraduate studies	69.31	
Graduate studies	29.70	
Postgraduate studies	0.99	
Experience in the field		
1–5 years		24.39
6–10 years		21.95
11–15 years		14.63
16–20 years		7.32
More than 20 years		31.71
Co-workers		
Less than 10		43.90
11–20 co-workers		21.95
21–30 co-workers		4.88
More than 30		29.27

successful in their future career. The students were asked to answer according to their extent of agreement or disagreement with each item.

5.1.2 Research instrument and procedure

With regards to this study, the term competency is defined as an underlying characteristic of a person leading to or causing superior or effective performance and it can be assessed and compared through indicators and indexes (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008). This assessment was carried out in two phases: 1) a self assessment of their own SCC and 2) the tourism professionals' assessment of what is needed in order to work in the field.

This process was developed using an SCC assessment tool for the analysis of higher education students moving from the academic world to the entrepreneurial world (Pérez, Petrides, & Furnham, 2005). This scale, in process of validation, is a questionnaire named Successful Soft Skills – Job & School 20 (SSS-JS_20, Russo & Bustreo, 2015), created after an in-depth evaluation and analysis of the existing scales: TEIQue Italian Revised (Petrides & Furnham, 2001), EQ-i Italian Revised (Bar-On, 1997, 2000), TSIS (Silvera, Martinussen, & Dahl, 2001), Org-EIQ (Giorgi & Majer, 2012) and SKIPI (Alpay & Walsh, 2008). The basis of the survey considered, among other aspects (16 in total: Russo & Bustreo, 2015), the following previous surveys and their limitations (Russo & Bustreo, 2015): the *MSCEIT Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test* (Meijer et al., 2001; its eight dimensions of emotional ability not clearly divided between EI and IQ (Conte, 2005); the *MEIS Multi-factor Emotional Intelligence Scale* (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999) and its focus on performance but with low levels of reliability (Conte, 2005); the *EQ-i Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory* (Bar-On, 1997) and its five individual and social dimensions (intra-personal, inter-personal, adaptation, stress control and emotions) but with some limitations in personality assumptions, reliability and validity (Conte, 2005; Davies, Stankov, &

Roberts, 1998); the *SREIS Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Scale* (Schutte et al., 1998) for using its four sub-scales (emotion perception, utilizing emotions, managing self-relevant emotions and managing others' emotions) but with some limitations pointed out by Petrides and Furnham (2000); the *ECI-360 Emotional Competency Inventory* (Boyatzis & Burckle, 1999) for its correlations with the four dimensions (self and social awareness, self-confidence, and social ability) of Goleman (1998) but strongly criticized by Mayer and colleagues (2001) and Conte (2005) for its effectiveness and reliability: the *TEIQue Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire* (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004).

The chosen measures were, on one side, common to all the scales and, on the other side, more consistent within an organizational setting and context. The items were divided into 165 that subsequently became 60 after verifying construct, face, content and factorial validity. These 60 items measured a total of 11 factors divided into two macro-dimensions identified as social and individual dimensions. The social dimension included *leadership, organization, sociability, empathy, social influence* and *emotional availability*. The individual dimension included *self-control, self confidence, commitment, assertiveness* and *adaptation*. This process was conducted using a 5-point Likert scale (in which 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree").

This instrument had a Cronbach's alpha between .657 and .907, with a mean total coefficient of internal consistency of .84 and saturation factor greater than .40 between and within the factors (Russo & Bustreo, 2015). In the present analysis, Cronbach's alpha varies between .790 and .997 for students and .863 and .998 for tour operators. After verifying the normality of the curves, and considering that the two groups were not homogeneous, the Levene's test was used to verify the homoskedasticity of the variances.

5.2. Results

As mentioned above, the objective of the comparison between tour operators' perceptions of what SCC new professionals in the field should have and students' perceptions regarding what SCC they should possess is numerous: 1) it should demonstrate if there is any difference between the two kinds of perceptions, if it is significant and in what terms; 2) it should encourage the students to reflect on their own areas for improvement; 3) it should provide information for tour operators on the ideal profile and the role that must be covered; 4) it should provide feedback to the training system regarding if and how any of the SCC dimensions should be improved.

The first result shows that a difference exists between the perceptions of tour operators and those of students. Students, in fact, do not seem to give the same relevance to SCC, in their curricular program, as tour operators do. Tour operators feel that a new, young operator who enters the field should mandatorily possess and, ultimately, demonstrate these skills in order to be considered well prepared. The mean values of each of the 11 factors are generally lower in the students' data than in the professionals' data as evinced in Table 2. The reason for students considering SCC as less important is certainly something that needs to be examined.

After verifying the significance, we discovered, as reported in the table below, that *empathy* ($t(91.63) = -1.550, p > .05$), *assertiveness* ($t(131) = 1.153, p > .05$) and *emotional availability* ($t(130) = -1.129, p > .05$) are the factors whose variances do not differ in an impartial way. We acknowledged that the variation between the perceptions of tour

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the 11 factors.

n.	Factor	Individual/social	Mean			Standard deviations	
			Tour operators	Students	Spread	Tour operators	Students
F9	Adaptation	Individual	4.43	3.72	-0.71	0.59	0.81
F6	Commitment	Individual	4.52	3.84	-0.68	0.43	0.58
F3	Self-control	Individual	3.88	3.21	-0.67	0.62	0.8
F5	Self-confidence	Individual	3.77	3.35	-0.42	0.55	0.75
F8	Assertiveness	Individual	3.49	3.64	0.15	0.65	0.67
F2	Organization ability	Social	4.02	3.50	-0.52	0.62	0.66
F10	Social influence	Social	3.33	3.01	-0.32	0.64	0.73
F4	Sociability	Social	4.35	4.05	-0.30	0.52	0.88
F1	Leadership	Social	3.84	3.64	-0.20	0.48	0.53
F11	Emotional Availability	Social	3.57	3.39	-0.18	0.7	0.88
F7	Empathy	Social	3.85	3.68	-0.17	0.53	0.66

operators and students is not explained by them being part of one of the two groups. With reference to empathy and emotional availability, we could suppose that in both groups the skills related to emotion are not univocally perceived as important/not important in the future career construction, as these SCC seem to indeed be subject to individual interpretation.

Levene's tests on homoskedasticity (see Table 3), after singling out the skills with significant results ($p < .05$), demonstrated that the comparison between the two groups is as follows: *leadership* $t(134) = -2.058, p < .05$; *organizational ability* $t(132) = -4.227, p < .001$; *self-control* $t(93.43) = -5.162, p < .001$; *sociability* $t(114.72) = -2.483, p < .05$; *self confidence* $t(133) = -3.235, p < .01$; *commitment* $t(98.08) = -7.489, p < .001$; *adaptation* $t(99.16) = -5.606, p < .001$; and *social influence* $t(132) = -2.324, p < .05$.

Among the factors, whose significance is lower than .001 are self-control, organizational ability, commitment and adaptation that are, as will be later explained, the four factors whose spread between tour operators and students is strikingly evident.

Some antagonistic items are revealed between students and tour operators when digging deeper into the specific factors. Tourism companies need young professionals with SCC that match and enhance hard skills management. These SCCs must reinforce the values and attitudes that new operators possess. The professionals who responded to the survey specifically mentioned the competencies of *adaptation* (mean = 4.43), *commitment* (mean = 4.52), *sociability* (mean = 4.35), *organization* (mean = 4.02), *self-control* (mean = 3.88) and *leadership* (mean = 3.84). At the same time, some of these competencies are not considered equally important by the students: *adaptation* (mean = 3.71; spread .71), *commitment* (mean = 3.84; spread .68), *self-control* (mean = 3.21; spread .67) and *organization* (mean = 3.50; spread .52). It is interesting that the spread is particularly evident as far as individual SCC are concerned rather than the social ones. This aspect should definitely be examined more in depth so as to understand whether this is due to incorrect self-perception or to the misconception that these abilities are not required for a career in tourism.

With regards to individual dimensions, self-control was considered to be extremely necessary by operators. Staying calm, reacting properly to one's own irritability or anxiety and being able to manage a stressful situation is an integral part of a career in tourism (and actually of any other for that matter). Experienced operators, through their

Table 3. Levene's tests on homoskedasticity between tour operators and students.

	Levene's test for equality of variances										t test for equality of means			95% confidence interval of the difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	95% confidence interval of the difference			
												Lower	Upper		
F1 Leadership	,157	,692	-2,058	134	,042	-19,899	,09671	-39,027	-,00771	-39,027	-,00771	-39,027	-,00771		
F2 Organizational ability	,611	,436	-4,227	79,198	,036	-19,899	,09333	-38,474	-,01323	-38,474	-,01323	-38,474	-,01323		
F3 Self-control	4,913	,028	-4,328	77,744	,000	-51,947	,12,288	-76,254	-,27,640	-76,254	-,27,640	-76,254	-,27,640		
F4 Sociability	10,299	,002	-5,162	93,427	,000	-66,230	,12,002	-75,842	-,28,052	-75,842	-,28,052	-75,842	-,28,052		
F5 Self-confidence	2,857	,093	-2,023	133	,045	-30,569	,12,830	-44,251	-,38,210	-44,251	-,38,210	-44,251	-,38,210		
F6 Commitment	3,980	,048	-3,668	99,217	,000	-42,481	,11,582	-54,952	-,06,186	-54,952	-,06,186	-54,952	-,06,186		
F7 Empathy	4,148	,044	-7,489	98,082	,000	-68,265	,09116	-86,354	-,50,175	-86,354	-,50,175	-86,354	-,50,175		
F8 Assertiveness	1,352	,247	-1,550	91,634	,125	-16,682	,11,788	-39,999	,06636	-39,999	,06636	-39,999	,06636		
F9 Adaptation	7,571	,007	-4,958	131	,000	-70,514	,12,491	-88,053	-,04,690	-88,053	-,04,690	-88,053	-,04,690		
F10 Social influence	,012	,914	-2,324	132	,022	-31,075	,13,372	-57,525	-,04,625	-57,525	-,04,625	-57,525	-,04,625		
F11 Emotional availability	2,754	,099	-1,129	130	,261	-17,949	,15,903	-49,410	-,05,880	-49,410	-,05,880	-49,410	-,05,880		
			-1,243	89,783	,217	-17,949	,14,436	-46,629	10,732	-46,629	10,732	-46,629	10,732		

daily work, have in fact come to understand that being able to control themselves is undoubtedly an important and necessary part of their jobs. Inexperienced students, on the other hand, are probably not completely aware that dealing with new and unexpected situations with composure and calmness is without a doubt an important and necessary part of their jobs. For this reason, many consider self-control as having a minor role in their success for the future.

Similarly, professionals in the field emphasized the need for young professionals to be able to deal with unexpected situations, change routines when necessary and adapt to new situations. This idea is not fully shared by the students whose results are lower, reflecting less interest in this skill.

Moreover, professionals feel that commitment in terms of organization, planning, coordination and management of strength and ability to complete assignments is a top priority and students again, do not feel the same.

The following are further results (Figures 2 and 3) that are consistent with a previous pilot phase of the study (Bustreo & Micheletto, 2015; Bustreo, Micheletto, & Fiorentino, 2015; Bustreo, Micheletto, Quaratino, & Fiorentino in Soresi, Nota, & Ginevra, 2016).

The radar (Figure 2) illustrates the perception of the importance of adaptation and commitment on behalf of tourism professionals as being particularly evident. This is in line, as previously stated with the day-to-day work experience where the main and most important aspect is being able to manage change and the consequences that are associated. On the contrary, students considered sociability as being the most important skill as they probably assume that being successful in this type of career is strongly related to relational skills, communication and socialization.

It is evident in the social macro dimension as to how new operators entering the field should be able to improve their organizational skills (provide feedback, lead group meetings), and all of the aspects that according to professionals are fundamental abilities to becoming a skilful professional in the field. Furthermore, both operators and students tend to attribute importance to leadership skills.

An interesting point can be deduced from the previous radar (Figure 3), and that is that both students and tour operators feel the same with regards to the fundamental

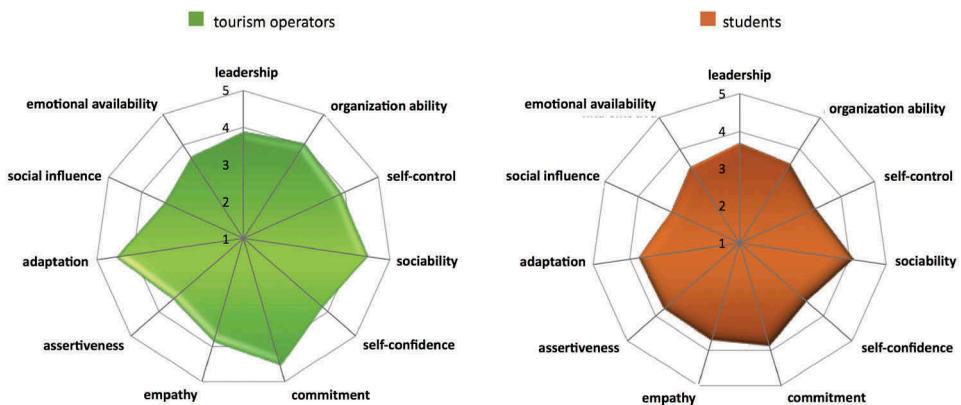


Figure 2. The emerging profiles for the two samples.

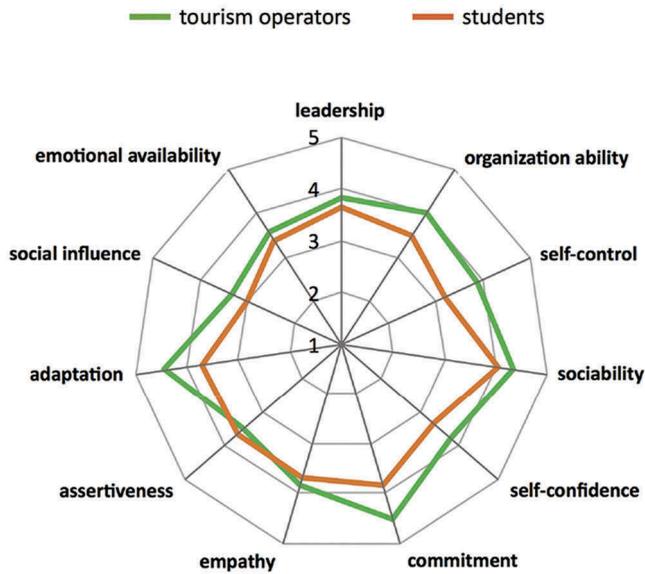


Figure 3. Comparison between the two different profiles.

abilities required for professional success within their field. Having a strong social influence over people in order to change their minds through suggestions made, dialogue or persuasion as well as being self-confident, do not rank among the top abilities necessary to carry out ones' job and find success.

6. Discussion and academic implications

Competencies are multidimensional; they are not simply an accumulation of knowledge and they never present detailed know-how for certain procedures. Competency is rather an individual disposition that directs strategies, values, motivations and attitudes, which, by mobilizing the wealth of global resources combined together with curiosity and initiation, contribute to the implementation of the most appropriate behavior. A professional must know how to create nimble and effective networking by knowing how to listen and responsibly manage different levels of interpersonal and professional communication. They must know how to solve a problem, and be able to foresee the problem through excellent problem-setting, or better yet, defining the problem. The SCC are crucial "meta-competencies" in an increasingly complex environment, where the demand is fragmented, the perspective becomes global and innovation is more frequent due to new and emerging technologies.

It is requested of today's young trainees that they are both prepared, as well as properly and multiculturally adept (Weber et al., 2013). That they are able to design, plan and promote the development of tourism products and services through constant networking with other operators (Quarantino, 2013). In order to do that, it is necessary to begin from the current demand segmentation and proceed toward the improvement of the human, cultural and environmental heritage.

As previous studies revealed, SCC were needed by entry-level hospitality managers. By increasing the awareness young practitioners have of SCC, tourism managers can have a positive influence on their organizations and also their organizations' customers (Weber et al., 2013). From these findings, it is clear that graduates must not delay the transition toward an indispensable professional development of their talents and their SCC according to agreed upon and rigorous guidelines.

The first result is the lack of awareness on behalf of the students on the importance of SCC together with hard skills. In fact, the difference between the samples that emerged in each of the 11 factors taken into consideration, seem to highlight that a young person involved in an advanced training course in the tourism sector tends to be highly focused on hard skills and does not acquire the necessary experience to improve their soft skills and understand the importance of such skills. On the contrary, improving SCC is actually subordinated to being deeply aware of what SCC are and how they contribute to the professional development of a young graduate.

This lack of awareness exists in young professionals and in some cases, also in those that are already operating within the field when they are searching for specific staff. If you consider social influence, emotional availability or assertiveness, these results are low also with regards to tour operators. A deficiency is particularly problematic to the extent that it does not allow one to develop at the onset of training a capacity for personal development, which is decisive for the purpose of long-term employability.

As far as students are concerned, specific action needs to be taken by schools through the activities provided to students to help them understand what SCCs are actually like. Specific classes on the matter, internships, temporary professional experiences, meetings with tourism professionals are all activities that can enhance this awareness. Thanks to this specific focus, it will be much easier for students to improve their SCC.

On the other hand, tour operators need to fully understand the fact that SCC are extremely relevant for young professionals who are entering the tourism market. Students will not only need to be young experts in their areas, but will also have the chance of becoming skilled professionals entering the labor market and could better promote their technical and scientific expertise in a rapidly changing professional context (business and consulting). This young generation of tourism managers will have the opportunity to improve their soft skills, their self branding and self-promoting abilities, which will inevitably require specific individual and social skills.

Furthermore, a second result of the research is the fact that there is a difference in the students' perception on the importance of individual and social SCC. They actually seem to care less about individual SCC than operators do. This suggests that students either view tourism professions as being associated with a purely relational context or consider the ability to relate with others more valid in professional terms with respect to characteristics linked to commitment and such. In reality though, the abilities such as commitment, adaptation and self-control, which are taken into consideration much less by students, are in fact those abilities that require a greater effort from the individual, in terms of hard work and exertion in order to fully acquire them.

It would be interesting to discuss the matter with students from other fields of employment in order to better understand whether this is a matter specifically related to tourism or if this is an evaluation that young, inexperienced people have of professions in general.

Once one has a greater understanding of SCC's underlying values and, in particular, engagement and adaptation, as well as organization, this will permit the practitioner to exhibit improved behaviors. This will improve the capacity to adapt to change and the social dynamics that characterize it. Moreover, this facilitates young people's integration and adaptation within the work environment in a responsible, flexible and reliable manner. Furthermore, the ability to establish and manage complex territorial networks seems to be a skill that will help young people be able to enter and advance within the labor market. This is a fact based on the continued changes taking place in the industry, both on the demand side and on the offer side.

7. Conclusions

The Italian tourism industry and the changing relationship with the global world, with its technological evolution inside a framework of sustainability, represents a first and decisive point of view from which to revise the needs of the professional tourism market. Certainly, things are developing quickly and as far as Italy is concerned, the change in tourism demand, the integration in tourism offers, the dissemination of technology, the globalization of the market and the emerging attention to environmental issues must all be taken into consideration when developing new curricula for students entering the tourism field of study.

Nevertheless, what emerges from the qualitative analysis is that emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998), which is as essential in this field as in others, involves two areas — on one side, the ability to perceive clients' feelings, interpret their attitudes and behaviors and ultimately be empathic; on the other side, the ability to interact internally with co-workers.

Once the setting in which the tourism industry and training are currently operating in Italy was examined and contextualized, the present survey demonstrated the gap that exists between the perception of soft skills that students and professionals have, which the tourism industry values as important, along the same line of previous studies by Rodríguez-Antón et al. (2013), Baum and Odgers (2001), Sigala and Baum (2003), and how this knowledge could be applied to the higher educational/training programs in tourism management.

The results brought to the surface differing perceptions of soft skills and the degree of their relative importance in professional fields. These findings both confirm and differ from prior studies in a number of results. First of all, the results draw one's attention to the students' low awareness of the importance of SCC for their future careers in tourism. Furthermore, personal and social competencies such as organizational ability, self-control, self esteem, commitment and adaptability seem to be perceived by tour operators as the most important competencies that need to be acquired. This is also true as far as the studies by the aforementioned authors are concerned. But, contrary to some of the results from these studies, the present survey illustrates that there seems to be a lack of more than one abilities, in students' perception, that are required of professionals in the field of tourism. This suggests that training programs must first, increase students' awareness with regards to SCC and their importance and, then must subsequently reinforce soft-skills content in their educational strategy. Similarly, to what Rodríguez-Antón and colleagues (2013)

wrote, the present research is one of the research efforts needed to tackle this challenge through different approaches to learning, teaching and tourism curriculum development.

It becomes imperative that a culture of entrepreneurship and promotion of talents that will able to go beyond technical and sectoral skills be put forth today. For this to occur, real opportunities must be created for dialogue between the worlds of education and profession. A young manager in the field of tourism must have higher self-esteem. They must either already know – or be taught – how to organize both themselves and their work. They need greater competency in managing emotions and stronger persuasion skills as well as to be able make decisions, influence others and motivate them during challenges and times of change. Moreover, they should have a strong focus and a concrete ability to improve their own self-management and self-guided development over time.

But it is extremely evident that cooperation between public organizations and private companies in the field of research is still inadequate in Italy (Angeloni, 2013). The culture of exchange and mutual improvement in the processes of interaction and collaboration between the two sectors does not exist, even in terms of knowledge transfer and SCC development. This is one of the reasons for the objectives of the present study: to offer a solution for overcoming this limit.

At the same time, the evolution of offerings in the tourism industry, requiring more and more integration among a plurality of private and public actors, calls for a new breed of professionals who are able to fill this gap.

Today, professional success is defined as the combination of many aspects. They include: learning the qualifications of a role, managing one's own personal and professional development, the ability to continuously reinforce efficient and creative ways of learning, the personal ability to live empathetically and make sense of the past and lived experiences and the cultivation of an attitude that is capable of improvising in the face of unforeseen and unforeseeable situations. These abilities can be taught, learned, enhanced and improved during a continuous path, for both individual and professional growth. The emergence of a focus on the understanding of SCC's importance, on one hand, can be enhanced by organizing courses that focus on SCCs within the curriculum of university tourism studies. It can also be done by creating assessment grids for the exams in which both hard skills and SCCs are evaluated. On the other side, specific internships or work experiences, during the academic period or immediately afterward would allow students the possibility to work on their abilities. Finally, continuous interaction between the university and professionals in the area through conferences and meetings can help students increase their perception of what their preparation should be and it could also be an interesting opportunity for professionals in the field to meet with one another.

8. Limitation and further research

The present research explores the Italian tourism field through the words of different stakeholders. Experts of the field, tour operators, and students on their way to enter the market are all involved in the frame and contribute to clarify what is happening today in Italy. By the way, some limitations are present in this research. First of all, the analyses,

both qualitative and quantitative, were based on perceptions, that is an important starting point, but they need to be completed, integrated and audited through further data and analyses of the area, of other stakeholders or end-users. This would allow possibly confirming the present conclusions and giving further information about the Italian tourism market.

Moreover, the sample of the research, both for qualitative and quantitative analyses, is still modest in number and needs to be increased in order to gain substance and allow to draw more precise and reliable conclusions.

Moreover, the SCC were considered as divided into two categories of social and individual skills, but each of these macro-categories presents skills that are inner-directed and other that are outer-directed. Therefore, it would have been interesting – and it will possibly be carried out in the future – to analyze the skills when divided into sub-categories so as to have further insightful results.

Notes

1. As pointed out in the methods, we referred to a criterion of prevalence, therefore each quote, even though coming from different interviews, is representative of a common opinion among interviewees.
2. <http://www.miur.it/guida/capitolo3.htm>.

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