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The Interest of the Target Groups in the New Study Program Sustainable Agritourism

Slavica Dudaš

Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia, sdudas@veleri.hr

Melita Zec Vojinović*

Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia, melita.zec-vojinovic@veleri.hr

Sanja Raspor Janković

Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia, sraspor@veleri.hr

Mladen Marinac

Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia, marinac@veleri.hr

Marino Golob

Polytechnic of Rijeka, Croatia, marino.golob@veleri.hr

Abstract

The Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF) is a reform instrument for regulating the system of qualifications through qualifications standards based on learning outcomes and following the needs of the labour market, individuals and the society. The project: The Development of a New Study Program Sustainable Agritourism Through CROQF, besides implementing CROQF, examine also the interest of target groups in the new study program. Thus, the aim of this research was to: i) determine the relative number of students interested in studying sustainable agritourism, ii) identify the marketing methods for the new study program, and iii) to identify key elements for the study program organization.

The instrument for collecting primary data was on-site and on-line self administered questionnaire. Data were collected in two types of educational institutions, high schools and college education institutions. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test.

The results showed that relatively high proportion of high school and college students are interested in studying the new study program, which could offer also courses in English, Italian or German. The marketing strategy for the new study program includes Internet marketing, direct marketing and promotion. Overall, the results showed the direction in which the new study program, Sustainable Agritourism, and the Polytechnic of Rijeka would need to develop and what should be improved.

Key words: new study program, sustainable agritourism, study interest, marketing strategy

*Corresponding author

1 Introduction

The Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF) is a reform instrument for regulating the system of qualifications at all levels in the Republic of Croatia through qualifications standards based on learning outcomes and following the needs of the labor market, individuals and the society. The development of CROQF started in 2006 with the document Baseline of Croatian Qualifications Framework across many activities toward the CROQF Act, which was adopted in 2013 (<http://www.kvalifikacije.hr>, 25.2.2016).

In addition to qualification standards, CROQF also introduces occupational standards. This document, clearly states competencies required for a particular occupation. Qualification Standard is made on the basis of clearly defined methodologies and collected data which identify and analyze the competences required for a profession. CROQF provides connectivity levels of qualifications acquired in the Republic of Croatia to the qualifications levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), which enables recognition of qualifications acquired in the Republic of Croatia in Croatian and European labor market.

In the center of the CROQF are learning outcomes, that is, competencies that a person has acquired through learning and demonstrated after the learning process, where the process of learning itself is not essential since the learning outcomes are tested. While the same qualification can be acquired at different educational institutions, through various educational programs, there are certain standards in terms of defined learning outcomes that qualifications must have. Educational programs should comply with the standards of qualification; they have to lead to the achievement of learning outcomes as required by the relevant standard qualifications (CROQF Act, 2013).

According to the CROQF Act, new study programs as well as existing study programs should be based on the CROQF, meaning that for all study programs occupational standards and qualifications standards should be adjusted or developed. Thus, all documents are based on the assessment and analysis of the current situation on the labor market in the given field.

The education transition from the knowledge transfer to the learning outcomes, in other words, the use of the teaching methodology where an emphasis is on learning outcomes, will be achieved by implementing innovative teaching methods and active e-learning adapted to contemporary students (ASOO, 2012). Thus, the quality and results of the education will be measurable (EUROPE 2020, 2010).

Besides the transition in education and education that is in line with the market needs, social inclusion and sustainable development, improved and better integration of students and stakeholders in the labor market are essential within the process of education for assuring acquirement of adequate entrepreneurial skills. The transition in education, know-how transition of knowledge and entrepreneurial skills would provide greater employability of graduates.

Implementation of the concepts of CROQF in the creation of the new study program, Sustainable Agritourism, will be achieved through 3 key elements: i) development of occupational standards for an engineer of sustainable agro-tourism with the corresponding analytical matrix, ii) the development of learning outcomes and iii) the development of qualification standards.

To follow the needs of contemporary students while aware of the high proportion of classical teaching methods at the Polytechnic of Rijeka, a new approach to learning will be adopted. In the new learning approach an emphasis will be on the achievement of the learning outcomes as well as on the implementation of a new approach to education which is based on student-centered teaching and students' achievement of the given learning outcomes. (EUROPE 2020, 2010). Innovative models of

teaching and learning will be introduced as well as a compulsory professional training for students in one of the EU countries at the end of the study.

Besides the CROQF, the project encompasses an additional aspect, the interest of students and high school pupils in the new study program. Thus, the aim of this research was to: i) determine the relative number of students who are interested in studying sustainable agritourism, ii) identify the marketing methods for the new program, and iii) to identify key elements for the study program organization.

2 Methodology

2.1 Questionnaire

The instrument for collecting primary data was on-site and on-line self-administered questionnaire. In order to address both study groups, two questionnaires were developed.

Both questionnaires included questions that can be grouped in three main sections, namely, study organization, sustainable and organic agriculture, and demographic characteristics. Variables in questionnaires were measured using a nominal scale and a 5-point Likert type scale with anchors "not important" (rating 1) and "very important" (rating 5).

2.2 Sampling procedure

The data were collected in two types of educational institutions that perform study programmes related to agriculture, tourism, and economics, resulting with two samples. One sample was taken from high schools in Istra County and Primorje-Gorski kotar County, while the second sample was taken from the higher education institutions (college) in Istra County and Primorje-Gorski kotar County. The college population were students of agriculture and entrepreneurship at the Polytechnic of Rijeka. In addition, the high school population regarded the third and fourth grade students in agriculture, tourism, and economics. The data were gathered during November and December 2015.

Before the data collection started, heads (e.g. deans) of educational institutions were contacted for permission to take part in the study. Thus, the questionnaires were administered only in those settings where their heads agreed to participate.

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents at the beginning of the class. Data collection resulted with 269 valid questionnaires filled in by students, and 427 valid questionnaires filled in by high school students.

2.3 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test using IBM SPSS version 23 software.

Descriptive statistics was used to examine a demographic profile of the respondents, to determine the respondents' relative proportion regarding their interest in the study programme, employment in agritourism, interest in courses held in foreign language, and to evaluate factors that influence study programme selection, important studying elements, and importance of foreign languages in agritourism.

Independent samples t-test was performed to determine the significance of the difference between college and high school students, regarding the study organization and factors that influence study programme selection.

3 Results

The results are presented as follows. Firstly, a demographic profile of the respondents and the importance of the selected study elements are presented. Secondly, the significance of the difference between two study groups is examined.

3.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

In both high school and college students' samples female respondents (60% and 74.7%, respectively) outnumbered male respondents. Almost 52% of high school students were in the fourth grade, and even 87% of college students took part in a professional undergraduate study programme. Furthermore, the majority of college students were in the age group between 18 and 25 (79.9%), and about 63% were full-time students. About 84% of the students indicated that they have a propensity for working in their field of education.

3.2 Selected study elements

The interest in the Sustainable Agritourism study program was showed by 37% of college students and 9% of high school students, while 41% of high school students were not sure about their interest in this study program. The interest in selfemployment or employment in agritourism was showed by 42% of the college students and 23% of high school students.

Both groups answered that the most important language in the agritourism is English, followed by Italian and German. The interest in the courses held in foreign language showed 74% of pupils and 48% of students.

3.3 The significance of the difference between high school and college students

Table 1 reports the results of independent samples t-test for factors that influence study programme selection.

Table 1: The comparison of mean scores for factors that influence study programme selection

Variables	Mean scores		t-value	Sig.
	Students	High school pupils		
Your friends' experience	3.25 (1.18)	3.20 (1.12)	0.466	0.641
Television	2.02 (1.09)	2.19 (1.08)	-2.045	0.041*
Information on the Internet	3.33 (1.18)	3.59 (1.13)	-2.839	0.005**
Newspapers	2.21 (1.09)	2.21 (1.07)	-0.031	0.975
Brochures	2.50 (1.18)	2.99 (1.20)	-5.260	0.000**
Promotion (fairs, presentations, etc.)	2.95 (1.28)	3.21 (1.20)	-2.684	0.007**
Personal interest in a study program	4.47 (0.99)	4.52 (0.97)	-0.688	0.491

Note: mean scores range from 1 to 5; values in parentheses are standard deviations; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

As noted in Table 1, the most important factor that influences study programme selection in both groups of the respondents was "personal interest in a study program", followed by "information on Internet". On the other hand, the least important factor for both groups was "television".

Although the results seem to be somewhat similar, the independent samples t-test showed that in four out of seven factors significant differences were found between both samples. These factors were

"television", "information on internet", "brochure", and "promotion". All of these factors have a significantly higher impact on study program selection for high school students than for college students.

Table 2: The comparison of mean scores for important studying elements

Variables	Mean scores		t-value	Sig.
	Students	High school pupils		
Availability of the literature in library	3.98 (1.07)	3.58 (1.10)	4.769	0.000*
Equipped rooms in which exercises are performed (eg. laboratory)	4.29 (0.89)	4.25 (0.89)	0.536	0.592
Appropriate size of classrooms (in line with the number of students)	3.95 (1.04)	3.92 (0.99)	0.411	0.681
Access to computers and the internet at the institution	4.27 (0.95)	4.35 (0.85)	-1.161	0.246
Possibility to attend courses that are not part of your study program (e.g. courses offered by another institution or at another department)	3.40 (1.23)	3.15 (1.12)	2.637	0.009*
Collaboration with other educational institution and Erasmus mobility opportunities (the ability to attend one semester in a college in another city or country)	3.70 (1.23)	3.68 (1.24)	0.118	0.906
Encouraging students to express opinions in a class freely	4.24 (0.96)	4.19 (1.04)	0.660	0.509
Study program fee	4.21 (1.10)	4.14 (1.07)	0.847	0.397
Offered accommodation in a student residence	3.13 (1.50)	3.61 (1.35)	-4.299	0.000*

Note: mean scores range from 1 to 5; values in parentheses are standard deviations; * $p < 0.01$.

According to the results shown in Table 2, the most important studying element for college students sample was "Equipped rooms in which exercises are performed (eg. laboratory)", while high school students indicated "Access to computers and the internet at the institution". On the other hand, the least important studying element in college students sample was "Offered accommodation in a student residence", while in high school students sample it was the item "Possibility to attend courses that are not part of your study program (e.g. courses offered by another institution or at another department)".

However, the results of independent samples t-test indicated three study elements that had significant differences between the two samples. These elements were "Availability of the literature in library", "Possibility to attend courses that are not part of your study program (e.g. courses offered by another institution or at another department)", and "Offered accommodation in a student residence ". The majority of these elements were more important for college students than for high school students. Only the element "Offered accommodation in a student residence" is more important to high school students than to college students.

4 Discussion

The study showed that a relatively high proportion of students is interested in attending the new study program, including both high school and college students. In addition, 39% of students and 41% of pupils were undecided, which means that within this group there are potential students that would decide to attend the new program. In favour of the creation of a new study program is also the fact that 42% of students are interested in self-employment or employment in agritourism.

The investigated groups are aware of the importance of foreign languages (English, Italian, German) in agritourism, and a high proportion of high school students showed interest in taking courses that are held in a foreign language. The result supports the idea that the new study program would offer several courses in English, Italian or German, which will be useful for improving language skills and competencies. Foreign languages skills and competencies provide a basis for communicating with guests in agritourism and participating in the ERASMUS exchange programs in the EU. Also, offering courses in foreign languages enable the Polytechnic of Rijeka to host students from the EU and to potentially become part of international study programs.

To about 80% of high school and college students the term organic agriculture is known or partly known, which suggests that the Polytechnic of Rijeka should take action to raise the awareness of organic agriculture as well as that organic and sustainable agriculture are in the service of sustainable tourism, environmental protection and in the protection of nature.

The results showed that the new study program should increase the number of training hours, improve the laboratory conditions, provide Wi-Fi in all classrooms, and enable students to express their opinion freely for which they should also be motivated. On the other hand, the results suggest that the study program should prepare and train teachers to adopt a different teaching approach, using modern and innovative methods and e-learning. The facilities should also support that initiative, e.g. having Wi-Fi in all classrooms.

The Polytechnic would need either to find solutions to partly finance the study fees or to offer an innovative study program that would create added value, which new students would be willing to pay, since the results showed that the study fee also plays a significant role for the high school students.

According to the results, the marketing strategy of the new study program should include Internet marketing, direct marketing and promotion. Using brochures, which was one of the marketing methods of the Polytechnic of Rijeka, as well as television, are not effective marketing methods that reach the target groups.

Overall, the results showed the direction in which the new study program, Sustainable Agritourism, and the Polytechnic of Rijeka would need to develop and what should be improved. Using a new approach to teaching and students, the Polytechnic of Rijeka will be a major step forward by realising its changing role in the local economy where a study program do not just provide the local area with graduates, as it is stressed in the EU innovation strategy (EU – COM(2006)502.3), but where an institution creates graduates that are competitive on the labour market with highly developed skills and

competencies according to the needs, in this case, in agritourism. The new study program, which plans to be more open to business and international collaboration, may also create ground for new funds. Exchanging knowledge through collaboration with business and research is a potential for an additional income, which would improve the quantity and quality of education and training.

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