



# Tourism Education in the Tourism Industry as a Key to Competitiveness

**Galina Romanova<sup>1\*</sup>, Sergei Romanov<sup>2</sup>, Alexey Popov<sup>3</sup>, Raisa Kushevsckaya<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Sochi State University, Sochi, Russia, <sup>2</sup>Sochi State University, Sochi, Russia, <sup>3</sup>Sochi State University, Sochi, Russia, <sup>4</sup>Sochi State University, Sochi, Russia. \*Email: [sochiuniversity@gmail.com](mailto:sochiuniversity@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

Over recent decades, tourism development in most countries has become an ultimately favored and viable area of business and commerce. Travel and tourism industry is seen both as a highly profitable option for investment, and a solid source of new jobs and national income. These advantages of tourism are considerably stronger than benefits of other economic activities. Tourism is also an agent in good-neighborly relations of peoples and nations, which is a very important role in the modern context. The article shares outcomes of a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats analysis of the current system of tourism higher education in Russia by presenting a structured assessment of the situation, findings of the survey regarding tourism employer's satisfaction with the graduates' higher education quality in the services and tourism fields. Results of the criteria-based quality assessment of the graduates' higher education quality, and the list of most significant criteria for benchmarking graduates' higher education quality and employers' needs.

**Keywords:** Education Quality Assessment, Tourism, Hotel Business

**JEL Classifications:** L83, Z32

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In spite of international and economic challenges, tourism features its usual positive dynamics. Thus, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) overview, international tourist arrivals reached 1,138 million in the year 2014, a 4.7% increase over the previous year. For 2015, UNWTO forecasts international tourism to grow by 3.4% (Komissiya UNWTO dla Evropy, <http://www.dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net>).

However, Russia, despite its rich resources of culture, history, nature and climate, has not yet advanced to a decent place in the structure of international tourist flows, and for many years, it has experienced the tourism BOP deficit (Table 1).

The tourism BOP deficit is severely damaging to the Russian economy. It also impedes world public access to Russia's rich cultural, historical and natural potential. The reasons are largely associated with the underdeveloped and hardly competitive state

of the Russian tourism industry, basically and at large due to the insufficient professionalism of staff.

## 2. REFERENCE TO BACKGROUND SOURCES

While conducting research in the field of quality development of tourism higher education, and on issues of tourism industry interaction with tourism education, we relied on some previous research reports and concepts in the field of professional tourism education (Jafari, Ritchie, Tribe, Kvartalnov, Fedulin, Petrun, Saharchuk, etc.).

## 3. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

While writing this article, we conducted desk research of scientific papers, teaching observations, expert assessments, surveys, statistical data. The subjects of our research have been tourism

higher education graduates, assessed by employers according to a set of criteria suggested by us. As part of our inquiry, we have designed a surveillance program which integrated our survey questionnaires and our mailing list. In our survey we used a method of online questionnaires.

To promote feedback, we designed a form with questions asking employers to specify their satisfaction with the graduates' education quality by a number of criteria. The same form has also helped to identify the employers' choice of most valuable criteria for graduates' quality assessment. The above-mentioned form was published as an interactive web interface allowing filling out and save answers on-line. Thus, we surveyed top-management and mid-management staff of companies in tourism and service. All their answers were saved in a database on the server of the web page. The results of the survey were compiled in a table for further statistical analysis. Processing of data was performed by statistical methods (Minashkin, 2012). Quality assessments allowed to benchmark average, maximum and minimum values, tolerance and frequency of particular answers. The most frequent answers and the most valuable criteria of assessment were identified.

Statistical data provided non-biased, relevant, complete information about employers' satisfaction with the quality of graduates' education in various fields pertaining to service and tourism domain. At further stage of research this information allowed to draw the scientifically substantiated conclusions about the graduates' education quality and efficiency of interaction between universities and employers in tourism.

#### 4. RESULTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Back in 1996 at a conference in Madrid, the WTO, while addressing issues of tourism human resources development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, set forward the following recommendations:

- Every stakeholder in tourism should give priority to the development of its human resources.
- Education and training of human resources should be recognized as the foundation for development of tourism professions.
- New education and training paradigms, that are most reflexive to changing environments, should be encouraged.
- Common standards, certification, accreditation should be developed both in support of the existing academic programs, and to guide new education and training systems.
- New technologies and information systems should be integrated in tourism education and training.
- A wealth of tourism components should be reflected in education to the maximum.
- Quality and professionalism should be recognized as essential features of education and service (Educating the Educators in Tourism, 1996; Nikolaeva et al., 2015).

To meet such a challenge, the first major step in our country was made along the EU TACIS/9510 EDRUS project of Strengthening of Tourism Human Resources in Russia. One of the main outcomes of the project was the profound design of the "Professional Requirements (Occupational Standards) for Tourism Professionals."

Occupational standards were developed by a joint task force of Russian and international experts, with reference to advanced European requirements and Russian specifics. Furthermore, the project resulted in a revision of Russian tourism education quality with reference to international trends (Romanova, 2012).

It was stated that tourism education in Russia was lagging behind international experience and tourism industry real needs. These two challenges still apply to current situation. Success of academic programs for tourism human resources will depend much on integration of educational establishments into international academic realm. This integration is important due to the fact, that many European nations had started development of their tourism schools into a network 40-50 years earlier than Russia, and they launched research projects in tourism education. As a result, they have advanced far ahead (Fedulin, 2004).

In the meanwhile, advance of integration and academic mobility is slow. Nevertheless, there are some success stories. One of them has been the TEMPUS project called NETOUR: Network For Excellence In Tourism Through Organizations and Universities In Russia, project edition 2015. It has contributed into competitiveness of Russian education a new textbook "Tourism in Russia: A Management Handbook." This manual was written by a team of researchers from 6 countries: Spain, France, Russia, Great Britain, Ireland, and Finland. They put together their research and methodological insights and designed a textbook which corresponds to international requirements (Tourism in Russia: A Management Handbook. Management Handbook, 2015).

In a real world, educational programs are expected to meet the changing needs of employers, new technologies, and alternative forms of service (Sakharchuk et al., 2013). For these reasons, Russian tourism education is tasked to upgrade further to the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of standards that would increasingly reflect on international experience and the changing environment of tourism industry. This new tourism educational standard will need to comply with the following requirements:

- To be consistent with goals and objectives of tourism industry, which is now one of the top priority sectors of the national economy.
- To provide training of highly qualified personnel, both for businesses, and for national, regional and local tourism regulators, authorities and administrations.
- To consider experience of the best international tourism education establishments and requirements of the UNWTO set for tourism higher education.

**Table 1: Outbound and inbound travel in the Russian Federation in years 2014-2015 (thousands of trips)**

Trips	2014	2015		
		1 <sup>st</sup> quarter	1 <sup>st</sup> ½ year	9 months
Inbound tourist arrivals	25438.0	7347.1	16112.9	24948.2
Outbound tourist departures	45888.9	6529.8	16435.1	n/a

Compiled from the official web records of the Federal Agency for Tourism (Statisticheskoye pokazateli, <http://www.russiatourism.ru>)

- To offer training in accordance with professional standards.
- To reflect tourism industry trends and needs of national regulators in qualified tourism professionals.
- To take into account best domestic practices in education and training of qualified personnel in other professional fields.
- To get rid of drawbacks inherent in the current system of tourism higher education.

The quality of a higher education system is determined by its ability to provide knowledge, skills, competences, that are adequate to modern industry-specific occupational standards, as well as take into account their dynamics, goals and realistic prospects for economic and technical development. They should remain relevant for a long time. Importance of this requirement is justified by the dynamic development of enterprises and sectors in tourism industry as a result of the growing demand for tourism services, tourism technical development, and tourism infrastructure development.

National educational standards and the national education system play a significant role in the development of tourism industry, if they correspond to the modern level of requirements generated by companies, and meet the goals and objectives of the development of these companies and tourism industry as a whole.

The starting point in the revision and development of the new educational standard should be a situation analysis of the existing system of tourism higher education, to identify its compliance on the basis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats analysis. The results of our analysis are presented below in Table 2.

The following weaknesses and threats are the most vivid challenges for designers of education draft standards.

1. Inconsistency of many academic programs with the established across the world requirements expressed by employers' in tourism.
2. Many universities offer typically low quality academic programs in the field of modern tourism-related technologies, tourism and entrepreneurship law, management, economics and finance.
3. Discredited reputation of tourism higher education, due to the irregular market of fee-based education programs, targeted at potential entrants with weak general academic background.
4. There are virtually no Master degree programs for staff of national bodies in charge of regulations for tourism business.

The above-mentioned issues need to be considered when developing and introducing a new educational standard. Of all the concerns, the main one is associated with the discredited reputation of tourism higher education, due to malpractice of many private universities and local branches of state universities.

This challenge is due to the intensely growing demand for tourism education products and emergence of the profit-seeking market of education services. On the one hand, the growth of the market of tourist services, optional classification of accommodation facilities have prompted increasing demand for tourism education in general, and tourism higher education in particular. On the other hand, the inadequate salaries paid to professors and teaching

staff in higher education, as well as the general insufficiency of funding allocated from the national budget to higher education establishments, have forced universities to seek opportunities for earning money. This is often done by means of programs of tourism education and training.

By our estimations, 410 state and non-state universities (and their branches) offer programs in the field of Tourism and Service, which is roughly 25% of the total number of universities in Russia. However, in spite of this, Russian tourism and services do not demonstrate higher rates of growth.

No doubt, development of any economic field depends, beyond human resources issues, on many more institutional conditions and material and technical aspects. However, we should note, that Russian tourism nowadays suffers from inconsistencies between the quality and structure of human resources development, and tourism industry needs in human resources.

The gap between what tourism business expects from the academic background of graduates of tourism higher education, and what the graduates really display as professional competencies, is usually described in words "irrelevance" and "lack of practical skills." However, there are so many tourism experts, so many definitions and interpretations.

We could explain the discord by the fact that the tourism industry in the name of its biggest players and professional communities has not developed yet distinct requirements towards the nature and quality of top-level tourism professional competencies. Occupational standards for this sphere are only emerging, and their scope is very narrow. That is why there is an urgent need in the development of an extended detailed list of requirements for top-level tourism professional qualifications for real tourism business.

We performed a survey to determine employers' satisfaction with the graduates' education and training quality in the field of tourism and service, and we identified the most important criteria for personnel selection in tourism industry (Table 3).

Over a 100 executives of different tourism and service companies were surveyed.

Outcomes of the criteria-based survey are presented in Figure 1 below:

Analysis of the criteria-based survey results showed that, on average, employers are by 80% satisfied with the quality of the graduates' competencies (Figure 1). The highest scores were granted to the following criteria (Table 4).

The lowest scores were awarded to the graduates' education and training quality with reference to the following criteria (Table 5).

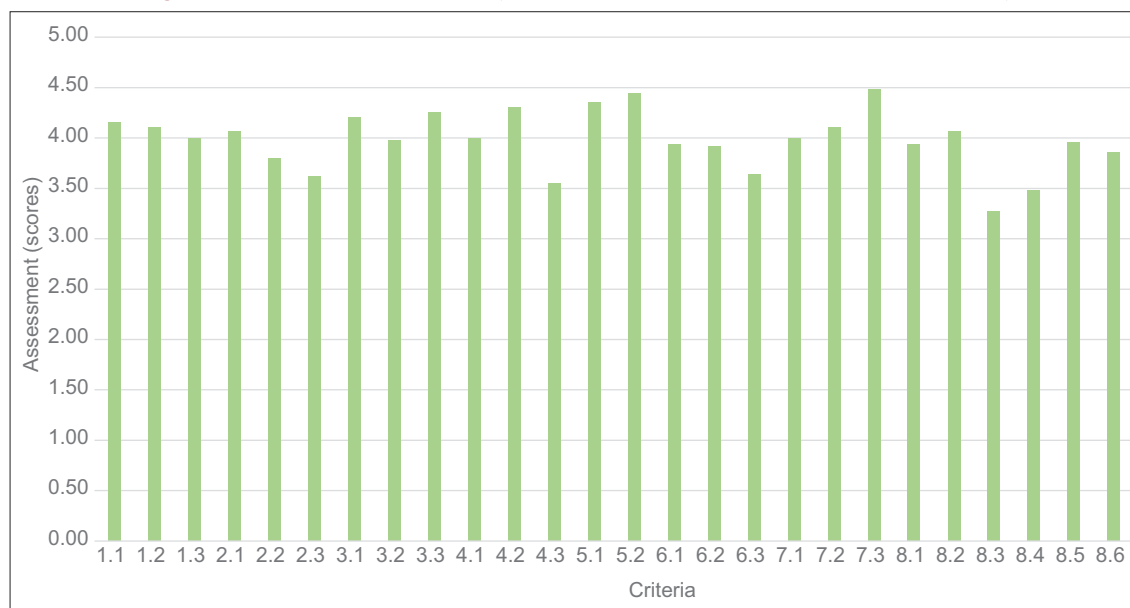
The outcomes of graduates' education and training quality assessment are split by criteria clusters as follows (Table 6).

The survey data show that the highest scores were awarded to the

**Table 2: SWOT analysis of the existing tourist training system**

Strengths	Weaknesses
A clear trend of consistently growing demand for professional higher education graduates who are apt for jobs in business and in national bodies governing and regulating tourism	Lack of a unified national strategy for training professionals with tourism higher professional education both for business, and for national authorities regulating tourism business development
Consistent high public demand for tourism education and training services	Inconsistency of the training programs available in world tourism to training requirements for tourism industry
Intensive development of commercial services in tourism education	Insufficient quality of training in the field of Modern Tourism-related Technologies, Tourism and Entrepreneurship Law, Management, Economics and Finance
	Insufficient quality of practical training, due to its insufficient share in the curricula
	Shortage of teaching staff with professional tourism experience and advanced theoretical education background
	Shortage and poor quality of textbooks and manuals in many universities
	In many universities, the practical components complementing theoretical courses do not help to develop practical skills of theory application
	Lack of proper facilities and material resources for practical trainings at a large number of universities
	Lack of proper training in foreign languages at many universities
Opportunities	Threats
Development and introduction of the 4 <sup>th</sup> edition of new educational standards increasingly tailored to the employers' needs	Weak and too often formalistic interaction of educational institutions with employers
Harmonization of educational standards and programs with the requirements of the UN WTO and with consideration of the advanced international practices	Discredited reputation of tourism higher education, due to the irregular market of fee-based education programs, offered by the majority of profit-seeking and marginal universities
Development of unified standardized practice-oriented programs	Devaluation of Ruble against US Dollar and Euro, which impedes the development of academic mobility of teaching staff and students
Development of unified professional development programs	Predominance of focus on social services field in human resources education and training disciplines, and the shortage of disciplines focused on business development competencies, as well as the shortage of practical skills development methods
Opening of postgraduate and doctoral teacher training programs for teachers of tourism professional higher education, with their compulsory internships abroad	Demotivation of most employers and tourism venue owners to invest in staff training
Introduction of a mandatory 6-month international internship inside Master degree programs	

SWOT: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, WTO: World Tourism Organization

**Figure 1: Criteria-based assessment (vertical scale - assessment, horizontal scale - criteria)**

following competences of graduates: Discipline and diligence, loyalty to corporate culture (Figure 2).

The lowest scores were awarded to additional competences of graduates (non-core) and practical training quality.



**Table 3: Graduates' education and training quality assessment criteria**

No	Criteria
1	Satisfaction with the quality of academic education of graduates
1.1	Relevance of theoretical instruction to current trends
1.2	Relevance of theoretical knowledge to qualification awarded
1.3	Aptitude to apply theoretical knowledge in professional activities
2	Satisfaction with the quality of practical training of graduates
2.1	Relevance of practical skills to current trends
2.2	Degree to which the acquired skills are applicable in practice
2.3	Aptitude to apply skills in unusual situations
3	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to adapt to the work environment
3.1	Speed of adaptation
3.2	Stress-resistance
3.3	Aptitude to recover
4	Satisfaction with the graduates' communication competencies
4.1	Aptitude to work in a customer service and a customer consulting zone
4.2	Aptitude to work in a team, to display tolerance to social, ethnic, faith and cultural differences
4.3	Aptitude to organize work of the team and take decisions
5	Satisfaction with the graduates' discipline and efficiency
5.1	Execution of job responsibilities
5.2	Compliance with corporate norms and on-job discipline
6	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to self-education
6.1	Ambitions for self-education, professional development and career growth
6.2	Aptitude to independent development of knowledge and practical skills required for excellence in professional operations
6.3	Ability for abstract reasoning, analysis, synthesis
7	Satisfaction with the graduates' corporate culture
7.1	Maturity of the corporate culture
7.2	Pro-active attitude to corporate culture
7.3	Ability to maintain good relations with colleagues
8	Satisfaction with the graduates' additional (non-core) competencies
8.1	Compliance with advanced service standards, application of innovative methods and technologies
8.2	Computer literacy, IT skills
8.3	Aptitude to operate in international professional environment
8.4	Legal and economic awareness
8.5	Aptitude to subordinate personal interests to the consumer benefits and corporate interests
8.6	Aptitude to creative, unusual and innovative approaches to professional challenges

**Table 4: The quality criteria that earned the highest scores**

No	Criteria	Scores
7.3	Ability to maintain good relations with colleagues	4.48
5.2	Compliance with corporate norms and on-job discipline	4.44
5.1	Execution of job responsibilities	4.347
4.2	Aptitude to work in a team, to display tolerance to social, ethnic, faith and cultural differences	4.3
3.3	Aptitude to recover	4.25

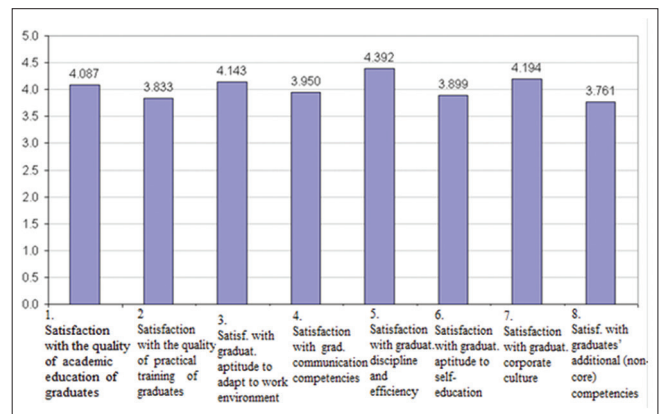
When designing educational programs, it is also important to consider the value of criteria for graduates' education and training quality assessment from the point of view of employers. To this end, they were asked to select the most valuable criteria within each cluster. Their opinion is presented in Table 7.

**Table 5: The quality criteria that earned the worst scores**

No	Criteria	Scores
8.3	Aptitude to operate in international professional environment	3.265
8.4	Legal and economic awareness	3.48
4.3	Aptitude to organize work of the team and take decisions	3.55
2.3	Aptitude to apply skills in unusual situations	3.62
2.2	Degree to which the acquired skills are applicable in practice	3.796

**Table 6: Quality of graduates' academic competencies, scores by criteria clusters**

No	Criteria	Scores
5	Satisfaction with the graduates' discipline and efficiency	4.392
7	Satisfaction with the graduates' corporate culture	4.194
3	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to adapt to the work environment	4.143
1	Satisfaction with the quality of academic education of graduates	4.087
4	Satisfaction with the graduates' communication competencies	3.95
6	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to self-education	3.899
2	Satisfaction with the quality of practical training of graduates	3.833
8	Satisfaction with the graduates' additional (non-core) competencies	3.761

**Figure 2: Quality of graduates' academic competences, scores summed up by criteria clusters**

The table shows that in the first criteria cluster "satisfaction with the quality of academic education of graduates," the vast majority of employers - 82% - indicated criterion 1.3 "Aptitude to apply theoretical knowledge in professional activities" as the most important one (Table 6).

In the second criteria cluster "satisfaction with the quality of practical training of graduates," the most important criterion 2.3 "aptitude to apply skills in unusual situations" was chosen by 48% of employers, the second most important criterion 2.2 "degree to which the acquired skills are applicable in practice" was selected by 34% of employers. As criteria 2.2 and 2.3 received low scores

**Table 7: Value scores awarded to criteria**

No	Criteria	Respondents, (%)
1	Satisfaction with the quality of academic education of graduates	
1.1	Aptitude to apply theoretical knowledge in professional activities	82
1.2	Relevance of theoretical knowledge to qualification awarded	12
1.3	Relevance of theoretical instruction to current trends	6
2	Satisfaction with the quality of practical training of graduates	
2.1	Relevance of practical skills to current trends	18
2.2	Degree to which the acquired skills are applicable in practice	34
2.3	Aptitude to apply skills in unusual situations	48
3	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to adapt to the work environment	
3.1	Speed of adaptation	34
3.2	Stress-resistance	56
3.3	Aptitude to recover	10
4	Satisfaction with the graduates' communication competencies	
4.1	Aptitude to work in a customer service and a customer consulting zone	36
4.2	Aptitude to work in a team, to display tolerance to social, ethnic, faith and cultural differences	28
4.3	Aptitude to organize work of the team and take decisions	32
5	Satisfaction with the graduates' discipline and efficiency	
5.1	Execution of job responsibilities	64
5.2	Compliance with corporate norms and on-job discipline	34
6	Satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to self-education	
6.1	Ambitions for self-education, professional development and career growth	36
6.2	Aptitude to independent development of knowledge and practical skills required for excellence in professional operations	48
6.3	Ability for abstract reasoning, analysis, synthesis	16
7	Satisfaction with the graduates' corporate culture	
7.1	Maturity of the corporate culture	12
7.2	Pro-active attitude to corporate culture	36
7.3	Ability to maintain good relations with colleagues	52
8	Satisfaction with the graduates' additional (non-core) competencies	
8.1	Compliance with advanced service standards, application of innovative methods and technologies	22
8.2	Computer literacy, IT skills	14
8.3	Aptitude to operate in international professional environment	2
8.4	Legal and economic awareness	22
8.5	Aptitude to subordinate personal interests to the consumer benefits and corporate interests	24
8.6	Aptitude to creative, unusual and innovative approaches to professional challenges	14

from employers (Table 4), employers are not satisfied with the quality of graduates' practical training.

The third criteria cluster "satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to adapt to the work environment" features as the most important one criterion 3.2 "stress-resistance" chosen by 56% of employers, the second most important criterion is 3.1 "speed of adaptation" chosen by 34% of employers.

In the fourth criteria cluster "satisfaction with the graduates' communication competencies" no single criterion was identified as the most important, as the scores granted to the cluster criteria value are just slightly different. The highest scores granted by 36% of employers went to criterion 4.1 "aptitude to work in a customer service and a customer consulting zone," the second most important criterion was 4.3 "aptitude to organize work of the team and take decisions" chosen by 32% employers.

The fifth group of criteria "satisfaction with the graduates' discipline and efficiency" featured criterion 5.1 "execution of job responsibilities" as the most important one chosen by 64% of employers.

The sixth group of criteria "satisfaction with the graduates' aptitude to self-education" feature criterion 6.2 "aptitude to

independent development of knowledge and practical skills required for excellence in professional operations" as the most important one chosen by 48% of employers, and the second most important one was criterion 6.1 "ambitions for self-education, professional development and career growth," chosen by 36% of employers.

The seventh group criteria "satisfaction with the graduates' corporate culture" featured the most important criterion 7.3 "ability to maintain good relations with colleagues" chosen by 52% of employers, the second most important criterion 7.2 "pro-active attitude to corporate culture" was chosen by 36% of employers.

The 8<sup>th</sup> group "satisfaction with the graduates' additional (non-core) competencies" featured criterion 8.5 "aptitude to subordinate personal interests to the consumer benefits and corporate interests" as the most important one chosen by 24% of employers, followed by two other criteria - 8.1 "compliance with advanced service standards, application of innovative methods and technologies" and 8.4 "legal and economic awareness" that earned appreciations of similar shares of employers - 22% each. Criterion 8.4 received low ratings that indicate the unsatisfied employers' expectations regarding the graduates' legal and economic awareness.

It should also be noted that most employers, when recruiting graduates, do not give preference to graduates of certain universities, according to 62% of responses; 36% of employers prefer to employ graduates of certain universities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Tourism education is an important factor in the competitiveness of the tourist business. However, the tourist business actively affects competitiveness of educational establishments, since it as a consumer of human resources, generates demand for graduates and consistently provides assessment of the quality of their academic background.

Due to the fact that there are continuing changes in technology of management and service, there is a need in changing the content of educational programs. Competitiveness of the graduates and the quality of education depend on promptly universities respond to these changes. Hence, an important role is given to a well-established flow of feedback, which is maintained through surveys of employers.

The work describes outcomes of one of the online surveys of top-level and middle managers at tourism and service companies, who provided their assessment of the quality of graduates' academic background. The survey revealed that when a five-point grading scale is used, the average scores range between 3.796 and 4.48 points. The highest scores are awarded to the following competencies: Ability to maintain good relations with colleagues, compliance with corporate norms and on-job discipline, aptitude to work in a team, to display tolerance to social, ethnic, faith and cultural differences and others.

The lowest scores were awarded to the following criteria: Aptitude to operate in international professional environment, possession of legal and economic awareness; aptitude to organize work of the team and take decisions.

Integrated analysis shows that this group of managers estimated that the weakest competences of the graduates they have employed are their aptitude to independent development of knowledge and practical skills, the mastery of practical skills and their additional competences.

Employers participating in the survey also highlighted the most important selection criteria for them graduates when hiring:

- Aptitude to apply theoretical knowledge in professional activities (82% of respondents).

- Execution of job responsibilities (64%).
- Stress-resistance (56%).

In general, such research should be continuing and serve as a guiding tool in the design of educational curricula, textbooks, teaching materials, methods and training methods.

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