

Enhancing Tourism Education in Bulgarian Universities

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Abstract. The quality of tourism education and the efforts to continuously improve it are of critical and strategic importance for the development of the sector in any country. This is even more important and applies with full force to Bulgaria, as tourism represents a significant part of our gross domestic product and we are dependent on high-quality tourism services in order to establish high end position in the market of high-income visitors. The article addresses two important aspects of tourism education: tourism sector and its education environment in Bulgaria and identify the main factors potentially influencing this sector.

Research methods are based on analysis of contemporary literary sources and review of the Bulgarian tourism education and the modern tourism curricula offered by other universities. They have been studied innovative and efficient educational methods used by other tourism university programs, which could contribute to more integrated investment and efficient use of existing resources.

This article proposes potential strategies for enhancing university programs in tourism education. Some of the efficient modern educational methods serve as examples of innovative teaching methods that Bulgaria could adopt.

Key words: tourism education, Bulgarian universities, enhancing.

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1. Introduction

Bulgarian tourism has achieved significant annual growth in contributions to GDP, and forecasts show a stable rise over next years. (Koprinarov, B. 2016)

Clearly, for Bulgarian universities face difficulties in terms of demographic crisis to reach the task of producing enough specialists to meet the demand of Bulgarian economic.

In 2019, according to data from Bulgarian ministry of Education the number of students who completed their education in tourism, encompassing all specialties and degrees with an "Economics" profile, were more than 1000. If we look at the dynamics from 2002 to 2019, more than 15 000 specialists have graduated universities. These experts do not meet employers' requirements in the labour market, and for that reason, there is an ever-growing demand for upgrading and developing tourism education in Bulgaria (Terziev & Lyubcheva, 2022; Brida et al. 2021; Tatiana et al. 2022; Terziev, 2020.).

In response to global challenges in the tourism industry, Bulgaria began to proactively create and support a domestic and foreign tourism policy after July 1998. It began the renovation of the Bulgarian tourism product and service portfolio in parallel with the overall socio-economic reconstruction of society. This signals the beginning of a transition from Soviet higher education, based on a regulatory, rigid, standardized, non-competitive, and low-level education and research, to a student-cantered education and research based on standards, which are flexible, adjustable, and demanding in terms of quality. In that respect, it is necessary to comply with the standards and requirements for well-demanded specialists from the sector (Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021; Muça et al., 2021; Chernykh et al., 2021).

The subject of the study is tourism education in Bulgaria.

The purpose of the study are the possible variants of enhancing tourism education in Bulgaria

In order to fulfil the objectives, we have set the following research tasks:

1. Based on contemporary literary sources, to review the Bulgarian tourism education.
2. To examine the challenges, opportunities, and sustainable practices in the Bulgarian tourism education.

2. Characteristics of tourism education in universities in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, state and private university institutions deliver tourism education. The National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation is evaluating tourism education qualifications. While some educational institutions in Bulgaria offer robust international programs that teach academic and practical content to the same extent as the theoretical aspect, the rest lack structured components. In the programs, there is still a high concentration on business and economics subjects and insufficient emphasis on programming, geography, and computer skills. The structure of the four-year programs allows BA students to participate in an exchange semester, and in certain instances, they can apply for a full academic year scholarship at a foreign university. The lack of interest in mobility among students stems from potential cultural differences between Eastern and Western Europe. The role of universities with their vocational training through academic programs is crucial in establishing the positioning of Bulgaria, but most importantly, in suggesting alternative points of tourism development. A few economic subjects that are focused on sustainable tourism development will stimulate the restructuring of the economy in less developed regions, thereby shaping the creation of alternative tourism-related advisory services. Particularly, the current economic development requires a permanent investment in knowledge. Therefore, it can be beneficial to briefly describe certain trends observed in local universities. The implementation of modern education is crucial and cannot be understated. A number of universities in Bulgaria are experiencing a decline in the number of students studying economics. This factor in no way indicates or predicts the future of the profession. On the contrary, our research shows a growth in interest among students in studying the profession of tourism.. Tourism itself has become a profession, as the state is highly dependent on the tourist economy. The managers of tourist promotion enterprises and policies could be better prepared if they had a chance to make pre-tourism marketing plans. It is crucial to understand the factors that predict success in terms of early job satisfaction, job satisfaction, and corporate pride. In client-centred development, we combine detailed client analysis with instructional system design, a set of procedures that guide the selection and arrangement of instructional activities. This shifts the focus from the instructor's role and expected content to what the client, students, and future employers should do. The key instructional objective is to develop a performance outcome (Kahraman & Alrawadieh, 2021; Ruhanen & Bowles, 2020; Tomasi et al., 2020).



Figure 1. Number of university students majoring in hospitality
Source: Ministry of education/2025/

We can also see a steady growth in those wishing to study tourism in secondary schools in Bulgaria. They are the main donors of students and a natural continuation of programs in higher education.

Over the years, there has been a steady growth in students from secondary schools studying tourism, despite the difficult demographic situation in Bulgaria. This once again emphasizes the attractiveness of the sector. We cannot fail to note the small percentage - less than 6% of students compared to secondary school graduates.

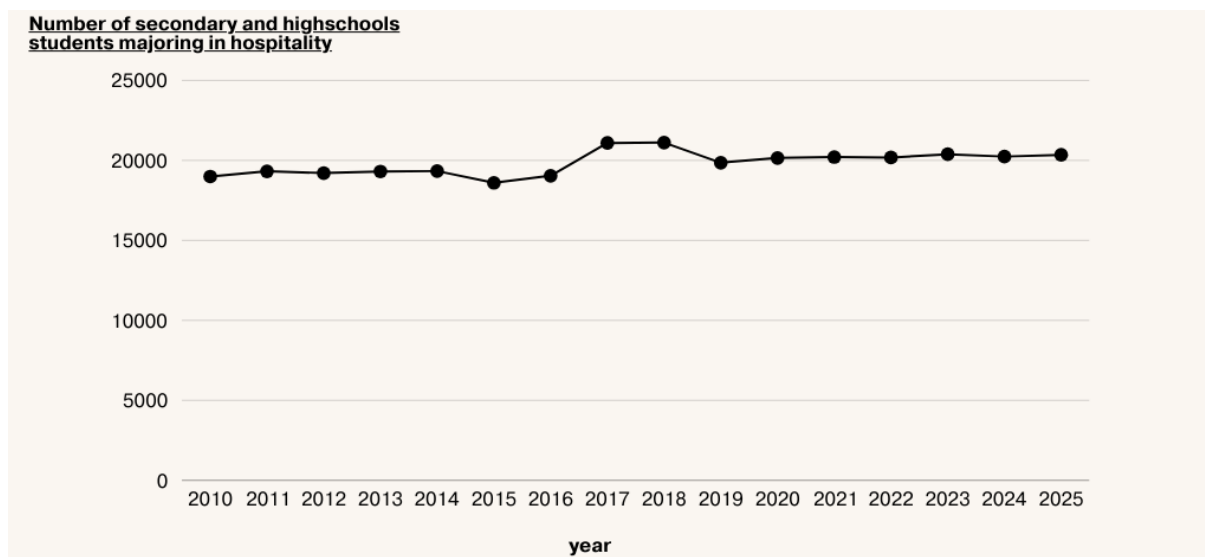


Figure 2. Number of secondary and high school students majoring in hospitality
Source: Ministry of education/2025

An integral part of the problems related to the processes of harmonizing education and talent needs in the tourism sector is the imperfection of the basic law and regulatory framework of its acquisition. The imperfect infrastructure for tourism education is largely responsible for the low interest young people show in it and the significant number of people who leave the training specialty before successfully completing their studies. The integration of our society into the international economic environment, along with the nature and scale of tourism services, necessitates a well-prepared staff with a high level of professionalism, capable of managing and developing the most advanced technologies and modern methods of work and management. However, the system of tourism education in Bulgaria faces a number of problems, which significantly hamper the promotion of the education of this scientific field and its use by training organizations. Outdated training programs based on inadequate conceptual frameworks and a disconnection between practical training and labour market requirements exacerbate the lack of qualified and experienced staff, leading to insufficient quality staff training. The language barriers also contribute to the rejection of many facilities today. The analysis of the curricula of the specialty "Tourism" in the three participating universities shows that the training focuses mainly on staff training in the fields of travel agencies, guides, and hotel business. The training does not prioritize dealing directly with clients, completing the specialties of "Restaurant" and "Tourist Animation," or training a tourism manager. Additionally, major tourism policies directly relate to certain learning topics and disciplines. In recent years, close cooperation with the management of the facilities has increased in universities. (Tambovceva et al. 2020; Neycheva and Baltov 2024; Dimitrov & Dimitrova, 2021)(Dimitrova2023).

The end of the second decade of the twenty-first century is characterized by strong competition in global tourism markets. Research results indicate that the quality of education, that is, the skills, capabilities, motivation, and professionalism of the students, depends on the quality of the faculty who stand in front of the audiences. The local labor market face difficulties to provide universities with staff who are capable of training highly valued tourism professionals with advanced qualifications. Combining the theoretical knowledge embedded in universities and the practical know-how of industry professionals is the key to the success of a country in providing high-quality education in tourism training. Attracting faculty members who meet the required profile and can connect their strong academic development to successful business achievements in the tourism sector or other in-demand sectors like economics, management, marketing, or other tourism curricula is crucial (Rinaldi et al. 2022; Sun et al. 2021).

The predominance of low-frequency regulatory mechanisms to encourage professional staff to enter, stay in, and subsequently advance in teaching and research careers has resulted in a significant shortage of qualified teaching staff for a variety of professional courses, particularly in tourism. One of the most challenging issues we

encounter is the scarcity of experienced faculty members at the State University. Moreover, individuals who are not strictly specialists in a particular subject typically provide these courses, and postgraduate students often deliver them without any practical expertise. Consequently, the range of subjects that colours the courses is limited; the number of courses to be delivered is directly related to the number of full- and part-time professionals available; there are only a few teaching methodologies that people can use, due in part to limited expertise and knowledge; and educational initiatives to extend the range of teaching available as a result of direct country involvement across the curriculum are also less effective. We may undertake a number of steps to bridge the gap. Universities employ a variety of recruitment strategies. Additionally, universities should promote a mentorship program that involves both university staff and industry professionals. One of the mandatory conditions is that the staff members must be included in professional development modules to be up-to-date and maintain a high level of teaching to students with an increasingly globalized and multicultural mindset. (Carlisle et al., 2023; Bilotta et al., 2021; Kovalchuk et al., 2023; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

An outdated curriculum plagues many tourism education programs in Bulgaria. The inadequate curriculum fails to provide tourism economy students with the necessary knowledge of the changes occurring in the sector, the trends, and the practices of the dynamically developing tourism market. This limits their preparedness for real-world challenges in a professional environment. Experts indicate that a significant portion of the curriculum in the educational programs is outdated. Despite widespread recognition of their quality, this leads to a decline in interest in dual degree programs. Future applicants for admission to Bulgarian universities possess significantly less knowledge and skills compared to young people, aged 18–19, who apply to universities in neighbouring countries. Outdated curricula do not correspond to the current practices of Western universities, most of which offer an international approach in the teaching of tourism. In a number of universities in Western Europe and in the USA, it is mandatory for students in the discipline of tourism and hospitality to learn a second language. Most higher education institutions incorporate mandatory practices into their final qualifications for tourism and hospitality programs, which can take place at the university level, in practical centres, or in the field with business partners. Non-university higher education institutions are gradually introducing educational programs in the field of tourism and entrepreneurship under the "Tourism" profile in pursuit of a qualitative transformation of tourism education. The updating of the curriculum is a strategic task for the higher education institutions in the country. Every five years, the tourism economy and management curricula undergo updates. This process ensures the relevance of the training of future professionals with the real needs of the tourism economy. At a roundtable, it was added that one of the most effective mechanisms by which an educational institution can verify whether its educational activities are contemporary and up-to-date in compliance with the dynamic environment is to organize the involvement of stakeholders in educational activities, the organization of roundtables, and work with leading researchers in this field. After its completion, everyone finds a sense of tranquillity as they recognize the ongoing necessity to update knowledge, explore innovative solutions, adopt best practices, and utilize technologies to offer tourists unique and unforgettable experiences in new destinations (Şimşek and Kalıpçı 2023; Tiwari et al. 2021; Berjozskina and Melanthiou 2021; Kırlar-Can et al. 2021).

One of the most frequently expressed criticisms of our current education in tourism is the poorly developed relationship between the tourism business, schools and universities. This is not unique to Bulgaria. A barrier is created between students and business, thus preventing the acquisition of practical experience and up-to-date training. Often, teachers also have no experience in the field and their entire career path is spent at the university. They do not have knowledge of current trends and what is most important for students to acquire in order to improve their knowledge and be up-to-date on the labour market. Furthermore, the limited partnerships between universities and workplaces result in a lack of training opportunities and internships in the tourism industry. This reduces opportunities for student mobility and internships. Most importantly, universities and academics fail to learn what is truly relevant for the sector and struggle to stay updated with current trends and developments. One possible reason for the limited connections between businesses and tourism education could be attributed to the current educational model and the teaching of existing subjects. These models are often highly restrictive, and academics are frequently overburdened with other responsibilities, such as research and administration. Here, we suggest a number of initiatives and processes that will not be time-consuming for most academics and can help start a process of changing and improving tourism education in Bulgaria (Nikolova et al., 2021; Kazandzhieva, 2021; Nikolova et al., 2021; Mitova et al., 2021).

Among the numerous potential initiatives listed below, we have observed successful implementations in various countries. These include, for example, advisory boards, where representatives of local tourism organizations visit and advise. Different countries may refer to these in different ways, but the benefits are universal: they enhance public relations. Another significant benefit is the enhancement of funding opportunities from tourism organizations, as well as business development and teaching. Joint conferences and research projects can benefit from the same general approach as co-developing courses. Again, business and industry are often willing to participate in these events. The potential to develop joint projects that connect educational research has

a double chance of improving the teaching of Bulgarian tourism as well as meeting the academic research needs of researchers in tourism. Such events and partnerships can strengthen mutual benefits and provide a platform for the dissemination and exchange of knowledge, research, and resources in a partnership that can contribute to tourism education in Bulgaria (Dimitrova, 2020; Glorius; Stoyanova-Bozhkova, 2022).

Language is one of the major problems in the professional development of students from the universities at the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Proficiency in the English language is considered the primary factor. One of the advantages of studying in Bulgaria is the strong language profile and the successful combination of several foreign languages in the curriculum. Only a small number of students in the country demonstrate a desire to learn and acquire knowledge in other foreign languages, primarily due to differences in traditions and mentalities. Consequently, language serves as a barrier that prevents students from competing in the global capitalist system, thereby creating boundaries or limits for the development of tourism education and impacting the employability of students (Lertchalermtipakoon et al., 2021; Khalid et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023).

The correlation between language barriers and the quality of the tourism curriculum in Bulgaria highlights the drawbacks in accessing resources, utilizing existing research literature, legal and standard documents, participating in international cooperation, attending national forums and roundtables, communicating with international lecturers, and participating in discussions about emerging tourism trends. The use of English in the practice of tourism education affects all aspects and processes—from structured areas of work with resources to an entire system of work-training-higher education, where it is seen not as optional but as an indispensable tool, with whose help the professional, scientific, and educational environment of a particular country communicates with the world around it. Until 15–20 years ago, in a country with a complex system of tourism, the main emphasis in higher tourism education was on training specialists available in Russian and, to a lesser extent, in a combination of two foreign languages—German and English. As a result, there was a clear replication or imitation of existing patterns found in the countries from which the knowledge and examples originated, often referred to as the outside world. This feature of the educational process did not result in any qualitative changes to either the national tourism product or the education system. Commercial-administrative service providers include translation agencies, hotel managers from sea and mountain regions, and tour operator managers from the network of former administrations for international tourism (Ushakov et al. 2020; Kazmina et al. 2020; Poddubnaya et al. 2020).

3. Best practices in tourism education

Readers should bear in mind that the practices and insights presented below mimic best practices in tourism education from around the globe and can serve as a tailor-made source of inspiration for improving the content and quality of tourism education within the curricula in use at universities in Bulgaria. Given the emphasis on unique life experiences in today's fast-paced world, this paper recommends universities in Bulgaria to develop an integrated curriculum that integrates both applied and theoretical knowledge. The idea is to combine theory with holistic experience, thereby enabling students to gain practical, problem-solving competencies. Competence-based curricula are receiving international attention for curricular reform because they can cause educators to re-examine the way they understand teaching and learning. Collaboration can exist and is crucial to successful learning in both the tourism and hospitality industry and hospitality education. After reviewing the curricula at many institutions, a clear trend regarding the experiential learning component emerged. An increasing number of higher education institutions integrate an applied work-study component, especially work/internship, into their programs. To be effective, these courses often include community service learning. Both the community and the students benefit greatly from these experiences. Institutions could incorporate all the interesting and innovative teaching strategies reported in the papers into their existing undergraduate curricula. Another strategy that many educators have employed is flexibility. Various summer placements encourage responses to the learning experience. Technology can be highly beneficial (Tarmo and Kimaro, 2021; Nombo, 2022).

Some of tourism programs from around the world shows a exceptional practices in the field of tourism education on a global scale. We highlighted the following programs for their exceptional student engagement, achievement, and employer satisfaction with the curriculum and graduates. The study participants identified the knowledge, skills, and attributes that these programs are delivering as important. We reviewed all these tourism programs for this project based on their ability to deliver educational outcomes, as evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative reviews. To reiterate, the programs discussed below represent Western examples of tourism programs that demonstrate effectiveness in enhancing student learning and engagement. In some case studies, aligning with professional standards and engaging industry in course design has acted as a powerful lever for curriculum improvement. While some of these unit experiences may not be applicable in the Bulgarian context, we assert that they provide inspiration and proof of success to other educators (Richards, 2020; Scheyvens et al., 2021; Ketter & Avraham, 2021).

Clarifying the attractions for students in a particular country is important, rather than presenting what might be irrelevant details of teaching models that do not apply outside the context of the example. We explore study

programs from the forefront of international tourism education to provide an evidence-based platform for developing and underpinning recommendations, to demonstrate how today's tourism programs can meet educational effectiveness, and to help the audience understand the value of employment in the tourism industry. This paper provides case studies of curriculum design (Tomasi et al., 2020; Bhrammanachote and Sawangdee, 2021).

Innovative digital technologies that engage learners in interactive environments are the focus of recent developments in teaching methods. Simulations, including virtual reality, can train tourism students in a more systematic way. Simulation gaming is a way to integrate both the theory and practice of tourism using tools ranging from resources to modern multimedia. Using the dimensions of innovation theory in education and the principles of digital learning in didactics, we propose innovation in both theory and practice to address the next gap in the tourism education system. Modern teaching tools include simulation games, where learners work on the release of different products and services and navigate through phases such as initiation, planning, contract, launch, monitoring, and closure. You can play this game through electronic platforms instead of writing it in the classroom. These electronic platforms can address subtasks such as risk analysis, resource adjustments, or other additional tasks (Timotheou et al. 2023; Haleem et al. 2022; Garzón et al. 2020).

The simulation used for the tourism and hospitality sector must encompass its specifics, not just its ability to operate across various industries. The entertainment service has the potential to be productive and effective in attracting new employees to various tourism and hospitality enterprises. We can group various types of simulation based on service processes. In educational fields related to tourism learning, users can explore the service sector through microsimulation. The present project contributes to increasing students' knowledge and competencies in tourism and healthcare. The project utilizes a range of online resources to simulate games in various subjects listed below. We specifically designed and utilized them in team-based collaborative learning environments to foster a variety of complementary skills, such as problem-solving, teamwork, performance monitoring and reflection, and peer evaluation. Such software testing systems have revealed excellent reliability and validity. We plan to use the same platforms for the simulation gaming project. New course learning outcomes expect students to develop some basic knowledge and skills that will be helpful when it comes to simulation gaming. The resource will particularly enhance students' listening, reading, and searching skills and also provide a basis for their awareness of social and economic connections related to tourism and healthcare. We present these innovative simulations, which contribute to educational tourism services, below. After conducting additional surveys among tourism SMEs to identify their direct needs, such simulations will be developed, which will enhance the scientific and practical knowledge related to the readiness indicators because of their immediate impact on the level of tourism enterprises (Phi and Clausen, 2021; Bilotta et al., 2021; Tomasi et al., 2020).

National tourism priorities for Bulgaria encompass major strategic aims for the development of the sector. The economic, social, and public spheres view it as vital. These priorities articulate a set of changes related to the human resource potential necessary for the sector's growth. These changes are integrated into the system, territory, and country, serving both as human capital and as consumers of public activity to meet their professional consumer needs. It is defined in existing national documents and strategies for human resource development as one of the most important aspects of the sustainable development of a country in the short and long term. The most crucial aspect is its alignment with the sustainable development of the Bulgarian economy. The proposed changes pertain to modernization, which includes the adjustment and development of the education and training base, with a particular emphasis on university education. The recommendations primarily focus on the education requirements based on current global common standards, offering a fresh perspective on the study of this sub-sector. The recommendations aim to enhance the trustworthiness of tourism professionals with employers who demonstrate high value in their industries, leading to subsequent career development and personalization.

4. Future directions

First, higher education institutions may revise and modernize their economic profile curriculum and educational programs to align with international standards, particularly in the areas of financial and banking education. They will provide insights into the latest trends in the European business landscape and guide the development of economic education. Higher education institutions should develop programs to train their faculty, particularly lecturers, in new teaching methods. These programs should focus on employing effective and innovative educational tools, including higher teaching levels and a wide range of alternative tools and methods. Another important recommendation is that higher education institutions need to take into account the increasing dependency on funding for laboratories, the development of new educational products, the improvement of training tools, and the like. In response to the wishes and specific requirements of tourism as material and in physical nature and sectors of the economy, tours of the development of modern hotel and restaurant services and activities are proposed as a continuous main form of higher education in university schools and outside the main part of higher

education—the best training centres in the names of qualified vocational tertiary education. These recommendations will consider the necessary conditions for the private and social reproduction of modern hotel and restaurant staff in Bulgaria, as well as in the financial professions and fishing industries. Teachers in the tourism education field, managers of state educational authorities and organizations, and other communities interested in improving the content of education for hotels and restaurants are the target audience for this study (Wu & Liu, 2021; Balzer, 2020; Alenezi, 2021).

The Bulgarian educational system, both at the level of general secondary and higher education, is undergoing major changes in order to adapt and meet the requirements of the European Commonality and the Bologna Process. These changes are particularly noticeable in the professional field of tourism, for which the requirements are on the rise in the labour market. In the context of considerable human resource reproduction in the field, the imperfections in tourism curricula complicate the training of highly qualified specialists. This is largely due to bad connection with the business, understanding of labor market needs and cross-functional analysis of all determinants of tourism development (Terziev et al., 2021; Terziev, 2020; Terziev & Lyubcheva, 2022).

Tourism is constantly evolving in order to face the global economic conditions and trends. This process integrates regional and national peculiarities, while simultaneously embracing a global approach to development and the search for tools that align with society, primarily education. The training of qualified specialists is needed to meet the requirements of the labour market and contribute to the development of both the industry and the quality of individual consumers in society. A curriculum that regularly modifies its content adapts to the changing realities. To align the learning experience with current knowledge, educators organize curricular activities and review and modernize the course program every 5-7 years. The three main lines of educational communication are interactions between educators, their contacts with industry practitioners, and the exchange of messages between learners and practitioners, achieved through internships and diploma theses. We need not view the subsystems as isolated. The regular control of the possible discrepancies between the 'expected' and 'acquired' learning outcomes on the part of the student and the needs of the labour market is direct proof of the system's unity. In this context, the paper also presents a compilation of the most successful case studies of how the reviewed and modernized curriculum successfully meets the changing requirements of employers and social partners (Okumus and Erdogan 2021; Verhun and Bondarchuk 2022; Thommandru et al. 2023).

The most crucial area for improving the quality of tourism education in Bulgaria is faculty development. The regular training of faculty members will lead to increased effectiveness in doing their job and, as a result, will increase the number of satisfied alumni. This type of program is considered an investment in the teacher as a person and in his/her professional development. Improved student attitudes and success in learning acquisition measure the return on this investment. Therefore, it is crucial for faculty development programs to align with the evolving training and education practices in the tourism industry. These programs should align with the global trends in tourism development, which prioritize the development of sustainable tourism, conservation practices, local community and cultural awareness, and deep and intensive learning and education for guests. These programs should primarily address the professional expectations of students, the necessary knowledge and competencies, and innovative teaching methodologies (Dimitrova, 2020; Dimitrov & Dimitrova, 2021; Kazandzhieva, 2021; Ivanova, 2021).

It is the responsibility of Bulgarian universities to provide continuing education and training to their faculty members in order to stimulate their growth, development, and learning in different areas, such as teaching, research, scholarly activities, public service, and educational leadership. This approach to training educates people in ways that are pertinent and relevant to wider fields of education and should set in motion a journey of cultural awareness and academic development that influences participants for the rest of their lives. Indeed, development becomes an integral way of working and a frame of mind. Giving this kind of training, promoting ownership for individuals, groups, and the organization, and being aware of the different learning styles and strategies that can work for people with different needs, traits, and preferences can have an impact on both institutions and tourism services in their own right (Sima et al. 2022; Terziev & Lyubcheva, 2022; Tsvetanska et al. 2020; Nacheva and Sulova 2020).

The scope of these programs is to provide ongoing training to new and existing faculty on effective teaching methods, understanding and use of current and cutting-edge technologies, appreciation of sharing resources that are necessary and required for educating students, providing support for all faculty, establishing teaching/learning environments with excellence in mind, introducing faculty to the institution and working with the students, as well as broadening the faculty's understanding of hospitality and working closely with educators, professionals, and the hospitality industry. We conducted recruitment events for mentoring on both a national and international level to ensure the sustained global success of this intervention. These programs identify other important skills and motivations that budding faculty must have, with an emotional emphasis on sharing resources. These include a genuine love, enjoyment, and ongoing interest in teaching; a curiosity about the why and how of learning; and the

ability to teach exuberantly. Peer workshops present various opportunities for learning, offering peers different ways to teach and learn. Additionally, through hands-on mentoring during meetings, encouragement sessions, and regular faculty feedback sessions, there is support and cross-fertilization of theories, ideas, and practices for various individual programs, fostering a global faculty mindset that aids in promoting academic excellence. The faculty may even incorporate techniques and ideas from outside or underutilized sources into their own classrooms. These techniques may also serve to bridge a communication divide beyond the classroom walls (Callo & Yazon, 2020; Dung, 2020).

Industry partnerships are a crucial way to build a bridge between academia and industry and to improve the content of specialized modules. They are considered an important aspect of higher education that could help enhance the theoretical teaching of critical issues. Offering internships provides students with intensive practical training that contributes to more comprehensive development, while applied research aims to prepare new knowledge that might be useful for the company and extend the means of cooperation (Bilotta et al., 2021; Sushchenko et al., 2021; Mandalia, 2023).

The partnerships should be based on achieving common goals and be valuable to the partners, providing experience, capacity building, using resources, or even representing an engagement in a process of social development. The second boundary of the model includes a significant portion of non-formal educational services. In contemporary educational politics, these services have the potential to serve as a potent instrument for assessing the quality and efficacy of higher education in the context of regional development and human resource management. Internships implemented within the framework of a formal national program, aiming to create and provide ready experts to some of the most dynamic economic branches, will help compensate for the chronic shortage of potential candidates for employment in the tourism sector. Open dialogue with tourism organizations at a national, regional, and destination level is critical. It is important for an exchange of policy ideas, but also because the industry can best assist in keeping curricula relevant to current and future needs. The tourist industry, of course, also benefits from the better-prepared knowledge the students derived from improved education. There should be increased formalized cooperation between universities and industry, including memorandums of understanding and shadowing between professional partners and university academics. In conclusion, the cooperation in the field of education is questioned, thus indicating the true need for an increasing number of professionals in the field and the semblance of a shortage in response to the increasing demand for labor force in the tourism sector (Orphanidou et al., 2023; Leung & Ladkin, 2024; Fang et al., 2021).

Clearly, the development of international professional skills among future tourism professionals is key to their employability. Language proficiency should count as one. Language is an important tool of communication in the highly communicative industry. It is language that connects individuals and companies in an industry that ultimately revolves around people. If employees fail to communicate effectively with clients, they are unlikely to be satisfied and return to the destination. The contemporary market requires well-trained human resources in the modern tourism industry, which is increasing. Every applicant in the job market with sufficient language proficiency is in a more advantageous position. Travel and tourism personnel are faced with dealing with clients from various regions, ethnic and social groups, or even countries; individuals with diverse life patterns, levels of education, and cultures who speak different languages. English is a key tool for bridging such gaps. A gap in linguistic competence has emerged as a key factor. Developing language awareness and competence, therefore, is based on the business case idea of enhancing students' employability, which in turn will increase their interest. Given the significance of these issues, universities and their affiliated bodies must make strategic, long-term decisions to anticipate and manage their students' language problems, while also implementing the most effective preparatory practices. Therefore, the determination of language diagnostics and enrichment schemes by an institution or government is crucial. Universities, in partnership with these institutions, provide market-driven language training. Totally, 96% of first-year students study a foreign language. The University of Economics in Varna guides a high percentage of its students in studying English, the most widely used language in the European Union and worldwide, as a foreign language. About 76% of students are studying this most-used language in European tourism, making use of the common tourism market—German language and French, as well as Italian. The students' profile, their language requirements, and the potential absence of a flawless registration system may mitigate some biases, but overall, the "adopted" approach provides insight into the languages spoken by a segment of the student population. In a scenario involving language barriers, a significant portion of our students will interact with potential scientists, visitors, and populations from developing countries. Therefore, an additional 77% of our students are required to possess the ability to speak foreign languages. Why should anyone select language training? It is believed that 81% of students study a foreign language because they are interested in it; fewer students do so to maintain their language skills; only a few students study a foreign language to fulfil their course requirements, and the fewest do so to secure a good job. Crucially, only 58% believe that knowing at least one foreign language will be useful to enhance their career prospects. A large number of students do not have any plans to hold a diploma or participate in any type of qualification test. A high percentage of the world's population is

bilingual. Mostly, children from affluent backgrounds and ethnicities are able to study in more than one language at the primary level. A much smaller proportion study foreign languages at later levels. While not many students in Bulgaria are able to study a variety of languages, there are still some (Hien2023; Belias et al.2020; Ngoc and Tien2023).

5. Conclusion

In summary, the paper has investigated the current landscape of tourism education in Bulgaria, synthesizing the perceptions of key stakeholders in the industry and within higher education. We identified several challenges that require attention, such as modernizing the curriculum and developing teaching materials and strategies to effectively implement it. Moreover, there is a need to enhance the research and knowledge exchange activities of tourism faculties and to develop stronger links with the industry to support the development of quality internships and further student employability. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the successful examples, these kinds of impacts are profound and sustainable. Furthermore, students can more easily acquire the necessary knowledge and skills during their formal education, instead of needing to adapt their traditional practices as working professionals. The successful developments and corresponding recommendations show the opportunities and affordances that such a policy might adopt. The following are detailed examples of three strategic directions and several specific strategies that should be taken in order to enhance tourism education in Bulgarian universities and correspond to the modern requirements of the sector. The successful implementation of the recommended strategies and practices will update the current position as outlined in the paper. These arguments show the necessity of developing in-depth investigations and continuously updating the models and strategies for improving the quality and accessibility of higher education. The recommendations underscore the necessity of ongoing monitoring, updating, and refining the findings and proposed actions, given the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of the tourism sector. According to the presented ideas, universities can establish new modern strategies and implement changes in the educational process to meet the challenges of the dynamically developing tourism sector. The paper points out that both curricula and educational activities should be subject to continuous monitoring and updating to cover the requirements of modern society and the labor markets. It explains a cycle of change and innovation by pointing out the dimensions of curriculum change from a qualification-centered approach to a learning-centered approach. We recommend fostering a culture of change and educational innovation among higher education stakeholders, including universities, employers, and state institutions.

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