

EMPLOYABILITY OF TOURISM GRADUATES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF EXPERIENCE OF TOURISM SERVICE PROVIDERS

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Abstract

Tourism and travel management programmes have been taught at different levels in Universities and colleges in India as a vocational course. The main purpose of introducing a curriculum in tourism was to educate and train students about tourism, travel and hospitality industry. These courses aimed at providing suitable employment opportunities to the graduates at the end of the course period. The ratio of students entering in tourism profession, or placement of students in tourism and hospitality institutions are determined by the course curriculum, assistance of the institution in proving campus recruitment and preparedness of the students to join the industry. This research paper attempts to study and analyse the employability of tourism graduates through the experiences of employers with reference to Varanasi. The study would be useful to the researchers and academia to understand the main attributes of employability which are expected from the tourism trade.

Keywords: *Employability, Tourism Education, Curriculum Development*

INTRODUCTION

World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2016) reported that the share of employment opportunities (direct and indirect) generated by tourism will be 11% by 2026, whereas it is 9.5% at present. As unemployment is one of the grave concerns of the third world, less developed countries and progressive nations perceive tourism as a panacea for such problems and pay much attention to facilitate the growth of tourism in order to create new opportunities. Tourism policy of India (2002, draft policy 2016) envisaged new opportunities for youth and women who can directly or indirectly associate with tourism. Proactive initiatives of Government of India in the last couple of years catalysed the growth of foreign tourist arrivals, improvisation in tourist infrastructure in the country, new policy initiatives such as 100% Foreign Direct Investment, E-visa facility for citizens of 150 countries etc. Domestic tourism figures show a very impressive picture in the last few years, which also shows the shift of stereotyped product offering to diversification of tourism products. As a result of these initiatives tourism & hospitality industry contributed 6.7% to India's GDP and sustained a total of 36.7 million direct, indirect, and induced jobs in the country in the year 2014 (KPMG/Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2016).

Statistics of tourist arrivals indicate that tourism industry in India shows an upward growth. It is also important to know the efficiency of the human resource trained in different institutions who are meant to serve the needs of tourists. Availability of trained and skilled manpower is the prerequisite of tourism development process in any country to ensure a sustained growth of tourism and maintaining reputation of the place. In order to bridge the skill gap in tourism industry, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has been conducting several training programmes through Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management to train the stake holders in tourism industry since 2014. According to the reports 163,524 persons were imparted training under Hunar se Rozgar Tak & Skill Testing and Certification schemes until May 31, 2016.

In addition to the part time training programmes, universities, and institutes offer multiple programmes in tourism and hospitality management across the country. Every year thousands of students pass out from these institutions and many of them find a suitable place to work in aviation, hospitality, tourism etc. It is also found that tourism and related area have been a favourite area for start-up business firms. Professionals from Information Technology and Management disciplines invest in innovative concepts looking at the bright future of this industry. But the

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question of how many students do really have the required competencies to work with a firm, or sustain own business profitably. A previous study by the researcher (2015) estimated that the attrition rate is high in tourism industry in comparison to other sectors. Many tourism students felt that tourism industry demands overtime working, high stress factor and low payment which discourage them to develop a positive attitude towards it.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Universities in India introduced tourism management programmes as early as 1975 at undergraduate level, but as a discipline it got popularity in the last leg of 1990's. These courses aimed to create trained human resource in tourism industry. Recently tourism has been offered under vocational streams at Bachelors and Masters level, which is flexible than the regular streams to augment trained manpower in tourism. A reality check of the employability of tourism graduates is essential as large amount of money and resources are utilised for tourism and hospitality education in India. The present study is an attempt to assess the key factors determines the employability of tourism graduates. View of the stake holders in tourism industry has been very important to complete the study and the obtained data was analysed in order to find the key contributing attributes of employability of tourism graduates.

500 plus students pass out of different tourism programmes from institution from Varanasi. Hotel Taj (under Indian Hotel Company) and Hotel Hindustan International offer in-house training programmes which finally leads to the placement of the students in the respective organisations. Majority of these students look for a suitable career in Varanasi as they are acquainted to the trade. Most of them are slowly absorbed in the tourism service sector, but in due course of time, many of them operate themselves as ground operators. A brief look at the tourism sector of Varanasi is important to understand the distribution of tourism trade. Varanasi is one of the main sites of all tour itineraries of foreign tourists, Buddhist pilgrims and domestic tourists. Rajmahal cruise (operates in River Ganga during seasons), luxury tourist trains bring high end tourists to the city. All categories of foreign tourists (elite tourists to back packers, hippies etc.) visit the city, spend time in immersing themselves in local culture.

Domestic tourism in the recent years witnessed a major change from the regular pilgrims to serious youth who are interested to explore the hidden treasures of the city such as narrow lanes, food, crafts, life etc. In total, there are more than 100 travel agents in Varanasi. (approved and unapproved) and majority of them are small enterprises. The list of standard hotels includes 20 plus hotels which are of different categories. Air India, Jet Airways, Vistara, Indigo

and Spice Jet offer services from the Varanasi Airport. Tourism business of Varanasi is highly fragmented, and the survivals of these enterprises are based up on the share of the business they receive from the tour operators in Delhi.

The course curriculum offered in the universities and colleges contain theoretical aspects of tourism, tourism operations, marketing and management which are intended to enable the students to work in tourism industry. Level of skills imparted varies according to the type of the course. It is found that most of the tourism jobs in tourism industry centered around tour operation business in Varanasi, a small group of operators experiment with heritage walks, exploring rituals to daily life of artisans, learning yoga, music etc. Interactions with employers show that graduates often struggle with the beginning of their career and many turn away from the job or switch in to other organisations. The employers also face difficulties as candidates lack interpersonal skills and basic knowledge on business operations. The initial period of two to three months, the new comers have to undergo extensive training as they have to learn the basic operations, office environment etc. In these circumstances, it is important to identify key attributes determine employability of tourism graduates so that a restructuring of the academic offering can be processed for the betterment of skills and competencies of students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A brief review of the available literature on employability provides an outline of the researches conducted in this area. It can be broadly classified in to employability related factors, curriculum effectiveness, skill development and competencies. The students in UK and Greece found hostile to tourism education (Airey and Frontistis 1997). Drummond et al. (1998) listed three general approaches to how skills and competencies can be taught within the curriculum. Universities challenge to produce idea candidates who have all knowledge and skill sets to the industry have been studied (Hagmann & Almekinders 2003). Lack of consensus among the academia on how to integrate courses upgrading skills and subject specific courses in the curriculum has also been studied in this paper.

Kay and Moncarz (2004) conducted a comparison study on Knowledge, Skills and Ability (KSA). It is found that knowledge of human resource management as the most important one and knowledge as the top level management considered financial monument is significant. The middle level management considered IT knowledge is important. Looking at the dynamic nature of the job requirements basic human traits also play an important role in the career upgradation of students. Tourism and hospitality industry being a service oriented industry, students need core knowledge, exposure and practical experience in order

to develop career. Gursoy and Swanger (2005) examined important course content items in hospitality management areas. The study shows the important skills required to work in tourism and hospitality industry. Human relations skills are as important as knowledge and this is basically part of the soft skill component. Researches in human resource management areas show that three major factors play dominant role in employability i.e. knowledge, skill and abilities set.

According to Trinko (2005) different organisations of the world indicated that honesty/integrity, group leadership as important qualities required. Hsieh & Yen (2005) conducted a study on job stress and found that service personnel encountered incompatible job demands in tourism and hospitality industry. Employability can be fostered through the curriculum up gradations (York and Knight 2006). The gap between theory and practice is well researched by researchers. The research of Zopiatis & Constanti (2007) shows that students realise the gap between classroom learning and experience in the job during the internship programmes. A study by Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009) examined the gap between the needs and requirements of the industry and the programmes offered by educational institutions. Employers look for flexible and adaptable workforce. It was found that the perception of the employers always differ with the classroom learning provided to the students. Improvement of competency level of students can be done only through the regular upgradation of curriculum. Chang and Chu (2009) emphasised the need of internship to have a better understanding on a particular job or specific area.

The learning outcome of the programme decides the employability level of the students (Chan, 2010). In order to bridge the gap between the academia and the industry, Chang and Hsu (2010) suggests universities and tourism and hospitality institutes should work together in the planning of the internship programmes in order to place the students in the right organisations. Employers perception on graduates are based on their performance and competence in team working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and other managerial abilities in general (SCRE, 2011).

Human resource strategies failed to meet graduates expectations (Costa, Breda et.al. 2013). Koc, E., Yumusak, S. et.al. (2014) pointed out the need of ensuring quality and quantity of graduates studying tourism and hospitality streams. It is found that the low salary packages and the overtime job timings of tourism and hospitality sector, students prefer other job options. Considering the peculiar nature of jobs offered in tourism industry (low salary, seasonality, stress, etc.), Walmsley (2014) termed tourism industry as a refuge sector. According to Meis, S. M. (2014), the need of credible information on employment and labour

market for any human resource related organisation in order to understand the volume of employment opportunities provided by tourism industry. This will act as a database for the policy makers or the human resource planners to design a proper strategy to develop programmes suitable for creating new employment opportunities as well as required manpower in each area.

Shivoro et. al (2017) argued that the Academics should seek to engage students in contextual situations. It was found that issues arise from the interpretation of skill requirements in the industry (by employers and teachers). Tsai (2017) conducted a detailed study on travel agency managers perception of tourism industry employability. The author used Delphi method to conduct the research and the findings indicate the key attributes of graduate employment are generic skills, disciplinary skills, professional attitude, and career planning skills. According to Tsai, travel agency managers consider generic skills and professional attitude are the two essential employability criteria.

The research gap is identified from available literature mentioned above, which mainly deals with the general features such as academic-industry gap, curriculum upgradation, core competencies etc. There exists a gap on methodological frameworks of the researches and the subject matter of the present research. Empirical model generally ends with regression models, whereas more scientific structural models are yet to find in research publications reviewed for the present study. The theoretical base of the present study is established at finding the causal relationship of four major factors i.e. knowledge, soft skill, self-efficacy and abilities on employability of tourism graduates. Contribution of these constructs on employability has been analysed in the study.

RESEARCH PROBLEM, OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

It is found that students passing out of tourism programmes don't get desired positions in tourism organisations or some of them don't even get selected in reputed organisations. Those who work in small organisations don't offer good salary according to the industry standards. Majority of tour operators in Varanasi are ground handling agencies and they survive on meagre share of the income receive from their lead operators. Another fact is that many students change their career option from tourism to other streams which they find befitting according to their perceptions of jobs. Tour operators often question the basic experience of the students, exposure to trade, knowledge levels, skill and abilities to work in the profession. Hence, it is important to know the key factors deciding the employability of tourism graduates in order to offer better options to students. Accordingly, major objectives for this paper has been set as per following:

- To assess the general perception of tourism organisations of Varanasi about the fresh tourism graduates.
- To examine the causal relationship between observed variables and employability.

To satisfy the objectives, research questions have been framed is that: What are the key factors contributing to the employability of a tourism graduate? What is the contribution of each factor? What is the general perception of tour operators of Varanasi about the employability of fresh tourism graduates?

Accordingly, following hypothesis have been formulated:

H1: Knowledge of tourist sites and tourism business has a positive effect on employability of tourism graduates.

H2: Soft skill levels have a positive effect on employability of tourism graduates.

H3: Self efficacy has a positive effect on employability of tourism graduates.

H4: Abilities have a positive impact on the employability of tourism graduates.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was carried out among the tourism service providers in Varanasi. The list of approved service providers were collected from Dept. of Tourism, Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO) and Varanasi Tourism Guild. Since there are several small enterprises are there in tourism sector of Varanasi, a random selection of respondents was made and survey was carried out.

Survey Instrument: A structured questionnaire was designed after a through literature review. The questionnaire was divided in to two sections. First section dealt with the nature of business, staff strength and the second part contained the constructs with several items each measured on a five point scale ranging from least important to highly important. Items in the questionnaire were chosen according to its relevance to the main construct and its degree of correlation among the items. Out of 75 questions distributed, 51 filled questionnaires were received, which could be used for the study. Although there are no definite agreement on number of samples required to conduct Partial Least Square Path Modelling (PLSPM) analysis, Chin (1998) recommends the sample size is 10 cases per indicator, as a rule of thumb. More samples can definitely bring better results. There are 4 indicators in this study and the largest block also contains four items.

Methods: Data analysis has been done using R-Studio which is open access software. R is widely being popular among researchers due to its applicability to carry out

several tests, compile and reproduce the results in an easy manner. PLSPM explains the causal relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable. According to Sanchez (2013) PLSPM is a very useful tool to understand relationships and designing statistical models. The process involved to conduct PLSPM is mentioned as below.

1. Identifying the manifest variables or indicators. Here the indicator variables are knowledge, soft skill, self-efficacy and abilities.
2. Define the latent variable which would be measured by the indicative variables. In this study it is employability.
3. Employability is reflected by indicator variables, hence the indicators are called as reflective indicators.

The analysis process carried out include cross tabulation, reliability test, designing the path diagram, listing outer model, and structural model assessment. Measurement model assessment include unidimensionality of the indicators, loadings and communalities and checking cross loadings. The structural model reflects the strength of the model.

RESULTS

The following diagramme indicates the staff strength of the organisations which responded to the study.

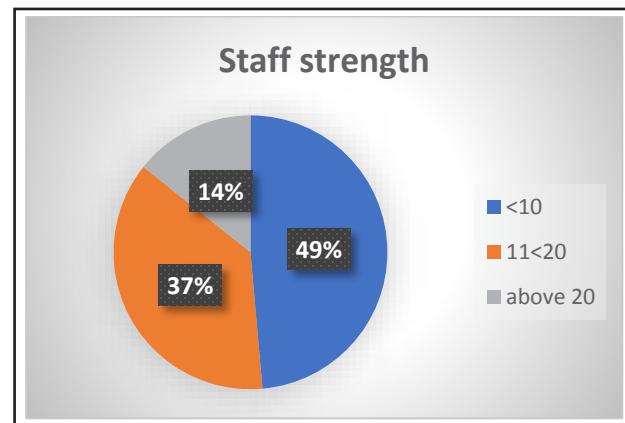


Fig. 1: Total No. of Staff Working in Respondents' Organisations

The staff strength of less than 10 comprised 49% of the respondent organisations (Fig. 1), whereas, 37% organisations had 11 to 20 and 14% organisations have a staff strength of more than 20 employees. Table-1 illustrates nature of business carried out by the respondents. The multiple responses show that the respondents' main business is tour operation business, followed by ticketing, transport arrangements and hotel booking. The survey was done mainly among the travel trade of Varanasi, hence the case of hospitality operations are not reported. It also indicates that majority of travel business operated in Varanasi are small entrepreneurs or business done on partnership basis.

Majority of them work as ground handling agencies of various tour operators in Delhi. But another interesting fact is that these agencies have a good hold on the business of Buddhist circuit.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

Department	Responses	
	Number	Percent
Tour operator	31	35.2%
Ticketing	21	23.9%
Transport	24	27.3%
Hotel Booking	11	12.5%
Hospitality	1	1.1%
Total	88	100.0%

Result of PLS PM

(a) Unidimensionality test result shows three values. Cronbach’s Alpha, Dhillon-Goldstein’s Rho and eigen value analysis. Cronbach’s alpha is 0.70 or above for all the constructs, as in the case of DG Rho. A higher score of reliability indicates the higher inter-item correlation. The first eigen value is higher than the second eigen value, (eigen value much more than 1 is appreciated, whereas the second eigen value should be less than 1 (Sanchez 2013, 58), which shows that the block is unidimensional.

Table 2: Test of Unidimensionality

	C. alpha	DG. rho	eig. 1st	eig. 2nd
K	0.88	0.92	2.94	0.45
S	0.70	0.84	1.90	0.77
SE	0.81	0.89	2.17	0.50
A	0.69	0.83	1.87	0.68
EM	0.72	0.84	1.93	0.68

(b) The descriptive statistics of each construct is presented below.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	No. of items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Knowledge	4	15.82	4.07
Soft skill	3	13.65	1.67
Self efficacy	3	14.45	5.82
Abilities	3	6.67	2.34
Employability	3	7.57	2.16

Above table explains that constructs, mean and standard deviation. Knowledge consists of 4 items, soft skill has 3 items, self-efficacy contains 3 constructs, abilities defined by 3 items and employability is defined by 3 items. Lowest standard deviation is reported in soft skill whereas the highest standard deviation is calculated in self efficacy.

(c) Outer model loadings and cross loadings.

Table 4: Cross Loadings

Constructs	K	S	SE	A	EM
K1	0.90	-0.05	0.10	-0.08	0.22
K2	0.84	0.01	0.04	-0.14	0.23
K3	0.87	-0.07	0.05	-0.15	0.21
K5	0.81	0.17	0.22	-0.29	0.18
S3	0.08	0.62	0.26	-0.20	0.13
S5	0.07	0.86	0.38	-0.36	0.15
S6	-0.08	0.87	0.40	-0.15	0.23
SE3	0.13	0.35	0.96	-0.14	0.34
SE4	0.06	0.36	0.76	-0.13	0.09
SE5	0.05	0.54	0.76	-0.16	0.12
AA2	-0.18	-0.29	-0.15	0.98	0.08
AA3	0.02	-0.33	-0.35	0.36	-0.01
AA4	-0.10	-0.23	-0.21	0.70	0.02
E1	0.26	0.10	0.21	-0.07	0.81
E2	0.09	0.08	0.13	0.05	0.61
E3	0.22	0.28	0.28	0.14	0.93

Each item loads more highly on their own construct than on other constructs and that all constructs

share more variance with their measures than with other constructs (Chan, 2010).

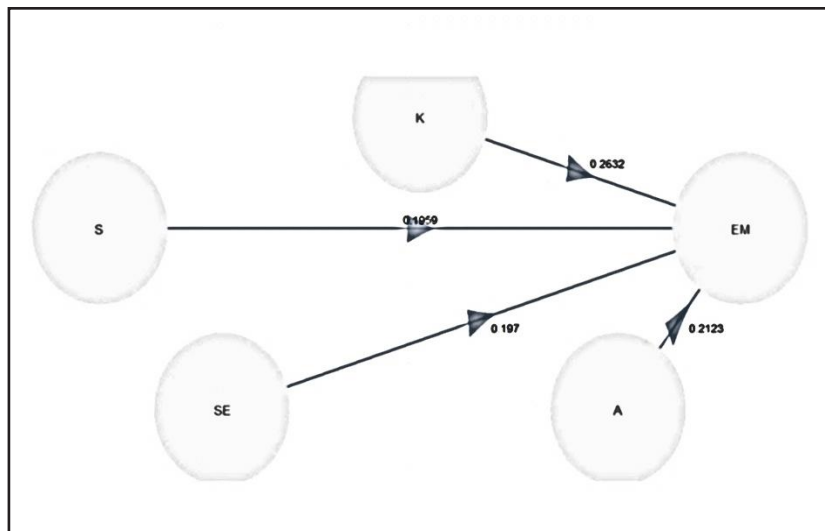


Fig. 2: Path Diagram

The path diagramme indicate a positive relationship with the latent variable employability (EM).

(d) Structural Model Assessment

Table 5: Summary of Structural Model

	Type	R ²	Block Communality	Mean Redundancy	AVE
K	Exogenous	0	0.734736	0	0.734736
S	Exogenous	0	0.626268	0	0.626268
SE	Exogenous	0	0.696206	0	0.696206
A	Exogenous	0	0.522264	0	0.522264
EM	Endogenous	0.18	0.629406	0.11	0.629406

R² indicates the amount of variance in the endogenous variable (employability) explained by its independent latent variables. The reported score of R² is 0.18, which is low. Redundancy measures the percent of the variance of indicators in an endogenous block that is predicted from the independent latent variable associated to the endogenous LV. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) ranges normally from 0 to 1 and an AVE of 0.5 or more indicates that more than 50% of the indicator’s variability is captured by the latent variable. Hence the convergent validity is established.

Validation

Bootstrapping is preformed (with 200 samples) to estimate the precision of the PLS parameters. The output of bootstrapping is given below.

The following table shows the mean R² after performing bootstrap.

Table 6: Regression Output

Original	Mean. Boot	Std. Error	perc.025	perc.975
0.180953	0.3127203	0.085965	0.162449	0.481286

Table 7: Path Coefficient

		Original	Mean. Boot	Std. Error	perc.025	perc.975
K	EM	0.26320	0.26680	0.09936	0.07935	0.42329
S	EM	0.19589	0.18114	0.20908	0.29852	0.51604
SE	EM	0.19698	0.14042	0.27017	0.49571	0.49358
A	EM	0.21234	0.10258	0.22168	-0.2681	0.45098

The bootstrap intervals for path coefficient is significant at 5% confidence level. Hence the hypotheses of the study have been supported. This validates the theoretical framework of

knowledge, soft skill, self-efficacy and abilities contribute to the overall employability of the tourism graduates. The calculated Goodness of fit value is 0.34 which means the prediction power of the model is low.

Table 8: Total Effects of Indicators on Employment

Total effects		Original	Mean. Boot	Std. Error	perc.025	perc.975
K	EM	0.2632	0.2668	0.0994	0.0793	0.4233
S	EM	0.1959	0.1811	0.2091	-0.2985	0.5160
SE	EM	0.1970	0.1404	0.2702	-0.4957	0.4936
A	EM	0.2123	0.1026	0.2217	-0.2681	0.4510

DISCUSSION

The study establishes the causal relationship between employability and exogenous variables though the effects are low. The following items define each exogenous variable.

Table 9: Items Defining Indicators

Knowledge	knowledge of tourist sites in city, U.P, and knowledge of resorts and hotels
Soft skill	Customer services, Problem solving
Self-efficacy	Obedience, listening and etiquettes
Abilities	handle things independently and trade exposure
Employability	overall performance in interaction and place of education

The present study was conducted to understand the theoretical model on employability is applicable for tourism graduates who pass out from various educational institutions of Varanasi. The results of the analysis shows that the existing model do support the study. A detailed observation of the results points out that that basic knowledge of tourist sites in and around Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, acquaintance of hotels and resorts are the key factors defining the manifest variable 'knowledge'. This is a valid point as every tourism service provider expects that tourism graduates should have the basic knowledge of tourist attractions and the suppliers of tourism services.

The effect of soft skill component is comparatively low as the local tour operators are not as professional as the operators in Delhi. But tourism service providers expect that the tourism graduates should have a basic understanding of customer services and finding solutions for the customer problems.

Self-efficacy levels indicate that the nature of professionalism expected from the graduates. Being obedient to the senior staff is very important in trade (in the context of Varanasi) as it reflects the politeness to accept assignments, correct oneself and finally provide better service. Listening skills not only proved as one of the most important component of communication it reiterates the need to properly understand

the real need of the client at the site. Tourism industry demands proper grooming up of the potential job seekers. The course curriculam and the exposure is expected to orient the students towards the industry requirements and developing professional etiquettes. This needs regular practice, monitoring, improvisation and demonstration of etiquettes among the young people at the time they complete the graduation programme.

Abilities of the candidates do play an important role in upgrading their efficiency levels. Every employer expect that their employees to be capable of doing things independently. Ability to take decisions, implement it time to time needs good understanding of responsibilities. Practical exposure is essential and the capability of a graduate to take up assignments which are related to the trade, understanding levels of the dynamic situations and ability to handle the issues can only learn from the ground level. Personal experience of the researcher reminds that class room assignments can provide a basic idea of such dynamism, but the real business world test the intellectual levels of the candidate to prove themselves. Another proven fact is trade exposure improves the abilities of the candidate.

Looking in to the results and the realities of tourism industry of Varanasi, it can be concluded that the question of employability of tourism graduates are determined by the skills and capabilities of the candidates, but other aspects such as the complexities of socio-business profile of the city needs to be understood in its present context. Tourism industry of Varanasi witnessed rejuvenation in the last couple of years, which also lead to the sprouting up of several new enterprises to cash the business opportunities in tourism. Tourism graduates (originally belonged to Varanasi) passed out from various institutions in India joined their hands to expedite this opportunities resulted gradually in introduction of some degree of professional approach, which was missing otherwise in the earlier period. Further, the number of job seekers in tourism industry also grew up over a period of time (last five years).

Low salaries, less opportunities to attract tourists directly (most of the business is channeled through Delhi bound

operators) and extreme competition still feature tourism trade of Varanasi. In this circumstances, a relook in to the competitiveness of the graduate students is very essential, in order to train them in a very objective manner which can yield results in the future. This needs upgradation of course curriculum as well. The study points to the revision of course curriculum of tourism at different level. The curriculum should cope with the dynamic nature of tourism trade, for that exposure is required at the larger scale. The upgradation of course curriculum in such a manner that train graduates to fulfill the job requirements at the very beginning of their professional career. Universities and institutions should come out of the vicious circle of offering conventional theory courses in tourism to participation oriented learning.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY TO THE THEORY

The present study delves in to the cross examination of various factors contributing to the employability of tourism graduates. This research examined the experiences of employers and theorized that the core characteristics of employment and man power requirements of tourism industry. The research also contributes to the existing branch of knowledge in terms of the fundamental notions of tourism education as empowering the graduates to attain required skills and knowledge to perform better in their career after completion of their formal education in tourism. Though this study can't be generalized for the whole country, it gives the researcher an opportunity to think and conduct similar studies and design a more powerful model which can predict the main factors determining employability.

CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to explore the causal relationship between employability and a set of constructs but there are other factors should also be looked in to. One of the factors overlooked in this study is the overall business environment of the geographical region, which could have a greater impact on the employability of graduates. Employment generation in tourism is also based on a number of other factors such as destination competitiveness, seasonality factors, popularity of the places etc. The findings indicate the key competencies required from the graduates in tourism in order to find a suitable job in tourism industry. The effectiveness of a course curriculum can be measured from the improvements in students' learning, utilization of their capabilities to begin a successful career in tourism industry. In the present context, many universities and colleges in India are converted in to machines of certificate producing rather than seriously looking in to the revision of course curriculum. Hence to improve the employability

of the tourism graduates, it is important to offer qualitative learning environment and creating an ecosystem which can experiment or test the capabilities.

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