

# Importance of **gender** in **students** demand for **higher education in tourism**: The case study of a tourism and hospitality higher education institution

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The importance of the scientific area of tourism, particularly in higher education, requires an analysis and interpretation of its evolution in Portugal. Assuming the widespread recognition of tourism and leisure transversal influence in the contemporary society, one considers the need for rigorous studies on the implications of gender issues in knowledge production in higher education institutions (HEI). Therefore, this study intends to understand the trends in students' demand for a degree in the tourism field and the importance of gender in higher education, and also their implication in the tourism sector labour market. This study is aimed mainly at interpreting the concern to understand the need and importance of studies on gender issues in tourism higher education, from different perspectives. To determine that the image of an HEI and the students' demand for this field of study may rely on a policy and strategy that include these relevant gender issues, both in an educational and in an employment perspective, which is also a purpose of this study. In the tourism sector, according to Costa, Carvalho and Breda (2011, p. 39), the Portuguese reality is

vertically segregated and, despite being a feminised sector, men occupy most top-level positions. Moreover, tourism workers, particularly female workers, are in general subject to poorer conditions of employment, such as low-pay, long working hours and more precarious contracts. The data [collected by these authors] hint at a very wide gender pay gap in the tourism industry.

Costa, Carvalho, Caçador and Breda (2012, p. 70) also analysed the higher education and the labour market in the tourism sector and concluded that

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although women prevail among tourism graduates in Portugal, men earn higher salaries and fill most top-level positions in the tourism sector. [Their] study diagnose[d] disparities between male and female tourism graduates in the following domains: areas of activity, positions, and salary.

An interesting exercise was made by Scott-Halsell, Blum and Huffman (2011) about the links between the hospitality schools and this sector. According to them, as a service-based industry, tourism relies on the ability of its managers to be service minded and guest focused as it is important to understand how the work is done 'from school desks to front desks', in order to better prepare the students with regards to emotional intelligence, namely in terms of gender representation (60.8% female) in the students' group. On the other hand, in the same study, it is observed that females represent 57.8% in the industry professionals and the educational achievement indicator of graduate degree is 12.8%.

The Portuguese HEI has significantly invested in this field over the last 27 years and it is still very important nowadays, because the vacancies represent 3.9% of the total, with also huge gender interesting implications. The Bologna Process led to significant changes in the philosophy and structure of higher education courses, particularly at the curriculum level and teaching-learning process. In this context, one characterised the educational project of the School of Tourism and Hospitality (STH) of the Polytechnic Institute of Guarda (Portugal) to understand the vocational orientation and the specificities of the educational offer, namely regarding gender characteristics.

The methodology relies on literature review to contextualize the current paradigms of the higher education system and gender issues in tourism education and labour market, to determine policy trends and the implementation of successful strategies. This study intends to understand the relative importance of gender issues to the evolution of the development project of the STH, through the collection and analysis of primary and secondary information on key indicators about courses' supply and students' demand for this HEI, which has a clearly defined institutional framework in tourism and hospitality fields. The primary data is obtained with intentional sample of present students in the Tourism and Leisure degree because the female group is more represented, compared to the degrees in the area of Hospitality and Food Service. The applied survey was based on some indicators from the study of Costa et al. (2011) to allow some results' comparisons. It is also possible to conclude from secondary data that, at national level, the majority of candidates to the higher education system are female that present higher average grades obtained in the secondary education level.

The hypothesis of this study aims to ascertain the existence of significant association between the growth of tourism education at the national level, the importance of an active gender policy and the development of the educational project of the STH. In this study it was possible to observe that the female percentage indicates the importance of women in STH, especially in the 'Tourism and Leisure' degree. This is an important fact that should be taken into consideration to define the marketing strategy for the maximization of the results in the admission of students in Tourism degrees. Academic results shows that female of this degree had the best graduation marks. This indicator could represent a part of the success of the work developed in the STH. There are more female students and graduates currently employed and they occupy higher positions in the hierarchical structure of their organisations.

This type of analysis may be important to make several recommendations aimed at a more effective management of the STH in the context of the national and regional networks. The results of this study support the need and interest of investment in the comprehension of the students demand for this particular area of study at a national level. This seems also true for the promotion of an increasing students' demand on STH, with the main purpose of using a gendered strategy that could improve the competitiveness of this HEI.

The marketing strategy of a higher education institution, at regional and national levels, should be supported with thorough knowledge about the students profile in order to effectively contribute to more adequate management decisions, and consequently to higher satisfaction levels of all students and graduates.

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