

# Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students in Ecuador

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## Abstract

This paper explored the perceptions and career goals of undergraduate tourism students, before and during the pandemic COVID-19, in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro, in Milagro*, Ecuador. The study is based on a quantitative approach. The sample is made up of 207 students during 2018 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) and 161 students in 2020 (during COVID-19). The questionnaire included questions about professional perceptions and questions about the professional goals that students have in the short and long term. Finally, perceptions exclusively related to COVID-19 were measured. The results showed that the vast majority of the students are highly motivated and committed to pursue a career in the tourism industry. A high percentage of the participants expressed their desire to do a Tourism master degree and undertake their own tourism businesses, despite the uncertainty now generated by COVID-19. The findings also reaffirmed the importance of guiding improvements on tourism higher education and tourism industry, with the aim of ensuring the quality of the tourist services, with highly skilled professionals, especially in emerging tourist destinations as Ecuador.

**Keywords:** undergraduate Tourism students, perceptions, tourism career, tourism career goals, COVID-19.

## Efecto de la pandemia COVID-19 en las percepciones y objetivos profesionales de estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo en Ecuador

## Resumen

Este artículo explora las percepciones y objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo, antes y durante la pandemia COVID-19, en la Universidad Estatal de Milagro, en Milagro, Ecuador. El estudio se basa en un enfoque cuantitativo. La muestra se compone de 207 estudiantes durante el 2018 (antes de la pandemia COVID-19) y de 161 estudiantes en el 2020 (durante el COVID-19). El cuestionario incluyó preguntas sobre percepciones profesionales y preguntas acerca de los objetivos profesionales que tienen los estudiantes a corto y largo plazo. Finalmente, se midieron las percepciones exclusivamente relacionadas al COVID-19. Los resultados mostraron que la gran mayoría de estudiantes están altamente motivados y comprometidos con seguir una carrera en la industria del turismo. Un alto porcentaje de los participantes expresó su deseo de hacer una Maestría en Turismo y emprender sus propios negocios turísticos, a pesar de la incertidumbre ahora generada por el COVID-19. Los hallazgos también reafirmaron la importancia para orientar mejoras en la educación superior del turismo y en la industria del turismo, con el objetivo de asegurar la calidad de los servicios turísticos, con profesionales altamente calificados, especialmente en destinos turísticos emergentes como Ecuador.

**Palabra clave:** Estudiantes de pregrado de Turismo, percepciones, carrera de Turismo, objetivos profesionales en Turismo, COVID-19.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors that plays an important role in creating jobs, driving exports and generating prosperity across the world (WTTC, 2018). Over the decades, this industry has shown a sustained and consistent trend of growth and deepening diversification (UNWTO, 2018). However, the strong negative impact that this industry has had with the arrival of COVID-19 is indisputable, not only in Ecuador but worldwide.

The growth of tourism worldwide and the importance of this industry in each territory are evident, since tourism provides economic and social development, while managed with knowledge. In this sense, education in hospitality and tourism is essential for a tourist destination to prosper and achieve a certain degree of economic, social and environmental sustainability, making it competitive (Gándara, 2004).

The education of human resources is the key to sustainability, productivity and survival of the companies and institutions that make up the tourism sector. In a nation, the role of higher education is indisputable for its socioeconomic development (Lindong, 2007; Celis, 2017). This background makes the study of perceptions that the undergraduate students have about this profession indispensable to know whether they have uncertainty about their career, since they have witnessed the effects of COVID-19 in their future professional field.

Limited studies have been done about undergraduate tourism students' perceptions toward the career and the industry, few have been made in Latin America, and unfortunately no one in Ecuador. Of the studies carried out, few of them have attempted to detect students' different career perceptions according to their individual characteristics such as gender, years of study in college, work experience, specific major, and their willingness to choose the major (King & Hang, 2011).

This study is relevant considering the boom in the tourism sector before the COVID-19 in South America, and considering the impact of the pandemic. These issues are also important for the tourism industry professionals and for the education providers that is why the purposes of this research were to examine the perceptions that undergraduate tourism students have about the profession and if they have the intention to pursue a career in this work field through the time. The

research was designed to achieve the following three objectives:

1. To determine the perceptions of undergraduate tourism students about their career, comparing the situation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To identify the career goals of undergraduate tourism students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To identify the level of commitment that the undergraduate tourism students have with their professional preparation facing the context generated by COVID-19.

This study was developed with the students who were enrolled in *Licenciatura en Turismo in the Universidad Estatal de Milagro* (Ecuador) during 2018 (pre-pandemic) and 2020.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is the service industry where the customers and the personnel have frequent face-to-face interactions. "Since the tourism industry relies so heavily on people to deliver a service, this would result in a negative impact on service quality and consumer satisfaction, which might then hinder the competitiveness of the industry" (Roney & Öztin, 2007). A positive attitude of tourism employees toward their works is fundamental to get satisfied and loyal customers. In this sense, Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000); Richardson (2008) claim the importance of examining students' attitudes toward the industry because this lies in the fact of having a skilled, enthusiastic, and committed workforce in the hospitality industry.

For a long time, the tourism industry worldwide has been confronted with the problem of attracting and retaining high-quality employees (Kusluvan & Kusluvan, 2000). Students are the potential supply of labor in the market, and having positive attitudes will more likely lead to greater attraction and retention of these graduates in the industry (King & Hang, 2012).

Even when it is recognized that tourism has become a fundamental piece for the socio-economic development of countries, the education in tourism and its importance is still not fully recognized and valued (Jafari & Ritchie, 1981; Zagorani, 2009; Celis, 2017). In this era of increasing globalization of higher education, in which academic institutions around the world compete for students and funding, the lack of data does

not allow comparing international tourism institutions and programs, which implies an important problem (Airey et al., 2015).

Tourism as an academic discipline was not established in the United States until the 1960s, with the first tourism program in 1963, at Michigan State University, followed by the University of Wisconsin, with the first tourism course in 1973 (Jafari, 2003; Celis, 2017). As time goes by, changes in education, driven by the labor market and the development of a service economy, have led tourism studies to reach the age of majority (Airey & Tribe, 2006; Celis, 2017). Despite this, tourism is a newer field of study compared with other research in social sciences as Psychology, Political Sciences, Sociology, etc. Although it is recognized that the tourism sector represents high economic values, research on education in tourism is relatively new (Ring et al., 2009).

This research ascertained undergraduate student's perceptions about a career in the tourism industry before and during the pandemic COVID-19. Wang and Huang (2014) expand and support an explanation of why is important to analyze the perceptions of Tourism students towards their career. They mention that several centers of higher education include different specializations of tourism among their academic offer, so it is essential for them to understand the perceptions that students have towards this career and their future work field. Besides, they say that for tourism educators is important to know these perceptions in order to recruit a greater number of students in their educational establishments. In the same way, Wang & Huang (2014) think it can help to improve study programs and made them more realistic for students. Also, they state that the tourism and hospitality industry definitely influence positively or negatively on the perceptions and career goals of the students, making it more or less attractive for them. Therefore, they say that working on this kind of study it will also allow employers to know how to attract professionals with projection in the industry to work for their companies.

Concerning the attitudes of young people to tourism careers, Airey & Frontistis (1997) claim that while tourism is held out as one of the world's major industries and sources of employment it would be suitable to know more about what potential recruits think about it, in order to provide a basis for attracting the best possible work force. Although there is

substantial literature about tourism employment, only a limited number of studies were done to highlight the perceptions of students towards careers in the tourism industry (Roney & Öztin, 2007). For them, this means that more empirical studies focusing on this topic are required in order to evaluate the status of tourism jobs in the human resources planning process for the tourism sector. They say that usually, human resources plan focus on the employment needs of large international tourism companies, especially in hospitality, and neglect perceptions of students.

Some researchers since the new century began to study the perceptions of undergraduate tourism students. Kusluvan & Kusluvan (2000) carried out a study about the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate tourism students towards working in the tourism industry. They tested a sample of four-year tourism and hotel management students, in seven different schools in Turkey and reported unfavorable perceptions towards different dimensions of working in the tourism industry. Roney & Öztin (2007) worked on the career perceptions of undergraduate tourism students. This paper focused on a sample of 450 Turkish students studying tourism at university level. The results showed that the respondents' perceptions were neither positive nor negative. The findings also indicated that: willingness to study tourism; willingness to work in tourism after graduation; and work experience; were important factors in shaping their image of tourism careers. Richardson (2010) examined the Tourism and Hospitality students' perceptions of a career in the industry. The finding of his research showed that the international students were more likely to believe that the tourism and hospitality industry offers the factors they find important when choosing a career. Richardson (2010) focused on generation Y's perceptions and attitudes towards a career in Tourism and Hospitality. This exploratory study based on a quantitative approach found that more than 50% of Australian respondents were contemplating careers outside the industry. Of those with work experience in tourism, 38.1% stated that they will not work for this industry after graduation, with 91.7% of these respondents' citing working experience in the industry as the main reason for their decision.

Although the hospitality and tourism industry, was negatively affected by many health-related crises in the past, such as SARS, Zika Virus, Ebola, none has

reached such broad and deep adverse effects as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021). Scholars suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic is amplifying the vulnerability of the hospitality and tourism workforce, manifested in issues of precarious work contracts, inequality, and exploitation of minimal criteria for employment (Baum et al., 2020). Tourism students, as future industry employees, are witnessing terrible consequences of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, such as business shutdowns, dwindling travel demand, employee layoffs, etc., and all these adversities could dampen students' confidence and commitment to their academic program and future industry career (Zhong et al., 2021).

### III. CASE STUDY

As mentioned before, tourism education offers have increased around the world. Authors such as Hannam et al. (2004) and Suvantola (2004) concluded that the number of Hospitality and Tourism programs at higher level would continue to increase because of the students' demand, better employment opportunities, better salaries and greater professional promotion, this accompanied by the demand of the tourist industry, which seeks to obtain well-prepared workers. In Ecuador, the situation is not different. The fastest and important growth of the Tourism sector in Ecuador and worldwide brought about that, since 2004, the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro* started to offer a degree in Tourism, as part of the formative options of the School of Administrative and Commercial Sciences. The students who choose the "*Licenciatura en Turismo*" program have to study eight semesters (four years), do 96 hours of community work and 240 hours of pre-professional internships. In total, they have to comply with 120 credits to get their professional degree.

## IV. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS.

### IV.1. Questionnaire design.

This study is based on a quantitative approach. A questionnaire was prepared to measure tourism students' career perceptions. The statements and questions used were taken from previously published studies (Roney & Oztin, 2007; Lu & Adler, 2009; Richardson, 2010; Richardson & Butler, 2012; Wang & Huang, 2014). Some modifications were made and certain additional details were considered according to

the reality of the case studied.

The questionnaire was composed of four sections. The first section contained 6 questions, 5 of them multiple-choice questions and 1 open-ended question. These questions considered general information of the respondent such as gender, year of study in the career, willingness to choose the career, work experience in tourism and current occupation. The second section contained 18 statements about career perceptions. These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant "Strongly disagree", 2 meant "Disagree", 3 meant "Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)", 4 meant "Agree" and 5 "Strongly agree". The third section contained 6 multiple choice questions about their career goals in the short and long term. In this section, some open-ended questions were included with the objective that the respondents expand their answers. The fourth section contained 3 questions focused exclusively on perceptions related to COVID-19. This survey could be completed in a maximum of 10 minutes.

Before sending the survey to the degree program students, ten pilot tests were conducted among 6 Professors, 2 PhD tourism students and 2 undergraduate tourism students. This is to check the relevance and clarity of the questions. Changes were done at the end of these pilots, and then it was sent to the students.

### IV.2. Sampling design.

The first time (before COVID-19) the survey was done at the beginning of the month of June, specifically from the 1st to the 10th of June, 2018 with 1st to 4th year tourism students of the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro*. It was carried out via web survey and the respondents were invited to fill out the survey from their institutional emails. The study population was finite, of the total of 220 students enrolled in the Tourism career, 207 participated - response rate 94%. A total of 207 surveys were found valid. During the pandemic, the survey was carried out from the 14th to the 23rd of September 2020. All the students enrolled in the semester from May to September 2020 were invited resulting in 161 responses - a response rate of 93%.

The data were collected by an online survey program and ANOVA test analyses were carried out to determine the differences pre and during COVID-19.

### IV.3. Profile of the Survey Sample.

Results show that in 2018 the respondents were mostly females. 159 women filled out the survey, which represents 77%. While the men were 48, which means 23%. Also, it can be seen that in 2020 -during COVID-19- the situation was similar, where 132 women and 29 men participated. This allows us to observe that this career has been more selected by women. The analysis of the distribution of respondents according to the year of study in 2018 revealed that the number of students who are in the first year (first or second semester) is higher (39%) than the other three years. In 2020, we could see a variation where the most representative percentage was 37% of the students who are in the second year (third or fourth semester).

### V. RESULTS.

The following section includes the analyses of variables willingness to choose the career, work experience, and current activity, besides of the Tourism career's perceptions included in the second part of the questionnaire. Then, they are going to be examined the research findings of the career goals in short and long-term asked in the third section of the questionnaire. And finally, the study is going to include an analysis of questions related exclusively to the COVID-19.

In 2018, 69% of students (142 of 207 respondents) chose the Tourism program as their first option to study. The 31% indicated that this program was not their first option. To go deeper into this question, in the survey, a brief explanation about why the students chose the Tourism career was asked. The responses of this open-ended question were codified in ten representative items. The highest percentage (24%) was for "for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures". Unfortunately, with an important percentage (14%) 30 students explained that they chose the Tourism program "because it was the one assigned to them and since they wanted to study something, they are studying it." It means that actually, they were not willing to study this degree program. Some of them said that they accepted to study Tourism with the idea of changing their studies in the second semester. Other students explained that they did not think about this career as their first option to professionalize themselves, but through time they were keened on the career and now they feel very well with the program. Happily, in 2020, during COVID-19 the survey results

show that there was no difference with the previous study since the vast majority (70%) of the students chose the Tourism degree program as their first option. Also, the most important percentage of students attributes the selection for the Tourism program "for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures." This matched with the 2018 study. On this occasion, it is necessary to emphasize the interest of the students in "knowing and promoting Ecuador's tourism", as the percentage grew from 9% to 20%. Surely, many students have already evidenced the crisis in the tourism sector in our country, due to COVID-19, and would like to contribute to its improvement.

Tourism and hospitality employers seem to consider work experience as more important than a degree when they hire a new employee; however, the hospitality degree qualification is needed for entering management levels (Harkison, 2004). The case study in 2018 showed that the higher percentage (48%) of the students enrolled in the program have not had any kind of experience in the tourism sector, they have not worked nor done pre-professional practices in this work field. During COVID-19, it is remarkable to see the growth of the percentage (from 17% to 32%) that represents the students who have worked in a different area other than tourism. This situation is probably an effect of COVID-19 since it made students look for any work in order to earn money to help their families. The fact of being studying virtually allows the combination of the two activities.

The study results in 2018 showed that the vast majority of the Tourism career students in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro* (79% of the respondents) just dedicate themselves to study the Tourism career. The results also showed that although with a small proportion, 13% of the respondents share their time between studying Tourism and doing another career or specialization course. In this case, the survey required that these students answer which career or specialization course they also study, resulting the following ones: English, Cosmetology, Gastronomy, Nursing, Language and Literature, Business Administration and Laws. In 2020 (during the COVID-19 survey), the situation is repeated, most of the students (71%) of the career only dedicate themselves to study Tourism. The interest in studying another career or specialization course is almost nil (1%), perhaps due to the situation generated by the pandemic, including

the lack of financial resources. Surprisingly, it can be observed that in 2020 the percentage which represents students who study Tourism and also work in a different sector now is the second most representative with a 24% (in 2018 was 4%), this due to the need for money.

**V.1. Perceptions of undergraduate tourism students.**

Table 1 shows data of 18 statements provided about Tourism career perceptions considered in the second part of the survey. The overall mean value ( $\bar{x}$ ) was 3,88 out of 5, which means the perception of the tourism students towards their career, in general, was neither positive nor negative.

In this Table, it can be seen that before of COVID-19 (in 2018) the 36% were agreed with the statement “Tourism offers me a stable job” ( $\bar{x} = 3,75$ ), but we can see that also a high percentage (25%) is neutral concerning this. The seasonality factor influenced this, according to Jolliffe & Farnsworth (2003), seasonality dramatically influences tourism industry employment, leading to widespread seasonal employment, underemployment, and unemployment.

Also, it is possible to see that the highest percentage (39%) of the students strongly agreed with the statement “It is necessary to have a university degree in the field of tourism to work in this industry” ( $\bar{x} = 3,85$ ). These perceptions are encouraging since it means that students trust that professionalization in tourism is essential to enter the labor field.

Also, Table 1 shows some data about the Tourism career perceptions during the COVID-19 where the overall mean value was 3,74 out of 5, which as in the

previous study, was neither positive nor negative. The results of this section, as can be seen also in Table 1, are similar to the 2018’ study. Both show the same trend. It can be highlighted who students (57%) strongly agreed with the statement "Working in tourism will allow me to contribute positively to society" ( $\bar{x} = 4,17$ ), something that must be valued, since this perception is important to generate positive impacts on a population that has been affected in various ways, due to COVID-19.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were used to compare the statistical difference between the pre-pandemic and during pandemic periods. For these tests, an alpha level of 0.05 was used, where a significance level (p-value) lower than 0.05 suggests that there was an important difference at 95% confidence level; while a significance level (p-value) higher than 0.05 points out that there was no statistical difference between the two analyzed periods. Results show that the mean for those who thought in 2018 tourism offers a stable job was higher than in 2020. This is probably because the COVID pandemic caused many closures of tourist businesses, and therefore layoffs of personnel. Unfortunately, the tourism industry was one of the most affected. Likewise, as can be seen in Table 1 the ANOVA indicates that the perception that the workload in the tourism field is reasonable between 2018 and 2020 had also a statistical difference. The mean of who thought in 2018 that the workload in the tourism field is reasonable, was higher than in 2020. This is probably because in time of COVID people started teleworking. It may also be due to the layoffs of personnel causing them to overload the functions of those who continue to be hired.

**Table 1:** Tourism career’s perceptions

	year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	ANOVA
					p-value
The labor supply in the field of tourism is wide, diverse and interesting for me.	2018	207	4.15	1.12	0.157
	2020	161	3.97	1.34	
I am proud for having chosen the Tourism career in front of relatives and friends.	2018	207	4.22	1.15	0.671
	2020	161	4.16	1.33	
Tourism is a respected profession in society.	2018	207	3.74	1.17	0.108
	2020	161	3.52	1.37	
Tourism career presents intellectual challenges.	2018	207	4.13	1.19	0.182
	2020	161	3.96	1.27	

Tourism offers me a stable job.	2018	207	3.75	1.12	0.034
	2020	161	3.49	1.22	
You can earn a lot of money working in tourism.	2018	207	4.00	1.18	0.300
	2020	161	3.87	1.28	
Since you start working in the tourism sector, this profession allows you to earn competitive salaries.	2018	207	3.77	1.08	0.100
	2020	161	3.58	1.16	
The work environment in tourism is pleasant.	2018	207	4.19	1.13	0.307
	2020	161	4.06	1.31	
Tourism is a profession that gives you the opportunity to grow at work.	2018	207	4.19	1.14	0.558
	2020	161	4.12	1.28	
There is gender discrimination in the labor sector of tourism.	2018	207	2.82	1.31	0.206
	2020	161	2.65	1.32	
The workload in the tourism field is reasonable.	2018	207	3.80	1.04	0.043
	2020	161	3.56	1.21	
Working in tourism allows using modern technology, equipment and resources.	2018	207	4.26	1.14	0.383
	2020	161	4.15	1.28	
In tourism, it is easy to get a job anywhere (even abroad).	2018	207	3.59	1.19	0.107
	2020	161	3.39	1.21	
It is possible to combine the tourism profession with maternity/paternity.	2018	207	2.99	1.12	0.512
	2020	161	3.07	1.14	
In tourism, jobs offer opportunities for constant training.	2018	207	4.00	1.11	0.419
	2020	161	3.90	1.22	
Working in tourism allows you to obtain transferable skills (judgment and decision-making, solving complex problems, time management, active listening, etc.).	2018	207	4.14	1.14	0.402
	2020	161	4.03	1.31	
Working in tourism will allow me to contribute positively to society.	2018	207	4.29	1.10	0.359
	2020	161	4.17	1.30	
It is necessary to have a university degree in the field of Tourism to work in this industry.	2018	207	3.85	1.22	0.090
	2020	161	3.61	1.39	

Source: Survey results.

## V.2. Career goals of undergraduate tourism students.

Career goals are very important to know what the students consider about their future in the tourism industry. This information is valuable for developing successful human resources strategies in the tourism labor field and offering postgraduate studies according to the interests and needs of the market.

As can be seen in Table 2, before the coronavirus, the vast majority of the study's respondents (98%) have the intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation. Among the preferred sectors of the tourism industry for future careers, the most favored area was "Transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.)" with 51%. It is important to mention that in the survey,

this question allowed to choose more than one option as a response if the student wanted it. The second preferred sector was "Intermediation (travel agency, tour operator, wholesaler, retailer, etc.)" with 42%. The third preferred area was "Planning and tourism management (Municipality, Prefecture, Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Organization or Association, etc.)" with a 38%.

In the same table (in 2020 during the COVID-19) also the majority of the students (99%) answered they have the intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation, which means that despite the pandemic, they continue to project themselves working in the tourism sector. The students still want to work in sectors such as Transportation (63%), Intermediation (51%) and Planning and tourism management (48%).

**Table 2:** Preferences for working in the tourism industry upon graduation

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Intention to work in the tourism industry upon graduation</b>				
Yes	202	98%	159	99%
No	5	2%	2	1%
<b>Preferred Sectors of the tourism Industry for working upon graduation*</b>				
Transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.)	105	51%	100	63%
Intermediation (travel agency, tour operator, wholesaler, retailer, etc.)	86	42%	81	51%
Planning and tourism management (Municipality, Prefecture, Ministry of Tourism, Tourism Organization or Association, etc.)	79	38%	76	48%
Accommodation	71	34%	68	43%
MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions)	69	33%	65	41%
Tourism products (recreational centers, tourist farms, etc.)	63	30%	71	45%
Food and beverage sector (restaurants, cafeterias, etc.)	56	27%	55	35%
Tourism Education, Consulting and Research	32	15%	26	16%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	2	1%

\* Response categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Survey results.

Table 3 refers to expected job positions upon graduation and after five years working in the tourism work field. In 2018, concerning expected positions for future graduates, 20% expected to start as “Tour guides”, 17% “Hotel receptionists” and 15% “Emissive or receptive assistants in a travel agency”. Remarkably, 14% of the respondents chose the option “Manager of my own company”. In this case, the students were asked what kind of company they want to undertake, to which they replied: travel agencies, tours operators, hotels, restaurants, cafeterias, bars, agrotourism farms, recreational centers, event planning and tourist transportation companies.

In the case of expected job positions after five years, it was interesting to know that the percentage of students wishing to start their own businesses grew and was the highest percentage between the options (19%). Among the business options that they considered were the same ones cited in the previous question, adding hostels and resorts. During the COVID-19, in 2020, there was a notable change, the vast majority of students (23%) chose “Cabin crew” as their expected starting job position. It is followed by “Tour guide” 18% and “Hotel receptionist” 17%. And, as the expected job position after five years, 18% of the respondents selected to want to be Managers of their own companies.

**Table 3:** Expected job positions in the Tourism work field

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Expected starting job positions</b>				
Tour guide	41	20%	29	18%
Hotel receptionist	36	17%	27	17%
Emissive or receptive assistant in a travel agency	31	15%	27	17%
Manager of my own company	29	14%	23	14%



Cabin crew	29	14%	37	23%
Tourism Technician of a public institution	26	13%	9	6%
Waiter/Waitress	5	2%	3	2%
Bartender	3	1%	4	2%
Other	2	1%	0	0%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	2	1%
<b>Expected job positions after five years</b>				
Manager of my own company	39	19%	29	18%
Hotel General Manager	29	14%	23	14%
Travel agency General Manager	23	11%	22	14%
Event planner	19	9%	5	3%
Director of a department in a public institution	18	9%	8	5%
Head of a department in a travel agency	18	9%	24	15%
Professor in Tourism careers	19	9%	9	6%
Head of a department in a hotel	15	7%	18	11%
Recreational center Administrator	11	5%	9	6%
Bar / cafe / restaurant General Manager	5	2%	6	4%
Bar / cafe / restaurant Supervisor	3	1%	2	1%
Other	3	1%	1	1%
He/she does not answer because he/she does not want to work in the tourism sector	5	2%	5	3%

Source: Survey results.

The results of the 2018 study showed that the majority of the study's respondents (93%) have the interest to perform their tourism profession in a different region or even country than their usual residence. Just the 5% (10 students) answered that they did not want to work in another region or abroad because of different reasons as: for not leaving his/her son/daughter alone, for not leaving his/her mother alone, for not separating from his/her family, because he/she believes in the tourist potential of Ecuador and he/she wants to contribute in the development of his/her country, because he/she wants to undertake a tourism business in his/her region, because he/she thinks that he/she would not get used to the different weather in other countries. In COVID-19 times (2020) the survey' results show that the vast majority of the students (92%) are willing to perform the tourism profession in a different region or country than their usual residence.

Considering that the desire to seek greater professionalization is a career goal, questions about

this intention were included in the survey. The answers of the 2018 study are showed in Table 4 where we can observe that 92% of the respondents answered that they would like to do a Tourism Master degree, while in 2020 it was 88% of respondents. Those who would like to study a postgraduate in tourism indicated that they would like to study preferably the following master degrees: Tourism Management (48% in 2018 and 43% in 2020), Hotel Management (36% in 2018 and 53% in 2020), Tourism Marketing (26% in 2018 and 35% in 2020) or Event Management (22% in 2018 and 30% in 2020). Is important to quote that this question allowed the students to choose the options they wanted, without excluding another selection. In addition, they could indicate the topic of Master they would like if it was not on the list. The respondents provided the following: Sustainable tourist destinations and Territorial tourism planning, Travel agencies management, International tourism management, Food and beverage, Gastronomic Tourism, Culinary Arts, Business Management and Foreign languages.

**Table 4:** Interest in a Tourism Master degree

Profile	2018		2020	
	Frequency (n=207)	Percentage	Frequency (n=161)	Percentage
<b>Interest in studying a Tourism Master degree</b>				
Yes	190	92%	142	88%
No	5	2%	6	4%
Maybe	12	6%	13	8%
<b>Which Tourism Master degree offer*</b>				
Tourism Management	100	48%	70	43%
Hotel Management	74	36%	86	53%
Tourism Marketing	53	26%	57	35%
Event Management	45	22%	48	30%
Cultural tourism	41	20%	42	26%
Sustainable tourism	34	16%	42	26%
I do know yet	12	6%	-	-
Other	8	4%	3	2%
Not answer (because he/she does not want to do a Tourism Master degree)	5	2%	16	10%

\* Response categories were not mutually exclusive.

Source: Survey results.

**5.3. Level of commitment generated by COVID-19.**

Finally, results of perceptions exclusively related to the COVID-19 are shown in Tables 5 and 6. This information is important because we can know if this pandemic generates uncertainty in the students about their future professional career, and if they are going to continue committed to their preparation, or if they are considering giving up studying this program.

As seen in Table 5, the majority of the 161 respondents (40%) recognized to have a medium uncertainty about the future of Tourism career because of the situation generated by the COVID-19. Besides, it can be seen that 25% of the students mentioned having

high uncertainty, and 20% selected to have very high uncertainty, which means that the vast majority of the study's respondents have uncertainty about their careers. These results are not positive because this uncertainty can cause students to drop out of their studies.

Table 5 also shows the level of commitment to professional preparation. Results were really encouraging because despite the great uncertainty that students have about the future of their professional careers, the vast majority (66%) selected to be very highly committed to their professional preparation, regardless of the context generated by the COVID-19.

**Table 5:** Level of uncertainty about the future and level of commitment to professional preparation facing the COVID-19 context

	No	Little	Medium	High	Very high
Level of uncertainty	7% (11)	7% (12)	40% (64)	25% (41)	20% (33)
Level of commitment	2% (4)	1% (2)	3% (5)	27% (43)	66% (107)

Source: Survey results.

In Table 6, it can be observed that 93% of the students who participated in this study consider that the Tourism career continues and will continue to be a career with great job opportunities despite the

COVID-19. 61% of those who are convinced of this, attribute it to the fact that these times of pandemic will allow tourism professionals and businesses to reinvent themselves to meet the needs of demand. On the

contrary, 7 of the 12 people who do not consider that the career will continue offering great job opportunities, support their answer because they believe that it will be more difficult to get a job or start a business.

**Table 6:** Perception if the career gives great job opportunities despite COVID-19

Profile	Frequency (n=161)	Little
<b>Despite COVID-19, do you consider that the Tourism career continues and will continue being a career with great job opportunities?</b>		
Yes	149	93%
No	12	7%
<b>If the answer was "yes", which was the reason selected</b>		
Because it will allow tourism professionals and businesses to reinvent themselves to meet the needs of demand.	91	61%
Because people continue and will continue to do tourism and nothing will change.	31	21%
Because it is the opportunity to make domestic tourism grow.	17	11%
Because tourism activity can give more attention to specialized tourism.	7	5%
He/she did not answer.	3	2%
<b>If the answer was "no", which was the reason selected</b>		
Because it will be more difficult to get a job or start a business.	7	58%
Because many tourism businesses closed or will close their activities.	2	17%
Because people will not do tourism for a long time.	2	17%
Because companies do not hire new staff.	1	8%

**Source:** Survey results.

In summary, we could observe that the vast majority of the respondents before or during the pandemic of the COVID-19 have chosen the Tourism career as their first option to study, supporting this decision on their motivation for learning languages and knowing different places and cultures. In the COVID-19 times it could be observed that the interest in knowing and promoting the tourism of Ecuador increased (from 9% to 20%), perhaps because of the economic crisis that motivates professionals to work for the reactivation of productive sectors such as tourism. Besides, these results demonstrated that it is necessary to generate strategic alliances with companies in the tourism industry with the aim of allowing students to do pre-professional practice since a high percentage of them do not have any kind of work experience. Also, we could see that the majority of the respondents said that they just study Tourism at the university.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be observed that many students (from 17% to 32%) are combining their tourism studies with work, and unfortunately, the work they do is not in this professional field. Concerning the 18 statements related to the perceptions

that the tourism students have about their career; this section got as an overall mean value a 3,88 out of 5 before the COVID-19 study and a 3,74 out of 5 during the COVID-19 study, which means the perception was neither positive nor negative. Satisfactorily we could see that the majority of the students want to work in the tourism industry upon graduation. The expected starting job positions are as Cabin crew or Tour guides and after five years the respondents hope to have their own Tourism businesses. In both studies, the highest percentage of the respondents affirmed their availability to perform the Tourism profession in a different region or country. Also, it could be seen that the majority of the respondents showed interest to study for a Tourism Master degree. Preferably, they would like to specialize in Tourism Management and Hotel Management. Finally, the second study revealed that students are uncertain about the future of their Tourism career, due to the context generated by the COVID-19. Fortunately, the vast majority acknowledge that they are very highly committed to their professional preparation despite this pandemic.

## VI. Conclusions.

This study explored perceptions and career goals of tourism undergraduate students enrolled in the *Universidad Estatal de Milagro – Ecuador* before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interesting results were found with this research. The vast majority of the undergraduate students expressed their desire to work in the Tourism industry upon graduation (98% before the COVID-19 survey and 99% during the COVID-19 survey) and their interest in studying a Tourism Master degree (92% before the COVID-19 survey and 88% during the COVID-19 survey).

The respondents of this study were asked to agree or disagree with 18 statements to measure different perceptions about the career. The results showed that the undergraduate tourism students who participated in this study have good perceptions about their career (the overall mean value was 3,88 out of 5 in the first survey and 3,74 in the second one), they are motivated and they want to pursue a career in this industry. Even the majority of the students who participated in the survey carried out during COVID-19, reaffirmed their very high commitment (66%) to their professional preparation, despite the complex situation that the scenario of this pandemic is presenting.

Satisfactorily, the study respondents anticipate that the labor supply in the field of tourism is wide, diverse and interesting. They believe that this career is going to present them with intellectual challenges. They also think they could enjoy a pleasant work environment, have the opportunity to grow as professionals, use cutting-edge technology and contribute positively to society.

The research conducted by Kuslivan & Kuslivan (2000) found that some of the concerns that seemed to account for the negative attitudes towards tourism career were stressful jobs, lack of family life because of the nature of the work, long working hours, exhausting and seasonal jobs. Agreeing with their findings, we could see that just the 8% (before the COVID-19 survey) and the 9% (during the COVID-19 survey) of the respondents strongly recognized that working in the tourism sector will allow them to combine their profession with maternity and paternity, which means that the majority of the respondents, unfortunately, think that their future jobs are going to take a lot of their time; a factor which demotivates them.

The result of the study demonstrated that

transportation (airlines, cruises, etc.) sector was preferred for a career in the industry. The highest percentage of respondents expect that they are going to start working as “Tour guides” or “Cabin crew” upon graduation. In the case of their expected job position after five years working in the industry, it was gratifying to find that the highest percentage of the students is planning to start their own business. They mentioned between their preferences the following: travel agencies, tour operators, hotels, hostels, resorts, restaurants, cafeterias, bars, agrotourism farms, recreational centers, event planning and tourist transportation companies. Likewise, it was encouraging to see that the majority of the respondents affirmed being interested in studying for a Master degree. The preferred ones were Tourism Management and Hotel Management.

If this industry wants to maintain highly motivated students and recruit and retain highly skilled professionals, it will be necessary that educators and the industry work together to improve the tourism work field. From the perspective of tourism higher education providers, it is important to be studying the perceptions that potential students and current students have about the career because it will affect positively or negatively the number of students they will receive and retain in their educational establishments. When the tourism career is promoted to attract potential students, it will be fundamental to provide the correct information about the future job careers that students can pursue in the tourism sector. This will make them know in advance the tourism work field and avoid wrong expectations and future negative perceptions about the career. It will be also indispensable to create methods that improve the image that current students have about the profession and future work field. Besides, it will be very important to design updated and high-quality study programs, offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in concordance with the interests and needs of the market, organize academic events and provoke the approach of students with recognized tourism professionals who with their experience help the students to feel the reality of the sector and motivate them to be part of it.

From the perspective of the tourism industry, it will be crucial to develop successful human resources strategies and improve issues related to working hours, salary levels, career promotions, gender discrimination and job security in order to help to create a better

tourism work field and therefore a good perception of this career. Besides, it is important to mention that according to the results of this research, the students believe that it is necessary to have a university degree for working in this industry. In this sense, it would be significant that employers implement and respect the selection processes to hire the most qualified professionals for working with them. It is also relevant to quote that this study showed an important result related to the intention of tourism entrepreneurship, thus the facilities that the government provides to the tourism sector will also be taken into consideration by many future entrepreneurs who want to undertake in tourism, despite feeling uncertainty in the sector, as a result of COVID-19.

Educators and the tourism industry cannot be working separately. It is necessary that universities make strategic alliances with tourism businesses that will favor both parties, either by providing a trained workforce that ensures the success of the company or allowing students to put their knowledge into practice. Unfortunately, we could see that the vast majority of this study's respondents did not have any type of work experience or if they have experience, this is not in the field of tourism; so, it is urgent to generate these alliances that allow them to do pre-professional practices. But this relationship will have to provide internships in relation to the student's level of education, just in this way it will be achieved the implementation of the students' knowledge, and the university and company's success. Only by working together and being aware of undergraduate tourism students' perceptions, it will be possible to have an excellent and competitive tourism industry, where motivated and well-prepared tourism professionals offer the best experiences to their customers.

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