

## Challenging students “to meet” accessibility in tourism: a case study from the University of Évora

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### **Abstract | Resumo:**

**Objectives** | There is currently a context of international reflection about the need to reinvent curricula and their training dynamics (e.g. Hoidn & Kärkkäinen, 2014; OECD, 2016; Stergiou, Airey & Riley, 2008). Initiatives that involve innovative educational dynamics and that are able to instil in students the human qualities are valued. These kind of dynamics is believed to allow students to develop a more critical sense about the social problems that really affect our society and, consequently, may have positive effects on the level of competitiveness of companies.

In this context, this article aims to present the context in which the Tourism Degree of the University of Évora promoted a voluntary initiative to celebrate the World Tourism Day, in 2016 and 2021, under the theme Accessible Tourism.

**Methodology** | The present case study used an exploratory qualitative approach, which allowed for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon under analysis (Jennings & Nickerson, 2006). The initiative, entitled "Discovering tourist accessibility in the Historical Centre of Évora", was planned based on three main actions. The first action involved an information session for students on Tourism For All, with the aim of providing them with the necessary background information to understand the scope of this theme. The second action involved a group activity, which took place in the public space of the Historical Centre of Évora (UNESCO World Heritage Site), in which students had to make a photographic report to identify constraints and facilities with influence on the tourist experience of visitors with some kind of disability and had to share their conclusions with the colleagues. The third action consisted in the fulfilment, by the students (N=95), of a small questionnaire regarding the evolution of their interest and awareness.

The data analysis was made through the content analysis of the presentations made by the students and through the statistical analysis of the data obtained via questionnaire.

**Results** | The initiative was very well received by the students, who from the first action, questioned some concepts and participated in discussions about the relevance of the theme and the general implications for the tourism sector. In their presentations constraints and facilitating elements related to issues of physical accessibility of spaces were most referred to. However, a considerable part of the groups identified more issues, for which they are usually not so alert, such as sensory accessibility and interpretation issues. They also presented solutions that seemed feasible to overcome the identified constraints, trying to find solutions that involved not only physical interventions but also creativity and commitment of the human resources of the identified sites. At the end of the different presentations, the discussion focused on the implications that those findings would have for future tourism professionals.



The students actively participated in the discussion, showing interest in the topic and recognizing that, although before the activity they did not have this awareness, the theme is very important to be considered by the sector, even if the market segmentation is not specific for people with disabilities. This result was strengthened by the data obtained from the questionnaires, which showed that students consider that, after this activity, their level of knowledge about the topic increased 2 points (in a 5-points Likert scale), as well as their interest about it (increased 1point). Additionally, the students recognized accessibility as an important (mean=4,33 in a 5-points Likert scale) issue to be addressed in Tourism courses in order to strengthen students' professional skills.

**Contributions |** In recent years it has been notorious the influence that various international institutions seek to have on universities, so that they stimulate in their students responsible attitudes, knowledge and motivation to get involved with current challenges and themes that raise universal concern. Since the Degree in Tourism does not yet have a formalized course unit exclusively dedicated to the subject of accessible and inclusive tourism, some teachers decided to make students aware of the importance of this subject. It was observed that initiatives of this type motivate students to learn about an issue that has received increasing concern in the tourism sector. Students showed interest and involvement in the initiative, and the discussion generated about new/emerging issues for them ranged from the definition of disability itself, to sensory accessibility issues and tourist interpretation itself. It would be interesting to develop similar initiatives between higher education institutions, in order to make comparisons about the reality of different types of students.

Also, it is important to highlight that if an important topic like this, addressed in an isolated educational initiative, has the potential to influence the students' education and awareness, it may, as a result, in the medium term, have very positive and modifying effects on the sector's trends.

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**Keywords | Palavras-chave:** accessible tourism; educational initiatives; Tourism Degree; Portugal; UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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