Tourism Education of the Future: Viability and Relevance of a Blended Learning Modality

Educación Turística del Futuro: Viabilidad y Pertinencia de una Modalidad Mixta

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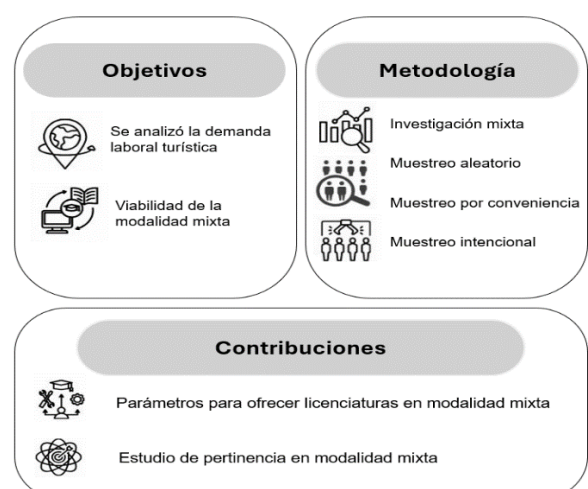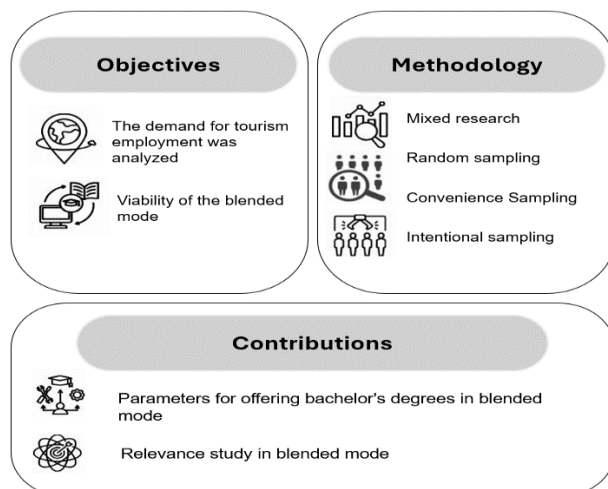
Abstract

The relevance and feasibility studies are essential to ensure the quality and relevance of educational programs. These analyses are crucial to align curricula with societal needs. Relevance focuses on meeting environmental expectations, while feasibility addresses financial and operational aspects to maintain high-quality programs. In the specific case of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism in a mixed mode, the viability and relevance of the academic program were evaluated by combining face-to-face and online elements. The methodology used was systematic, empirical, and critical, employing quantitative and qualitative data. The results highlighted the growing importance of mixed mode in higher education, offering flexibility to students and meeting high demand. This study supports the implementation of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism in a mixed mode at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, demonstrating its relevance and feasibility.

Resumen

Los estudios de pertinencia y factibilidad son fundamentales para garantizar la calidad y relevancia de los programas educativos. Estos análisis son esenciales para alinear los planes de estudios con las necesidades de la sociedad. La pertinencia se centra en cumplir con las expectativas del entorno, mientras que la factibilidad aborda aspectos financieros y operativos para mantener programas de alta calidad. En el caso específico de la Licenciatura en Turismo en modalidad mixta, se evaluó la viabilidad y relevancia del programa académico combinando elementos presenciales y en línea. La metodología utilizada fue sistemática, empírica y crítica, empleando datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los resultados destacaron la creciente importancia de la modalidad mixta en la educación superior, ofreciendo flexibilidad a los estudiantes y respondiendo a una alta demanda. Este estudio respalda la implementación de la Licenciatura en Turismo en modalidad mixta en la Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit, demostrando su pertinencia y viabilidad.
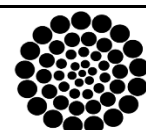
Objectives
- The demand for tourism employment was analyzed
- Viability of the blended mode

Methodology
- Mixed research
- Random sampling
- Convenience Sampling
- Intentional sampling

Contributions
- Parameters for offering bachelor's degrees in blended mode
- Relevance study in blended mode

Objetivos
- Se analizó la demanda laboral turística
- Viabilidad de la modalidad mixta

Metodología
- Investigación mixta
- Muestreo aleatorio
- Muestreo por conveniencia
- Muestreo intencional

Contribuciones
- Parámetros para ofrecer licenciaturas en modalidad mixta
- Estudio de pertinencia en modalidad mixta

Curricula, Implementation, Viability

Currículo, Implementación, Viabilidad

Introduction

This study examines the relevance and feasibility of adopting a hybrid education approach for the Bachelor's degree programme in Tourism at the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit. This initiative responds to the need to align educational offerings with the dynamic demands of society, highlighting the growing role of distance and blended learning formats in higher education. Faced with the current challenges facing higher education, such as the need to maintain the relevance of academic programmes in the face of changes in the labour market, this analysis is essential. The Bachelor's Degree in Tourism, of critical importance to the region, requires a meticulous review of its structure and modalities to ensure its effectiveness and alignment with market needs.

Globally, the tourism sector has seen a significant increase, raising the demand for well-trained professionals. The Autonomous University of Nayarit recognises the importance of offering a programme in Tourism that not only meets the needs of the labour market but also contributes to regional development.

This research paper delves into the theories that underpin the integration of face-to-face and online teaching methods, highlighting how this modality can incorporate emerging technologies to enrich the learning experience. Theoretical bases are presented that support the ongoing evaluation of academic programmes, focusing on their quality, relevance and effectiveness in achieving educational objectives.

In addition, theories that emphasise the importance of strategic planning in the design and development of academic programmes, taking into account aspects such as market demands and institutional resources, are analysed.

The research also examines how the intersection between tourism and curriculum research offers a comprehensive perspective on how to adapt teaching methods to the needs of the tourism sector, thus fostering academic advancement. In summary, this study aims to foster continuous improvement of educational programmes by encouraging strategic adaptation and pedagogical innovation.

Background

Tourism education has undergone a remarkable evolution, adapting to changes in the sector and to the demands of employers and professionals. Originating at the dawn of the 20th century with the birth of tourism as an industry, tourism education has grown in parallel with the expansion and diversification of the sector. Over time, numerous programmes and specialised educational institutions have been created globally, offering theoretical and practical studies in areas such as tourism management, marketing, planning and sustainability. Despite progress, challenges remain, such as the need for greater synergy between academia and industry to ensure the relevance of educational programmes (Liu et al., 2022).

Adapting to new trends, such as digitalisation and sustainable tourism, is critical to address contemporary challenges in the sector. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted tourism, prompting adaptations in academic training, especially in Nayarit, Mexico, where a mixed-mode Bachelor's Degree in Tourism is proposed to meet the demand for trained professionals.

This approach seeks to respond not only to local needs but also to current educational trends, offering flexibility and essential practical experiences. Educational relevance is understood as the coherence between the academic offer and social and economic needs, a key concept for curriculum design in higher education. The blended mode, combining face-to-face and distance learning, emerges as an adaptive solution in the face of technological and social changes, promoting more accessible and flexible training for students in the tourism field (Venturini, 2020).

Tourism education has advanced significantly, reflecting the changing dynamics of the tourism industry and the demands of those who work in it. Since its inception in the 20th century, with the development of tourism as a recognised industry, the need for trained professionals in this field became evident. With the growth and diversification of the tourism industry, tourism education has expanded and adapted to its evolving needs and requirements.

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Over the years, a large number of educational institutions and specialised tourism programmes have been established around the world, offering a mix of theoretical and practical education in areas such as tourism management, tourism marketing, tourism planning and development, destination management and tourism sustainability. (Ginanjar, 2023).

Despite these developments, challenges and opportunities for improving tourism education remain. One notable challenge is the need for closer collaboration between educational institutions and the tourism industry to ensure that educational programmes remain up-to-date and aligned with the needs of the sector. In addition, it is critical that tourism education keeps abreast of the latest trends and developments in the industry, including the use of digital technologies and tools for tourism promotion and management. It is also crucial to address contemporary challenges in the sector, such as the environmental impacts of tourism, the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism practices, and the importance of involving local communities in tourism decisions (Sarmiadi et al., 2021).

In summary, while tourism education has made considerable progress, adapting to the changing demands of the tourism sector and preparing professionals to face its challenges, there are still areas that require attention and improvement. Collaboration between academia and industry, along with constant updating of curricula to reflect current and future trends, are key to the continued development and relevance of tourism education.

Relevance in Education

Malagón Plata (2011) and Valencia (2022) conceive relevance as the meaningful interaction between the university and its social context, highlighting how the institution adapts and responds to the historical environment in which it is situated. This relationship is expressed in multiple ways, both internal and external to the university. Relevance is defined as the relevance or appropriateness of something in a specific time and place, applying this concept to evaluate the coherence of educational programmes with the demands and needs of society (Valencia, 2022).

On the other hand, Guevara (2017) interprets relevance as the alignment between new educational programmes and the social and economic development needs of the local environment. This approach makes it possible to determine the role and position that higher education should occupy in society, fulfilling its essential functions. Both Valencia (2022) and Guevara (2017) examine educational relevance, focusing on how educational programmes should be synchronised with social needs and the local environment. Valencia stresses the importance of timeliness and appropriateness of educational actions, while Guevara emphasises the correlation between educational provision and social and economic progress, outlining the significant role of higher education in society. Therefore, relevance refers to the relationship between the university and its social environment. The university, as a social institution, is influenced by the historical context in which it finds itself. Its interaction with society manifests itself in various ways both inside and outside the institution.

Mixed Modalities in Education

The Ministry of Public Education (n.d.) has categorised the educational modalities in the Mexican Education System according to the pedagogical approaches adopted, identifying three main ones: school-based, non-school-based and mixed. The school-based modality, the most traditional, involves the assignment of students to an institution where they follow a study programme according to the official calendar. The non-school-based and blended modes, on the other hand, are carried out through open or distance learning methods, being completely non-face-to-face or partially face-to-face, respectively. This analysis will focus on the blended mode.

Technological advances have revolutionised learning methods, creating new digital educational environments and demanding adaptations of both teachers and students to renewed roles and perspectives. Falco (2017) notes that educators face challenges such as a shortage of teaching resources and a tendency towards rote teaching methods that restrict critical analysis. Online education, driven by digital technologies, offers the possibility of reaching a wider student audience, offering accessibility and time flexibility.

Article

However, challenges include fostering interaction and maintaining student motivation, as well as developing effective assessment and monitoring strategies for distance learning.

Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online learning, benefits from a specific theoretical framework for distance education that guides the effective design and management of educational programmes using information and communication technologies. Aretio (2018) highlights that blended learning allows students to manage their own time and learning space, while the use of virtual resources improves access to educational materials and fosters richer interaction between students and content.

Box 1

Figure 1

Sistema Modalidad Mixta
Source: Own elaboration, 2024. From (Aretio,2018)

In this sense, blended learning, also called hybrid education or blended learning, integrates both face-to-face instruction and online activities. In the field of higher education, blended learning has become increasingly important.
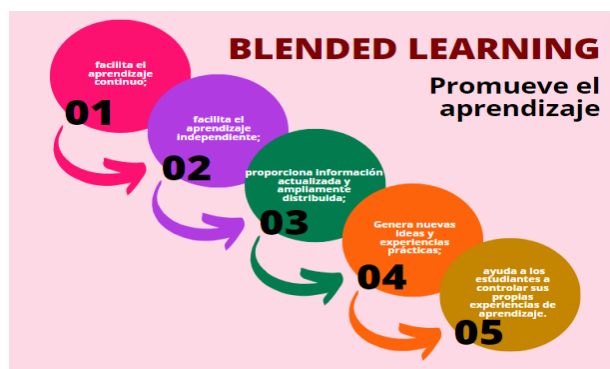
Box 2

Figure 2

Blended Learning
Source: Own elaboration, 2024. Based on (Hopson et al. 2002).

Tourism Education

Tourism education is fundamental to the growth and excellence of the sector, equipping participants with the essential skills, knowledge and competencies to excel in different areas of the industry. By receiving specialised tourism education, individuals gain a comprehensive understanding of the sector and its many facets, ensuring that tourism professionals are adequately prepared to meet the expectations and needs of visitors. Furthermore, this training promotes an environment of professionalism and high quality of service within the sector, which enhances the perception and image of both tourism organisations and destinations. Significantly, tourism education also plays a crucial role in driving sustainable practices in the industry (Chaisawat, 2005).

The instruction offered sensitises individuals to the importance of preserving the natural environment and cultural heritage, thus encouraging responsible tourism. Therefore, tourism education not only benefits those seeking careers in the field, but also has a positive impact on the community, the economy and the environment. It prepares individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in various roles within the sector, facilitating increased employment and business opportunities. Furthermore, promoting national tourism as a leading industry contributes to economic growth and raises local incomes, as well as preserving the biodiversity and unique cultural characteristics of each location, which attracts more visitors and benefits the global economy (Nurlina, 2020).

The benefits of tourism education include consistent job performance, as this training enables individuals to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in their roles within the industry (Lisitzina et al., 2014).

In the current era, acquiring competences to train a tourism professional has become more complex, being crucial to investigate and evaluate new scenarios, as well as to respond to the challenges of the digital era and adapt to international economic, social, technological, environmental and cultural changes. Therefore, Osorio García, Ramírez de la O and Viesca González (2017), argue that the educational process in tourism considers this reality and adapts its regulations to review and update

educational contents and contexts, in order to prepare individuals capable of facing the challenges arising from the rapid changes at a global level. Short-term international trends (up to 2030) underline the importance of focusing on human development as a key element that tourism must reinforce.

Tourism education has multidimensional benefits, including: (a) economic empowerment through increased employment opportunities and business growth in the tourism sector, (b) increased job opportunities in hospitality, gastronomy, tour guiding, and other related areas, (c) fostering the growth of small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, (d) supporting environmental conservation efforts and promoting sustainable practices in the sector, (e) developing skilled human capital to drive tourism success and growth.

In conclusion, tourism education is fundamental to enhance the development and success of the tourism sector in a holistic and sustainable manner.

Methodology

In the study presented, a mixed research approach was adopted that integrated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, focusing on systematic, empirical and critical research processes. This approach included the collection, analysis and integration of quantitative and qualitative data to facilitate a deeper understanding of the research topic through the generation of meta-inferences from all the information obtained. (Hernández Sampieri, Roberto, 2014).

This methodological framework was specifically applied to evaluate the relevance of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism offered in mixed modality by the Autonomous University of Nayarit. For the qualitative analysis, a structure divided into two main segments was established: internal relevance and external relevance.

The choice of the sample was a crucial aspect to ensure the validity of the results obtained. Therefore, it was decided to use a non-probabilistic sample, also known as a targeted or purposive sample, which was selected according to the researcher's criteria. Three sampling strategies are described:

- Random sampling for potential students.
- Convenience sampling for tourism professionals in Nayarit (graduates).
- Purposive sampling for education and tourism experts (Teachers and Employers).

A qualitative methodology was adopted for the research, complemented by a probability sampling approach. A simple random sample of 32 students was selected from a total of 58 new entrants in August 2023. This selection process was based on a 90% confidence level and a 10% margin of error, using the standard formula that takes into account the total population size and the specified margin of error. Additionally, in the qualitative stage, the focus group technique with employers was implemented to obtain qualitative data on the opinions of the participants, following the recommendations of Hamui-Sutton (2013).

Regarding the design of questionnaires for employers and graduates, qualitative methods were applied to assess various factors. Open-ended questions were included in order to capture aspects not foreseen in the structured questionnaires. In addition, an analysis of relevant institutional documents and statistical data was carried out to complement the collection of information and provide a broader view of the topic under study.

Employers' instrument

This instrument was used to collect data to discern the specific social, educational and labour needs of the region. It also sought to evaluate the relevance of the educational offer provided by the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, offered in mixed modality. The questions posed covered a variety of issues, including current problems in the tourism sector, staffing demands, skills needed, existing training programmes, hiring preferences, perceptions of the educational institution, among other critical aspects.

Student survey

The online student survey addressed issues such as understanding the differences between the school-based and semi-school-based modes, study timetable preferences, current employment situation and opinion on the blended mode.

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It was highlighted that the blended mode offers flexibility with distance work and face-to-face sessions for tutoring and counselling, and it was asked whether it is considered a good option to study a degree and whether they would like to study the Bachelor in Tourism in this mode.

Results

The study found that the blended mode of the Bachelor in Tourism is becoming increasingly relevant in higher education as it offers flexibility to students and takes advantage of technology.

The results of the student survey revealed that there is a high demand for this mode, especially among those seeking flexibility in their studies.

The main factors of preference for blended learning include flexibility, access to technology and online resources, and adaptability to different learning styles. In addition, it was found that the majority of students surveyed are currently working and are interested in studying in blended mode.

Main factors of preference for blended mode according to survey results

The survey results indicate that the aspects most valued by students regarding blended learning are its flexibility, access to technology and digital resources, and the ability to adapt to different learning styles. In addition, it is noted that a large proportion of currently employed respondents are interested in study modes that integrate blended learning.

Specifically, 75% of the survey participants indicated that they were working at the time of the study, reflecting the fact that a significant majority of the sample is in employment.

This data provides relevant insights into the employment situation of students and can be useful for market research, labour market analysis or evaluations of employment-oriented programmes.
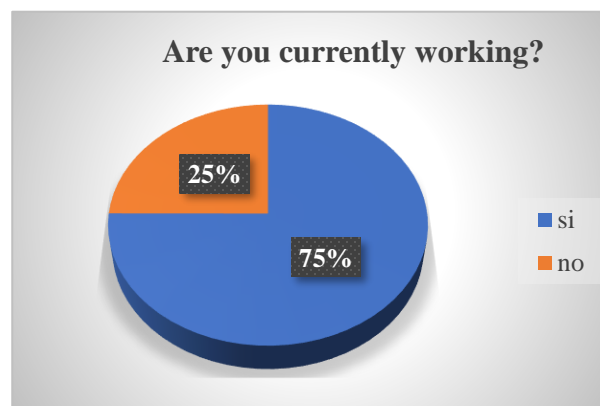
Box 3

Are you currently working?

25%
75%

■ si
■ no

Figure 3

Number of students currently working
Source: Own elaboration (2023), based on the results of the student survey.

Graduates' opinion on the relevance of the contents of the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism to face current challenges.

The graduates highlighted the importance of the contents taught in the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism to face contemporary challenges in the tourism sector. They indicated that the set of learning units and contents provided them with essential knowledge and tools to excel in the professional field of tourism. They also underlined the value of language training within the curriculum and suggested adding new subjects related to hospitality and socio-cultural animation. Overall, the graduates considered that the curriculum laid a solid foundation for their optimal professional development.

Perspectives and opinions of internal and external stakeholders on the proposed tourism programme

Graduates and employers coincide in highlighting the importance of the education received through the degree, emphasising that each of the learning units has been key to their professional growth. The importance of competences such as customer service, problem solving and fluency in several languages is underlined, as well as the need to incorporate practical content and work experience in the student curriculum.

Employers particularly appreciate the final skills provided by the Bachelor's degree, highlighting the relevance of graduates' knowledge in technology, business management and marketing.

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Both graduates and employers value the training offered in the tourism programme, highlighting key skills such as customer service, problem solving and language proficiency. Emphasis is placed on integrating practical experience and adapting to constant change, reflecting the challenges faced by professionals according to Beltrán, Matos, Ramírez, Campos and Moreno (2021). Employers emphasise the importance of knowledge in technology, management and marketing, as well as proficiency in English, preparing students for an ever-changing labour market.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the contemporary scenario, marked by rapid technological advancement and transformations in the methods of knowledge acquisition, tourism education is forced to evolve to meet the emerging demands of both the labour market and the student population. In this dynamic environment, blended learning emerges as a cutting-edge solution that integrates the virtues of face-to-face instruction with those of distance education, thus providing greater flexibility, interaction and adaptability to the particular requirements of each student.

The feasibility of adopting a blended approach to tourism training is based on the ability to harmonise the benefits of direct classroom interaction with the potential offered by educational technology. This educational strategy not only makes it possible to access study materials from any location and at any time, but also promotes collaborative work, self-directed learning and the practical implementation of acquired knowledge.

The importance of incorporating blended learning in the tourism education sector is manifested in its ability to adjust to the fluctuating demands of a constantly evolving tourism industry, which demands professionals with up-to-date training, competent and prepared to excel in a competitive and global labour market.

The fusion of face-to-face sessions with digital resources, online simulations and real-life practical experiences equips students with the necessary skills to successfully address contemporary challenges in the tourism field, equipping them with a robust and contemporary professional profile.

In relation to the feasibility and appropriateness of implementing the Bachelor's Degree in Tourism under a blended mode, it is observed that both the feasibility and relevance of this initiative are high.

This is due to the fact that both graduates and employers have underlined the importance and relevance of the subjects covered during the academic programme to address the contemporary challenges of the tourism sector.

Graduates have specifically pointed out the importance of reincorporating the study of languages and subjects related to hospitality and socio-cultural animation in the curriculum, indicating a strong demand for particular skills in the field of tourism. Furthermore, there is a consensus among graduates and employers that it is essential for tourism professionals to be fluent in at least two foreign languages and to possess skills in customer service, quality service provision and problem solving. The latter underlines the relevance of a blended mode of education, capable of offering a broad and versatile education.

Therefore, it is anticipated that future tourism education will be characterised as a dynamic and adaptable field, where blended learning is emerging as a promising option for the training of the next tourism professionals.

The viability and suitability of this modality is based on its ability to respond to the demands of the labour market and the learning preferences of students, effectively preparing them to face the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities presented by an ever-changing tourism industry.

The proposal to create a Bachelor's Degree in Tourism in mixed mode is presented as a highly viable and appropriate strategy, meeting the needs and expectations of both the sector's members and future students.

The integration of theoretical and practical elements in the programme, together with a focus on specific competences and adaptation to current market trends, confirms the viability and relevance of this educational approach.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest

Authors' Contribution

Availability of data and materials

The data used in this research are available for consultation and use upon request. Interested parties can contact the corresponding author to access the data. The data will be provided in a suitable format for further analysis, and a confidentiality agreement will be required to ensure privacy and ethical use of the information. Additionally, details about the materials and methods used in the study can be provided for those who wish to replicate or expand upon this research.

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