Prospective Hospitality Business Managers' Sociocultural Competence within the Context of Social and Cultural Environments

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Abstract: Ecological paradigm in education actualizes the significance of managers' interaction with *study environment* within the development of their competitiveness, where study environment is formed by university education and companies as the environment of professional activities. Therefore, one of the conceptual approaches in the research is *ecological approach* within the study process. On the basis of ecological approach there are several contexts identified in the environment of hospitality professional activities, there has been *the context of social and cultural environments* viewed in the article within the substantiation of *sociocultural competence*. The aim of the study was: to substantiate and, during the pedagogical experiment, to evaluate empirically university hospitality students' sociocultural competence as a component of competitiveness within the context of social and cultural environments. In order to find out how significantly has changed the self-evaluation of students' sociocultural competence component after the approbation of the model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers, both before and after the pedagogical experiment the students performed the self-evaluation of sociocultural competence component by using the authors' developed competitiveness evaluation methodology. The conclusive statistics of Wilcoxon test shows that after the approbation of competitiveness facilitation model, in 17 indicators out of 28 indicators of the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies hospitality students' self-evaluation sociocultural competence component there are statistically significant changes.

Keywords: hospitality business manager, competitiveness self-evaluation, sociocultural competence, university education.

Introduction

Ecological paradigm in education actualizes the significance of managers' interaction with *study environment* within the development of their competitiveness, where study environment is formed by university education and companies as the environment of professional activities. Therefore, one of the conceptual approaches in the research is *ecological approach* within the study process, including organization of practical training, by facilitating the prospective hospitality business managers' competitiveness, including the readiness to the professional activities within the changing environment of hospitality sphere.

The environment of professional activities in hospitality has many aspects; each aspect enables the prospective hospitality business manager to discover his or her creative potential, to self-develop and self-organize both in the humanitarian and analytical fields. The hospitality environment is related to both entrepreneurship – business, political and legal issues, the advanced technologies – and social environment, society – and the consumers of hospitality services. Thus, the development of a competitive specialist takes place, firstly, in the study environment, where a human rational individual transforms into a spiritual personality who is able in the competitive environment changed according to his laws to take the optimal decisions for the benefit of his own and the society; secondly, the above mentioned development takes place in the environment of hospitality professional activities, while interacting with this multi-component environment, and at the same time while being an element and creator, transformer of the components of the environment.

Environment of hospitality business is very specific, therefore it is necessary to substantiate the concept *competence of the environment of professional activities*, because competence develops through the cognition of the environment of professional activities, through diverse activities in this multidimensional environment of professional activities, as well as through the development of the environment-friendly thinking, by showing environment-friendly and responsible actions through one's own professional activities. Secondly, on the basis of ecological approach, in the environment of hospitality professional activities the authors of the article see and identify several contexts that are

continuously interacting and influencing each other by overlapping and supplementing each other. In this article there will be viewed ***the context of social and cultural environments*** in the substantiation of ***sociocultural competence***. *The aim of the research:* to substantiate and, during the pedagogical experiment, to evaluate empirically university hospitality students' sociocultural competence as a component of competitiveness within the context of social and cultural environments.

Methodology

The research was carried out at the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (hereafter – LLU), Institute of Education and Home Economics, where competitiveness self-evaluation methodology of prospective hospitality business managers was developed and the model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers was approbated, and at the Faculty of Food Technology, the Nutrition Department, where the experiment took place. The 22 4th year undergraduate students of the study programme Catering and Hotel Management (hereafter – CHM) were invited to participate in the experiment.

The pedagogical experiment consisted of several stages:
- the selection of experimental group and control group participants;
- the first self-evaluation of experimental group participants' competitiveness, incl. component of the sociocultural competence, summarizing of obtained data, primary mathematical processing of obtained data;
- approbation of the prospective hospitality business managers competitiveness facilitation in the study environment models (Figure 1) in the experimental group;
- the repeated self-evaluation of experimental group participants' competitiveness, incl. component of the sociocultural competence, summarizing of obtained data, primary and secondary mathematical processing of obtained data, analysis and evaluation of the results.
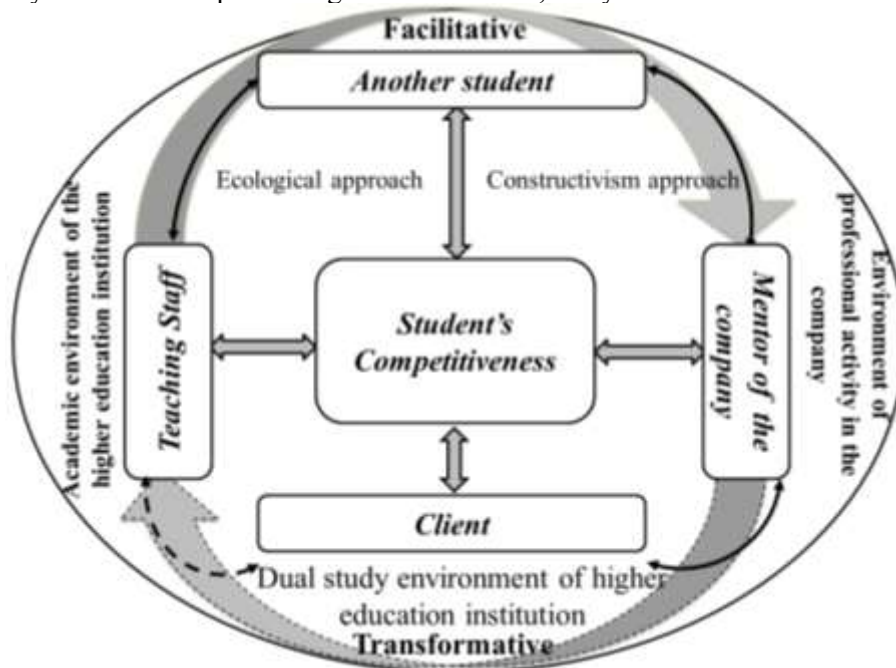

Figure 1. The model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers.

In order to find out, how significantly has changed the self-evaluation of students' competitiveness, including sociocultural competences, after the approbation of the model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers, the students of experimental group self-evaluated their competitiveness both before and after the pedagogical experiment. The results of both evaluations were compared after the experiment in order to identify differences (Figure 2).
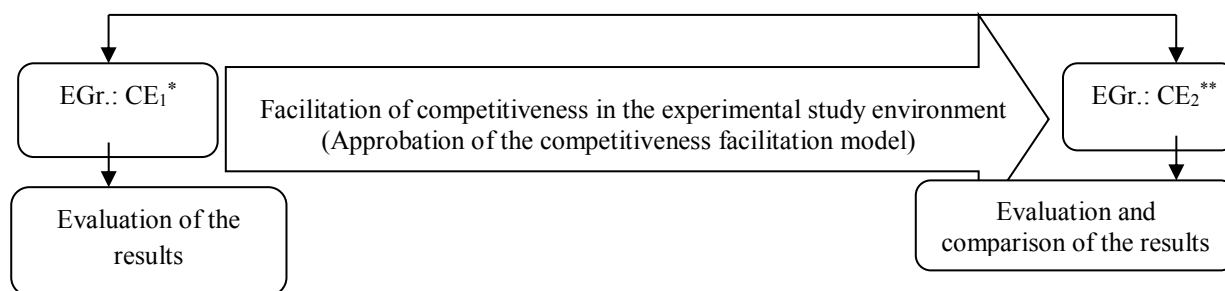
Figure 2. The competitiveness development of the experimental group of prospective hospitality business managers in the experimental study environment.

* EGr.: CE_1 the first self-evaluation of experimental group participants' competitiveness, including component of sociocultural competence;

**EGr.: CE_2 the repeated self-evaluation of experimental group participants' competitiveness, including component of sociocultural competence.

Wilcoxon Test (SPSS 21.0 software) was used to identify differences and to obtain the conclusive statistics.

Results and Discussion

Theoretical description of sociocultural competence

Prior to this experiment, competitiveness self-evaluation methodology of prospective hospitality business managers was developed. It was based on the preliminary developed and scientifically grounded the competitiveness structure model of prospective hospitality business managers, where *competence of the environment of professional activities* is very essential.

Competence of the environment of professional activities. Ecological approach in educational research emphasizes *environment* as the central category. Concept *environment* is defined differently. In Oxford dictionary of sociology (Scott, 2015) the environment has been explained as social context, where an individual (or just a living organism) exists; the emphasis is put on his adaptation to this environment. But in Oxford dictionary of ecology (Allaby, 2015) the environment is defined as outer conditions, where the organism lives. The environment comprises social, cultural, economical and political conditions.

It is important to point out that the competence of the professional activities environment of a student as a prospective specialist is formed and developed within the direct interaction with the multi-contextual and multifunctional environment of professional activities.

Within the context of education to be acquired at the university the environment should be viewed as:
- an integral part of educational subjectivity (which, in its turn, is an environmental component);
- the effect of the implementation of particular educational practice (the condition of which it simultaneously is);
- a differential integrity in the constructed actual educational situations.

In this case the environment should be viewed not like a subjective or objective field, but like a symbolic one. It develops and functions, where different activities take place; as a result, it accumulates this diversity, and everyone who exists in this environment can change own position and a view on situation. Therefore, the scientists emphasize that environment should not be viewed outside those situations, where they are generated, and those effects it is generating (Korbut, 2004). Besides, the transformation of prospective specialists' identity and experience, as a developmental base of competitiveness, takes place in the study environment.

In the document of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (The European Qualifications…, 2008) there are competence-based educational qualifications described, where competences have a special role within the educational education (in the performance definition).

Scientists R. White (White, 1959), J. Giesecke and B. McNeil (Giesecke, McNeil, 1999), F. Delamare Le Deist and J. Winterton (Delamare Le Deist, Winterton, 2005), R. Bolden and J. Gosling (Bolden, Gosling, 2006) emphasize that *the manager's competences shall be adjusted to the environment,*

where they act, because environment influences the manager abilities to fulfil his duties, as well as to delay what has been expected from him.

Thus, the prospective hospitality business manager develops as a professional *within the mutual interaction with environment,* namely:

- within the environment of professional activities there is developed, improved the specialist's competitiveness, including competence of the environment of professional activities according to the environmental specificity;
- at the same time – depending of own professionalism (including competence of the environment of professional activities, creativity, flexible thinking etc.) the specialist is able also to improve and perfect the environment of own professional activities by introducing innovations, novelties, becoming the initiator of everything new, an innovator, and, as a result of the sharing of experience, the best practice is popularized and spreads in the professional environment.

The authors of the article substantiated the competence of the environment of professional activities as complicated, whole totality of several sub-competences, which manifests through different types of abilities to perform independently and responsibly the functions of different types of professional activities resulting from many contexts of the environment of professional activities.

Thus, competence of the environment of professional activities (Figure 3) consists of several sub-competences, including sociocultural competences. The emphasized environmental contexts (Figure 3) result from the authors' reflection on the experience for many years obtained in the fields of education and hospitality and on the scientific literature studies: social and cultural environment; hospitality technologies environment; information and communication technologies environment; business technologies; legal environment.
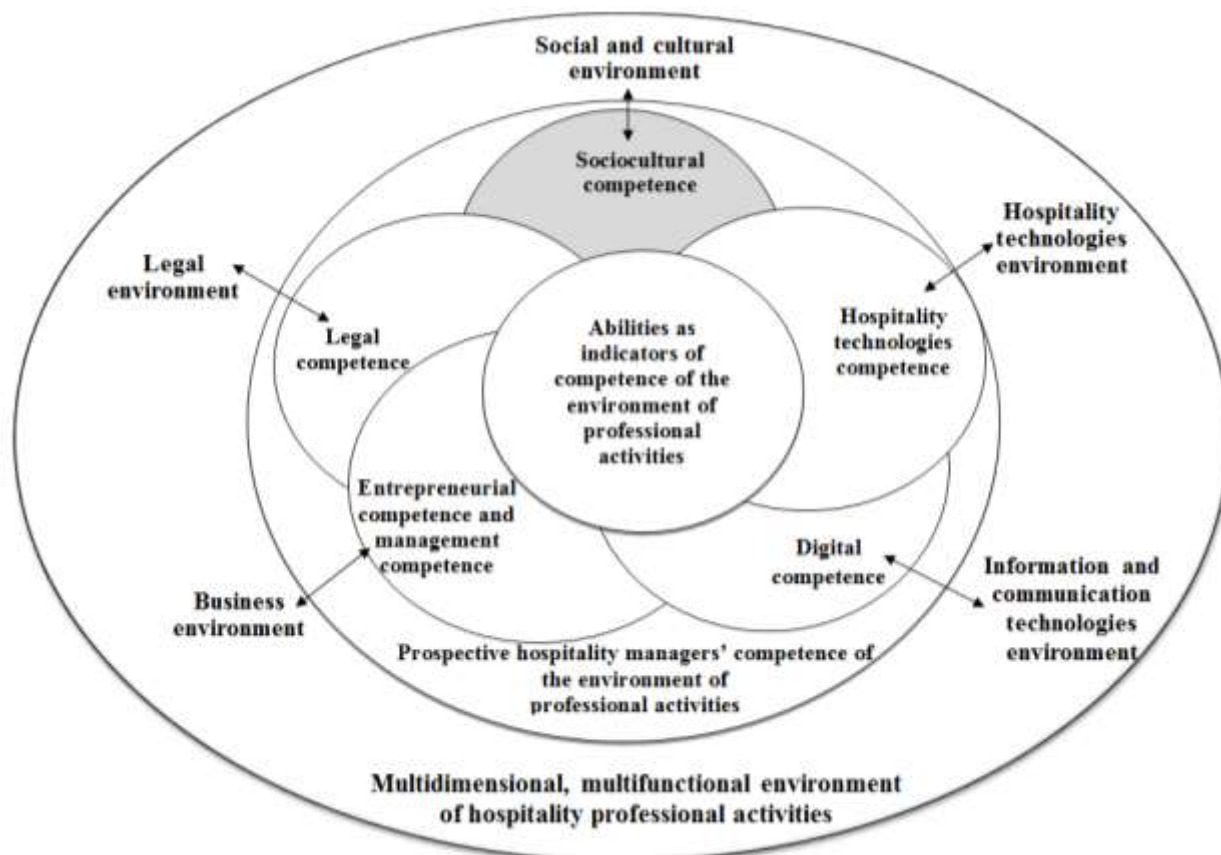

Figure 3. Sociocultural competence in the structure of competence of the environment of professional activities of the prospective hospitality business manager.

In this article there are published the results of theoretical and empirical research in relation to one of the components of prospective hospitality business managers' competence of the environment of professional activities - sociocultural competence within the context of social and cultural environment. 28 indicators of

the prospective hospitality business managers' self-evaluation methodology (Iriste, 2018), which constitute only an insignificant part of competitiveness self-evaluation indicators, enable to evaluate prospective hospitality business managers' sociocultural competence according to different aspects.

Social and cultural environments as the context of the formation and development of sociocultural competence: the results of theoretical research

There are two types of functions essential for hospitality business managers: to work with own employees by providing different types of support, as well as they shall be oriented towards the client – the consumer of products/services. Thus, the hospitality business managers need the client servicing orientation, team-work, which could be developed through professional activities, education and integration into social and cultural environment.

Social and cultural environment is explained as a complex structure of social, material spiritual circumstances, where the individual's life activities are implemented (Masovic, 2018). While living in this multidimensional space, the personality formation process takes place, the personality develops through the interaction with other individuals, natural factors and cultural values. The environment influences the development of personality considerably, but as a result of an individual's actions the environment changes itself.

A hospitality business manager has a significant role for the facilitation of ensuring sustainable environment, because the ecological human resource management (Yoon, Jang, Lee, 2016; Kim et al., 2019), *the green climate of a company* (Chou, 2014) improves the employees' nature-friendly and society-friendly, sustainable thinking and actions.

In their turn, the processes that take place in the social environment (thinking, actions) can be understood only within the context of particular culture, because the cultural and historical environment:
- specifically activates archetypes dominating in the society;
- develops value, cognitive systems;
- creates models of social relations etc.

As a result of a human direct/indirect transformation of the world, nowadays an individual life in two worlds simultaneously – in the natural environment and in the human-made environment, where an individual's ability to adapt to social or human-made environment – knowledge of legal and political, economical field, psycho-emotional skills etc. - becomes more and more important. Since the hospitality companies often function in the buildings – cultural and historical monuments, next to natural objects – the specialists working at such places shall be able to adapt to both natural and human-made environment; they shall find balance between their interests, while being a manager of a hospitality company, and the interests of society in general.

This may be implemented by developing the communicative culture of those working in hospitality sphere; the communicative culture is a precondition for the effectiveness of professional activities, because the sphere of service provision is very specific – the human interaction in the environment of these activities takes up more than 90% of working hours (Makarova, 2012). The prospective hospitality business manager's communicative culture can be seen as a component of the specialist's professional culture that comprises knowledge, norms, values and models of conduct accepted by society and as an ability to apply them through business and emotional communication.

American sociologist T. Parsons (Parsons, 1977) indicates that the communication process is a precondition for the development of all social systems, because it ensures the connection among people and groups, organization of joint activities, division of labour.

Thus, the aim of communication, and also the result, is determined by social environment and culture (Lasswell, 1948). French sociologist E. Durkheim and American sociologist T. Parsons, the developer of Durkheim's ideas, indicate that an individual *interiorizes* the social values and norms (Durkheim, 1958; Parsons, 1977). The process of exteriorization also takes place, when an individual introduces new values to society. However, nowadays it does not always happen, because there is a cultural system situated above the personality as a system. According to the scientists' point of view, the cultural system is the most important controller of personality; it provides beliefs, values and norms of conduct necessary for the survival of an individual in the particular society.

French anthropologist, philosopher and sociologist P. Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984) introduces the concept *habitus* by which scientist denotes *semi- automatically, partially intentional style of conduct* that is developed as a result of experience. He points out that an individual's action always takes place under the circumstances of instability, where the models of conduct provided by culture do not function efficiently. Therefore, a human being, through improvisation, acts strategically – within the limits of cultural beliefs, knowledge; however, he violates the rules.

Sociocultural competence is an instrument for the education of internationally oriented personality who will be aware of global interdependence and unity, necessity for cooperation to deal with the global problems of humankind (Rakhimova, 2017; Zygaitiene, Numgaudiene, 2016). Because only in such manner it will be possible to implement 17 sustainability principles of United Nations (17 goals to..., 2015), where there is indicated the necessity to deal with such problems as the increase of the efficiency of production resources without degrading the environment, the reducing of food waste – very many hospitality companies of Latvia shall participate in dealing with this problem, as well as there has been indicated the necessity to facilitate sustainable tourism.

As a result of research, it is possible to say that the sociocultural competence is an ability to apply knowledge, skills and experience by showing responsible attitude for ensuring successful communication in the particular social and the cultural environment. The prospective hospitality business managers shall be able to communicate in different environments and at the same time to be empathic, tolerant; they shall be able to overcome prejudices, to find compromises, to understand different views within the context of particular social and the cultural environment, to be ready for a dialogue. They shall be stress-enduring, to be able to divide the personal sphere from the professional one. Through overcoming different difficulties and obstacles, development of abilities and amassing individual experience, there is improved also the prospective hospitality business managers' competence as a component of the competence of the environment of professional activities within the structure of competitiveness.

Pedagogical experiment: results of empirical research

Based on authors' developed and scientifically substantiated competitiveness self-evaluation methodology of prospective hospitality business managers, the competence of the environment of professional activities can be evaluated using 95 indicators; 28 of these indicators were attributed to the self-evaluation of the sociocultural competence, which is one of the 5 sub-competencies (competence of hospitality technologies, digital competence, entrepreneurial competence and management competence, legal competence) in the structure of competence of the environment of professional activities (Iriste, 2018). The system of these indicators was based on:

- developed and scientifically grounded the competitiveness structure model of prospective hospitality business managers as a result of theoretical research;
- decision No. 209 of 26 June 2013 on the accredited study direction *Hotel and Restaurants Service, Tourism and Recreation Organization* in conformity with which there is being implemented LLU Faculty of Food Technology Nutrition Department Professional Bachelor study programme CHM.

In order to find out how significant changes have taken place comparing self-evaluation indicators of sociocultural competence component within representative sample of the experimental group (22 4th year undergraduate students of the study programme CHM) before and after approbation of the model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers, secondary mathematical processing of the obtained data was carried out using the Wilcoxon test SPSS (21.0) software.

During pedagogical experiment there have been statistically significant changes in 17 indicators from 28 in *the sociocultural competence* component (p-value=0.000...0.049), besides, very significant changes have taken place in indicators 8, 14 and 20 that shows the high level of students' tolerance towards the representatives of different age, sex and ethnical minorities (Table 1).

But statistically insignificant changes (p-value=0.050...1.000) have taken place in the case of 2 sociocultural competence indicators: indicator 1 (p-value=0.857) – the ability to integrate into a foreign company and indicator 10 (p-value=0.797) – knowledge of foreign languages (Table 2).

Table 1

The essentiality of the changes of sociocultural competence self-evaluation

Indicator No.	Self-evaluation indicators of sociocultural competence	Wilcoxon test p-value	Conclusions	Self-evaluation coefficients of competence	
				Before experiment	After experiment
Statistically significant changes (p-value = 0.000 ... 0.049)				Before experiment	After experiment
8.	I have amassed rich experience regarding different social roles that helps me to socialize and fulfil my professional duties.	0.002	very significant differences	0.62	0.88
14.	I can develop and maintain a dialogue with the representatives of different age, culture and social groups.	0.008	very significant differences	0.63	0.84
20.	In my professional performance I am able to disassociate myself from different types of stereotype in relation to the ethnic minorities and to be tolerant towards a representative of any nationality.	0.002	very significant differences	0.65	0.89

Besides, the self-evaluation coefficient (0.75) of indicator 1 was at high level already before the experiment, but foreign languages cannot be completely mastered within a year, therefore the increase of self-evaluation coefficient before (0.63) the pedagogical experiment and after it (0.65) is insignificant.

Table 2

The essentiality of the changes of sociocultural competence self-evaluation

Indicator No.	Self-evaluation indicators of sociocultural competence	Wilcoxon test p-value	Conclusions	Self-evaluation coefficients of competence	
				Before experiment	After experiment
Statistically insignificant changes or statistically significant coincidence (p-value= 0.050 ... 1.000)				Before experiment	After experiment
1.	Ability to include in unknown social environment.	0.857	good coincidence	0.75	0.77
10.	Knowledge of several languages.	0.797	good coincidence	0.63	0.65

Very high self-evaluation coefficient of sociocultural competence after the pedagogical experiment is in several indicators: 2 - good communication skills – 0.89, 6 – ability to work in a team – 0.83, 23 – in knowledge about own country and culture of own nation 0.73 (Table 3).

Table 3

The changes of sociocultural competence self-evaluation coefficients

Indicator No.	Self-evaluation indicators of sociocultural competence	Self-evaluation coefficients	
		Before experiment	After experiment
2.	I have good interrelation, including communication, skills.	0.79	0.89
6.	I can work in a team, even if the team is led by another person.	0.74	0.83
10.	Knowledge of several languages.	0.63	0.65
15.	At the company I was able to organize and run a seminar for sharing experience, a field trip and other events.	0.37	0.64
23.	I know well the culture of our country and my nation and I can use my knowledge for professional purposes.	0.65	0.89
26.	My competitiveness is characterized by client-centred thinking and performance.	0.57	0.69

The high level of the self-evaluation coefficients of other indicators shows the high level of the development of this competence in participants of experimental group. The self-evaluation coefficients of only three indicators out of 28 after the pedagogical experiment are below 0.70 (these are the following indicators: 10, 15 and 26).

Conclusions

- The prospective hospitality business manager develops as a professional within the mutual interaction with environment, namely: within the environment of professional activities there is developed, improved the specialist's competitiveness, including competence of the environment of professional activities according to the environmental specificity; at the same time – depending of own professionalism (including competence of the environment of professional activities, creativity, flexible thinking etc.) the specialist is able also to improve and perfect the environment of own professional activities by introducing innovations, novelties, becoming the initiator of everything new, an innovator, and, as a result of the sharing of experience, the best practice is popularized and spreads in the professional environment.

- The prospective hospitality business manager's competence of the environment of professional activities is an integral totality of several competences (competency) that manifests through several abilities to perform independently and responsibly many functions the environment of professional activities, where there could be identified several environmental contexts.

- The conclusive statistics of Wilcoxon test SPSS (21.0) shows that after the approbation of model of the dual study environment of a higher education institution that transforms and facilitates the development of the competitiveness of prospective hospitality business managers, in 17 indicators out of 28 indicators of LLU CHM students' self-evaluation sociocultural competence component there are statistically significant changes (p-value=0.000...0.049); besides, three indicators reflect very significant changes in the students' self-evaluations. But statistically insignificant changes (p- value=0.050...1.000) have taken place in the case of 2 sociocultural competence indicators.

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