

# Tourism Employees' Readiness during the Covid-19 Pandemic: The case of Greek Tourism Industry

**Anthi Gousiou**

University of the Aegean, Greece

**Panoraia Poulaki**

University of the Aegean, Greece

**Maria Lagou**

University of West Attica, Greece

**Abstract:** The objective of this article is to explore the readiness of the tourism industry in Greece during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study examines employees' readiness in issues related to the implementation of health protocols or emergency management (such as COVID-19 pandemic), the employers' satisfaction from their employees in dealing with the pandemic and emergency issues, and the necessity of appropriate employees' training in such topics for the most efficient operation of tourism businesses. To satisfy the aforementioned objectives three empirical studies were conducted, involving 457 employers, 455 employees and 12 stakeholders of the tourism industry in Greece and in particular hotels, food businesses and travel agencies. As regards the methodological context, this study was based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative research. According to the key findings of these studies, employers of tourism businesses consider that their staff is sufficiently prepared in dealing with emergencies (such as pandemic Covid-19), while employees consider that they are not adequately trained in dealing with such issues. In terms of employers' satisfaction from their employees' readiness in dealing with emergencies, employers are quite satisfied by them. Moreover, both employers and employees as well as tourism stakeholders acknowledge the necessity of trained staff in emergency periods for the effective operation of tourism businesses. The findings of this study provide useful insights to policy makers, tourism industry and tourism educators in order to provide the necessary strategic plans for tourism education and training and its adjustment in the meta-Covid-19 era.

**Keywords:** Tourism education and training, Covid-19 pandemic, readiness, employees, employers, tourism industry, Greece

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the political, social and financial structures of the whole world, forcing them to make constant efforts to cope with this multifaceted crisis. Tourism industry in particular has confronted one of the most severe shocks that have ever occurred. The second year of the pandemic will be challenging for the tourism sector but, at the same time, it is expected to be better than the previous one, since we are armed with the vaccination and the experience of managing the first year's crisis. The destructive impact of

pandemic on world tourism has continued into 2021, with new evidence revealing an 87% drop in international tourist arrivals in January 2021 compared to 2020. The prospects for the remaining part of the year are still bleak, as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) continues to urge stronger coordination of travel protocols between countries to ensure a safe restart of tourism and prevent another year of massive damage to the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2021). To this end, the international community must take strong and immediate actions to ensure a safer and brighter continuity, since many millions of businesses depend on tourism. Moreover, for tourism and its socio-economic system to be regenerated and transformed, tourism research should support new modes and potential for research, development, and knowledge and, at the same time, inspire, encourage, and inform the tourism industry to pursue innovative forms of operating, evolving, and progressing (Sigala, 2020).

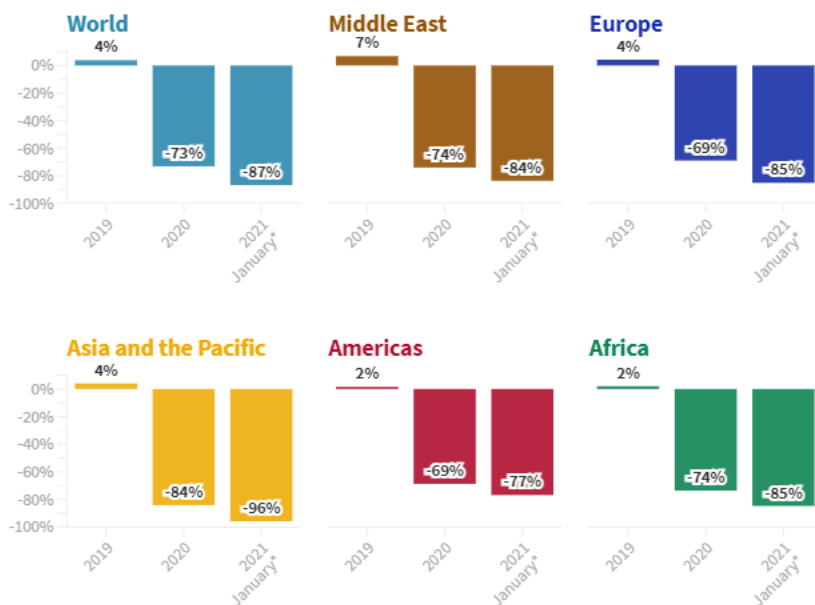
According to the WHO, workers experience different levels of exposure to the Covid-19 risk and employers need to carry out risk assessments to identify the possibility of exposure to the risk, and implement preventive measures (WHO, 2020). Yet, both employers and employees need to adapt to the new normality, implement the required health protocols and adopt new models of services and work design in order to provide quality and safe tourism services and, at the same time, to contribute to the restoration of confidence in tourism and the secure restart of it. To this end, several strategies have been suggested by experts, such as strict cleaning protocols, refurbished hotel premises to comply with new health safety norms, shift from personal to technology supported interactions, limited interaction in public areas that could contribute to changing customers' perception of tourism and restore confidence in it (Assaf, & Scuderi, 2020). As regards tourism employees, it has been suggested, among other things, to be supported for the development of their professional skills (reskilling/upskilling) and the new skills they should acquire related to the implementation of health protocols or emergency management (such as COVID-19 pandemic) (TRINET, 2020).

Based on the above and especially on the importance of providing safe tourism services to customers and thus, contributing to tourism restart, it is essential to investigate the readiness of tourism industry employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. To this end, this paper tries to explore the tourism employees' readiness in Greece. In fact, three studies were carried out in order to analyze the aforementioned issues on the part of employers, employees and tourism stakeholders of three sectors of tourism, namely hotels, food businesses and travel agencies. In what follows, a literature review is introduced and then the methodology of the study along with the findings are presented. Finally, discussion of the results and conclusions are drawn.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

After the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, global tourism has suffered, and this fact is reflected in the steep drop in international tourist arrivals

illustrated in Figure 1 and in the uncertainty for the employees due to the unprecedented crisis in jobs and incomes (ILO, 2021).



**Figure 1: Change (%) in international tourist arrivals**  
(Source: World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, 2021)

Although the tourism industry is vulnerable to diverse external, as well as to internal challenges and crises and it is not the first time this happens, the evolving economic devastation resulting from this pandemic, stands out from any other disaster in human memory. Several crises have disrupted the tourism industry during the last forty years (Lagos, Poulaki, & Lambrou, 2021) and crisis management has become a major topic in this sector, although academic attention to crisis management education and training is limited (Wut, Xu, & Wong, 2021). Considering the emergency nature of the pandemic, the important role of governments is highlighted to support the tourism industry on staff training in order to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic (Salem, Elbaz, Elkhwesky, & Ghazi, 2021). It is noteworthy to mention that during disasters, tourism businesses are essential to try to keep their employees, since human resource is a highly valued asset for businesses as it contributes to their recovery. To this end, because of the pandemic, there is an emerging trend in companies to retrain staff to multitask in order to improve work flexibility and optimize human resource allocation. Moreover, many companies were forced to exploit and use digital technologies to perform work from distance, although employees had to confront connectivity and equipment issues (Chadee, Ren, & Tang, 2021). In addition, specific initiatives have been put forward for the recovery of the

tourism sector harnessing business innovation, emphasizing the role of training (Breier, Kallmuenzer, Clauss, Gast, Kraus, & Tiberius, 2021; Bonfanti, Vigolo, & Yfantidou, 2021) and the pivotal role of technology (Pillai, Haldorai, Seo, & Kim, 2021), focusing on the qualitative reconstruction of the tourism product (Lagos, Poulaki, & Lambrou, 2021).

At the same time, in the phase of an emergency, tourism industry has to ensure the safety of their employees, guests and property (Hao, Xiao, & Chon, 2020; Nakat, & Bou-Mitri, 2021) to support tourism recovery and to this end, the World Travel & Tourism Council has provided a set of global protocols, based on World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines, creating a Covid-19 pandemic prevention plan (WTTC, 2020). Hygiene as well as safety and health protection seem to be paramount factors for tourism businesses, and this is also confirmed by the customers. Specifically, customers' attitudes towards tourism and travel were explored (Pappas, & Glyptou, 2021), and it seems that safety and health issues were the main considerations for them when they had to make decisions about their holidays. Moreover, it was also suggested that quality-related services in terms of health and safety contribute to the recovery of the tourism industry and the reduction of consumer doubt and fear.

British Standards Institution (2021) suggests that training on Covid-19 risk factors and protective behaviors is one of the keys to the effective implementation of Covid-19 measures. Moreover, according to Stergiou and Farmaki (2021) and Agarwal (2021), employees in hospitality sector feel more willing, motivated, and competent to work during the pandemic, when they are appropriately trained to protect themselves from infection, while hotel businesses should take care of the appropriate actions to provide the appropriate training.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to explore the tourism industry employees' readiness to respond in Covid-19 pandemic, three empirical studies were conducted, and they are described below. Specifically, two field studies and a census study were carried out in Greece between June 2020 and October 2020. The objective was to explore the role of tourism education and training in tourism development. To this end, three different questionnaires were used that also included a group of questions about Covid-19 pandemic and staff education and training in issues related to pandemic and emergency management. This part of the studies is presented in this article.

The questionnaires used were sent to employers and employees of hotels, food businesses and travel agencies through their associations and unions in Greece. Moreover, questionnaires were sent directly to fourteen stakeholders related to them. The population under investigation for the two studies consisted of all the employers and employees of hotel, food businesses and travel agencies. The total size of population could not be estimated due to the fact that it was not possible to know whether the recipient associations and unions of the

questionnaires forwarded them to their members. The samples consisted of 457 employers, 455 employees and 12 stakeholders of the tourism industry.

As regards the employers' study, the sample consisted of 457 employers, 344 (75.3%) of them were male and 113 (24.7%) of them were female. Most of them were aged between 41-60 years (71.5%) and they were from the administrative region of Attica (17.72%), Crete (14.22%) and South Aegean (13.79%), followed by Ionian Islands (9.85%), Central Macedonia (8.53%), Peloponnese (7.66%), Thessaly (5.69%) and West Greece (5.03%). As regards the business type of the employers, hotel employers hold 34.1%, food businesses employers hold 33% and travel agency employers hold 32.8% of the sample. Most employers work in companies that operate all year round (74%) and the rest of them (26%) in companies that operate seasonally, while companies with 11-20 employees ranked first (30%), followed by companies with up to 5 employees (21%), with 5-10 employees (20.1%), with 31 employees or more (15.8%) and with 21-30 employees (13.1%). It seems that there was an adequate representation of all sizes of business.

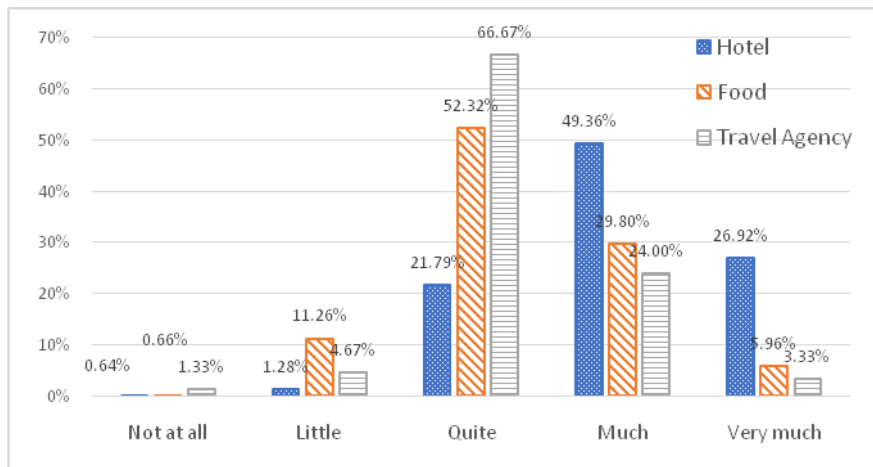
Regarding the employees' study, the sample consisted of 455 employees, 238 (52.3%) of them were male and 217 (47.7%) were female. Most of them were aged between 26-45 years (71.2%) and they were from the administrative region of Attica (22.64%), Crete (14.29%) and South Aegean (12.31%), followed by Central Macedonia (8.13%), Ionian Islands (7.25%), Epirus (6.59%), West Greece (6.15%), Thessaly (5.93%) and Peloponnese (5.05%). As regards the business type in which the sample employees work, hotel businesses hold 33.40%, food businesses hold 32.70% and travel agency hold 33.80%. Most of these enterprises operate all year (76.9%) and 23.1% of them operate seasonally, while most employees were permanent staff (86.37%) and the rest of them were seasonal ones (13.63%). Regarding the level of education of the employees who participated in the study, most of them (33.20%) were post-secondary education graduates, followed by secondary education (29.70%) and bachelor's degree graduates (27%).

As regards the methodological context, the studies were based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The findings of each of the three studies are presented in this section. As regards the employers' study, firstly, it was investigated the extent to which tourism industry employees are trained in the implementation of health protocols and emergency (e.g., pandemic) or natural disasters management. It seems that, according to their employers' views, most of them seem to be "quite trained" (46.60%), "much trained" (34.60%) and "very much trained" (12.30%), while only 6.5% of them are "little trained" or "not at all trained". The employers' responses for each business category are illustrated in Chart 1.

**Chart 1: Employers' perspectives by each business category about tourism employees' training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency or natural disasters management.**



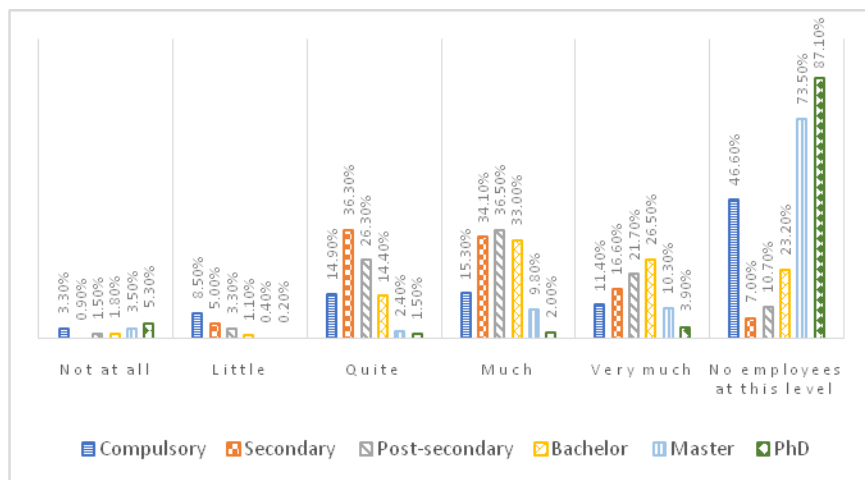
As it is shown in Chart 1, most hotel employers consider their employees from “much trained” to “very much trained”, while most food businesses’ and travel agency’s employers consider their employees from “quite trained” to “much trained”.

Accordingly, 97.59% of the participating employers reported that their company provided specialized training to their employees in the implementation of health protocols, while 23.85% of them also reported that they provided specialized training in the emergency or natural disaster management. Regarding the degree of employers’ satisfaction with the implementation of health protocols from their employees by level of education, as it is shown in Chart 2, most of the employers said that they were “quite satisfied” to “very much satisfied” with their staff from almost all levels of education.

Next, it was investigated the extent to which employers consider trained staff necessary in times of emergencies or natural disasters in order for their businesses to operate effectively and most of them consider it from “quite necessary” to “very much necessary”. Specifically, 42.90% of the sample employers consider trained staff to be “much necessary”, 36.5% “quite necessary” and 17.10% “very much necessary”, while only 3.5% of the sample employees consider it “little necessary” or “not at all necessary”. The last question tried to explore the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic to the staff selection of tourism businesses. Half of the employers (50.77%) estimate that it will not affect them, while the others believe that it will mainly affect them either by selecting staff with flexible working arrangements (46.17%) or by selecting staff with minimum wage (28.88%). To a much lesser extent, employers believe that the pandemic will lead their companies to select staff with minimum or no experience (9.41%), with a lower level of education (5.25%), with reduced or no

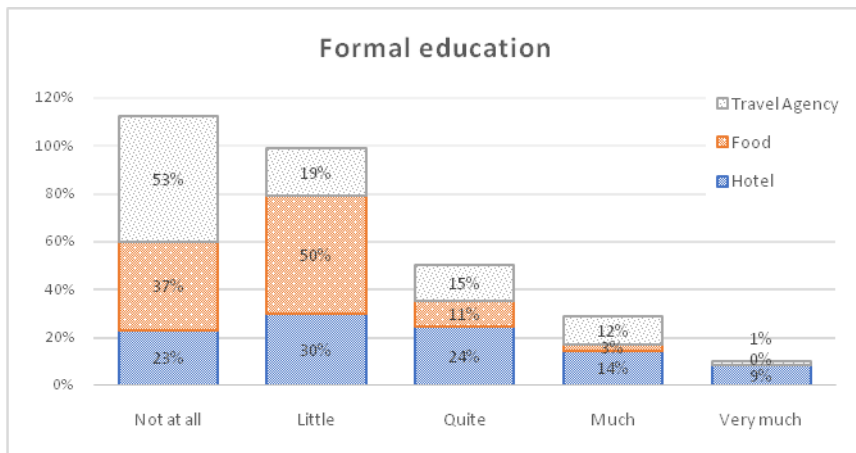
additional qualifications (4.38%), with little or no professional expertise (4.16%) or with no references (3.28%).

**Chart 2: Employers' satisfaction by level of employees' education with the implementation of health protocols.**

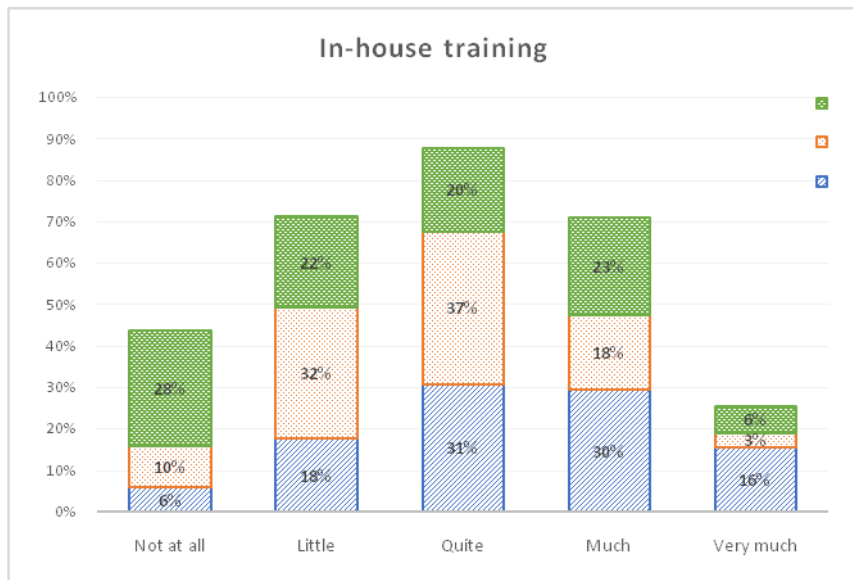


Apropos the employees' study, firstly, it was explored the extent to which employees consider training in the application of health protocols and emergency management necessary in order to meet the requirements of the companies they work in. Specifically, the largest percentage of them (44%) think that it is "much necessary", while to a lesser percentage regard it "very much necessary" (29%) and "quite necessary" (21.3%). Only 5.7% consider it "little necessary", while none of them consider this kind of training "not at all necessary". Next, it was investigated the degree of training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency (e.g., pandemic) or natural disasters management from formal education, in-house training, and personally initiated training. As regards formal education, most of them indicated that they were "little trained" (32.75%) and "not at all trained" (37.58%), while 16.70% of the sample indicated that they were "quite trained", 9.67% "much trained" and 3.30% "very much trained". Regarding in-house education, the majority of them consider themselves "quite trained" (29.23%), "much trained" (23.74%) and "very much trained" (8.57%), while a quite large percentage of the sample employees said that they consider themselves "little trained" (23.74%) or "not at all trained" (14.73%). Finally, as regards personally initiated training, half of the employees reported that they were "not at all trained" (34.51%) or "little trained" (15.16%), while the other half said that they were "quite trained" (22.64%), "much trained" (15.82%) or "very much trained" (11.87%). The employees' responses by each business category are illustrated in Chart 3 for hotels, Chart 4 for food businesses and Chart 5 for travel agencies.

**Chart 3: Employees' perspectives by each business category about the degree of training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency (e.g., pandemic) or natural disasters management from formal education.**

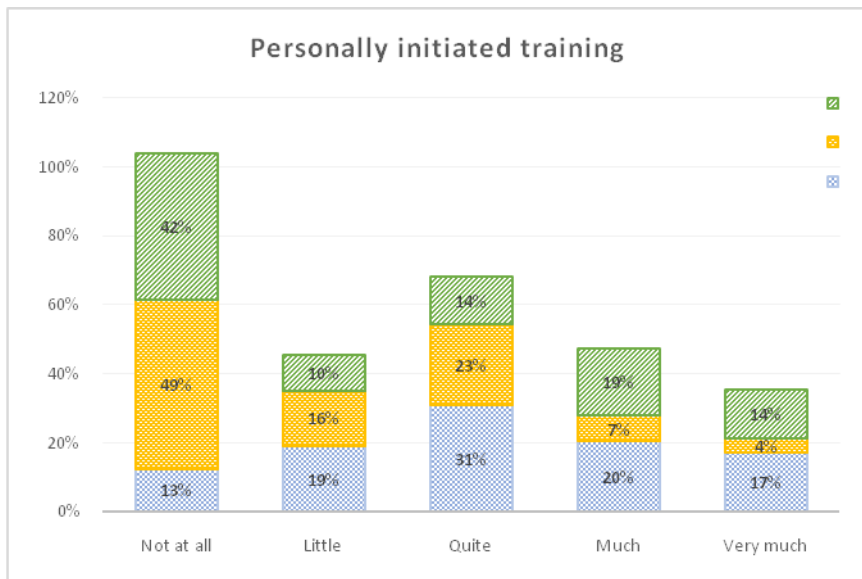


**Chart 4: Employees' perspectives by each business category about the degree of training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency (e.g., pandemic) or natural disasters management from in-house training.**



**Chart 5: Employees' perspectives by each business category about the degree of training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency (e.g., pandemic) or natural disasters management from personally initiated training.**





As regards the tourism stakeholders' study, firstly, it was investigated the need to train the human resources of tourism enterprises on the implementation of health protocols and emergency or natural disaster management through formal, in-house training and lifelong education and training. Specifically, as regards formal education, most of the participant stakeholders consider that this kind of training by formal education is "much necessary" (66.67%), "very much necessary" (16.67%) and "quite necessary" (8.33%), while a small percentage of them (8.33%) consider it "little necessary". As far as in-house training is concerned, it seems that all participants acknowledge the necessity of it, namely 58.33% of them consider it "much necessary" and 41.67% "very much necessary", while it is worth to be mentioned that none of them gave a negative answer. The choices are similar for lifelong education and training, where 58.83% of the stakeholders stated that they consider it "much necessary" and 33.33% "very much necessary", while 8.33% consider it "quite necessary". Likewise in the case of lifelong education and training, there was no negative answer regarding the need for training on the implementation of health protocols and emergency or natural disaster management. Finally, it was also investigated the need for the existence of a tourism crisis management body on a permanent basis, which could also manage issues related to tourism education and training. Specifically, 50% of the participants consider the existence of this body to be "much necessary" and 41.7% "very much necessary", while 8.3% consider it "quite necessary". It is noteworthy to be mentioned that nobody answered this question negatively.

## **DISCUSSION**

Given that COVID-19 pandemic has affected the tourism industry and the way tourism employees cope with their work needs, three studies were conducted. These studies investigated employees' readiness during this period on issues related to the implementation of health protocols or emergency management (such as COVID-19 pandemic), the employers' satisfaction with their staff in dealing with pandemic and emergency issues, as well as the necessity of staff training on such topics for the effective operation of tourism businesses.

The results emerging from these studies provide useful insights into the importance of employees' training in emergency management to enhance the efficiency of tourism enterprises.

As regards employers' study, it seems that employers consider the human resources of tourism enterprises to be adequately trained in the implementation of health protocols and this is confirmed for each type of enterprise, namely, hotels, food businesses and travel agencies. However, it is worth to be mentioned that employers of hotel businesses consider their employees to be adequately trained to a greater extent than what employers of the food services and travel agencies consider their own employees are. The investigation of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the selection of human resources in tourism enterprises also revealed that there are many enterprises that do not assume it will affect them. Nevertheless, the ones who expect that it will affect them mainly report that they will hire employees with flexible working arrangements and minimum pay. In other words, it seems that the impact of the pandemic is mainly on decisions related to the financial aspects of the businesses.

Regarding employees' study, it was found that all employees consider training on issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and emergency management to be necessary to improve their job skills and especially hotel workers consider it very much necessary. However, in exploring the adequacy of their training on issues related to emergency management, it was found that they consider themselves not sufficiently trained in these issues by formal education, while they are more trained from in-house training and to a lesser extent by personally initiated training. This finding is consistent with another study (Stergiou, & Farmaki, 2021), where employees also said that they were not adequately trained by their businesses, making them feel neglected. Employees in hotel businesses seem to consider themselves marginally trained in these matters, while employees in food businesses and travel agencies consider themselves insufficiently trained. The same applies to employers in hotels, who seem to consider that hotel employees are better trained, while employers in food businesses and travel agencies consider that their employees are trained to a lesser extent. Overall, it seems that there is a non-convergence of views between employees and employers as regards employees' training in emergency management. On the one hand, employers possibly consider that their employees are adequately trained since they have provided them specialized training in the

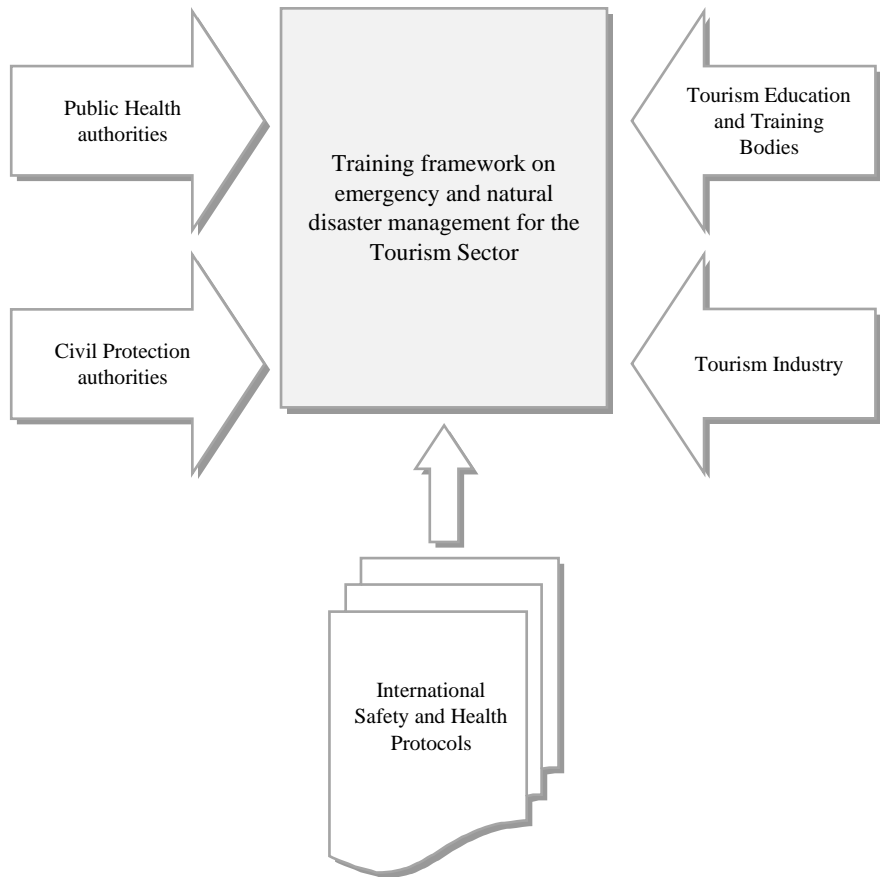
implementation of health protocols during the pandemic. On the other hand, employees might feel not adequately trained due to the fact that the training they had was provided at the time of the pandemic and that they were not trained in advance by formal education or by in-house training or by their own initiative.

As regards tourism stakeholders' study, it was found that the existence of a tourism crisis management body on a permanent basis, which could also manage issues related to tourism education and training, is considered necessary. This need may be more pronounced in the current period, as tourism businesses have to cope with huge problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The existence of such a body is likely to contribute to the coordinated and integrated management and resolution of crises affecting tourism, while, at the same time, it might facilitate the creation of a reference framework for all types of tourism businesses. In addition, it is necessary for the proposed body to be able to submit proposals for the update and adaptation of tourism curricula on subjects related to the management of potential crises in the tourism sector, so that tourism education and training can contribute to the appropriate preparation of its graduates.

The aforementioned findings show that all categories of participants acknowledge the necessity of training for the efficient management of emergency situations. This finding is consistent with other studies (Agarwal, 2021; Bonfanti, Vigolo, & Yfantidou, 2021; Hu, Yan, Casey, & Wu, 2021), which also emphasize the importance of staff training for the cognitive and psychological support of the employees during the pandemic related issues. However, there are different views between employers, employees, and stakeholders as regards employees' adequate training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency management. Moreover, each of the three participant groups (employers, employees, and stakeholders) have different priorities and may potentially prioritize and assess their needs and expectations differently. Specifically, while employers state that they consider their workforce to be adequately trained on issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic, employees themselves consider that they are not adequately trained on relevant issues. The only exception is found in hotel staff, who seem to consider themselves marginally trained. It seems that while employers consider that their staff is adequately trained, at the same time they need to support them more by providing them the appropriate resources to ensure that employees feel safe and confident and, thus, contribute to the effective operation of their business. This need is most evident in food businesses' and travel agencies' employees, who consider that they are not trained in such issues from formal education or in-house training or from personal initiated training, as it emerged from both the employers' and employees' studies. This is to be expected, given the different nature of the three types of enterprises under study. Moreover, it also confirms the multidimensional and broad nature of tourism, and the different approaches should be used during employees' education and training. To this end, tourism industry ought to make concerted efforts to provide adequate and appropriate

training to its employees in order for them to deliver quality and safe tourism services. Therefore, it is essential to set up a specific training framework on emergency and natural disaster management for the tourism sector. The proposed framework should be developed on the basis of international health and safety protocols, while tourism education and training bodies could design it in cooperation with the tourism industry and the relevant health and civil protection authorities. Moreover, this framework should be updated on a regular basis in the light of new developments and changes and be adapted to the needs of the country.

**Figure 2: Training framework on emergency and natural disaster management for the Tourism Sector**



The aim is to ensure the readiness and flexibility of the tourism industry to deal with future crises that may arise. Another important issue is that the

emergency management dimension needs to be integrated into tourism education and training programmes, and tourism education and training bodies need to take this into account.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the fact that the provision of safe tourism services is a paramount issue for the recovery of the tourism sector, this paper explored staff readiness of tourism businesses in Greece. The results arising from the conducted studies revealed that employees of the tourism industry feel that they are not adequately trained in order to respond to the pandemic crisis in the workplace. It seems that it is necessary to be properly trained. To this end, the dimension of emergency management needs to be embedded in tourism education and training programs. Moreover, it is necessary for tourism education institutions, tourism industry and the state to cooperate for the design and planning of a specific training framework on emergency and natural disaster management for the tourism sector.

As regards the limitations of the study, it should be mentioned that this study was part of a bigger study that explored tourism education and training in Greece and not only Covid-19 issues. Therefore, tourism employees' readiness in such issues was not explored in detail. Another limitation is that the participants represented three specific sectors (hotels, food businesses and travel agencies) and not all sectors of tourism. Further in our research agenda is to explore tourism educators' perceptions of integrating the emergency management dimension into tourism education and training curricula.

Finally, it is hoped that the findings of these studies would offer some useful insights for tourism employers and employees, as well as tourism education and training bodies into the outcomes emerged from the adequate staff training in the implementation of health protocols and emergency management, as well as the integration of this axis in the tourism education and training curricula.

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## **About the Authors**

***Anthi Gousiou*** holds a Ph.D.in Tourism Education and Training from the Department of Business Administration from the University of the Aegean and a BSc and an MSc in Computer Science from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece. Her research interest focuses on the development and management of tourism, tourism education and training, digital game-based learning, and computer science education.

E-mail: [agousiou@aegean.gr](mailto:agousiou@aegean.gr).

***Dr Panoraia Poulaki*** (BSc, MSc, PhD) is Academic Laboratory Teaching Staff in Department of Economics and Management of Tourism of the University of the Aegean. She also teaches in MSc Programme in Strategic Management of Tourism Destinations and Hospitality Enterprises of the University of the Aegean. She holds a first degree in History and Archaeology from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Master of Science (MSc) in Planning, Management and Policy of Tourism from the University of the Aegean and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Tourism from the same University. She has written a book about the contribution of the Ottoman Monuments of Chios to the development of cultural tourism, and she has published research papers in scientific journals and has presented her research work in international conferences. Her research interests focus on the development, planning and management of tourism, with emphasis on special and alternative forms of tourism.

E-mail: [panoraia@aegean.gr](mailto:panoraia@aegean.gr)

***Maria Lagou*** is a graduate of the Department of Economic and Regional Development of the Panteion University of Greece, and she holds an MBA from the Department of Business Administration at the University of the Aegean, in Chios, Greece. Moreover, currently she is a PhD student at the Department of Accounting and Finance of the University of the West Attica in Athens, Greece. Her research focuses on leadership in tourism activity, regional tourism development, special forms of tourism and tourism destination management.

E-mail: [la44mar@yahoo.gr](mailto:la44mar@yahoo.gr)