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GAPS IN TOURISM EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE NEED: ATTRACTING AND EDUCATING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Research note

Abstract

The intense development of the tourism industry requires a skilled and qualified workforce. It is important to attract the right candidates to the tourism education, and subsequently provide relevant education to prepare students for the industry after graduation. While work placements may be useful and important to some extent, they are not the ideal solution. Hence, alternative approaches such as simulations and flipped classrooms may be applied. To provide realistic expectations, a closer collaboration between industry operators and education providers is needed. Education providers should assume a more proactive role by inviting tourism operators and integrated them in the tourism education programs as guest lecturers.

Keywords: Tourism education, tourism workforce, higher education, alternative teaching methods, Norway

Introduction

Despite an increase in demand of skilled and qualified tourism workforce, the growth and development of tourism education have received scant attention (Fidgeon, 2010). What types of tourism education is needed for the current and future tourism workforce? In Norway, two main challenges are associated with tourism education. Firstly, attracting the right candidates to the tourism programs at higher education institutions. Secondly, providing the tourism education, which the industry considers as relevant (Goldeng & Mei, 2013). The purpose of this research note is to investigate a case focused on the Buskerud County, based on a qualitative research methodology and in-depth interviews. The paper presents some preliminary findings and implications, which may be applicable to other destinations and region facing similar challenges in terms of tourism workforce and education.

Literature review

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A glance at tourism education and workforce

Wan, Wong, and Kong (2014) argue that there are generally limited opportunities along with low salary and social status of tourism jobs. Tourism is a labour intensive industry, and is in constant need of a skilled workforce. As a sector with high turnover and high uncertainty, there is no doubt that tourism education needs to foster a great set of skills, aptitudes and knowledge (Sheldon, Fesenmaier, & Tribe, 2011). Hence, there is a need to restructure and re-design tourism education (Fidgeon, 2010; Sheldon et al., 2011). However, remarkably little attention has been given to the evaluation of tourism teaching and education (Stergiou, Airey, & Riley, 2008).

Tourism education in Norway

In Norway, students who are admitted to tourism programs at higher education level are not necessarily the most motivated and academic strong students. While not unique in Norway (Baum, 2006), this is even more challenging in the Norwegian context as the destination is known for its high prices and low service quality (Mei, 2014). High living costs and prices are factors that the tourism industry cannot change, but services can be improved. Not all necessary skills and knowledge can be learned in a traditional classroom setting, which dominates most tourism courses at the university level. Hence, alternative teaching methods have gained importance in the recent years consisting of simulations and flipped classroom. Although not widely used in tourism education, they are gaining importance in many general business courses (Findlay-Thompson & Mombourquette, 2014). Strayer (2012) explains that flipped classrooms “moves the lectures outside the classrooms and uses learning activities to move practice with concepts inside the classroom” (Strayer, 2012, p. 171).

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was applied in this study due to its ability to explore themes in-depth by concentrating on a small sample (Veal, 1992). A qualitative approach also allows the researchers to investigate human behaviour and opinions in a more natural setting (Kraus & Allen, 1997). The purpose of such approach is to investigate the respondents’ opinions and experiences from their point-of-view rather than the researchers’ point-of-view (Creswell, 1998). On the basis on such approach, a more interpretive paradigm was adopted which allowed the researchers to explore many topics and answers that would emerge during the process (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002).

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Data collection was conducted in two stages. Firstly, the researchers participated in a meeting with Team Tourism, an advisory body for the tourism industry in the Buskerud County, consisting of members of the industry, the government and trade associations. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected government representatives, representatives from trade associations, owners and managers of tourism establishments. In total, 16 in-depth interviews were conducted. The questions from the interview guide were developed based on input from the meeting as well as themes raised in existing literatures. A majority of interviews were conducted personally whereas some were conducted on the phone.

Table 1: Respondents of this study

Respondents	Numbers	Indicate as _# in the result
Government Representatives	2	GR#
Trade Association representatives	3	TA#
Industry Representatives (owners/managers from tourism establishments)	11	IR#

Result and discussion

Importance of formal education

It is important to establish that while many studies argue that tourism operators often do not consider a degree in tourism to be a prerequisite for employment (Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, & Xiao, 2014; Evans, 1993), the findings contradict with such claim:

If they have formal education but no practical experiences, we'll still call them for interviews. If they have the right skills, interpersonal skills, attitude and willingness to learn then of course they are highly relevant for us. I believe that even if they don't have practical experience, they have shown their willingness to learn through their formal education [IR11].

Formal education is very important. The challenges arise when they for instance talk an international tour operator, who notices very clearly if this person at the other end has little knowledge of tourism [IR7].

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The main challenge is thus not convincing the industry that formal education is important, but to close the gap between the current tourism education programs and workforce needs.

Realistic expectations

A key finding indicates that students should have a realistic picture of the tourism industry even before they enter the tourism education programs. Subsequently, candidates with the right motivations can be attracted in the first place.

Start at the high school level or even junior high. Bring in some guest lecturers from the industry, not only representatives from the university colleges. They [industry representatives] are the ones who can provide a realistic picture of the industry [IR4]!

After entering the program, realistic expectations and challenges may be further provided and stimulated. As many tourism and business courses are still offering the traditional classroom teaching, many graduates are not aware of how the industry work in practice.

It is important to offer a realistic picture of how it is to work in the tourism industry [TA2].

You can't expect to get a management position straight away after graduation [IR2]!

If work placement works so well for nursing and teacher education, why should it be so difficult in tourism [GR2]?

Many higher education institutions in Norway do not offer work placements as a compulsory requirement due to the lack of resources. While work placements are important to prepare students for the workforce and help to clarify career intentions (Busby, 2003; Evans, 1993; Robinson, Ruhanen, & Breakey, 2016), not all are successful. Some are only reserved for high achievement students. Furthermore in many placements, students are mostly given administrative tasks, which do not offer enough stimulation and challenges (Seyitoğlu & Yirik, 2015). Hence, although useful to some extent, work placements are not the ideal solution.

Industry-education collaboration in teaching

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Lee and Joung (2017) argue the importance of an industry-education collaboration curriculum framework where education providers must initiate the invitation to industry operators. This concurs with the findings as tourism and industry representatives seek a more proactive role from the education providers.

We want a closer collaboration, very little exist now. The university colleges must be more active, and take initiative. Take the driver's seat! [TA3].

While such collaboration is not new, adopting alternative teaching approaches also means that industry experts should be integrated in new teaching methods. Interestingly, despite expressing their lack of time and resources, industry operators are keen to be invited by education institutions as guest lecturers and be a part of the education programs, which currently is not done in a large extent in many institutions in Norway. The respondents believe that guest lecturers who are industry representatives can provide realistic examples and be role models (Lee & Joung, 2017; Song, 2010). With the possibility of digital tools and alternative teaching methods such as simulations and flipped classrooms, guest lecturers can participate through web-based solutions, to overcome some of the challenges of bringing in guest lecturers such as cost, accommodation and availability (Mullins, 2001). Furthermore as discussed, industry experts should also be used as guest speakers in recruiting the right candidates to the tourism programs in the first place.

Conclusion

A preliminary key finding is that the right candidates must be attracted in the first place. To achieve so, a realistic view of the tourism industry must be offered to prospective students before they embark on a higher education program. Furthermore, rather than providing a few students with work placement opportunities, alternative teaching methods such as simulations and flipped classroom in conjunction with guest lecturers and web-based solutions might be considered. While many general business and practical courses are embracing such methods, there are still scant usage in tourism educations. Thus, future studies should focus on investigating such approaches for their usefulness in tourism education programs.

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