Is tourism education meeting the needs of the tourism industry?

An Australian case study

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid growth in the provision of tourism higher education in the past 40 years, uncertainties remain about the content and nature of tourism degrees and how these are aligned with the needs of the tourism industry. Some research has been done on tourism higher education curriculum design, but the extent to which tourism higher education meets industry needs has not yet been closely investigated. This study aims to ascertain whether a gap exists between what education institutions provide in their undergraduate curricula in the way of tourism knowledge and skills sets, and what knowledge and skills sets are required by the tourism industry.

A conceptual framework was developed to outline the research process, which involved two steps. First, content analysis of tourism curricula was conducted as the preliminary research. A list of 34 subject areas was synthesised from all core subjects offered in tourism courses in a sample of Australian universities according to subjects' titles, themes and detailed descriptions. A list of 27 skills and abilities was identified by collating university generic skills and tourism discipline attributes from these institutions. Based on the study of tourism curricula, two web-based surveys were then designed and distributed in order to investigate the respective perceptions of industry professionals and academic providers on the subjects and skills sets necessary for tourism employment.

In analysing the data, perceptions about the subjects and skills sets were compared between tourism industry professionals and academic providers. Importance- performance analysis, gap analysis, and SPSS statistical tools were applied to analyse this data.

The study found considerable variance between the views of industry professionals and academic providers in Australia. Their views vary firstly on the relative value of tertiary degrees for tourism professionals; secondly, on the relative merits of skills and abilities needed to work in the tourism sector; and thirdly, on the relative merits of various subjects taught at university. These findings establish the existence of a gap between the existing tourism curriculum at university level, and the needs of the tourism industry. The findings of this study also provide evidence to suggest that tourism higher education provision should not

be isolated from real practice and that those involved in curriculum design should work closely with industry representatives to ensure a strong connection between theory and practice, thus improving the likelihood that graduates of tourism higher education courses will graduate with knowledge and skills sets which are closely aligned with the needs and expectations of the tourism industry.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANZSIC	Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification
CAEs	Colleges of Advanced Education
CEHR	Committee for Ethics in Human Research
DITR	Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources
HND	Higher National Diploma
IPA	Importance-performance analysis
MICE	Meetings, incentives, and conference & exhibitions tourism
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
STCRC	Sustainable Tourism Co-operative Research Centre
SWIM	Senior Women in Management
THE-ICE	The International Centre of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education
TTF	Tourism and Transport Forum