

Tourism Education at Universities - A Diverse Field of Study

Quite often when being asked what field my doctorate was in, and I say “tourism”, I look into surprised faces, and get the response “I didn’t know you can study tourism at university”.



According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 940 million international tourists spent US\$ 919 billion in 2010, and the first two months of 2011 saw a healthy growth of 5% over the same months the previous year. It is thus widely recognized that tourism is globally one of the largest industries and the top generator of foreign exchange earnings for many of the world’s economies.

An industry of that size has to be managed just as any other industry, and the different stakeholders in the millions of businesses need well educated and well trained employees and entrepreneurs. In many countries, tourism is increasingly replacing primary industries, and it is no surprise that academic tourism programmes, including hospitality and events, are growing steadily and gain in popularity.

Tourism is probably one of the most diverse fields of study, and heavily relies on a multi-disciplinary approach. The reality that tourism research includes many disciplines, including, but not limited to economics, marketing, social sciences, geography, anthropology, biology, history, architecture, and law, makes it one of the most exciting fields of study.

Many tourism programmes are based in business schools at universities around the world. However,

over the past decades it became clear that tourism is much more than just business, and programmes adapted to this view.

Along with the general move to more sustainable practices, the tourism industry needs to adapt the triple-bottom-line as well, i.e. in addition to economic sustainability needs to also address the important issues of social/cultural and environmental sustainability.

Many innovative tourism programmes include a wide array of course subjects, from cultural and heritage tourism, to ecotourism, coastal and marine tourism, dark tourism, golf tourism, to name but a few. The spectrum broadens, and often includes subjects, such as business travel, and the ever increasing events sector.



In addition to regular coursework, students increasingly need to work on real life projects, either in groups or as individuals in form of a cooperative education. This means a move away from the traditional practicum, where many students had been abused as “cheap cleaning and coffee making staff”, and towards concrete projects in cooperation with an industry partner (business, NGOs, governmental agencies) that aim for real life usable outcomes.

Similarly, there is an increasing integration of research into the daily education at universities. Research centers and institutes often build the backbone of a department’s research activities, and provide students and faculty with invaluable experiences.

For example, students are often employed as research assistants, and can gain valuable experience while at the same time earn some money to support their student life. Some institutes offer an array of different positions, such as internships, cooperative placements, research assistantships, etc.

For postgraduate students, these jobs can also support the research activities for their own Masters and PhD theses. For faculty, the active work as researchers provides the unique advantage to stay up-to-date, and incorporate research findings and experience into the day-to-day teaching.

Not only topics and research areas are experiencing a shift into more contemporary fields and niches, but also the delivery of the material. Many universities move away from the classical standard lecture, supported by PowerPoint slides. Innovation in the teaching and assessment methods is a large field of inquiry in its own right, and can include the employment of modern techniques and gadgets (such as online tools, text messaging, the use of smartphones, laptops and tablets).



The teaching environment also changes drastically, from online components, to project work off-campus, to new classroom set-ups with round tables or even couches and bean bags, and field components to experience and investigate tourism phenomena first hand.

I feel very lucky and privileged to be part of a worldwide team that is allowed to interact with a wide range of students and colleagues, from and in different countries. To me, tourism (including all its facets and sub-fields) is the most exciting field of study, and it is great fun working with colleagues and students to learn and understand more about the world's largest industry!

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