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Forty years of tourism education and research

Abstract: After 40 years of growth, tourism education can be found in the higher education repertoire of countries across with world. Indications of its progress can be seen in the development of popular courses that attract large numbers of students as well as in a range of research outputs in some good academic journals. However, progress in the past few years, especially since the 2008 economic crisis, has been less certain. Notably the context of higher education has changed and this has brought some problems for tourism. Increasingly it needs to justify its position in the academy, especially in terms of student recruitment, student quality, research outputs and income, and societal impacts. For many centres of tourism study this represents a challenge. This is creating uncertainty for the future.
Keywords: tourism education, tourism research, growth, funding, league tables, reputation.
JEL codes: I20.

Introduction

The dates of the Department of Tourism of the Poznan University of Economics almost coincide exactly with those for the study of tourism itself. Although there are a few examples of tourism studies as early as the 1920s [Medlik 1965] it was not really until the 1970s that tourism began to be identified as a distinct area for scholarship, research and teaching [Airey 2005]. Since then, notwithstanding some formidable changes in the world, tourism itself, and more so tourism as a field of study has, until recently, shown almost continuous growth and development. In part this has been spurred on by the sheer growth of higher education. The aim of this article is to explore and comment on the development and the current challenges facing tourism studies. It seeks to do this by taking three distinct themes that have been dealt with in the literature relating to tourism education taking us to the cur-

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rent position where, in the context of the world in crisis, tourism is facing its own crises and likely period of change. The paper draws mainly on published sources and takes many of its examples from the United Kingdom (UK) and Western experience. Nevertheless the issues have a resonance world-wide.

1. A background of growth and development

Tourism as a subject for study and research developed against the background of the growth of tourism itself and against the background of the growth of higher education. According to the UN World Tourism Organization [UNWTO 2006, 2011] international tourism arrivals grew about five fold between 1970 and 2010, from 165.8 million to 940 million. Over a similar period, in the UK alone, student enrolments in higher education increased at a similar rate from about 600,000 [Office for National Statistics 2002] to 2.4 million [Higher Education Statistics Agency 2011]. These changes provided a context within which universities, especially the newly created ones, identified tourism as an area for development. Tourism was seen as an attractive addition to the university repertoire [Airey 1995] partly because it was allied with what was identified as a growth sector of the economy, partly because it fitted with many of the universities' orientation toward providing programmes which offered links with graduate employment [Ayikouru, Tribe & Airey 2009] and partly because it was seen as a useful vehicle to attract students. The result was a massive expansion in tourism course enrolments in most of the developed world. For example in the UK, enrolments into degree level programmes grew from about 20 in 1972 [Airey 2005] to 9,000 in 2011 [Walmsley 2012]. But growth in student numbers was not the only change.

At the same time the tourism literature has expanded, tourism related research has been established and tourism academic journals appear to have flourished. Taking the example of academic journals as an indicator, in 1970 there were just two journals concerned with tourism published in English. By 2006 Morrison [2006] reported that this had risen to more than 40 and there have been many more added since then. Similarly PhD completions in the UK related to tourism increased more than 8-fold between 1990 and 2002 [Botterill & Gale 2005].

Tourism scholarship is now also replete with organisations and networks to support it. In the UK for example there is an *Association for Tourism in Higher Education*, as well as a *Tourism Society* for professionals in the field. And this names just two. Internationally there are bodies such as *ATLAS*, *The Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA)*, *The International Association for Experts in Scientific Tourism (AIEST),* the *International Academy for the Study of Tourism* (IAST) as well as the *UN World Tourism Organization* with its *Knowledge Network.* And of course along

with these go the various agencies that scrutinise the quality and nature of the education provision. In the UK we have the *Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)* which produced a separate report [Quality Assurance Agency 2001] on the provision for hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism programmes in higher education. The *UNWTO* through its *TEDQUAL* mechanism carries out a similar function internationally.

In brief tourism has become an established part of the academic repertoire.

2. Coming of age

The growth and development has prompted a number of authors [Airey 2008a; Council for National Academic Awards 1993; Jafari 2001] to question whether tourism has now "come of age" or reached "maturity" as a part of higher education. Writing five years ago Airey [2008b] gave a few pointers to maturity but at the same time he illustrated some of the areas where tourism had not yet reached the same level as other social sciences. As far as the curriculum is concerned he suggested that a level of maturity had been reached. After its beginnings with a very narrow vocational focus on business and economic issues, and after a fragmented stage in which there was limited agreement, the tourism community has now reached general agreement about the curriculum to include a broad range of issues prompted by tourism movements. Perhaps more important than this is the extent to which rather than being concerned with justifying or questioning its existence tourism scholars are now engaged in wider debates more akin to the social sciences generally. He includes among these: taking a more self-critical view of its work in research and knowledge creation as evidenced in the work of Tribe [Tribe 2006b, 2005]; as well as its engagement with the so-called "cultural turn" [Ateljevic, Pritchard & Morgan 2007] in which tourism takes both a more cultural and critical view of itself. As Airey [2008b, p. 31]puts it:

> The importance here is that this represents another important step for tourism as a field of study becoming self-critical and alert to broader issues about itself that extend far beyond the basic curriculum debates of the 1990s. Again, it is a pointer to tourism reaching a point of maturity.

Against this, he also points to two areas where tourism can still be considered to be immature. Here he [Airey 2008b, p. 31] suggests that:

> there is as yet no coherent theoretical framework for tourism as a subject of study; rather its boundaries are still defined by tourism as a field of practice. Knowledge about tourism still draws heavily from other disciplines and consequently remains multidisciplinary with examples of interdiscipli-

> nary knowledge creation from within tourism being few and far between [Airey 2002, p. 16].

Further, he compares tourism to the more established disciplines in the physical sciences and engineering and with other social sciences, where, for example, sociologists, psychologists and economists have generally close engagement with their worlds of practice in the exchange of knowledge. Here, echoing the work of Cooper [2006, p. 47] he suggests that tourism has been slow in adopting this so-called "knowledge management," partly because of the gap between researchers and the tourism sector, and also what he calls a "hostile knowledge adoption environment". In other words, while the study of tourism might have established itself within the academic community it is not yet having the kind of influence on the wider world that is seen in other fields of study.

3. The research challenge

As noted earlier the growth of tourism programmes in the academy has been accompanied by the growth of research. The huge increase in research journals devoted to tourism bears ample witness to this. However, in understanding the development of tourism, far more important than the sheer volume of growth is the changing nature of the research, in its scope, its approaches and its methods. Based on the work of Tribe and Airey [2007], apart from research taking place connected with other fields of study, the first tourism research had four characteristics: it drew heavily on what Tribe refers to as *extradisciplinary* knowledge [1997] from industry, government, think tanks etc.; it had a strong orientation toward the needs of business and drew heavily upon economics [Jafari & Aaser 1988]; it primarily took a positivist stance with mainly quantitative methods; and outside the field of business and economics the research was as described by Tribe [1997, pp. 653–654] as "bits of atomized knowledge [emanating] from the disciplines themselves". Since those early days research for tourism has changed almost beyond recognition described in the words of Tribe and Airey [2007, p. 5]:

> "Many of the gaps in knowledge have been completed and the methodological approaches and research techniques have extended".

No longer is tourism research caught solely in the positivist tradition and the hegemony of economics has given way to a much more "eclectic multi-disciplinarity" [Tribe & Airey 2007, p. 6]. As Tribe [2006a, p. 2] has described it:

> "[tourism now] has the characteristics of a fledgling post-modern field of research (…) [with] more reflexivity (…) [and] (…) innovative and radical lines of enquiry".

Tourism research now regularly draws upon a wide range of disciplines, it is as likely to take an interpretivist or critical stance as it is to take a positivist one and qualitative methods are just as likely to be found as quantitative. For example, in their study of UK PhD dissertations Botterill, Gale and Haven [2003, p. 288] report that "quantitative (…) and qualitative (…) methods were reported in roughly equal proportions".

In many ways this is another part of the growing maturity of tourism in the academy in that the range, approaches and scope of research in tourism can stand alongside other social sciences although the question as to the links between this and their wider world still harbours some rooms for doubt.

4. The current crisis

The World Economic Crisis, starting in about 2008 coincided with the 40th anniversary of the real start of the expansion of higher education in general and with the start of the first tourism programmes. Indeed it came just at a point when tourism was beginning to feel itself established in the academy, with some top ranked journals, some well-regarded tourism programmes that were demonstrating innovative curricular developments, popular with students, and with good employment track records.

The effects of the crisis, combined with the previous substantial growth in higher education, have ben explored by Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff and Xiao (forthcoming). They are grouped here under four headings. First, governments around the world, prompted by the massive growth of higher education and by the tightening of public budgets, have sought to reduce the funding for universities from the taxpayer and increasingly have passed the costs on to the students and their parents. In other words students have been increasingly obliged to pay fees for attending higher education. Secondly, the provision offered by universities is increasingly subject to internal and external scrutiny. This has in part been driven by a need to establish whether higher education is providing value and quality for money. Such scrutiny has taken the form of national surveys of student satisfaction, assessments of research quality, as well as the establishment of agencies designed to inspect and sometimes to accredit institutions and programmes. Linked to the outcomes of such scrutiny the third effect has been the creation of league tables of performance for universities, departments and subjects. These operate at both national and in-

ternational levels with institutions fighting to improve their league table positions. This all forms a part of the final change which relates to the growth in competition between universities and between subjects. At a time when students now pay their own fees, and these form the major source of income, all universities and subjects are competing with each other to attract student numbers. In brief, if universities and subjects cannot attract sufficient students they will cease to exist.

These changes have put enormous pressures on institutions and subjects. Ultimately if universities are not offering programmes or areas of scholarship and research that attract money, mainly from students, and that enhance their reputation then the programmes are unlikely to have a long term future. Within this tourism as a relatively new area of study is facing particular challenges and against this background a number of tourism programmes have already been closed.

Taking the two themes of money and reputation, the recent study by Airey et al (forthcoming) reports how all subjects are being judged against a number of measureable criteria. In relation to students, the criteria they identify are numbers of students, their quality and their satisfaction; in relation to research they are the quality of research outputs, notably in top ranked journals and research income; and in relation to impact they include student employment and the broader impact of the work of the university on its world.

On the positive side, Airey et al (forthcoming) show how tourism programmes have generally been successful in attracting students, hence bringing in the money, and the students are generally satisfied with their experiences of tourism programmes. The tourism academy has also achieved success in its research outputs in some top ranked journals, and in terms of impact, employment of students after graduation from tourism programmes have generally been satisfactory. All of these are, in their different ways, measures of success of tourism after 40 years of development.

Airey et al (forthcoming) however, point to some crucial areas of weakness. Notably they identify that the quality of the students on entry to programmes is generally weaker than for most other subjects. Taking the experience of the UK in which grades in pre-university qualifications are awarded points, the average points for undergraduate entry in 2012 for medicine was 516.8. Similar scores for business studies was 312.6. The entry points for tourism was 258.8 [Independent 2012]. For research, the success of tourism in securing significant funding is very limited. Again, using the study by Airey et al (forthcoming), based on the experience of the UK, out of 5,332 awards made by the Research Council [Economic 2012] between 2000 and 2011, only 29 or 0.5% related to tourism. Finally for impact, as noted above, the extent to which tourism scholarship has identifiable impacts on the world of tourism practice is remarkably limited.

In addition to these weaknesses, Airey et al (forthcoming) reveal that tourism in general in the academy has a further problem in that, while there are some excel-

lent centres of scholarship and excellent scholars in the field there is also a long tail of performance that simply does not meet the needs of the twin themes of money and reputation. To take one example of this, the point has already been made that there are now some excellent academic journals in tourism. However, Airey et al (forthcoming) show how out of 24 tourism journals the Association of Business Schools [2010] in the UK ranks only two of these in their top category. But in the same ranking it shows ten tourism journals or 42% falling in the lowest category. This long tail of weaker journals compares with psychology which has only 5% of its journals in the lowest category. This long tail represents a real challenge for the future of tourism in the academy. If the subject is to prosper it cannot afford to have this level of underperformance.

5. Responding to the challenge

The initial question now is how should the tourism academy respond to these challenges? In many ways the answer to this is obvious: it should ensure that it contributes to the finance and reputation of its institutions. Where it can achieve this its future will be secure. But the further question is whether it is able to do this? Here the answer is much less clear. As far as the core (and money earning) activity of teaching is concerned, tourism programmes generally perform well, as measured by student satisfaction (Airey et al. forthcoming). Indeed they point to some of the recent initiatives such as the international Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) [Prebezac 2012] or the work of the BEST Education Network that demonstrate that tourism educators are both inventive and ambitious in their goals for learning and teaching in ways that are well reflected both in the curriculum and in the pedagogy. Ambitious field trips, placements and class exercises regularly form a part of the learning experiences of tourism students in ways that ensure that the tourism programmes compare favourably with other subjects offered by the academy. In a similar way some of the research outputs achieved by tourism scholars reach high levels in terms of adding to an institution's reputation, and the employment track record of tourism students is generally strong.

However, as already noted, these strengths are counter-balanced by some crucial weaknesses in, for example, the quality of student enrolments, in the attraction of research income and in the general influence of the work of the tourism academy on the world of tourism practice. These general weaknesses, coupled with an apparently long list of institutions where the performance of the tourism departments is relatively weak, suggest that the tourism academy is in for some significant changes. These can be characterised as closures and successes. The closures, which have already started, will simply be that institutions will decide that their tourism provi-

sion is not bringing in sufficient income or reputation or both to justify its continuance. The successes will be those tourism departments that manage to build on their excellent teaching, research outputs, student employment and student recruitment and to strengthen their ability to attract research funding and to extend their influence such that in terms of both reputation and influence they secure their position in the academy. These are the stark realities for this next stage in the development of the tourism academy.

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