The theming of tourism education: a three-domain approach

Crispin Dale
Lecturer in Tourism, School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure, University of Wolverhampton, Gorway Road, Walsall, UK
Neil Robinson
Senior Lecturer in Tourism, Bolton Business School, Bolton Institute of Higher Education, Bolton, UK

Abstract
Explores developments in tourism education to date, drawing on wider theoretical perspectives including the "McDonaldization" and the "Disneyization" of society. The article raises critical questions that tourism stakeholders need to acknowledge if tourism, both as an industry and as a field of study, is to sustain itself in the long term. To meet the evolving needs of stakeholders, this article proposes that tourism education should become more specialist in nature. The authors forward a three-domain model of tourism education based on generic, functional, and product/market-based themed degree routes. The article outlines a cost/benefit analysis of theming tourism education for the key stakeholders and puts forward an action plan for its implementation.

Introduction

The recent expansion in tourism-related courses has over recent years mushroomed to such an extent that it has been argued that those graduating in the next decade may have difficulty finding employment within the tourism industry. There has been much discussion over the past decade into the provision and content of tourism education. Some have acknowledged, and raised concern, over the rapid growth in tourism degree courses (Evans, 1993), while others have advocated a core body of knowledge which should form the basis for all tourism degree education (Richards, 1998; Airey and Johnson, 1999). The intention of this article is to explore the wider significance of these debates for tourism stakeholders and offer a vision on the future development of tourism education to meet the industry's evolving needs.

The provision of tourism education

The supply of tourism courses has grown considerably over the past three decades (Table I). Such growth has been fuelled by the rapid expansion of the industry and recognition by governments that tourism contributes significantly to local and national economies. Within the UK, for instance, the value of tourism in 1998 was over £61,000 million and supported approximately 1.7 million jobs (StarUK, 1999). In addition, expenditure on tourism is expected to grow by 44 per cent between 1997 and 2003 (StarUK, 1999).

The supply of tourism courses has been met by an increasing student demand. According to UCAS (2000) there has been a sustained level of applications (in the region of 14,000) to tourism-related courses since 1996 and the level of acceptances has steadily risen over this period to a high of 2,350 in 1998. Nevertheless, this global trend

(Bosselman *et al.*, 1996) will, according to some, inevitably result in an oversupply of graduates entering the industry (Evans, 1993; Busby, 1994). These claims have serious ramifications for tourism stakeholders.

Tourism employers often recruit non-tourism graduates (i.e. business studies students) who are able to demonstrate the generic skills required for a vocation in tourism. Paradoxically, uncertainty among employers unrelated to tourism about the nature and content of tourism degrees, can restrict employment opportunities for tourism graduates. Indeed, tourism degrees come in many different guises and are offered with no uniform title or description as to their nature and content. For instance, the most common degree titles are Tourism Management and Tourism Studies. Others are prefixed with terms such as international, while some amalgamate their titles with leisure and/or hospitality. Thus, a lack of common understanding of what constitutes a tourism degree and how it differs from other related service sector programmes, can be confusing for both employers and students alike attempting to evaluate the differences between degree products (Middleton and Ladkin, 1996).

A fundamental question, therefore, emerges for stakeholders in the tourism industry. Should tourism degrees be developed to enable graduates to be perceived as employable outside of the tourism industry or, alternatively, should tourism courses be producing highly-skilled graduates for specialist positions in the industry, thus enhancing their employment opportunities?

This juxtaposition is further exacerbated by the concern that tourism education has not kept pace with the changing nature and diversity of the industry and as a field of study (Formica, 1996; Amoah and Baum, 1997). Keiser (1998) amplifies these concerns by commenting that "as programmes in the hospitality and tourism industries seek greater legitimacy as a profession, it is necessary that educators be very specific about what they teach and research and to

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which constituents they serve". Furthermore, Cooper and Westlake (1998) recognise that curriculum planning of tourism courses "will involve the need to demonstrate efficiency, flexibility and responsiveness to stakeholders". Thus, in recent years, there has been the drive towards a more coherent approach towards the content of tourism education, on a domestic, European and global scale.

The content of tourism education

Much of the debate surrounding the standardisation of curricula content has been regarded as the influencing forces of "McDonaldization" (Ritzer, 1998) in further and higher education. Parker and Jary (1995) refer to this as the creation of the McUniversity where there is an increasing need for institutions to demonstrate efficiency and predictability. This is evidenced in the identification of transferable skills to ensure that the student is able to demonstrate graduateness on completion of their degree. Within tourism, these skills have been based on the benchmark standards (Unit 25) established by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in collaboration with advisory bodies such as the European Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS) and the National Liaison Group for Higher Education in Tourism (NLG). As well as the identification of skills, there is the concurrent drive towards the need for the student to learn how to learn and be flexible (Christou, 1999).

The process of standardisation is embedded in the desire to define the nature and scope of tourism, with the aim of being able to identify a core body of knowledge. Even though, Jaspers (1987), as far back as the 1980s, argued for the international harmonisation of tourism education, Tribe (1997) contends that tourism cannot be described as a discipline in its own right. This is further complicated by the interchangeable use of the term's tourism, leisure and hospitality to describe industries, academic departments and degree programmes (Keiser, 1998).

The body of knowledge debate has progressed to the stage where a European (Richards 1998) and even global core curriculum (Go, 1998) is being advocated. In their comprehensive study of the content of tourism courses, Airey and Johnson (1999) suggest that a body of knowledge would, for example, facilitate comparability between programmes and allow for effective quality assurance. They also found that the majority of institutions which provide tourism courses, adhere, to some extent, to the core body of knowledge as forwarded by the NLG. However, Airey and Johnson (1999) neglect to recognise that there is an underlying tendency to bound the subject of tourism. Indeed, a core body of knowledge could actually constrain the development of tourism as a subject area (Cooper, 1997) and stifle creativity (Amoah and Baum, 1997). Furthermore, while ATLAS proclaim that it is important for tourism to establish itself as a discrete field of study, Richards (1998) notes that "it is important to build bridges to other disciplines, and not to isolate tourism from developments in other areas".

This raises further issues for tourism stakeholders. For the prospective student, it can be extremely difficult to distinguish between tourism degree alternatives. Thus choices are based on other factors such as institutional location, social and academic facilities and so on. However, because of the financial contributions students are now having to make towards their education, they are viewing themselves as customers (Ritzer, 1998). Increasingly, therefore, the content of the degree and the vocational opportunities it offers will be of an imperative when the students makes their final destination choice. For the practitioner, recruiting graduates who hold similar tourism degrees in title and content can make it difficult for them to shortlist at the selection stage of the recruitment process. Once recruited, it can also mean that the employer has to train the graduate in specialist skills that have not been directly taught on their programme of study. As a consequence of these issues, how should tourism educators develop courses that meet the needs of students and practitioners while concurrently differentiating themselves from other educational providers?

Theming tourism education

Bryman (1999) argues that the forces of "Disneyization" and, in particular theming, are influencing wider society. To illustrate his point, Bryman draws on a number of practical examples from the tourism industry. For instance, he argues that many restaurants such as the Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, Rainforest Cafe, and so on, are based on cultural themes, including music, film and ecology, respectively. He also identifies other aspects of the industry which are also themed, including hotels, cruise ships and even airports. Bryman notes how theming is used as a marketing device to

Table I
Growth in tourism postgraduate and undergraduate degree programmes

Year	Postgraduate	Year	Undergraduate
1972	2	1986	2
1991	10	1991	12
1997	33	1997	66

Source: Airey and Johnson (1999)

differentiate your offerings from those of your competitors.

Theming is also emerging as a force within tourism education. Some institutions already offer themed degree routes which equip the graduate with specialist skills. In a review of institutions offering undergraduate tourism courses using UCAS (1999) data, themed degree routes include rural tourism, tourism and the environment, adventure tourism management, tourist destination management, sports tourism and European tourism. Though institutions offer pathways (major/joint/minor) through the modular scheme which enable students to study tourism with another subject (e.g. tourism with IT, tourism and sport, etc.), these are often taught and studied in isolation and bear no reciprocal relationship to each other. In contrast, the development of tourism postgraduate courses has made major inroads into this apparent shortfall in specialist themed areas of study. For instance, a selection of postgraduate degrees exist in tourism business administration, tourism planning, tourism marketing, sustainable tourism and heritage and cultural tourism.

This trend is also reflected in the plethora of themed texts and journals that are now being published on many of the aforementioned areas. If tourism continues to forge alliances with other academic and vocational areas will such a rich diversity of subject matter be out of the scope of a generic tourism undergraduate programme? Furthermore, as a consequence of this growing diversity, will practitioners, therefore, require graduates who have the specialist knowledge and skills to be able to adapt to the industry's evolving needs?
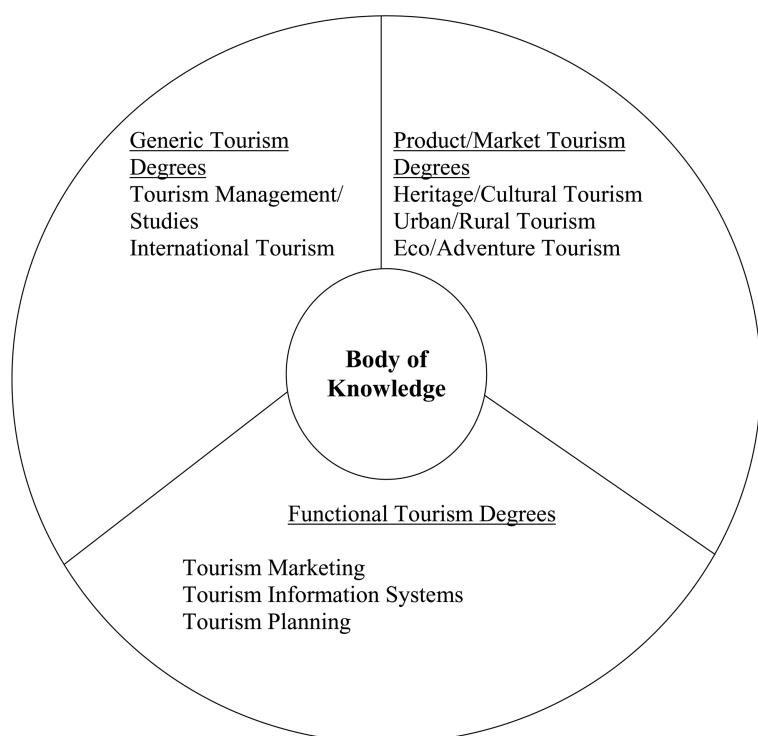
A three-domain approach

If tourism education is to develop and continually meet the needs of an expanding and increasingly differentiated global industry, then programme developers will need to seek out new ways of ensuring that graduates are able to demonstrate a breadth of management skills and have the ability to add value to organisations operating in the tourism environment.

To meet the evolving needs of stakeholders, therefore, it is argued that three domains should emerge within tourism education as follows:
1 *Generic degrees*. These programmes offer the interdisciplinary skills required for a broad understanding of the tourism industry. Specialist options might be studied but there is no particular area which is given specific attention overall.
2 *Functional degrees*. These programmes offer the student the functional expertise in a particular area of tourism. Due to the service-oriented nature of the tourism industry, often specialist skills are required in the areas of IT, marketing, planning and so on.
3 *Market/product-based degrees*. These programmes focus on the nature and development of particular niche products and markets which require specialist knowledge and expertise for their effective delivery.

The three-domains model in Figure 1 incorporates the body of knowledge which is essential if tourism students are to demonstrate the wider knowledge and skills that will enable them to operate effectively in, and understand the nature of, the wider tourism environment.

In the first instance, theming tourism education might appear unusual, but a number of generic degrees in other subject areas have successfully devolved into themed routes. For example, drama has sub-divided into specialist areas such as theatre studies and costume studies, and business studies into functional areas, including marketing, human resource management and e-commerce.

There are a number of benefits for theming tourism education in this way. Fundamentally, it would encourage closer links between a host of stakeholders. This would lead to a greater understanding as to the future development of tourism as an academic and vocational area and continue to build closer relationships between employers and institutions. It would also

Figure 1
The three domains model of tourism education

allow institutions to clearly differentiate their product offerings from those of competitors and give students a better understanding of programme content, the learning outcomes the programme is attempting to achieve, and the vocational opportunities on completion. Employers would gain from being able to recruit graduates who have attained a combination of generic and value-adding specialist skills, thus enhancing the overall tourism experience for consumers.

Theming would facilitate the development of tourism as a field of study. Tourism is often perceived as a subject that lacks academic credibility in comparison with traditional subjects such as the humanities. Tourism's lack of recognition as a discrete subject area within the research assessment exercise is evidence of this. Theming will allow tourism to develop more coherently as an academic field of study and afford learners, academics and practitioners alike, the opportunity to build on existing concepts and expand the boundaries of tourism knowledge in specialist areas.

There are a number of arguments that could be levied against theming tourism education (Table II). It could be argued that it might restrict job opportunities for the

graduate. Employers might perceive the student as being functionally capable in the themed route they have specialised in but unable to perform outside of this role. This is why it is important for the themed routes to embrace the body of knowledge. This will equip the student with the generic skills and enable them to be flexible enough to cope with the changing demands and needs of the industry. Also the development of these themed routes will require specialist areas of expertise and this could create difficulties for institutions that rely on existing staffing resources. However, a number of these costs can be minimised if a number of action points are adhered to.

Conclusion – action points

Some critical issues about the future of tourism education have been raised that need to be addressed by the key stakeholders forthwith if tourism is to sustain itself both as an industry and as a field of study. If concerns about the oversupply of tourism graduates are to be allayed then there needs to be a convergence of initiatives between stakeholders within the industry. Organisations such as the NLG ATLAS, in

Table II
Cost/benefit analysis of theming tourism education for the key stakeholders

Stakeholder	Benefits	Costs
Learner/student/ graduate	Clearly differentiate between degree programmes for ease of choice	Could possibly restrict employment opportunities
	Better understanding of programme content and its learning outcomes	Lack of knowledge about the themed route prior to entry might reduce demand to some degree programmes
	More specific skill development	
	Encourage better career development and future direction	Too many themed alternatives may actually cause confusion for the prospective student
Educator/researcher/ academic	More focused programmes	Require specialist areas of expertise
	Encourage the academic development of tourism as a field of study	Increased numbers of specialist academics may lack wider knowledge of the tourism industry
	Clearer transparency between tourism degree routes and the respective benchmark standards	The need to clearly differentiate from other educational providers offering similar themed programmes
	Develop closer relationships with practitioners	Tourism field may become increasingly insular and specialised, further alienating itself from other subject areas
	New recruitment opportunities for both academics and students alike	
Practitioner/employer	Reduce employer uncertainty concerning the skills and abilities of the graduate	Specialist graduates may have difficulty in understanding the wider tourism environment to the detriment of tourism organisations
	Re-training for a specific function (e.g. IT) or field (e.g. adventure tourism) can be kept to a minimum	
	Themed, and possibly sponsored, degree routes can lead to a constant supply of skilled graduates	Employers might still be unsure of the difference between students coming from various themed degree routes
	Encourage closer relationship with academics	

particular, need to encourage practitioners to participate more widely in consultative meetings on the future development of tourism education. Academic institutions should also invite practitioners to become members of course development committees, thus ensuring advice and guidance on skill shortages and emerging areas within tourism that require expertise. If practitioners are involved in the consultation and validation process during course development, this facilitates more tailored courses that are more appropriate to the needs of both learners and employers.

In terms of course development and structure, tourism educators should consider developing an initial bridging year that equips the learner with a range of generic tourism management skills without restricting them to a specific themed route. Students will then be afforded the time to consider their available themed options and the career that they would most like to pursue on graduation. In this respect, themed tourism degrees would encourage better career development and future direction for the graduate. Students need to be given more realistic and structured employment opportunities that are able to sustain them for a career within the tourism industry. Career paths within tourism are not clearly defined and this can demotivate the individual and discourage them from entering the industry. Clearer career guidance needs to be given before, during and after the completion of the students tourism degree and opportunities for vocational learning need to be fully integrated into the themed routes.

Institutions should also consider developing specialist departments/faculties that concentrate on particular themed tourism areas. This has already occurred within some institutions, the Department of Adventure Tourism at Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies, being an example of this.

This article forms the basis for a wider analysis of stakeholder needs within tourism education. Further research needs to be conducted into the extent to which tourism practitioners require specialist tourism skills and in what areas, the use and availability of resources within education to be able to develop themed tourism degrees and the demand for themed tourism routes among learners.

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