

Whither (wither?) Tourism Education.

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Abstract

After 40 years or so of fairly steady development and growth, tourism's position in the academy is now facing some major challenges. In part these stem from the change in funding levels and mechanisms, especially the shift from payment by the taxpayer to payment by the client (the student and their parents), opening up a competitive market place for higher education. And in part they come from the increased scrutiny of the academy and the associated growth of metrics and league tables that document university rankings. It is in this setting, that heads of universities are taking decisions to ensure that their institution remains competitive. For the most part this means that they need to ensure that the services that they offer, in terms of research and teaching, contribute to the finances and to the reputation of the institution. For this there are a number of published metrics that they can use. The managerial gaze of the senior management hence becomes focused on some fairly narrow metrics.

This paper seeks to explore this managerial gaze and the metrics that are the main points of focus, to form a view about how tourism fares against other areas of study. The work draws upon the experience of three separate jurisdictions, Australia, China and the United Kingdom, it confines itself to published data (easily available to university managers) and it puts tourism against five other areas of study: Business Studies, Economics, Mathematics, Medicine, Sociology. For each it explores the performance of tourism in relation to learning and teaching, research and its wider impact.

In terms of teaching, tourism performs reasonably well in attracting students. In other words in financial terms, the managerial gaze is likely to be favourable. Students also seem to be fairly satisfied with their experience. The big weakness is the in overall quality of the students which is poor when set against the comparator subjects. For research, while there is now a large research output, published in a 100 or so dedicated journals, many of the journals have a low ranking and even the top ranked ones do not compare with those of other subjects. At the same time research funding for tourism from the leading funding bodies is weak. The impact of the work of the academy in tourism on its wider community is also generally weak. For while progression to employment by tourism graduates is respectable, the engagement of the tourism industry and society with the academy in relation to tourism is poorly developed.

In summary therefore, notwithstanding some positive results and some strong centres, the managerial gaze on tourism is likely to produce critical results. The closure of tourism at some universities may be a reflection of this. The challenge now for those involved in tourism within the academy is twofold. It is to ensure that they focus on the quality of their outputs and it is to try to make the case for tourism within the academy. As a part of this, there is a need to broaden the managerial gaze beyond the narrow focus on published metrics.