
Challenges and constraints of hospitality and tourism education in China

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Abstract

Tourism education in China plays an important role of supporting tourism development and ensuring the continuous supply of quality human resources to meet the overwhelming industry requirements. This paper presents a comprehensive review of current tourism education in China in terms of the various educational programs. The attitude of tourism employers towards human resource development was also assessed. The results indicate that a big gap exists between supply and demand for quality personnel, as the tourism industry is growing rapidly in China. A key dilemma of tourism education in China is poor curriculum design. Graduates from tourism education institutes and vocational training schools cannot fulfill industry needs and demands in terms of quality and quantity. A number of education reforms are discussed regarding curricula design, scholars' and educators' qualifications and knowledge, and standardisation of tourism education practices in China.

Introduction

With the rapid economic development in China since the introduction of the economic reform policy by Deng Xiao-ping in 1978, the influx of international tourists and businessmen into this untapped market has increased significantly in the last 20 years. It is anticipated that the growth will continue, in particular, when China is expected to join the World Trade Organisation in 2000. Tourism will become a dominant tertiary industry in China that has been guaranteed in the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economy, Social Development and Prospective and that target for 2010 was passed at the 14th Communist Party of China National Committee.

Given the rise of tourism ventures, tourism education in China has been developed rapidly. It began in 1978 when Nanjing Tourism School was first established and Shanghai Tourism College the year after (Tao, 1997). According to Chinese government statistics, there were only 27 universities and colleges offering hospitality and tourism programs with 4,800 students in 1986, and the number has increased to 69 with 8,551 students in 1989. The number continues to grow. In 1998, 936 tourism schools and colleges existed, of which 192 were higher educational institutes of tourism with 29,566 students. Among the higher educational institutes of tourism, 81 offer degree programs, representing 42.2 per cent. It was estimated that 45.5 per cent of the students study for bachelor's or Master's degrees in tourism and 54.5 per cent for the two- or three-year diploma or certificate. On the other hand, vocational training schools at secondary school level have increased in numbers and become popular after a resolution on Institutional Reform of

Education made by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on 27 May 1985, which spells out the importance of preparing professionals or experts by the tens of millions (Yuan Qi, 1988). Tables I and II show the number and distribution of tourism schools and colleges. It is found that the development of tourism education in China is consistent with the industry growth and the labour demand of the region.

Attitude of tourism employers towards human resources development

Although the industry people consider that the hardware contexts of hotels, restaurants, airports and transportation facilities have generally attained international standards, the software contexts in terms of employees' service attitude, skill levels, and language ability still fall short of those expected by international travellers. The employers feel that the poor quality of service providers in China is due to lack of visionary education and training plans provided by the government. The supply of labour force from existing tourism institutions and vocational training schools cannot fulfill the expanding needs for high quality service providers. By and large, tourism employers consider that human resource problems are crucial, and that they are not healthy for tourism development in China. The problems can be summarised as follows:

- 1 The general international service ethic as expected by foreign operators, and comprehended by international visitors, rarely exists among Chinese employees in the tourism industry. The legacy of the Cultural Revolution has created an environment where the concept of "service" was foreign to most employees, regardless of their status or level of employment (Huyton and Sutton, 1996). Conceptually, the employees can only subjectively see the importance of



tangible products provided for their customers, but not the intangible added-value service delivered during each interaction between customers/guests and employees.

2 The higher education institutions and vocational training schools of tourism continuously develop pools of tourism graduates every year to meet the overwhelming demand by the expanding industry. Unfortunately, few graduates are dedicated to the industry and committed to their jobs. Industry managers comment that young tourism graduates seem to have unrealistic career expectations. For example, they expect to get promotion from operative to managerial levels within two to three years in the hotel industry.

3 New recruits have high intentions to quit the job or leave the tourism industry when they find that the salary package of the industry is not as competitive as others, and the pressure or the stress at work is unexpectedly high. It appears that hotel schools cannot provide realistic information for students so that, when the graduates join the industry, they are likely to encounter reality shock about the nature of the job, work conditions, and human relations.

4 Education institutes and vocational training schools of tourism nurture graduates with operational concepts and knowledge without paying much attention to skill development. Practical training is not sufficiently provided for students during their study. Zhou (1991) states that because of the limited experience of most of the faculty and limited lab facilities, the curriculum in institutes of higher learning generally places more emphasis on classroom instruction and de-emphasises skill development. Thus students have virtually no laboratory experience prior to entering the industry as an intern. Fresh graduates have to learn the skills from scratch and are unproductive during their early stage of employment. The learning time can be shortened if students are provided with intensive internship programs in the industry to gain hands-on practical experience.

5 The teaching materials are outdated. Textbooks are usually written and

Table I

Number of tourism schools and colleges in China (1993-1998)

Year	Total	Number of institutes of higher education	Number of secondary profession/vocational schools
1993	354	102	252
1994	399	109	290
1995	622	138	484
1996	845	166	679
1997	936	192	744
1998	909	187	722

Source: CNTA, *Yearbooks of China Tourism Statistics*, 1994-1999

Table II

Major statistics of tourism schools and colleges 1998

Locality	Total	Number of tourism schools and colleges			Number of students at tourism schools and colleges			
		Institutes of higher education	Secondary professional schools	Vocational schools	Total	Institutes of higher education	Secondary professional schools	Vocational schools
Total	936	192	87	657	221,504	28,566	26,912	166,026
North China	96	20	5	71	39,080	4,013	2,264	32,803
Northeast China	63	21	4	38	22,235	2,704	669	18,832
East China	381	50	30	301	85,464	8,415	7,901	69,688
Central China	116	32	20	64	21,866	3,968	6,218	11,680
South China	149	22	4	123	27,132	3,340	3,626	20,166
Southwest China	87	31	14	42	15,957	4,066	3,653	8,238
Northwest China	44	16	10	18	9,770	2,060	2,551	5,159

Notes: Tourism institutes include tourism colleges and ordinary institutes of higher education with tourism departments.

Vocational schools include vocational high schools and tourism classes at ordinary vocational high schools and technical schools.

Statistics in this Table are presented on the basis of China's administrative and economic regionalisation. North China includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanxi and Inner Mongolia; Northeast China consists of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang; East China covers Shanghai, Jiangsu, Anhui and Shandong; Central China is composed of Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan; South China includes Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan; Southwest China covers Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan and Tibet; and Northwest China includes Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xingjiang

Source: CNTA, 1998

published by faculty members. Unfortunately, most textbooks are simply translated from foreign texts without taking Chinese cultures, values and contemporary issues into consideration. Knowledge gained by students may not be applicable to China's situation.

Tourism programs

The first hospitality educational institution of its kind was the Jiangsu Provincial Tourism School, which was set up in Yixing in 1978. The first institution of higher education in tourism and hospitality was established in Shanghai in 1979 and is known as The Shanghai Institute of Tourism. The rapid tourism development in China since the 1980s has forced the Chinese government to redefine its tourism education policy at both higher education institutes and vocational and technical training schools.

Among the 192 higher educational institutes in tourism, 19 offer a Master's degree in tourism/hospitality management. So far, no universities offer doctoral degree programs in tourism management in China. Doctoral degrees in tourism have to be studied with overseas hotel schools.

For the Bachelor Degree, Diploma or other certificate education programs in tourism, there are various programs provided that primarily cover four areas: first, language programs with a strong service orientation; second, economics and management programs such as tourism management, hotel management, tourism economics, and tourism finance; third, educators' training programs which aim at developing quality tourism teachers for vocational and technical schools of tourism; and fourth, skill-oriented programs which have become part of the national plan for higher occupational education. This national plan started in September 1999. The course programs include various areas of study such as hotel service and operations, tour service and operations, food preparation and cuisine, tourism sales and promotion, and food and beverage service and operations.

Vocational and technical training in tourism takes various forms in China, including high vocational school, tourism skill training school and tourism vocational technical school. The National Education Ministry is responsible for the development and management of national vocational education in tourism. The Ministry of Labour and some bureaux such as China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) are also involved in running some of the

programs. Run jointly with tourism and hospitality enterprises, the programs are usually shorter in duration and more flexible to cater for the needs of the industry. Vocational and technical schools serve the purposes of pre-employment training and help develop skilled or semi-skilled front line workers for their co-operative enterprises. The functions of these vocational schools are similar to those in Hong Kong. The students receive three- to 12-month off-the-job training in the classroom as well as on-the-job internship at enterprises in the related industry. These students are usually competent and skilful in operations when they graduate.

Development constraints of tourism education

Although China's tourism education has been developed for 20 years, there exists a big gap between supply and demand for quality managers, supervisors and operative staff as a result of the rapid growth of the tourism industry. It appears that the current tourism education system emphasises the supply of a labour force to meet the industry's needs, but less attention is given to the development of quality human resources for this service industry. It is considered that quality employees can help organizations to meet their customers' expectations and their satisfaction (Evans and Lindsay, 1999; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). The development constraints of tourism education in China can be summarised as follows:

- 1 The hierarchy of tourism education and training does not correspond to the tourism career path which is specified by individual needs of tourism students or trainees and the general demand of the industry (Jiang, 1998).
- 2 Most degree programs of tourism education are dominated by non-tourism-related disciplines, such as geography, business administration, social sciences, foreign languages and other humanities disciplines. It may indicate that the scope of tourism education programs is limited and that they cannot meet the sophisticated and specific requirements of the industry.
- 3 The curricula in tourism education are not developed effectively. Curriculum design is constrained by the education laws. Most of the current tourism programs are out-of-date and are not able to develop competent and knowledgeable personnel to meet the industry needs. Some tourism-related subjects such as

management of tourist attractions, hotel facility planning, strategic human resource management, employee relations and service management are not found in the programs.

- 4 The curricula of tourism education do not emphasise internship, which is considered important by foreign tourism educators. In Hong Kong, hotel and tourism students are compulsorily required to undergo a certain period of practical training in at least one area such as hotels, travel agencies, fast food and catering organizations, private clubs and airlines during their three-year study. At present, tourism students in China do not have much hands-on experience and realistic evaluation of actual working experience. As a result, tourism graduates are handicapped by a lack of technical skills and workplace experience. They are likely to encounter reality shock when they join the industry after graduation.
- 5 China's tourism education has a strong emphasis upon international tourism and service, while domestic tourism, leisure, and leisure-related studies are rarely included in the scope of tourism education programs.
- 6 Though the development of higher education in tourism is rapid, professional and vocational schools still play a dominant role, accounting for 80 per cent of tourism education in China. Moreover, the hierarchical link between tourism education and training has not been established in accordance with the individual needs and industry demand.
- 7 Many authorities are found to be involved in the development of tourism education programs. For example, CNTA plays a more dominant role in fostering the tourism education development than the China National Education Ministry. As a result, these central authorities may confuse the genuine tourism educators in executing the policies.
- 8 The Chinese government does not provide much support to tourism institutions in terms of granting funds for research, setting-up training facilities and equipment, strategic plans for developing quality local teachers or for inviting renowned educators and professors from Hong Kong or abroad to share their expertise. In addition, the status of tourism educators is low in China; hence tourism teachers are poorly paid. It is difficult to attract good quality educators to join the education field.

Education reform and future development

It is crucial for the Chinese government to focus efforts and investment on the improvement of the existing education institutions of tourism. Education reforms are necessary and demand-oriented. They should focus primarily on tourism education and training needs in parallel with the rapid development of the industry and help develop and improve the quality human resources for the industry and have a long-term implication for the tourism education development in China.

China had a series of reforms implemented in 1999. For example, The National Education Ministry simplified the structural contexts by reducing the original catalogue of 543 secondary disciplines to 249. In addition, the higher occupational education program in tourism was implemented in September 1999. The reforms of tourism education cover the following areas:

- 1 National education policies and standard guidelines are set to unify tourism education practices across the country. The new policies and guidelines require tourism education institutes and vocational training schools to review their existing education programs so that the latter should be commensurate with the standardised requirements. All program structures, contexts and contents, teaching equipment and facilities, educators' background, textbooks and student learning assessment have been defined for the design of curricula. The prescription of core fundamental courses aims not only at developing students in a broader disciplinary context which is the general direction of China's educational reform, but also, and more practically or operationally, at guiding the actual curricula design of tourism management as a secondary discipline.
- 2 A new education model has been set that aims to establish a linkage between education and training path and career path. By building a hierarchical career path into the curricula of tourism education and training, the relationships, functions and objectives at different levels of the course programs can be further distinguished. In addition, functional distinctions and hierarchical links are also established between tourism education and tourism training. Distinctions are set in curricula design regarding qualifications of educators and teachers, facilities and equipment,

experimental foundations needed for the course programs, and the knowledge and skill constructs of students and trainees.

3 In terms of tourism research, the methodologies adopted by Chinese scholars and educators are less sophisticated as compared to international researchers. Publications of research papers from Chinese scholars are mainly confined to local journals and newspapers such as China Tourism Publishing House (Beijing), Tourism Education Press (Beijing), and Guangdong Tourism Publishing House (Guangzhou). Having said that, the importance of tourism research has been emphasised by the State Education Commission. Although there are no official records documented, it is estimated that there are 13 tourism textbook series consisting of 109 tourism books in China and 155 articles regarding design and tourism teaching and research methodologies in various publications. Research efforts cannot be undermined in China and as such will accelerate the maturity of tourism as a discipline.

Conclusions

The rapid development of tourism in China has urged reforms of tourism education. China's tourism education into the twenty-first century will develop graduates with a broader disciplinary base, a hierarchically balanced knowledge and skill construct, and a greater innovative ability in China's international as well as domestic tourism labour market. If the reforms can be successfully implemented, they will benefit both the students and the tourism industry. On the one hand, the graduates, once they have left school, are able to meet the industry demand and provide quality service for

customers, and will become more committed to their employers when they find their knowledge and skills provided at school can be applied immediately at work. On the other hand, the employers in the industry will be more willing to accept the graduates and put in more effort to develop them if the latter can help contribute to the success of the organisations.

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