

Case study

The value of tourism degrees: a Luton-based case study

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Abstract

Travel and tourism graduates are facing challenges in securing jobs within the travel and tourism industry, as their degrees have low recognition among travel and tourism employers. Yet there are growing numbers of tourism courses provided by universities, and these are increasingly popular among students. This paper attempts an informed discussion of the relevance of travel and tourism degrees, comparing students' career expectations and aspirations with industry needs and perceptions of travel and tourism degrees and graduates. Students' perceptions were investigated, using a questionnaire survey, while the employers' perceptions and needs were explored through semi-structured interviews. The results indicate a desire and optimism amongst current travel and tourism undergraduate students towards securing a job in the tourism industry, while the industry is not convinced, or at best unaware, of the benefits of tourism degrees and employing tourism graduates.

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Introduction

Traditionally, being a graduate meant a secure future as a manager and a guaranteed good salary (Jameson and Holden, 2000). Unfortunately, for the majority of students today, this is a thing of the past. Today fewer graduates are able to secure traditional graduate jobs (LaValle *et al.*, 1996). The graduate labour market is less predictable, changing more rapidly and becoming more competitive (Connor and Pollard, 1996).

These trends are believed to be the result of two factors: an uncertain economic environment and an increase in graduate numbers (Jameson and Holden, 2000). The twofold increase between 1979 and 1996 of the number graduate entrants to the labour market outstrips the numbers of traditional graduate job openings, according to the Department for Education and Employment (1998, as cited in Lee-Ross, 1999). If graduates can not secure a traditional graduate job they are forced to accept jobs that do not offer the fast-track opportunities of a management-training scheme, leading to the "graduatisation" of many jobs previously filled by non-graduates (Lee-Ross, 1999; Jameson and Holden, 2000).

The consequences of employing graduates in positions previously filled by non-graduates are twofold (Mason, 1995; Jameson and Holden, 2000). On the one hand, employers complain of the lack of transferable skills offered by the graduates. On the other hand, employers do not modify these positions in sufficient way to take advantage of the graduates' skills and knowledge, and do not offer a salary premium on the basis of a degree. This has led to the under-utilisation and low morale of graduate employees.

Graduate follow-up studies have revealed a substantial proportion of the [highly qualified students leaving colleges and universities] new entrants to the labour market feel over qualified and under-rewarded for the jobs they have taken (Purcell and Quinn, 1996, p. 62).

The negative impacts of "graduatisation" of jobs extend further in the financial services and, by implication, to the service industries in general (Ryan, 1995).

Within tourism the number of undergraduate courses has grown from two in 1972 to 77 in 1997, well beyond the rate of growth in the industry in general and its needs (Ryan, 1995; Airey and Johnson, 1999; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). Three decades of rapid expansion of tourism courses has resulted in a lack of uniformity and standardisation of those courses (Airey and Johnson, 1999), which has contributed to confusion among employers about what is on offer (Evans, 1993), and increased the obstacles facing



tourism graduates in the labour market (Airey and Johnson, 1999):

There appears to be a considerable gap between what providers offer as management level tourism education and the needs as expressed by the industry (Amoha and Baum, 1997, p. 3).

Tourism employers are not convinced tourism graduates can meet their requirements, therefore limiting the future career prospects of tourism graduates (Baum, 1995; Amoha and Baum, 1997; Thomas and Long, 2001). Nevertheless, UK universities are overwhelmingly promoting their courses as vocational and leading to employment (Airey and Johnson, 1999). This way of promotion is proving successful – tourism courses are increasingly popular among students (Airey and Johnson, 1999; Leslie and Richardson, 2000).

Despite the above trends little has been done to explore the differences and similarities in perceptions and expectation of travel and tourism students and employers. Research aimed at establishing the perceived value of travel and tourism degrees amongst tourism undergraduate students, or to examine their attitudes, plans and expectations for their future careers is limited (Airey and Frontistis, 1997; Ross, 1997). Determining the tourism industry's needs in terms of staff characteristics (skills, education, etc.) is deemed important by both tourism industry and academia (Churchward and Riley, 2002). It is believed that such knowledge may influence vocational education in tourism, and possibly improve the career prospects of tourism graduates. Studies looking at travel and tourism employers' requirements and perceptions of travel and tourism degrees and graduates include Busby *et al.*'s (1997) investigation of the key skills required in tourism sandwich placements and Kelly's (1998) study of the education and training requirements for regional tourism operators in Australia. However, there seems to be almost no research into what tourism managers, in particular, consider the most important skills and personality characteristics of a prospective employee or a tourism graduate, while the requirements of hospitality employers, and their perceptions of hospitality degrees is well covered in the literature (Baum, 1995; Ineson and Kempa, 1996; Mayo, 1997; Ross, 1997; Li and Kivela, 1998). Therefore within this paper, when discussing tourism employment in this article the term is to include travel and tourism, excluding hospitality.

This paper discusses the relevance of travel and tourism degrees, comparing students' career expectations and aspirations with the travel and tourism industry needs and perceptions of travel and tourism degrees and graduates. It examines

specifically the case of charter airline A, one of the biggest charter airlines in the UK and the University of Luton.

The research questions are as follows:

- What are the characteristics of working in the travel and tourism industry and are students aware of them?
- What are the human resource needs of the employers and the requirements they pose to potential employees? Are students aware of them and can they meet these requirements?
- Where do employers see the point of entry of travel and tourism graduates in the industry? Where do students see their career take off?
- What is the value of travel and tourism degrees to employers, and to students?

Methodology

Most techniques for measuring attitudes rely heavily on verbal material in the form of interviews and questionnaires (Eiser and Pligt, 1988, p. 3).

Airey and Frontistis (1997) researched the attitudes to careers in tourism of English and Greek secondary school pupils. They used interviews with leading employers, followed by focus groups with pupils, parents and teachers, resulting in a subsequent questionnaire. Purcell and Quinn (1996) used a self-completion questionnaire to explore alumni's experiences and perceptions and to determine "how well they appear to be equipped to meet the needs of the hospitality industry" (Purcell and Quinn, 1996, p. 51). Two particularly important studies that researched the attitudes of undergraduate students were influential in this investigation. Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) researched the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate tourism students towards working in the tourism industry. They developed a multi-dimensional and multi-item attitude scale. Pitcher and Purcell (1998) examined the diversity of expectations and access to opportunities in the graduate labour market, using a survey and focus group follow-up sessions of UK final year undergraduate students, from a range of academic disciplines.

For the primary research discussed here, the perceptions and attitudes of undergraduate tourism students at the University of Luton were investigated, using a questionnaire (Petrova, 2001). This presented the opportunity to "generalise from a sample to a population, so that inferences can be made about some characteristics, attitudes or behaviour of this population" (Creswell, 1994, p. 118). The tourism degree courses in the UK pursue very similar aims and objectives (Airey and Johnson, 1999). Thus it can

be assumed that tourism students at the University of Luton would have understanding and knowledge of the tourism industry, similar to tourism students at other UK universities. It was therefore hoped that some generalisations of the results could be made, not only to the population of this research – students enrolled on travel and tourism, and international tourism management undergraduate courses at the University of Luton, but also to tourism students at other universities in the UK. Therefore the sampling was purposive, made on a convenience basis, minimising cost and maximising rates of return.

However, the questionnaire presents some limitations, in particular if largely closed-ended questions are used, there is a danger of “reducing something that is rich and complex to a single index that assumes an importance out of all proportion to its meaning” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 3). This constraint was addressed by introducing a number of open-ended questions, enabling respondents to present their answers in their own words. The results from the open-ended and closed-ended responses were compared, as a means of triangulation within the same research instrument (Mason, 1996).

The population for this study included all students enrolled in 2001 on undergraduate tourism related courses at the University of Luton. The size of the population was as follows:

- 75 level 1 students;
- 62 level 2 students; and
- 50 level 3 students.

The questionnaire was administered to students at the beginning of their induction session for the first semester, academic year 2001-2002. Any possible bias from lecturers influencing the expectations and perceptions of first year students was minimised by conducting the questionnaire before the induction session had begun. Although the survey captured students’ attitudes at a particular time, it is cross-sectional, looking at levels 1, 2 and 3. It can be argued that it gives indications of the development of students’ attitudes before and after being exposed to university education. For this purpose, the answers of level 2 and level 3 were compared against the answers of level 1 students. The respondents were distributed as follows:

- level 1 – 50; and
- level 2/3 – 40.

Tourism employers’ experiences and perceptions of tourism higher education, students and careers are likely to inform and influence their requirements and attitudes to employing tourism graduates. “Attitudes are important in explaining and predicting behaviour” (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000, p. 253), therefore finding

employers’ attitudes could indicate whether they are likely to employ tourism graduates, and finding the attitudes of students could indicate whether they will pursue a career in tourism upon graduation. In the case of employers, it was considered important to look not only at their attitudes, but also at the factors that may have affected them. In this case, questionnaire studies “leave out the dynamics of meaning-making, both sense-making and sense-giving in a local context” (Bartunek and Myeong-Gu, 2002, p. 239), while qualitative research can be a source of ideas, insights and new perspectives upon a problem (Ryan, 1995). Therefore, interviews presented the opportunity to have an in-depth and focused discussion into persons’ past, educational background and values, and experiences in their career.

At the time of the study, six semi-structured interviews had been conducted with representatives of a particular sector of the industry – former and current employees of charter airline A, using a snowball technique (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) (Table I).

All of the six interviewees gave unique perspectives; however, the views of Ann, Betty and Catherine were quite similar, despite the difference in their careers and time of their employment within charter airline A. Evelyn had worked for two years in charter airline A, but the perspective and examples she gave were largely from her current employer tour operator A (charter airline A and tour operator A are part of the same travel group). Her contribution was included, as it provides an insight to the characteristics of employment in a charter airline as compared to a tour operator. Frank and George represented the views of senior management within the business, and therefore considered if and how tourism degrees may contribute to their business.

Results and discussion

In relation to the question why study tourism, more than one third of the students chose to do a

Table I Key informants

Pseudonym	Position	Status
Ann	Training and development manager	Left 2002
Betty	Head of cabin services	Left 1985
Catherine	Customer service officer	Left 2002
Evelyn	Manager customer relations (currently change and control manager at tour operator A)	Left 1998
Frank	Deputy managing director	Currently employed
George	HR director	Currently employed

bachelor of arts' (BA) degree in tourism, because they have enjoyed previously working in the industry. Of those who worked in charter airline A, and were interviewed, Ann, Betty, Catherine and Evelyn referred to enjoying ones' work, e.g.: "I enjoyed the work, I enjoyed the cabin crew" (Ann). Other motivational factors for choosing a career in tourism was "I just needed something different from a nine-five job". This Betty recognised as one of the reasons why people in general choose to work in tourism:

They want something different, they find that they want something that they think is going to be exciting, adventurous and, whilst it was not always exciting and adventurous, it is good fun.

Within the top four reasons why students chose to do a BA in tourism were "there is variety of tasks"; "there is opportunity to travel"; "I like working with people". These reasons are linked to the students' future career plans and expectations. Careers were an important factor in choosing to study tourism. As many as 71 per cent chose to study tourism, as they thought it would lead to a good job in the tourism industry, and 40 per cent would like to work in the industry, as they think there are good career prospects.

The interviews with charter airline A employees indicated that there are good career prospects within the organisation. Promotion is a natural way of career progression, as few people are employed externally. Phrases like "I was promoted", "my manager asked me whether I would be interested" were often used in describing career progression. "Working your way up" is another concept that came through during the interviews – all of the interviewed (other than the HR director, whose background was not in travel) have built their career within charter airline A.

This way of career progression may explain the lack of degree level qualifications in charter airline A. Out of the six people interviewed two were current employees, three recent and one left charter airline A years ago. They were from a variety of levels from customer service officer up to deputy managing director, all but one (the customer service officer) had management roles. Their educational background was as follows – two were educated to degree level (the HR director – George, and Evelyn, currently employed at tour operator A), two had alternative post A level education, and two had O levels. According to Kusluvan and Kusluvan (2000) the proportion of managers with university level education in tourism and hospitality is low, compared to other industries. This was largely confirmed by the interviewees to be the case in charter airline A. When asked whether managers in charter

airline A had degrees, most of the responses were similar to Ann's:

No they did not have. In the main most cabin crew became managers. No one was ever recruited externally to come and be a manager of cabin crew they were all people who would had cabin crew experience. The majority would have limited academic [background]. It would be GCE, GCSE, O level, that sort of standard. Very few were there who had already been to university, there were some.

This is similar to Betty's response while referring to her experience of ten years ago:

None of us had degrees . . . nobody in the management team had a degree.

However, Catherine, who left the company a month before the interview, pointed out that recently some employees at charter airline A do have degrees. As she said:

Yes we have people now who have gone on and have degrees.

Evelyn, when referring to the educational levels of managers at tour operator A, said that "it is very varied", whereas she herself has a degree. This indicates that there may be differences in the educational levels of employees within a charter airline and a tour operator.

Students were generally unaware of this trend – only 12 per cent were aware that "the majority of tourism managers do not hold university degree", while 64 per cent were undecided and 24 per cent disagreed with the statement. Students were also unaware of the low pay associated with the tourism industry. When faced with the statement: "jobs in tourism are poorly paid" 43 per cent ticked "undecided", 24 per cent "disagreed" and only 33 per cent of the students "agreed" with this statement. Describing the culture of low pay within tourism, Evelyn said:

Most people realise with tourism – from different careers that it is not going to be the one that brings the highest rewards.

In addition, one in three students were also not aware that "jobs in tourism involve working unsociable hours" where 62 per cent agreed, 25 per cent were uncertain and 13 per cent disagreed!

The lack of awareness among students of some of the main characteristics of working in the tourism industry – low pay and working unsociable hours – can have a negative impact on their job satisfaction and motivation, and may force them to leave the industry (Parsons and Care, 1991, p. 205).

Issues relating to securing the first job in the industry were also discussed with the students and the interviewees. Students were asked which of their skills, knowledge, experience and personality characteristics they think would be beneficial in

securing employment. The skill awareness varied – customer service skills and communication skills were referred to by 23 per cent of the students and IT skills were referred to by 19 per cent of the respondents. Interpersonal, communication, problem solving and leadership skills generated a minimum response of 3 per cent.

Although only 3 per cent of students considered interpersonal skills important, students were convinced that their personality characteristics would benefit them in securing a job. Being “friendly and outgoing” registered the highest number of references of personality characteristics that they thought would help them in securing a job in the industry – 79. This outweighed the total number of transferable skills mentioned by the students.

When asked what they consider important in new employees, the interviewees often referred to personality. Frank, Catherine, Betty, and Ann also referred to “people skills”. Another requirement linked to personality was having “a package, because it is not any one thing” (Betty), and similarly Ann referred to being an “all rounder”. Ann and Betty, when referring to employing cabin crew, had quite similar answers, although Betty had left the industry more than ten years ago. They both talked about being “presentable”, the “ability to talk to people”, to be “quick on their feet”, “adaptable”, and “resourceful”. Evelyn’s requirements posed to potential employees in her department at tour operator A were more specific:

- commercial awareness;
- numerical;
- analytical and negotiation skills;
- to be system literate; and
- also good communicators.

Transferable skills play an important role in the potential employability of graduates (Stewart and Knowles, 2000). However, in this case there appears to be limited influence from university education on acquiring, or raising, awareness and self-awareness of transferable skills.

What the majority of students perceived as very important in securing a job was “knowledge”. As many as 68 per cent of the students consider that their knowledge will give them an advantage in securing a job. Yet in comparison to specific skills, knowledge was regarded as of little importance amongst the interviewees at charter airline A. This is in line with Baum’s (1995) and Li and Kivela’s (1998) observation of tourism and hospitality employers. Further to this, holding a degree was not considered important at charter airline A. This confirms Evans’ (1993, p. 243) claim that employers are “all supportive of ‘general intellect, calibre, personality and fit’ being the key criteria for graduate selection and not the degree subject

itself”. Of all interviewees, holding a degree was only clearly stated as an advantage by Evelyn, referring to her current position at tour operator A:

I think that if anybody studied an amount of time in that subject and they still want a job in that environment or industry, [that] demonstrates you have got a passion for it, a commitment to it . . . So that demonstrates they have and interest in that area and also they have knowledge of it, and that is very useful, people come in and know what to expect.

Enthusiasm, dedication and commitment were stated as very important characteristics of prospective employees by all the interviewees. Enthusiasm was important to Frank and George, and “striving to improve” was important to Ann. Students also referred to being “enthusiastic”, “willing to learn”, “hardworking”, “dedicated” and “determined”. These responses were grouped as “determination”, with 24 per cent of the students referring to their “determination”.

Students’ dedication and commitment to the industry may prove advantageous in securing a job. The desire of tourism students at the University of Luton to work within tourism was shown clearly. Students were asked to complete the sentence: “after I graduated from the university I would like to”, by choosing one statement from a list of eight. Responses related to the tourism industry were as high as 92 per cent, within this 24 per cent would like to work in an airline, some referring specifically to jobs in charter airlines, such as check-in and cabin crew. Nine out of ten of tourism students at the University of Luton would like a career in their related industry. This is a considerably higher proportion than five out of ten hospitality students in Purcell and Quinn’s (1996) study.

According to the interviewees, the point of entry for a tourism graduate would be quite clearly an entry-level position. The interviewees suggest that students should expect to start their career at the bottom of the career ladder. Betty, when asked what advice would she give tourism graduates if they want to find work in charter airline A, said:

They could not really go far wrong by trying to get in and trying to just do anything . . . Well they can try and become a stewardess, they could try and work on the ground as a check-in at an airline or for a handling agent, they could go and work in a marketing department, customer relations department.

Talking about her experience and employment within a charter airline, Catherine suggested gaining experience at a check-in desk because:

That is where you are going to get really good customer service skills. In that terminal, dealing with people, seeing all the problems.

Ann, talking about where she has seen graduates enter charter airline A noted:

They were coming at quite a low level because presumably that is to get to know the business. They would have their generic knowledge and they would presumably slot in and be recruited at quite a low level I would think.

This appears to be the way the interviewees themselves have started their career – at the bottom of the career ladder. Such positions in general do not require degree level education. There is clearly no graduate training at charter airline A:

There is not a graduate training programme . . . there is not a graduate career structure (George).

This confirms that traditional graduate jobs in the tourism industry are almost non-existent, with the exception of larger tourism organisations, such as national and multinational hotel chains (McKercher *et al.*, 1995).

The employers from charter airline A expect students to start with an entry-level position and work their way up.

You come in and do a job and if you do well there might be the opportunity to do other things (George).

The problem is that whilst this may give them the opportunity to “get to know the business” as Ann suggested, such positions may not fully utilise the skills taught during students’ education (Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000). These positions are also characterised by poor employment conditions, absence of motivating factors and low pay, factors that could lead to low job satisfaction, and tourism graduates may choose to leave the industry (Ross, 1997; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Lam *et al.*, 2001).

But how easy would it be for the students to secure this entry-level job and how likely are the interviewees to employ tourism graduates? Students chose to study tourism as they see their careers in the industry, and believe that their degrees will ensure that. They are clearly career minded and dedicated to the industry. Students are confident their degree will enable them to secure a job upon graduation. As many as 74 per cent thought they would be able to secure their ideal job after graduation. The statement: “I expect it will be easy to secure a job after graduation”, generated positive responses from 45 per cent of students, with 33 per cent undecided and 21 per cent negative. Similarly, as many as 92 per cent of the students believed that their degree would give them advantage when securing a job in tourism.

Employers believed that holding a tourism degree demonstrates interest in and commitment to the industry, giving tourism graduates an advantage in securing a job:

I would immediately think that someone who has taken the time to do a degree in tourism is pretty certain that they are going to have a career in that area . . . And I think probably as an employer [I would] have more confidence that someone is going to be more capable of doing the job, if they have gone through a degree course and come out with the qualification (Ann).

Similarly, Frank stated that having done a tourism degree demonstrates:

That these people have got a real interest in a particular vocation, a particular area ensuring that that person is more likely to stick to their job.

However, he added:

Where this [degree] gives the groundwork to prepare somebody to come into a particular area. Not so much in the airline terms, but in industry, broader industry.

The interviewees frequently referred to the fact that tourism degrees are more tailored to the needs of other parts of tourism such as tour operators and travel agents. The reasons for that were clearly stated by Frank:

It is a very specialist area – where would you come in, if you have a degree in that [travel and tourism]. Most people [*sic*] will want to go into junior management of some form, having had the benefit of a degree. But in an airline you need either experience or you do not need the particular skills that they would teach in travel and tourism. The area where we employ most people would be the area where Betty used to run – cabin services, which is much more about personality, and experience and dealing with the public, more than it is knowing about the complications and complexities of the tourist industry. And we teach all of that on the courses. So the skills that people learn from that [travel and tourism degrees] aren’t really geared and I do not know how that can be into aviation.

Frank also added that he could see no benefit for his business from these degrees:

Travel and tourism [degree] in aviation really does not contribute a great deal.

When asked “do you see any benefit from having a tourism degree both for the students and for your organisation?” after a long pause George answered:

Not particularly, not in the airline business, not from my own perspective.

But both Frank and George added that there might be some relevance to other parts of the industry:

It is not related to the reality of the aviation. I think it is far more the tourism side of it . . . Most of those people are going into travel agencies and I think you would find within tour operator A, a lot of people in travel agency A and in tour operator A [both part of the same travel group] have travel and tourism degrees. But I do not think many of them in aviation (Frank).

Evelyn confirmed this when stating that:

Yes we [tour operator A] have a number of people that work currently in change control and do have those degrees.

While discussing the fact that they do not see any relevance of tourism degrees to the charter airlines, it became obvious that the interviewees had little exposure to tourism degrees. George, the HR director at charter airline A simply asked:

What does a degree in travel and leisure cover?

When asked what she knew about tourism education at university, Ann responded:

You need to tell me about it.

Betty also indicated that:

I have not first-hand knowledge of what it [the degree] actually achieves.

In addition, Catherine said that she did not know much about tourism degrees, and she did not know the details of the syllabus. Frank also concurred that he did not know what the content of tourism degree includes. As he stated:

I have not really come across them much.

While the employers were unaware of the content of tourism degrees, they had some idea/experience of what to expect from the graduates. As Catherine said:

I think they almost wanted to run before they could walk, that they did not have the basic knowledge . . .

Frank's attitudes to tourism graduates was based on students contacting him in the past for their projects:

They really horrify me with the lack of understanding that their tutors have got, in the industry and the questions that they are asking. I stopped seeing them many years ago, because I have found that they really did not know what they are talking about in aviation terms. And that their tutors really did not know much about the business either.

Evelyn, however, was positive when referring to a number of her colleagues who have completed a tourism degree, validating Frank and George's point that tourism degrees may be better related to the tour operator side of the business.

The interviews showed little recognition of the value of tourism degrees among employees in charter airline A, while at the same time they were unaware of what tourism degrees involve and achieve. Little recognition of the value of tourism degrees among tourism managers were observed by Baum (1995) and Thomas and Long (2001). They believed that this might threaten the prospects of tourism graduates trying to secure a job in the industry. However, students were not aware of this trend. Students in general were optimistic about the ease of securing employment

after graduation. They felt confident of securing a job in tourism, because they believe their degrees would give them an advantage. However, the only clear advantage of holding a tourism degree, recognised by the employers, is that it shows that tourism graduates have sustained interest and higher awareness of what the industry is about and therefore will be more likely to commit to it. Students were unaware that their degree may not provide advantage in securing employment. Nevertheless, the students were aware of the importance of work experience to prospective employers. As many as 50 per cent of the students indicated that to employers, work experience in the industry would be more important than degree qualifications of prospective employees. If students engage in such work experience while in education, this may enable them to secure a job in the industry in the future.

Conclusion

The results from the questionnaire survey present a picture of high interest and commitment by the University of Luton students to the tourism industry, intertwined with little understanding of the specifics of tourism careers and of the importance of transferable skills. Students were unable to show in a convincing manner that they are aware of and possess the skills that may be beneficial in securing employment upon graduation. Students also held over optimistic views of their future career prospects in the tourism industry. The lack of awareness of the realities of employment in the industry and the high expectations of the students is likely to lead to disillusionment about tourism careers (Ross, 1997; Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000; Lam *et al.*, 2001).

The interviewees from charter airline A want personality, skills, work experience, attitude, not qualifications. They see little or no relevance of a tourism degree to their business. Holding a degree was not mentioned as a prerequisite, and was only clearly stated as an advantage by one interviewee, referring to her current position at tour operator A. This finding confirms Evans' (1993, p. 243) view that "many employers do not consider a degree in tourism to be a prerequisite for employment." The low recognition of the value of tourism degrees among managers in charter airline A may threaten the prospects of tourism graduates trying to secure a job in that part of the industry.

The interviews with charter airline A employees, suggest that they have created their unfavourable perceptions of tourism degrees, with little understanding of what a tourism degree

involves. They also have had only limited, if any, contact with tourism graduates. However, the unfavourable perceptions of tourism degrees may be explained with the interviewees' negative attitudes to vocational degrees and the new universities. Further research into this issue should bring a valuable perspective to the debate about the relevance of vocational education.

However, some of the reasons why a degree in tourism is of little relevance to charter airline A may be due to the specifics of the business. Much of the business is outsourced (e.g. marketing), and the nature of potential entry-level positions for graduates is most likely front line jobs with high customer contact. The requirements for these jobs are focused on personality and skills, not knowledge, whereas within a tour operator, the entry-level positions may not be customer facing. For example Evelyn referred to entry-level positions within change control. These are not customer facing and require ability to deal with information, not people, hence her requirements were focused towards relevant skills, e.g. commercial awareness, numerical, analytical and negotiation skills, system literate and good communication skills. Those skills can easily be linked with what is taught/developed within universities. It is therefore not surprising that Evelyn considered a degree in tourism an advantage. Further research is needed to compare between the employee needs of charter airlines and tour operators. However, even within a tour operator:

A degree in tourism does not mean that you are going to be successful in the industry. It means you have got good background, a good understanding, it is all about the individual and how they choose to use that.

In summary, the value of a degree in tourism may be less about the knowledge gained in studying and more about the evidence of interest and commitment to the tourism industry that can be demonstrated to an employer by a student.

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