
The road to quality enhancement in tourism

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The aim of this paper is to identify reasons for current quality problems in tourism and possible ways of enhancing tourism quality. To attain this goal, recent initiatives directed at quality improvement in tourism are first presented. Primary and secondary data have been utilised to achieve this. Systems theory is utilised in order to recognise the reasons for current quality problems. Evaluation of quality management processes is based on Dale and Plunkett's model of levels in the evolution of quality management. The SERVQUAL model and the benchmarking technique are critically evaluated. The existence and inability of closing the tourism quality perception gap and the tourism quality control gap have been identified as chief causes of private sector tourism quality systems ineffectiveness. Three conditions of tourism quality enhancement have been formulated and a new tourism quality system that complies with these requirements has been proposed. A need for establishing a Total Quality Tourism Consortium as a formal body is emphasised.

Introduction

Quality issues have never been alien to tourism. In fact, quality tourism has become one of the future global tourism policy issues in the light of the rapid growth of the tourism industry, which is to become one of the major economic sectors by the year 2000 and beyond. Concern with quality tourism has been shown by various public and private organisations at all levels: international, national, regional and entrepreneurial. However, the increasing number of dissatisfied tourists demonstrates that the recent initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism have not been effective. This leads to a question of the reasons for current quality problems in tourism, and possible ways of quality enhancement in tourism. To answer these questions, it is first necessary to look at various initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism.

Initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism

With the increasing role of tourism in the global economy and growing competition in the global tourism market, the importance of developing quality tourism products has been recognised both by the public and private tourism sectors. To this end, a number of initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism have been undertaken at four different levels: international, national, regional/local and entrepreneurial. The analysis of current work in this area is therefore approached from these four different perspectives and is based on secondary and primary sources. The primary sources include relevant legislative acts, reports of public and private tourism organisations and the results of the study into the role of the state in tourism development, that was carried out in 1994-1995 in selected European countries (Augustyn, 1995). The information derived from informal interviews with representatives of small tourism enterprises in Denmark, Norway, Italy, Poland and the UK has also been utilised for the analysis of recent initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism.

International perspective

Among many international tourism organisations, the work of the International Union of Official Travel Organisations (IUOTO), and then the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), is of utmost importance in creating quality awareness among public and private tourism organisations. In fact, this organisation has been concerned with quality issues since its creation in 1923 (WTO, 1985a, p. 30). The adoption of the Manila Declaration in 1980 (WTO, 1980) constituted a milestone in the concepts on which most tourism policies and strategies had been based in the past. Since then, on various occasions, the WTO emphasised that the future of the tourism industry depends on the ability to instil a culture of quality in tourism services. In order to support this idea, the WTO has adopted the *Tourism Bill of Rights and Tourism Code* (WTO, 1985b), undertook a study on state measures to ensure quality of tourism services (WTO, 1985a), published a manual on *Quality Control of Tourism Products and Services* (WTO, 1988), adopted *Recommended Measures for Tourism Safety* (WTO, 1991) and published policy guidelines on health-oriented information (WTO, 1993). The recognition of quality in tourism ultimately led to the creation of a quality support committee in 1995 (WTO, 1995, p. 4). The committee was assigned the task of developing a basic framework necessary for providing quality tourism services and the issue of safety and security received the greatest concern in the committee's recommendations. It is apparent that the major purpose of all these steps undertaken by the WTO is to build quality awareness in the tourism sector, protect the customer and encourage states to set measures aimed at prevention, assistance and international cooperation in order to improve quality in tourism.

At the European level, a number of legislative instruments have been used to increase the level of consumer protection. They include the *EC Directive on Package Travel, Package Holiday and Package Tours* (EC, 1990), as well as other European Union legislation related to unfair terms in consumer contracts, general product safety, the quality of bathing water and fraudulent publicity.

Although this legislation does not cover the complex issue of quality improvement, it is perceived as a tool for setting uniform standards from which tourists can benefit.

National perspective

Following the WTO initiatives aimed at building tourism quality awareness, in most countries central government departments responsible for tourism demonstrate a growing interest in the development of quality tourism. This became even more important in view of quality problems that many countries have faced due to neglecting this issue in the past. The prevailing focus on economic goals in national tourism policies until the 1980s, had in many cases resulted in degradation of physical and socio-cultural environments, thus reducing the quality of the tourism experience (e.g. Italy and Spain). To solve this problem, a majority of states give priority to quality goals and objectives in their current national tourism policies (Augustyn, 1995). Various tourism policy instruments are used to achieve these goals, depending on the political and economic systems of the country, the degree of tourism development and the importance of tourism in the national economy. The most common instruments include:

- legislative measures (e.g. establishment of quality and safety standards for various sectors of the tourism industry, environmental regulations, liberalisation of frontier formalities, consumer protection);
- financial measures (e.g. investment incentives for creation of new tourism areas, support of education);
- operational measures (e.g. planning, co-ordination, horizontal co-operation, national tourism information systems) (Augustyn, 1995).

In market-led economies (e.g. UK, Denmark, Norway), where the private sector is strong, the role of the government is limited to emphasising the need for quality improvement and taking preventive measures. The quality improvement initiatives in terms of developing quality systems are left primarily to the private sector.

On the contrary, in economies with a high level of state intervention into the market processes (e.g. Spain, Poland), the government departments responsible for tourism adopt a more active role in ensuring quality improvement of the tourism products. Legislative, financial and operational measures undertaken by these departments are aimed at creating national tourism quality systems. Concurrently, the private sector tourism

enterprises are free to develop their own quality systems.

Regardless of the degree and form of government involvement, it is evident that the problem of quality improvement in tourism receives due consideration at the national level.

Regional/local perspective

The importance of quality improvement has also been recognised by a number of regions which have introduced various quality assurance procedures. In England, for example, the English Tourist Board adopted the quality assurance inspection scheme for England in 1991, while in Wales, an attractions accreditation scheme was introduced in 1992 by the Wales Tourist Board (Buswell, 1993, p. 120). The Scottish Association of Visitor Attractions has also instigated an inspection scheme (Graw, 1992). These inspection programmes are developed in order to score a particular attraction for provision and standards of service and reward the attraction operator with a certificate.

At the local level, the authorities introduce various environmental regulations, enforce building codes or provide public services (roads, public transport, car parks, social services, etc.). These steps, although important for the development of quality tourism, are undertaken, however, for other purposes and few local authorities are aware of their importance for quality improvement in tourism. In fact, not much has specifically been done with this purpose at the local level. Even in cases where the public sector owns local visitor attractions, the initiatives aimed at increasing customers' satisfaction are scarce.

Entrepreneurial perspective

At the entrepreneurial level, most tourism businesses are nowadays aware of the need for quality improvement. Few of them, however, emphasise this need in their strategies and even less develop quality systems in order to improve their performance and satisfy the customer. A great deal of these systems have been established by big tourism companies, such as international hotel chains (e.g. Marriott, Hilton), multinational tour operators (e.g. Thomas Cook), airlines (e.g. British Airways), and visitor attractions (e.g. Disneyland) (Brown, 1992). In contrast, despite the fact that the majority of small tourism enterprises appreciate the importance of quality improvement as a means of sustaining competition, they are mainly concerned with upgrading their facilities or inspecting their products. In most cases,

however, they do not develop formal quality systems.

The analysis of initiatives aimed at quality improvement in tourism proves that this issue is not new and has received much attention from both public and private tourism organisations. Various steps have been taken at international and national levels to build quality awareness among the providers of tourism products and services. There are also examples of developing national and regional tourism quality systems. Private tourism companies have widely accepted that quality is one of the most important factors of their competitiveness in the global tourism market. To this end, a number of big tourism companies spend vast sums of money on developing quality systems whereas small tourism enterprises at least aim at upgrading their facilities. With all this work on quality improvement, the number of dissatisfied tourists is, however, increasing and many tourism organisations have to deal with their customers' complaints on a daily basis (Brewda, 1990; Le Blanc, 1992). This leads to an obvious question of the reasons why tourists are not fully satisfied with their tourism experience if so much has been done about quality improvement in tourism at all levels.

Reasons for current quality problems in tourism

The quality experts agree that poor quality results either from the lack of quality awareness / interest or from employing the wrong system for quality improvement (Wille, 1992, p. 13). The previous analysis proves that both public and private tourism organisations, at all levels, recognise the need for quality improvement and undertake various measures to achieve this goal. This implies that quality problems in tourism do not result from lack of quality awareness or interest but from improper systems of quality improvement being implemented. So what is wrong with the existing tourism quality systems?

Owing to the above considerations, a systems theory is now adopted in order to provide a framework for the examination of the reasons for current quality problems in tourism. A system is defined as an ordered set of interrelated components that affect each other by being part of the system (Bertalanffy, 1962). Each system has strictly defined boundaries and operates within an external environment. The components of the system include inputs into the system derived from the environment (physical, financial, human resources and information) that are

converted into outputs (desired effects) through the use of an appropriate process (Figure 1).

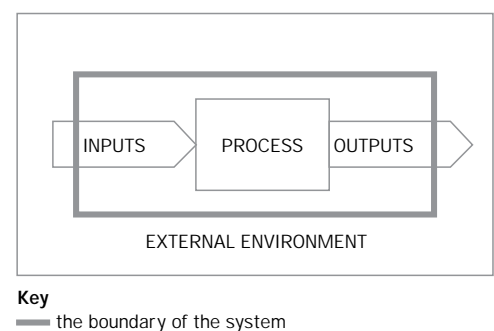
Systems theory focuses on the interdependency of the elements of the system. The behaviour of a system is constrained by the needs and conditions of its setting. Changes in one component of the system and the ways in which its internal subsystems and processes are linked affect the entire system. The entities operating within the external environment also influence the activities of the system (e.g. legislation, competition, customers, politics). The effectiveness of a system in terms of producing satisfactory outputs depends on the capability of the system to:

- 1 manage the relationships with the external environment;
- 2 secure proper inputs; and
- 3 employ an appropriate process in which the inputs are transformed into the outputs.

Fulfilment of these three conditions enables the system to achieve its goals.

The examination of tourism quality improvement initiatives indicated that in a number of countries, various quality systems have been developed at the national, regional and entrepreneurial levels. All these systems aim at enhancing their competitiveness in the global tourism market through increased customer satisfaction. Concurrently, the tourism quality awareness initiatives undertaken at the international level and, in the case of several countries (e.g. UK, Denmark, Norway), at the national level, constitute an important element of the external environment in which other quality systems operate. While searching for the reasons for current quality problems in tourism it is therefore necessary to evaluate the national/regional tourism quality systems and the quality systems of individual tourism enterprises.

Figure 1
General model of a system



National/regional tourism quality system

In order to increase the competitiveness of a country/region in the global tourism market, national/regional tourism quality systems have been created in several countries/regions. National tourism quality systems have been developed by the government departments responsible for tourism in these countries in co-operation with the national and regional tourism organisations as well as the private sector. They operate within the boundaries of a particular country and consist of a set of subsystems, such as regional and local public tourism bodies and individual private sector tourism enterprises. Regional tourism quality systems have been developed by the regional tourism boards. They operate within the boundaries of a particular region and include a number of individual private sector tourism organisations that are willing to participate in a particular quality improvement scheme. In both cases, the internal subsystems are linked by a quality management process that converts the inputs (physical, financial, human resources and information) into satisfactory outputs (quality tourism products). The national/regional tourism quality systems are open systems, inasmuch as they communicate with an external environment. The major components of the external environment for national systems include quality improvement initiatives of international organisations as well as measures of other government departments (e.g. department of environment or department of transport) that influence the overall quality of tourism. In case of regional tourism quality systems, the environment also includes national initiatives aimed at quality improvement.

Both in the case of the national and regional tourism quality systems, the relationships with the external environment are generally managed properly through well established horizontal and vertical co-ordination and co-operation links. The major drawbacks of these systems relate to the inputs and the tourism quality management processes.

Inputs

A majority of government departments that develop tourism quality systems recognise the importance of securing directly or indirectly adequate inputs to the national tourism quality systems. This is reflected in undertaking various legislative, financial and operational measures described earlier. The capabilities of regional tourism boards to assure satisfactory inputs are, however, limited owing to their restricted competencies. Nonetheless, encouraged by the public sector, some private sector tourism enterprises

operating within national/regional tourism quality systems make an effort to improve their inputs but despite the support from the government or regional tourist boards, the majority of them still lack financial and human resources to provide a quality service. The information flows that are indispensable for the smooth functioning of the quality systems also have some weaknesses. This makes it difficult for the subsystems to make appropriate decisions. From the national/regional viewpoint, inadequate inputs prevent the tourism quality systems from achieving their goals.

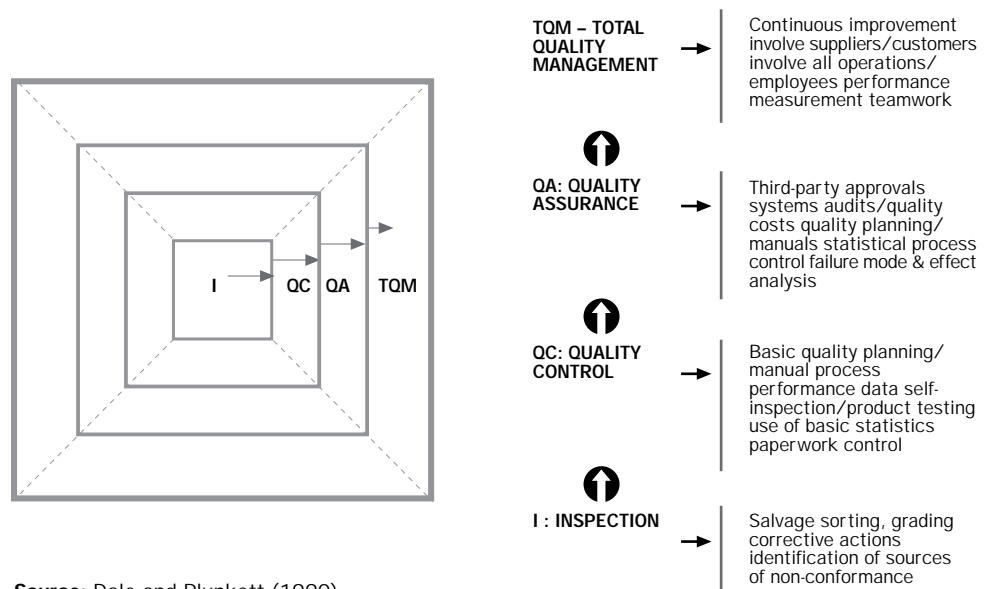
Tourism quality management process

Based on systems theory, employment of an adequate quality management process should link the internal subsystems and transform the inputs into quality tourism products. The model of levels in the evolution of quality management, developed by Dale and Plunkett (1990, p. 12), has been used to evaluate national and regional tourism quality management processes as well as those that have been applied by their internal subsystems (Figure 2).

The model presents various quality management concepts that started to develop in the previous century with the first era of inspection. Over the years, quality management theory has evolved into the concept of quality control, then quality assurance to reach the highest level of total quality management (TQM). Various tools and techniques are associated with each of these four levels. The authors emphasise that the highest level in the evolution of quality management – the level of TQM – comprises the achievements of all previous stages in the development of quality management theory. This signifies, that the philosophy of TQM utilises the tools and techniques developed by preceding authors of quality management theories. The concept of TQM goes, however, one step further. It assumes that it is not sufficient to inspect, control or assure quality in order to achieve customer satisfaction. TQM requires the application of quality management principles to every branch and at every level of the organisation. Everyone should be committed to continuous improvement in their part of the operation. Through this participation and commitment, with the use of various tools and techniques that the TQM concept has adopted or developed, quality can be managed effectively. As a result, a system has a capability to minimise errors, to ensure continuous improvement leading to excellence and to delight the customer (Creech, 1994; Juran, 1964). It has been widely recognised and proved among quality management

Figure 2

The four levels in the evolution of quality management



Source: Dale and Plunkett (1990)

experts, based on the cases of manufacturing and service companies, that the concept of TQM is currently the best possible strategy for building a competitive advantage through customer satisfaction (Grocock, 1986; Wilson *et al.*, 1995).

The evaluation of quality management processes within the national/regional tourism quality systems, based on the above model and an analysis of relationships among their internal subsystems, reveals three general features of national/regional tourism quality management processes: lack of advanced processes, lack of comprehensiveness and lack of consistency.

Lack of advanced processes. At the national and regional levels, quality management processes are based on the use of basic quality management techniques that have been developed at the lowest level of inspection and quality control in the evolution of quality management (setting basic quality objectives and standards, use of basic statistics). In some cases, regional tourism boards additionally apply selected quality assurance instruments (e.g. certificates and rewards). It is worth pointing out, however, that none of the national/regional tourism quality systems has applied the concept of total quality management.

Lack of comprehensiveness. The quality management processes employed within the national/regional systems can also be referred to as incomplete. Quality management techniques are utilised in a selective manner and none of the quality management concepts have been applied thoroughly. Lack

of monitoring and feedback is the major drawback of national/regional tourism quality management processes.

Lack of consistency. Inconsistency results from the lack of comprehensiveness of the national/regional quality management processes and inability to link the internal subsystems. It is first of all reflected in setting quality objectives by the subsystems that are incompatible with the quality objectives of the whole system. A great deal of small tourism enterprises that participate in regional schemes, for example, aim at obtaining a certificate in order to magnify their promotional strengths rather than to increase customer satisfaction and contribute to the competitiveness of the entire region. Moreover, small accommodation units, such as bed and breakfasts, are more concerned with raising “quality” standards in terms of upgrading their facilities (e.g. more *en suite* rooms), instead of satisfying the real customer needs (e.g. hospitable behaviour). Despite the fact that the quality of the physical part of the tourism product is important, the quality of the human part of the service offered constitutes a critical success factor. A room of top quality standard is not in a position to compensate for the unfriendly and inhospitable behaviour of staff.

Lack of consistency is also reflected in the fact that private tourism enterprises develop various quality management processes, independently of the national/regional processes. Several small tourism enterprises base their processes on the concept of inspection or

quality control while big tourism companies apply the concept of total quality management into their management processes. A majority of small tourism enterprises do not, however, manage quality at all. From the point of view of building a consistent quality image of national/regional tourism products, this diversification of quality management processes, ranging from the primal level of inspection to the advanced level of TQM, is definitely an inhibiting factor to the increase in customer satisfaction.

Despite the fact that the national/regional tourism quality systems properly manage their relationships with the external environment, the general lack of advanced, comprehensive and consistent national/regional quality management processes, combined with the inability of securing the inputs, make the national tourism quality systems highly ineffective. As a result, the resources utilised for the creation of these systems are lost, with the quality problems remaining unresolved.

Quality systems of individual tourism enterprises

Increasing competition in the tourism market impels individual tourism enterprises to focus on quality improvement as a source of competitive advantage. Small tourism enterprises typically lack adequate inputs and ability to manage effectively internal and external relationships in order to develop comprehensive quality systems. A majority of big tourism enterprises have, however, developed modern quality systems based on the concept of TQM. Despite the fact that their quality management processes are in most cases advanced, comprehensive and consistent, they also face difficulties with achieving total satisfaction of tourists. These problems result from inadequate inputs and inability to secure quality relationships with the environment in which the systems operate, which is associated with the nature of the tourism product.

The nature of the tourism product

Unlike other products offered by manufacturing or service companies, tourism products are far more complex and consist of many complementary components provided by suppliers from various public, private and voluntary sectors (Figure 3). Each tourism product is heterogeneous and includes components furnished by numerous relatively small private or public suppliers. On the other hand, the purchase and consumption of the tourism product is spread over time and distance. Thus, the consumer buys expectations at the tourism generating area (TGA: a

region where tourist demand originates) which should meet with the reality during the transit and consumption of the tourism product at the tourism destination area (TDA: a coherent tourism – receiving region that has some common tourism features and the potential for tourism development, e.g. a city, a county or a region beyond the administrative boundaries of a city, county, etc.).

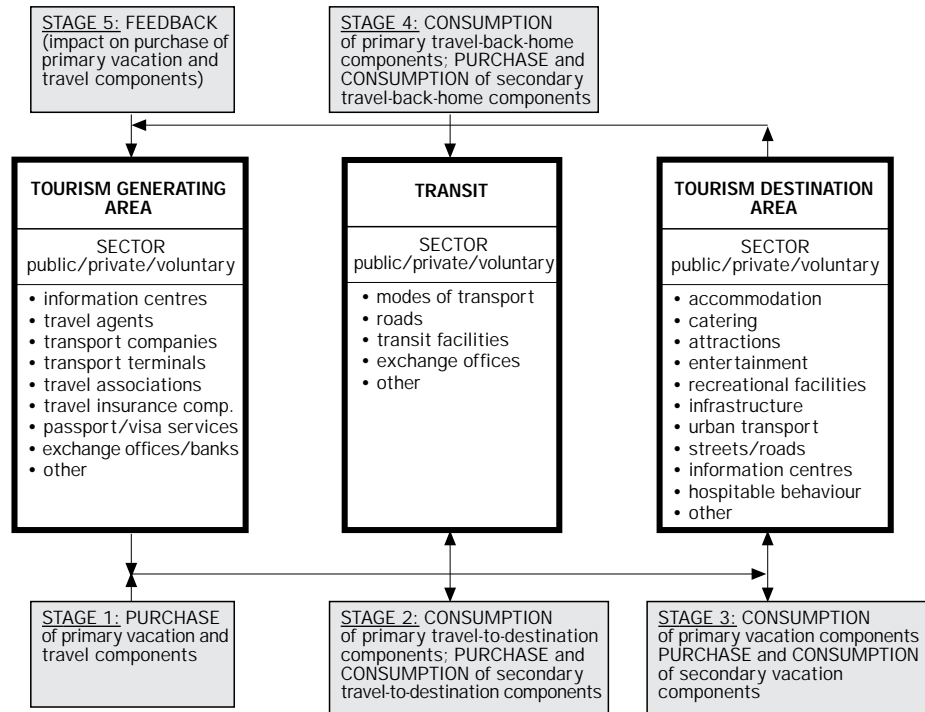
At present, however, this coincidence is difficult to achieve due to the existence of two tourism quality gaps that have their roots in the nature of the tourism product, namely the tourism quality perception gap and the tourism quality control gap. The tourism quality perception gap is responsible for inadequate inputs to the quality systems of large tourism enterprises whereas the tourism quality control gap gives rise to the quality problems in the area of monitoring the relationships between the big tourism enterprises and their external environment.

Inputs and the tourism quality perception gap

In most cases, large tourism companies are in a position to secure adequate physical, financial and human resources needed for the development of a comprehensive and advanced quality system based on the concept of TQM. In many cases, they also have satisfactory information about the areas of improvement in relation to their competitors as a result of using the benchmarking technique (Cheshire, 1997). Benchmarking is defined as a process of measuring the performance of a company – in terms of the products and services offered and the processes employed – against its best competitors. It is important to determine how the best competitors achieve their performance levels in order to introduce changes to the practices of the company (Bemowski, 1991). Benchmarking helps, therefore, to focus resources on the performance targets that relate to the areas of improvement against the company's best competitors. The use of benchmarking is definitely of great importance in enhancing the performance of an individual tourism company and to gain market leadership. However, it still provides partial information about the customer needs. As a matter of fact, benchmarking establishes only what, in their customers' opinion, makes the difference between the company and its best competitor (Ho, 1995, p. 114). The new standards that are set as a result of applying the benchmarking technique are mainly conducive to gaining a competitive advantage by an individual tourism company. In view of the complex nature of the tourism product, this technique does not provide sufficient information about

Figure 3

Components of tourism products at various stages of the tourist purchase-consumption process



the customers' needs in relation to their total tourism experience.

Partial information about customer needs constitutes the major source of increased customer dissatisfaction with the products offered by big tourism companies. The conceptual model of service quality (SERVQUAL), developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1990), is regarded as an important tool for identifying quality improvement areas within individual service organisations in relation to enhancing customer satisfaction. The model measures tangible and intangible elements of the service and investigates gaps in the customer-supplier chain to highlight target areas where quality may be improved. These gaps include the gap between:

- customers' expectations and management's perceptions of customers expectations;
- management's perceptions of customers' expectations and service quality specifications;
- service quality specifications and service delivery;
- service delivery and external communications to customers;
- customers' expectations and perceived services.

Despite the fact that many service companies have benefited from the use of the SERVQUAL model in terms of increased customer satis-

faction, the application of this instrument does not prove to be sufficient with regard to tourism services. The information about quality improvement areas gained with the use of the SERVQUAL model is also partial owing to the fact that it focuses on customer opinion related merely to the performance of an individual tourism company. Similarly to the benchmarking technique, the SERVQUAL model is of great practical importance with reference to gaining a competitive advantage within the specialist sector of the individual company, (e.g. Thomas Cook within the travel trade sector or Disneyland within the theme parks sector). However, the use of this instrument does not provide the necessary information about the overall customer expectations in relation to the total tourist experience. This is also due to the nature of the tourism product and the existence of the tourism quality perception gap in particular, that are not taken into account in the process of identifying quality improvement areas.

The tourism quality perception gap relates to the discrepancy between the views of the tourists and those of the tourism organisations in respect to the quality of the tourism product. While tourists perceive quality as satisfaction with the complete tourism experience from the time they leave home to the time they return (Medlik and Middleton, 1979), the popular tourism organisation's

approach to quality in tourism limits tourists' satisfaction to those components of the tourism product that are provided by the organisation (Handsuh, 1996). For example, a tour operating company offers a quality package composed of a seat in an aeroplane, a hotel room and meals in a restaurant, and is interested only in the quality of those components, as well as the quality of their own services. It should, however, be noted that other factors, such as the quality of destination facilities, infrastructure, public transport, hospitality behaviour also influence tourist satisfaction. Particularly as the major part of the total tourism product is consumed at the TDA. In most cases, however, these factors are not taken into consideration by individual tourism companies while searching for information related to customers' expectations and levels of satisfaction. Therefore, even if the packages offered by the tour operators are of top quality, the other factors may spoil the tourist's overall experience.

This implies that in order to enhance customer satisfaction, an individual tourism organisation should adopt the same understanding of quality as its customers. Consequently, the information needed for identification of quality improvement areas should relate to all components of the total tourism product and not only to those offered by the tourism company. A majority of the companies do not have, however, sufficient resources to develop and monitor complex information systems. Since the information about customer expectations constitutes an important part of the inputs to a quality system, shortcomings within this area give rise to failures of quality systems developed by individual tourism organisations.

Relationship with the external environment and the tourism quality control gap

Each tourism organisation provides only one or several components of the total tourism product that is consumed by its customers during the course of the complete tourism experience (Figure 3). Therefore, in order to enhance customer satisfaction, tourism companies have to establish effective relationships with their stakeholders, and especially with their suppliers, defined as those companies operating within the external environment that are responsible for the provision of other components of the total tourism product. However, it is hardly possible for any tourism company to achieve this goal due to the existence of the tourism quality control gap.

The tourism quality control gap relates to the discrepancy between the need for quality

control at every stage of the total tourism product delivery and the feasibility of the individual tourism company of exerting actual control over this process. The existence of this gap accounts for an inability of individual tourism companies to offer the total quality tourism product that the customer expects at the beginning of the tourist purchase – consumption process. The tourism quality control gap is also responsible for the increasing number of tourists dissatisfied with their total tourism experience.

It is worth pointing out in this context that currently the leading tour operators are not even in a position to control the delivery of the tourism product components included in the holiday package, which is reflected in an increasing number of customer complaints.

The problem becomes even more complicated in view of the fact that tourists consume other elements of the total tourism product during their overall tourism experience, mainly at the destination area. With the large number of destinations that tour operators deal with and offer to the customers, an individual tour operating company is not in a position to control the quality of all the elements of the total tourism product offered by the providers operating at the host area. All the more reason that many of these elements are offered by the public sector (e.g. infrastructure, security, police, urban transport, education). Moreover, the human aspect of the product is of utmost importance for total tourist satisfaction, and this can be confronted only at the time of tourism product consumption.

This implies that, even if several tourism companies make an effort to establish effective relationships with their suppliers, many of the components of the total tourism product that influence customer satisfaction are beyond their control. This lack of control results in customer dissatisfaction, since the standards promised or implied in advertisements are not matched by the reality of the visitors' experience during their stay.

The evaluation of quality systems of individual tourism enterprises indicates that the lack of proper inputs combined with the unfavourable features of the external environment in which these systems operate obstruct the benefits that these systems could otherwise produce (quality tourism products). The resources used by big tourism companies for the development of advanced quality systems are therefore lost. In the short term, the existing quality systems of individual tourism companies may increase their competitiveness. However, in the long term, lack of the ability to satisfy the needs of

their customers may result in a gradual decrease in the sales of tourism products offered by these companies.

This analysis of the reasons for current quality problems in tourism has revealed serious drawbacks with the existing tourism quality systems. Is it therefore possible to improve the effectiveness of these systems with the result of enhanced tourism quality?

Conditions of tourism quality enhancement

Based on systems theory as well as the analysis of the reasons for current quality problems in tourism, three conditions for tourism quality enhancement can be identified.

First, a tourism quality system has to be in a position for securing adequate inputs in terms of physical, human and financial resources as well as appropriate information about the customers' needs. The tourism quality perception gap has to be closed through the adoption of the view of quality that is represented by the tourists, i.e. satisfaction with the complete tourism experience from the time they leave home to the time they return.

This way of perceiving quality has to be adopted by all subsystems and members of the quality system.

Second, the quality management process that converts the inputs into outputs (total quality tourism products) should be based on the principles of TQM in view of the fact that this concept currently represents the most advanced level in the evolution of quality management. Moreover, unlike other quality management theories, TQM assumes that:

- everyone associated with the system is involved in continuous improvement;
- the customers' expressed and implied needs are met fully; and
- executives are fully committed (Ho, 1995, p. 4).

Taking into consideration the need for employing a comprehensive and consistent management process within the whole quality system, the concept of TQM seems to be an important tool for quality enhancement in tourism.

Third, in order to ensure quality of the total tourism product, relationships with the external environment have to be managed effectively. In particular, the number of suppliers should be reduced to the necessary minimum, i.e. to such a level that enables provision of all components of the total tourism product on the one hand and closure of the tourism quality control gap on the other hand.

These conditions of tourism quality enhancement have to be fulfilled simultaneously in order to increase the levels of customers' satisfaction with their total tourism experience.

From the previous analysis, it is apparent that the existing tourism quality systems lack the ability to introduce the required changes in order to comply with the three conditions of tourism quality enhancement simultaneously. The complexity of national/regional tourism quality systems constitutes a serious obstacle for these systems to conform to condition number two. The development of an advanced, comprehensive and consistent TQM process on a national scale is not feasible. It would require from all subsystems (providers of all components of the total tourism product) commitment towards continuous quality improvement, which is highly unlikely, if not idealistic. It thus seems rational that governments abandon the role of developing these systems in favour of increasing quality awareness and securing proper legal conditions for the creation of tourism quality systems by the private sector.

As far as the existing quality systems of individual tourism organisations are concerned, the actual inability to bridge the quality control gap (condition number three) constitutes the major obstacle to satisfying the tourists' expressed and implied requirements fully.

If none of the existing quality systems can be rectified so that the three conditions of tourism quality improvement could be met, then is there any other road to quality enhancement in tourism?

A new approach towards quality enhancement in tourism

It has been proved so far that current quality problems in tourism result from operating improper tourism quality systems rather than from the lack of quality awareness or interest. Owing to the fact that the existing tourism quality systems are not in a position to comply with the conditions of tourism quality enhancement, a new system that meets these requirements has to be created. While designing the new system, it is necessary to consider the following issues: location of the system, the system boundary, synergy, inputs, quality management process and relations with the external environment.

Location of the system

On the grounds of systems theory, it is necessary to place the new tourism quality system within the environment. At this stage,

a question as to whether the system should be created within a TGA or a TDA has to be answered. An analysis of the features of the two alternatives against the three conditions of tourism quality enhancement indicates that the new tourism quality system should be established within a tourism destination area. There are several reasons behind such an assertion.

First, the results of recent studies into the customer buying process indicate that in most cases tourists initially decide on the destination they want to visit, then on the mode of transport, and once these decisions have been made, on the tour operator or travel agent who can help them satisfy their requirements, unless they organise their holiday without the use of the services offered by the travel intermediaries (Mill and Morrison, 1992; Schmoll, 1987). Thus, the pre-sale tourists' expectations relate mainly to the quality of the destination area rather than the quality of services provided by tour operators and travel agents that operate within a TGA.

Second, locating the tourism quality system within the TDA enables more accurate identification of the benefits that the host area is in a position to offer to various market segments. Required quality improvement areas in terms of satisfying total customer expectations can also be better recognised owing to the fact that the majority of components of the total tourism product are consumed at a TDA. It is therefore easier to close the tourism quality perception gap.

Third, in view of the fact that the great majority of the providers of total tourism product components operate within a TDA, the establishment of the tourism quality system within a host area makes it easier to close the tourism quality control gap.

A new tourism quality system will therefore be created within a tourism destination area but establishing good relations with its external environment which is indispensable for proper operation of the system.

The system boundary

Once it has been decided that the creation of a new tourism quality system will be located within a TDA, it is now necessary to determine the boundary of the system that separates it from its environment. It has been proved earlier that individual tourism organisations operating in isolation are not able to provide an effective tourism quality system due to their inability to close the tourism quality control gap. The high level of complementarity between tourism organisations operating within a TDA can be perceived, however, as an opportunity for establishing

co-operative links between all providers of various components of the tourism product (subsystems) within the tourism destination area. Thus the boundary of the new quality system is set by the boundaries of the TDA.

The need for co-operation reduces, however, the size of the TDA to the absolute minimum – the minimum that provides necessary inputs to the quality system and the minimum beyond which the development of an advanced, comprehensive and consistent quality management process is not possible. It signifies that not all TDAs can create effective quality systems based on co-operative links. They have to be sufficiently large to secure indispensable inputs and, concurrently, relatively small to enable a smooth operation of quality management processes. The new tourism quality system can thus be developed within the boundaries of a small town or within the boundaries of a number of villages that have some common tourism features and the potential for tourism development.

Synergy

On the grounds of systems theory, synergy is essential for the success of a system. Synergy is defined as a situation in which separate subsystems (providers of various components of the tourism product within the TDA) co-operate and interact with the result of becoming more productive than they would be if they operated in isolation (Stoner and Freeman, 1992, p. 45). However, as the theory on strategic alliances assumes (Kanter, 1994), co-operation between the providers of tourism services within a TDA should be based on formally established links in order to bring about the benefits of synergy.

Co-operative links may take various forms, such as a syndicate, a cartel, a pool or a consortium. In the case of quality systems created within tourism destination areas, the form of consortium proves to be most desirable. There are some arguments for establishing a consortium:

- unlike a cartel, it is a formal association;
- unlike a syndicate, it facilitates co-operation of all the parties within the TDA;
- unlike a pool, it does not attempt to control price, to share the business and to divide profits.

A consortium is a group of companies and/or public sector organisations that co-operate for a specific purpose (Gilpin, 1973; Hornby, 1980; Wallace and Patrick, 1990).

The concept of Total Quality Tourism Consortium

Owing to the fact that the new tourism quality system should be an advanced system,

based on the concept of total quality management, a Total Quality Tourism Consortium (TQTC) can be established within a tourism destination area in order to ensure synergy.

The concept of TQTC (Figure 4) assumes that representatives (top managers) of various public, private and voluntary tourism organisations, operating within a tourism destination area and willing to co-operate, enter a special agreement aimed at tourism quality enhancement while sharing the cost of the task. The involvement in continuous improvement and full commitment of all the partners to the agreement, and consequently all members of organisations entering such an agreement, enhance tourism quality in terms of satisfying customers' expressed and implied requirements completely. This, however, requires securing appropriate inputs to the system, integrating TQM concepts into the quality management process of the system and establishing successful relationships with the external environment.

Inputs

The first task of a total quality tourism consortium operating within a tourism destination area is to secure proper inputs into the newly created tourism quality system. Numerous providers of the components of the total tourism product (public, private and voluntary tourism organisations) possess essential parts of physical, human and financial resources. Therefore, it is vital for the success of the system that all these organisations operating within the TDA enter the consortium. In view of the fact that initially only few businesses may be willing to co-operate, the TQTC should make an effort to encourage as many tourism organisations operating within the TDA as possible to participate in the scheme. This may be achieved by means of emphasising the benefits of

synergy and competitive collaboration. The idea of competitive collaboration assumes that "competing with" is superior to "competing against" (Aguayo, 1990). Co-operation may therefore stem from giving people reasons and incentives with the result that they look at their endeavours in a team context. In relation to those tourism organisations that ultimately do not enter the agreement, the TQTC has to establish effective relationships with them in order to secure all necessary resources and quality image of the destination.

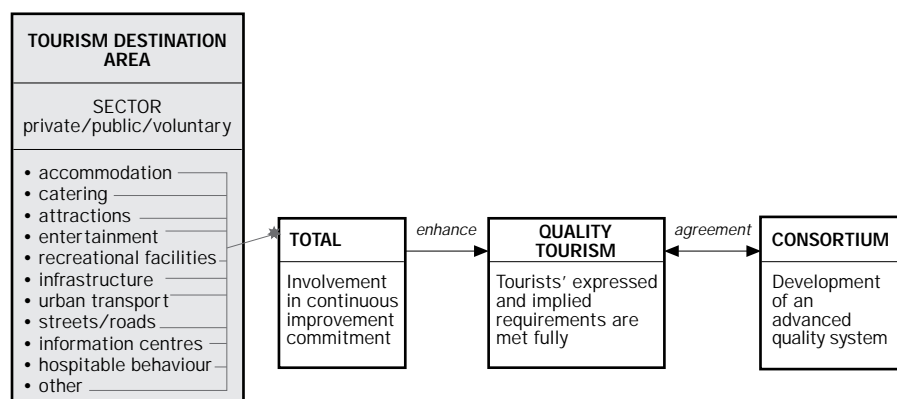
Proper information about the customers' expectations related to the total tourism product should also be secured within such a system. The active involvement of all tourism-related organisations in quality enhancement within the system is conducive to the closure of the tourism quality perception gap. It is essential, however, that quality is understood properly by all subsystems in order to enable the achievement of the objectives set by the system (quality tourism products and increased customer satisfaction). This may require launching a quality awareness programme within the system. Adopting the view of the customers in respect to the quality of the tourism product constitutes a pre-requisite for identifying quality improvement areas within the TQTC. With such understanding of quality, benchmarking techniques and the model of service quality (SERVQUAL) can be applied as a means of gaining information about the competitors and customers.

Quality management process

Development of an advanced, comprehensive and consistent quality management process that converts the inputs into satisfactory outputs and links the internal subsystems is crucial for the success of the new tourism

Figure 4

The concept of Total Quality Tourism Consortium



quality system. Therefore, another responsibility of a total quality tourism consortium is to develop an adequate quality management process based on the concept of TQM.

Prior to employing the TQM principles, it is essential to make sure that all members of the subsystems focus on the customer as a purpose of whatever they do. Continuous research and measurement of customer satisfaction are essential for the purpose of designing and re-designing the quality tourism product. A dynamic approach to product development is required in order to delight customers. This approach focuses on a continuous variation by means of special events, such as surprise events or gifts not itemised in an offer. A development of a consistent marketing strategy for the whole system, based on the research results, constitutes an integral part of the TQM process.

A smooth running of the TQM process demands also creating teams, securing proper communication, devising tools, building commitment and quality culture within the system (James, 1996, pp. 48-9; Kondo, 1997; Oakland and Morris, 1997). Organising action-centred or self-directed teams within the subsystems enables quality performance in handling day-to-day problems. Empowerment of employees is indispensable in order to achieve the goals of the system. Training for quality may, however, be required to assure quality consciousness among the employees. Communication between individuals and subsystems (internal) as well as between the system and the suppliers and customers (external) enables the flow of information, which is indispensable for making decisions within the system. Internal communication with the emphasis on the progress in achieving the goals of the system is needed in order to avoid discouragement. Devising tools for delivering, sustaining and measuring quality is vital for ensuring high and consistent levels of tourism quality within the entire system. Setting quality standards, comparing performance against them and feedback are extremely important for identifying opportunities for improvement. It should be pointed out, however, that quality has to be built into the system rather than inspected. This requires promoting a system-wide commitment to "getting things right". The principles and practices of TQM must be accepted by everyone within the system. This can be achieved by means of cultural change from the attitude of performing tasks towards the attitude of commitment. Generating enthusiasm among the executives and employees through recognition and rewards is of utmost importance for the success of the TQM process. Quality

culture determines the ability of the system to accept change within its morale and internal working relationships as well as relations with the environment. Partnership relationships in which everyone learns from each other constitute an important pre-requisite for the success of the new tourism quality systems. Building a quality climate is based on the principle of encouraging people to look beyond preventing problems and seek opportunities for continuous improvement.

In view of its complexity, the TQM process has to be well planned and professionally designed. In many cases, there is a need for employing a consultant to guide the whole process in order to avoid the development of impractical or over-elaborated processes (Jackson and Ashton, 1995, pp. 119-26). It is worth pointing out, however, that the concept of TQM should not be treated as a ready-made set of principles and tools to be used technically as a fast solution to gaining competitive advantage. TQM requires several years of sustained effort to change the culture of the system (Castle, 1996). The management of a total quality tourism consortium is therefore responsible for making the employees of participating organisations aware of this in order to maintain enthusiasm and interest. Through the commitment of the executives and involvement of all members of the system in continuous improvement, the TQTC is in a position to assure comprehensiveness and consistency of the quality management process. The particular choice of the TQM tools depends, however, on the nature of the internal and external environments in which a tourism quality system operates.

Relations with the external environment

The new tourism quality system operating within a tourism destination area is an open system for the reason that it interacts with its external environment that is marked by the system boundary. According to the criterion of the influence on the system's activities, the external environment is divided into two groups: a group of indirect-action elements and a group of direct-action elements (stakeholders) (Elbing, 1974).

The indirect-action environment includes social, economic, political and technological variables that create the climate in which the tourism quality system operates. The management of a total quality tourism consortium is responsible for monitoring the changes within these components of the environment and adjusting to these changes by means of a planning process.

Among numerous stakeholders (e.g. customers, suppliers, competitors, governments, financial institutions, special interest

groups), suppliers of various components of the total tourism product are of utmost importance for the success of the system. Owing to the fact that a total quality tourism consortium operates within a tourism destination area, the number of suppliers is reduced to travel intermediaries and transportation companies, unless tourists use their own cars. The few tourism businesses that operate within the TDA and do not enter the co-operative agreement are also classified as suppliers. It is therefore relatively easy to identify and choose quality suppliers needed for the effective operation of the tourism quality system. The TQTC is in a position to manage the relationships with them through the establishment of a quality supplier-customer chain. The TQTC operating within a tourism destination area has also the capability of controlling almost the entire process of the delivery of the tourism product. These tasks are even easier in view of the fact that a number of transportation and travel trade companies have already integrated TQM concepts into their management. The tourism quality control gap can therefore be closed.

The new tourism quality system provides a framework within which actions aimed at quality enhancement can be undertaken. The concept of establishing a TQTC within a tourism destination area is of great theoretical and practical importance for the system to comply with the three conditions of tourism quality enhancement simultaneously. Despite the fact that the application of the concept can result in higher customer satisfaction and therefore contribute to the increased competitiveness of a TDA, the concept should not be treated as a technical and universal solution as to how to manage quality in tourism successfully. The success of this concept depends on circumstances in which a tourism destination area attempts to survive and grow. Prior to deciding on the creation of a total quality tourism consortium, a thorough examination of these circumstances, including an analysis of costs and benefits of this and other alternatives, it is therefore indispensable.

Conclusions

In view of the fact that the great majority of public and private tourism organisations are aware of and interested in quality improvement in tourism, the employment of inappropriate tourism quality systems has been associated with the major source of current quality problems in tourism. These problems are reflected in an increasing number of customers dissatisfied with their

total tourism experience. The lack and incapability of securing an advanced, comprehensive, and consistent quality management process constitutes the major weakness of national/regional tourism quality systems. Shortcomings in inputs and relations with the suppliers make it impossible for the quality systems of individual tourism enterprises to close the quality perception gap and quality control gap. None of the existing tourism quality systems is in a position to introduce the required changes that would enable them to conform to the conditions of tourism quality enhancement. Therefore, a new tourism quality system, based on co-operative links among private, public and voluntary organisations and operating within a tourism destination area, has been proposed. The establishment of a TQTC within the framework of this system enables quality enhancement inasmuch as the TQTC is in a position to:

- secure adequate inputs and close the tourism quality perception gap;
- develop an advanced, comprehensive and consistent quality management process that converts the inputs into outputs (total quality tourism products); and
- manage effectively the relationships with the external environment and the suppliers in particular with the result of bridging the tourism quality control gap.

The success of this concept depends, however, on circumstances in which a tourism destination area attempts to survive and grow.

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