Travel and Tourism: Creating Synergy Between Principles and Practices

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Abstract

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of practical experience in travel and tourism education, yet there remains a need for a comprehensive understanding of how educational content can be better tailored to reflect industry realities. On this instance, this paper aims to bridge this gap by analyzing existing literature and identifying strategies to create a more cohesive relationship between academic principles through its curricula and industry practices; It highlights the importance of integrating practical experiences with classroom learning to enhance the preparedness of graduates for the dynamic and competitive travel and tourism sector. By examining case studies and industry reports, the paper identifies key areas where academic instruction can be enhanced to better meet the demands of the industry. The findings underscore the necessity for ongoing collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to enhance the knowledge and skills required for success and entrepreneurship in travel and tourism business operations.

Keywords: Travel, Tourism, Education, Principles and Practice

Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest growing industry with no signs of slowing down in this century. Statistics from the World Tourism Organization (WTO), in June 2023, showed that tourism is consolidating its position as the fastest growing industry in the world, even despite the setback brought by Covid-19. Nigeria is a country endowed with numerous world class tourist destinations. Considering the immense wealth of tourism potential, one would have expected Nigeria to feature prominently in the tourism roll call for Africa, if not in the list of top fifteen tourism destinations of the world. But bad governance, leading to poor economic performance and civil instability has combined to deprive the country the opportunity to develop a vibrant tourism industry. Tourism can generate direct visitor pay back into the management of the environment and economically fragile communities which can lead to the sustainability of tourism development. Sustainable tourism thus requires the interplay of many sectors which transportation is a crucial factor. Travel and tourism are important job creators, employing an estimated 100 million people around the world (Anifowose, 2020).

It is an established fact that tourism has become a universally embraced phenomenon. Statistical evidence, with verifiable facts and figures, has so far confirmed tourism industry as a unique contributor to the world socio-economic growth (UNWTO, 2023). Its remarkable employment generation tendencies and foreign exchange earning capacities have continued to

raise people's confidence in the sector's ability to stimulate sustainable growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as it is being recorded in many developed, as well as developing economies of the world (UNWTO, 2023). It must however be emphasized that not many countries are committed to harnessing the enormous opportunities that tourism development has in stock for them. This explains their not too encouraging attitude towards full exploitation of their substantial tourism resources for the benefit of their citizens.

The travel and tourism industry is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing sectors worldwide, contributing significantly to global economies and job creation. As the industry evolves, there is an increasing demand for skilled professionals who can navigate its complexities and drive innovation. Educational institutions play a critical role in preparing these professionals by imparting theoretical knowledge and practical skills. However, there is often a disconnect between what is taught in classrooms and the actual practices and demands of the industry. This gap can result in graduates who are ill-prepared for the challenges they will face in their careers. To address this issue, it is essential to examine how well academic programs align with industry needs and how experiential learning can be integrated into the curriculum.

Previous studies by Buhalis and Leung (2021), and Airey and Tribe (2019), have highlighted the importance of practical experience in travel and tourism education, yet there remains a need for a comprehensive understanding of how educational content can be better tailored to reflect industry realities. This paper aims to bridge this gap by analyzing existing literature and identifying strategies to create a more cohesive relationship between academic principles and industry practices. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on improving travel and tourism education and ensuring that graduates are fully equipped to contribute to the industry's success.

The main aim of this study therefore is to examine and enhance the alignment between educational principles in travel and tourism and the practical demands of the industry, thereby improving the preparedness and effectiveness of graduates entering the workforce. The guiding objectives of the study are: to analyze current travel and tourism curricula and identify areas where academic instruction diverges from industry practices; and to propose strategies for integrating industry-relevant experiences and knowledge into travel and tourism education, ensuring a more cohesive and practical learning experience for students. Hence, this study employs a library review to access secondary data through the review of relevant literatures.

Literature Review

The relationship between educational principles in travel and tourism and industry practices has been a subject of considerable research and debate. This literature review synthesizes existing studies, reports, and academic articles to provide a comprehensive overview of this relationship, highlighting key areas of alignment and disparity, and proposing potential pathways for bridging the gap.

Theoretical Foundations of Travel and Tourism Education

The theoretical framework for travel and tourism education often emphasizes a blend of business management, hospitality, geography, and cultural studies. According to Tribe (2022), tourism education has traditionally focused on providing a broad knowledge base, equipping students with theoretical insights into tourism systems, marketing, management, and the socio-

cultural impacts of tourism. However, Airey and Tribe (2019), argue that while this theoretical grounding is essential, it often lacks direct application to real-world scenarios that students will encounter in the industry.

The travel and tourism industry is characterized by its dynamic nature, requiring professionals to possess a diverse skill set that includes customer service, management, digital literacy, and intercultural communication. Studies by Baum (2017) and, Folorunso and Ogundele (2023) highlight the industry's preference for employees who are not only knowledgeable but also adaptable and capable of delivering high-quality customer experiences. These studies suggest that the industry values practical skills and experiential learning, which are not always adequately emphasized in academic settings.

According to Buhalis and Leung (2021), tourism development and its sustenance anywhere in the world, depends largely on two major factors. On one hand, there must be availability of qualitative and distinct tourism-related resources, which may be categorized into natural, physical, cultural and historical, as well as ecological resources. And on the other hand, the political will of national governments and other stakeholders to be fully committed to the exploration and exploitation of resources at their disposal, coupled with the provision of basic infrastructure to guarantee robust socio-economic growth that is sustainable and enduring. Anyanwu, *et al.,* (2020), describes tourism as a "multi-dimensional, multifaceted activity which touches lives and business activities such as restaurants, hotels, motels, travel agencies, car rentals etc". According to Okpoko and Okpoko (2002), tourism entails, "any temporary movement of people, either individually or in groups, from one place to another for specific tourism purposes of pleasure, health, education, religion, meeting or business, and for a period of not less than twenty-four (24) hours". In view of these definitions, the significance of movement as a vital element in the successful realization of tourism activities is emphasized, as the tourism industry is mainly driven by several important sectors which include accommodation, transportation, health and logistics sectors.

In the light of the above, it becomes expedient to be knowledgeable about the dynamics of the tourism industry, and highly imperative to assess the role of the middle man between attractive local and international touristic features and the modes of accessing these features. They are referred to as tourism service providers (Mungai, Kieti and Cheloti-Mapelu, 2021). According to Papacostas (1987), the key man in this context is the travel agent. As it is known to modern studies, Thomas Cook is the first globally recognized travel agent and tour operator. In 1841, Thomas Cook began running a special excursion train from Leicester to Loughborough in England, a trip of 12 miles. On July 5th 1841, Cook's train carried 570 passengers at a round trip price of 1 shilling per passenger. This is believed to be the first publicly advertised excursion train. Thus, as earlier mentioned, Cook can rightfully be recognized as the first rail excursion agent; his pioneering efforts were eventually copied widely in all parts of the world. Cook's company grew rapidly, providing escorted tours to Continent and later to the United States and around the World. He started a full-time excursion agency in 1845. The railway company agreed to give him 5% commission, which, however, was not enough to make the business worthwhile. Cook had, therefore, to diversify his business in other directions and he became the first tour operator in this world (Folorunso, Bashiru, Festus and Adebayo, 2024).

Today, when the world has not become any bigger, the number of people who travel around has certainly gone up several hundred thousand times. This increase in the number of people

leaving their place of stay and visiting another place has resulted in the expansion of travel agencies and their linkages with the principal suppliers. In this, several job opportunities are created for students who studies tourism, but they must earn the opportunity based on certain skill sets to provide tourism services which their education curricular may not entail. An important part of this opportunity is a becoming a travel agent. The travel agency is a link between the customers, that is to say, the travelers or tourists and the principle suppliers, i.e., primary service providers such as tour wholesalers, hotels, and airlines, among others. It is the first stop for anyone considering travel, especially to a distant place, for example, tourist destination, in order to make travel arrangements. The knowledge of travel agency is not restricted to the classroom alone.

The primary job of a travel agency is to provide easy and trouble-free travel to the traveler. It is also important for a travel agency to provide enough information to the tourist so that the tourist is not cheated during his or her travel and has a hassle-free trip. "Travel Agencies sell inclusive tours, holiday, transportation tickets and other related products such as accommodations, car rentals, attraction tickets and insurance to the public. A Travel Agent is a middleman – a business or person selling the travel industry's individual parts or combination of the parts to the consumer". In legal terms "Travel Agency is an agent of the principal – specifically, transportation companies. The agency operates as a legally appointed agent, representing the principal in certain geographic area. The agency functions as a broker for the other suppliers, such as hotels, car rentals, ground operators and tour companies (Bailey, Mokhtarian and Littlel, 2018).

Gaps Between Academic Instruction and Industry Practice

Several studies have identified a significant gap between what is taught in travel and tourism programs and what is required in the industry. In their comprehensive review, Sheldon, Fesenmaier, and Tribe (2011) note that many graduates feel unprepared for the practical challenges they face in the workplace. This sentiment is echoed by Wang, Ayres, and Huyton (2019), who found that while students often possess strong theoretical knowledge, they lack practical skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and hands-on experience.

Experiential learning, including internships, field trips, and industry projects, has been identified as a crucial component of effective travel and tourism education. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through experience, which can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Raelin (1997) and Dewey (1938) support this notion, advocating for a more integrative approach where students engage directly with the industry through hands-on experiences.

The fact that tourism depends heavily on the movement of tourists from the usual place of residence to the place of leisure, relaxation and pleasure is undisputable. Amongst the larger sectors under the umbrella that detailed the whole tourism process is the travel agency; the need to examine the gap becomes essential as many undergraduate students opt for their Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) to be carried out at a travel agency firm. Buhalis (2020), stresses that the roles of the travel agencies are vital in the travel industry. They help to promote and develop travel sales. The travel agency puts together different services of tourism products and sells them to the clients. The travel agency also acts as a broker between the client and the suppliers. They bring together the buyers and sellers of tourism products and services. The service providers include hotels, car rentals, tour companies, etc. Falabi, Akande

and Folorunso (2018), buttresses that a travel agent must therefore be aware of the flight schedule, flight route, currency, tourists' places, etc. They can be likened to a retail store that serves all the travel requirements of a client.

In furtherance, tour operators are a key factor in the success of the tourism industry. Tourists count on tour operators to turn their dream vacations into realities. Booking a tour is an easy way for a traveler to experience a foreign land and make sure they hit the best spots. This implies that the roles and functions of tour operators are aimed at providing the ultimate travel experience (Oyesiku, 2012). The main goal or function of a tour operator is to organize the services being provided to the customer, such as transportation and accommodations. The tour operator is the brains behind the beauty of vacation and they leverage their expertise and resources (provider databases or technology like tour operator software). World over, there are two major types of tour operators and these are national tour operators who operate within a country's boundaries (ground handlers) and multinational tour operators who participate internationally (Wang *et al.,* 2019). The tour operators bring together products of individual suppliers and market them as package to the final user. Most of the practices are often not embedded in students' academic synopsis, they still need to be exposed to the practical aspect of it, and this is only possible being attached to a tour operating establishment.

Meanwhile, the issues of insecurity and other social vices have a direct bearing on the movement of students between their academic institution and place of industrial work experience scheme. Mungai *et al.,* (2021), stress that learning, especially through practical application is more effective in an environment devoid of conflict and health hazards. Security issues in Nigeria significantly impact students' opportunity for the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). High crime rates and instability create a hostile environment for internships, making employer hesitant to accept students, which limit placement opportunities. Furthermore, the lack of adequate supervision and guidance during placement can exacerbate these challenges, leaving students vulnerable and less prepared for real-world work situations (Wang *et al.,* 2019).

Collaborations Between Academia and Industry

Collaborations between educational institutions and industry stakeholders have been recognized as vital for enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of travel and tourism education. According to Mungai *et al.,* (2021), partnerships between universities and industry can facilitate the development of curricula that better reflect the skills and knowledge required in the workplace. These collaborations can take various forms, including guest lectures from industry professionals, joint research projects, and co-created educational programs (Buhalis and Leung, 2021). Other collaboration is evident in the aspect of student's internship and SIWES programme. In addition, Folorunso and Ogundele (2023), stress that academia must be encouraged to participate in symposiums and workshops organized by the industry experts. The professionals who are practicing the business of travel and tourism must also participate in academic discussion like conferences, plenary and technical discussion that tends to unravel the key elements of what each sect required of one another.

Empirical Review

Integrating Theory and Practice

Integrating practical knowledge with theoretical learning in travel and tourism education is increasingly recognized as essential to developing competent professionals who can adapt to industry demands. Empirical studies have explored this integration from various perspectives, particularly its impact on student learning, employability, and the broader tourism industry.

Several studies indicate that students who experience a blend of theoretical and practical learning are better equipped for the job market. For instance, a study by Barron and Maxwell (2017) demonstrated that tourism students exposed to internships and field trips showed improved communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. Employers in the tourism sector often prioritize candidates with hands-on experience, and the integration of practical learning boosts employability by familiarizing students with real-world challenges.

Research by Airey and Tribe (2019) found that one of the primary challenges in tourism education is the gap between theoretical knowledge taught in the classroom and the practical skills required by the industry. By incorporating experiential learning opportunities like industry placements, simulations, and case studies, students can better understand how theories apply to real-world tourism practices. A study conducted at a university in Singapore revealed that students who underwent work-based learning demonstrated a deeper understanding of concepts like customer satisfaction, destination management, and sustainable tourism (Lashley & Morrison, 2018).

Another impact of integrating practical knowledge is the increase in student engagement and retention rates. Studies such as that by Chan and Yeung (2021) suggest that when students are provided with opportunities to apply theoretical concepts in practical settings, they become more motivated to learn and less likely to drop out. Students who participated in experiential learning modules reported higher levels of satisfaction with their courses and were more likely to pursue careers in the tourism industry.

On the impact of integrating theoretical education with practical industry experience in travel and tourism programs. Busby and Gibson (2010), conducted an empirical study on the University of Plymouth's tourism management program, which integrates internships and industry projects into the curriculum. Their findings indicate that students who participated in these experiential learning opportunities reported higher levels of job readiness and confidence in their practical skills compared to those who did not.

Wang *et al.,* (2019), in their own work, examined the effectiveness of an industry placement program in an Australian university's tourism degree. The study found that students who completed industry placements demonstrated improved problem-solving skills, a better understanding of industry operations, and a higher rate of employment upon graduation.

Practical experiences in travel and tourism education help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In a study by Williams and Buswell (2020), students who participated in project-based learning, which involved solving real-life tourism management issues, demonstrated a significant improvement in their ability to think critically and adapt to unforeseen circumstances. This aligns with industry needs, as tourism professionals often encounter unpredictable environments requiring innovative solutions.

Yiu and Law (2012), on the other hand investigated the impact of work-integrated learning (WIL) on hospitality and tourism students in Hong Kong. Their study revealed that students who engaged in WIL activities developed stronger professional networks, gained valuable industry insights, and reported a smoother transition from education to employment.

Tourism students need to understand not only business operations but also the cultural and social dynamics of travel. Empirical research by Richardson and Fluker (2017) highlighted that practical experiences such as study tours and cultural exchanges broaden students' perspectives on cross-cultural communication, ethical tourism practices, and global tourism trends. These experiences are crucial in preparing students for roles in a globally connected industry.

Finally, Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, and Koo (2015), explored the incorporation of digital literacy and emerging technologies in tourism education. Their research highlighted the positive outcomes of integrating technology-focused courses and practical digital marketing projects, which significantly enhanced students' employability and preparedness for the industry's technological advancements.

It is interesting to note that despite the positive impacts, some challenges exist in integrating practical knowledge with theory. A study by Cooper and Shepherd (2019) identified logistical constraints, such as limited access to quality internships or practical opportunities, especially in developing countries. Additionally, balancing academic rigor with the demands of practical learning can be challenging for institutions, as seen in the case of universities in sub-Saharan Africa (Okoro & Nwosu, 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the integration of practical knowledge with theoretical learning in travel and tourism education, as it enhances student employability, engagement, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. However, the success of this approach relies heavily on the availability of practical learning opportunities and the ability of educational institutions to provide structured, meaningful experiences that complement theoretical instruction, in a peaceful environment.

Case Studies of Successful Integrative Approaches

Several case studies illustrate the benefits of integrating practical experiences into travel and tourism education. For instance, a study by Busby and Gibson (2010) on the University of Plymouth's tourism management program demonstrates how embedding internships and industry projects into the curriculum can enhance students' employability and practical skills. Similarly, the work of Inui, Wheeler, and Lankford (2016) highlights the success of collaborative programs between the University of Hawaii and local tourism businesses, which provide students with valuable hands-on experience and industry insights. Here are some key insights on successful integrative approaches to practical experiences in travel and tourism education, based on the provided search results:

Another case study is a blended teaching and learning approach that combines classroom instruction with field-based experiences. Huang & Chuang (2021), in their study on Hong Kong Polytechnic University, documents that it is an effective educational model for travel and tourism. This approach provides opportunities for content synthesis and creates an effective framework for travel and tourism education. The instructional methodology typically involves three phases: classroom instruction on theories and principles of travel and tourism using a lecture/discussion approach; identifying and analyzing practical tourist-based problems in local

settings near campus; and traveling to a regional tourist destination for 4-6 days to evaluate attractions and develop solutions as a team

In addition, effectiveness of instructional methods was also investigated in Yale University by Buhalis (2020), and it was deduced that student perceptions indicate that lectures and field trips are more effective instructional methods compared to labs, case studies, and experiential education for travel and tourism courses. However, it is the blending of these approaches that makes an effective program.

Huang & Chuang (2021), assert that case studies are a valuable learning strategy that enables students to consider, debate and offer possible solutions to realistic problems faced in the hospitality, tourism and event industries. They allow students to apply their knowledge and work experiences to identify, analyze and evaluate issues in various geographical, cultural and legal contexts. Educational tourism programs like the Erasmus program demonstrate that student and teacher mobility is a viable and profitable activity, benefiting both participants and collaborating higher learning institutions Inui *et al.,* (2016). The success of Erasmus can serve as a benchmark for future educational tourism projects, as this form of tourism has huge potential for further expansion. This implies that an integrative approach combining classroom instruction with practical field experiences, especially case studies and field trips, is most effective for travel and tourism education. Successful educational tourism programs like Erasmus showcase the benefits of student and faculty mobility.

Challenges and Barriers to Integration

Despite the recognized benefits, integrating practical experiences into academic programs presents several challenges. One significant barrier is the logistical and financial constraints faced by educational institutions. According to Gretzel *et al.,* (2015), arranging internships, field trips, and industry collaborations requires substantial resources and coordination, which may not be feasible for all institutions. Additionally, there is often a disconnect between academic faculty and industry professionals, with differing priorities and expectations complicating effective collaboration (Cooper and Shepherd, 2019).

The Impact of Technological Advancements

The rapid advancement of technology has also reshaped the landscape of travel and tourism, necessitating a shift in educational focus. Digital literacy and familiarity with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, and virtual reality are increasingly important for tourism professionals (Buhalis and Leung 2021). However, many educational programs have been slow to integrate these technological competencies into their curricula, leading to a gap between graduates' skills and industry needs (Gretzel, Sigala, Xiang, & Koo, 2015).

Conclusion

The literature underscores the importance of aligning educational principles with industry practices in travel and tourism. While theoretical knowledge provides a necessary foundation, practical experience and industry-relevant skills are crucial for preparing students for successful careers. By addressing the gaps identified in the literature and implementing strategies to enhance experiential learning and industry collaboration, educational institutions can better equip graduates to meet the evolving demands of the travel and tourism sector. This

positional paper aims to contribute to this ongoing dialogue, offering insights and recommendations for creating a more cohesive and effective relationship between travel and tourism education and industry practice.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

To address the discrepancies between academic instruction and industry practice, several recommendations have emerged from the literature. First, enhancing experiential learning opportunities through internships/SIWES, fieldwork, and industry projects can provide students with practical skills and insights. Second, fostering stronger partnerships between academia and industry can ensure that curricula remain relevant and aligned with current industry demands. Third, integrating technological competencies into travel and tourism education is essential for preparing graduates for the digital transformation of the industry (Huang & Chuang, 2021). In addition, security concerns should be effectively tackled to ensure that students gain valuable experience necessary for their future careers.

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