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**Service Learning in Tourism Educational
Programs**

**- a Sustainable Skills Base for
Sustainable Tourism**

Abstract

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Service Learning in Tourism Educational Programs:

Developing a Sustainable Skills Base for Sustainable Tourism

One problem in developing new tourism markets remains how to resource them from an existing employment base. Key questions arising are: Do current current tourism markets have the existing skills to move into these new markets for sustainable tourism? How will tourism keep itself and its goals competitive and sustainable from a skills perspective? What skills are needed now and in the future?

This paper will discuss how the Australian national vocational education and training (VET) system provides a model that can lead to meeting these skills demands and which enables the dissemination of messages about sustainability as they trickle down through a diaspora of training and educational programs.

The Australian VET system is industry led. The national training program for VET is developed by Industry Skills Councils, funded by the Australian Government, and acting on behalf of industry to develop national qualifications based on competency standards. These outline the skills and knowledge required successfully to undertake jobs and are developed through extensive national consultation with industry. They form the basis of learning and assessment in industry, schools and technical colleges and increasingly in many universities.

Service Skills Australia is the skills council for the service industries which include tourism and hospitality, retail and personal services and sport and recreation. It is an independent, not-for-profit body established as part of an industry-led system to ensure that skills development in Australia meets the current and future needs of all industries. Through close involvement and consultation with industry, the system provides a network of interconnected bodies able to put in place relevant training programs and skills initiatives and to maximise opportunities for skills development to meet real and current industry needs.

Australia, like many countries, is facing impending skills even labour shortages across most industries. There are currently shortages of qualified cooks and hospitality service staff and an impending shortage of Mandarin-speaking guides and employees with cross-cultural skills, as we open the market increasingly to visitors to China and India. There are labour shortages in many other pockets of the industry, particularly in regional areas. Therefore, how do we ensure that we have the right numbers of skilled people for the current situation, let alone future growth? Further, how do we ensure that people have the right skills for specific jobs in particular sectors, especially in growth areas? How do we maximise the skill base of our nation to ensure maximum productivity and sustainability in this current climate of development and change.

Matching skills with industry needs is the major goal for the Skills Council. In the development of national qualifications and competency standards, Service Skills

engages in continued dialogue with industry at all levels through Board and Advisory Committee representation, consultation, projects, and research, both formal and informal. The qualifications are formally reviewed every three years and are also subject to continuous improvement in response to changing industry needs. This requires the Skills Council to be both a leader and a follower, constantly in touch with trends through close work with industry at all levels.

Recent initiatives in response to developing areas include researching the skills needs of wine tourism and ecotourism. Some three years ago, Service Skills (then Tourism Training Australia) conducted face-to-face national consultation to determine the skills needs of a range of jobs in the growing wine tourism industry. The result was a resource showing career paths and relevant training pathways as well as the development of learning support materials to encourage and support the delivery of training targeted at those working in the wine industry. In the guiding area a suite of new competency standards was developed to meet the knowledge needs of specialist guides including eco-guides, and the qualifications themselves are flexible enough to allow adaptation to many local and diverse needs.

Other areas where work is currently being undertaken in response to an industry need include the growth areas of:

- spa tourism
- indigenous cultural tourism
- events.

A set of competency standards to address the foreign language needs of jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry has been developed following needs identified in several government reports over recent years. In the area of sustainable tourism, a cluster of competency standards has been written to address skills and knowledge in environmental and cultural sustainability. Future work planned will involve taking another look at the changing skills needs of commercial cooks and caterers and at the crossover between retail food, retail liquor sales and hospitality. It is an ongoing challenge as tourism in Australia grows and changes in this increasingly global market.

But what about the implementation of the national curriculum? The Australian training system allows for flexible and diverse modes of learning and training, multi entry and exit points into training programs, articulation from vocational and technical programs into university degrees and national and cross-border recognition allowing portable skills sets. Further, the national competency standards are able to be used in a variety of ways and be linked to other programs such as accreditation. Some key examples include:

- the Eco-guide Accreditation program and a new guide accreditation program being developed by Guiding Organisations of Australia based on national competency standards
- Competency standards as the basis for an on-line training program for guides working in desert regions

- Mapping to national qualifications for Outdoor Recreation
- Links to industry run programs such as those conducted by Aboriginal Tourism Australia and Accor Pacific Hotels
- A range of training materials based on or linked to the competency standards eg the Australian Government's Steps to Sustainable Tourism.

So is it a perfect system? Does it meet the challenge for skilling Australia? Are current industry needs being met? The simple answer is that we still have much to do. The vocational education model provides a sound basis of direct industry input into skills development, however there is much room for improvement, particularly in its implementation. There is still in Australia in many areas, a mismatch between learning undertaken and industry skills needs. The Language competencies are not being delivered in tourism training programs and yet a recent Federal Government report again talks of the need for more tourism employees to speak languages other than English. Employees in many regional areas and even in some cities lack the most basic customer service skills. Trained cooks cannot be found, and even fewer exist with the required management skills. Many students with degrees cannot find jobs in their chosen fields.

Much research has been conducted, many projects and strategic initiatives have been undertaken, but we need a more pro-active and collaborative approach with participation of all players including researchers, governments, industry and training providers to develop some common goals and approaches. There are many reports either languishing on shelves or buried on the Internet!. We need more collaboration to see them turn into outcomes. Those in the educational field need to tap into both national strategic directions and local needs. Further, innovative approaches are needed in skills development models. What is the point of a wonderful training program if no-one can access it, or if it takes too long, costs too much or is on the wrong day of the week for industry? The content of programs and learning models needs to be continually examined and reviewed to meet national, local requirements. I am sure these challenges are not unique to Australia, as tourism expands and grows at an exponential rate. However, research and strategic initiatives to develop tourism will be in vain if more attention is not paid to addressing local skills needs, for without a skilled workforce, tourism cannot be sustainable.