

Cross-Cultural Interaction, Capacity Building and Sustainable (Tourism) Development. Assessing values and experiences in field-based education

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings which are part of a broader research conducted under the *Learning and Teaching Fellowship Award 2007/08*, aimed at the assessment of innovative blended learning techniques and applied learning in alternative study contexts, facilitating cross-cultural interaction, capacity building and sustainable development in the wider community.

The principal aims of this paper is to report on aspects of the research focusing on:

The exploration of students' values and learning experience facilitated through *innovative blended learning approaches* and *field-based module delivery*.

The assessment of broader values, practices and processes of *field-based activities* within Travel and Tourism Management programmes - e.g. study trips/fieldwork, block and distance content delivery, group assessment, cross-cultural collaboration with local students, etc.

Generally, travel and tourism students, studying in the UK and Europe, are taught about tourism impacts, development and management, but their applied experience is inconsistent at best and non-existent at worst. Many of them, for instance, have never visited developing countries, although they might aspire to work closely to those realities.

I was determined to change this, and after dealing with a variety of organizational issues, on November 29th 2007, a new learning experience was about to start, with a group of 21 undergraduate Travel and Tourism level 3 students from the University of Brighton, setting off for a one-week *Niche Tourism* 'field-based training' in the Gambia. This pilot experience was repeated in November 2008, to later become an established part of the level 3 curricula for the Travel and Tourism programmes at the School of Service Management of the University of Brighton.

I had visited the Gambia in November 2006 as part of a research project on tourism portfolio diversification through niche tourism development and identified the presence of conventional *educational tourism* practice in the country. The Gambia appeared to be one of the most used destinations for educational purposes by UK colleges and Universities mainly

for its accessibility and the availability of relatively cheap package holidays. However, the question on how educational tourism could differentiate itself from the mass-tourism perusal of the destination and have a deeper impact than simply taking group of students site-seeing and sun-bathing for a week in the 'smiling coast of Africa' was yet to be addressed.

While tourism is an integral part of the Gambian economy and although it is claimed to be a key driver in the socio-economic development of the country, it determines a variety of impacts, which need consideration in terms of diversified tourism development and field specific training. In line with such need, I developed collaborations with the Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism (ASSET), local operators and industry experts to enable the delivery of a field-based training equivalent to a 20 credits module, which would benefit both students from the UK and participants from the Gambia sponsored by the School of Service Management and by participants from the UK.

This venture denoted a change in SSM's values as a school and in its strategy to stimulate and enhance students' vocational leaning, values and experience by offering innovative blended delivery pattern employing fieldtrip activities with a deeper purpose and facilitating cross-cultural and philanthropic interactions and collaborations. In this context, the importance of values in sustainable practices in tourism is reflected in the implementation of innovative methods in tourism training and knowledge exchange, which can help meeting challenges in the developing world.

Values, cross-cultural interaction, innovation and knowledge management have key roles to play in both setting future agendas and responding to changes that are taking place in tourism and this particular case study can offer 'food for thoughts' for the *BEST Education Network* in furthering knowledge about practices in the field of sustainable educational tourism.

The paper will report on the data gathered through pre-field activities questionnaires, end of module questionnaire, students reflective statements and focus groups conducted in 2007 and 2008 and on this basis will attempt some final considerations on values and experiences in field-based education in particular and educational tourism in general.

Keywords: *cross-cultural interaction, field-based delivery, vocational leaning, capacity building, educational tourism.*