

Sustainable Tourism Course Structure and Associated Student Research; Past and Future

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Abstract

The author has developed and delivered Sustainable Tourism (S.T.) related courses at Institutions of Higher Education in Paris, London, Helsinki, and Parnu, Estonia over the last 10 years. The focus of the presentation would be the S.T. content and associated student research conducted in the delivery of the course over a 5 year period (2005 – 2010) at Ecole Hoteliere de Lausanne (EHL), Switzerland.

During the above time period, the S.T. course was required of all undergraduate students and delivered during their 5th of a 6 semester Bachelor of Science degree program. Although the S.T. course was listed as “Eco-tourism”, the content was S.T. and considered, as in all Schools in which the author was involved, student career aspirations and curriculum circumstances unique in each Institution.

As to be expected, the course content included some variations in major topics during the subject period. Yet, the focus of the “Past” part of this presentation will be on the structure of the assigned student team research projects and their associated learning objectives. The author was able to take advantage of the International orientation of his students who came from many different countries and as a group, often had access to as many as 4-6 different languages. (EHL often attracts students from over 80 different countries each year). As EHL students are required to work in teams in conducting research as part of most all their courses, generating papers and presentations, taking as many as 6-7 courses per semester, they developed efficient, if not always effective, methods in organizing tasks.

As it is impossible to identify in any detail the scope of the assigned team research projects to be presented, a brief preview includes 3 projects focusing on: (1) the use and limitations of lodging based eco-labeling schemes; (2) the challenges to be addressed in developing S.T. based destination eco-efficiency assessments; and (3) the take-up of regional, national and local S.T. related strategies by sample hotels in costal tourism destinations along the Spanish Mediterranean Coast.

In the assigned student team research on eco-labeling schemes, the Instructor wanted to expose the students to both the common environmental related indicators used in most

major labeling schemes being applied globally or in Europe as well as the relatively weak nature of the Social/Cultural performance indicators. Students prepared a list of eco-labeling schemes that they chose for review for approval before developing a detailed comparison, by sub-categories, of all performance indicators applied by each scheme. This data base then served as a platform for development of the 'ideal' scheme than developed and used by the student teams in conducting on-site assessments of both area hotels and restaurants as defined by the project guidelines.

Several versions of destination based S.T. eco-efficiency assessments were conducted over succeeding semesters. Learning objectives included the exposure of students to the principles associated with such assessments that compared visitor expenditures (benefits) to associated environmental impacts (costs) including both the energy requirements and related CO2 emissions for travel to, from and within selected destinations. The scope of environmental costs the students needed to examine varied but at times included the profile of tourism activities within the destination, the profile of accommodations used, etc. both by key market segments. Of course, as in all S.T. research projects; students were required to develop proposed recommendations in response to the issues identified from their research. In this case, identifying strategies to improve Eco-efficiency based Benefit/Cost ratios for specific market segments.

One of the last S. T. related research projects conducted during the subject period was focused on the 'take-up' issues by different destination based hotels of regional (IE; EU), national and local S.T. based strategies. Following structured assessments of area specific S.T. programs, organizations, key issues, implementation strategies, etc., students conducted interviews with sample 'Green' hotel managers in pre-determined Spanish Coastal tourism destinations to identify what efforts were being utilized and how area programs influenced their Sustainability programs. Students also conducted a limited number of interviews with key S.T. related organizational representatives to better identify area specific initiatives. One interesting finding of this research was the increasing information and coordination gap between regional and national S.T. programs and local hotel programs as you moved from North to South along the Coast. The failure of area inter-regional groups to deliver and support programs developed at the EU and National levels to local destinations resulted in poor awareness of opportunities to leverage incentives being offered to improve Green operations.

To address the need to improve student awareness of the decision making regarding the many tourism related trade-offs they may face in the future in shaping S.T. strategies in the destinations in which they will work, the author decided to explore the possibility of developing a web based learning tool or simulation that could be designed to enhance management capability to develop sustainable tourism destinations. The author teamed

with a simulation expert who had success in developing and introducing a simulation learning tool called 'HOTS' (www.hots-simulation.net) that is now in use in many Schools, Colleges and Universities around the world. The proposed simulation, TOUR@SIM, will hopefully be applied in a variety of learning environments, and in particular, academic institutions who could use the simulation to enhance course learning objectives. In the proposed application of the simulation, participating students would be broken into teams representing functional areas associated with attracting and servicing visitors, both domestic and foreign. For example, supply functions include accommodations, attractions, public transport, public utilities, and public services. Management functions include policy development, staffing, marketing, budgeting, revenue generation, etc. These student teams must work together under the guidance of a course instructor to make annual decisions on allocating resources. Decisions are proposed and negotiated after tracking the outcomes of previous decisions generated on a quarterly basis and monitoring the many communications generated by the simulation assessing the trends being developed in the changing 'destination'. The simulation is being designed to allow flexibility for course instructors to induce environmental changes or to place greater emphasis on key resource issues, such as water shortages during peak periods.

In developing the simulation, we have decided to take an aggressive approach to sustainable tourism. For example, TOUR@SIM will include the carbon impacts of travel to and from a destination when estimating the annual environmental costs. In our proposed use of this learning tool, student teams set their TBL index targets to match their long term (5 year) strategies, both at the beginning and half way through the learning simulation and are able to see how the decisions they made impacted their target scores or TBL trade-offs . We anticipate the use of a 10 year annual period of operations for most courses.

The author will present the concept of 'TOUR@SIM in his 'Future' segment of his presentation as it has been developed at the time of the conference and, if time allows, encourage feedback on possibilities for improving simulation performance.