

Exploring the Chinese Tourism Curriculum: A case study of Guilin Institute of Tourism, China

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the development of the tourism curriculum at the Guilin Institute of Tourism. Using a case study approach, the research describes the process of curriculum review from an existing to a new hotel management programme. Two areas are identified for discussion based on empirical data collection, satisfaction with the curriculum and quality of teaching, and the views of the students are presented. The study concludes that Guilin Institute has made considerable improvements in programme content and delivery methods and that evaluation of this kind can offer significant improvements and lead the way for developing tourism education in China.

KEYWORDS

Tourism Education, China, Programme Development

INTRODUCTION

With travel and tourism in the People's Republic of China expected to grow at an annual rate of 9.6 percent over the next decade, China will become the number one world destination for foreign tourists by 2020 (WTTC, 2008). It has also been predicted that by 2015, there will be around 200,000 lodging facilities of various kinds including about 10,000 star-rated hotels and over 500 five-star hotels across China (China Economic Net, 2008). The unprecedented growth of new hotels and developments in the tourism industry over the past decade in China has led to a sustained need for trained professionals – which in turn has created increasing pressure on its human resources' capacity. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2008) the industry accounted for 74.5 million jobs in 2008, 9.6 percent of total employment in the country. However, with projections of 98.9 million people needed in the industry by 2018, China will be greatly challenged to recruit, train and develop these millions of people for the industry over the next 9 years.

Although there is a huge demand for front line and managerial staff, in the hotel industry, and some 3.2 million job vacancies in 2007 for hospitality positions, there were still 1.2 million college graduates in China with no job offers (Xinhua News Agency, 2007). One of the challenges in meeting this demand is the ability of the universities, colleges and vocational training institutes to prepare more people equipped to meet future demands of the industry. According to Zhang and Wu (2004), "The current state of tourism education is not meeting the industry's expectation. Industry executives and managers are not satisfied with graduate performance...The current curriculum is outdated; it needs to be updated in line with industry expectations. Good, quality educators are rare."

Set against this background, there is a clear need to evaluate the ways in which tourism is being taught in China and to ascertain if and where improvements can be made.

TOURISM EDUCATION IN CHINA

There is a well established body of literature that examines the development of tourism education (Ritchie, 2002). Liu and Wall (2005) articulate that "The Chinese, in becoming involved in this (tourism) industry, are typically hampered by their lack of familiarity with service skills, marketing, and tourism cultures." Cheuk (2005) found that the Chinese education system itself did not help the development of hospitality and tourism professionals. His view was that the tourism discipline was not recognized, teachers did not have the necessary practical experience or industry networks, and in addition, Chinese tourism institutes should "strengthen the cooperation with the industry, closely linking production, learning and research" (Cheuk, 2005). In an earlier study, Lam and Xiao (2000) concluded that poor curriculum design was a major problem for

tourism education in China, and that graduates from tourism institutes and vocational schools do not meet industry requirements. This finding was confirmed in a later study by Zhang and Wu which also indicated that university graduates were unwilling to enter the industry, and that there was a gap between what was taught and the “realities of the industry itself” (Zhang & Wu, 2004). In summary, researchers seem to agree that reform of tourism education is sorely needed, and that higher education in China needs to be enabled to respond to socio-economic and labour market demands (Li & Min, 2001). These reforms are slowly happening as the Central Government responds to the need for a skilled and well-educated workforce. In essence, China is witnessing the need to develop or modernise the tourism and hospitality curriculum in order to provide an improved educational experience for students and to better meet industry needs.

Leading the way in tourism educational reform is the development of a new hotel management program at the Guilin Institute of Tourism (GLIT) in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Guilin is one of China’s primary destinations for overseas and domestic tourists, with over 12 million visitors to the city in 2008. Founded by Guilin City Council in 1985, GLIT has become one of three main institutions in China for the education and training of tourism professionals, providing over 55,000 graduates to the industry since its foundation. With the support of the regional government and the Guilin City Council the Institute received assistance from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to help establish an internationally recognized hotel management diploma program designed to meet the needs of the industry, raise quality standards and equip students for 21st century employment. A leading hospitality and tourism educational institution was commissioned by UNWTO to help GLIT design, develop and implement the new program.

The new program development process took two years and involved six phases. 1) Environmental scan, to enable the Institute to better formulate strategy, benchmark what they were doing against international standards, respond to identified industry needs and align their strategies and policies to ensure successful education of undergraduate students for the burgeoning hotel and tourism industry in China. 2) Design of the program, which involved a comparative analysis of six world-class hospitality programs to identify core subjects, gaps in the existing curriculum and unique features of the existing curriculum. 3) Training of teachers in curriculum design, lesson planning, assessment methods and classroom teaching. 4) Design of the overall curriculum, detailed syllabi and outline lesson plans. 5) Implementation of the new program in 2007 and 2008. 6) Evaluation and review of the program using qualitative and quantitative data. This comprehensive review has given an in-depth insight into the tourism curriculum in the institute.

Key features of the new programme are...(describe the new model)...what is unique?.....

STUDY METHODS

The merits of a case study approach are well documented (Yin, 2003). It allows for in-depth exploration of a particular issue, site, etc and here is used to explore the development of a

new course in Hotel Management in Guilin institute. The program was evaluated independently by the Institute and the UNWTO consultants at the end of the project development phase in December 2008. Focus group interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators and students from to gather qualitative data and to refine the questions to be used in the quantitative surveys. In addition, GLIT conducted an evaluation to compare student satisfaction and achievement in the new program with the old existing programme. The questionnaires comprised of three parts: facilities, teaching quality and the overall program. In each part, there were several relative attributes used to address the perceived importance of each attribute using a 5-point Likert scale with “1=very important” to “5=very not important”). The questionnaire also measured the satisfaction with the facilities, teaching quality and program as a whole using a 5-point Likert scale with “1=very satisfied” to “5=very dissatisfied.” The results were measured by the ranking of mean and standard deviations. This short paper cannot present the full report on the detailed results from students, teachers and administrators, so it will focus on just two critical areas – satisfaction with the curriculum and quality of teaching. Both of these areas will have a major impact on the graduate quality and determine whether graduates meet the requirements of the industry.

FINDINGS

The questionnaire data revealed that students, teachers and administrators were more satisfied with the new program than with the existing older program. The comparative study between students who joined the new program, and other students studying similar subjects in the traditional program showed that the students on the new program were more independent learners, were more responsible, had better communication and language skills and took a more active part in class. In addition, it was found that the academic achievements were higher among the students of the new program, with grades of between 3-15 percent above those of students studying similar core subjects in the traditional program (Figure 1). Due to differences in the teaching content, the arrangement of the semester and other factors, this is not an absolute comparison, but an indication that perhaps the subject content, teaching methods and student attitudes have led to better academic outcomes than comparative subject results.

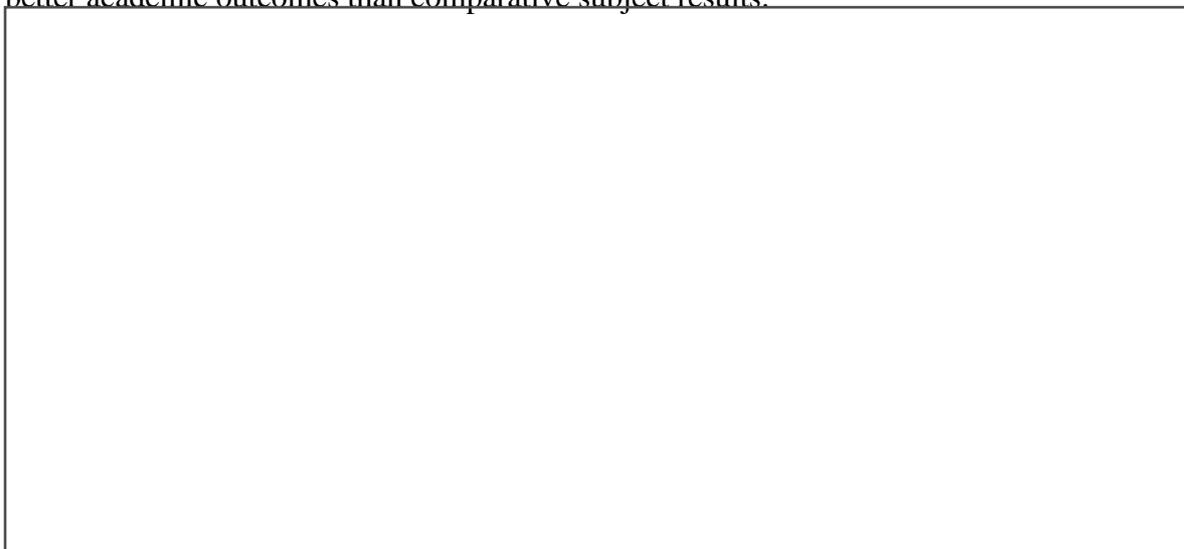


Figure 1: Comparison of New Program Class & Normal Classes

Students taking the new program were overall much more satisfied with the quality of teaching than students taking the normal program in the Institute. Students were most satisfied with the ‘Interaction between teachers and students’ (95.45%), the ‘Use of case studies’ (95.45%) and the ‘Teaching methods’ (93.18%). This compares with a much lower level of satisfaction by the other students, who rated ‘Interaction between students and teachers’ at 79.07%, ‘Use of case studies’ at 82.56% and ‘Teaching methods’ at 81.40% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Students’ satisfaction with quality of teaching

| No. | Aspect | New Program class | Normal classes | % Difference |
|-----|---|-------------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1 | After class support | 70.45% | 48.84% | 21.62% |
| 2 | Facilities | 88.64% | 72.09% | 16.54% |
| 3 | Interaction between teachers and students | 95.45% | 79.07% | 16.38% |
| 4 | Case studies | 95.45% | 82.56% | 12.90% |
| 5 | Teaching methods | 93.18% | 81.40% | 11.79% |
| 6 | Teacher’s help | 81.82% | 74.42% | 7.40% |
| 7 | Teacher’s knowledge | 90.91% | 83.72% | 7.19% |
| 8 | Teacher’s qualifications | 93.18% | 87.21% | 5.97% |
| 9 | Assessment methods | 77.27% | 73.26% | 4.02% |
| 10 | Preparation for class | 88.64% | 84.88% | 3.75% |
| 11 | Teacher’s experience | 90.91% | 87.21% | 3.70% |
| 12 | Theory and practice | 72.73% | 72.09% | 0.63% |

Students in the new program rated the following aspects of the new curriculum most satisfactory – ‘Flexibility’ 86.36% compared with 66.28% by other students, ‘Program administration’ 84.09% compared to 66.28%, and ‘Length of Internship’ 84.09% compared to 72.09% by the other students (Table 2).

Table 2: Students’ Satisfaction with the Curriculum

| No. | Aspect | New Program class | Normal class | Difference |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|------------|
| 1 | Timetabling | 81.82% | 55.17% | 26.65% |
| 2 | Flexibility | 86.36% | 66.28% | 20.08% |
| 3 | Program administration | 84.09% | 66.28% | 17.81% |
| 4 | Helpfulness to professional practice | 81.82% | 67.44% | 14.38% |
| 5 | Length of Internship | 84.09% | 72.09% | 12.00% |
| 6 | Usefulness for job seeking | 77.27% | 66.28% | 10.99% |
| 7 | Curriculum diversification | 81.82% | 72.09% | 9.73% |
| 8 | Hospitality content for freshmen | 84.09% | 74.42% | 9.67% |
| 9 | Length of Program | 81.82% | 74.42% | 7.40% |
| 10 | Teachers with industrial experience | 63.64% | 58.14% | 5.50% |
| 11 | Broad foundation of learning | 77.27% | 74.42% | 2.85% |
| 12 | Up-to-date information | 70.45% | 68.60% | 1.85% |
| 13 | Depth of Knowledge | 72.73% | 72.09% | 0.63% |
| 14 | Funding for field trips | 45.45% | 56.98% | -11.52% |

CONCLUSIONS

This new model of tourism education is quite unique in China as far as we know. The program challenges the traditional methods and approaches, and can be perceived as a threat by some who see the traditional teaching and assessment processes being undermined. In the main, however, it is seen as an opportunity to raise the standards and professionalism of the tourism and hospitality industry. For a government institution to be able to change the curriculum, implement outcome-based approaches, introduce interactive teaching, run tutorial classes and put in place an international model of assessment and quality assurance is a huge achievement. Despite some initial uncertainties about aspects of the new curriculum model, students and most academics and administrative staff have been enthusiastic, and have effectively implemented the new program in a relatively short time frame. There are still challenges to be overcome, in particular how to make the program cost-effective, hiring of enough suitably qualified and experienced teachers and satisfying Ministry of Education requirements. GLIT are also considering how to expand the model from a pilot program in one department to the rest of the Institute, which will have a much greater impact on the future direction of tourism education in mainland China.

There is a sense of expectation about the future of education in China as the nation reaches new heights in diplomacy, space exploration, research and innovation. This project is very timely for China's growth and economic development, as the model is breaking new ground, challenging traditional education methods and providing a well-designed and workable model for tourism education in China. The barriers are not insurmountable, but need to be recognized and overcome in order for Guilin Institute of Tourism, and tourism education in particular, to benefit from the foundational work of this project.

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