

Title - Supplier development – an exercise in wider reading on sustainability

Keywords - Sustainable Development, Assessment

Name - Xavier Font

School / Department - Tourism Hospitality and Events School

Institution - Leeds Metropolitan University

Group - Final year students on BA (Hons) International Tourism Management

Activity - An assessment on sustainable supply chain management for tour operators

Aim - To show that there are many lessons to be learned from looking beyond the tourism literature, and then asking the students to reflect on those lessons for the purpose of advancing knowledge in tourism

Context / Background - The decision to include sustainable supply chain management within the programme was made for a number of reasons: sustainable development issues are seen as a core part of the tourism subject area; these issues have been somewhat under-utilised to date, and sustainability is the module leader's area of research expertise.

The concept of sustainable supply chain management as it applies to tour operators was chosen for a number of reasons. First, tour operators repeatedly insist that they do not cause any negative impacts, but rather that it is their suppliers who are accountable for those impacts. There are many examples of this behaviour, particularly amongst mass tour operators, and yet little evidence of positive change. Second, these same issues have been faced by other industries in the past, eg forestry, fishing, clothing, agriculture and so on, but the parallels with the tourism industry have not necessarily been drawn. These other industries have managed to find levers for change in a way that tourism, to date, has not. Terminology such as 'corporate social responsibility', and more importantly, 'sustainable supply chain management', was not invented in tourism, but it is perfectly transferable as a concept. The challenge is to look at the range of lessons learned, including the type of actions taken by key players in the industry, and to reflect on whether tour operators can use them.

Example - The majority of tourism students tend to only use materials that talk explicitly about tourism and hospitality, and the purpose of this assessment was to help students see the advantages of looking beyond those materials. This was achieved through the study of sustainability where most of the innovations are happening outside tourism, only being adopted within the sector years later. The expectation was to encourage students to consider the feasibility of transferring experiences from other industries to tourism, and to

have them reflect on the reasons why other sectors might have adopted certain practices, considering the extent to which these are helpful to tourism.

As part of the module in Environmental Management for Tourism, students are required to write a 3,000 word essay, addressing the issues, challenges and theories on using supplier development for the purpose of sustainable supply chain management. They are required to demonstrate an awareness of the methods available to tour operators in implementing sustainable development (the part of supply chain management that looks at how the purchasing company can help their suppliers to improve their performance) in their supply chains, drawing on a range of examples and commenting on progress within the industry. There is also a need to consider the implications of sustainable supply chains for all involved. The essay is weighted as 60% of the grade for the module.

To prepare for the assessment, four different guest speakers were invited to talk to the students about supply chain management from different angles, discussing how it might be applied to tourism and the possibilities in making it happen. These included two PhD students who were currently researching the topic, and Janet Cochrane, who was previously Responsible Tourism Manager at Intravel.

Because of the complexity of the subject, each student who had a first draft of the assignment was given one-to-one time with the module leader to discuss their understanding of the subject, and to provide feedback on how to improve the first draft. This encouraged students to begin work on the assignment early (drafts were only looked at up to two weeks before the submission deadline) and allowed improvements to be made based on the feedback. It was hoped that this would overcome the issue of students too often receiving feedback only after the assignment has been marked and losing the opportunity to improve, or think about how the feedback for one assignment could help future assessments.

To make up for the challenge of writing on such a narrow topic, 50 journal articles and reports from outside the tourism industry that dealt with the assignment subject were uploaded on to WebCT (the virtual learning environment space for the module). The purpose of this was to reduce the time students spent searching for additional information (as this was not the skill being assessed), allowing them more time to work on their understanding. Fifty articles was deemed to be enough to allow different students to read different articles, so not all would be quoting the same papers. The majority of students went further and found their own sources.

Results / Feedback - Overall, the assignment was a challenge and the topic was complex, but the support provided by the module leader encouraged reflection and learning on the part of the students.

It was felt that the focus of the assignment specifically on supplier development was perhaps too narrow. This was taken into account in the marking process. The assignment had already been adapted from the

previous year, when students were asked to reflect on the transferability of the concept of corporate social responsibility, as adopted by other industries, to tourism. This was an easier topic because it was that much broader and it is intended to again broaden out the topic for next year.

Students found reading journal articles about other industries difficult, and did not always manage to see the relevance. This exercise helped to distinguish between those students that simply described what articles said, in summary format one by one, and those that not only understood the articles, but could also think critically about the transfer of experiences.

The external examiner praised the assignment, and was particularly interested in the ability of students to make sense of it.

Further Information - x.font@leedsmet.ac.uk