



Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

Vol. 1, No. 2.

ISSN: 1473-8376

www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste

PERSPECTIVE

Tourism Studies and Research Quality Assessment in UK Universities

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DOI:10.3794/johlste.12.per

© Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education

The study of tourism in UK higher education developed from several different starting points. Studies of tourism first emerged in the pre-1966 universities from within the disciplines of Geography and Economics in the decade of the 1960s. Concurrently, studies of leisure and recreation began also to appear in Geography and additionally in Sociology and Psychology, particularly in the sociology and psychology of work and social policy literatures. From the early-1980s, studies of tourism can also be found in other social sciences and humanities disciplines, particularly the Anthropology literature, and the cognate area of Business and Management Studies. The status afforded to studies of tourism within academic disciplines has been problematic from the outset. Pioneers in the field often found themselves marginalised within their own discipline communities as the 'worth' of studying leisure, recreation and tourism was constantly called into question. Some 35 years on and despite the growth of activity, particularly within Geography and Anthropology, the status of disciplined-based tourism study remains problematic.

A further source of momentum in the legitimising of the study of tourism emerged with the growth in vocational higher education through the expansion of the higher education system, post-1966. Here the disciplinary influence of industrial economics upon the study of tourism (and hotel, catering and institutional management) was strong, but the argument about the value of studying tourism was not discipline-based and the case for its emergence was made by the leadership of the interdisciplinary departments created in post-1966 universities and polytechnics. The applied knowledge and vocational agendas of these 'new' institutions of higher education forged an enduring, if not always harmonious, relationship between the study of tourism and the study of businesses, organisations and management. It is out of these dynamic influences that the considerable expansion of higher education in tourism has grown. For example, the recently published Baseline Statement of the Learning and Teaching Support Network for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (LTSN, 2002)

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identifies a 142 per cent growth in single honours courses in tourism from 31 in 1996 to 75 in 2000. The demands of an estimated 12,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students of tourism, in conjunction with expansion in the allied subjects of hospitality, leisure and sport, have prompted the creation of distinct departmental structures within higher education institutions and a growing tourism studies academy in UK higher education. It can be argued that the legitimacy of higher education learning and teaching in tourism has been strengthened by the linking of these four subject areas in the recent subject reviews in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland (Panel 25), the creation of the LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism, and the subject benchmarking initiative of the Quality Assessment Agency (QAA). It should be noted that this occurred separate to the creation of similar structures for Business and Management Studies. In contrast the process of legitimising research and scholarship in tourism studies has received scant attention in the subject communities, the funding bodies and the research councils. The purpose of this commentary is to stimulate such a debate by focusing upon the relationship between research output in, and related to, tourism studies and research quality assessment in the UK universities.

Research quality assessment in UK universities has used a number of output measures. One measure has been the volume of doctoral studies completed. A recent survey identified 147 doctoral theses related to tourism accepted by UK and Irish universities from 1990-1999 (Botterill et al., in press). The continuing marginal status of tourism studies within the disciplines, and the indifference shown towards interdisciplinary studies within a conservative discipline-based UK academy, made it surprising to the authors that the reported and sustained growth had happened at all. The growth of studies at doctoral level is in itself an indicator of the increasing importance of the subject of tourism in the wider academy. This indicator and a number of others such as the growth in the number of journal titles published in the English language (most recently estimated at 45) contribute to the estimates of the considerable scale of research and scholarship in, or related to, tourism studies.

In spite of these growth factors, the difficulties faced by discipline-based and interdisciplinary academic staff conducting tourism research are compounded by the influences of the funding structures for research in UK higher education. The internal debates on the intrinsic worth of tourism studies (which might have been restricted to individual university senates before 1986) became, through the research quality assessment exercises (RAE), structurally determined. The ensuing structure of Units of Assessment (UoA) patterned the distribution of central government research income for the universities around identified subject units. The place for reporting tourism research within the structures of the RAE has never been clear. The guidance notes on submissions to the RAE 2001 failed to mention 'tourism' at all in any major subject listing and to my knowledge, only within the UoA 34 (Town and Country Planning) was there any recognition of the subject. Research conducted prior to the 2001 RAE by the Association of Tourism in Higher Education (ATHE) identified that amongst its members, largely drawn from the 'new' university sector, submissions would be made in at least five different UoAs. Subsequent scrutiny of the published panel reports indicates that, in both UoA 43 (Business and Management) and UoA 69 (Sports-Related Studies), a considerable number of universities made returns relating to tourism. No mention was made of tourism studies in the reports of the Sociology and Anthropology, Geography or Economics panels and yet the survey of doctoral studies suggests that many are likely to have been undertaken in discipline-based departments.

These data, reported in the survey of doctorates and that being accumulated by the subject association on university submissions to the RAE 2001, confirm a substantive and expanding volume of research into tourism in UK universities. This would seem to suggest that there are some grounds for optimism that tourism studies as a distinct cognate area is coming of age in UK higher education. However, the context of the development of tourism studies referred to in the introduction of this comment confounds a simplistic inference. At the institutional level, of the 51 universities identified in the survey of doctoral theses only 11 are currently members of the subject association (ATHE). This position is slightly improved when considering the *proportion* of doctoral studies undertaken, as the largest contributors, the Universities of Strathclyde and Surrey, are both members of ATHE. Consequently this increases the proportion of doctoral studies completed in ATHE member institutions to just over one third. Conversely, in the remaining two thirds of institutions it is unclear

how such research is related to the development of tourism studies. There are clearly implications here for the 'health' of tourism studies particularly in respect of the increasingly important issue of the links, or lack of them, between research and teaching in UK universities. The development of an academy of tourism scholars also becomes problematic in this context.

Until the creation of a named category for tourism in the QAA subject frameworks of the late 1990s, there was a problem with regards to the visibility of the growth of subject provision and the recognition of the need to develop a mature academy in learning and teaching. It is suggested, therefore, that a solution to the context described above would be to secure greater visibility for the research output of UK universities in tourism studies. This could be achieved by changing the way research output related to tourism is reported in the returns made by universities to any subsequent research assessment quality exercise. Clearly this is likely to be a controversial issue as any change may impact upon the distribution of funding. In any debate within the subject community it is essential that two separate but not easily separable matters be considered. The first is the matter of the structure that drives the research quality assessment process as determined by the funding councils. The second is the matter of the tactical decisions that universities make in reporting tourism research output against that structure. The future shape and timing of the next research quality assessment is uncertain. Until it becomes more certain we can only discuss options assuming the language of the 2001 RAE.

The status quo relationship between tourism studies and research quality assessment has, in my view, become untenable and is unhelpful to the maturing of the subject. The argument that judgements of quality in tourism studies are best determined when measured against the standards in other academic subjects may well have been persuasive in the early 1990s when the volume of work was still comparatively small. It can no longer hold credibility against the evidence of the scale and quality of output now being assembled. The tactical response of UK universities and their academic collectives to this situation is understandable but potentially damaging to the subject. This tactic requires tourism scholars to seek to gain legitimacy for studies of tourism by publishing in the 'other' academic subjects' journals, in essence to define tourism studies as a sub-component of Business and Management, Geography, Media and Cultural Studies, Sports-Related Studies or whatever. The danger in continuing this tactic on its own is that the subject will remain largely invisible and will never gain the confidence to assert a body of knowledge and an equal place to other subjects within the UK academy. The subject becomes appropriated and risks being 'taken-over' and 'disappearing' from the structures of the universities and thereby increases the likelihood of becoming further marginalised. There is considerable evidence to support that this is already happening.

The creation of a single UoA for tourism studies is unlikely to be a realistic option. However, it might usefully be a manifesto pledge for the ATHE member institutions, in attempting to change the status quo at the funding councils. It may also keep the subject community debate sharply focused upon the structure of future research quality assessment. The result of such action could lead to increased visibility for tourism studies in a revised structure of research quality assessment. A realistic expectation might be that the word 'tourism' appears within one UoA title. Should this happen then collectives of tourism scholars might reassess their tactics. It is not however, in my view, likely to lead to a mass defection from other units of assessment. There are already, within the 69 UoAs examples, such as Latin American Studies, where not all research output in that subject is considered by that panel (see Latin American Studies evaluation report on the Higher Education Funding Council for England's website <http://www.hefce.ac.uk>). Tactics within universities determines that some research output finds its ways into 'other' discipline panels and leads, in many panels, to a process of cross-referral. It is suggested, however, that this outcome would have two desirable effects on the 'health' of the tourism studies academy. First, the 'newer' universities at the forefront of expansion in undergraduate tourism higher education currently not engaging in research output activities might be more encouraged to do so, thus increasing the contribution to the body of knowledge in tourism studies and, although not automatically, strengthening links between research and learning and teaching. Second, the 'older' universities might be encouraged to submit research output to such a panel because they would have a more visible and, contentiously a potentially higher, evaluation of *tourism* research output. This, in turn, might encourage discipline-based individuals in those

institutions to become more confident in self-identifying as tourism researchers, thereby contributing to the unification of the tourism studies academy.

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