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PERSPECTIVE

## In search of a mature subject?

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Following the recent memorial lecture for Professor Rik Medlik who died last year it is timely to consider the state of the subject that he helped to pioneer – Tourism. Has it reached a point of maturity and recognition, taking its place as an equal alongside other longer standing social sciences or is it still primarily a vocational application of other subject areas, designed simply to leave students “surprise free” about what they might find in subsequent employment? As the first professor in the field and as pioneer of the first tourism degree programme, Rik and his contemporaries did much to set out and codify an initial field of study for tourism, to develop its position in relation to the wider community and to develop the pedagogy associated with the subject. A good example of Rik’s influence is the first UK textbook devoted specifically to tourism, *Tourism Past Present and Future*, which he co-authored with John Burkart in 1974. Its influence on the curriculum was clear for at least 20 years and elements of it can still be recognised in programmes today.

However, subjects do not stand still and tourism is no exception. Since Rik’s time there has of course been a massive expansion in the provision of tourism programmes. Recent estimates (Airey, 2005) put the number of degree programmes at 150 in the UK alone with about 10,000 students - a far cry from the 20 or so students in 1972. This growth is important in that it has supported a parallel expansion in the scholars involved in tourism (Airey, 2002) and it is these who have been key in the development of the subject and taken it on from the initial steps of Rik’s first generation of scholars. Based on their work over the past 40 or so years, tourism has clearly become a recognised member of the Academy. It is this scholarly contribution which suggests that the first stage of development of tourism as a subject is now complete. However, the question remains whether it has reached a point of maturity.

Evidence from those who have commented on the nature and the growth of knowledge about tourism, the development of the research base, the diversification of the curriculum and the development of the pedagogy (Xiao & Smith, 2006; Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Tribe, 2005b; Tribe & Airey, 2007; Stergiou et al., 2008; Tribe, 1997; Tribe, 2000; Tribe, 2006) suggest that tourism has moved far beyond its “surprise free” origins. If the following are indicators of maturity: a community of scholars with the support structures of dedicated journals, other publications and scholarly conferences; a curriculum which is not constrained to a particular territory and about which there is a measure of agreement; an appreciation that teaching and learning is as much about encouraging students to challenge and think as it is about passing on knowledge; a recognition in common with other social sciences that tourism has taken a cultural turn (Ateljevic et al., 2007); an ability for scholars to be self-critical and aware of the

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nature of the truths about their work (Tribe, 2006); then as Airey (2008) has noted, tourism has reached a point of maturity.

There is of course plenty of work to be done in further exploring these aspects of maturity. This in itself provides a more than full research agenda for the next generation of scholars interested in the subject area of tourism. But there are other issues where maturity is much less well assured, and these are equally worthy of further work and consideration. Among the continuing questions for tourism is whether, as a subject area, it is theoretically coherent or equally whether it contains some underlying theories that distinguish it from other areas of study. The subject's boundaries are still largely defined by tourism as a field of practice, and its knowledge and theoretical bases still draw heavily on a range of disciplines. In this sense it is essentially multidisciplinary. Examples of interdisciplinary knowledge creation from within tourism are few and far between (Airey, 2002). These linked topics of the development of theory, and the nature and creation of interdisciplinary knowledge, pose some important puzzles for tourism as a field of study which are certainly worthy of further thought and exploration.

Meyer and Land's (2003) work relating to threshold knowledge provides an interesting line of thinking in the consideration of tourism as a mature subject. For Meyer and Land, threshold knowledge is that which is often troublesome to grasp, but once entered and understood leads on to new and, for the individual, previously inaccessible ways of thinking. It is the sort of knowledge without which it is impossible to proceed further in understanding a subject and having been acquired the individual never quite sees the subject in the same light again. The examples they provide are "opportunity cost" for economics, "signification and deconstruction" for literary studies, "precedence" for law and "limits" for pure mathematics. The question for tourism is whether it contains its own threshold knowledge. Perhaps Urry's "tourism gaze" (1990) or Archer's (1977) "tourism multiplier" provide examples, although in both cases they have their origins in other subject areas.

One area where tourism seemingly lacks maturity compared with other social sciences lies in the broad acceptance of the knowledge developed in the Academy by a wider community. It is something of a paradox that while tourism educational programmes typically have a strong orientation toward the world of work and indeed are essentially vocational, tourism knowledge creation is much less engaged with the wider world and so often has little influence on developments in tourism itself either in policy or in operational terms. As Cooper (2006:48) has pointed out "while the pivotal role of knowledge as a competitive tool has long been recognised" tourism has been slow in adopting this so called "knowledge management". This is partly because of the gap between researchers and the tourism sector, and partly because of a "hostile knowledge adoption environment" (Cooper, 2006, p. 47). There is clearly much more work to be done in understanding this apparent gap in tourism as a subject of study and research.

Winne and Marx (1977) commented that research on education depends most heavily on research about teaching for its advancement. For tourism, the research agenda has been dominated by studies of the curriculum. The work by Stergiou et al. (2005; 2008) has begun to redress this, but there is still a long way to go before outputs about teaching match those related to the curriculum. In 2001, Tribe (2005a) found 261 papers related to the curriculum and only 8 concerned with learning, teaching and assessment. Here is clear territory for further work. One interesting direction for research into teaching is provided by Shulman's (2005) work on signature pedagogies in the professions or, as he describes them, "the characteristic forms of teaching and learning ...that organize the fundamental ways ...in which novices are instructed" (p. 52) to think, perform and act with integrity. The starting point in this is the simple question as to whether tourism has its own signature pedagogies.

The theme of the maturity of a subject area is a complex one and one with definitional problems, but it clearly provides a useful framework for thinking about the next stages in the exploration and development of the subject of tourism. Given that tourism as a distinct field of study has reached the age of 40 (Airey, 2008), the age at which life is supposed to begin, it provides a timely theme for the development of further strands of research. There is still

plenty of work relating to the curriculum, the nature of knowledge and its creation, and the theory building in tourism, but if these can also be joined by studies of knowledge management and pedagogical development, wherever maturity lies, tourism will be able to move closer to it.

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