Chapter 11 Integrating the ‘VERB’ model into an undergraduate tourism management degree programme
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Summary

This case study highlights the value of consultancy-led learning and teaching, and outlines how an industry model supporting sustainable destination management has been successfully embedded into an undergraduate tourism management degree programme to help students understand and contextualise the key aspects of sustainable tourism. The VERB equation (visitor, environment, residents, businesses) provides an extremely simple but coherent framework around which to consider the long-term sustainability of tourism and destination planning, while coincidentally providing an effective vehicle for education for sustainable development (ESD).

Introduction and context

Since its inclusion in 2003 in the joint English Tourism Council and Tourism Management Institute (TMI) Destination Management Handbook (DMH), the VERB model has been regarded by the tourism sector as a “simple concept, used by agencies, businesses and government as a means of making tourism an integral part of sustainable development” (VisitEngland, 2012a). The VERB model, an effective ‘quadruple bottom line’, covers the interaction between visitors, the businesses that serve them, the residents that host them, and their collective impact on, and in response to, the environment (Partners for England, 2008) (see Figure 1). Given that tourism businesses are characteristically resistant to calls to operate more sustainably as a result of confusion about the meaning and relevance of the concept (Vernon et al, 2005), the VERB model has provided a means of ‘de-mystifying’ the theory of sustainability into a topic that encourages business understanding and engagement. First pioneered by New Forest District Council, the VERB model has provided a structure that facilitates a “planned and co-ordinated approach to sustainable destination management, that has struck a balance between being sufficiently complex to involve all the stakeholders in an informed working partnership and sufficiently simple to be operational” (Countryside Agency, 2001: 44).

Figure 1: The VERB model. (Source: VisitEngland, 2012a)

Now embedded in VisitEngland’s Strategic Tourism Framework (2011) and all related action plans, the VERB model underpins VisitEngland’s vision for sustainable tourism, embodied in their Principles for Wise Growth (see Figure 2). They say: “Its success will depend on the quality of dialogue and relationships between those who are responsible for achieving its aims. These stakeholders include visitors, residents and tourism businesses…bringing these different interests together, and the organisations that represent them, is essential in establishing common ground and effective decision-making.” (VisitEngland, 2010b: 2). The VERB model provides a coherent framework for understanding, managing and monitoring sustainable tourism, and achieving the principles and long-term industry aspirations for Wise Growth.

1 VERB replaced VICE (Visitor, Industry, Community and Environment) in VisitBritain’s Principles for Wise Growth (2010). To avoid confusion the VERB model is referred to throughout.
While central to effective destination management, the VERB model has also emerged as an effective vehicle to support ESD, for businesses and students alike, facilitating an holistic and informed overview of a destination, which allows all related, and often disparate, stakeholders to recognise the role they can play in supporting economic, social and environmental sustainability (Clegg, 2008). As Climpson (2008) highlights: “All those working in destination management have a piece of the jigsaw: the trick will be to work together to create a successful bigger picture which will benefit the tourism offering of the UK as a whole…so, in effect, destination tourism requires a quadruple bottom line consideration, a balance between the competing needs and demands of the visitor, industry, community and environment…it is only then that true sustainability can be targeted.”

Applicable on a local, regional, national and international scale, the VERB model provides an applied framework from which destination managers can positively respond to their local VERB circumstances (VisitEngland, 2012a), and create a destination management plan which serves to:

- welcome, involve and satisfy visitors;
- achieve a profitable and prosperous business sector;
• engage and benefit local residents and host communities;
• protect, reflect and enhance the local environment.

Compared with more established models of sustainable tourism which focus on the need to balance social, economic and environmental issues (the triple bottom line), the VERB model puts an additional focus on the visitor, thus seeking to develop sustainable tourism in the wider context of enhancing the overall quality of the visitor experience. As VisitEngland (2010a: 1) highlights “destination management is a process that ensures that the visit experience is of the highest quality and continues to develop and adapt to meet the needs and expectations of visitors”.

Given the increasing strategic emphasis on destination management, and the need to develop effective destination management plans, as evidenced in the Destination Management Action Plan (VisitEngland, 2010a), it is imperative that tourism management graduates are conversant with the theory and practical application of the VERB model and the Destination Management Handbook (DMH). Given the model is central to the core responsibilities of destination managers, and their engagement with the four constituent stakeholder groups, it is also essential that attention is given to developing competences and employability skills required for work in the destination sector, and that graduates are given the opportunity to engage with different stakeholder groups as part of their degree programme. As VisitEngland (2012b) points out “the greatest challenge for destination managers is that they directly control very little of the huge range of elements that make up the visitor’s experience. The skill in delivering the VICE model is to become a ‘jack of all trades, master of making them one’”.

The role of external consultancy work

In order to contextualise the integration of the VERB model into ESD, it is first necessary to consider how our use of the VERB model has been influenced by employer engagement, and how this in turn has influenced the underpinning pedagogy of the tourism management degree in the School of Enterprise, Management and Leadership (SEMAL) at the University of Chichester. Our degree has a specific focus on sustainability and sustainable destination management, which has arisen as a result of related consultancy work we have undertaken in the department. For example, we pioneered the use of the VERB model as part of the south-east Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) sustainable tourism project. Set up to run for two years from January 2002, the project aimed to co-ordinate, deliver and promote a rural tourism initiative in the AONBs of South East England, which endeavoured to foster a greater sense and awareness of sustainability that was not solely restricted to environmental considerations but also the wider economic, social and cultural impacts of tourism within a host destination. Working with the Regional Tourist Board Partnership, we have also been providing training and support for sustainable business development over the last decade.

In 2009, green training built around the VERB model, developed by staff at the University of Chichester to support accreditation in the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS), won a regional National Training Award.

As one training delegate commented: “The training really inspired me to look at my green marketing in a different light… it’s not about light bulbs, it’s about being innovative and really participating in my local community. . . I can advance my business by being proud of our green achievements and not being shy to shout about them.”

Reflecting on our pedagogic successes of using the VERB model externally with tourism providers, it seemed logical to integrate the same application of VERB in to our approaches to learning and teaching and ESD in our academic programmes.

Objectives

Consultancy-led learning and teaching

The external use of VERB and the subsequent embedding of consultancy work have both helped us to develop an applied perspective towards ESD. Involvement with the public and private sector at a local, regional and national level has provided valuable opportunities to include industry professionals in the teaching and learning programme. Industry engagement has highlighted the diverse range of sustainable tourism projects underway across the region, and provided valuable real-life examples of the practical realities associated with sustainable destination management. Such examples provide valuable fieldtrip opportunities to consider and critique examples of best practice. We have afforded students the opportunity to look beyond the academic text and place key themes related to sustainable destination management in the context of destination environments. The consistent emphasis we place on applied situations and engagement with destination professionals is essential to embed the necessary skills, competences and experience that destination managers require nowadays and which have been highlighted in the Destination Management Action Plan (VisitEngland, 2010b). Significantly, this approach counters the common criticism of tourism degrees which is that they fail to deliver programmes that are relevant to the tourism industry and are seen to be provided by individuals with little experience of the ‘real world’ (Leslie and Richardson, 2000).
Developing progression

We have given careful consideration to progression in the delivery of ESD in the degree programme, making a clear transition from introduction, to theory, to applied application (see Figure 3). Within a core first year module (Tourism, Events and Destinations: Impacts and Sustainability) students are introduced to sustainable tourism, and the VERB model. A second year module, Sustainable Business Management, takes the discussion a stage further and looks at the underpinning theory and operational aspects of sustainable development and sustainable business practice. Interestingly, the latter was originally a module focusing solely on sustainable tourism; however, given the increasing emphasis on the need for environmentally aware graduates, we have developed this into a broader module, that, while remaining core to all tourism and event students, is now offered to all students in SEMAL. The module refers back to VERB but also considers related issues such as green business accreditation, for example, the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GBTS), and sustainable events, with reference to the British Standard for Sustainable Events (BS8901).
In their final year, students undertake a core module on Sustainable Destination Management, which has been specifically designed around the content of the DMH (see Figure 4).
Figure 4: The contents of the Destination Management Handbook. (Source: VisitEngland, 2012a)

1: Destination Planning
Introduction
1A: Tourism in the Public Sector
1B: Developing Tourism Partnerships
1C: Engaging the Industry
1D: Tourism and Planning
1E: Tourism - Links to Other Public Policy Programmes

2: Destination Development
Introduction
2A: Sustainable Destination Management
2B: Taking a Quality-Led Approach
2C: Skills and Workforce Development
2D: Sustainable Visitor Transport
2E: Setting up a Visitor Payback Scheme
2F: Accessible Tourism
2G: Identifying and Developing Local Distinctiveness
2H: Developing Visitor Management Plans

3: Destination Monitoring
Introduction
3A: Measuring Overall Tourism Performance
3B: Surveying Visitor Satisfaction
3C: Determining the Local Economic Impact of Tourism
3D: Surveying Local Community Attitudes to Tourism
3E: Determining Local Recreational Carrying Capacity

4: Destination Marketing
Introduction
4A: A Strategic Approach to Destination Marketing
4B: Who to Target
4C: The Product or What to Take to Market
4D: Routes to Market – Or How to Reach the Visitor
4E: Marketing to Business Tourism

5: Destination Information
Introduction
5A: Visitor Information Services
5B: The Business Case for Visitor Information
5C: Delivering Visitor Information
5D: Alternative Delivery Options
5E: New Technology

6: Tourism in the Public Sector
Introduction
6: National and Regional Tourism Structures and Policies
Using the VERB model

The constituent elements of the VERB model provide the basis for a range of practical and interactive workshop sessions. For a typical first-year workshop on the Tourism, Events and Destinations: Impacts and Sustainability module, students are split into respective VERB groups (visitor, environment, residents and businesses) and then asked to identify all the sustainability elements which relate to them. This workshop provides an overview of sustainable tourism, and encourages students to critique sustainable tourism in the broadest context. The session serves to map out the key areas of sustainable tourism that will be covered in the module, which also relate to the Wise Growth Action Plan (VisitEngland, 2010b). Students work through the same workshop materials that were developed for industry and which were awarded a National Training Award. This is invaluable as it not only provides academic context but also encourages students to think about sustainability from a business and destination perspective. A similar workshop format is used in the module Sustainable Destination Management, where interactive sessions are used to explore the different aspects of the DMH (see Figure 5). This collaborative working is now being supported by the use of online collaborative tools, such as Mindmeister (http://www.mindmeister.com/) (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Interactive workshops. (Source: Clegg, 2012)
Assessment

We have designed assessment to support ESD across the degree programme. This is best illustrated in the module Sustainable Destination Management, in which students are asked to develop a destination management strategy, working collectively as a consultancy company to a clear brief provided by a client. The aim of this assessment is for students to demonstrate their understanding of the DHM and VERB model through the process of destination management – as specified in the Destination Management Action Plan (VisitEngland, 2010a). Examples of destination management strategies the students have produced include a Visitor Economy Strategy for Bognor Regis, an Arts and Cultural Heritage Strategy for Chichester, and a Sense of Place Strategy for the Manhood Peninsula. Projects are frequently linked to live consultancy projects we are supporting in SEMAL. As a second part of the assessment, students are asked to apply for a destination management post, and give a ten-minute presentation as part of the application process. The job profiles, based on the descriptors developed by New Forest District Council, relate to the constituent elements of the VERB model, so students can choose to apply for a position as a visitor, environment, resident, or business. In the presentations, the students are asked to consider the operational challenges of implementing the VERB model in relation to the specific post they have chosen. Following the presentation, the students are afforded the opportunity to expand on and defend their presentation in a 15-minute interview. To add a greater sense of realism, destination management professionals are invited to sit on the interview panel.

Evaluation

A review of the module evaluation forms shows the overall feedback from students has been positive.

As one student commented: “Dealing with the industry on projects is very helpful as we are going out into the industry in a few months’ time so getting prepared to deal with various industry members in a suitable professional manner is beneficial, and having such experience to add to a CV will help us stand out in the job market.”
Another student commented: “Fieldtrips were a valuable tool to enable us to gather first-hand experience from people involved with sustainable destination management…it was helpful to meet so many visiting speakers…seeing theory in practice puts the past three years in context…and demonstrated the fragmented but very inter-related aspects of tourism and sustainable development.”

Positive feedback has also come from external stakeholders, who have been involved in the delivery of the programme. Moreover, external feedback has demonstrated the emerging emphasis on ‘green graduates’ and that understanding sustainability is now regarded as an important graduate skill, which also enhances student employability.

As one stakeholder commented: “An activity that I most enjoy is participating on the employer/student interview panel at the end of Level 3. I have interviewed many of the students and am enthused by the quality and breadth of knowledge displayed at these mock interview sessions. The students are well versed and are able to demonstrate how theories can be applied to the business environment. They are up to speed with many of the current tourism issues and show flair and acumen for the subject. Many of the students would make an immediate contribution to the business world and workforce.”

Our approach and focus to ESD through the use of the DMH, has also been endorsed by New Forest District Council which commented: “Continued involvement with the industry adds significant value to the student experience…the integration of the DMH into the degree programme signals HE’s alignment to the needs of employers and ensures that students are suitably qualified and experienced to work in the industry.”

Main learning points

Three specific learning points can be highlighted from our experiences of using the VERB model. First, the process has reinforced the importance and value of consultancy-led learning and teaching. Our engagement with public and private sector organisations has facilitated an applied approach to the delivery of ESD, and added real currency, credibility and legitimacy to the learning experience. Involving destination management professionals in the learning, teaching and assessment process has facilitated a better understanding among industry partners of how HE is equipping tourism management graduates with an up-to-date and applied knowledge of the principles and practices of sustainable destination management.

Second, the VERB model provides an effective framework in which to consider sustainable tourism and, in particular, the practical intricacies of sustainable destination management. As Climpson (2008) highlights “…the key messages from the destination management perspective are that sustainability should be approached as a built-in component of all activity, not a bolt-on option. It is about creating a destination relationship network with everybody: visitor, industry, community and environmental stakeholders”.

The quadruple bottom line of the VERB model extends established definitions of sustainable tourism, and provides an accessible and coherent platform for ESD from which to consider social, economic and environmental sustainability. Moreover, within the social component, the model serves to stress the importance of the relationship between visitors and residents; in developing a sustainable tourism destination it is essential that the well-being and needs of the host community are considered as part of the equation (VisitEngland, 2012a), and that sustainable destination management should serve to enhance the overall quality of the visitor experience.

Third, careful module design (in terms of the delivery of ESD) has facilitated clear progression between theory and application. This in turn, has been supported by the nature of the delivery and our specific focus on interactive workshops, allowing students to really engage with ESD and the themes of the VERB model and DMH. In particular, the applied emphasis at Level 6 and student engagement in live consultancy projects have been instrumental in allowing students to develop the skills and competences required of destination managers.

References


Biographies

ANDREW CLEGG is programme co-ordinator for tourism management at the University of Chichester, and also principal lecturer for learning and teaching. Andrew has a specialist interest in sustainable destination management, and has worked with a variety of public and private sector organisations guiding the development of destination management strategies. Andrew is an external trainer for Tourism South East, and in 2009 won a regional National Training Award for work supporting green tourism business accreditation. Andrew has recently become the Chairman of Visit Chichester.

JORGE GUTIC is a senior lecturer in tourism management at the University of Chichester and is particularly interested in the development of sustainable tourism initiatives in natural environments aimed at enhancing the quality of life of local communities and the preservation of the ecosystems on which the tourism industry depends. He has extensive experience in environmental impact assessment for tourism projects and in the design, provision and delivery of interpretative training packages for front-line tourism industry staff in natural areas and heritage destinations.
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