THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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Abstract

The Master’s Program in Management and Ecological Tourism combines sustainability and tourism in an educational program, in a high quality education program, with professionals and experts, in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach that allows improving product competitiveness and increasing cultural, social and environmental sensitivity. In order to determine the role of academia in sustainable tourism, we asked experts in the area. It should be to unify tourism development with sustainability, which requires knowledge applied to management. The demand for qualified personnel grows as this type of tourism increases. There are no educational alternatives to professionalize sustainable tourism. It is a fact in this field that local graduates do not find an outlet in the labour market, while companies complain that graduates do not respond to their needs. So, there is a mismatch between training and the labour market in Sustainable Tourism, which generates a training need. The areas in which education is needed are management, good practices, administration, economic resources, marketing and communication. The students are professionals and recent graduates. Professionals want to apply concepts of sustainability to their work, to expand knowledge and start new projects or to undertake an ecotourism project. Recent graduates have a sustainable mentality and lifestyle and want to orient their professional life in this sector and deepen knowledge about ecotourism. This program is taught online, and often this causes contradictions, so students were asked regarding the advantages and disadvantages of e-Learning methodology. The advantages of studying online are self-organization of time, self-taught research, comfort, costs savings, possibility of studying anywhere, to be able to combine master with work and daily life conciliation. Regarding disadvantages, some students do not see any, and other say there is no direct contact with teachers or other students, they don't live the university environment, the sensation of "loneliness" and difficulties in understanding.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, education, e-Learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Master’s Program in Management and Ecological Tourism combines sustainability and tourism in an educational program, in a high quality education program, with professionals and experts, in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach that allows improving product competitiveness and increasing cultural, social and environmental sensitivity. In order to determine the role of academia in sustainable tourism, we asked experts in the area. It should be to unify tourism development with sustainability, which requires knowledge applied to management. The demand for qualified personnel grows as this type of tourism increases. There are no educational alternatives to professionalize sustainable tourism. It is a fact in this field that local graduates do not find an outlet in the labour market, while companies complain that graduates do not respond to their needs. So, there is a mismatch between training and the labour market in Sustainable Tourism, which generates a training need. The areas in which education is needed are management, good practices, administration, economic resources, marketing and communication [1]. The students are professionals and recent graduates. Professionals want to apply concepts of sustainability to their work, to expand knowledge and start new projects or to undertake an ecotourism project. Recent graduates have a sustainable mentality and lifestyle and want to orient their professional life in this sector and deepen knowledge about ecotourism. This program is taught online, and often this causes contradictions, so students were asked regarding the advantages and disadvantages of e-Learning methodology. The advantages of studying online are self-organization of time, self-taught research, comfort, costs savings, possibility of studying anywhere, to be able to combine master with work and daily life conciliation. Regarding disadvantages, some students do not see any, and other say there is no direct contact with teachers or other students, they don't live the university environment, the sensation of "loneliness" and difficulties in understanding.
2 WHAT IS MEST?

MEST (Master’s Program in Ecological and Sustainable Tourism) is an Official specialized postgraduate program, included in the official programme of the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), and in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) [2]. It lasts one year (60 ECTS) and it is taught online, through a virtual platform. The program started in 2016 and this is the second year it takes place [3].

MEST links sustainability and tourism in a learning program, with high quality education, taught by highly qualified experts. It gives a multidisciplinary approach of ecotourism that improves the competitiveness of the ecotouristic product and increases cultural, social and environmental sensibility [4].

MEST is intended for professionals who wish to apply concepts of sustainability to their work, to expand knowledge, to start new projects or to undertake an ecotourism project.

It is also intended for just graduates who want to orient their professional life in this sector, who have a sustainable mentality and/or lifestyle, or who want to deepen knowledge about ecotourism.

3 METHODOLOGY

Surveys were conducted on students in order to get feedback regarding the reasons to study this program, the advantages and disadvantages they find in online courses, and what is in their opinion the role of academia in ecotourism.

The following questions were asked to students.

Survey. Importance of training in sustainable tourism

1. What have you studied previously?
2. What are your motivations to study this Master's Program?
3. What are the advantages of online training?
4. What are the disadvantages of online training?
5. Would you have preferred the master's degree to be face-to-face?
6. Write any additional information that you consider relevant as data on the importance of training in the field of sustainable tourism.
7. What is the role of the academy in Sustainable Tourism?

3.1 Academic Year 2016 - 2017

The academic year 2016-2017 was the first year of the Master’s Program. It started with 15 students from Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Mexico, Argentina and China. The number of just graduated students was higher than the number of professionals.

3.2 Academic Year 2017 - 2018

The academic year 2017-2018 was the second year of the Master's Program. It started with 20 students from Spain, Portugal, Germany, Peru, Ecuador and China. The number of students working in this field was higher than the number of just graduated students.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Previous studies

Students background where Information and Documentation, Education Sciences, Tourism, Technical Architecture, Anthropology, Languages and Business Administration.
4.2 Results MOTIVATION

According to the surveys conducted on the students, their motivation to study the program is their “sustainable mentality” (43%), to deepen knowledge (29%), to start an ecotourism project (14%) and other reasons (14%).

4.3 Preference for online vs. in person studies

Most of the students have chosen this study programme because it is taught online. Only 11% would have preferred that it was an in-person programme.
4.4 Advantages of online studies

According to the surveys, the advantages of studying online are the following.

- Self-organization of own time.
- Comfort.
- Cost savings.
- Self-taught research.
- Possibility of studying anywhere.
- Possibility to combine with daily life and conciliation.

4.5 Disadvantages of online studies

According to the surveys conducted on the students, the disadvantages of studying online are the following.

- Some students do not see any disadvantage.
- They miss the direct contact with the lecturers.
- There are also more facilities when going to classes, since being in the university they can access libraries, go to tutorials with teachers or manage other topics such as enrolment, internships, etc. They consider sometimes emails are not enough and that face-to-face is better.
- Sensation of "loneliness" because the relationship with teachers and students is more complicated virtually, even if the online communication tools are available.
- Sometimes learning is based on readings and there are no face-to-face teacher-student meetings, in which it is easier to convey by the teacher what are the key points on which he wants the student to focus his study.
- There is a lack of involvement or the fluent relationship with the teachers.
- Little cultural exchange with the other people of the master. For those who do not have discipline it can be very difficult to follow. The courses become very theoretical and impractical.
- Difficulties in understanding.

5 THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA IN ECOTOURISM MASTER STUDIES

Surveys were conducted on students but also on stakeholders belonging to the MEST Friends Club, which has been mentioned in previous publications [5].

According to the surveys conducted on students, there are very few specific studies on sustainable tourism and ecotourism at specialized level of Master or postgraduate, for what the implementation of this Master is something very necessary, when dealing with an issue of global importance and for being of basic and necessary application from the present moment.

Sustainable tourism is an area that should be strengthened for that it is the only way to manage tourism correctly in the long term, however, there are not many qualifications in this regard and although all have to do with similar topics, there is no homogeneity in the titles offered.
This type of training is essential in Spain, since there is little quality available. It is necessary to link knowledge to the business and institutional sphere, and to raise awareness about the importance of expanding and applying knowledge in the field of sustainability in tourism. It is of no use to professionals in tourism to specialize in a field that is not valued or demanded by companies or by public institutions.

Like all sectors and industries, tourism must evolve towards sustainable practices that guarantee the conservation of our resources. Adequate continuous training is essential for this type of tourism to become a requirement and not something that only some practice. The training of professionals must come from public institutions and the private sector and involve both tourists and host communities.

According to the surveys conducted on stakeholders, role of Academia in Ecotourism would be.

- To respond to the training needs for the sector highlighted in the Daimiel 2016 Ecotourism Declaration [6] and ratified in the II National Ecotourism Congress [7].
- To share knowledge and training with all sectors and actors of ecotourism, from the professional to the visitor.
- To unite tourism development with sustainability requires knowledge applied to management.
- To respond to the demand for qualified personnel that grows as this type of tourism increases.
- To offer educational alternatives to professionalize sustainable tourism.
- To help local graduates find an outlet in the labor market in which companies complain that graduates do not respond to their needs.
- To eliminate the mismatch between training and the labor market in Sustainable Tourism.

According to this, the academic need in ecotourism should be focused in the following fields.

- Sustainable tourism management
- Good practices
- Administration
- Search of economic resources

And it should cover the following areas.

- Natural spaces. Management, planning, uses.
- Creation of products
  - Design and typologies of ecotourism products.
  - Public attention and public relations.
  - Good practices.
  - Training of guides.
  - Interpretation of heritage.
  - Biodiversity, conservation, identification of flora and fauna.
  - Legislation, financing, etc.
  - Marketing strategies.
  - Communication and ICT, marketing, trends.

Finally, the challenges and trends of the academia in this sector would be.

- To provide qualified training.
- To investigate about all aspects related to sustainable tourism.
- To establish knowledge networks at different levels to exchange information.
- To collaborate with public administration.
- To develop tools and methods of work applying scientific research methods.
• To be aligned with the advances, trends and evolution of the sector, in contact with local companies, public bodies, associations and administrations.

REFERENCES


