

Exploring the Chinese Tourism Curriculum: A case study of Guilin Institute of Tourism, China

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the development of a new tourism curriculum at the Guilin Institute of Tourism. Using a case study approach, the research describes the process of curriculum review from an existing to a new hotel management programme. Two areas are identified for discussion based on empirical data collection, satisfaction with the curriculum and quality of teaching. The views of the students are presented. The study concludes that Guilin Institute has made considerable improvements in programme content and delivery methods and that evaluation of this kind can offer significant improvements and may lead the way for developing tourism education in China.

KEYWORDS

Tourism Education, China, Programme Development

INTRODUCTION

With travel and tourism in the People's Republic of China expected to grow at an annual rate of 9.6 percent over the next decade, China will become the number one world destination for foreign tourists by 2020 (WTTC, 2008). It has also been predicted that by 2015, there will be around 200,000 lodging facilities of various kinds including about 10,000 star-rated hotels and over 500 five-star hotels across China (China Economic Net, 2008). The unprecedented growth of new hotels and developments in the tourism industry over the past decade in China has led to a sustained need for trained professionals – which in turn has created increasing pressure on its human resources' capacity. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2008) the industry accounted for 74.5 million jobs in 2008, 9.6 percent of total employment in the country. However, with projections of 98.9 million people needed in the industry by 2018, China will be greatly challenged to recruit, train and develop these numbers of people for the industry over the next 9 years.

Although there is a huge demand for front line and managerial staff in the hotel industry, and some 3.2 million job vacancies in 2007 for hospitality positions, there were still 1.2 million college graduates in China with no job offers (Xinhua News Agency, 2007). One of the challenges in meeting this demand is the ability of the universities, colleges and vocational training institutes to prepare more people equipped to meet future demands of the industry. According to Zhang and Wu (2004), "The current state of tourism education is not meeting the industry's expectation. Industry executives and managers are not satisfied with graduate performance...The current curriculum is outdated; it needs to be updated in line with industry expectations. Good, quality educators are rare."

Set against this background, there is a clear need to evaluate the ways in which tourism is being taught in China and to ascertain if and where improvements can be made.

TOURISM EDUCATION IN CHINA

There is a well established body of literature that examines the development of tourism education (Ritchie, 2002). Liu and Wall (2005) articulate that "The Chinese, in becoming involved in this (tourism) industry, are typically hampered by their lack of familiarity with service skills, marketing, and tourism cultures." Cheuk (2005) found that the Chinese education system itself did not help the development of hospitality and tourism professionals. His view was that the tourism discipline was not recognized, teachers did not have the necessary practical experience or industry networks, and in addition, Chinese tourism institutes should "strengthen the cooperation with the industry, closely linking production, learning and research" (Cheuk, 2005). In an earlier study, Lam and Xiao (2000) concluded that poor curriculum design was a major problem for tourism education in China, and that graduates from tourism institutes and vocational schools do not meet industry requirements. This finding was confirmed in a later study by Zhang and Wu which also indicated that university graduates were unwilling to enter the industry, and that there was a gap between what was taught and the "realities of the industry

itself" (Zhang and Wu, 2004). In summary, researchers seem to agree that reform of tourism education is sorely needed, and that higher education in China needs to be enabled to respond to socio-economic and labour market demands (Li and Min, 2001). These reforms are slowly happening as the Central Government responds to the need for a skilled and well-educated workforce. In essence, China is witnessing the need to develop or modernise the tourism and hospitality curriculum in order to provide an improved educational experience for students and to better meet industry needs.

Leading the way in tourism educational reform is the development of a new hotel management program at the Guilin Institute of Tourism (GLIT) in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Guilin is one of China's primary destinations for overseas and domestic tourists, with over 12 million visitors to the city in 2008. Founded by Guilin City Council in 1985, GLIT has become one of three main institutions in China for the education and training of tourism professionals, providing over 55,000 graduates to the industry since its foundation. With the support of the regional government and the Guilin City Council the Institute received assistance from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to help establish an internationally recognized hotel management diploma program designed to meet the needs of the industry, raise quality standards and equip students for 21st century employment. A leading hospitality and tourism educational institution was commissioned by UNWTO to help GLIT design, develop and implement the new program.

The new program development process took two years and involved six phases. 1) An environmental scan, to enable the Institute to better formulate strategy, benchmark what they were doing against international standards, respond to identified industry needs and align their strategies and policies to ensure successful education of undergraduate students for the burgeoning hotel and tourism industry in China. 2) Design of the program, which involved a comparative analysis of six world-class hospitality programs to identify core subjects, gaps in the existing curriculum and unique features of the existing curriculum. 3) Training of teachers in curriculum design, lesson planning, assessment methods and classroom teaching. 4) Design of the overall curriculum, detailed syllabi and outline lesson plans. 5) Implementation of the new program in 2007 and 2008. 6) Evaluation and review of the program using qualitative and quantitative data. This comprehensive review has given an in-depth insight into the tourism curriculum in the institute.

This new model, though not new in the west, was new for almost all teachers and students who had only experienced a didactic method of teaching and learning. Key features of the new programme were: a) *A move away from teacher-centred towards student-centred learning*. China, and Asia generally, has a strong focus on the teacher as the fount of knowledge, dispensing information with students as passive receptacles. The new model encouraged students to contribute, learn from each other as well as from the teacher and from a variety of resources. b) *More interactivity and participation from students* was achieved through the introduction of small tutorial classes and through encouraging students and teachers to take part more actively in lectures. c) *Out of class activity*, through guided self-study and class discussion and information sharing on QQ (an instant messaging site like MSN with around 300 users in China). c) *A focus on learning outcomes rather than on content* was a major change for the institution which meant a change of mindset away from dispensing knowledge to student achievement. d) *Introduction of*

course resources to replace the set text book was also significant as almost every subject taught in China has a set text approved by Central Government. This was a challenge for teachers to develop their own resources, and also a change in mindset away from systematically working through a text book to more creative use of various resources including media and other data from the internet. e) *Widening of assessment methods*. Traditionally, students in China are assessed almost exclusively by examinations and essays. This new model introduced a wider variety of methods of assessment including peer review, practical demonstrations, group projects and journal activities, among others.

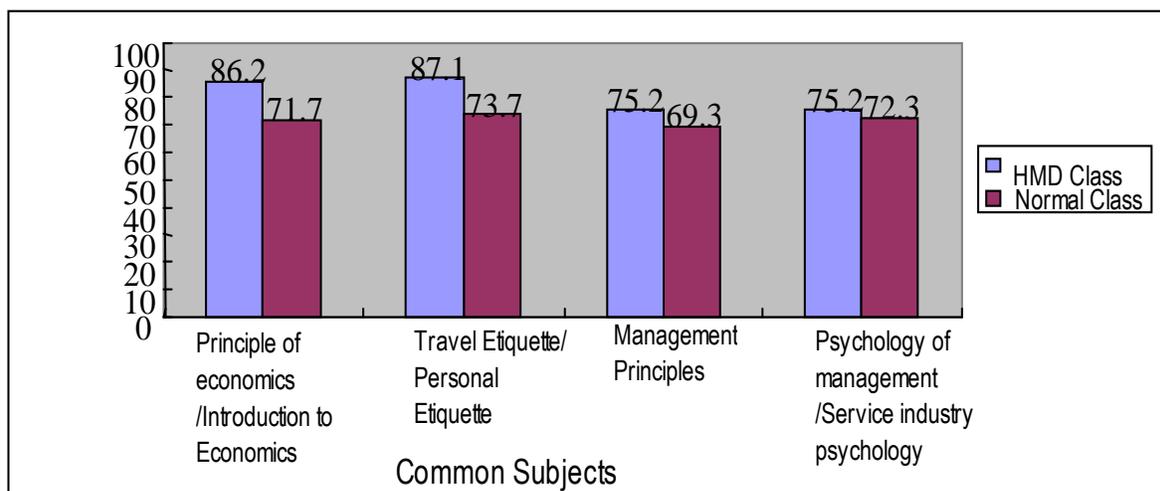
STUDY METHODS

The merits of a case study approach are well documented (Yin, 2003). It allows for in-depth exploration of a particular issue, site, etc and here is used to explore the development of a new course in Hotel Management in Guilin institute. The program was evaluated independently by the Institute and the UNWTO consultants at the end of the project development phase in December 2008. Focus group interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators and students from to gather qualitative data and to refine the questions to be used in the quantitative surveys. In addition, GLIT conducted an evaluation to compare student satisfaction and achievement in the new program with the old existing programme. The questionnaires comprised of three parts: facilities, teaching quality and the overall program. In each part, there were several relative attributes used to address the perceived importance of each attribute using a 5-point Likert scale with “1=very important” to “5=very not important”). The questionnaire also measured the satisfaction with the facilities, teaching quality and program as a whole using a 5-point Likert scale with “1=very satisfied” to “5=very dissatisfied.” The results were measured by the ranking of mean and standard deviations. This short paper cannot present the full report on the detailed results from students, teachers and administrators, so it will focus on just two critical areas – satisfaction with the quality of teaching and the curriculum from the students perspective. Both of these areas will have a major impact on the graduate quality and determine whether graduates meet the requirements of the industry.

FINDINGS

The questionnaire data revealed that students, teachers and administrators were more satisfied with the new program than with the existing older program. The comparative study between students who joined the new program, and other students studying similar subjects in the traditional program showed that the students on the new program were more independent learners, were more responsible, had better communication and language skills and took a more active part in class. In addition, it was found that the academic achievements were higher among the students of the new program, with grades of between 3-15 percent above those of students studying similar core subjects in the traditional program (Figure 1). Due to differences in the teaching content, the arrangement of the semester and other factors, this is not an absolute comparison, but an indication that perhaps the subject content, teaching methods and student attitudes have led to better academic outcomes than comparative subject results.

Figure 1: Comparison of New Program Class & Normal Classes



Students taking the new program were overall much more satisfied with the quality of teaching than students taking the normal program in the Institute. Students were most satisfied with the ‘Interaction between teachers and students’ (95.45%), the ‘Use of case studies’ (95.45%) and the ‘Teaching methods’ (93.18%). This compares with a much lower level of satisfaction by the other students, who rated ‘Interaction between students and teachers’ at 79.07%, ‘Use of case studies’ at 82.56% and ‘Teaching methods’ at 81.40% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Students’ satisfaction with quality of teaching

No.	Aspect	New Program class	Normal classes	% Difference
1	After class support	70.45%	48.84%	21.62%
2	Facilities	88.64%	72.09%	16.54%
3	Interaction between teachers and students	95.45%	79.07%	16.38%
4	Case studies	95.45%	82.56%	12.90%
5	Teaching methods	93.18%	81.40%	11.79%
6	Teacher’s help	81.82%	74.42%	7.40%
7	Teacher’s knowledge	90.91%	83.72%	7.19%
8	Teacher’s qualifications	93.18%	87.21%	5.97%
9	Assessment methods	77.27%	73.26%	4.02%
10	Preparation for class	88.64%	84.88%	3.75%
11	Teacher’s experience	90.91%	87.21%	3.70%
12	Theory and practice	72.73%	72.09%	0.63%

This indicates that the movement away from teacher centred towards student centred learning and out of class activities has seen positive results with the students feeling they have a

much better interaction with the teachers. New teaching methods including the use of case studies have also had a positive impact on the student learning experience. Less difference in the teachers experience and preparation for class is to be expected from the student's perspective.

Students in the new program rated the following aspects of the new curriculum most satisfactory – 'Flexibility' 86.36% compared with 66.28% by other students, 'Program administration' 84.09% compared to 66.28%, and 'Length of Internship' 84.09% compared to 72.09% by the other students (Table 2).

Table 2: Students' Satisfaction with the Curriculum

No.	Aspect	New Program class	Normal class	Difference
1	Timetabling	81.82%	55.17%	26.65%
2	Flexibility	86.36%	66.28%	20.08%
3	Program administration	84.09%	66.28%	17.81%
4	Helpfulness to professional practice	81.82%	67.44%	14.38%
5	Length of Internship	84.09%	72.09%	12.00%
6	Usefulness for job seeking	77.27%	66.28%	10.99%
7	Curriculum diversification	81.82%	72.09%	9.73%
8	Hospitality content for freshmen	84.09%	74.42%	9.67%
9	Length of Program	81.82%	74.42%	7.40%
10	Teachers with industrial experience	63.64%	58.14%	5.50%
11	Broad foundation of learning	77.27%	74.42%	2.85%
12	Up-to-date information	70.45%	68.60%	1.85%
13	Depth of Knowledge	72.73%	72.09%	0.63%
14	Funding for field trips	45.45%	56.98%	-11.52%

The new curriculum model incorporated changes in the availability of courses, timetabling and the administrative procedures, each greatly appreciated by the students. The internship was also altered which in turn had a positive effect on the perceived use of job seeking. It is suggested that perhaps improvements towards graduates meeting the requirements of the industry have emerged. In general terms, students were satisfied with the new curriculum and positive feedback was received on each of the elements. The only exception was the funding for field trips which at the time of the review project, funding was uncertain and therefore has a negative perception.

CONCLUSION

This new model of tourism education is quite unique in China as far as we know. The program challenges the traditional methods and approaches, and can be perceived as a threat by some who see the traditional teaching and assessment processes being undermined. In the main, however, it is seen

as an opportunity to raise the standards and professionalism of the tourism and hospitality industry. For a government institution to be able to change the curriculum, implement outcome-based approaches, introduce interactive teaching, run tutorial classes and put in place an international model of assessment and quality assurance is a huge achievement. Despite some initial uncertainties about aspects of the new curriculum model, students and most academics and administrative staff have been enthusiastic, and have effectively implemented the new program in a relatively short time frame. There are still challenges to be overcome, in particular how to make the program cost-effective, hiring of enough suitably qualified and experienced teachers and satisfying Ministry of Education requirements. GLIT are also considering how to expand the model from a pilot program in one department to the rest of the Institute, which will have a much greater impact on the future direction of tourism education in mainland China.

There is a sense of expectation about the future of education in China as the nation reaches new heights in diplomacy, space exploration, research and innovation. This project is very timely for China's growth and economic development, as the model is breaking new ground, challenging traditional education methods and providing a well-designed and workable model for tourism education in China. The barriers are not insurmountable, but need to be recognized and overcome in order for Guilin Institute of Tourism and tourism education in particular, to benefit from the foundational work of this project.

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