

AN ANALYSIS OF SKILLS REQUIRED FOR SELECTED SECTORS OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a relative newcomer to the academic repertoire and literature on the subject revealed a plethora of issues which need to be addressed when offering training programmes in tourism and hospitality studies. One of the most significant problems is the fact that tourism educators, guided by their individual biases, design tourism curricula with little or no input from the industry. The aim of the research is to determine what skills are required by industry for travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides. A two-pronged approach was followed: A literature study as well as a survey. For the survey a questionnaire, covering a wide range of variables divided into eight categories, was used to obtain the opinions of travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides. The surveys were conducted as structured telephonic interviews with representatives of cities and towns in Gauteng Province, Republic of South Africa. The results indicate which aspects are rated as important by the industry that should be included in tourism curricula. The results were divided into three categories namely tourism specific, general and business knowledge.

Key words: Tourism education; Skills tourist guides; Tour operators; Travel agents.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has developed rapidly since World War II. By 1991 worldwide tourism expenditure exceeded the GNP of all but three countries (Hall, 1991:3) and it is growing at a pace more rapid than most economies (2.8% in 1998) while a report of the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) indicates that tourist arrivals grew by 2.4% in 1998 (WTO, 1998). This tremendous growth of the industry has not been achieved without effort, as tourism has had to meet the challenges of economic uncertainties, political upheavals, deregulation and shifts in the levels of consumer confidence with a remarkable degree of ingenuity, management flexibility, marketing skills, commitment to service quality, and a responsibility towards the travelling public. In spite of these challenges tourism will continue to be a growing industry because the factors that have been responsible for its growth during the past decade are still continuing (Harrison & Husbands, 1996:2; World Bank, 1998; WTO, 1998).

South Africa has a phenomenal tourism resource base and this tremendous growth should also have been prevalent in this country. This has however not been the case. Although the first democratic election of the country in 1994 dramatically changed the country's tourism prospects (Msimang, 1995:20) and the more favourable political climate has led to an increase of international tourist arrivals (Saayman, 1996; Hicks, 1997:7), the tourism industry has not been able to reach its full potential (South Africa, 1996:4). One of the reasons for this

stipulated in the White Paper on Tourism is inadequate tourism education and training (South Africa, 1996:4; Saayman & Van der Merwe, 1996; Business and Marketing Intelligence (BMI), 1997:1). Various international studies, such as the one conducted by Sheldon and Gee in Hawaii, concluded that the success of the travel industry in any destination is dependent on the quality of its staff (Sheldon & Gee, 1997:173).

Wood (1995:29) and Croukamp (1996:14) point out that South Africa, like many other countries, relies heavily on tourism for its economic prosperity. In order to maximise the benefits of tourism, South Africa should however, not rely solely on foreign expertise to meet its skilled labour requirements as this would result in tourism-generated revenue leaking out of the country. This will happen through management fees and allowances for multinational enterprises and their expatriate personnel, while South African citizens would be left with the low-skilled jobs, as has been the case in so many third world countries. To prevent this the South African government will have to ensure that training is more accessible and affordable (South Africa, 1996:29).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although tourism is a relative newcomer to the academic repertoire, the literature on tourism education has increased substantially over the last two decades. The literature reveals a plethora of issues which arise when offering tourism and hospitality education and training programmes, ranging from the positive and negative aspects of a multi-disciplinary approach to tourism (Leiper, 1981), to the academic credibility of the study of tourism (Evans, 1988). One of the most significant problems identified is that tourism curricula are designed by tourist educators, who, guided by their individual biases, do so with little or no input from industry (Keyter, 1982; Knutson, 1989; Wolfire, 1990; Golden, 1992).

The literature study revealed a number of studies undertaken to develop tourism curricula in conjunction with industry. One such study was undertaken by Koh (1994:853) to develop a 4-year tourism curriculum where the views from the US industry were solicited specifically to likely tourism developments in the 1990's, the types of human resources that would be most needed by the industry and the scope of knowledge/skills 4-year tourism graduates would be expected to have. The panel suggested that the curriculum should comprise 40% general education, 30% business education, 23% tourism-specific education and 5% experiential education. A similar study, conducted in Hawaii by Sheldon and Gee (1997:173-178), which covered the entire travel industry and canvassed the opinions of both employers and employees, confirmed Koh's findings. Cooper (1996), working under the auspices of the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), consulted industry, government and educational representatives world wide to determine the key skills required by all parties, and came to the same conclusions as Koh, and Sheldon and Gee.

Apart from the above mentioned skills, the vocational skills that successful travel agents should have, as suggested by various authors such as Reiff (1990), Stevens (1990), Howell (1993), Davidson (1994), Van Harssel (1994), Syrratt (1995) and Horner (1996) were also included. The same was done for the tour operator and tourist guide sector for which authors such as Reilly (1991), Howell (1993), Pond (1993), Sarbey De Souto (1993), Yale (1995), Mancini (1996) and Laws (1997) have identified vocational skills.

In order to address the quality of personnel in the tourism industry, educators and trainers have to bear other relevant aspects in mind. International trends in lifelong learning, multi-skilling needs and global competitiveness indicate the need for rethinking education and training systems in South Africa. The development of the NQF (National Qualifications Framework) has placed the country at the cutting edge of these world developments. However the following problems face tourism education:

- Tourism is often used as case study material to add interest to, and to enrich, other disciplines such as economics and geography (Geldenhuys, 2001).
- Tourism education is multi-disciplinary in its approach, and contains elements which are attractive to other disciplines (Howell & Uysal, 1987:62).
- Tourism is a relatively young subject area and therefore lacks the history and evolution of some of the more mature fields of study (Goeldner, 1988). Howell and Uysal (1987:62) argue that tourism is an emerging discipline with a rapidly changing empirical research base.
- The approach to tourism education is currently a fragmented one (Howell & Uysal, 1987:62; Stephen & Moutinho, 1989:119) and there is a lack of clear direction for sustained development.
- Howell (1993:34) maintains that the tourism industry is dominated by small businesses, which are led by entrepreneurs and self-made people who do not have any formal tourism training. These men/women do not necessarily recognise the need to support tourism courses which will increase the overall professionalism of the industry (Pearce *et al.*; 1998:368).
- Another problem identified by Pearce *et al.* (1998:368) is that higher education institutions offering tourism courses experience a lack of respect within their own institutions and the community.
- The shortage of tourism staff with appropriate industry experience in industry and relevant qualifications is a serious problem (Geldenhuys, 2001; BMI, 1997:122).
- Globalisation requires a change in the training and education in the tourism industry (Keller, 1996).
- The boom in information technology will also affect the tourism industry (Frangialli, 1999; Zoreda, 1999).
- The vast body of knowledge and research issues creates its own set of problems for tourism educators (Saayman, 2000).
- There is a lack of co-operation and interaction among the different stakeholder groups, the training suppliers, the private sector, the government and industry associations (Stephen & Moutinho, 1989:121; Go, 1994:345; Van der Merwe, 2000:42).
- There seems to be a lack of trainer understanding pertaining to private sector training needs (BMI, 1997:132; Van der Merwe, 2000:42).
- Too few and inadequate standard control and accreditation systems are in place.
- Students from previously disadvantaged communities have little or no travel experience. Their limited frame of reference created difficulties when lecturers have to explain certain concepts (Sime & Potgieter, 2000).
- Despite the White Paper on Tourism of 1996, which emphasises the cruciality of training and education for the tourism industry's success, there is a lack of understanding from Government in this regard, which does not give training the priority it deserves (Van der Merwe, 2000:41).

While tourism educators in South Africa face the same problems as their international counterparts, they have to deal not only with the unique South African situation in education and training, where large sections of the population have had little or no formal education, but also with the challenges that a changing society and tourism industry present. The successful political transformation in South Africa has opened the country's tourism potential to the rest of the world, and indeed to the previously disadvantaged groups in society. With this in mind Saayman (1998) is concerned that training should be focussed on the preparation of employees to cater for a new type of tourist, in order for South Africa to stay competitive in a global tourism market. Ferrario (1986:332-348) maintains that it is imperative to understand the evolving patterns of leisure activities of the various population groups in South Africa, and to appreciate the extent of change in a complex society in order to address domestic tourism.

To aggravate matters the report brought out by BMI (1997:119) states that respondents from the travel sector have accused traditional training institutions of offering non-practical, non-directed courses in general tourism, with course content that has very little practical application in the travel service sector. Because of the entry-level skills of travel graduates from the traditional tertiary training institutions and private colleges, a large proportion of private employers in the travel sector prefer to employ school leavers, who are given the necessary in-house and on-the-job training. The inappropriateness of the training received by students at tourism institutions, is cited as the key influence driving this industry trend. This has been confirmed by research done by Van der Merwe (2000). The BMI report (BMI, 1997:120) also states that only 20% of graduates with the 3-year National Diploma from Technikons in South Africa find permanent employment in the tourism sector.

Based on the above this study attempted to address the following problem: What are the skills required by industry for travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides?

METHODOLOGY

A two-pronged approach was followed: A literature study as well as a survey. The aim of the literature survey was to determine which skills should be included in the questionnaire. The results of the literature study were used to draw up the questionnaire.

Literature study

The literature study was based on a qualitative study, which included monographs, journal articles, conference papers, theses and dissertations, other tourism-related literature as well as sources on education and training. Information searches were conducted mainly on library catalogues and indices, as well as the Internet. Information was also gained from communication on a personal level with individuals from the tourism industry and training institutions, as well as from previous South African Tourism Board (SATOUR) research. Themes of conversation included: Travel Agents, Tour Operators, Tourist Guides, Education, Training, Tourism Industry and Tourism. From the literature study a list of skills were identified (Tables 1, 2 and 3) that was then rated by the various sectors of the tourism industry to determine their importance and relevance.

A questionnaire was compiled covering a wide range of variables that were divided into eight categories (based on the results of the literature reviews):

- 1) A general section.
- 2) Personality traits.
- 3) Vocational skills.
- 4) General education.
- 5) Business education.
- 6) Languages.
- 7) Tourism-specific education.
- 8) Experimental training.

Survey

The same questionnaire was used for retail travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides. The respondents were asked to rate (on a five-point Likert scale) the required skills, where 5=very important and 1=unimportant.

The three sets of the survey were conducted as telephonic interviews, using structured questions with employees at all levels within the designated sectors. The interviews were conducted with representatives of establishments in cities as well as towns throughout Gauteng Province in South Africa during the months of April and May 2000. A proportional random sample was drawn from the membership of registered ASATA (Association of South African Travel Agents) travel agencies, SATOS (ASATA Outgoing Members) tour operators and tourist guides accredited by SATOUR in Gauteng Province to accurately reflect the constituency of the mentioned sector. 46 Retail travel agencies, 11 outbound tour operating businesses and 54 tourist guides, representing 25%, 57% and 10% of the respective sector were interviewed.

The Statistical Consultation Service of Technikon Pretoria processed the data. The information was then analysed to determine the skills required for travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides.

RESULTS

The following results were obtained from the research.

The first table indicates the view of the respondents regarding the required level of general education. Tables 2 and 3 deals with business education and tourism specific education respectively.

TABLE 1. GENERAL EDUCATION FOR TRAVEL AGENTS, TOUR OPERATORS AND TOURIST GUIDES

GENERAL EDUCATION		5	4	3	2	1
Computer skills	Travel Agent	76.9	7.7	7.7	7.7	
	Tour Operator	100				
	Tourist Guide		8.8	20.6	14.8	55.8
Arithmetical skills	Travel Agent	7.7	15.4	30.8	7.7	38.5
	Tour Operator	33.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	5.8	35.2	44.4	5.8	8.8
COMMUNICATION SKILLS						
Telephone skills	Travel Agent	100				
	Tour Operator	100				
	Tourist Guide	14.7	44.2	20.5	5.8	14.7
Business writing	Travel Agent	61.5	23.1	7.7	7.7	
	Tour Operator	33.3	33.3	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	26.5	26.5	35.3	11.7	
Listening skills	Travel Agent	100				
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	47	50	3		
Language skills	Travel Agent	100				
	Tour Operator	66.7	16.7	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	44.1	52.9	3		
Negotiation skills	Travel Agent	100				
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	29.4	55.8	11.8		2.9
Presentation skills	Travel Agent	69.2	15.4	15.4		
	Tour Operator	66.7	16.7	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	26.4	73.5			
Interpersonal skills	Travel Agent	61.2	38.8			
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	17.6	76.5	5.8		
Leadership/social skills	Travel Agent	76.9	15.4		7.7	
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	32.4	64.7	2.9		

GENERAL EDUCATION		5	4	3	2	1
Organisational skills	Travel Agent	84.6	15.4			
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	26.5	70.6	2.9		
Research skills	Travel Agent	61.5	38.5			
	Tour Operator	66.7	16.7	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	8.8	64.7	26.5		
Ethical/social responsibilities	Travel Agent	38.5	46.2	15.4		
	Tour Operator	50	33.3	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	32.4	55.9	8.8	2.9	
Societies & cultures of the world	Travel Agent	23.1	46.2	23.1	7.7	
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	23.6	64.7	8.8	2.9	
Cultural sensitivity	Travel Agent	61.5	23.1		7.7	7.7
	Tour Operator	16.7	50	16.7	16.7	
	Tourist Guide	58.9	41.1			
Use of natural resources	Travel Agent	53.8	30.8	7.7	7.7	
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	32.3	58.9	8.8		
Leisure appreciation	Travel Agent	69.2	23.1	7.7		
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	14.6	50	23.6	5.9	5.9

From Table 1, the following can be concluded:

- Computer skills were rated by both travel agents and tour operators as extremely important. Only 7.7% of the travel agents did not think computer skills were important. However, the majority of tourist guides, almost 70%, thought it was not important.
- Travel agents regard communication skills as extremely important. In all of the identified categories of communication skills except business writing, 100% of the respondents rated these skills as extremely important. 16.7% of tour operators rated business writing as not important at all, although all the respondents in the tour operation sector rated all the other categories of communication at least as important. The reason may be that most of the documents they require are prepared and their function is only to send these out to customers. Tourist guides did not rate telephone skills and business writing as highly as their counterparts in the retail travel and tour operations sector, but this was expected as this is not an integral part of their daily activities. One would, however, have thought that more of the respondents in this sector would have rated listening and language skills as extremely important.

TABLE 2. BUSINESS EDUCATION FOR TRAVEL AGENTS, TOUR OPERATORS AND TOURIST GUIDES

BUSINESS EDUCATION		5	4	3	2	1
Management theories	Travel Agent	61.5	30.8	7.7		
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	8.8	61.7	17.6	2.9	8.8
Human resources	Travel Agent	69.2	15.4	7.7		7.7
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	8.8	41.2	29.4		
Resort management	Travel Agent	38.5	23.1	23.1		15.4
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	2.9	2.9	20.6	47.1	26.5
Marketing theories	Travel Agent	38.5	23.1	30.8		7.7
	Tour Operator	66.7	16.7	16.7		
	Tourist Guide	5.9	52.9	23.5	5.9	11.8
Selling skills	Travel Agent	76.9	7.7	7.7	7.7	
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	5.9	58.9	20.6	5.9	8.8
Principles of service management	Travel Agent	61.5	23.1	7.7		7.7
	Tour Operator	16.7	50	16.7		16.7
	Tourist Guide	5.9	61.8	26.6	2.9	2.9
Entrepreneurship and innovation	Travel Agent	61.5	23.1	15.4		
	Tour Operator	83.3		16.7		
	Tourist Guide	11.8	41.2	35.3	8.8	2.9
Accounting principles	Travel Agent	53.8	23.1	15.4		7.7
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide		14.7	64.7	14.7	5.9
Principles of finance	Travel Agent	53.8	23.1	15.4		7.7
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide		20.6	64.7	8.8	5.9
Principles of economics	Travel Agent	38.5	30.8	15.4		15.4
	Tour Operator	83.7				16.7
	Tourist Guide	2.9	29.4	50	14.7	2.9

From Table 2 the following can be concluded:

- Nearly 11% of the tourist guides did not think it was important to include management theories in an education tourism curriculum and only 8.8% rated it as extremely important. As most of the respondents interviewed were self-employed this is an unexpected result. 100% travel agents and tour operators rated this education skill at least as important.
- Only 7.7% of the travel agents and nearly 20% of the tourist guides thought that human resources as an educational theme was not important. This could be explained by the fact that most of the tourist guides are self-employed one-man shows and some of the travel agents work for small businesses where this function probably does not receive much attention. All the tour operators rated it as very important.
- An extremely high percentage of the travel agents (84%) and tour operators (100%) rated resort management as important whereas of their colleagues in the tour guiding sector approximately 73% did not think this was important. The fact that such a high percentage of the travel agents and tour operators rated this as important was not expected at all, for the mere fact that they do not have to apply these skills in their day to day work.

TABLE 3. TOURISM SPECIFIC EDUCATION FOR TRAVEL AGENTS, TOUR OPERATORS AND TOURIST GUIDES

TOURISM-SPECIFIC EDUCATION		5	4	3	2	1
Tourism geography	Travel Agent	61.5	30.8	7.7		
	Tour Operator	83.3				16.7
	Tourist Guide	52.9	44.1	2.9		
Product knowledge	Travel Agent	61.5	38.5			7.7
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	61.8	38.2			
Principles of facility planning	Travel Agent	15.4	46.2	38.5		
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	17.6	64.7	8.8	8.8	
Special events	Travel Agent	23.1	46.2	23.1	7.7	
	Tour Operator	83.3	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	2.9	58.8	32.4		5.9
Tourism law	Travel Agent	61.5		30.8	7.7	
	Tour Operator	33.3	33.3	16.7		16.7
	Tourist Guide	2.9	35.3	47.1	14.7	
Tourism research methods	Travel Agent	76.9	7.7	7.7	7.7	
	Tour Operator	66.7			16.7	16.7
	Tourist Guide	8.8	61.8	17.6	11.8	

TOURISM-SPECIFIC EDUCATION		5	4	3	2	1
Tourism development policies	Travel Agent	61.5	15.4	23.1		
	Tour Operator	50	50			
	Tourist Guide	11.8	61.6	8.8	11.8	5.9
Hospitality operations	Travel Agent	30.8	53.8	15.4		
	Tour Operator	66.7	16.7			
	Tourist Guide	5.9	20.6	11.8	38.2	23.5
South African cultures	Travel Agent	46.2	38.5	7.7		7.7
	Tour Operator	66.7	33.3			
	Tourist Guide	55.9	38.2	5.9		

From Table 3, the following can be seen:

- It is surprising that 16.7% of the tour operators rated tourism geography as not important. However 100% of the travel agents and tourist guides thought this was important. An overwhelming 83.3% of the tour operators rated this skill as extremely important as opposed to 61.5% of the travel agents. One would have expected more respondents from the latter category to rate tourism geography as extremely important, as this section of the tourism industry uses this skill daily when planning itineraries. A lack of knowledge of tourism geography could have dire consequence, especially for the corporate travel agent. The reason why travel agents rated this skill lower than was expected could be a direct result of the ease with which information can be found nowadays. Most travel agencies are linked to the Internet and are able to access information effortlessly. 16.7% of the tour operators rated this skill as not at all important. The only explanation for this could be that the tour operators who were interviewed are out-bound operators who act as reservation clerks selling pre-packaged tours. With larger tour operators in South Africa there is a certain amount of specialisation and consultants are briefed on destinations or work under supervision for a certain period of time. These consultants would therefore be able to answer questions pertaining to the product. Should they encounter questions they are unable to answer, they could find out and phone back. There is considerable less pressure on the tour operator than on the travel agent who could have a corporate customer in front of him demanding an immediate answer. Tourist guides have to have a thorough knowledge of the region in which they are guiding and this knowledge is tested in the accreditation examination. This could be an explanation for the lower percentage of this group rating this skill as not extremely important.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to identify what skills are required by industry. The latter also had to rate the importance of the skills. This could then be used by academics to develop tourism curricula. A literature study identified the various skills which were then rated by the industry. From this the following conclusions can be drawn.

General education is seen by all three categories as being important. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these aspects should be included as core modules in all training programmes targeting prospective employees for these sectors (travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides) of the tourism industry.

The majority of the respondents from the three different sectors were in agreement that business education should be included in a curriculum with the exception of resort management that were rated low by the tourist guides. The latter was to be expected.

With regard to the tourism specific education all three groups rated all aspects (except hospitality operations) of this educational cluster as important. Tourist guides did not see the value of hospitality operators, which is an aspect that they don't really deal with.

It was surprising that only the tourist guiding sector was in favour of a generic course. The majority of travel agents (92.3%) and tour operators (100%) preferred specific training and education. As a result the survey indicate a considerable overlap between the training requirements indicated by the three sectors, it would make sense to offer a generic course to train and educate travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides. The general, business and tourism-specific as well as language requirements seem to be the same and should be included in all tourism curricula for students preparing to enter these sectors of the tourism industry. Certain electives could be offered to address the specific needs of the retail travel, tour operator and tourist guiding sectors. If these skills are compared with what technikons are offering in their B Tech: Tourism Management Programmes, it appears that this qualification compares well with what industry requires as well as what is offered at other international universities. It should however be noted that the depth of these offerings has not been measured. More research on solutions to the problems as was identified in the literature study needs to be done.

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