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Rethinking Tourism Education in Georgia

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Summary. Tourism is the second largest industry in the world and one of the fastest growing economic sectors in Georgia. Successful development of tourism in the country is largely depended on the quality of education, skills and competences of the people involved in the process of building the sector. The purpose of the research is to investigate the compliance of tourism education programs with the practical needs of the tourism sector challenges in Georgia that will reveal where we are at present and what resources we have for further development. The research showed that the tourism curriculums not always reflect the needs of the industry in case of Georgia. The paper attempts to show the complexity of tourism phenomenon and the challenges tourism education faces to meet the need of the industry. Therefore, the state and universities need to rethink the way they provide academic education in tourism. While making efforts to stay academic, knowledge transferability and applicability need to be considered when designing the curriculums. Fitting education to the practical needs of the tourism industry will enable the state and university to respond to the need of the country's economic development, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, such a policy will increase chances to justify the expectation of students to get higher education, which is being competitive on the labor market.

Introduction

Tourism has been described as the world's largest and fastest growing industry by the World Tourism & Travel Council (WTTC). The organization actively

works on investigation of the worldwide economic impact of tourism. According to the WTTC, in 2014, Travel & Tourism's total contribution to the global economy rose to 9.5% of the global GDP, not only outperforming the wider economy, but also growing faster than any other significant sectors such as financial and business services, transport and manufacturing (WTTC, 2014). Around 266 million jobs were generated by Travel & Tourism, which is 1 out of 11 job places in the world. The increasing demand on tourism activities, showed the importance of this sector for economic growth and job creation. As a result, interest towards tourism sector is increasing within governments, businesses and academics.

Tourism is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in Georgia as well. In 2007, it was named to be the priority economic sector for the country. According to the Georgian National Statistics Department, the tourism contribution to the country's GDP was 6% in 2014; and jobs generated by the tourism have achieved 11%. International arrivals to Georgia have been growing rapidly over the recent years, reaching the record number of 5,515,559 in 2014. The highest growth rate was registered in 2012, when the number of international arrivals increased by 57%. According to the World Tourism Organization, it was the highest growth rate in Europe as well (UNWTO, 2013). In the same period, the World Economic Forum named Tourism to be the third most competitive economic sector in Georgia.

Hence, Georgia has made a big success in terms of tourism quantitative development. But still, there is a problem of qualitative development. At present, the declared purpose of the Georgian National Tourism Administration is to double the value and profitability of Georgia's tourism sector and create the high-end tourism destination out of Georgia by the year 2025 (GNTA, 2015). In the mentioned strategic document, there are listed different strategic activities to achieve the goal, but unfortunately no attention is paid to tourism education.

Objective of the research and methodology

The objective of the research is to define what the demand of the industry is in terms of tourism education; what the supply secured from the side of university is in terms of graduate students qualification; and, what needs to be done to diminish the gap between the above demand/supply chain.

The work is done with qualitative and desk research methods. The qualitative research method was used to organize industry research, which involved conducting deep interviews with company representatives. The desk research was used to make situation analysis, which involved investigation of tourism education programs provided by Georgian Universities and Georgian legislation framework for tourism education. Alongside, different academic literature and research were reviewed to see worldwide experiences existed in the field of tourism education and curricula design.

The research outcomes are divided into three parts. Among them, the first is aimed at investigating the needs of the industry in terms of competences of the personnel and their behavioral patterns when recruiting new staff. The second responds to the question what the level of tourism education is in Georgia, what the key barriers are to translate employers' needs into improvements in the education programs. And the third one represents the solutions how to increase compliance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills when providing academic education in tourism.

1. Industry/employer's research method: 50 companies were selected for the interview, who are operating in Tourism & Hospitality sector of Georgia. In our case, main employers are big businesses (150 employees and more), SMEs (up to 150 employees) and state agencies. To make research representative, we gave them more or less equal share in the consecutive order: 40%, 30%, 30%. The research participants comprised the following types of companies: hotels, HoReCa management groups, travel agencies, air-line and travel companies, tourism state agencies.
2. Method of review of tourism education programs and legislation of Georgia: the evaluation of tourism education programs was conducted by Georgian Universities. Overall, there are 33 public and private universities in Georgia that provide education in tourism. As for the legislation basis, Georgian Education Qualification Framework is universal and applies to each accredited university. Here we shall discuss the framework which stands for tourism education.
3. Method of review of worldwide tourism education developments and experiences: the literature that provides international theoretical frameworks and practices for tourism education is not vast. Although, there are several reliable sources and we selected them taking into consideration the popularity of the author and the work. Due to the lack of academic literature, we also used different non-academic research studies, published by authoritative international tourism organizations.

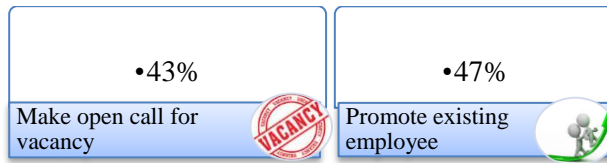
Industry/employer's research

Industry research revealed many interesting facts that are far away from the perception of education offered by universities¹. To be more precise, the employers' interest is absolutely pragmatic and egocentric, unlike universities that are more prone to idealism and bringing common good for the society. The attitude of private sector is very natural, since the quality of its performance has a direct effect

¹ The point is the University does not give the student practical skills – i.e. after graduating the student cannot manage the tasks set by employers.

on its profits. Although, it is “business as usual” to take a risk, it does not apply to the qualification of staff when recruiting a new personnel.

During private interviews, company representatives admitted that it was not their interest to employ students, since it was a loss of time and efforts for them. It was safer to recruit experienced candidates or develop their existing human capital. To the question – how you seek for a new employee in case of a vacant position – responses were distributed as follows:



Responses were more in favor of practical experience, rather than academic education, when asking employers about their preferences during recruiting or promoting a personnel – figure 1.

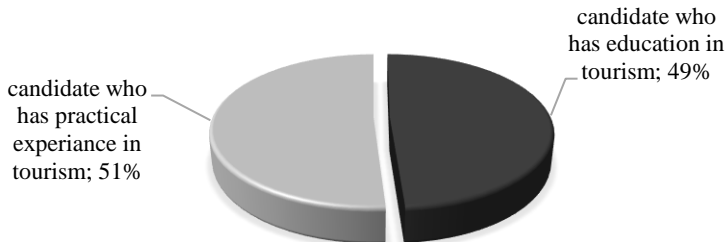


Figure 1. Which one would you give privilege when recruiting or promoting a personnel?

Source: own elaboration.

It is worth admitting that tourism is a new specialization for Georgia. Therefore, there is a great lack of knowledge about tourism business in Georgia. A fast increase in tourism product/services demand has resulted in quick raise of supply, which still has not caught up the qualitative criterion. Another problem is a nature of Georgia’s entrepreneurs. There is a lack of development will on the part of companies, especially in case of SMEs, which are driving forces for massive employment. Based on the research, which was conducted within Georgian private sector representatives (DAI Europe, 2014), most of the companies are not seeking for growth and development, they are rather oriented to surviving. It seems entrepreneurship is not our DNA characteristics at this phase of the country’s development. The implication of this type of attitude may be found in the responses

below, which were addressed to the financing behavior of the companies, when it comes to the employee's development:

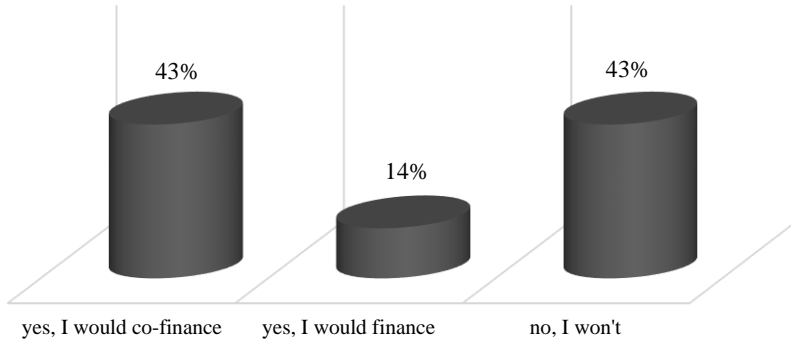


Figure 2. Would you finance or co-finance education of the employee?

Source: own elaboration.

Another reason for the above mentioned lack of will of employers to finance employee's education, is lack of trust towards education institutions and the country's education system. Industries are experiencing disappointment when hiring students, even the ones with excellent academic records. Students' knowledge is far too theoretical and not practical or transferable. That is why, industries prefer to hire people with practical experience, who have already learned from practice.

This attitude reveals itself during negotiations between universities and companies on internships as well. According to the research, it is a very common type of behavior of private sector in tourism to recruit young non-professionals and train them in accordance with their own needs, starting from the very low positions. Here the interests of industries and universities are different: universities seek for professional internships, while industry is not eager to involve students in real business activities as they do not see long-term benefit from them. And, university does not agree to train students in the types of jobs that are not responding to the curriculums of the tourism academic program.

Review of tourism education programs and legislation of Georgia

Tourism education is in the process of development in Georgia. Sharp increase on the demand side, provoked by the boost of the tourism industry, has stimulated development of the tourism education in a short period of time. Tourism has become one of the most popular and demanded specialization within education institutions since 2007. Naturally, tourism curriculums broadened beyond the vocational sphere and tourism has emerged as a field of Bachelor and Master Degree studies. Currently, there are around 33 Public and Private Universities providing

academic degree courses in tourism. Tourism is based on Faculties of Business in case of each Georgian University.

So far, the only tourism program, provided at Bachelor and Master Levels, is “Tourism and Hospitality Management” subfield, under the umbrella of “Business Administration” or “Management” specialization fields. A range of options on Tourism specializations are provided only at Professional/Vocational education institutions. The fact that tourism as an academic specialization is rather new puts it in a permanent struggling process for acquisition within universities. While tourism is a more practical field of specialization, universities, as well as the state, keep staying conservative about university education, considering that they need to provide only academic education.

Below there is a National Qualification Framework of Georgia on tourism education, which defines the range of specializations for all accredited education institutions in Georgia:

Table 1

Tourism Qualification Framework in Georgia

| Direction | Field/Specialty (at Bachelor Degree level) | Subfield/Minor specialties (at Master Degree level) | Professional Qualification specializations (Vocational Education) |
|---|---|---|--|
| Business Administration | Management | – Tourism and Hospitality Management | – Flight-attendant /steward – Event organizer – Event manager |
| Interdisciplinary Fields (Since late 2015) | Tourism | – Nature tourism and preserved territories – Ecotourism – Cultural tourism – Medicinal tourism and resort business – Recreational tourism – Agro tourism | – Guide – Tour operator – Hotel manager – Restaurant manager – Receptionist – Bartender – Waiter – Sommelier – Hiking Guide – Cleaning Specialist |

Source: Higher Education Qualification Framework of Georgia, 2015.

Based on the requirements of academic tourism, last year tourism was put in the section of “Interdisciplinary Fields”, which means that now there is a chance that tourism will become an independent field of study. Although, there is one danger: independent tourism program cannot provide “Tourism and Hospitality” management course, when the ultimate demand comes to this direction. Respectively, tourism still prefers to be within the faculty.

The problem “Tourism and Hospitality Management” subfield experiences, under the umbrella of “Business Administration” or “Management” specializations, is: the overall teaching program is dominated by the General (University) Business and Management disciplines. As it is shown in the Figure 3, limited ECTs are left for tourism specialization subjects. No credits are left for shifting from general tourism subjects to narrow specialized disciplines.

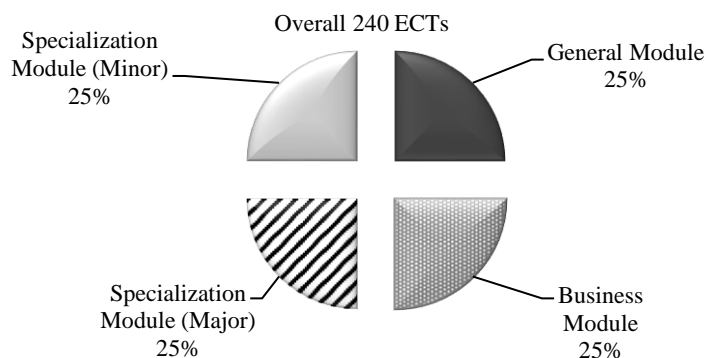


Figure 3. Credit (ECTs) distribution at Bachelor's degree program

Source: own elaboration.

It can be declared that the qualification framework and ECTs limit prevent tourism program from development and make it more diversified and sophisticated. Tourism specialists must have a broad range of skills and competences (socio-cultural, linguistic, cognitive, narrow specialization competences), but the national framework creates a deteriorating factor that does not allow to be focused on narrow disciplines and to provide real practice.

Review of worldwide tourism education developments and experiences

Tourism education began as a development of vocational schools in Europe. Gradually, the interest and demand from the public and private sectors have pushed the growth and development of tourism education. There are three main stages of tourism education development (Airey, Tribe, 2005):

- a) first, there was a massive increase in the numbers of students, institutions and teachers of tourism;
- b) second, the curriculums have broadened beyond the vocational and tourism has emerged as a subject for at different levels of education;
- c) third, this rapid growth and changes have led to tensions in the development of the curriculum.

Having passed through all these stages the present-day European universities enjoy more diversified and sophisticated tourism teaching programs and curriculums at HEIs, which are oriented to development of either professional or intellectual skills. As a result, graduate students are equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to know what to do, how to do and how it could be done in a more creative way. The focuses of teaching programs are ranged from general tourism management to specializations in various sectors, even extremely narrow ones, like e-Tourism (Maurer, Egger, 2014).

Tourism is a complex field of studies. It is just as wide-range, multi-layered and rapidly changing as the human nature is. While tourism is perceived as a set of business activities or movements of people, it is also a social phenomenon: “tourism needs to be considered not just as a type of business or industry, but as a powerful cultural arena and process that both shapes and is shaped by people, nations and cultures” (Rojek, Urry, 1997). Intercultural dialogue, which is provoked by tourism, shapes not only countries’ economies, but also social opinions and ideologies.

Indeed, Renaissance Era in Europe was the result of increased tourism activities which helped people increase the scope of knowledge and accumulate experiences. Therefore, a sociological insight is a great weapon to help tourism managers explore the social impacts of tourism; such as: tourism culture, tourism tendencies, gender and ethnical perspectives, etc. Some academic workers even consider tourism education to be the “marginal branch of applied sociology”. Tribe (2002) recommends education institutions to produce “philosophic practitioners”, who would be able to reflect and act on the basis of the “reflective process”.

That is the reason why academics emphasize the necessity of combining two types of approaches while providing tourism education: vocational and philosophical (Inui, Wheeler, Lankford, 2006). Concentration only on vocational studies decreases the chances of students to become able to: 1) respond to the needs of the developing tourist society; and, 2) develop the tourism concepts and long-term strategies. Concentrating only on philosophical approach results in lack of professional skills in students.

The Harvard professor David Perkins proposes clear and short message explanation what education needs to stand for. According to him (Perkins, 2006) the aim of education needs to be retention of knowledge, understanding of knowledge and active use of knowledge beyond the classroom walls and academia. Perkins calls it to be a “generative knowledge”, which is developing a knowledge base that encourages the learner to generate or learn/create new knowledge in the future within different circumstances.

Sonntag, Schmidt and Rathjens (Zehrer, Mössenlechner, 2009) have developed a classic concept for tourism education competences in 2004. The authors

have figured our four core competences, such as: technical competences, social competences, methodological competences and personal competences, to be crucial for producing professional decision-making competences in future tourism specialists. Each of the above competences help students to work out specific cognitive powers:

- a) technical competences – the specific knowledge of work components to deal with professional tasks successfully;
- b) social competences – the communicative skills necessary to achieve objectives through social interactions;
- c) methodological competences – the capacity of a person to solve situation-specific and complex tasks independently;
- d) personal competences – the emotional and motivational attitude behind activities, as well as values, standards and mindsets for actions.

The ultimate idea of the above mentioned powers is to provide in-depth theoretical knowledge, however with practical orientation (Maurer, Egger, 2014). While providing tourism education, it is important to keep the optimal balance of information provided that will create basis for production of well-rounded tourism professional, and able to transfer knowledge into practical actions in specific situations, make adequate decisions and be self-organized which is crucial for career development and advancement.

There are good organizational patterns of tourism educations. According to Maurer and Egger, tourism programs are more productive if studies begin with general tourism subjects and it goes to narrow specializations. Studies need to be based on research, practical activities and professional internships. Different research studies made it evident that internships are more profitable if they are provided in-between studies, sandwiched between first and last years of studies.

Main findings and conclusion

The problems of development of tourism education are multifold and they derive from different layers of state, education system and industry:

1. The research showed that the tourism curriculums not always reflect the needs of the industry in case of Georgia. Therefore, the state and universities need to rethink the way they provide academic education in Tourism. While making efforts to stay academic, knowledge transferability and applicability need to be considered when designing the curriculums.
2. One of the biggest problems lies in legislation. National Qualification Framework establishes sharp frames, which prevents tourism programs from further development, sophistication or diversification. The question whether tourism is a serious or worthy area for study is still hanging in the air.
3. Tourism is not only a set of business activities or movements of people, and it is not only a social and cultural phenomenon as well. Therefore, the focus

of tourism education must not be only development of managerial skill, neither philosophical knowledge, which is associated with cultural relationships. It was not a well thought-out policy, when separating tourism programs within the fields of “Business Administration” and “Interdisciplinary Direction”.

4. To make tourism programs more relevant to the needs of the employment market, curriculums need to be designed in the way that it equips tourism specialists with a broad range of skills and competences (socio-cultural, linguistic, cognitive, narrow specialization competences). A limited number of ECTS for specialization module disables this changes. Fitting education to the practical needs of the tourism industry will enable the state and university to respond to the need of the country’s economic development.
5. It is impossible to achieve a high quality of tourism education through searching for the perfect theoretical frameworks without practice in Tourism. There is lack of mechanisms to integrate students in working life. Employers do not agree to accept students for internships for real tourism practice. On the other hand, universities are bounded with regulations to give credits only for professional internships. As a result, graduate students lack ability to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice at the job place, as they have only theoretical knowledge.
6. Tourism education development is largely intertwined with the development of country’s tourism industry. There is a strong linkage between labor market demand and demand on academic education. The slow development of tourism education is the result of weak private tourism sector that lack professional skills and intuition, as well as entrepreneurship spirit.

Conclusions

1. It is true, tourism is a great tool for economic growth and job-creation, but as it is a service sector, only highly qualified people can shape and develop it. Therefore, to achieve an increased value and profitability of tourism, the state needs to increase the quality of goods and services provided for tourists. Respectively, the ultimate goal needs to be development of tourism industry (which is the driving force for the sector growth) and tourism education (which is providing future professionals for the sector).
2. Collaboration of the key actors involved in the process of tourism development – state, industry and academia – is essential to make the process more efficient, cost-effective and sustainable.
3. It is the right time for universities to demonstrate their real role in a broad development picture of the state. To be capable of getting in charge of this process, universities need to enquire a real value of their work and then to start rethinking the way they provide education. New developments require

totally different employability skills and competences from graduate students that would enable them to handle the changing circumstances of the global tourism industry. Students see university education as an investment in their future career. Diplomas need to offer economic value to the graduates. Therefore, tourism programs need to regard the employability issue as one of the core product of education.

4. While redesigning curriculums, universities need to use both academic and vocational approaches in order to secure generative, functional and transferable knowledge. This will provide a productive basis for students to further build and develop new knowledge and skills in the future. Such program would provide tourism sector with highly competitive human capital that would be useful to its further development.
5. Greater involvement of international expertise is needed for harmonization of the qualification frameworks and creation of curriculum designs. Sharing knowledge through international academic exchange programs is essential for students and professors to increase the scope and the value of their knowledge and experiences.
6. Development of learning resources is vital for Tourism education. Contemporary and professional literature needs to be translated in order to catch up with the worldwide developments in Tourism and make education more relevant to contemporary challenges of the industry.
7. The State needs to work with the private sector to show them their role in the overall country's development scheme. The youth is high potential workforce able to develop. This is the ultimate advantage of the youth which is not used yet by Georgia industries. There is a great need to change the perception of industries that the youth are less skillful. Indeed, the youth are good investment projects. Putting investment in their development will result in their own benefit in the future.
8. The State needs to promote joint research projects and activities among universities and industries to stimulate collaboration. Joint projects would rebuild the trust towards universities. Usually, the committed interest of cooperation demonstrated by both sides – universities and industries – contributes to the production of more benefits for both the parties. A consultative framework needs to be elaborated among tourism industry and tourism academic representatives to receive feed-back and design more employer tailored teaching programs. This would be useful to respond the increased challenges of the industry development and contribute to the economic growth of the country.
9. Tourism needs to be developed at grass-root level. Existence of tourism professional associations and councils encourages development of tourism education and research. Forums, conference, summits and other professional

events organized by civil society organizations and universities increases the attractiveness of the field for highly qualified professionals and as well as for future tourism specialists.

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Przemyślenia dotyczące edukacji turystycznej w Gruzji

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja w zakresie turystyki, edukacja akademicka, projektowanie programów nauczania, przekazywanie wiedzy, badania turystyczne

Streszczenie. Turystyka jest drugą co do wielkości branżą na świecie i jednym z najszybciej rozwijających się sektorów gospodarczych w Gruzji. Pomyślny rozwój turystyki w kraju w dużej mierze zależy od jakości edukacji, umiejętności i kompetencji osób zaangażowanych w proces budowania sektora. Celem badań jest zbadanie zgodności programów edukacji turystycznej z praktycznymi potrzebami wyzwań stojących przed sektorem turystyki w Gruzji, które ujawnią, gdzie jesteśmy obecnie i jakie zasoby mamy na

dalszy rozwój. Badania pokazały, że w przypadku Gruzji programy nauczania turystyki nie zawsze odzwierciedlają potrzeby branży. W artykule starano się pokazać złożoność zjawiska turystycznego i wyzwania stojące przed edukacją turystyczną w celu zaspokojenia potrzeb branży. Z tego też względu państwo i uniwersytety powinny przemyśleć sposób, w jaki zapewniają kształcenie akademickie w turystyce. Podejmując wysiłki, aby pozostać akademickim, podczas projektowania programów nauczania należy uwzględnić transfer wiedzy i jej zastosowanie. Dostosowanie kształcenia do praktycznych potrzeb branży turystycznej pozwoli z jednej strony państwu i uczelniom odpowiedzieć na potrzebę rozwoju gospodarczego kraju. z drugiej strony taka polityka zwiększy szanse na uzasadnienie oczekiwania studentów na uzyskanie wyższego wykształcenia, które jest konkurencyjne na rynku pracy.

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