

Pacific Asia Tourism and the Human Resources Development Crisis

ONE OF the consequences of the tourism explosion in the Pacific Asia region over the last 20 years has been the identification of a severe shortage of qualified manpower. As the industry recovers from the economic crisis, many of the same issues are resurfacing but are now requiring new solutions to cope with pressing demands of the age of globalisation.

Some of these issues came under scrutiny at the sixth conference of the Asia-Pacific Tourism Association (APTA) in Phuket in early July. Indeed, industry academics and educators are getting increasingly worried about a whole range of issues, from the ability to attract new entrants and improve the quality of curriculum, to the impact of the Internet and perhaps most importantly, the search for funding and partnerships to pursue expansion and modernisation.

With PATA having announced the launch of its own Virtual Education scheme, this edition of *Issues & Trends* seeks to highlight a few of the challenges facing HRD in the years ahead. Some of the latest research results presented in the APTA conference papers have been extracted and incorporated into this report.

Common Industry Problems

Some of the common problems faced by both the travel and tourism industry as well as those universities and educational institutions offering travel and hospitality courses regionwide are:

- Difficulty in employing those with experience and knowledge in the respective fields
- Difficulty in maintaining trained and skilled employees
- A perception that careers in the industry are largely unattractive

- Competition within industry for same skills
- Unattractive work environment and surroundings
- Low incentives and motivation schemes
- Almost no exposure or promotions on career prospects in the tourism industry
- Limited systematic training/skills training in-house for small and medium businesses
- Limited government financial assistance to develop tourism study courses
- Lack of professional support in identifying direct industry needs for institutions and educational development

School of Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia

Just how bad is the shortage of qualified manpower?

Researchers at the Universiti Utara, Kedah state, Malaysia, found that 113 hotels of all categories opened nationwide between 1996-98 alone, creating a demand for 26,692 employees at all levels. The researchers then surveyed 29 hotels in the northern states of Malaysia (Perlis, Kedah and Langkawi) and found that they were all facing a manpower shortage. Of the total of 2,634 employees needed by hotels in just these three states, the hotels in Langkawi, the primary tourist spot, alone needed about 2,000 employees.

Qualified manpower was needed in all levels of hotels including the physical operation of the building, equipment and facilities, as well as in behavioural elements like communication, attitude, personality, values, beliefs and motivation. The survey also discovered there was a serious lack of training institutions to meet the needs; in 1998, there were only six training institutions with government accredited curricula in hotel/tourism training programmes.

Similar to hotels in other countries, the researchers found that there appeared to be a "vast difference" in the type of training undertaken by the employees, with the intensity of training being higher in the upper-market hotels. While the bigger hotels had full-scale human resources departments, the smaller hotels simply left the entire matter in the hands of the manager. The bigger, wealthier hotels were also those that provided external training for their employees.

Prince of Songkhla University

A similar shortage of qualified staff is being felt in Thailand where the tourism industry is one of the economic high-flyers. Universities have scrambled to meet demand for jobs in tourism.

The number of students graduating from university tourism programmes rose from 1,737 in 1996 to 2,485 in 1999. Total teaching staff in hospitality/tourism programmes rose from 324 in 1996 to 429 in 1999. Of these, the number of staff educated in hospitality/tourism disciplines rose from 96 in 1996 to 204 in 1999. The staff to student ratio has dropped from 1:162.5 to 1:98.04 but it is now the quality of staff that matters, according to Dr. Manat Chaisawat of the Prince of Songkhla University, Phuket.

He says the industry needs more versatile graduates with critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communication, strategic management and marketing and other functional skills for surviving and doing well in a globalised economy. The urgent issue is to design a new curriculum that can produce the graduates to shape the quality and sustainable tourism development of the country.

This will not be possible if there are no qualified teaching staff. In the past, some institutions have sent their teaching staff abroad for further study, but this can often cost one million baht (about US\$26,300) per year per person in some countries.

"It is now time... to find a more efficient and more economic way to solve the problem," said Dr. Manat. One way would be to create a joint programme for staff development. He recommends the creation of a Thai Hospitality and Tourism Educators Club to coordinate this staff development programme and set the guidelines

in terms of input/output of the students, curriculum, quality assurance and accreditation of the programmes.

Dr. Manat notes that it is far too expensive for universities to try and go it alone. Rather, by pooling resources, they could work more efficiently and cost-effectively in ways that will benefit the universities, the faculty and students.

University of Hainan, China (PRC)

Why do students sign up to study tourism?

Researchers Ms. Abby Liu and Mr. Geoffrey Wall of the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, asked this very question of students at the University of Hainan, China (PRC). A total of 160 questionnaires were sent to first- and second-year students in June-July 1999.

Hainan Island is a Special Economic Zone with much potential for industrial development. The Hainan Provincial Tourism Administration says jobs in tourism doubled from about 20,000 in 1992 to about 40,000 in 1997.

The survey showed that it is job potential that attracts young people. A total of 57.5 percent of respondents said it was their first choice of study and another 27.5 percent, their second choice. As parental support is also important, the results found that 59.7 percent of the students indicated their

parents were "very supportive" of their enrolment for tourism studies.

Asked about their perception of the tourism profession, students cited it as being interesting/challenging work. Good pay and welfare ranked lower on the ladder, indicating an awareness that the students did not think they would get rich in tourism.

They also expressed a clear desire to have more courses in foreign languages, operational knowledge and techniques, and communication skills and etiquette. According to the researchers, the subject of planning and resource management appeared to draw less attention, as it does not directly equip students with the necessary skills/knowledge required in the workplace.

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

How can travel training and education be improved in China (PRC)?

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This was among the questions that researchers at the Department of Hotel and Tourism Management posed to academics at 28 Chinese universities. They received 156 replies out of 420 questionnaires dispatched.

Results gleaned through open-ended questions identified the main issues thus: Improvement in the design of syllabus-subjects/skills with more language training and the balance of theory and practice; change from traditional teaching mode to more modernised innovative and interactive teaching; and greater responsiveness by education to industry needs.

More specifically, academics suggested a better tourism curriculum in three main areas: 1) tourism sales and marketing, including market research, 2) the service concept and 3) tourism management and corporate culture and strategy.

The most mentioned issue of concern was upgrading the quality of general operational staff through practical training. Very few respondents felt any need for upgrading the academic qualifications of people working in hotels and tourism — needed instead is a focus on service concepts, technical skills and customer relations.

However, respondents did stress the need to improve the academic qualifications and operational knowledge of the tourism educators in order for it to be passed down to the students.

Indeed, the research showed that 82 percent of the respondents said it was either “important” or “very important” to upgrade their academic qualifications, and 75 percent of the respondents said they would “definitely undertake further studies” within five years. Asked about the most significant barriers towards pursuing further studies, 38.9 percent cited financial problems and 37.6 percent cited lack of time.

The researchers concluded that the government needs to support academic staff with scholarships and time-release to upgrade their knowledge, research and teaching skills. The staff also needed to provide incentives to help universities retain qualified academic staff through competitive salaries and benefits, better housing conditions and more chances for self-development.

The need to cooperate with international hospitality schools to set up post-graduate programmes and executive training was also mentioned. At the same time, the government was asked to create more fora to bring

together academics and the tourism industry so both sides can join hands to produce higher-quality students.

University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Pooling resources and forging partnerships is also being looked at by universities in the West which have already confronted some of the issues facing Pacific Asia-based institutions.

Somewhat ahead in the life-cycle transition from introduction, growth, maturity, decline and/or rebirth, the University of Guelph is focussing on partnerships, especially in the Pacific Asia region, to broaden delivery of its curriculum, especially over the World Wide Web.

It has created a Web-based distance graduate education programme in Hospitality and Tourism Management, which it plans to market globally via partnerships and alliances. University researchers say that while there are some disadvantages such as loss of “ownership” and revenue sharing, the advantages are greater.

These advantages include: 1) sharing of faculty expertise between educational institutions which potentially doubles the teaching and support pool, 2) access

to regional markets with a specific product and the ability to offer the required residential aspects of the degree programme on a multi-site global basis, 3) institutions in developing countries incur very little infrastructure or developmental costs, 4) English language training and exposure get a significant boost, 5) greater social and cultural exchanges which work to the advantage of both the programme and the participants, 6) costs of individual participants are low in terms of tuition, materials, technology and very limited travel, and they also need not leave their place of work, 7) research can be shared among the institutions and also made more useful to the industry.

Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia

To what extent will undergraduate students accept “teletuition” and “cyber-ed” (cyber-education)?

Researchers in the School of Management asked the students. A total of 437 undergraduate students doing tourism management and administrative management courses were surveyed at the university’s two campuses in Australia and one in Malaysia.

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Earlier work had suggested that while teletuition can have many advantages such as improved productivity, cost-savings and flexibility, it may also lead to problems in terms of communication, isolation, lack of personal and social contact, low morale, satisfaction and achievement and even issues of security and safety.

In the new survey, there was overwhelming agreement that education over the Internet saves time, provides a vehicle for getting lecture notes and research assignments and is flexible and unbound by time constraints. It was also cited for helping students improve their computer skills, allow individual/online learning and discussion and remote access to students.

However, there were a number of responses that regarded the Internet as "not being helpful." Reasons cited in this area included: Lack of face-to-face interaction; time-consuming; information too broad/lost; and technological problems. To a lesser degree, students also cited references to "harmful sections," its potential for misuse (such as for entertainment or chatting) and other personal problems. A few also cited lack of credibility.

Concluded the researchers: "Overall, students preferred the traditional method of face-to-face teaching, but simultaneously considered the 'hybrid approach' to education delivery as one of the systems for educators to embrace." The Internet should not replace face-to-face interaction and traditional teaching and learning directions, but rather be used as a "tool" to assist and complement the total tertiary education environment.

Ming Chuan University, Chinese Taipei

And yet another important question: Are tourism industry staff satisfied with the curricula offered by university tourism programmes?

Researchers here surveyed both the staff and supervisors in the tourism industry to find out if the demand for qualified manpower matched the supply produced by tourism departments.

Two questionnaires were sent out, one to staff who had graduated from university-level tourism programmes in the last five years and were still working in the tourism industry. In the first sign of trouble, the survey found that of a targeted 2,000 people, only 142 qualified, i.e., were still working in tourism. The second questionnaire was sent out to 86 chiefs or supervisors currently employed in the tourism industry.

Among the staff, it was found that language courses were considered the most useful with a score of 4.11 out

of five, but had a lower ranking of 3.67 out of 5 in the satisfaction level with the courses. Similarly, computer technology courses came in second in terms of usefulness (3.79 out of 5) but scored a lower 3.39 out of five in terms of satisfaction. Then came professional tourism courses where the difference between the usefulness and satisfaction levels was lower: respectively 3.66 and 3.41 out of five.

Among the industry supervisors, the researchers did not list the precise results but summarised the results thus: "Generally, the supervisors were not satisfied with the university-level tourism graduates. On the contrary, only those college graduates with full practical training were considered well-equipped in the tourism industry. Thus, it can be concluded that more attention and effort on internship should be put into the tourism curricula instead of emphasising on management courses only."

The researchers also commented on their finding that the "stick-in employment rate" of the tourism graduates is far lower than those of the western countries. "The reason could be that most of the tourism employees have to undergo a basic training of each department before the promotion. During this period, the income is low and there is no fixed working schedule compared to the typical 9-to-5 employees in the other industries."

Conclusion

The challenge of human resources development will not be easy to surmount, especially as it too gets swept up by the winds of globalisation. If the Golden Rule is to hold sway, he who has the gold will make the rules. This will mean greater emphasis on the sources of funding to create the systems and services that will generate the educational quality to attract the students who will be able to pay for it. The less well-off risk getting left out of the process.

For a full set of the papers presented at the APTA conference, please contact Dr. Manat Chaisawat at cmanat@ratree.psu.ac.th or apta2000@bob.psu.ac.th.

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