

Reassessing the Core of Tourism Education: From the Perspectives of Practicum Travel Agency

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Abstract

This paper intends to (1) investigate the extent of the usage of practicum facilities across different level of the curriculum, (2) to establish the fundamental purpose of the practicum travel agency and investigate the extent to which it remains as the core of tourism education, and (3) to assure and conclude that practicum travel agency is an essential part of quality management and enhancement process of tourism education. Students in the Department of Tourism, I-Shou University Taiwan, participated in the practicum travel agency program assured that the program supports their professional enhancement. The strategic alliance travel and tourism businesses concluded and proved their ability and trait as well. Correspondingly, several tourism businesses inquire upon the Department of Tourism and enquire for students to work as trainees.

Keywords: Practicum Travel Agency, Practical Experience, Tourism Education

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this Study

The global economic tsunami in 2009 imposed severely influence on financial system in every country. The travel and tourism industry thrives greatly on disposable income which reaches high only when a country's economy is at prosperous period. The dramatic economic downturn leads the travel and tourism industry to a difficult position. Taiwan, located in the subtropical Southwest Pacific rim, has been experiencing extraordinary transition in the past two years due to her differential political and geographical role. Taiwan has changed the policy with regard to travel and tourism by embracing tourists from Mainland China to barely sustain the market for public and private sectors in the industry.

Travel agency in Taiwan encounters unprecedented situation in dealing with inbound tourists from the so-called opposing neighbor, China. Since the economy in China is booming and apparently becomes a magnet for investors and visitor from all over the world, the tourism professional dares not to neglect the influence and revenue brought upon from Chinese visitors. Thus, a call for well-trained and certificated manpower aiming for the growing market has ringed the bell. Actually, to answer the need in practice, Practicum Travel Agency has come into being in Taiwan Higher Education for long. The solid relationship built up between educational institutions and travel agencies serves as channel for practitioners and faculty members to coordinate and cooperate in preparing students for professional challenges.

1.2 Practical Experience

The HEFCE review, back in 1998, had advised that "the industry values higher education for providing industry specific technical skills and practical experience" (Alexander, 2007; HEPCE, 1998, p. 3). As professional oriented curricula, authentic working life should be highlighted integrated into the study of travel and tourism. Correspondingly, Tourism is a subject that requires operational training and the facilities necessary within a "serving" the needs industry. Has the degree program in tourism a role in preparing students for industry, the operational element of this degree cannot be omitted. Robinson, Barron & Solnet (2008) stated that the tourism industry matures; there is actually an increasing demand for well-qualified graduates with a range of attributes and skills. If the institution with tourism program fails to align their graduates with tourism industry expectation, this could restrain graduates from realizing the actual skills and traits needed for tourism career (Robinson, Barron & Solnet, 2008). In that sense, the tourism educator specifically plays the role in preparing graduates' acquisition of tourism industry-required professional and practical skills and traits. Let alone the workforce for tourism is

distinguished by seasonality, mobility, dynamism, and entrepreneurialism (Donkin, 2002; Robinson, Barron & Solnet, 2008).

1.3 On-Campus Training Facility

Alexander (2007) claimed that institutions providing operational training in the professional practices could offer as part of a more balanced curriculum for students to develop skills at both a practical and theoretical level. The discipline, tourism, identified with any practical or academic issues is also associated with training facilities. Among all the relevant facilities, the practicum travel agency plays a core role in establishing a holistic spectrum of learning environment. Practicum Travel Agency program provides the disciplines, operating, and know-how for students who intend to work in the travel industry. Though Alexander, Lynch & Murray(2009) stated that operational training has become an “expensive, resource-intensive, fixed location and fixed timetable” problem for numerous higher education institutions (Gillespie & Baum, 2000, p. 148.), many Tourism programs in Taiwan higher education still proclaim practicum travel agency as their core training facility. This might be ascribed to different social and educational circumstances, but it is an existed trend that leads Taiwan tourism higher education to what it is to be right now.

The university tourism faculties would definitely agree that the practical experience is the critical training for professional preparation in the tourism industry. Students can continue to integrate learning through the guided application based on academic foundation in a business setting. However, different applications of practical training could vary from student to student in different school years. Thus, Alexander, Lynch & Murray (2009) did conclude that the extent of the usage of practicum facilities across different level of the curriculum needs further investigation.

This paper has the following specific aims:

1. To investigate the extent of the usage of practicum facilities across different level of the curriculum.
2. To establish the fundamental purpose of the practicum travel agency and investigate the extent to which it remains as the core of tourism education.
3. To assure and conclude that practicum travel agency is an essential part of quality management and enhancement process of tourism education.

2. The University and The Department of Tourism

I - Shou University was established in 1990; renamed in 1997, locating at the east foothill of Guanyin Mountain in Kaohsiung County, Taiwan, I-Shou University (ISU) was established by Mr. Lin I-Shou for commemorating his mother and benefiting the villages and towns where he grew up. Its predecessor, Kaohsiung Polytechnic Institute (KPI), started to recruit students in August 1990; in 1997, after being approved by the Ministry of Education, KPI was formally renamed as I-Shou University. I-Shou University had also taken part in assisting Kaohsiung Municipal Government holding the World Games in 2009.

The Department of Tourism is a newly founded discipline in 2007 and currently comes under the authority of College of Management. The curricula were wholly and truly designed and developed by the incumbent Department Chair and faculty members. With an objective to cultivate tourism professionals who possess international perspectives and advanced management ability, the department provides students with a comprehensive theoretical and practical knowledge together with the actual development of tourism-related industry. Curriculum planning emphasizes on two distinct tracks in “tour planning” and “meeting, incentive tour, convention and exhibitions organizing.”

Nearby I-Shou University, across the street actually, the opening of a whole new paradise of entertainment, E-DA World, took place in mid 2010. The E-DA world consists of Crowne Plaza Kaohsiung E-DA World, E-DA Outlet mall, E-DA Theme Park, and E-DA SkyLark Hotel. I-Shou University herself also owns an on-site training restaurant, travel agency and an international housing on campus for Tourism and Hospitality major students to practice their expertise. In another words, the existence of all the tourism industry relevant facilities provides various opportunities for students and faculty members.

2.1 Practicum Travel Agency

Among all the on-site training facilities, the practicum travel agency is particularly designed and established by the Department of Tourism. The facilities within the practicum Travel Agency include LCD monitors, multimedia equipments, portable computers, travel information system, office furniture, and micro-library of tourism information. The interior design of the Practicum Travel Agency includes everything that a real travel agency needs and itself actually works as a real one. Students who participate in the program shall be on duty and shifts everyday on site unless they have to conduct a tour for certain assignment. Therefore, the Practicum Travel Agency actually plays a transit network for students wherever or whenever they need to contact the Department of Tourism Office. Strategic alliance with South East Travel Service Company, a tour operator in Taiwan, enables students to work in real-world application and expose themselves to those promising travel and tourism businesses in the meantime.

3. Methods

In order to prepare future travel agency professionals who are knowledgeable and skilled in travel and tourism industry, as well as address the tourism opportunities in Taiwan, the department intends to develop an innovative education to practice program entitled “Practicum Travel Agency Program.” The primary purpose of this program was to provide students majoring in the Tour Planning Program, minor of Department of Tourism, with classroom instruction on tour planning and direct application of that knowledge when working with a team. A secondary purpose was to provide industry-academia interaction and cooperation to build solid manpower for the tourism industry. Furthermore, the department aims to cultivate students a sense of responsibility, teamwork ability and international perspectives.

3.1 Participants

Certainly, students who participate in this program will also have finished prerequisite courses so that they have a clear idea how a travel agency works. To operate in coordination, courses entitled “practical training I & II” and “internship” are particularly in place so that students have opportunities to become familiar with real-world applications. The practicum travel agency works as an acting venue for students to operate all the administrative matters and routine work. Therefore the curricula could be wholly and successfully linked up with the conduct of practicum travel agency. Pertaining to the theme of this article, practical training I & II contribute greatly for those students who would like to take part in the travel and tourism industry in choosing track “tour planning” as their focused field.

A successful partnership was implemented between the Department of Tourism, I-Shou University and South East Travel Service Company (local agency) in Taiwan. Students were delegated with full responsibility as practical training travel agency staff for practicum programs that serve I-Shou students, faculty members, and visitor to E-DA World. Several tutors were assigned to the practicum travel agency for supervision by the faculty members. Feedback from students and faculty evaluations provide as a solid mechanism in synchronizing tourism pedagogy and professional enhancement.

3.2 Practicum Travel Agency Program

The Practical Training I & II were designed and organized for students at the Department of Tourism of I-Shou University in the spring semester for sophomore and the whole school year for junior. Students choosing “tour planning” as their specified expertise are required to be involved in Practicum Travel Agency Program that were initiated by the Department of Tourism and South East Service Travel Company. The mechanism of apprenticeship virtually is the spirit of this practical training. The junior students managed to lead and guide sophomore ones during the conduct of practical training. In another words, the junior in the department of tourism should always acts as mentor for underclassmen.

Over the courses taken in first four semesters after entering the university, undergraduate students majoring in the Tour Planning Program, minor of Department of Tourism, at the I-Shou University were invited to participate in the Practicum Travel Agency Program. Students who participated in the Practicum Travel Agency program had taken courses such as Introduction to Tourism, Introduction to Hospitality Management, Tour Planning, Travel Agency

Management, Incentive Tours, Consumer Behaviors, and Practice for Conductor & Tour Guide. Moreover, each of the program participants had passed the National Tour Guide and Leader Examinations and earned Certificates of Tour Guide and Tour Leader in Taiwan.

During the first classroom session in the fall semester of sophomore year, students' consent for participation in the evaluation component of the program was secured. Participants in the program also included referees and teams from other faculty members and students. Several tutors were nominated by the faculty members and to arrange for regular meetings in order to secure consent and consistency for participation in this program and gather and edit data and information needed for future evaluation.

For practical training I, sophomore students participated in classroom instruction during the first five weeks of the semester. Course content focused on travel strategic planning, bidding, destination promotion as well as presentation skills. Following the five weeks of classroom instruction, the student participated in the tour planning program were assigned into different groups in charge of data researching and gathering, editing and formatting, promotion and marketing. Each group of students had to plan the weekend excursion that actually interest and attract schoolmates by using fliers and internet to advertise their tours. It was an escorted tour that organized by certificated tour guides on site.

As taught in practical training I, in class practical training II the junior students would modify what they had learned and done in previous semester to set an example for the sophomore students who were taking practical training I in the meantime. The mechanism and spirit of apprenticeship thus had been implemented thru the conduct of two practical training courses.

A course manual was developed for the program that included information on the topics covered during class instruction. The faculty member and the tutors affiliated with the program were available to discuss any problems or issues that arose. Students communicated with the faculty member via weekly meetings on campus. Following each weekly session the student completed a log that called for reflection on his or her learning and practice. The learning log was considered a relatively consistent way to monitor students' progress and able to avoid confusion and nervousness through traditional reviewing method: interview taping (Katajavuri, Lindblom-Ylänne & Hirvonen, 2006). At the end of the semester students and faculty convened to evaluate the program and celebrate the students' accomplishment.

The faculty members who facilitate the courses were the reviewers of tour execution. Students would feel more secured in uttering their actual feelings and consequently the true results and achievement of the program should be converted into students' actual professional competencies. After interviewing with program participants, the results turn out to be far more pleasing and satisfactory. For not only students assured the practicum travel agency program support their professional enhancement but also some travel and tourism businesses concluded and proved their ability and trait. Correspondingly, some relevant businesses, EVA Air for example, inquire upon the Department of Tourism and enquire for students to work as trainees.

4. Conclusion

In responding to aims of the study, this paper describes the experience of a tourism department that furnished students with a program responsibility that would facilitate practicum travel agency. By integrating the principles of "Travel Management," "Tour Planning" and "Practice of Tour Guide & Tour Manager" classes with onsite application, the department faculty members provided a cooperative learning environment for students to be socialized to the expectations of the tourism industry.

Students whoever take these classes should be able to utilize all the equipments within the Practicum Travel Agency. To distribute the extent of usage of practicum facilities across different level of the curriculum, the practicum travel agency actually embraces courses such as, Introduction to Tourism, Travel Management, Tour Planning, Practice of Tour Guide and Tour Manager, and Practical Training I & II, etc... From the fundamental to practical and advanced curricula designed for cultivating a professional tour manager, this study suggests that the existence of the practicum

agency certainly remains as the core of tourism education and practice.

In preparing students for professional challenges, strategic alliance with travel and tourism businesses has become imperative for tourism discipline in higher education. Thus, the practicum travel agency did provide an opportunity for the department of tourism and students to work as a team in running a program that responds to parents and industry market that ask for quality management and enhancement of tourism education.

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