

Student Experiences of Tourism Education and Nurturing the 'Spirit of Service'

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Abstract

The importance of service quality management has been well documented in the tourism and hospitality literature. To achieve this service quality goal, the role of the employee cannot be over emphasised. Successful tourism firms have found that the biggest single factor in visitor satisfaction and loyalty is the perceived responsiveness of employees, the training of whom is a major element in creating and maintaining a positive tourism image. Yet tourism research has largely neglected the experience of tourism students in the education and training process of tourism employment. The appropriate skills and qualities required of tourism employees in the tourism service encounter are conceptualised in this thesis as the 'Spirit of Service'. This thesis argues that the 'Spirit of Service' contains five key qualities or skills that must be nurtured in tourism students such that personnel graduate into the tourism industry with the necessary skills to deliver a positive tourism encounter. This thesis considers the role that the student experience is playing in nurturing the 'Spirit of Service' among tourism students.

A focus on the student experience of tourism education is important in tourism service quality research as there is some evidence in the literature that the student experience (in effect, the 'hidden' curriculum) of vocational education is not always in total congruence with the official curriculum. Official curricula largely aim to produce graduates prepared for the "new" economy, which emphasises a win-win 'Spirited' customer focus. There is much concern as to whether traditional educational approaches actually nurture in tourism students the necessary skills required to deliver a quality tourism service encounter.

In order to complement existing traditional quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research methodologies this study employed the interpretive methodological approach known as Interpretive Description, originally developed in the field of nursing. Within this methodological framework, the study collected data by way of a participant-observation study of tourism students at three educational establishments. The case studies were chosen by way of theoretical sampling to ensure maximum variation on data collection and analysis.

Notably, the participant-observation revealed that the student experience of the 'hidden' curriculum was playing a prominent and powerful role in the development of the skills and qualities that conceptualise the 'Spirit of Service'. In the majority of instances, student experiences were supportive of industry needs and the goals of the official curricula, and the gap between business and education or training was not as wide as feared in some literature. An empowering educational model was found to best allow for educational experiences that supported the 'Spirit of Service' and was perceived to lead to a more positive and empowered student conceptualisation of service and service quality. Conversely, when negative student experiences were either observed, or reported, the model of education employed was largely a traditional 'banking' model. Thus, there was also evident a strong element of student oppression in the service conceptualisation.

The findings of this thesis provide a positive step in understanding the student experience of being educated or trained to provide quality service in tourism. The findings suggest that tourism educators and trainers should consider embracing an open, dialogical, 'Spirited' and empowering educational paradigm, at the expense of the more traditional, 'Unspirited', banking pedagogical method. The outcomes of this empowering model include student empowerment in their conceptualisation of service, mindfulness, and spontaneous 'Spirited' service delivery, thus constituting quality service management.

Profile

Nell has been working in the Higher Education Development Centre at the University of Otago since 2004. Her current position involves research into affective values in higher education. Nell is also the Editor of 'Akoranga' a biannual publication about teaching and learning produced by HEDC for all University of Otago staff.