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RESEARCH NOTES AND REPORTS

Producing Graduates for the Tourism Industry in Greece: A Case Study

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Abstract

A telephone survey of the first graduates from the newly-formed department of Tourism Business at the Technological Educational Institute of Epirus in Greece was carried out during May 2003. The purpose of the study was to assess the employment status of the graduates and the survey also included general questions about age, employment status and salary.

The survey revealed there was no correlation between age, sex or degree classification (X^2 – test, $P>0.05$) and salary or career expectations, and that the interviewed graduates consider family network, foreign languages or computer literacy to be more important than the degree itself in getting their first job in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: tourism, education, Greece, training

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Introduction

The tourism industry in Greece

Since World War II, tourism has become one of the most important social and economic activities, crucial to many national and local economies, especially for those countries with less developed, modern, service industry-based economies (Dritsakis, 2004; Inskeep, 1991). Many countries seek to develop tourism for its various economic and social benefits such as income, foreign currency earnings, cross cultural exchange and employment (Dritsakis, 2004; Pavlopoulos, 1999).

Greece is a popular tourist destination (see Table 1). Between 1960 and 2000, tourist arrivals in Greece increased by an average of 2.4 per cent per annum (Dritsakis, 2004). By 1999, tourism arrivals to the country counted for more than 11 million people. In 2002, Greece was the 13th most popular destination worldwide and the eighth most popular European destination (WTO, 2003).

| Year | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2003 |
|--------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Greece: arrival numbers in thousands | 10,130 | 9,233 | 10,070 | 10,916 | 11,462 | 14,180 |

(Based on Anastasiou and Alexiou, 2001; WTO, 2003)

Table 1: Greece as a tourist destination in Europe

Tourism education in Greece

Following the Educational Reform of 2001, public higher education is divided into the University (universities, polytechnic schools, and Athens School of Arts) and Technological sectors (technological educational institutes - TEI). Student admission depends on performance in national written examinations. Those who are over the age of 22 can also apply for admission to the Hellenic Open University. There is also a thriving private education industry providing unofficial tertiary education. In 2000 there were 225 private institutions offering diplomas or certificates in several subjects (Koulaidis, 2002).

Until recently and unlike other European countries, public higher education options in Greece were limited, when pursuing a career in the hospitality industry. In the UK, for example, there were 66 undergraduate programmes in 1997, and 14 tourism courses in universities in Italy (Airey and Johnson, 1999).

In Greece, only the technological sector (TEI) of public higher education offers undergraduate tourism and hospitality degrees. Currently, there are seven TEIs offering an undergraduate degree in Tourism Business and two Training Centers of Advanced Studies (A.S.T.P.) on the islands of Rhodes and Crete offering an undergraduate degree in Hotel and Catering (see Table 2). In 2000, there were 2,186 students admitted to study tourism and hospitality courses (Stamelos, 2002).

Currently, there are four universities offering postgraduate degrees in hospitality and tourism management: the University of Athens offers an MA in Tourism Management, the University of Aegean offers an MA in Tourism Business Administration and Planning, the Athens University of Economics and Business offers an MA in Tourism and the Greek Open University offers an MA in Tourism Enterprises Management by distance learning.

In addition to the above, there are a number of private education establishments offering courses in hospitality management. The courses offered are franchised and validated by foreign universities, but the Greek Ministry of Education does not officially recognise them.

| Public Educational establishment | No of students in 2000 |
|--|------------------------|
| Technological Educational Institute of Athens: Dept. Tourism Business | 228 |
| Technological Educational Institute of Crete: Dept. Tourism Business | 236 |
| Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki: Dept. Tourism Business | 182 |
| Technological Educational Institute of Larisa: Dept. Tourism Business | 361 |
| Technological Educational Institute of Lamia: Dept. Tourism Business | 290 |
| Technological Educational Institute of Epirus: Dept. Tourism Business | 240 |
| Training Center of Advanced Studies in Rhodes | 48 |
| Training Center of Advanced Studies in Crete | 48 |

(Based on Stamelos, 2002)

Table 2: Number of students admitted to study hospitality and tourism management degrees in Greece in 2000

The Department of Tourism Business – Technological Educational Institute Of Epirus, Greece

The Technological Educational Institute of Epirus was founded in 1994 and is located in the north-west of Greece. It includes four faculties with 15 departments spread over four towns. The Department of Tourism Business was established in 1998. It is situated in Igoumenitsa, close to Corfu Island, a major tourist destination.

The academic staff comprises of: four full-time and 16 visiting lecturers, two full-time senior lecturers, and two full-time Readers. Student admission depends on performance in the national written examinations. In 2000, there were 2,391 prospective students for a degree in Tourism Business. Of those, only 16.6 per cent selected this department as a first, second or third choice (Stamelos, 2002). A total of 240 applicants were offered places with half of them finally accepting the offer and a much lower number regularly attending the course.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to assess the employment status of the first graduates (n=45) of the Department of Tourism Business at the Technological Educational Institute of Epirus. The survey also included general questions about age, employment status and salary. A telephone survey was conducted in May 2003.

Results and discussion

The sample group contained 32 graduates. Out of the 32 interviewees, 26 (81 per cent) were female and the remaining 19 per cent were male. Table 3 shows the ages of the respondents. There was no correlation between age, sex or degree classification (X^2 – test, $P>0.05$) and salary or career expectations.

Most of the interviewees (65.6 per cent) had selected the department of Tourism Business as a first, second or third choice. A minority (34.4 per cent) were employed in the tourism industry and of those, 28.1 per cent were employed in the private sector and 6.3 per cent in the public sector (see Table 3).

| Age Group | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| 22 | 25% |
| 23 | 34.40% |
| 24 | 25% |
| 25 or above | 15.60% |
| Employment Status | |
| Employed in Public sector | 6.30% |
| Employed in Private sector | 28.10% |
| Unemployed | 65.60% |
| Starting Net Salary (Euros per calendar month) | |
| 400 to 600 | 27.30% |
| 600-800 | 54.50% |
| 800-1000 | 18.20% |
| Reason stated as most significant for getting a job | |
| Degree | 11.80% |
| Computer literacy | 17.60% |
| Family network | 29.40% |
| Foreign language | 35.20% |
| Other | 6.00% |

Table 3: Profile of first Tourism Business graduates of the Technological Educational Institute of Epirus

The majority of the interviewees (81.8 per cent) received the same salary as a non-graduate employees; 27.3 per cent were paid 400-600 euros per calendar month and 54.59 per cent of the graduates received 600-800 euros per month (see Table 3). Only one fifth of the interviewees received the salary expected for a university graduate (800-1000 euros per calendar month).

Although most of the interviewees (54.5 per cent) agreed that they gained adequate theoretical knowledge and practical skills during their studies, only a small fraction (11.8 per cent) stated that their degree helped them to find relevant employment. Most of the graduates (35.2 per cent) considered knowledge of foreign languages as the most significant factor for getting a job (see Table 3). Other factors considered as being significant were family network (29.4 per cent) and computer literacy (17.6 per cent).

The majority of the graduates were between 23 and 24 years of age (59.4 per cent) and all of them completed their studies within the minimum period required. Considering that in Greece the entry point to higher education is 18 years of age, it can be seen that a significant portion (40.6 per cent) of the graduates were mature students.

The overwhelming majority of the graduates were unemployed (65.6 per cent); these included male graduates serving or about to begin serving in the army, graduates pursuing postgraduate studies, and those actively seeking employment. The majority of those who work are employed in the private sector (28.1 per cent) and the rest in the public sector (6.3 per cent). This can be explained by the fact that the majority of jobs in the tourism industry in Greece are in the private sector.

A knowledge of foreign languages was stated as the most significant factor (35.20 per cent) in the search for relevant employment. Family network was the second most significant reason (29.40 per cent) for getting a job. This can be attributed to the many family run, small enterprises operating in Greece (Christou, 1999). In terms of finding a job, most of the graduates ranked their degree in Tourism Business as less important than their foreign language skills, computer literacy and family network.

It is widely recognised that higher standards in hospitality education are required in order to provide personnel of high calibre to support the development of the tourism sector in Greece (Christou, 1999). It would therefore be reasonable to assume that a degree in tourism should be regarded as a significant qualification, enhancing career prospects in the tourism industry. The fact that the interviewed graduates do not consider their degree as the most significant factor for getting a job may be a result of a combination of factors:

- There is an oversupply of graduates in the tourism industry; from the several public and numerous private educational institutes.
- The tourism industry's needs are not fully covered by the majority of the degree courses (Christou, 1999; Goldsmith and Smirli, 1995).
- The cost of employing a graduate is higher and this sometimes discourages employment (Goldsmith and Smirli, 1995).

It is therefore not surprising to see that the interviewed graduates consider family network, foreign languages and computer literacy as more important than the degree itself in getting their first job in the hospitality industry.

Conclusion

The telephone survey revealed that the interviewed graduates consider family network, foreign languages and computer literacy as more important than the degree itself in getting their first job in the hospitality industry. The survey also revealed that there was no correlation between age, sex or degree classification (X^2 – test, $P > 0.05$) and salary or career expectations.

Considering the above it would be reasonable to evaluate the effectiveness of the current degree courses in hospitality and tourism management offered in Greece. Of equal importance, is the need for a change of attitude within the tourism industry in Greece, regarding the recruitment of graduates. There are studies showing that in Greece graduates are sometimes considered by major employers to be an 'expense' (Goldsmith and Smirli, 1995) rather an 'investment'. This contrasts with a commonly accepted principle in modern human resource management, where human resources are seen as a vital investment.

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