

## *“SUSTAINABLE WHAT?”*

# *SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN GREEK TERTIARY CURRICULA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sustainable tourism development, as a concept, is an important curriculum component since many tourism graduates will become the managers of the future. This paper presents the findings from a short student-survey regarding present understanding and usage of the concept in Greek tourism degree courses. The results of this survey suggest that aspects of sustainable tourism development are not comprehensively addressed in the curriculum and that students do not have a reasonable understanding of the concept. Educational implications of the study results are presented.

**Keywords:** tourism higher education, sustainable development, Greece

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades there has been much talk over the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable tourism development”. This includes the introduction of a specialist tourism journal devoted to the subject of sustainability (*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*) in 1992. The World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, held in Lanzarote, was also one of a large number that produced recommendations on the application of sustainable development principles to tourism, in that case a “Charter of Principles and Objectives for Sustainable Tourism” (France, 1997).

The tourism industry and its professional bodies are recognizing the need to engage with sustainable development issues (WTO, 2005). However, a number of studies on the conceptualisation of sustainable development within the context of tourism showed a lack of understanding and vagueness about sustainability concepts and their implementation into current tourism practice. These concerns have been well articulated by several authors, ranging from Craik (1995) over a decade ago to McKercher (2003) more recently. Other recent publications have also drawn attention to the misuse of the concept in touristic practice (Cohen, 2000; Sharpley, 2000).

To address these issues changes need to be made in the way tourism education is conceived and delivered, so that tourism graduates can become proponents for the implementation of sustainable development practices in their organisations. This statement should not be taken to imply that education will solve all our problems and lead us single-handedly into the desired sustainable tourism society. Clearly the *status quo* is setting parameters which render much of what is done in education obsolete (Barnett, 1990). Yet it is also clear that without some sort of education, of learning and fostering understanding, the transition to sustainability will hardly be achieved (Jucker, 2002). This mirrors closely Agenda 21, a global action plan for delivering sustainable development, which proposes that “education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address sustainable development issues” (UNCED, 1992).

The Greek Government is a signatory of Agenda 21. However, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no research exists on the incorporation of the concept of sustainable development in Greek tourism studies at a higher level. The only relevant research reported appears to be an investigation into the aspects of sustainable development in Greece which revealed the absence of a consistent specific national strategy for sustainable development education (United Nations, 1998). Against this background, this paper reviews the tourism curriculum in Greece at undergraduate level, with the purpose of illuminating the nature of

provision, before presenting a discussion of what the concept of sustainable tourism development should incorporate. This will set the conceptual framework of the study and will be used as a basis of comparison with student conceptions. Findings from a short survey of final-year students are then presented in an attempt to elicit student perception of the concept of sustainable tourism development and its usage in the curriculum. Finally, the most important problems faced by students in the teaching of sustainable tourism development are recorded.

## **TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION IN GREECE**

After about 35 years of development, Greece now has a fairly well-developed higher education system in tourism which, in common with Western Europe, has experienced significant expansion in the past few years. According to Greek legislation, higher education consists of two parallel sectors (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, 2005):

- The University Sector, which includes Universities, Polytechnics, and the Athens School of Fine Arts.
- The Technical Sector, which includes the Higher Technological Educational Institutions (ATEIs). It is important to note that ATEIs were fully integrated into the higher education system in 2001.

Within the University Sector, degree-level courses with a management component relating to tourism (but not degrees on tourism) are offered by the Business Administration Departments of the University of the Aegean and the University of Patras. Also at the University Sector, three Universities (University of the Aegean, University of Piraeus, and the Hellenic Open University) offer postgraduate programmes in tourism, leading to Master's or PhD degrees, established during the past eight years. Within the Technical Sector, there are six ATEIs (in Athens, Epirus, Heraclion, Larissa, Patras, and Thessalonica) offering courses leading to an undergraduate degree in tourism management.

The provision at the two sectors noted here provides a fairly comprehensive system of tourism higher education and the recent introduction of postgraduate degrees indicates the way in which the system is expanding to meet the needs of students and of the tourism industry. The remaining of this section now turns to a more detailed consideration of the nature of tourism education in the technical sector, which acts as the sole provider of tourism degrees at undergraduate level.

However, many of the issues developed are also relevant to the wider tourism educational system of Greece.

### **Development and Curricula Issues**

To a large extent the development of tourism education in Greece has been driven by what Tribe (1997) has referred to as a “vocational action” approach. *Action* is used here as the counterpart of *reflection*. As Tribe (1999, p. 123) explains, vocational actions “are activities or performances in the world and generally involve exercise of a skill or technique”. It follows logically that by vocational actions we are referring to the actions of those employed in the tourism sector. So, for example, the preparation of a profit and loss account, the operation of a reception desk, the marketing of a destination or an attraction involve vocational actions. Hence, the aims of an education for vocational action are simply to equip students to be effective practitioners in the business world of tourism (*ibid.*).

Given its history, origins and development, this vocational emphasis should not raise many eyebrows. In its origins, tourism education in Greece was developed as a response to the impressive growth of the tourism industry during the last 30 years (Laloumis and Roupas, 1998) and the perceived employment needs of this growing economic sector, and was given added impetus by student demand anxious about future employment prospects (Christou, 1999). The outcome of these developments was that formal courses became the main route, at least in principle, for potential employees to gain entry to the industry and not surprisingly the courses were strongly geared to these employment needs. This vocational orientation was further supported by a strong vocational ethos nationally which emphasised, and continues to do so even today, the important links between an educated labour force and a strong tourism industry.

This strong influence of industry was seen in the initial establishment of technological educational institutions in the 1970s as Centres of Professional Technological Education (K.A.T.E.). This latter point is also reflected today in the departmental location of ATEIs’ tourism programmes which are exclusively found in departments of tourism management. The information provided in Table 1 relating to the contents of a tourism management degree provides further confirmation of the same pattern.

**Table 1:** Outline of a tourism management degree course

<b>1<sup>st</sup> semester</b>	<b>5<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
Microeconomics Business mathematics General accounting Labour relations Professional cooking I Tourism psychology or Tourism sociology	Organisation of conventions Clients record keeping Tourism marketing Computerised reservation systems Tourism legislation Supplies-Auditing-Costing or Hotel accounting
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> semester</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
Macroeconomics Principles of tourism Business accounting Floor service Professional cooking II European Union Law or Commercial law	Hotel marketing Hotel computer applications Communication policy – Public relations Tourism business administration Client recreation and exercise Airport operation or Tour package and travelling
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> semester</b>	<b>7<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
Tourism economy Business statistics Computer applications Bar Restaurant organisation and operation Global tourism geography or Greek tourism geography	Graduate seminar Human resources management Finance for tourism enterprises English tourism terminology French tourism terminology German tourism terminology or Italian tourism terminology
<b>4<sup>th</sup> semester</b>	<b>8<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
Tourism policy Airfares – Ticketing Reception service Organisation & operation of travel agencies Tourism enterprises and the Internet Tourism market research or advertising	Dissertation Six-month industrial placement

Source: Higher Technological Educational Institute of Patras (2004)

Like all ATEI courses, this is offered as a four-year programme of study including six months of supervised industrial placement. The extent to which the content has a strong vocational slant finds expression in module titles such as *Business Statistics* and *Tourism Marketing*. The prevalence of production kitchens, laboratories of hotel reception and floor service, and six-month industrial placements as a part of the students' learning experience, also provide tangible evidence of this focus. The industry influence is also demonstrated clearly in the 2004 prospectus of the ATEI of Patras (2004, p. 52) which suggests that the aim of the offered tourism course is "to develop managerial staff ... able to be assimilated directly into the Greek and international tourism industry". This vocational orientation also comes through Christou's (1999, p. 687) analysis of the Greek tourism management education system, which suggested that tourism graduates "gain adequate knowledge and practical skills in food and beverage operations, accommodation services and front-office operations".

What all this adds up to is an orientation that produces a vocationalist curriculum, based on technique and means rather than consideration of ends (Tribe, 1999). Of course, in many ways the vocational oriented curriculum fits the needs of the key stakeholders in tourism education: the employers, the students, and the educators. The emphasis on action, rather than reflection, helps meet employers' immediate workforce needs, thus providing students with fairly good initial employment prospects, and it makes sure that the educators have a good student demand for their programmes (Airey, 2003). Indeed, this combination is often seen as one of the strengths and successes of this aspect of education.

Yet, at the same time, a problem lies here in that such an approach can lead to a one-dimensional development of the curriculum where a critical view of the society is missed. Tribe's (1999, pp. 121-122) comments on the nature of business actions are particularly apposite to this case:

"A business action may be good for profits, good for shareholders, good for customers, but adversely affect other groups such as workers or distant host communities. These communities are separate."

In this sense, a curriculum which is implicitly framed as the development of business skills for the tourism sector of the economy plays a key part in the reproduction of an imperfect society. This is both disappointing and uncritical, given the far-reaching contributions of tourism – both positive and negative – to the economic, social, cultural and environmental fabric and well-being of societies. It is in this connection that "sustainable development" emerges as a key concept for consideration within the tourism curriculum. By encompassing a wide range of

disciplines, including aspects of economics, sociology, and natural science, “sustainable development” can provide a broad disciplinary framework which will foster an understanding of the different ideologies and discourses associated with the wider world of tourism.

## **THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Defining and achieving sustainable development has become one of the major policy debates of our generation. Since the term “sustainable development” first came to public attention with the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, it has been much contested by international forums, academics, scientists, public sector institutions, and private businesses (Eber, 2002). However, it is fair to say that much of the discussion on the concept has been structured around the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (WCED, 1987, p. 43) well-known definition of sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Milne, 1998). For the WCED, this involves a process of change in which economic prosperity must be integrated with environmental integrity in a manner that is socially equitable and preserves the culture of a society. In this sense, sustainable development is a comprehensive and inclusive approach which stresses the interdependence of the natural environment with economy and society – the “triple-bottom-line”.

The adoption of the principles of sustainable development to tourism has been rapid and pervasive, although implementation of the practice has been much more limited (Butler, 1998). Where it has been adopted in the tourism industry, the term “sustainable tourism development” has become widely accepted as meaning tourism that is developed and operated in such a manner as to follow the triple-bottom-line approach (Swarbrooke, 1999). According to this line of thought, the conventional focus of tourism development on the demands of the market should be replaced by an emphasis on the needs of the destination communities. The focus of sustainable tourism development strategies should be on equity, less consumption, more efficiency, and preservation of the health and resilience of the human, social, natural and built environment (Jurowski and Liburd, 2001; Wight, 2002). However, this change of focus from the market to the destination community does not result in lesser economic gains for tourism businesses. Higher profits can be realised through sound sustainable business practices that reduce costs and increase revenues. For example, the use of renewable resources not only saves the accommodation unit money, but also allows it to

achieve good public relations with a market that is increasingly concerned about environmental issues, and consequently increase customer loyalty (Urry, 1996; Bohdanowicz *et al.*, 2001). Thus, to achieve economic, social and environmental gains, tourism developers must communicate and apply the sustainable values through policies and procedures.

The overwhelming appeal of sustainability is situated in the strong belief of mutual care for the world, hindering or excluding unwanted environmental effects of tourism development, and responsibility towards future generations (Wheeller, 1993). However, while appropriate and praiseworthy in principle, it is important to note that sustainable development remains an essentially contested concept. For Hall (1998), the main reason for this is the extent to which the concept is used to refer to a wise use in the way natural resources are exploited. The problem here lies in that the very way in which “wise use” is defined will depend on the values of various stakeholders. Perhaps most problematic is the contest between those who accent harmony with nature as the most important element in sustainable development and those who value human progress as of paramount importance – with the latter group concentrating on the continuity of development and economic growth (Redclift, 1988; Milne, 1998).

Besides being contested the concept of sustainable development is complex. Sustainability is related to many different disciplinary topics, such as environmental conservation, development of peripheral areas, natural resource management, human processes and requirements, and so on. In addressing sustainable development, different levels of analysis are used, for example from global to the destination level, or from household to individual level (Butler, 1998). The relative weight and importance of the subjects related to sustainable development is hardly objectively determinable and depends on the values and ideologies of various stakeholders (Hall, 1998). From this discussion and specific remarks on sustainable development it follows logically that a clear elaboration of the concept in courses or study programmes is difficult.

However, while sustainable development is clearly a concept with inherent weaknesses, its real value should not be overlooked. Although the contradictory goals of continued economic growth and societal and environmental sustainability may never be met, the concept of sustainable development provides a focal point around which the conflicting value positions of different stakeholders can be reconciled (Milne, 1998). It is useful to note that in discussing the design of tourism curricula, Tribe (2000) identifies a similar contest that exists over their contents. This is due to:

“influences which promote the tourism curriculum as a vocational one for commercial ends [including] the needs of employers, professional bodies, academics rooted in business departments [and] influences which promote the tourism curriculum as one for non-commercial ends. For example host and environmental interests would promote a curriculum for sustainable tourism, and academics from critical subjects will promote a more open agenda for tourism studies.”

These guidelines illustrate why sustainable development is a key concept for consideration within tourism programmes of study and how this apparent dichotomy can be resolved. Here, then, there is ample justification in integrating sustainable tourism development as an inclusive approach within the tourism curriculum, since this will address concerns for wider interests and introduce a more open agenda compatible with the achievement of commercial ends (Eber, 2002).

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to get an overview of student perception on the usage of sustainable development in Greek tourism curricula, we undertook a short self-completion questionnaire survey. The population from which the survey sought information was defined as those final-year students for the academic year 2004/5 following tourism programmes at ATEIs. No reliable data exists on the total size or characteristics of the target population and this posed problems for data collection. Under these circumstances the researchers had to turn to forms of convenience sampling as the basis for selecting the sample. Convenience sampling is built upon selections which suit the convenience of the researcher and which are available by virtue of their accessibility (Clark *et al.*, 1998). This element of convenience entered the sampling procedure discussed here in that data were collected at two different ATEIs, where the researchers had a number of personal acquaintances that showed interest in the study and facilitated access to students. Following this, questionnaires were collected from 81 final-year students registered in tourism programmes of study at the participating ATEIs.

The employed questionnaire was an adapted version of a questionnaire developed by Busby (2003) for the purposes of a similar research to the one reported here. The questionnaire contained five open-ended questions, inviting comments on the concept of sustainable tourism development and its usage within

tourism curricula. A limited number of statements, used to assess specific perceptions of the curriculum, were also included. In the light of a short pilot study, some minor amendments were made to questions in order to improve clarity. Most importantly in relation to this, the term “sustainable tourism development” was used throughout the questionnaire and was not used in conjunction with sustainable tourism, as was the case with Busby’s questionnaire. The reason for this was that sustainable tourism is often regarded as part of sustainable tourism development – i.e. the two concepts are distinct (see Diamantis, 1998, pp. 20-42). In this connection, it was thought that the interchangeable use of the two concepts might confuse respondents.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis that follows gives an overview of the ideas of the students that responded. It reflects the situation for the tourism students of the participating ATEIs and not necessarily for all ATEIs in Greece. However, the outcomes of the study identify some important messages about student perceptions of the present usage of the concept of sustainable tourism development within their programmes of study, providing material for further discussion and research.

To get an indication of how “sustainable tourism development” is understood in the study content of tourism curricula, the two opening questions attempted to elicit students’ views by asking them for keywords associated with the concept, and whether it involves any necessary foundations. The vast majority of answers to both questions raised one common issue, namely that sustainable tourism development is seen as synonymous with environmental conservation. This is clearly illustrated in the responses of the 37 students who answered this question, in that the most frequently cited keywords were: physical environment, natural resources, ecotourism, green tourism, and ecology. Only six students referred to keywords such as human heritage, social environment, destination communities, and future generations.

A similar emphasis arose over student responses on the necessary foundations of sustainable tourism development. From the 81 questionnaires, this elicited 32 responses with most students stressing the need for natural resources management, respect for the environment, and less environmentally impacting forms of tourism development. Only nine students considered there was a need for relevant government policy, and, vitally, collaboration amongst stakeholders, long-term thinking, and holistic approaches to tourism development. Fourteen students

made comments to support their answers; the two most relevant to the point made here stating that “current tourism development is imposing too great a demand upon the natural environment” and “the physical environment does not have the capacity to absorb the demands made on it by various forms of tourism development”.

The third question asked students to identify which modules in their programmes of study provided a foundation on sustainable tourism development. Not surprisingly, most students (78%) recognised the Tourism Policy module to be relevant. The Tourism Marketing and Public Relations modules were also identified as embedding some aspect of sustainable development by twenty-four and twenty-one students respectively. Against these, the rest of the modules were considered to be irrelevant by the vast majority of students. It is interesting to note that all three modules cited to be relevant are taught in the latter stages of the curriculum.

In an attempt to assess specific perceptions of the curriculum, students were asked to rank four short statements, representing deconstructed curriculum components, on a five-point Likert scale. As regards the scoring of the scale, statements were scored 5 for “strongly agree”, down to 1 for “strongly disagree”. The results of responses to the statements are given in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Student perception of the curriculum

<b>No.</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean n = 72</b>
1.	The tourism degree I am undertaking provides me with an understanding of the term “sustainable tourism development”.	1.5
2.	The concept of sustainable tourism development is embedded in all taught modules.	1.3
3.	The curriculum places too much emphasis on the commercial aspects of tourism.	4.1
4.	The business practices of Greek tourism establishments do not help sustainable tourism development.	3.9

From the table, it is evident that students felt that they did not gain adequate knowledge in the area of sustainable tourism development (statement 1) and that the concept is not present in all modules (statement 2). The highest mean score was recorded for statement 3. Here, again, there is ample demonstration of the strong influence of industry on the content of degree programmes; an influence which is realised by students. Of course, following student responses to earlier questions and the discussion on the nature of tourism curricula in Greece, these results are more or less as expected. However, it is remarkable that all three statements elicited scores close to the ends of the scale. Why were students so emphatic in their responses? Here, there is clearly a disconcerting indication about the way in which sustainable development is addressed in the curriculum and the extent to which its content is tied to the needs of industry.

Statement 4, concerning the business practices within the Greek tourism industry, also elicited a remarkably high score. It is important to note that none of the students stated “disagree” or “strongly disagree”. Following the closeness of the links of tourism education with industry, this is an interesting finding because many students clearly believe that Greek tourism establishments do not help sustainable tourism development.

When asked to identify as many authors as possible associated with the concept of sustainable tourism development, most students were not able to cite any key texts. Given the plethora of existing articles and books on sustainable tourism and its development, this is a disappointing and concerning result. Of the twenty-six students that replied, twenty-one identified Igoumenakis' (1999) text, which is used as a textbook for the Tourism Policy module in many ATEIs. However, it is important to note that the text does not include sustainable tourism development or sustainability in its subject index. Seven students cited Swarbrooke's text, five of which also identified the work of Butler.

The questionnaire also included an explicit question regarding the most important problems experienced by students in the way the concept of sustainable tourism development is addressed in their courses. Fifty-two students provided comments. Perhaps not surprisingly, thirty-eight individuals considered the difficult conceptualisation of the concept as the most important problem. One respondent reflected the core idea as follows: “Sustainable development is an elusive concept. Key concepts need to be clarified before anything meaningful can be discussed”. Other common suggested problems can be categorised roughly in four areas: the inadequate content of the taught modules (34); the unavailability of relevant resources (29); the contradiction between the nature of sustainable development and conventional business practices within the tourism industry (27); and rather

prominently present, the opinion that the concept of sustainability exceeds the expertise of the majority of individual staff members (36). Finally, four respondents mentioned a rather interesting problem with the attitudes of staff and students. The following verbatim comment is particularly relevant: "Sometimes both staff and students seem reluctant to become involved with issues of sustainable development". Unfortunately, these students did not attempt to explain why this is the case.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This survey has suggested that aspects of sustainable tourism development are not comprehensively addressed in undergraduate programmes offered by ATEIs. The disappointingly low number of modules shown to embed some aspect of sustainability, the Likert scores and identification of authors, all indicate that students do not have a reasonable understanding of the concept. Responses regarding the inadequacy of the content of taught modules, the unavailability of relevant resources and appropriate teaching expertise are also characteristic of the situation.

Of course, the integration of the concept of sustainable development within undergraduate programmes of study is not an easy task. The conceptualisation of the concept is with good reason alleged to be complex, a point acknowledged by students. This is because of the required balance among its three basic components – the environment, the economy, and society (the triple-bottom-line). Indeed, the concept of sustainable development as depicted by the triple-bottom-line approach is a holistic one, and this element is at the heart of successful adoption of the concept within educational contexts (Eber, 2002). Yet, this broad agenda is not echoed in the results of this study in that student understanding of sustainable development does not appear to go beyond concern with the environment. To a certain extent, this fragmentation is not surprising. After all, many of the fundamental principles of sustainable development are close to the original idea of environmental conservation. However, to talk of sustainable development in any one sense alone, such as environmental sustainability, is philosophically against the true nature of the concept (Butler, 1998).

The paper ends with one final, more abstract point about tourism higher education in Greece. Following the results of this study, it appears that Greek tourism courses have focused on tourism problems the solution of which requires the exercise of vocational skills or technique. The overt emphasis of the curriculum on

the vocational appears to have tied tourism education too closely to the needs of the industry, thus preventing the curriculum from expanding into a consideration of wider issues that underlie tourism – in this case issues of sustainable tourism development. But vocational skills represent only one aspect of the tourism knowledge needed in the delivery of projects, tourism products and services. Tourism is affected by, and affects, other issues which are not so easily encapsulated. What this implies in education terms is that greater emphasis must be placed on problem definition; a view confirmed by Young (1989, p. 23) who suggests the need for education to first “transcend its present incomplete and one-sided level of development and second to make a contribution to the solution of problems of the society in which they are found”. This challenging commitment requires tourism graduates to retain a robust and analytical approach whilst dealing increasingly with non-vocational details. For this perspective to be achieved, tourism education must seek to provide its future graduates with a longer and broader view of tourism and of their practice. This will help avoid past failures where narrow vocational actions have negatively “affected groups such as workers or distant host communities” (Tribe, 1999, p. 122).

This should be a source of excitement for Greek tourism higher education and grasped as a marvellous opportunity to show what it has to offer the individual and the wider world. It is argued here that the integration of sustainable development within the tourism curriculum can constitute a valuable step in this developmental process, which is in the interest of all parties: for the students who, after their studies, will be equipped to enter the world of work and contribute usefully to its development; for the tourism industry that needs a workforce that can think beyond day-to-day issues and move it towards a more sustainable future; as well as for the tourism educational sector itself, the rationale of which lies in much more than fairly immediate training (Airey, 2003). It would be wrong to infer from this that tourism higher education should be dismissive about its vocational elements. But, as Stergiou (2005) has argued, this should not be the totality of its responsibilities or commitments.

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