An Innovative Virtual Method for Providing eTourism Education in a University Network: eTourism Curriculum Finland

Juho Pesonen[a], Outi Kähkönen[b], Päivi-Hanni-Vaara[b], Mikael Viitasaari[c], Tarja Kupiainen[d], Alexandre Kostov[e] and Johanna Heinonen[e]

[a]Centre for Tourism Studies, University of Eastern Finland
juho.pesonen@uef.fi
[b]Lapland University of Applied Sciences
[c]JAMK University of Applied Sciences
[d]Karelia University of Applied Sciences
[e]Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

Developing the know-how and capabilities of tourism students in the field of online business and eTourism is crucial to increase use of information and communication technologies in the industry. This paper presents a novel system for organizing eTourism education in higher education institutes such as universities and universities of applied sciences. This system is based on course exchange between institutions and provides altogether 35 ECTS credits of annual studies in eTourism in English. This paper provides an overview of how the system came to be and how it is organized in practice. The results of this paper are useful for universities interested in developing eTourism education and demonstrates how universities can work together with low investments to create something that none of them could do alone. It elaborates the new possibilities information and communication technologies provide for universities for co-operation and more efficient curriculum.

Keywords: education, studying, eTourism, information and communication technologies, teaching, virtual

1 Introduction

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have revolutionised the tourism industry. Travellers are now searching for information, purchasing a trip and sharing experiences mostly online. The competitiveness of travel destinations and companies is partly determined by their ability to promote themselves and their capability to communicate interactively in the electronic channels (Mazanec, Wöber & Zins, 2007). Tourism businesses and destinations need skills to manage these electronic channels. Even though these skills are vital for the development of the tourism industry, this kind of expertise has not been widely available in higher education institutions in Finland.

The use of ICTs for educational purposes has witnessed a phenomenal increase and has been finally taken into account as a serious player in the field of higher education growth (González-Sanmamed, Muñoz-Carril, and Sangrà, 2014). ICTs enable completely new approaches to education and teaching. For example Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs, Murphy, Kalbaska, Horton-Tognazzini and Cantoni, 2015) have opened a new world for institutes of higher education which many of the world's top universities have embraced (Lewin, 2013). It is now even possible to study

eTourism in a MOOC organized by Università della Svizzera italiana (https://iversity.org/en/courses/etourism).

To develop online tourism business capabilities in Finland eTourismCurriculum (eTC) Finland has been created. This is a new network-based virtual study module coordinated by the Centre for Tourism Studies (CTS) at the University of Eastern Finland and provided to students by six Finnish universities of applied sciences. This article presents the formation and practical operation of eTourismCurriculum Finland. Even at an international level, eTourismCurriculum is an exceptional way to implement collaboration between higher education institutions, and the experience gained from creating this network is useful when similar networks between higher education institutions are built.

2   University Co-operation and Online Studies

Universities around the world are struggling with funding and limited resources. Institutions want to provide their students the best possible study opportunities and make sure that students have the skills and knowledge they need in their work after graduation.

Co-operation such as the Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies (FUNTS, www. https://www.uef.fi/web/funts) between universities could provide an answer to this problem. Instead of many universities organizing the same course in each institution, universities can work together and organize one common course for all their students. This is done in a virtual learning environment that is not dependent on time nor place of the teacher or students.

Online studies have received significant attention in the research and teaching community (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). ICTs have been often regarded as a means to improve higher education's productivity and quality (Meyer, 2012). E-learning systems have a huge impact on the education and are a part of a structural infrastructure that leverages knowledge diffusion and acquisition (Aparicio, Bacao & Oliveira, 2016). Institutes of higher education are continuing to roll out online courses and programs and especially during the past decade this growth has been well documented (van Rooij & Zirkle, 2015).

In the academia e-learning has been observed to improve hospitality and tourism student' learning experiences (Feinstein et al., 2007; McDowall and Lin, 2007) and e-learning in tourism has been examined in various occasions, but mostly from the perspective of the student (Liu et al., 2015). A considerable amount of literature is focused on the pedagogy of online learning (Boling et al., 2012), but an analysis of university networks as creators and educators of eTourism is lacking.

3   eTourism Curriculum Finland Background

Increasing need for digital competencies created demand for e-tourism education in Finland. The first step to organize this education was to explore the e-business-related courses that Finnish vocational schools and universities of applied sciences were offering to tourism and hospitality students. As a result, it was discovered that the majority of educational institutions offered studies in the subject area in only one

course, the scope of which was about five credits. Especially the tourism and hospitality bachelors (restonomi in Finnish) are the ones who can best take advantage of the possibilities of e-business as they are typically working in the industry in hands-on positions.

4 Building the Network and Beginning the Operation

When the level of education provided in e-business in tourism in Finland was examined, contact details for teachers in charge of courses on e-business in tourism were also collected from the educational institutions. The aim was to compile a list of people who could provide expertise for developing the education in the subject area. All these teachers were contacted in person at the end of 2012 and asked whether they were interested in joining the development of teaching e-business in tourism in Finnish higher education institutions at a national level. From the very beginning, educational institutions across Finland showed great interest in the subject, and many of them had identified the importance of e-business and especially the need to improve the expertise in e-business. All actors participated in the operation with their own resources and, apart from the coordination that was part of a project in CTS in 2013 and 2014, the collaboration has not been funded by any external source.

5 Network-based Operation in eTourism Curriculum

The operation of the eTC network has from the beginning been carried out at a national level and it has involved actors from industry as well as educational institutions across Finland – heads of academic affairs as well as teachers of e-business in tourism. Virtual tools have been utilised in the network's operation from the beginning. The working group has used a Dropbox folder, in which all files belonging to the network have been stored and modified. Communication has mainly been carried out by emailing and, since 2015, also through the Basecamp.com project management tool and meetings with a possibility for virtual participation. Once the network had established itself in autumn 2015 virtual meetings have been held on an almost monthly basis.

Creating a network-based, nationwide operation has been challenging, especially as the available resources have been scarce. The intention with eTC was to develop a model whose operation would not require any transfer of money by the participating educational institutions. It would then be possible to keep the administrative costs to a minimum and to produce credits cost-effectively. However, it proved challenging to develop such a model.

During the meetings in 2013 and 2014, work was carried out on the course contents and the operating model for organising the courses. An operating model was finally developed in spring 2015, and it has now been implemented in the network. In this model, each educational institution in the network commits to providing one five-credit course in its field of expertise for its own students and students in the other member institutions in the network. In other words, this way the six educational institutions were able to create a study module of 35 credits, available to all the educational institutions providing the courses. Haaga-Helia provided two courses. As many of the teachers in charge of the course were familiar with Moodle as a platform

and it was possible to create user IDs also for both external teachers and external students in Open Moodle, the decision was made to provide the courses in the Open Moodle system maintained by Lapland University of Applied Sciences. The member institutions in the network signed a two-year agreement in which they committed to the following matters: 1) Annual teacher resources for 5 credits, 2) Resourcing for the overall development according to the educational institution's own practices, 3) Registration of students for the course and recording of the grades, and 4) The educational institution's share of the costs of the OpenMoodle system (about €300–500 / term depending on the number of students in the system).

It was decided to provide all courses in English. There is a need for courses in English in the member institutions and, also, most of the material in the subject area is in English. The courses can also be provided for international students as this kind of study module is exceptional at international level as well.

6   The eTourism Curriculum Virtual Study Module

The education in digital business in tourism in the network began in the summer of 2016. The network is coordinated by the University of Eastern Finland and it includes Laurea UAS, Lapland UAS, Karelia UAS, Haaga-Helia UAS, JAMK UAS and Satakunta UAS. The seven courses are divided between the educational institutions in the following way: 1) Haaga-Helia, Helsinki: E-business in Tourism and Hospitality, 2) Haaga-Helia, Porvoo: Electronic Distribution in Tourism, 3) Satakunta UAS: Online Marketing in Tourism, 4) Laurea UAS: Business Online Visibility, 5) Karelia UAS: Gamification in Tourism Marketing, 6) JAMK UAS: Future Applications and Trends of Tourism Technology, 7) Lapland UAS: Managing eTourism.

In practice, the teachers in charge of the courses in the educational institutions promote the studies to the students in their own institution. These teachers are also the contact persons to the educational institutions. In addition, the student affairs offices have been informed about the study module. Students will find out from the student affairs office or the teacher in charge of the course in their educational institution whether it is possible to include some or all eTC studies in their own study programmes. The student will then register for the course at www.etourismcurriculum.fi. Registration is continuous and always open for the next time each course is to be organized. The enrolment forms have been created using the Webropol online survey system and all teachers in charge of a course have access to the forms. Before the course begins, the teacher in charge creates the course in the Open Moodle system of Lapland University of Applied Sciences. When the course begins, the teacher in charge sends instructions for joining the course to the students who have registered for the course. Once the student has completed the course, the teacher in charge sends the grade to designated contact persons in the student's own student affairs office, who will then add the course credits in the study register. A student is not required to study all courses, but can choose those eTC courses that they are most interested in and that best supplement their expertise.

7 Conclusions

eTC has a lot to offer to Finnish higher education and eTourism education worldwide. In this network model, the participating educational institutions each get 35 credits in their study guide while providing the teaching resources required for five credits through education exchange system. There is no fee for the university membership in the eTC network; the only costs come from maintaining the platform and depend on the number of students taking the course. The courses are also ideally suited to international students Courses can also be completed as summer studies and studies in the Open University of Applied Sciences, meaning that also entrepreneurs can participate in the courses.

The development of the virtual study module has encouraged teachers to utilise virtual tools in more versatile ways and to share their experiences from these experimentations with their colleagues both in their own higher education institutions and in the eTC network. Thanks to the membership in the eTC network and the development of the courses, the appreciation and acknowledgement of different e-business and network pedagogy solutions has also increased in the members' own universities of applied sciences.

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