

Special track 9: Soft skills in tourism and leisure: education and research challenges for a new generation

Certificate in Sustainable Tourism: an evaluation of student knowledge and skills development.

A unique feature of the International Tourism: sustainability, development and impact module, at Nottingham Business School, is that it results in students gaining an additional '**Certificate in Sustainable Tourism**' [CST], awarded by Nottingham Trent University. This mandatory, self-study certification seeks to deepen the students' knowledge of the practical application of sustainability principles to the tourism industry.

The Certificate in Sustainable Tourism is delivered via the University's Virtual Learning Environment, learning material is structured into 4 sessions, comprising of rich multimedia content, text, and discussion based research activity. After completing the 4 sessions, students complete a multiple-choice quiz to demonstrate their knowledge gained and furthermore assess their own responsible tourism practice, and intended future practice, in light of what they have learned.

The paper examines the impact of this additional sustainability certification on both their knowledge and skills. Specifically, does the CST complement and enhance International Business students' study of Responsible Tourism and enhance their employability skills? The most employable graduates are those who not only possess such 'soft' skills, but are able to reflect and articulate how they have developed their skills and why they are important. (Nye 2005) refer to soft power – the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than coerce or give force is not often referred to in educational terms, but is explored in this paper. A mixed methods approach was utilised that includes module evaluation, a survey and focus group with module participants.

Initial findings indicate that CST students:

- have a deeper insight into the principles and practice of sustainability within tourism
- develop a broader awareness of the influence of sustainability upon the external business environment and complexities of systems thinking
- gain from additional Continuous Professional Development opportunities to enhance the CV
- evidence of attaining NTU Graduate Attributes in Global Citizenship and Sustainability

In practice, students taking this certificate have been found to display a greater awareness and understanding of the practical application of sustainability principles and practice of sustainability within the tourism industry. They appear to have the ability to draw upon relevant examples of projects and initiatives, which display best practice in balancing the three pillars of sustainability. Their knowledge of systems thinking, and critical evaluation skills of sustainable tourism projects, have been greatly improved and anecdotally employers recognise these as students transfer into the workplace. Findings suggest that students taking the Certificate in Sustainable Tourism appreciate the opportunity for the 'value added' learning opportunity and that engagement in the certificate helps to develop a reflexive approach to learning.

In summary, this research evaluates how the students' knowledge and skills altered and what were the triggers. The results from the research show that reflective learning can be transformational and providing a relevant platform to change and inform the learner's knowledge, attitudes, values and future actions. A model has been developed based on

these findings and discussion will consider the transferability of these ideas into other disciplinary areas.