

STAKEHOLDERS INFLUENCE IN MALTESE TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Tourism sector is a key element of the Maltese economy. Therefore, having an appropriately trained workforce becomes a critical factor in ensuring that tourism continues to flourish. In order to avoid skills mismatch and similar problems, it is extremely important to identify the key stakeholders and encourage them to participate in the process of curriculum change in Maltese Tourism Higher Education (HE). A successful stakeholder analysis will determine their degree of influence and as a result devise appropriate mechanisms for their involvement in curricular reform. Failure to do so often results in an unsuccessful reform project.

KEYWORDS

Stakeholder Analysis, Higher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The current socio-economic scenario presents challenges ranging from aspects of globalisation, work-related migration and in particular the need to be able to engage in an environment that no longer has a homogeneous culture but rather a mix of cultures. This is a challenge that Higher Education (HE) institutions need to redress in the sense that the 21st century student has to be exposed and adequately prepared to operate in such an environment. The OECD (2012), the European Commission (2013) and other constituted bodies are taking diverse research initiatives that are looking at this aspect of a multicultural environment and how to effectively take on the advantages that may be brought by such an environment, yet at the same time mitigating the possible negative consequences arising from culture-based misinterpretation of human behaviour.

The counter argument is that HE graduates do not have the 'right' cultural skill set for today's economic scenario. The gap in students' skill-set is a cause for concern for the graduates, academics and employers (Times of Malta, 2011) in Malta. Studies from different countries share similar concerns (Constable & Touloumakos, 2009).

This investigation forms part an ongoing research process that is investigating the assessment and accreditation of culture-related 'soft skills' through the implementation of an e-learning system within the Institute of Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) at the University of Malta (UoM). The research focuses on undergraduate students reading for the B.A. Tourism Studies who, upon graduation will most probably take up employment in the Maltese Tourism sector. This paper looks at the need of carrying out an adequate stakeholder analysis exercise to ensure a successful project outcome.

2. THE MALTESE SCENARIO

The importance of the Maltese Tourism and Hospitality sector may be seen from its contribution to the Maltese economy. With over 25%¹ of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) it is by far the most significant sector which is well above the EU average of around 8%. (Azzopardi, 2011). The number of persons employed directly in hotels and restaurants alone on a permanent basis, amounts to approximately 6% of the entire country's workforce (NSO, 2013).

At the same time, (NSO, 2013), visitors to Malta are diverse in terms of country of origin, ethnicity, religion, cuisine and scope of the visit itself (sun & sea, heritage, culture, leisure activities, etc.), than before. This has posed a series of challenges in that various operators in tourism, hospitality, culture and heritage management, etc., must be aware of the multicultural environment in which they are now operating. Educators operating in tourism, travel and culture also need to face up this challenge.

In order to ensure a successful implementation, the key stakeholders need to be identified and involved in the process; in this case that of curricular development including the use of e-learning technologies. Bryson (2004) refers to Nutt's (2002), study of 400 strategic decisions that suggest that half of them failed (not implemented or implemented with poor results) because the decision makers did not seek information from and at the same time redress the needs of the stakeholders involved. Chapleo and Simms (2010) refer to the importance of identifying stakeholders their influence as being of fundamental importance to policy-makers. Failure to do so often results in poor performance if not a complete disaster (Bryson, 2004).

3. STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS

Freeman (1994) defines stakeholders as groups or individuals that may affect or are themselves affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives. Mead and Andrews (2011) discuss stakeholders as being fundamental towards successfully implementing a strategy. They quote David's (1993) definition as individuals and groups of persons who have a special stake or claim on the company.

Maric (2013) makes a direct reference to the role stakeholders may play in affecting HE. Getting to know the stakeholders' perspective is an essential element in order to ensure that universities are able to fulfil their mission.

Bryson (2004) illustrates various techniques that can be used to carry out a comprehensive stakeholder analysis exercise. He suggests that as a starting point, one should employ a grid and map the interest and power or influence of each stakeholder group on a quadrant (Bryson 1995: 71 -5).

Bryson (2004) goes on to indicate Mitchell's et. al., (1997) work that, in order to be able to position the stakeholders along the power/influence quadrant one has to be able to:

1. specify how each stakeholder may influence the organisation
2. determine what the organisation needs from each stakeholder
3. rank stakeholders according to their importance to the organisation (by considering stakeholder's power, legitimacy and attention seeking) (Mitchell et. al, 1997)

3.1 Identifying ITTC Stakeholders

A process involving the detailed analysis of the documentation governing the ITTC (2010) was carried out in order to identify the main stakeholders that may have an interest and possibly have an influence on the ITTC HE curriculum. This first outcome was to look at all potential stakeholders and classify them in two broad categories, external and internal (Lewis, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, external Stakeholders would be those not 'residing' within the UoM and the ITTC. The current governance structure of the UoM (2012), makes it unlikely that they are able to have a direct involvement the development of the ITTC's strategies and policies, including curriculum development (ITTC, 2010). They would however, be affected by the decisions taken within the ITTC. These stakeholders were:

¹ It is thought that the overall contribution is closer to 40% based upon estimates carried out by the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association

1. Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) – the principal government agency involved with developing Malta’s tourism strategies, policy planning, legislation and enforcement, etc. It is the Maltese government’s official representation for the tourism sector.
2. Heritage Malta – the government agency entrusted with the running and management of various heritage sites.
3. Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA), representing the vast majority of operators/employers in the Maltese tourism and hospitality sector.
4. Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) – a state managed vocational college in the field of tourism and hospitality. Students from ITS on completion of Higher Diploma courses may enrol for an undergraduate degree course at the ITTC.
5. The tourists visiting the Maltese Islands.

On the other hand, internal stakeholders are found within the UoM. Although not all be directly involved with the planning and development of ITTC curriculum, their influence and power wielding is determined by the administrative and managerial roles that they may occupy within the ITTC and other UoM entities. They are thus in a position to determine whether a proposed curricular change would be, approved, amended and ultimately implemented. The following internal stakeholders were identified:

1. ITTC Director
2. ITTC Academic Staff
3. ITTC Board Members
4. Other UoM Academic Staff
5. ITTC Students
6. UoM IT Services

4. FINDINGS

The official documentation related to the governance of the ITTC (ITTC, 2010) within the framework of the University of Malta’s governance (UoM, 2013) was analysed to determine the actual influence that diverse stakeholders have and the power that they may wield in curriculum development and management. Other documentation, internal to ITTC, was reviewed. These included documentation related to the employability of ITTC graduates, ITTC’s developmental strategy, annual reports, and ITTC’s journal, dissertations, examinations and post-graduate committees. It is significant to note that the ITTC director either chairs or co-chairs each of the above-mentioned committees and the appointment of the other members lies within the Directors remit, albeit subject to the ITTC board approval. Another finding was that the almost all the committee members were in fact academic staff members of the ITTC. In some, isolated cases, other, non ITTC UoM academic staff members were found. As with the previous group, these were also subject to approval by the ITTC board.

This documentation review indicates that the ITTC Director has a considerable amount of power and within the ITTC. However, this is counterbalanced by the ITTC board, whose composition does include other stakeholder categories that do have considerable interest in the ITTC itself. The terms of reference of the ITTC specify clearly (ITTC, 2010) that it is this board that is entrusted with the functioning of the Institute and setting of policies. The ITTC board is made of:

1. Chairman: Rector or his delegate;
2. Vice-Chairman: Director of the Institute;
3. a person appointed by the Council of the University;
4. a person appointed by the Senate of the University;
5. up to two representatives of the academic staff lecturing at the Institute;
6. up to two representatives of the students registered with the Institute;
7. one scholar of repute to be recommended by the Board and approved by Senate;
8. one person actively involved in the field of tourism, travel and culture nominated by the Board and approved by Senate;
9. one person nominated by the Board of Governors of the Institute for Tourism Studies and approved by Senate.

(ITTC, 2010)

In order to gain further understanding of the power and influence that internal stakeholders have over the ITTC, two interviews were carried out with two out of a total of seven full time academic staff members of the ITTC. The first member is a very recent addition to the ITTC academic team. Since the mid-1970's he has held various very high profile tourism management and consultancy positions and has over 30 years of experience within the Maltese tourism sector. The second member is an academic by profession from the mid 1990's occupying various academic and administrative roles. He was on the University Council which is responsible for the general administration of the University (UoM, 2013) and currently a member of the ITTC board which as indicated earlier directs the academic tasks of the Institute, as it determines the studies, teaching and research within the Institute.

The outcome of these interviews was that when it comes to ITTC curriculum design and development, the key stakeholders within the ITTC are the ITTC board and the ITTC Director who ultimately sets the policies. Academic staff do have some influence and power due to the positions that they may occupy on the ITTC subcommittees, but the ultimate decision making lies within the ITTC board. ITTC students are represented on some of the subcommittees and therefore may bring their views forward; their representation is always of minority. Thus, while some aspects of the ITTC curriculum design would be of interest, their degree of influence is limited.

However, when the issue of utilising ICT/e-learning for teaching and learning within the ITTC, it was pointed out that any decisions taken are subject to approval by the UoM IT services. A simple analogy was made by referring to the current ITTC website, which is hosted on the UoM IT services servers. The website template and layout of the ITTC website was set by the UoM IT services. Amendments are regularly made by the ITTC staff, but all the changes are subject to approval by the IT services supervisory staff. Similarly, any e-learning related initiative is subject to their approval. Hence although not on the ITTC board, the UoM IT services unit has significant influence over curricular development that involves ICT/e-learning.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This exercise served to identify and determine the degree of influence and power that potential tourism education stakeholders may have had in determining the ITTC e-learning curriculum. The ITTC Director and ITTC board are highly influential stakeholders. Their status set by the ITTC governance rules gives them both influence and a high degree of power as they are the ones determining the policies (including curricular development) and implementing the objectives of the institute. For any reform to be successful it is imperative to have the ITTC director as the main champion as s/he will be sponsoring these reforms with the ITTC board. However, another significant stakeholder would be the UoM IT services section as they determine the mode of engagement with the current UoM IT systems, for any IT-related initiative including e-learning. Being able to engage successfully with these stakeholders becomes a critical factor for the successful implementation of proposed e-learning related curricular changes.

One possible way being considered for engaging with the various stakeholders is through the use of a Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland & Scholes, 2004). SSM has been used in order to illustrate the complexity of innovation within an educational setting (Cox, 2010) and get a better view of the stakeholders' position. This should help in devising effective forms of stakeholder engagement in order to ensure the successful implementation of the proposed e-learning curricular reform from a technical point of view and at the same time, addressing the culture skills gap indicated earlier. In practical terms, providing university graduates with the right set of skills and knowledge enabling them to engage successfully in today's globalised, multicultural environment, contribute towards socio-economic growth and fulfil their own personal development.

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