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International field trips – the Tourism & Entertainment Management field trip to The Gambia, West Africa

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Introduction

Since 2008 students from the Tourism & Entertainment Management Subject Group at Leeds Metropolitan University have been offered the opportunity to spend seven nights in The Gambia, West Africa on an educational field visit. The purpose of the field visit is to investigate how tourism and entertainment can contribute to economic and social development in one of the poorest countries in the world. The field trip is extra-curricular and as such is an optional experience for the students. While the study experience is not assessed, it is hoped that the students will use the learning they gain from their time in The Gambia in the assignments and projects on their course. To date three field trips have been organised and each year the number of students selecting this study abroad opportunity has increased. Thirty-two students (6% of our total student population in Tourism and Entertainment Management) joined the field trip in February 2010, with the majority of students being from our BA (Hons) International Tourism Management degree (primarily at Level 4) and the second largest cohort being from BA (Hons) Entertainment Management (Level 6). The students fund the cost of the field trip themselves.

The Gambia was chosen as the field trip destination for three main reasons. First, from an educational perspective, The Gambia is frequently used as a case study of responsible tourism, to show how tourism has been harnessed to benefit the local

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communities who live in and around the main tourist resorts on the coast. Second, from an accessibility perspective, The Gambia is just a six-hour flight from Manchester Airport and is in the same time zone as the UK so there is no jet lag. During the winter months tour operators feature The Gambia as a winter sun destination, flying tourists on package holidays to the hotels located in the coastal tourist development zone for sun and beach winter holidays. Finally, Leeds Metropolitan University has a strong relationship with the International Centre for Responsible Tourism West Africa (ICRTWA) and it is the ICRTWA that organises and implements the field study programme for the students. The ICRTWA is involved in a number of award-winning initiatives in The Gambia to help the local population and communities benefit from international tourism.

The purpose of this article is to provide brief background details of the Tourism and Entertainment Management field trip to The Gambia and to present findings from a questionnaire survey conducted with the February 2010 cohort to discover the value they placed on this international experience.

The field study programme

The base for the field study programme has been the resort of Kololi, where the first hotel for international tourists in The Gambia was opened in 1967. Kololi is used as the base for the programme because it provides the students with a contemporary understanding of many different facets of how tourism and entertainment contribute to local economic and social development. The resort provides a variety of entertainment opportunities – nightclubs, casinos and live music venues – as well as the strongest concentration of tourism facilities in The Gambia – hotels, restaurants, bars and the beach. Being based in Kololi allows the students the opportunity to observe and experience tourism and entertainment in Gambian style. During the course of the eight-day international excursion the students are introduced to a number of aspects of tourism and entertainment management that relate to their programmes of study:

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- tourism and entertainment business practices in a developing country
- coastal tourism
- eco tourism
- community tourism
- tourism planning and development
- entertainment provision for international tourists
- the staged authenticity of entertainment for tourists.

In addition, by working with the ICRTWA the students are able to meet and interact with stakeholders in the Gambian tourism and entertainment sectors whom they would normally not have the opportunity to meet.

The benefits of field trips

Students are said to enjoy field trips, regardless of their age or upbringing (see Bitgood, 1989; Orion & Hofstein, 1991; Boud et al, 1993; Knapp, 2000; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). But do such activities represent anything more than an opportunity to escape the classroom? Do they actually enhance an individual's understanding of the theories and frameworks taught on campus? More importantly, what motivates fee-paying university students to participate, and what do they expect to encounter while away? Though there has been a considerable amount of academic interest in identifying the advantages of taking students out of the everyday environment, the majority of studies have tended to focus on teachers who run curriculum-based day trips for children aged between five and 15 (Falk, 1983; Koran et al, 1989; Bitgood, 1989, 1994; Jakubowski, 2003; Smith, 2007; Koernig, 2007). A detailed review of the 'field trip' literature, for example, reveals a distinct lack of research on the expectations of higher education students. Likewise, little is known about the implications that international excursions can have on an adult's ability to relate

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theory to practice.

With the demand for UK university places reaching unprecedented heights, one could easily argue the need for HE institutions to explore the value and validity of offering international field trips as a means of distinguishing their 'product' from that offered elsewhere. With this in mind, the author's ongoing exploration was designed to critically assess and evaluate the broader benefits of offering international HE field trips to both students and staff at Leeds Metropolitan University. Though the study is far from being complete, the findings introduced in this article provide an overview of the answers provided by the 32 students who paid over £500 to participate in an optional eight-day excursion to The Gambia. More specifically, the article focuses upon the perceived assessment, learning and teaching (ALT) value of the Tourism and Entertainment Management Subject Group's 2010 field trip. The students' initial motivations are identified and discussed, alongside their thoughts regarding their pre-trip expectations and overall Gambian experience.

The questionnaire – distributed during the journey home – focused on the students' pre-trip motivations and expectations, as well as their initial thoughts regarding the experience that they had just encountered. The survey included a number of true or false questions, and a list of statements that required the respondent to rate either their relevance or applicability using a five-point Likert scale (with 1 being 'very relevant' and 5 being 'not very relevant'). A number of open-ended questions were also included, alongside some more generic questions such as age, gender, nationality, year of study and the course on which they were currently enrolled. Each respondent was also given the opportunity to state whether they would be happy to be considered for a follow-up semi-structured interview at a later date. Follow-up interviews were initially scheduled to take place at the end of the 2009–10 academic year but are now due to be conducted 12 months after they returned from this trip¹.

¹ Though the author has begun arranging the interview stage of the research, none will have been conducted prior to the submission of this paper. The primary reason behind the change was to allow the students longer to reflect upon the academic value of attending the 2010 trip, and ensure that they were not disturbed during the end of year assessment and examination period.

Results and discussion

While some questions were unanswered, every member of the group was happy to complete the questionnaire. More importantly, all but seven of the 32 were willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. All of the respondents understood that the trip was neither compulsory nor a part of their assessment. Interestingly, however, while 17 of the students expected the trip to help them enhance their personal understanding of the subject, only 12 thought that the experiences encountered during the trip would actually result in them obtaining improved grades and, as a result, getting a better degree upon graduating. Eleven of the group indicated that they expected to be seen as an overseas ambassador for both the Subject Group and the University. Seventeen, however, admitted that such a role and/or responsibility had no direct applicability to their initial motivation to travel to The Gambia, or their subsequent behaviour while away. Furthermore, six admitted that they had only signed up as a direct consequence of pressure from friends on the course. Such a finding clearly supports the vast amounts of existing academic literature that discuss the influential role of other people on an individual's consumer behaviour, especially that related to travelling overseas (Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

In terms of meeting their pre-trip expectations, there were no complaints or elements of doubt raised by any of the respondents. Twenty-four out of the 32 respondents claimed that the trip exceeded their initial expectations, with the rest reporting that their expectations had been met. Furthermore, when asked to rate the perceived value of international field trips in terms of their ability to enhance the student learning experience, 21 indicated that they saw them as being very effective. The remaining students viewed them as being effective, with no-one rating them as ineffective. This clearly supports the literature that acknowledges the value placed on educational field trips by students (see, for example, Henley, 1998; Knapp, 2000; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Likewise, when asked about their opinions on the utilisation of non-compulsory international field trips (offered within higher education), the vast majority (28 out of 32) saw them as being very important in terms of helping their overall academic performance.

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All but two of the students felt that the field trip was worth the money that they had spent, and 28 stated that they would definitely be signing up to go on other trips offered during their time at Leeds Metropolitan University. While 15 noted that this was not their first HE field trip, they were not asked to list the places that they had previously visited. Overall, the most popular reason for participating in the field trip was the fact that they wanted to do something that they thought they would never have the opportunity to do again (28/32). The second reason related to their desire to engage with a completely different culture. Such findings clearly support Falk's (1983) discussion on the importance of the perceived novelty value of taking students out of the classroom and into less formal learning environments. While this could arguably be achieved without leaving the local community, the fact that the trip offered over half the students their first opportunity to travel outside Europe should not be overlooked. Two of the respondents claimed to have never flown before, making the first and final day of the excursion as exciting, and daunting, as the six spent in The Gambia.

The majority of students (26/32) were clearly concerned by the thought of missing out on a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity, adding further support to the existing research on the subject of educational field trips (Orion & Hofstein, 1991; Bitgood, 1994). Twenty-four, however, also supported the work of Falk (1983), Boud et al (1993) and Jakubowski (2003) by revealing their strong desire for the opportunity to relate some of the theory taught in their tutorials to things personally experienced in a real-world setting. Despite the initial importance placed on the uniqueness and perceived novelty of the field trip, all but one of the respondents stated that they could see themselves returning to The Gambia at some point in their lives. Twenty-nine of the group actually revealed their desire to go back within the next five years, and a handful of the first- and second-year students commented on the possibility of conducting their final-year dissertations on topics related to the issues witnessed during the trip. The follow-up interviews should reveal whether this is still the case.

The survey results were extremely positive with only a few minor issues being raised within the additional comments box positioned at the end of the questionnaire. The biggest concern related to the "lack of time" set aside "to interact with members of

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the local community". One student noted that the "intensive itinerary" left them little freedom to explore the host destination independently. Another respondent wanted to know why some of the sites were included on the trip, having failed to see the direct relevance to the material studied in class. She felt they would have benefited more from spending longer at some places, and less at others. The overall feeling was that too much had been attempted by the over-eager hosts.

Overall, the students were all in agreement that they had learnt more about their subject, and tourism in The Gambia, through being there and seeing it with their own eyes, than they thought possible through either reading about it or watching it on a screen in the classroom. The respondents were very happy to express their satisfaction and emphasise the value that they placed upon their overseas field trip experience in terms of a non-formal learning environment. Their positive evaluation of the field trip was not dampened by the unexpected seven-hour delay on the journey home, and the number of positive comments vastly outnumbered those suggesting improvements to next year's itinerary. Ultimately, comments such as: "brilliant", "fantastic", "unbelievable", "unforgettable", "amazing!", "awesome" and "inspiring!!" were found on 24 of the completed surveys. No negative comments were found on any of the surveys.

Conclusions

The findings of this study clearly support the existing field trip literature produced over the past three decades (i.e. the conclusion that field trips are very popular with students). Though the authors cannot make any generalisations about the benefits of getting HE students out of the classroom, off campus and into unfamiliar environments, the early results of this ongoing exploration do at least indicate that the 32 students who paid to participate in the 2010 field trip to The Gambia came home feeling better off for their optional educational experience. Whether this experience has actually affected the academic capabilities of the students in question should become more apparent at the conclusion of the forthcoming interview stage (to be conducted between February and April 2011). Clearly, the

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students questioned at the end of the eight-day excursion felt that their participation had provided them with an enhanced learning experience, even if they were unable to make the connection between this and a potential improvement in their overall academic performance. The authors are understandably excited to discover if – twelve months on – this remains the case.

The fact that the vast majority revealed their desire to go back implies that the 2010 trip to The Gambia has had a positive impact on this group of Leeds Metropolitan University students. The key, however, will be to discover how many of them actually choose to complete projects on the subjects and situations witnessed while on the field trip. The authors are committed to conducting follow-up interviews with as many of the respondents as possible to discover if their initial opinions have subsequently altered in any way. Ultimately, the 2010 Gambia field trip was seen by the participants as an unquestionable success and of significant value to those responsible for its design, development and delivery. Pre-trip expectations were not only met; they were often exceeded. As a result, it seems somewhat inappropriate to suggest any major changes to its current format. The calls for a less structured itinerary, allowing more free time to “explore the host destination” and “interact with the locals” are worthy of further exploration, but it should be noted that all of the respondents were given at least a day and a half, plus most evenings, to themselves. They were also asked to attend two briefing sessions in which they were asked to provide comments and ask questions about the planned itinerary (which was discussed in detail).

Recommendations

The first recommendation, in terms of increasing the internationalisation potential of this annual informal learning activity, is to ensure that every participant is encouraged to spend free time away from the hotel swimming pool. Clearly, those only interested in working on their tans need to be advised about the implications that this type of tourist behaviour has on the local tourism industry. A greater emphasis has to be placed on the experiential learning opportunities that students

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can encounter while out in The Gambia, especially when they are given the freedom to explore as an individual or with their friends (i.e. away from the gaze of their teachers).

The second recommendation drawn from this study focuses on the need for continued further research into the values and validity of academic field trips within the higher education context, especially those looking to enhance internationalisation within assessment, learning and teaching practices. The students, for example, are not the only ones who can utilise informal learning environments to improve their learning capabilities. The authors are also keen to discover how such trips enhance the teaching abilities of those who design and deliver such activities. From a personal perspective, the trip allowed the researchers (staff) the opportunity to observe the respondents (students) in a much more relaxed and informal environment. From an ALT perspective, the experience has unquestionably increased our overall understanding of both the subject and the students we teach. The images captured on film, and in our minds, will undoubtedly last us a lifetime.

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