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The TEDQUAL Certification: quality management at the Faculty of Economics - Rimini

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In the last decades, the domain of tourism education and training has flourished, attracting researcher, teachers, and students. A growing number of graduate and under-graduate courses have been developed by universities and educational institutions. However, in many cases, the educational offer does not succeed in meeting the actual needs of the tourism sector, with a level of preparation of human resources sometimes unable to satisfy the requirements of the job market (Becton and Graetz, 2001). The lack of coordination procedures and standards in curricular design triggers a wide sense of confusion to both students and employers. Finally, curricula are usually inconsistent at the international level, thus hindering workers' mobility (Airey and Tribe, 2005).

Hence, the importance of developing formalized systems aimed at improving and certifying the quality of the education has strongly emerged also in the tourism sector (Bosselman, 1996; Lewis and Tribe, 2002). From an education point of view, quality can be defined as the degree to which the expectation and the perception of the user tend to perfectly correspond among them. In other words, the absence of gaps between perception and expectation means quality and, consequently, a profitable correspondence between supply and demand in an education/training context. A Total Quality approach to education assumes that gaps should be prevented before they occur, stressing the importance to anticipate potential hurdles towards a complete satisfaction of the relevant stakeholders (Becket and Brookes, 2008).

In the tourism industry, a leading role in supporting and improving the quality of the education is being played by the World Tourism Organization. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the specialized agency of the UN in charge for the "promotion and development of tourism with a view to contributing to economic development, international understanding, peace, prosperity, and universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion". It has been set up in its present form in 1975. Today, it gathers 150 countries and territories and more than 300 affiliate members. The UNWTO serves as an international forum for tourism policy issues and as a source of tourism know-how and best practices. In addition to the elaboration of surveys, statistics and market researches, and to

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the diffusion of tourism know-how to developing countries, the UNTWO pursues the development of human resources in tourism. In particular, within UNTWO, the Education, Training and Knowledge Management Department work to build the knowledge capacity of Members, providing leadership, initiative and coordination in tourism education, training and research. The main operative arm of the Department is THEMIS, a foundation established to facilitate administration and management in implementing the programme of work in the area of education and training in tourism. The THEMIS Foundation directly manages the TedQual (Tourism Education Quality) programme, which is a quality certification system in the tourism sector, available to all teaching institutions in the world according to a voluntary criterion of application. The final aim of TedQual is to guarantee standardization in terms of management, structure and organization among all institutions which spontaneously decide to base on this quality model. Coherently with this aim, a lot of different standardized processes – and consequently sub-processes –, which constitute the respective production of services, are planned by the interested institutions in order to create a corporate culture based on the predominant role of the system to achieve a uniform and reliable level of quality.

The three following dimensions characterize a TedQual System: (1) standards of quality, in terms of results realized in each of the processes, sub-processes and procedures obtained by a Tourism Education Programme (TEP), (2) quality of audit, which is assured by the selection of independent external organizations, (3) certification, which is granted by WTO_THEMIS after examination of the quality audits by the TedQual Certification Committee. In addition to these standard criteria and quality objectives, an Education Institution should be flexible, methodical and systematic in order to continuously adapt itself to the changes affecting the tourism industry (Fayos-Sola, 1997). Thus, the customer orientation and satisfaction should be considered the two most important criteria to be followed over the time in order to be consistently able to guarantee standard and continuous service production processes in line with the targeted consumer. At the same time, it becomes increasingly important to achieve the commitment of all members of the institution in pursuing the final goal (customer satisfaction). However, quality alone is not sufficient, it is also necessary to adopt criteria for the efficient management of available resources and to realize an adequate market segmentation and service positioning.

The TedQual Certification System tends to adopt a process-oriented configuration, which is defined as “a combination of inter-related resources and activities which convert incoming elements into outgoing elements, creating an added value for the client and greater efficiency in the management of the Education Institution”.

These processes in turn are articulated in sub-processes and procedures constituting the TEP. For the aim of this contribute, we briefly explain the six following processes, which always represent the basic structure of a TEP (UNWTO-Themis, 2007):

Employer: the objective in this process is to certify the quality in terms of ability in responding to the socio-economic needs of external client (employers), maximizing his/her satisfaction. This process is in turn articulated in three sub-processes (corporate mission; strategies; action plan);

Student: the objective in this process is to verify the quality of the service delivered to students. This process is in turn articulated in three sub-processes (attractiveness for students; relationship with students; assessment of student);

Curricula: the objective of this process is to certify the quality of the adopted pedagogic system and the efficient planning of the mix between teaching methodology and curricular contents. This process is in turn articulated in three sub-processes (contents; pedagogic methodology; pedagogic resources);

Faculty: the objective of this process is to certify the effectiveness of the Faculty in designing and implementing curricular contents and pedagogic methodologies. This process is in turn articulated in three sub-processes (teaching structure; continuous updating; research and

development);

Infrastructure: the objective of this process is to certify that the activity of the TEP is realized within an effective infrastructural framework. This process is in turn articulated in two sub-processes (physical infrastructure; equipment and supplies);

Management: the objective of this process is to certify the availability of a management model which is capable to pursue organizational mission and objectives. This process is in turn articulated in three sub-processes (information and analysis; organization; quality system).

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In 2007, the Faculty of Economics-Rimini of the University of Bologna decided to make an application to THEMIS to initiate the TedQuak certification process for its tourism academic courses. The Faculty of Economics-Rimini already had an established reputation in tourism education (in Italy, the first Degree Programme in Economics of Tourism was developed by this Faculty) and was playing a leading role both at national and international level, however it perceived the TedQual certification as a strategic opportunity for:

- Starting an internal process of continuous self-assessment to preserve and improve the level of quality of its tourism education programmes;
- Establishing a collaboration with UNWTO and with its members (in particular within the UNWTO Educational Council) to take part to tourism education policy-making processes;
- Sharing its expertise and experience with universities operating in less developed countries;
- Strengthening its international reputation, thus enhancing the chances for students to find jobs and to move abroad.

Hence, the Dean of the Faculty appointed a special commission composed by academic and administrative staff to produce the documentation necessary for the certification and to interact with the THEMIS Foundation officers. The Commission analyzed internal processes, structured and formalized the procedures (coherently with the TedQual specifications) and defined the global architecture of the internal quality system. In addition, quality-assessment procedures and indicators were proposed, and specific duties assigned to existing jobs.

In late 2007, the two TEP of the Faculty (Degree Programme in Economics of Tourism and Degree Programme in Economics of Markets and of Tourist Systems) were certified by the UNWTO.

Many benefits derived from this certification, mostly in terms of international reputation. In particular, the TedQual certification stimulated the implementation of a wider range of

internal efforts aimed at improving the educational offer of the Faculty; in addition, the international image of the Faculty improved, thus increasing its capability in attracting foreign students and in developing collaborations with the hospitality industry.

Overall, for the Faculty of Economics-Rimini, the TedQual certification is just an additional step ahead within the framework of a wider strategy aimed at continuously improving the quality of its educational offer, in the belief that the quality of a tourism product is crucially depending on the quality of people working in the tourism industry, which in turn depends on the quality of academic education they received. Since the tourism environment and its education system are highly dynamic and are influenced by global economic, social and environmental issues, the adoption of a continuous engagement toward quality is likely to represent an efficient strategy for allowing the Faculty of Economics-Rimini to remain a centre of excellence in this competitive environment.

Finally, the process of certification review that will engage the Faculty at the end of 2010 should be considered as an additional opportunity for strengthening the quality standards and for disseminating new and more efficient and effective standards, both inside the organization and towards the stakeholders.

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