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**Reassessing Employer Expectations of Graduates in UK Travel Services.**

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## Reassessing Employer Expectations of Graduates in UK Travel Services.

*This article sets out to ascertain employers' in the travel and tourism industries views on degrees. Research of this kind and on this scale has not previously been carried out and a large scale survey of industry views was conducted with key issues identified and discussed. These cover topics such as the employment of graduates within the UK travel services industry, views on their contribution and appropriateness, the types of skills which such degrees provide, salary scales and graduate training schemes. Current government policy on widening participation in Higher Education and its impact on industry skills is also evaluated. The issue of the provision of tourism curricula and their content has at the beginning of 2007 once again been pushed centre stage. This is as a result of the increasing scrutiny of the Sector Skills organisation People 1<sup>st</sup> and the launch of the government's new vocational diplomas in 2008. The findings in this article are pertinent for government bodies and educators alike and have previously been shared with the Sector Skills organisation and DCMS in addressing higher education in tourism.*

*Key Words: Tourism, Education, Degrees, Employer, Skills, Curriculum*

### **Introduction.**

In recent years there has been a proliferation in the provision of travel and tourism programmes in higher education in the UK but also across the world, which is

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congruent with the fact that the industry is one of the largest global employers and a significant economic and social force. Reassessment of this provision in relation to employer expectations highlights several factors. These factors include changes in government policy with regard to widening participation in higher education, the launch of foundation degrees in 2001, the changing focus of tourism curricula and the role of the industry in tourism education. The launch of yet another qualification in the form of the new Diploma for 14 – 19 year olds in 2008, with travel and tourism coming on board in 2010 is another very current development DFES (2007)

The changing focus of the tourism curricula has received quite broad coverage in

literature with some discussion on government policy. It is apparent, however that there is a shortage of research which ascertains the views of employers within the travel industry on the recruitment of graduates, and particularly graduates with undergraduate degrees in travel and tourism management and allied subjects. Ladkin (2005) acknowledges that “surprisingly little is known about careers and employment in the tourism industry.” The breadth, variety and vocational nature of the travel industry, (Ladkin (2005) raises the issue of the complexity of classification and the number of SIC codes in use for the industries by DCMS), results in a need for a diversely trained workforce and the question must be asked if degrees are meeting employer knowledge and skills needs. Currently modules and programmes are developed with reference to subject benchmark statements facilitated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000) however the benchmarking is undertaken by a group of subject specialists and does not take employers or industry views into account. It should also be pointed out that these have not been updated since 2000. This paper ascertains the views of employers of degree educated travel

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3 and tourism students as the providers of an appropriate work force for industry. A  
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5 large primary study involving a sizeable sample of a variety of UK travel industry  
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7 providers utilising technological methods facilitated by the Internet was undertaken.  
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12 The aims of the paper are

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17  To ascertain views of organisations within the UK travel industry on the  
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19 training and the recruitment of graduates and the efficacy of degree  
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21 programmes in meeting employer needs.
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24  To evaluate the key issues raised by the primary research and the implications  
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26 of these for tourism curricula in UK Higher Education.  
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32 The research identifies issues which although previously raised (Cooper and Shepherd  
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34 1997, Haywood and Maki, 1992, Koh, 1994) have never actually been previously  
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36 quantified on this scale across the industry in the UK and, are the subject of much  
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38 anecdotal discussion. It is evident that salary scales give rise to a very real concern  
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40 and this, set against the backdrop of a growing pool of graduate labour available as a  
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42 result of government policy on widening participation and the introduction of top up  
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44 fees in the UK in 2006 presents some serious issues. It was largely considered that  
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46 graduates did have skills to offer, but there appeared to be a lack of awareness  
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48 amongst employers of the one year work placement inherent in most travel and  
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50 tourism degree courses in the UK and the resulting industry experience gained. The  
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52 research shows that the 'apprentice' route to working in the industry is still strongly  
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54 valued. Issues arising from the research are identified and recommendations made.  
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## Background Literature

Prior to considering the expectations of employers with regard to tourism education it is helpful to provide a backdrop of some of the previous academic literature and place the discussion in context. Much of the literature stems from the 1990's, and focuses on the tourism curriculum and does not therefore address the current provision of tourism higher education in terms of government policy and widening participation. Tribe, J (2005) presents an overview of research but focuses solely on the period up to the end of 2001. Airey and Johnson (1999) re-assessed and provided a valuable discussion as to content some three decades after the first such degree courses were initiated at Masters' level. Evans, N., (2001) considered the diversity and complexity of tourism studies and the influences on academic curricula design in the UK. Airey, D (2005) presents a useful overview of the growth and development of the study of the subject of tourism and raises concerns over the curriculum, particularly in its currently mainly vocational and business oriented setting and the need for it to progress beyond that if it is to become a truly distinct area of scholarship. There has been substantial growth in the provision of degree based courses; indeed there are currently 144 programmes on the UCAS site (2007) listed under travel / tourism. These include joint honours programmes with Travel / Tourism and such fields as Entrepreneurship, ICT, Languages, Hospitality, Adventure Tourism, Travel Journalism, Planning Journalism and Accounting Tourism. Middleton and Ladkin (1996) commented that on the issue of tourism as a subject retaining "its coherence against powerful pressures for diversification and fragmentation." Defining the 'travel and tourism industry' (for which tourism degrees are aimed at) is in itself is a complex problem in that the industry is at the same time diverse, multi-faceted, international and subject to journalistic interpretation. The definitional complexities are beyond the

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3 scope of this paper but are addressed by Cooper and Shepherd (1997) and by other  
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5 authors including the well known conceptualisation provided by Middleton and  
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8 Clarke (2001:11).

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10 Recent research however from People First, the Sector Skills Council shows that only  
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12 12% of university graduates go on to work in the industry, Nelson, P. (2007). Major, B  
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14 (2007) makes the point that “the globally educated will race ahead,...in other industries  
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17 “ if the sectors do not address investment in their workforce. This is all against the  
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19 backdrop of widening participation in HE by the government with currently 43% of 18  
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21 – 30 year olds undertaking a degree course, HEFCE (2007) and  
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25 raises the question of the level of skills being employed within the industry.  
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28 Moreover there are “some 500 qualifications for our industries but employers and  
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30 employees do not see their relevance to careers.” People 1<sup>st</sup> (2006). There are also  
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32 currently more than 100 post 16 travel and tourism courses, Nelson, P., (2007). To  
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34 add to this, many developments have taken place within school curricula with the  
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36 vocationally oriented GCSE in Leisure and Tourism and the AVCE in travel and  
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38 tourism taught in a significant number of secondary schools.  
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44 The discussion has taken place as to the role tourism studies should play in terms of  
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46 serving the industry (see for example Middleton and Ladkin, 1996; Cooper and  
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48 Shepherd, 1997; Busby, et al, 1997). It is apparent that there is a perceived gap between  
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50 educators influenced by the academic rationales for their degree programmes and the  
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52 more practically oriented approach often advocated by employers with their emphasis  
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54 on transferable skills. Stuart-Hoyle (2003) questions the claim that the majority of  
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56 undergraduate tourism programmes key purpose is in preparing graduates for a career  
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58 in the tourism industry. She provides evidence that some programmes  
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3 have a “tendency to drift away from that aim, ” and that a distinction appears to be  
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5 emerging between programmes which offer a ‘whole system approach’ i.e. an  
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7 education about tourism, as opposed to those which deal with more operational  
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9 elements; an education for tourism, Stuart-Hoyle (2003).

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15 Foundation degrees were launched in 2001, the first new HE qualification in 25 years.

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17 They were implemented as a response to the needs for a high quality education level  
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19 qualification that balance academic understanding with vocational experience  
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23 and career relevance, Foundation Degrees (2007) They were also designed in  
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25 partnership with employers. At the time this research was conducted however, the  
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27 first raft of graduates from these programmes had yet to emerge and so a discussion of  
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29 their effectiveness has to be beyond the scope of this paper.  
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33 Haywood and Maki (1992) provided a conceptual model for the relationship between  
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35 employers and the education sector. They suggest that there are differing expectations  
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37 between the two groups in that employers emphasise practical skills and general  
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39 transferable skills whereas educators are developing more conceptual and tourism-  
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41 specific materials. This, Haywood and Maki contend has resulted in a communications  
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43 gap characterised by poor levels of communication between the two groups; a lack of  
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45 involvement of educators in the industry; and, industry’s role in education (through  
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47 advisory bodies etc), often being poorly defined. This discussion is once more centre  
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49 stage as the Sector Skills Council seeks to produce its Sector Skills Agreement. They  
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51 claim that the industry hasn’t worked with the education sector and that this has  
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53 produced a volume of non employer endorsed courses. Their intention is to produce  
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55 “the first employer-endorsed education courses,” Nelson, P (2007). The validity of this  
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57 claim is questionable in that many degree validations  
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3 have a representative from industry present and it is relatively common practice to  
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5 have an industry external examiner for programmes.  
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11 This communication gap (between educators and employers) identified by Haywood  
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13 and Maki (1992) is a theme that is also emphasised by other writers. Koh (1994)  
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15 pursued the curricula issues from a US perspective and by drawing on earlier research  
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17 (Golden, 1992; Ketyer, 1982; Knutson, 1989) indicated that most of the tourism  
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19 curricula were “designed by educators (influenced by their individual biases) with  
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21 little/no representation from the tourism industry.” Churchward and Riley (2002)  
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26 examined the generic content of jobs and the relationship of tourism education to job  
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28 content. This is aligned to the study in this paper in that as Churchward and Riley  
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30 (2002) point out it makes a contribution to the issue of the industry-education  
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32 relationship by offering an alternative view as to how job knowledge can be  
33  
34 measured. In order to promote industry-education links the 'Tourism Society' in the  
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36 UK established the National Liaison Group for Higher Education in Tourism (NLG) in  
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38 1993 (which has now become the Association for Tourism Teachers in Higher  
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40 Education, ATTHE). This independent membership organisation provides a focus for  
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42 development of tourism studies degrees and postgraduate qualifications through  
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44 collaboration with employers (Busby, et al., 1997); although ensuring full industry  
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46 involvement has proved to be problematic.  
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51 The NLG set out a core curriculum based on findings by Holloway (1995). It would  
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53 appear that there is a great deal of similarity amongst programmes; as vindicated by  
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55 Tribe (1997) and Airey and Johnston (1999).  
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**Background to the primary research.**

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4 Although as indicated there is an existing literature that examines the specific nature  
5 of the relationship between employers and education programmes related to tourism,  
6 the literature is somewhat limited in two respects. Firstly much of the existing  
7 literature is rather dated and in the meantime degree programmes and the tourism  
8 industry have developed and matured. Secondly, much of the evidence of perceived  
9 gaps in understanding and intent between the two parties is based on somewhat  
10 anecdotal evidence rather than based upon solid empirical work. Thus it was felt that  
11 there was a gap in the research and literature and a need for a re-assessment of  
12 employer expectations of undergraduate programmes.  
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30 Mirroring the growth of the industry itself, tourism higher education in the UK has  
31 developed rapidly from the early post-graduate courses in the 1970's through the first  
32 under-graduate courses launched in 1986 (at  
33 what have now become the  
34 Universities of Northumbria and  
35 Bournemouth) to the present situation where approximately 40 higher education  
36 providers feature tourism in the titles of the degrees that they offer. Business schools  
37 and departments have not been fast to adapt to employers needs by  
38 embedding employability in the curriculum and working more closely with industry  
39 and employers, Major, B ( 2006)  
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55 The position has now been reached where there is a large and consistent flow of  
56 Graduates from Universities who are seeking employment opportunities in the  
57 industry. However such courses are currently being developed often without explicit  
58 reference to the industry. The curricula are being developed without reference to  
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3 has attracted some concern, but they are in accordance with the benchmark standards  
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5 for Hospitality, Leisure Sport and Tourism set by the Quality Assurance Agency for  
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7 Higher Education (2000) which will be updated in 2007, QAA (2007).  
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11 A worry is also the fact that “Less than one in five businesses taps into universities’  
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13 skills and knowledge.” DFES, (2003). Research has shown that in the travel services  
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15 sector, only 8.3% are recruited from higher education – i.e. with an undergraduate  
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17 degree (TENTO, 2001). The travel, tourism and hospitality sector is one of the largest  
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19 global employers and in the UK alone employs a workforce of 2 million people  
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24 People  
25 (2006)  
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28 2003) but has however this reputation for recruiting staff with skills of a lower level  
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30 than higher education.  
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34 ts 4.5 %  
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42 The industry’s perceptions of the efficacy of the provision of education and skills and  
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44 learning opportunities, particularly at a higher education level, are notorious for being  
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46 low. Whilst we do not endeavour to address this issue or the reasons for it here, it is  
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48 against this backdrop that the research is set and it would appear that there is a  
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50 mismatch of aims between the views of industry and the government in terms of the  
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52 provision of the number of graduates and the placement of these in employment in the  
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54 industry. It would be relevant also for Higher Education institutions to be assessing  
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56 whether their curricula are currently meeting the needs of employers, although, it must  
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58 be understood that these must be maintained within an academic framework. It would  
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60 appear that ‘bridging the gap’ between industry and education, an area currently high  
on the government’s agenda, needs to be examined in the context of

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3 industry perceptions and needs. Indeed this has become centre stage for the Sector  
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5 Skills Council in developing the new Sector Skills Agreement, People 1<sup>st</sup> (2006)  
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### 10 **Research Methodology**

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14 The research adopts an ‘action research’ orientation which as Reason and McArdle,  
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16 (2003) and Ladkin, (2004) point out has come to be used in a broad spectrum of  
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18 circumstances, and hence it represents an orientation as opposed to a particular  
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23 methodology. The orientation responds to the concern (often expressed by  
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25 practitioners, academics and indeed politicians) relating to the alleged ‘theory-practice’  
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27 gap. Practitioners claim that academic knowledge is inaccessible or does not fit their  
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29 unique circumstances (Meyer, 2004). Action research is seen as a valid way of dealing  
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31 with this rift in that through drawing upon practitioners’ experience combined with  
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33 academics’ knowledge base provides the ability to influence practice positively while  
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35 simultaneously gathering data to share with a wider audience.  
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41 Differences of opinion and variations in approach have developed, with regard to  
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43 action research, since the term was first used by Kurt Lewin (1946). The approach  
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45 adopted here is one based on ‘collaborative action research’ as advocated by Oja and  
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47 Smulyan (1989), in which collaboration between the researcher and the research target  
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49 is advocated in order to achieve the desired goals. However, in this case the target (the  
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51 community of travel organisations) is targeted through intermediaries: the  
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53 organisations which collaborated in this research, as opposed to directly thereby  
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55 shielding the target companies from direct influence from the researchers and vice  
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6 Notwithstanding the differing terminology and approaches that have developed, there  
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8 are some common elements that can be distinguished in this research orientation. A  
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10 common feature of action research is that the researcher no longer tries to maintain a  
11  
12 distance and separation from the object being studied, as they might in most other types  
13  
14 of qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002:10). Furthermore, most definitions  
15  
16 of action research incorporate three important elements: its participatory character; its  
17  
18 democratic impulse; and, its simultaneous contribution change (Meyer, 2004). Some  
19  
20 writers such as Reason and Bradbury (2001:2) also stress the centrality of the 'purpose'  
21  
22 of the research in these methods in stating that, "A primary purpose  
23  
24 of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the  
25  
26 everyday conduct of their lives".

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34 A key concern for the action research orientation proposed is establishing the research  
35  
36 validity of the work where the more traditional criteria such as lack of experimenter  
37  
38 bias, control groups or statistical significance are unavailable (Ladkin, 2004). To  
39  
40 Zuber-Skerritt (1991), research validity is established through a 'critical community' in  
41  
42 which people both look to improvements  
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44 in their work but also critically address  
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46 the constraints, which impact upon them

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52 It can be argued that the research carried out here is participatory in that a large number  
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54 of organisations were targeted and intermediaries were employed to reach the target  
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56 sample; democratic in that all organisations are accorded equal significance; and,  
57  
58 advocating changes to practice. All of these aspects accord with Meyer's (2004)  
59  
60 categorisation, whilst the research is also practical in its orientation in line with the

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3 notions of Reason and Bradbury (2001:2). The size of the sample at 5000 established a  
4  
5 critical community as advocated by Zuber-Skerritt (1991).  
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## 10 **Research Methods**

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13 A new 'collaborative partnership approach' was used which both facilitated the  
14  
15 research and was cost effective. All the partners were from different sectors with  
16  
17 differing aims and objectives but with a common interest in enabling research of the  
18  
19 issue. Respondents were sent an electronic questionnaire which asked for their views  
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21 regarding tourism degrees in general and on the nature of the curriculum. The  
22  
23 Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) met the full costs of the project and  
24  
25 supported it throughout by promoting the research and providing for the use of the  
26  
27 organisation's logo. The 'TravelMole' ([WWW.travelmole.com](http://www.travelmole.com)), an internet newswire  
28  
29 service with a mailing list of over 23,000 members (at the time of the research) ,70% of  
30  
31 whom are in the UK and the majority of whom are represented by senior managers,  
32  
33 provided the database. 'ABISCOM' a company specialising in electronic marketing  
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35 services and providing leading edge messaging facilities, facilitated and formatted the  
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37 electronic questionnaire and collated the results into a spreadsheet format.  
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48 It was decided that a large sample of 5,000 would be representative of views across the  
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50 travel industry. It was important that views were reflected across the many diverse  
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52 sectors and as broad a spread as possible within the confines of the TravelMole  
53  
54 database was utilised. Some sectors are better represented than others, e.g. travel agents  
55  
56 and tour operators. This however was appropriate to the survey in that it could be  
57  
58 argued that these sectors are larger in employment terms and possibly less specific  
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3 in terms of the skills that they require from employees. Table 1 provides an analysis of  
4  
5 the sample broken down by industry sector, showing the representation of the  
6  
7 respondents across the sectors.  
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12 ***Table 1. Analysis of Sample by Industry Sector.***  
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28 The questionnaire was designed to provide a maximum amount of information, some  
29 of which could be looked at within the context of this piece of research. It was also  
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31 anticipated that the findings might act as exploratory research in that it might prompt  
32  
33 specific areas upon which to focus new investigation and research. A 'Likert' scale  
34  
35 was used for many of the questions, which gave respondents the opportunity to reflect the  
36  
37 extent of their opinions. Prior to sending out the questionnaire it was piloted by several  
38  
39 senior members of the travel industry whose interests covered airlines, tour operating  
40  
41 and travel and tourism education, as well as a senior academic colleague. The response  
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43 was very positive and only minor changes were made in response to the feedback  
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45 provided.  
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52 The questionnaire was sent out in an electronic format within the main body of the  
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54 TravelMole Newsletter on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2003. On account of the way that the  
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56 survey was set up, respondents had no need to open or save attachments, merely to fill in  
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58 the questionnaire and press 'submit' upon completion.  
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5 The response rate, after 22.7% of the data had been discarded (multi-response,  
6 incomplete, unworkable etc) was 4%. This may appear low but is consistent with web  
7 survey response, which is declining over the years. (Grandcolas et al, 2003). Web  
8 survey research is lower than traditional methods but it does have the advantage of  
9 being able to use a larger sample on account of cost savings in terms of resources used in  
10 transmission, collation and evaluation. With a total of 181 useable responses provided  
11 by many senior industry sources, it can be argued that a wide and legitimate  
12 sample of views has been collected and consequently valid conclusions (subject to  
13 some limitations) can be reached.  
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### 29 **Limitations of the Research**

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34 It is acknowledged that there are limitations in this research. The research aims to  
35 ascertain views of industry employers and it is not designed to give explicit and  
36 detailed qualitative data, although the qualitative findings are of interest and back up  
37 the quantitative data. The enormity and multi-sectored nature of the industry poses  
38 problems in making statements, which do not appear sweeping generalisations. Indeed as  
39 mentioned previously, a definition of the travel and tourism industry alone is  
40 problematic, as surely reference needs to be made to the 'accommodation' sector, who  
41 arguably, is under represented in the sample. One respondent stated that 'we were  
42 trying to fit a generic questionnaire into a multi-faceted industry.' In response to this, it  
43 should be pointed out that the limitations of the approach are acknowledged but in the  
44 absence of any previous research or data at all on some of the issues, a 'broad-brush'  
45 approach is better than none at all. Furthermore, having identified the principal  
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3 issues and themes that emerge from this study it is suggested that more detailed  
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5 research could be carried out to gain a deeper understanding and attempt to verify the  
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7 results contained in this paper. The findings have in fact been used extensively by the  
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9 Association of British Travel Agents , Institute of Travel and Tourism, People 1<sup>st</sup> the  
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11 Sector Skills Agency (one of the authors sits on the Travel Provider Working Group)  
12  
13 and the Department of Culture Media and Sport. The reason for the interest in the  
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15 findings was that they were unique in terms of the data provided on the travel  
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17 industry's view of graduates as employees.  
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25 A further respondent suggested that the questions were 'too cut and dried and that  
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27 there would be no single answer' which in itself is perhaps an indication of the  
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29 complexity of the issue. A similar point was made in that it was indicated by one  
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31 respondent that there was 'no flexibility in answering the questions'. This, it is  
32  
33 conceded, is the nature of such a survey and  
34  
35 that in order to receive any quantitative  
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37 findings, explicit questions had to be posed and that it was the volume of responses  
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39 pertaining to the questions that was most important in this case. Views such as these  
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41 had been anticipated at the questionnaire design stage and it was for this reason that a  
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43 section was provided for additional comments in Section 13 of the questionnaire. The  
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45 response to this (qualitative commentary) was good and a summary of the main  
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47 findings is presented in Appendix 1. Some of the comments make useful reading in  
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49 addressing the limitations of further research using similar methodologies.  
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57 One problem encountered was that the software permitted some multi responses. These  
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59 were detected and deleted from the sample in order to avoid distorting the results.  
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Software problems were regrettably encountered with question 9 which asked

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3 respondents to rank topics in order of importance as to what they felt was the most  
4  
5 important subject to be taught on a travel/tourism degree course. The data could not be  
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7 used from this question, as there were too many inconsistencies with the ranking of the  
8  
9 15 topics. This has been identified as an important area upon which to base future  
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11 further research which would be of relevance to the Quality Assurance Authority and  
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13 People 1st. Such research is currently being undertaken by one of the authors.  
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20 The use of an electronic survey has both positive and negative aspects. It enabled a  
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22 large number of respondents to receive the data, but it was also evident from  
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24 comments that some of these encountered problems of a technological nature. The  
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26 useable responses that were received were very positive about the nature of the  
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28 research being undertaken and its importance.  
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### 34 **The Findings.**

#### 35 *Respondents Role within Organisation*

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42 The findings on respondent's roles reflect the level of seniority with almost 47%  
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44 being either Owner or Director of Organisations and over 40% being Senior Manager or  
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46 Manager. These factors relate directly to employment propensity in that although  
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48 some categories are not directly responsible for employment on a day-to-day basis,  
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50 those at higher levels within an organisation are normally responsible for directing  
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52 and steering employment policy which adds validity to the findings.  
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8 *Number of Employees*  
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11 The second question ascertained that over 30% of respondents had less than 10  
12 employees. This data is consistent with TTENTO Sector Workforce Development  
13 Plan 2001 (TTENTO, 2001) where it was found that 80% of the three sectors  
14 evaluated were small to medium-sized enterprises (SME's). The sectors were the  
15 events sector (10%) and tourism (10%) but the travel sector was responsible for 80%  
16  
17 of employees. When the variables for questions one (role within the organisation and  
18 two were cross referenced (using SPSS statistical analysis software), it was found as  
19 would be expected, that the 17.9% of owners had a high percentage (78.1%) of 0 – 10  
20 employees and that the majority of respondents (68%) who had selected the 'other'  
21 box worked for larger organisations with more than 51 employees.  
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40 Size of the organisation was cross referenced with whether the organisation had a  
41 salary scale which reflected the qualifications of staff upon entry and this revealed no  
42 relationship. Thus all sizes of organisation appeared to behave in similar ways with  
43 respect to this question.  
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50 The respondents' views on all other questions were evaluated in relation to the size of the  
51 organisation that they worked for and it was found that there was no significant  
52 difference in the views of those that worked in larger or smaller organisations.  
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3 Respondents were asked the question as to whether they were graduates; 69.1%  
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5 replied in the affirmative.  
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### 10 **Employing Graduates.**

#### 11 12 13 14 15 *Figure 1*

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30 Figure 1 shows the responses to the following question: Have you ever employed a) a  
31 graduate? b) a travel and tourism or hospitality graduate? c) both a) and b) d) don't  
32 know if you have employed either e) have never employed a graduate.  
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39 A majority of respondents had recruited a graduate at some time, although only 7.7%  
40 had recruited a graduate of travel, tourism or hospitality. It is well known that students  
41 following academic and vocational disciplines do not always follow career paths which  
42 relate directly to their undergraduate studies (DFES, 2002). Further research needs to  
43 be carried out in order to track the evident large number of graduates who have subject  
44 specific degrees but who never enter the industry. However some studies indicate the  
45 scope of the issue. Research by Major (2004) showed that 50% of travel and tourism  
46 graduates from Newcastle Business School, UK, between 2000 – 2003 did not proceed  
47 to work in the industry. These findings are in line with those of McKercher, et al.,  
48 (1995) based on their research of Tourism  
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3 Management majors at Charles Sturt University, NSW, Australia which showed that  
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8 tourism industry up to three years after graduation.  
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11 only about 40% of all former  
12 students from this programme were working in the  
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20 Statistical cross-referencing confirmed a tendency that might have been predicted i.e.  
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22 that those employers who were themselves graduates were more likely to employ  
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24 graduates than those employers who were not themselves graduates. Of the 69.1%  
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26 graduate respondents to the survey 74% had recruited graduates whereas of the  
27

28 non-graduate 30.5%  
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30 respondents, only 26% had  
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32 recruited a graduate.  
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34 Graduates also appear to  
35

36 have a greater predilection for recruiting not just graduates, but graduates with  
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38 relevant degrees, with 68.6% of the graduate respondents having recruited as such as  
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40 opposed to only 31.4% of the non-graduate respondents.  
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#### 49 *Graduate Training Schemes*

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53 **Figure 2** Anecdotal evidence regarding the relatively limited number of graduate  
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55 training schemes operating in the industry is confirmed by the results. Of the  
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57 respondents,  
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59 85.2% did not have a graduate training scheme on offer within their organisation.  
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**Importance of subject area of degree to working in the industry**1  
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Respondents were asked ‘if you employ a graduate/s to what extent do you believe that the subject area of a degree is important to work in the industry?’

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3 The majority of respondents indicated that the subject area of a degree was important  
4 to work in the industry with almost 50%, (shown in Figure 2), 'strongly agreeing' or  
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7  
8 'agreeing' with the statement above. This is a positive indicator for institutions  
9  
10 delivering travel, tourism, hospitality or business disciplines and demonstrates that  
11  
12 their programmes and curriculum are perceived to have some value and relevance to  
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14  
15 many respondents from the industry. However some degree of conflict is indicated in  
16  
17 that 22.9% of respondents still disagreed or strongly disagreed suggesting that a  
18  
19 degree is still valued by some on the basis of its academic merits as opposed to its  
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21  
22 delivery of specific knowledge  
23 and skills.

### 24 25 26 27 *Salary Scales*

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30 The research indicated that the salary scales offered to graduates do not appear to  
31  
32 reflect their additional skills, abilities and knowledge for the most part. The majority  
33  
34 of respondents (64.8%) worked for an organisation that did not have a salary scale  
35  
36 which reflects the qualifications of staff upon entry to the organisation; only 35.2% of  
37  
38 those surveyed did have such a scale. Further research to compare this figure against  
39  
40 other industries would be interesting and an analysis sector by sector within the  
41  
42 industry might be useful. It suggests that the value and perception of graduates when  
43  
44 entering the industry is relatively low.  
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### 53 54 *Views on UK Government Widening Participation Policy*

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58 **Figure 3**

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As discussed in the background to this research, the UK government's current aim is to recruit 50% of 18 – 30 year olds into higher education HEFCE (2005). Results are fairly mixed in this area, perhaps an indication that either views are not strongly held or that the implications of the government's higher education policy is an area that respondents have failed to consider in detail. Figure 3 indicates that 27.5% agreed with the statement that this would have no effect on their organisation, although 26.4% disagreed whilst a relatively large proportion (33.1%) recorded a neutral response.

The question was then posed as to whether this government policy might mean that organisations might employ a graduate; 63.5% either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement, and only 8.9% 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. It appears, unsurprisingly perhaps, that if the supply of graduates is set to increase, then the take up of graduates in employment would also increase. The topic was then widened to ascertain whether respondents felt that the extra supply of graduates would increase an organisation's choice of employees with over 50% 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' with this implication. Again however a fairly large proportion (27.7%) expressed a neutral response thus indicating that many respondents did not have strong views about this statement.

### **Implications of the UK Government's Higher Education Target of 50% and Increased Skill and Knowledge Levels.**

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6 **Figure 4**  
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17 The respondents felt quite strongly that the overall skills and knowledge  
18 level of employees would increase as a result of the UK government's policy, as  
19 shown in  
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25 Figure 4, with just over two-thirds (66.7%) of respondents indicating an 'agree' or  
26 'strongly agree' response. This suggests that organisations in the industry do indeed  
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29 bestows upon a graduate. attach value to the acquisition of a degree in terms of the  
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31 skills and knowledge that it  
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39 However, interviewees were then asked their views on the implications of this  
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41 'widening participation policy' and whether they believed that graduates would have to  
42 accept positions of lower responsibility. Just over 60% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'  
43  
44 with this view. This leaves open a wide area of discussion, not least as to whether  
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46 students who have been educated at some expense (both to themselves and to  
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48 the state), for three or four years should then find themselves faced with this situation.  
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55 The topic of whether the government policy would result in the workforce being more  
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57 efficient was raised; the response was ambiguous with only just over a third of  
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59 respondents 'agreeing' that the employment of graduates would result in higher levels of  
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60 efficiency thus throwing some doubt on the value attributed by the industry to the

recruitment of graduates. Such a finding perhaps runs contrary to the information

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4 gained earlier in the questionnaire where it was indicated that skills and knowledge  
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6 would be increased as a result of government policy; or is it the case that 'skills and  
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8 knowledge' are perhaps deemed to be different from 'efficiency' by employers? A  
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10 majority of respondents did concede that the implications of the widening  
11  
12 participation policy are that they might employ a graduate, that it would increase their  
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14 choice of employees and that as a result there would be an increase of skills and  
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16 knowledge levels. However, the majority of respondents also concluded that  
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18 graduates would have to accept positions of lower responsibility as a result of the  
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20 initiative.  
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28 *Skills provided by a Travel, Tourism or Hospitality Degree.*  
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32 The industry's views on the value attached to skills derived from a Travel, Tourism  
33  
34 and/or Hospitality degree were specifically sought. Overall, the response was positive  
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36 with the majority of respondents agreeing that the specific listed skills were provided  
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39 by such degree programmes:  
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- 43 a) Analytical
- 44
- 45 c) Industry Experience
- 46
- 47 e) Intellectual
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- 49 f) Literacy
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- 51 g) Numeracy
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- 53 i) Planning
- 54
- 55 k) Problem Solving
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- 57 m) Research
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- i) Social
- j) Specific Knowledge

Almost 60% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that analytical skills were provided whilst undertaking a degree. The skills however which it would appear were most widely perceived as being gained by undertaking such a degree were: problem solving; planning; and, research with 64.6%, 70% and 75.4% respectively either 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' with the statements. Social skills also scored well with 59.2% of respondents 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that they were a benefit of such a degree.

Results were more mixed with regard to industry experience with 47.5% considering that such experience was gained whilst almost a quarter (24.7%) third (and growing) number of courses the year is optional reflecting a perceived desire among students for flexibility.

'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that this was the case. This raises an issue as to the awareness of

the place of the sandwich/placement year that so many degree courses operate. On some courses the year is mandatory, on others there is no such provision whilst on a

In a separate question views on the value of the student placement year were solicited; 71.7% of respondents considered the placement year (in which students spend working

in the industry as part of their degree) to be of value. As mentioned previously, this

raises an issue of industry awareness however, since 27.4% of respondents had

responded that they felt that industry experience was not gained whilst studying for a degree.

Views on the previous training or education which provided the best potential employees.

Some very interesting data was revealed when respondents were asked what previous training or education they believed provided them with the best potential employees.

**Figure 5**

A substantial proportion of respondents 'strongly agree' that

the training or education,

which will provide the best potential employees, is provided by an 'apprentice' who has grown up in the industry (44.7%). Of those that opted for a graduate intake as the way of providing the best employees, respondents expressed a preference for specialised degrees rather than more generic courses with 30% responding that a travel and tourism graduate was most appropriate as opposed to a non-subject specific graduate receiving a response of 21.2%.

This reinforces the views expressed previously when respondents were asked about the importance of the degree subject studied (see *figure 2*). Interestingly the value of non graduates with experience from other sectors was low – only 4.7% thereby suggesting that industry skills are fairly specific and cannot easily be acquired and transferred from another industry sector.

Finally, a large majority of respondents (73.6%) indicated that they would be willing to participate in future research thus demonstrating that the topic and area of research is of interest and value to many within the industry



### Qualitative Findings.

The questionnaire was designed to gather some richer qualitative data to supplement the closed question responses in allowing respondents to make any relevant general comments. The main issues arising are summarised in Table 2. In the main the qualitative findings reflect the quantitative data. Firstly and predominantly the issue of low salaries was raised from various perspectives, especially as to whether graduates are in fact willing to work in an industry with such poor salaries on offer. (The introduction of University top up fees in 2006 and increasing student debt may also have future implications here.) This perhaps also reflects the data produced by People 1<sup>st</sup> (2007) of a 12% retention of graduates working in the industry. The size of organisations (many being SME's with under 10 employees) and the declining margins within the industry were highlighted as contributory factors to low salary scales. A recurring theme throughout the qualitative comments was that graduates were not what the industry requires, and that skilled 'apprentices' or 'tradesmen' with communication skills, common sense, experience and a flair for sales are more appropriate. This echoes closely the quantitative findings. Several respondents raised the question of the necessity for subject specific degrees, suggesting that generic degrees such as English could equip graduates with the necessary transferable skills to work in the industry. The value of the placement year and working experience within the industry was endorsed throughout.

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6 **Conclusions and recommendations.**  
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10 It is believed that valid conclusions and recommendations can be made on the basis of  
11 this research for several reasons. Firstly the research carried out, although not without  
12 limitations, is based on a large sample of employers who by virtue of their relatively  
13 seniority are in positions which enable them to authoritatively comment on the issues  
14 relating to graduate employment in the travel industry. Secondly the sample reflects the  
15 diversity and fragmentation of the industry representing the full range of employers  
16 from those employing less than 10 employees to those employing over 500 and  
17 representing the various sub-sectors represented in the industry. Finally the research  
18 respondents represented both graduates and non-graduates (although not in equal  
19 numbers) so that they had a range of experiences to draw upon.  
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37 Overall the research as might be expected revealed very mixed views regarding the  
38 value of employing graduates. This perhaps goes some way to confirming anecdotal  
39 evidence, continuous reporting in the Travel Press (TTG and Travel Weekly) and the  
40 evidence of studies (Evans, 1993) that the industry views experience of the industry to be  
41 of greater importance than academic achievement.  
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52 Thus approximately half of respondents viewed 'apprentice' experience of the industry  
53 or other sector experience as producing the best employees as opposed to employing  
54 graduates. However, travel and tourism educators may draw some comfort from the  
55 fact that respondents did recognise that graduates of travel and tourism  
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2 related studies were likely to be of more value than more generic graduates and that  
3 such graduates provided a range of relevant skills particularly planning, problem  
4 solving, social and research based skills. The industry does have experience of  
5 recruiting travel and tourism graduates: 30% of respondents felt that this is the best  
6 form of training and education. However, an even higher number of respondents  
7 view the apprenticeship routes as the favoured mechanism for providing the best  
8 employees, despite the fact that nearly 70% of those surveyed are graduates. This  
9 confirms anecdotal evidence to that effect.  
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26 Relatively few specific arrangements for graduates appear to be in place with only a  
27 small number of companies offering graduate training schemes and only a minority of  
28 companies offering salary scales reflecting entry qualifications. The issue of salary  
29 scales arose as a very real concern and reflects other research on this topic. Croner  
30 Research (2003) found that pay levels as a whole in the travel industry are up to 18%  
31 lower than the national average. Given that some 50% of the 18 – 30 population may  
32 soon be graduates, (with debts to pay back as a result of the introduction of top up fees  
33 from 2006), this factor will clearly have some impact on graduates considering entering  
34 the industry and thus in turn have a possible negative impact on the level of skills  
35 provided by staff working in the industry.  
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52 The skills provided by travel and tourism graduates are widely recognised by  
53 respondents particularly the ability of such graduates with regard to analysis, problem  
54 solving, planning and research. By contrast, slightly less than half of all respondents  
55 consider industrial experience to be provided by these degree programmes which  
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3 raises the issue that many employers may be unaware of the provision of placement  
4 opportunities provided by most of these programmes. However, the research clearly  
5 identifies the value attributed to the 'placement year' by the industry with over 70%  
6 of respondents considering this to be of value.  
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15 It is evident, from the number of 'neutral' responses and those agreeing or strongly  
16 agreeing (68.9%) that the implications of widening participation in higher education is  
17 that either employers feel it will have no effect or perhaps that many employers have  
18 not fully considered this issue. Responses showed that employers may well consider  
19 recruiting a graduate if the pool of labour at that level increased, but the salary on offer  
20 may not be one commensurate with a graduate training and that graduates may well  
21 have to accept position of lower responsibility. The implications of this are far reaching  
22 given the introduction of top up fees in the UK in 2006.  
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38 The travel industry (including the accommodation sector) is a large employer of young  
39 people. Given the on-going growth of the industry it is set to employ ever-greater  
40 number of such employees. The industry however, has to compete with other sectors  
41 for suitable employees in an emerging demographic environment, which will not  
42 favour the industry in that declining numbers in the younger age groups will be  
43 witnessed but with a greater proportion of those will be attending university.  
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56 Industry growth coupled with demographic factors and widening participation could  
57 mean that the travel industry could in future be disadvantaged in the enhanced  
58 competition for labour (and skilled labour in particular). The research indicates that  
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3 few employers in the industry fully recognise the value of graduates either as evidenced  
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5 by the data on salary scales, the lack of graduate training schemes and the relative lack  
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7 of value placed on graduates. In such circumstances the industry could find that it is  
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9 squeezed out in the increased competition for the 'brightest and best' if it does not seek  
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11 suitable ways of valuing and employing graduates and providing suitable and  
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13 sustainable career paths. Sadly such initiatives appear to be somewhat rare in the  
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15 industry at present.  
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24 The authors would argue that the industry needs a well educated workforce to provide  
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26 the skills base to compete effectively in modern markets and that in particular the  
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28 industry must treat graduate recruitment with a greater degree of seriousness. This  
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30 research raises some areas of concern since it appears to confirm other evidence in  
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32 that graduate training programmes are rare, salary levels are low, and qualifications  
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34 are not rewarded.  
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43 Furthermore many employers view experience with a company as being of more  
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45 importance than degree qualifications at a time when other factors indicate that higher  
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47 order skills and competences are frequently necessary. Travel industry companies are  
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49 not alone in dealing with key issues such as the impacts of globalisation, regulation and  
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51 de-regulation, rapid market shifts and environmental turbulence (as indicated by oil  
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53 price movements and climatic crises), but certainly these issues, and others, are of key  
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55 importance to contemporary travel industry managers. It is argued that these sorts of  
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57 issues require critical and reflective thinkers which university level education can  
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59 facilitate.  
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2 However the evidence seems to suggest and the authors would contend that degree  
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4 programmes must not be developed in isolation from the industry they purport to serve.  
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6 People 1<sup>st</sup> the Sector Skills industry is currently trying to address the issue of industry  
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8 involvement in their initiative 'Unravelling the Skills Spaghetti' which is looking at the  
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10 whole raft of levels of qualifications available. In designing their degree programmes  
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12 universities have to be aware of a number of academic and financial design imperatives  
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14 in relation to achieving economies of scale in delivery, abiding by government  
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16 supported benchmarking standards and providing a degree level broad based education  
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18 as opposed to specific training. People 1<sup>st</sup> the Sector Skills industry is currently trying to  
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20 address in their initiative 'Unravelling the Skills Spaghetti' which is looking at the  
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22 whole raft of levels of qualifications available. Nevertheless it seems clear that  
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24 education providers must also work in conjunction with the industry to ensure that  
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26 delivered modules and programmes provide the essential knowledge, skills and  
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28 managerial competences required to contribute to a sustainable and economically  
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30 successful future for the industry.  
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42 The industry for its part must be encouraged to develop effective graduate training  
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44 schemes and opportunities for graduates in general and travel and tourism graduates in  
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46 particular. In so-doing universities (in conjunction with others such as People1<sup>st</sup>)  
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48 could, if called upon, assist in the development of potential graduate career  
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50 progression paths through the design of valid career progression opportunities, the  
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52 validation of in-company training, and the establishment of professional recognition for  
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54 qualifications within the industry.  
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3 This study has provided the basis for further in depth work which could examine in  
4 greater detail the likely higher order skills gaps which may develop within the  
5 industry over the coming years. Further research is also necessary to ascertain how  
6 careers can be developed within the industry. Clearly the enthusiasm of people to  
7 work in the industry is evident and there is an abundant supply of well qualified  
8 graduates. However, more work is necessary to establish career progression  
9 opportunities if the current situation with regard to travel and tourism graduates in  
10 which they are under-valued, often go into other industries or leave the industry  
11 prematurely is not to persist.  
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*Tables, Figures and  
Appendices.*

*Table 1*

<b>Sector</b>	<b>% Sample</b>	<b>Number</b>
Travel Agent	12.87%	700
Travel Technology	11.74%	500
Outbound Tour Operator	11.29%	700
Business Travel Agent/ Operator	7.90%	700
Hotel/Accommodation	4.74%	600
Inbound Tour Operator	2.48%	485
Airline	2.03%	397
Consolidator	1.35%	132
Domestic Tour Operator	1.13%	210
Ground Handler	0.90%	176
Tourist Board	0.90%	176
Car Rental	0.68%	133
Coach-line	0.23%	45
Cruise-line	0.23%	45
<b>Total</b>		<b>4999</b>

view

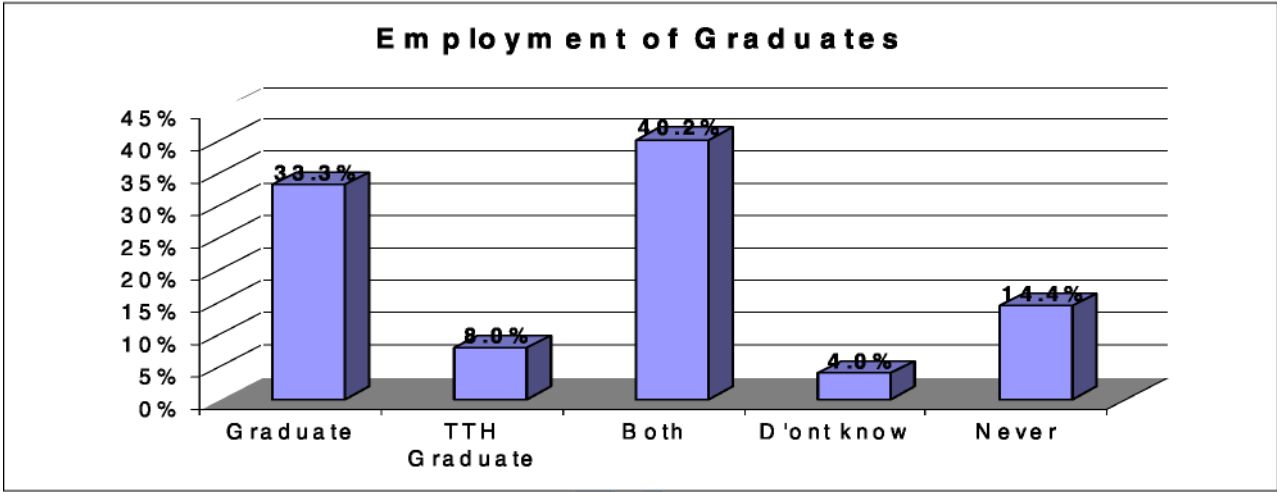
**Table 2 Summary of  
Main Issues Arising from Qualitative Research Questions**

Issue	Comments
Low Salaries	Many of the comments pertained to the issue of low salaries. In particular the issue was raised as to whether this would deter graduates from entering the industry and indeed, diverts the best performers into other industries where the rewards are higher. This issue was also linked to declining margins in travel companies. Poor pay meant that graduates did not stay long in the industry. It was also argued that if more people have a degree, then graduates would not be able to start on high salaries, which they would need in order to pay back the debt that they had incurred through studying.
Value of 'hands-on experience'	The value of 'hands-on experience' and working from 'the bottom up' within the industry was clearly reflected. Some viewed 50% of the population proceeding to higher education was too many and that the 'trade apprenticeship' route was more appropriate for working in the industry. One respondent also stated that there were already 'a mass of graduates desperately chasing too few jobs.'
Industrial Placements	Several respondents mentioned the value of the industrial placement year in that this represented a good chance of leading onto recruitment on a permanent basis.
Specific Skills	Several respondents mentioned the needs for specific skill sets. PC literate skills, good customer contact skills, selling ability and good product knowledge were all emphasised.
Graduate resentment	Resentment of graduates by other employees was raised as an issue i.e. those who had worked their way up in the industry and taken advantage of in house training, only to be surpassed by a graduate entering the industry. The idea was also purported that a "school leaver with GCSE's can do a consultants job a lot better than a graduate..."
Industry suitability	Attitude, flexibility and adaptability were regarded as what made individuals suited to working in the industry. However it was also pointed out that aptitude and application to tasks were stronger qualities, which degree calibre students tend to have more of. A concern however was voiced over perceived graduate complacency that was observable in some cases.
Combining theoretical & practical experience	A view was expressed, that a combination of industry and specific study on a part time basis was the best method to gain practical and theoretical experience and personal development.
Relevance of university study	One respondent stated that he/she had obtained a good understanding of (the) industry, business and operation through the various modules studied at university and that a degree relevant to the industry helped in job procurement.
Skills development 'on - th e- job'	A view was expressed that the main social and basic skills needed by young people in most industries are deficient at school leaving age and that many of the skills necessary in a working travel agency can only be gained by experience.
Course costs	The point was made that small businesses (less than 5 employees on this occasion) could not contribute to the costs of courses for employees – they would therefore look at employees who already have a degree and 'A'-levels rather than a vocational training.
Perception of the travel and tourism industry	It was pointed out that the number of high quality people within the travel and tourism industry is very low. Travel and tourism is possibly viewed as a soft option and does not attract particularly high quality students. The organisation in question had recruited approximately 20 graduates over the last 3 years –

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	none of whom had been from travel and tourism courses.
Literacy standards	The issue was raised of the standard of literacy and understanding (misunderstanding) of the product being areas of weakness in agency staff, which do not reflect well on the industry when these staff are dealing with customers.

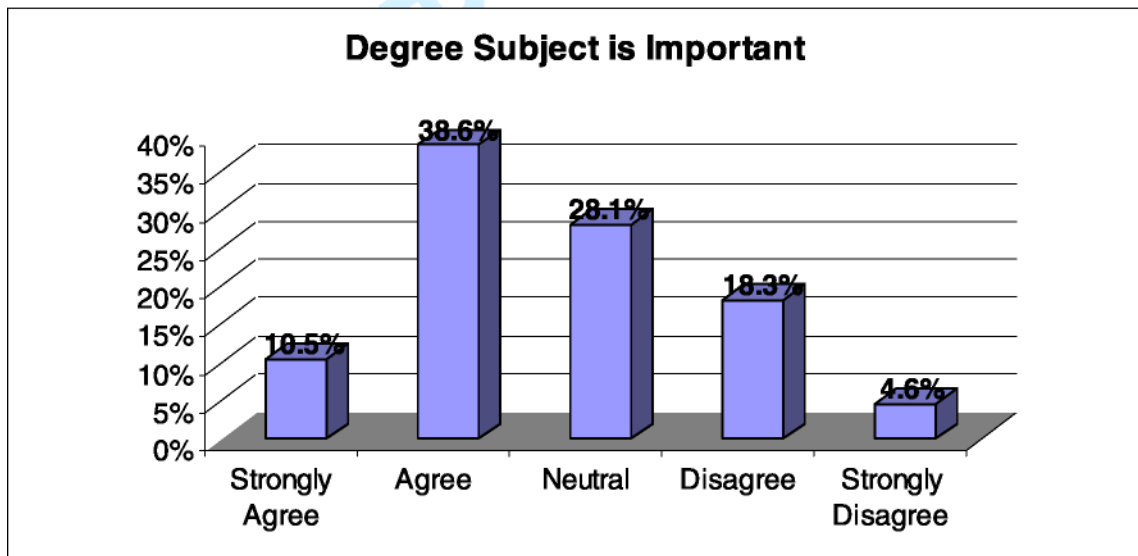
Figure 1. Employment of Graduates





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**Figure 2. Importance  
of Subject Area of Degree to Working in the Industry**



**Figure 3.**

The government's aim of 50% of young people enrolling on a higher education course will –

- a) Have no effect
- b) Might employ a graduate
- c) Increase our choice of employees
- d) Increase overall skill and knowledge levels
- e) Lead to graduates accepting less responsibility
- f) Lead to greater workforce efficiency
- g) Overall workforce reductions
- h) Lead to consideration of sponsoring students

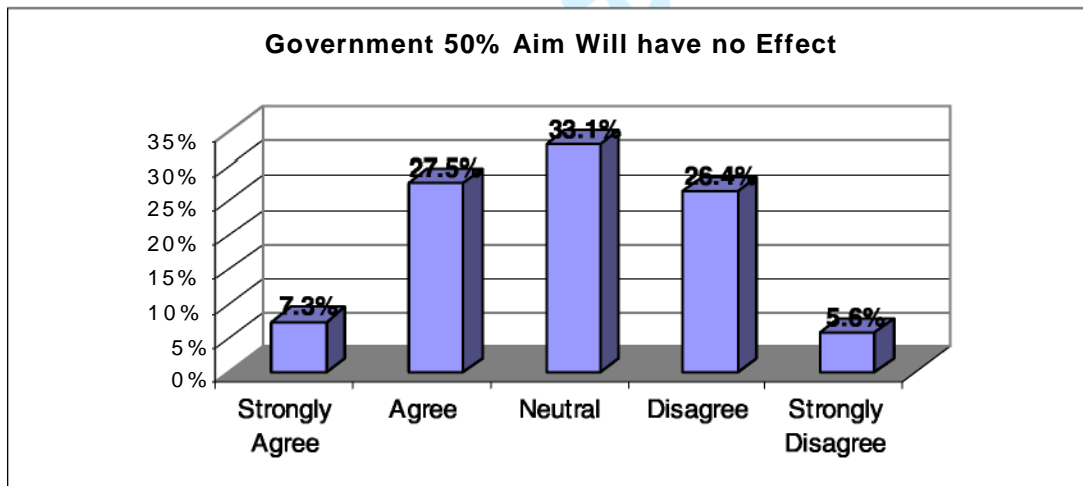


Figure 4

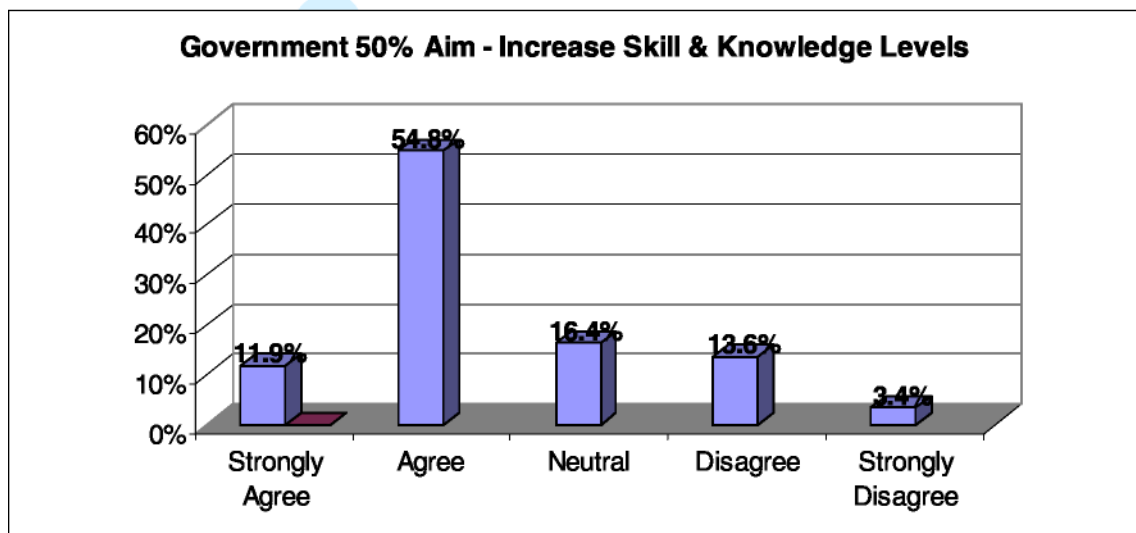


Figure 5



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