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UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION TO
IMPROVE TOURISM EDUCATION,
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University of Florida, USA and the State University
of Nizhni Novgorod, Russian Federation

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CAPACITY BUILDING PARTNERSHIP: A MODEL FOR INTERNATIONAL
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ABSTRACT

The proposed model of international collaboration between the University of Florida (UF), USA, and the State University of Nizhni Novgorod (UNN), Russian Federation, aims to strengthen teaching process, research, and industry outreach in partner institutions. The model includes curriculum development and delivery, faculty training, student exchange, facilitation of research through creation of a center for tourism research at UNN, and involving industry professionals in the education process. When implemented, the project will contribute to producing better specialists in the area of tourism and hospitality management and, on a larger scale, positively transform societies in both the Nizhni Novgorod region, Russia, and the state of Florida, USA.

Keywords: *Curriculum development, Industry outreach, International collaboration, Research, Student exchange, Teaching.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an important industry in Russia as visitor expenditures permeate throughout various sectors of the economy and create a multiplier impact in income and employment. The tourism industry encompasses multiple interrelated businesses that include lodging, natural and built attractions, restaurants, travel agents and operators, etc. Given the interdependency of these multiple businesses, it is important to maintain and further enhance tourism with a sustained long-term growth strategy for destinations and the nation's economy. Russia is a vast country with rich tourist resources of all kinds – unique natural features, beautiful landscapes, historical and cultural attractions, places of ethnographic interest, and excellent recreational opportunities. To realize its potential, Russia needs to diversify its tourism product mix beyond the traditional nucleus of Moscow and St. Petersburg and into other regions, i.e., Nizhni Novgorod (Stepchenkova and Morrison 2006, 2008).

The city of Nizhni Novgorod with a population of about 1.3 million people was founded in 1221 and is one of the cultural centers of modern Russia due to its central location, history, and background. It is also referred to as the third “capital” of Russia and is located at the strategic confluence of the Oka and Volga rivers. The city attracts a sizeable number of visitors to learn and experience the culture and heritage. Beyond the elements of cultural heritage, the city is also a commercial hub for industry, manufacturing, innovation and research, as well as a major educational center in Russia.

The city and the national government expect to increase international arrivals as the potential to expand this sector to generate more income, employment and other benefits are enormous. Nevertheless, tourism growth is dependent on a number of factors, notably, developing a qualified, trained and skilled labor force. This is evidently the case in Russia as tourism education lags behind that of other disciplines. The shortage of specialists in tourism related professions (e.g., destination planning and development) is rooted in the surge in international visitors following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although economic prosperity was cultivated in various sectors, the growth in the hospitality and tourism industry was experienced later. Given the current influx of visitors as well as development of destinations and attractions in Russia, there has been limited number of institutions that has focused on tourism degrees. This is a major limitation when compared with other countries with similar tourist flows. Overall, capacity building and institutional development in tourism education is a fundamental component for the vitality and sustainability of the industry in Russia.

The greater Nizhni Novgorod region is a major tourist destination but there is a lack of institutions of higher education with a bachelor and postgraduate degree programs focused on tourism management. University of Nizhni Novgorod is the largest in the region with 40,000 students and has also received the distinction of being one of the 29 national research universities in the country. In May 2010 the University of Florida (UF) and the State University of Nizhni Novgorod (UNN) formed a strategic partnership to improve tourism education at both institutions with the focus on degree curriculum development and pedagogy, tourism research development, faculty and student exchange mobility program, and experiential education involving service learning projects.

First, the curriculum assessment and development has been conducted in both institutions, separately. The UNN developed a four-year curriculum plan for the Bachelor of Science in Tourism degree, which is going to be offered within the Faculty of International Relations at UNN. The plan has been certified with the Federal Agency for Education of the Russian Federation. The UF has revised the Tourism and Hospitality curriculum offered for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Hospitality and Tourism Management. Courses developed within the project are being offered for the first time in Spring 2012 (Cultural Tourism, Tourism English). Destination Management course will be first offered in Fall 2012. Vocational and executive training certificate programs based on the new degree programs are to be developed at a later phase of the project.

Second, a Center for Tourism Management was established at UNN, with active local and national industry engagement and partnership. The mission of the Center will be largely to serve the city of Nizhni Novgorod and tourism destinations in the region and industries through research, training and outreach.

Third, a first collaborative research project has been designed for the city of Nizhni Novgorod. It will focus on city visitors’ profile and economic impact of tourism. The study is to

be conducted by the team of UNN and UF faculties, as well as undergraduate and graduate students from both institutions.

Fourth, one of the project objectives is professional development of the UNN faculty with respect to tourism and hospitality education. This objective is to be achieved by a series of workshops spread across the 3-year period of 2010-2013. Four workshops have been conducted so far:

- Introductory Seminar on Curriculum Development at UNN (January 2011)
- E-Learning Seminar at UF (April 2011)
- Tourism Education Seminar at UF (April 2011)
 - ✓ Curriculum Development Framework
 - ✓ Tourism & Hospitality Research
 - ✓ Preparing Students for Real World: Education and Industry Experience
 - ✓ Regional Tourism Development and University Role in It
 - ✓ Development of Service Learning Projects
 - ✓ Study Abroad at UF and Language Component
 - ✓ Experiencing Online Learning
- Questions and Answers Session on Teaching Online (September 2011)

Currently, the partnership is in its second year. So far, this partnership has been successful in capacity building and institutional development with respect to tourism education, research, faculty training, and industry outreach. The student exchange objective is to be achieved in year 2 and 3 of the project. The effectiveness, quality, and timeliness of project deliverables are ensured by independent expertise provided by a Geography and Tourism scholar from a leading Russian university – Lomonosov’s Moscow State University. This expert is acting as the external evaluator of the project.

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