



A skill- gap study: An analytical approach with a special focus on Tourism Education and the Tourism Industry in Odisha

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to ascertain whether there is a gap between institutes offering tourism education curriculum with respect to skill-sets and the skills required by the tourism industry in Odisha. An in-depth study was carried out based on the literature on the generic skills on offer by various universities and institutes offering tourism degree courses across the country and the State. Based on the list of 20 (Twenty) attributes/skills identified, the data was analyzed to know the views of the tourism education providers or academicians and the industry professionals. The study found considerable variance on 20 attributes/skills amongst the industry professionals and academic provider's perspective in Odisha. The finding confirms that there lies a skill gap between the present tourism education syllabus and the requirements of the tourism industry. Further, on reviewing the existing literature available on tourism education and tourism industry, it was found that tourism education and tourism industry are the two sides of the same coin and cannot be isolated from each other and there should be an amalgamation of both theory & concepts and real practical know-how. Thus, on the issue of bridging the skills-gap, it was suggested that those working closely on designing the higher tourism education curricula, need to work in liaison with representatives of the tourism industry so as to ensure a deep connection between theory and practice so that the needed skill-sets of graduates of tourism education can align with those expected in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Tourism Education, skills and abilities, tourism Industry, skills-gap, India.

Introduction

The tourism sector has evolved over the years and has become one of the rapidly growing industries across the globe. The total contribution by travel and tourism sector to India's GDP in the year 2017-18 was Rs.15.24 trillion and is expected to increase to Rs.32.05 trillion by 2028 (Source: India Brand Equity Foundation – IBEF). The industry is ranked 5th in the long-term (for a period of 10 years) growth and is expected to be the second largest employer in the world by 2019. The State of Odisha is gifted with a plethora of natural resources and its strength lies in its rich cultural heritage and the new ethnic, Buddhist



and ecotourism products that have helped attract a lot of tourists both domestic as well as international. The annual footfall to the State suggests that Odisha is growing at a rate of nine percent per annum as against four percent globally.

As the tourism industry in India continues to grow and expand, its products and services are also getting diversified. This diversification and expansion of tourism and its allied sectors call for professionally trained human resources with requisite skills/attributes to develop, plan, promote and market the tourism as a product per se to the entire world. Today, the tourism industry and tourism education are the prime concerns of not only the developed nations but also the developing nations as well. In this regard, connoisseurs in tourism sector across the globe have always acknowledged and felt the need for quality in higher tourism education because the success of tourism industry in the knowledge-driven economy mainly depends upon the effective and efficient trained manpower with necessary skill-sets.

The tourism education curriculum at the university level is based on the premise: *vocational* and *academic focus*. The objective is to provide tourism graduates with the required skills and competencies who can meet the needs and expectation of the tourism industry. On the contrary, Tribe (2002) is of the opinion that all courses in travel and tourism as vocational and this argument set by him has provided a different meaning and value of tourism curriculum in the eyes and expectations of most tourism industry professionals.

According to (Gamble & Messenger, 1990) it is quite a difficult task to accurately define and relate to the skills and competencies a tourism graduate need to exhibit or possess in order to survive and succeed in the industry. In this connection, many trade pundits opine that hotel and catering programmes offered in various institutes are losing their focus and are not in sync with the needs of the industry (Casado, 1992).

However, (Goodman & Sprague, 1991) in their study found out that a four-year hospitality and tourism curriculum does relate and respond to the demand for increased professional skills within the hospitality and tourism industry This view was supported and reiterated by Lewis (1993) who felt the need revisit in the manner and way the tourism curriculum needs to be designed as per the requirements of the industry.

As tourism industry is highly dynamic is nature, skill-gaps within the industry will exist and many researchers in the past and present have maintained that “soft human relation skills including oral and written communication and interpersonal communication are essential for graduates and trainees to possess” (Baum, 1991; Christou & Karamanidis, 1999).

In this regard, the tourism sector in the state of Odisha is witnessing a dearth of qualified and skilled manpower. It is commonly agreed that due to the scarcity of these generic skills, there is a hindrance in the growth of the tourism business (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2005).

Based on the above premise, the present study endeavors to find **the** skill-gap if any that exists between the tourism education providers and the tourism industry professionals in the state of Odisha.

Objective of the Study



The objective of the study was to determine the skills gap, if any, between the undergraduate tourism curricula provided by educational institutions with regards to skill sets and the skill sets required by the tourism industry in Odisha, India.

Literature Review

In this section of the study, the researchers have provided the literature reviews on tourism education, the tourism industry, employment issues and challenges in the tourism industry and identified the needs for the tourism industry. Further, the reviews not only served as a basis for the study but also provided a guideline which concerns the methodology and outcome of the study.

Tourism as an industry, plays an important role in the economy of any country. Although the tourism industry provides huge job opportunities, its growth is hindered due to the need for adequately trained professionals, which has been the main cause hampering the growth of a country's economy (Liu, 2022). In this regard, the need to examine tourism education in relation to employment is of prime importance in imparting quality education and fostering trained manpower as per the requirements of the ever- demanding tourism industry. Ayres (2006) opines that "tourism is a multidisciplinary field, characterized by a large number of small and medium-sized businesses".

According to various authors' (Leiper, 2004, Richardson & Fluker, 2004, Riley et al., 2002) the tourism industry is certainly a multidisciplinary area which encompasses *inter-alia* transport, health, and spa, retail, travel agencies and tour operators, events and conventions as well as NGOs, that largely contribute towards the society and the economy. In order to manage, control and expand these activities, there is a need for qualified working professionals with requisite skills and abilities graduating from institutions offering tourism programmes catering to the requirements of the tourism industry. Tourism education *per se* is highly vocational in nature and its end objective is to prepare graduates to work in the tourism industry. The contribution of tourism education towards fulfilling the needs of the tourism industry and its impact on the economy cannot be undermined or underestimated (Oper, 2002a; Stuart-Hoyle, 2003). Hospitality and tourism education fosters growth and development of the tourism industry of any region (Bagri & Babu, 2009) and is thus critically important.

Similarly, Bernthall (1988) opined that "industry participation in tourism education has been a consistent challenge to tourism education". In this connection, Goodenough and Page (1993) propagated the notion that "good academic practices, student industrial visits, constant interaction with guest speakers from the industry will bring the academia and industry closer". Key contributions from the employers can be realized through a concerted effort and partnership between the industry and institutions (Cassels, 1994 & Botterill, 1996). On the other hand, Cooper, et al., (1996) advocated that "adoption of a core curriculum helps the tourism education with a credible and identifiable focus wherein the tourism discipline can gain professional recognition, and the skills and knowledge of tourism students can be recognised by employers in the tourism industry".

However, the multidisciplinary nature of the tourism industry warrants the tourism education curriculum designers to develop students' skill-sets such as leadership quality, problem-solving ability and dealing with customers as these skills and abilities will enable the graduates to carry out their responsibilities in the industry with aplomb (Zopiatis &



Constanti, 2007). Moreover, being a labour-intensive industry, the tourism industry depends upon manpower to augment the quality of tourism products. Hence, the role of tourism education is imperative in matching the needs of the industry to develop highly professional human resources of worth (Riley et al., 2002).

The preceding paragraphs mention tourism education, the tourism industry and the growth and opportunities it entails, as well as tourism education in relation to employment in the tourism industry. However, researches on the existing argument surrounding tourism education curricula and more importantly the relationship between the tourism industry and its requirements and tourism education are highlighted to study the gap. For example, Chimutingiza et al., (2012) conducted a study to find out whether there is skill-gap as far as the competencies of graduates are concerned and in relation to the requirements of the tourism industry. The findings suggested a gap between what is taught to the students and what the industry demands. Similarly, Wang (2008) noted differences between the views of industry professionals and academicians on points such as skills and abilities, and the merits of various subjects taught by educational institutions.

On similar lines, Morgan (2004) voiced his opinion by saying “although tourism education is aimed at meeting students’ needs, employers and various government funding bodies, there is no proper road map to achieve it”. This could be due to the fact that most of the tourism programmes are usually framed by the faculty with no practical inputs from the industry professionals. Thus, the tourism curriculum offered by institutions offering these courses lacks in consistency and standardization as they have no official backing of the industry. The tourism curriculum needs to be updated with respect to the changes that are happening in the market place of which tourism industry is a part. The curriculum should not be designed based upon the by whims and fancies of a few individuals viz., the tourism educators and the government policy makers (McKercher, 2002 & Koh, 1995). “There is a constant need for educators to retain an up-to- date knowledge of trends in the tourism industry and practices to ensure that the academic perspective is consistent with the industry approach” (Cooper & Shepherd, 2014).

There have always been constant and continuous arguments in the past and also in present by various researchers on whether there is a sync between tourism education curricula and tourism industry or not. If the answer is “no”, are there any remedial steps or suggestions to bridge the gap between academia and the industry in terms of skills enhancement of the graduates? The existing arguments on the above, as discussed by some of the authors have been mentioned below in support of the skill-gap between the tourism industry and tourism education institutions.

According to Mileva (2015), the aim and objective of any educational institution that offers tourism related courses, should be to try and match the expectations of the tourism industry by churning out industry-ready professionals with skills necessary to work and sustain the industry in the long run thus promoting sustainability. This is amply supported by Bowden and Marton (1998) who expanded on the idea by saying that “quality learning should develop the capability in the student to engage in effective action in novel situations within their field of expertise”.

A range of re-drafted tourism curricula with needed amendments should for example, address the following skills: organizational, managerial, strategic, operational and marketing skills of the graduates, so as to make them work efficiently in the industry. An approach with an open mind that fosters interpersonal and analytical skills coupled with



practical orientation will enable the graduates to respond to the demands of the industry and these skills need to be taught in educational institutions offering tourism programmes (Dautrey, 2013 & Saenghiran (2012) [cited in Batra, 2015].

Further, studies by (Amoah & Baum, 1997; Cooper, et al., 1996; P. Nischithae & A.L. Narasimha Rao, 2014; Nafees, A. Khan, 2008 & Manjula Chowdari, 2010) highlighted the need for tourism education to develop tourism programmes that can bridge the skill gap between the tourism industry and tourism education institutions. Emphasis on training and development of employees as per the set norms for enhancement of quality services standards in the tourism industry should be imparted. Proper human resources initiatives are needed to sharpen the skills and capabilities of employees by identifying the shortcomings in terms of employees' lack of technological know-how and skills deficiencies.

In a nutshell, if tourism education serves as a basis for the development of effective human resources, then a dialogue engaging the industry professionals and academicians would be a useful, needed and a good beginning in the right direction. If tourism education were to provide a valuable starting point for the development of human capital, then the dialogue between industry and education would be greater and more useful (Ladkin, 2005). Tribe and Airey (2005) state that "tourism education must do much more than reflecting the immediate needs of the workplace or the immediate demands of entry-level employment positions. Tourism education, aiming to provide new insights to the management of tourism activity, will make itself relevant for the future".

Skill Development Initiatives in the Tourism Industry

The Government along with the Ministry of Tourism in India, is taking a lot of initiatives for skill development. The Government of India is also providing various skill development courses through different Hotel Management and Travel and Tourism Management institutes.

Projected Skilled Manpower Requirements for Tourism Industry in India

Table 1. Skilled Manpower Requirements in the Tourism Industry in India (in '000s)

	2008	2012	2018	2022	Incremental (2008-2022)
Hotels	1,289	1,869	2,939	4,065	2,775
Restaurants	2,112	2,481	2,639	2,834	723
Tour Operators	129	164	220	273	144
Total	3,530	4,514	5,798	7,172	3,642

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and ImaCS Analysis

In the above table -1, The PAN India survey undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and the ImaCS Analysis shows the projected manpower requirements in hotels, restaurants and tour operators for tourism industry from the year 2008 to the year 2022. The demand for skilled/trained manpower requirements in hotels, restaurants and tour operators shows an increase in trend with an incremental of 36, 42,000 workforce by the year 2022. The table clearly suggests that the skilled manpower requirements in the tourism industry across the country is huge, but the only problem is the industry is plagued with a huge skill gap in terms of trained manpower. These gaps



can be minimized by educational institutions that offer tourism programmes in consultation with the tourism industry professionals. Considering the fact that the tourism industry has the potential of earning high foreign exchange, which contributes to the economy, it becomes imperative to develop human resources according to the needs of the tourism industry.

Collection of skills/abilities for the study

Employers from the tourism industry look for professionals with certain skills/abilities to perform the job well. The graduate's quality is replicated by their knowledge, skills/abilities, and traits required for the job which enables them to work in the dynamic environment (Pearce, 2002). The skills/abilities of graduates may slightly vary from institution to institution (Pearce, 2005). Therefore, the traits developed by various programmes offering tourism courses may be diverse in nature. For the purpose of this study, the collection of skills/abilities is based upon the generic skills form various universities across the country and skills/abilities that are specific to tourism industry taken from institutions offering tourism management courses. A combination of 20 skills/abilities identified are: Oral Skills, Critical Thinking, Written Skills, Team Skills, Relationship Building, Decision Making Ability, Industry Know-How, Problem Solving Ability, Management Skills, Adaptability, Organising Capacity, Customer Service Ability, Leadership Quality, Attention to Detail, Ethics at Workplace, Negotiation Skills, Computer Skill, Networking Ability, Work Experience and Academic Grades.

Significance of the study

In the views of (Sola, 2002), the performance and quality of tourism is hinged upon two things, one – the educational qualification and two – employees' motivation as a customer-centric activity involving people. From a human capital theory perspective, the aim of tourism education is to enrich the ability of the future employees, in order to deal with uncertainties in the tourism industry effectively and efficiently (Lo, 2005; Lin, 2005).

Tourism education is the beginning of training and development of human resources for employment in the tourism sector as it not only adds value, improves quality of manpower, imbues a sense of professionalism, but also serves the local communities that support successful tourist destinations (Cooper, et al., 1996; Ladkin, 2005). Four stakeholders stand to gain from the outcome of this study viz., *tourism higher education, tourism industry, employees in the tourism industry* and *Odisha tourism economy*.

Research Methodology

The study was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the researchers carried out a detailed study on the content analysis about the various programmes on offer by different universities and institutes in the State and country in order to have a proper understanding of the curriculum pertaining to tourism education. In the second phase, based on the preliminary research of curriculum, a structured questionnaire survey was conducted on twenty relevant attributes/skills developed from these institutes and universities (State and Country) to explore the respective views of the respondents i.e., the *Academicians from the tourism institutes* and *professionals from the tourism industry* on importance of skills/attributes needed to work in the tourism industry.



The survey was carried out on 100 respondents (50 from Tourism Educational Institutes and 50 from the Tourism Industry). The respondents from the industry comprised of in the cadre of manager and assistant managers and managers and assistant managers of various departments of star hotels in Odisha and the respondents from tourism educational institutes comprised of teaching staff in various capacities viz., lecturer, assistant professor and professor.

A five-point Likert Scale was used to record the responses of the participants where 1 = Extremely Insignificant, 2 = Insignificant, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Significant and 5 = Extremely Significant. In order to find out the veracity of the study, the total score of each skill/ability was obtained from the responses. A high score showed a positive response/attitude and a low score showed a negative response/attitude. The mean score of each skill/ability was calculated from total scores of skills/attitudes by using the SPSS package.

Tourism Education Survey on Skills/Abilities

Table 2. Views of Academicians on Skills/Abilities

Skills/Abilities	Mean Score	Ranking
Oral Skills	4.75	1
Critical Thinking	4.66	2
Written Skills	4.58	3
Team Skills	4.49	4
Relationship Building Skills	4.41	5
Decision Making Ability	4.38	6
Industry Know- how	4.35	7
Problem Solving Ability	4.33	8
Management Skills	4.26	9
Adaptability	4.22	10
Organising Capacity	4.19	11
Customer Service Ability	4.14	12
Leadership Quality	4.10	13
Attention to Detail	4.01	14
Ethics at the Workplace	3.98	15
Negotiation Skills	3.36	16
Computer Skill	3.30	17
Networking Ability	3.25	18
Work Experience	3.15	19
Academic Grades	3.10	20
Total Average Mean Score	4.11	--

Source: Primary Data

Table – 2 represents the mean scores of all the skills/abilities in the order of importance given by the respondents of the study. The results show that the range between 3.10 to 4.75 is the relative importance given by the academicians from tourism educational institutes and 4.11 happens to be the mean value.

The detail description of the views of the respondents on skills/abilities are provided below:

As per the views of the respondents, '3' skills/abilities emerge as important skills required in the tourism industry and they are *Oral Skills (1)*, *Written Skills (2)* and *Critical Thinking (3)* with mean scores of 4.75, 4.66 & 4.58 respectively.

Whereas, the skills that are ranked the least in the order of importance were: *Networking Skills (18)*, *Work Experience (19)* and *Academic Grades (20)* with mean scores of 3.25,



3.15 & 3.10 respectively. *Oral skills* which are usually considered to be an important asset for any graduate was perceived as the most important skill by the respondents and interestingly *Academic Grades* is the least important skill as perceived by the respondents.

The respondents (academicians) have rated strategic management skills such as *Decision Making Ability (6)*, *Problem Solving Ability (8)* and *Management Skills (9)* with higher mean values of 4.38, 4.33 & 4.26 respectively. However, the respondents rated skills/abilities that are operational in nature such as *Attention to Detail (14)*, *Ethics at Workplace (15)* and *Negotiation Skills (16)* very low on the given scale with the mean scores of 4.01, 3.98 & 3.36 respectively. One of the important findings is that *Industry Know-How (7)* has been given more priority as compared to *Work Experience*.

Tourism Industry Survey on Skills/Abilities

Table 3. Views of Industry Professionals on Skills/Abilities

Skills/Abilities	Mean Score	Ranking
Oral Skills	4.79	1
Relationship Building Skills	4.70	2
Ethics at Workplace	4.65	3
Customer Service Ability	4.58	4
Team Skills	4.52	5
Adaptability	4.45	6
Written Skills	4.37	7
Attention to Detail	4.31	8
Computer Skills	4.26	9
Problem Solving Ability	4.21	10
Organising Capacity	4.16	11
Decision Making Ability	4.10	12
Negotiation Skills	3.87	13
Management Skills	3.74	14
Practical Skills	3.64	15
Industry Know- How	3.52	16
Leadership Quality	3.44	17
Networking Skills	3.35	18
Work Experience	3.25	19
Academic Grades	3.15	20
Total Average Mean Score	3.79	--

Source: Primary Data

Table –3 shows the mean scores on the relative importance of skills/abilities as perceived by the respondents of the study. The results show that the degree of importance given by the respondents ranges from 3.15 to 4.79 with a mean value of 3.79.

The detail description of the views of the respondents on skills/abilities are provided below:

As per the views of the respondents, '3' skills/abilities emerge as important skills required in the tourism industry and they are *Oral Skills (1)*, *Relationship Building Skills (2)* and *Ethics at Workplace (3)* with mean scores of 4.79, 4.70 & 4.65 respectively.

Secondly, the respondents have rated operational skills such as *Adaptability (6)*, *Attention to Detail (8)* and *Practical Skills (15)* and with higher mean values of 4.45, 4.31 & 3.64 respectively.



Whereas, the skills that are ranked the least in the order of importance were: *Networking Skills (18)*, *Work Experience (19)* and *Academic Grades (20)* with mean scores of 3.35, 3.25 & 3.15 respectively. *Oral skills* are rated as the top skill by the respondents (tourism industry professionals), while *Academic Grades* as the least important attribute. Finally, the respondents have ranked *Industry Know-How (16)* above *Work Experience*.

Findings of the study and discussion

Skills/Abilities with similar views by tourism industry professionals and academicians:

It is interesting to find out on some of the skills/abilities, the respondents (both academicians and industry professionals) have the same opinion or perception. These skills/abilities are *Oral Skills*, *Team Skills*, *Relationship Building Skills*, and *Academic Grades*. One skill that is highly ranked by academicians and industry professionals is the *Oral Skill* which they have indicated as the most important one as far as the workplace is concerned. An interesting outcome of the study is that both the industry professionals and academicians have given the least priority to *Academic Grades* amongst all the skills/abilities taken under the study. The reason could be, that while grades are important for any graduate for entry level job, it is basically the hands-on job related skills that matter the most in the workplace.

Skills/Abilities with dissimilar views by tourism industry professionals and academicians (Skill- Gap):

It a matter of concern that the views/opinions of the respondents of academicians and industry professionals differ on such skills as *Critical Thinking*, *Ethics at Workplace* and *Customer Service Ability*. Tourism Industry professionals consider *Ethics at Workplace* and *Customer Service Ability* to be of higher value and essential to success. *Ethics at Workplace* is very important for any business and more so for a dynamic and challenging business environment such as the tourism sector. Honesty and Accountability - the subset of Ethics are very important for personal and professional development and expansion of businesses under the aegis of tourism. Similarly, *Customer Service Ability* play a vital role in helping the tourism industry succeed because tourism organizations majorly depend and thrive upon on customers who buy and use their products and services. However, academicians do not place a similar value on such skills/abilities and this indicates that there is no proper linkage between academicians and industry professionals in understanding the needs and wants of the tourism industry. This skill-gap gives an indication that the tourism courses designed by various universities are not well-equipped with the latest trends and skills demanded by the dynamic industry. Another important thing is both academicians and industry professionals do not place a high value on work experience which is essential for many entry-level jobs.

The findings also reveal that academicians place a high value on strategic skills such as *Decision Making Ability*, *Management Skills*, *Leadership Qualities*, and *Problem Solving Ability*. It is remarkable that industry professionals have recorded low satisfaction levels are far as the above mentioned attributes are concerned. Likewise, industry professionals value Operational Skills more highly such as *Attention to Detail*, *Practical Skills*, and *Adaptability* which academicians appear to rate as less important.



Thus, these findings indicate that a gap exists between academicians and industry professionals on the above mentioned skills/abilities needed to work in the tourism industry. Industry professionals want their employees to be not only good thinkers but also good doers. Any work place looks for the practical-oriented person who can deliver as per the industry demands. In this regard, Lo (2005) opines, “tourism higher education should be tailored to meet the needs of the tourism industry in terms of the professional skills required. The theory is important, but the connection between theory and practice is more important”.

Implications of the study

This study has uncovered that there is a significant gap between the tourism education providers and tourism industry in the state of Odisha in terms of skills and abilities of tourism graduates. The takeaway from this study is that universities both government and private and institutes offering tourism related courses are not producing industry-ready manpower with requisite skills demanded by the tourism industry. “One of the objectives of higher tourism education is to produce graduates with the skills that are highly regarded by employers and that enable them to contribute to the industry and country’s economy” (Nelson, 2002; Cleary et al., 2007). Finally, tourism education and tourism industry with its dynamic nature should come onto the same page to create a win-win situation. The skills and abilities gap identified by both tourism education providers and tourism professionals will provide food for thought for all the stakeholders including employees, employer and the society at large.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that educational institutes and universities offering tourism education need to re-structure their syllabi with respect to the content and skills in order to meet the needs of the tourism industry. Various research has been carried out on the existing problem of synchronization between the tourism industry and tourism education curriculum in meeting the practical requirements of the industry. Because of a lack of research on this issue in the State of Odisha, this has motivated the researchers to conduct the study to explore what the tourism industry actually needs in terms of skills/abilities from the graduating students, and to what extent the institutions offering tourism courses are able to fulfill the needs adequately.

The study found that there are differences of opinions between tourism industry professionals and academicians teaching tourism courses on skills/abilities needed to work in the tourism industry. Both tourism industry professionals and academicians share common views on important skills/abilities such as oral skills, team skills, organizing capacity, etc., their academicians place a high value to strategic skills such as decision making ability, management skills, leadership quality and problem solving ability whereas tourism industry professionals place a value to operational skills such as critical thinking, ethics at workplace, practical skills, attention to detail, adaptability and customer service ability.

This skill-gap can be bridged by the academicians preparing the students on practical oriented skills wherein they are taught how to perform their tasks and jobs at hand rather than focusing on the conceptual clarity and thinking skills only. Tourism management courses need to be restructured carefully, keeping the above views in mind where 70% weighting must be given to operational or practical oriented skills and 30% weighting to



theory and concepts. This process will certainly enhance the quality and quantity of tourism graduates' and improve their employment prospects in the tourism industry.

Finally, in order to meet the requirements of the ever dynamic and demanding tourism industry, a full-proof plan-of-action towards development and promotion of human architects is the need to the hour for a win-win situation for both academia as well as the industry.

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