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## Cracks in the ivory tower? A survey-based analysis of undergraduate tourism education and educators in China



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### ABSTRACT

Through a nationwide survey, this research profiled undergraduate tourism higher education programs in China and explored the relationships among disciplinary affiliations, program specializations, and academic backgrounds of tourism teaching faculty members. Most tourism teaching faculty members in China were from disciplines other than tourism management and had no practical industry work experience in the tourism industry. A very small proportion of the teaching faculty members with tourism management backgrounds had earned doctoral degrees. Some potential associations among disciplinary affiliations, program specializations and faculty academic backgrounds were detected. Recommendations for tourism education program improvements and future research were provided based upon the research findings.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism in China has boomed in the past two decades in parallel with the country's rapid social and economic development. A continuing strong growth trend is anticipated as much greater attention is being given by governments to promoting the tourism industry than previously (Yang & Cheung, 2010). The expectations for the quantity and quality of graduates from tourism undergraduate education programs have increased to meet the anticipated increased demand for skilled labor. However, despite the significant expansion of tourism education programs, industry and academia concur that the quality of tourism education in China, in particular the higher education programs, is far from satisfactory (Gu, Kavanaugh, & Cong, 2007; Wang, 2010). This unfortunate situation has resulted in a declining employment rate of tourism graduates. The main reasons have been attributed to educational institutions' blind production of tourism graduates without adequate regard for fast changing market demands as well as the absence of appropriate positioning strategies (Bao & Zhu, 2008).

Several authors have reviewed the research literature on China's tourism and have reported on the most popular topics and apparent gaps in this scholarship (Aramberri & Xie, 2003; Hsu, Huang, & Huang, 2010; Huang & Hsu, 2008; Kong &

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Cheung, 2009; Song, Wu, Lian, & Yang, 2005; Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Xie, 2003). The accumulated research tends to have a strong focus on tourism development and policy, and other supply-side issues. It is noteworthy that not much attention has been given to human resources. Although tourism has become a popular research topic, the coverage in academic publications of the development of tourism higher education in China is limited, regardless of the language used in journals. A recent review of academic publications in leading Chinese and English tourism and hospitality journals over an 8-year period (2000–2008) revealed that only 28 articles (1.9%) in Chinese and one article (1.6%) in English had a specific focus on education (Hsu et al., 2010). Another recent study reported that no education-related topics were found among the 219 doctoral dissertations in tourism and related fields in the China Doctoral Dissertations Full-text Database (CDDFD) from 1999 to 2009 (Huang, 2011). In order to address the research gap on tourism education in China, this study was designed to meet the following objectives:

1. To determine the geographic distribution and disciplinary affiliations of undergraduate tourism education programs in China.
2. To identify the specializations of undergraduate tourism education programs in China.
3. To document the academic backgrounds of the faculty members teaching in undergraduate tourism education programs in China.
4. To investigate the relationships among the disciplinary affiliations, program specializations, and academic backgrounds of tourism teaching faculty members.

The term undergraduate tourism education program represents tourism, hospitality and convention education/programs as a whole. There are only two official categories of *Tourism Management* and *Exhibition Economy and Management* in the Ministry of Education's categorization of China's undergraduate education; both are sub-disciplines, under Business Administration and Public Administration respectively. However, there are many different program names, such as hotel management, hotel and tourism management, convention management, event management, and others (Yang & Song, 2010).

## 2. Literature review

Research on tourism education has been conducted at various places around the world for 30 or more years. It is therefore important to review this body of international literature so that the current research on China's undergraduate tourism education programs can be placed in a global context.

### 2.1. National-level tourism education program evaluations

Evaluations of tourism education programs at the national level have been completed for several countries. Busby and Fiedel (2001) conducted a content analysis of 112 tourism course prospectuses from 66 educational institutions in the U.K. They found that vocational, career and industry issues stood out as key elements stressed in the material given to prospective students. MacLaurin (2005) reported on tourism education in Canada over a 40-year period from the late 1960s. He noted the significant influence of tourism industry organizations and government legislation on the Canadian programs. Pearce (2005) concluded that tourism education in Australia occupied a distinctive and relatively successful niche. He attributed part of this success to a strong research–education nexus. Chaisawat (2005) found problems in terms of the quality of Thailand's tourism graduates' qualifications in not matching the standards required by employers. Horng and Lee (2005) recommended that the industry, government, and academia in Taiwan should work together closely to develop and decide upon future reforms for tourism and hospitality education. Cho and Kang (2005) reviewed the development of tourism education programs at various levels in South Korea. They highlighted the importance of the Industrial–Educational Cooperation Promotional Act of 1977 which mandated industrial and educational institution cooperation for student practical training experiences. Hawkins, Ruddy, and Ardah (2012) assessed the tourism education system in Jordan and advocated a major reform. They concluded that in the future Jordan needed a relevant, comprehensive (tourism) higher education system integrated with industry-based professional experience.

These nationwide analyses of tourism education programs highlight significant program growth and especially beginning in the 1960s. In general, they appear to suggest that the quantity of tourism programs is satisfactory, but in certain countries the most desirable quality of programs is lacking. Of particular note among these studies for undergraduate tourism program evaluation in China was the South Korean government's intervention to mandate that universities and tourism employer organizations work together to ensure undergraduate students received significant practical industry training, and the nexus of research and teaching highlighted in Pearce's (2005) review of tourism education programs in Australia.

The importance of students acquiring practical industry work experience has been emphasized in previous scholarly articles (Busby, 2001; Busby & Fiedel, 2001; Ring, Dickinger, & Wöber, 2009). In the case of South Korea, the government mandated that the students would get industry experience, but in other countries this has come via the influence of strong industry bodies such as national trade associations and public–private bodies established to enhance and improve tourism

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