A stakeholder analysis of a service learning project for tourism development in An Ecuadorian Rural Community

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A B S T R A C T

This paper discusses stakeholders' relationships in a service learning project in a rural destination in Ecuador (Mashpi, province of Pichincha). A conceptual framework was developed examining three areas: stakeholder management, tourism development and service learning projects and knowledge transfer.

Sixteen (16) stakeholders took part in the case study using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. A thematic analysis was conducted informed by the literature review. The first research theme related to stakeholders' objectives, roles and perceptions about the involvement of other stakeholders. The second theme includes all the strategic management issues concerning the tourism development project. This includes issues of transferring knowledge from students and teachers to the community, a feature of service learning projects of this type. Thirdly, the relationships amongst stakeholders are outlined in a Venn diagram. Finally, the hindrances encountered in the projects connected to the other themes are discussed in this paper.

The paper concludes that even though the project is found to be beneficial to all stakeholders, including students and teachers, enhancing the academic experience, it is fraught with challenges and several hindrances. One of the challenges is to plan activities in a way that takes into consideration the needs of the community involved in the tourism project, which are not aligned with the university scheduling. Problems of coordination and communication arise from a lack of strong leadership in the management of these projects. This includes a clear understanding of the various roles and responsibilities together with an analysis of the power and legitimacy of each stakeholder.

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of problem

The engagement of a civic nature of universities is ideal but also posits challenges for achieving pre-established objectives (Boland, 2014). Since contributions in the area of university engagement with society are uneven across the academy (Weerts, 2015),

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a clear definition for this engagement is necessary from the onset. The term adopted is ´university outreach´; defined by the Provost's Committee on University Outreach (Michigan State University, 1993; p. 1) as "scholarship that cuts across teaching, research, and service. It involves generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences". Engagement should have a scholarly expression and should be institutionalised (Sandman, 2008). It enhances society and higher education (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012).

The complex relationship entailed by community engagement should be adapted to a local context rather than a national agenda (Eaton, 2015) despite the fact that developments of these programmes originate from national or international initiatives. This paper presents research findings from Ecuador. Its government has promoted university outreach and outlined how this should be undertaken by universities. This is now part and parcel of the daily activities of universities, monitored by the national education authorities that enforce the execution of outreach projects (Ordoñez, 2013).

Service learning projects entail complex processes that require management. Some attempts have been made at looking into these processes including effective societal engagement (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). The classification of universities with engagement programmes using certain criteria was discussed by Driscoll (2009). The field is fraught with new areas for research, particularly when looking at the various stakeholders that take part in the outreach endeavour. This process appears to need strong leadership as a key factor for community engagement (Sandman, 2008). This is relevant for sustainable tourism development, with diverse stakeholders. In order to "build partnerships and create genuine knowledge sharing, the operational characteristics and information pathways of each stakeholder group need to be understood" (Hawkins, 2006; p. 24). Hence, the research took the view that outreach programmes involve stakeholders with different objectives and expectations. This leads into approaching the topic from a stakeholder management perspective, deemed appropriate for the study of the processes involved.

The literature on tourism development has not explored service learning sufficiently, although some work has been conducted in the field of sustainable tourism (Carnicelli & Boluk, 2017). Using a case study in a rural community in Ecuador, the study aims to analyse the various issues and challenges regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the project. The following research objectives were formulated:

- RO1) Understanding stakeholders' views of their role and involvement in the process for achieving their objectives.
- RO2) Exploring the main issues and challenges that these stakeholders in Mashpi, Ecuador face and how can they be dealt with.

2. Literature review

The literature review guided the development of the following conceptual framework (Fig. 1). This framework shows aspects of the research underpinned by stakeholder theory.

The study addresses the relationships amongst all the stakeholders involved. Service is operationalised through knowledge transfer from students and teachers to the community. Knowledge transfer is the connecting vessel between service learning and the purpose of developing sustainable tourism, main aim of the community and the tourism board. The university's stakeholders, through service learning, are enabling this process. The following sections examine studies pertinent to research in Mashpi, Ecuador.
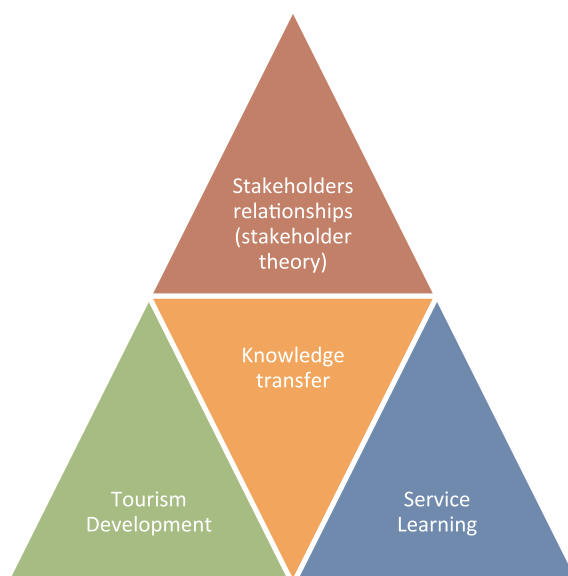

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the literature review.