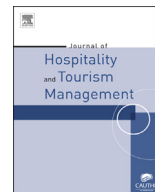




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Semantics of learning outcomes for a tourism degree across institutions, industry and governing bodies

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a major Australian business sector contributing significantly to the nation's GDP and employing many Australians in hundreds of thousands of businesses, but also currently and in the future expected to face significant skills shortages. Amongst the responses is the Office of Learning and Teaching's recent development of agreed tourism, hospitality and events academic standards in the form of threshold learning outcomes. But do current Australian tourism degree course objectives and graduate attributes align with the new standards? And do the semantics, or naming conventions, for particular graduate attributes cause confusion across the various stakeholders such as industry recruiters and even students and their families. This paper considers this question with regard to the tourism and events management degree offered in a middle sized Australian university tourism program.

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1. Introduction

The Australian Government's 2020 Tourism Industry Potential notes that: 'tourism is a vital industry for Australia', generating \$94 billion in spending, contributing \$34 billion (or 2.6%) to Australia's GDP, and creating 500,000 jobs (Tourism Australia, 2010). Then current Minister for Trade and Investment Andrew Robb noted in 2014 that 'there are nearly 300,000 businesses within the industry, ranging from accommodation, restaurants and cafes, to transport and travel agents, as well as the retail and education sectors' (Austrade, 2014). A key challenge for this important industry is the perceived shortfall in skilled workers: the Government's Tourism 2020 strategy noted the demand (Tourism Australia, 2011), and then Minister Robb provided a number for this shortfall – 56,000 in 2015 (Austrade, 2014). While many of these are expected to be serving and other frontline workers, 'supervisors and managers with the skills and knowledge to deal with the unique challenges of these sectors will also be needed.

Amongst the responses is the Office of Learning and Teaching's

(OLT) recent development of agreed tourism hospitality and events threshold learning outcome (TLO) academic standards (Office of Learning and Teaching, 2013). While standards "are intended to be useful to higher education providers as a framework for internal monitoring of the quality of their higher education activities" (TEQSA, March 2016; p.4) and purport to "form a solid foundation for the academic community to continue developing pedagogy ..." (Office of Learning and Teaching, 2013; p. iii) to eventually assist in the development of successful graduates, their actual translation in the development of tourism programmes and courses in Australian universities can only be assumed to be taking place. Indeed, describing and sharing unambiguously the standards-themselves the product of complex methodologies involving multiple stakeholders and several iterative activities encompassing almost two years, - with sufficient detailed articulation and clarity to enable common and consistent adoption and implementation across institutions would be a significant step towards the development of pedagogy and assessment activities in the learning domains of Tourism, Hospitality and Events (TH&E). Ultimately, their adoption and implementation would also create results and data as part of an evidence-based approach that would then, hopefully, enable evaluation and replication.

Universities are increasingly pressed to adopt the standards prescribed by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) so as

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to ensure consistency and equivalency in the teaching and learning outcome expectations at the different degree levels across tertiary institutions (Keating, 2003). The implication underlying such an approach is that there has been a standardised and consistent use of terminologies and ontologies in the final articulation of the TLOs contextualised for TH&E. However, given the global nature and complexity of the TH&E industry, its intersection with higher education represents a powerful nexus of influence in terms of sustainable employment in an ever unstable and changing global economy. Subsequently, there is an accompanying need for flexible TH&E educational systems that would necessitate their constant fundamental retooling and redesigning. What is taught to TH&E students and how they are taught would subsequently reflect shifts in the diversity and complexity of skills and knowledge, themselves the consequence of constant questioning and redefinition to problematise and meet the challenges of a global paradigm shift.

In Australia, these shifts are reflected in practice in the structuring of a Higher Education Standards Framework (threshold standards) that aligns with the student experience “from prospective students through to the award of a qualification” (TEQSA, March 2016; p. 4). At an operational level, the characteristics of the TH&E standards are expected to be present across all their five learning domains identified as: (i) Services and Experience Design; (ii) Interdisciplinary Inquiry; (iii) Collaboration, Problem Solving and (iv) Professional Responsibility. In practice, the course learning outcomes should thus align with the programme learning outcomes and the attributes graduates at that particular degree level should possess. The assumption here is that universities are clear in the articulation of their graduate attributes as these generic skills, reflective disposition and identity developed in the course of their studies have implications for students in relating their learning and their employability (Jackson, 2014). As an expression of the quality assurance of the degree qualification, graduate attributes become not only indicators of the work readiness of graduates but also guidelines for the engagement of course convenors in mapping, embedding and enacting the TLOs in their courses. However, research on the translation of standards into practice in other fields such as biomedicine (Chen, Chiang, & Storey, 2012) and healthcare (Bouhaddou et al., 2012), reveal challenges such as the struggle of disciplines to agree on the standardised use of terminologies and ontologies, and, the absence of an accompanying guiding pedagogy to support academics (Delany et al., 2016). Thus, underscoring the importance of TLOs is the need for terminology standards that would facilitate initiatives ranging from certification and accreditation to mapping across terminology systems not only of the various disciplines that cross through TH&E education curricula but also of the intrinsic differences of the individual fields. By acknowledging that the learning domains of the TH&E standards require contextualised definitions and explanations by each of the three fields, the OLT (2015) implicitly recognizes the problematic of the significance and challenges presented by the use of language in the interdisciplinary and multi-field education curricula of TH&E. In other words, we need to explore the different epistemologies (and practices) that transgress and draw upon the collective field of TH&E. The implication of interdisciplinarity recognizes at a minimum, the tacit existence of problems that could lie in fundamental differences in epistemologies, knowledge domains and methodological approaches, and communication and pedagogical perspectives of and within each of the three fields. Extrapolated to other stakeholders including parents, students and industry, the significance and meanings of the terms and language used would be even more diverse and confusing as far as their interpretation and understanding thereof are concerned.

Undertaking an interdisciplinary research of that nature and size would be quite a daunting exercise that would have required,

as suggested by Balsinger (2004) an earlier, longer and broader interdisciplinary set-up that would employ both theoretical and practical aspects of interdisciplinarity. This is not what this paper is trying to do. This paper is about the semantic matching of TH&E standards with their actual application at the operational level. The scope of this study is restricted to the problematic of translation of (theoretical?) standards into practice within the one field of tourism. The field choice reflects the disciplinary expertise and pedagogical interests of both authors. As such, the question that arises and which underlies this study thus becomes: How well do current Australian tourism degree course outcomes effectively reflect and align with the new standards? By extension, we are called to also question whether the current Australian graduate attributes at the degree level effectively align with the TLOs. Answers to these questions require first, semiotic and discourse analyses of the standards document on TH&E to reveal (i) the signification of the processes by which words are used to carry meaning and content (Barley, 1983, p. 394) and (ii) the interpretative repertoires used in the construction of the salient features of this version of the document. Thereafter, the results are juxtaposed with the mapping of the different levels of application and implementation involved in the translation of these standards in a course (degree) programme in Tourism and Events in a second-tier Australian university. Ultimately, this exercise should reveal the effectiveness of the role played by the ‘discourse’ and semiotic context in translating framework and shaping meaning (see Woollacott, 1982) for tourism course design, contents and practice.

1.1. Threshold learning outcomes: background

Since the turn of the last century, the changing nature of higher education in terms of increasing participation and a more diverse student population coupled with the pressure of adopting one form or another of a national qualification framework, have led to the definition of learning outcomes at various degree levels. Such outcomes-based learning and teaching (OBLT) was accompanied by quality assurance systems (Biggs, 2014) that ensured not only equivalency and consistency but also accountability. The monitoring of the success of educators became thus determined through students’ learning and mastery of standards expressed as TLOs. Implied in the threshold concept is the idea of a “transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005, p. 53). In terms of the learning domains to which the standards apply, the TLOs refer to “the minimum standard’ that is expected of graduates” (www.tourismhospitalityeventsstandards.org; p. 8). To stakeholders in higher education, standards mean that they have to ask themselves questions as basic as “what are the students learning?” and “what is worth learning?” Expressed in terms of threshold learning outcomes, standards thus shift the focus from the teacher to the learner in as far as the student achieves what the teacher is meant to teach. This shift in perspective is necessary if these standards are to be transformative for the learner, unlikely to be forgotten or irreversible and revealing of previously unnoticed interrelatedness among bodies of knowledge and disciplines. Such shift however can only derive meaning and legitimacy only if the language that expresses the new foci is extended or expressed in an elaborated discourse. It comes as no surprise then that the TLOs are quite descriptive in nature.

Former Australian minister responsible for tourism Andrew Robb notes that the current and projected skills shortages create a problem not only for individual tourism businesses, but also create a capacity constraint impacting negatively on the overall industry’s international competitiveness. This demand side issue of course also causes the supply side of the industry to ask the questions—

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