



## Case study: Wellness, tourism and small business development in a UK coastal resort: Public engagement in practice



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### H I G H L I G H T S

- Discusses tourism, well-being and public engagement.
- Examines value of well-being for tourism business and local community.
- Action research study located in Bournemouth, UK.

### A R T I C L E I N F O

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### A B S T R A C T

This article examines the scope of well-being as a focus for tourism and its potential as a tool for small business development, particularly the opportunities for tourism entrepreneurs in coastal resorts. The study reports an example of public engagement by a research team and the co-creation of research knowledge with businesses to assist in business development by adapting many existing features of tourist resorts and extending their offer to wider markets. The synergy between well-being and public health interests also brings potential benefits for the tourism workforce and the host community. The Case Study outlines how these ideas were tested in Bournemouth, a southern coastal resort in the UK, in a study ultimately intended to be adopted nationally and with more wide reaching implications for global development of the visitor economy. Local changes ascribed to the study are assessed and its wider potential is evaluated.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a growing interest within public policy in many countries about the relevance and application of University research expertise to different stakeholders, typically framed as the private and public sectors as research partners. One driver of this growing public policy focus is around demonstrating value for money and relevance of publicly-funded research. Other political motives by government also characterise these approaches to demonstrate the role of Universities in cooperating, collaborating and in stimulating innovation with the private sector as forms of knowledge transfer.

The wider publics which Universities engage with, particularly businesses and the public sector, are now subsumed as part of a growing agenda around 'public engagement', defined as '... the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit' (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE, 2016) often conceptualised as co-creation where mutually derived benefits occur through cooperation, collaboration and joint working. The principal objective of public funding which endorses such an approach is to share the benefits of publicly-funded research (and the knowledge existing in Universities) to help solve problems and to benefit society. The European Community (EC.europea.eu) also

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endorse such an approach, as do many UK Research Councils with their requirement for pathways to impact<sup>1</sup> to help co-create research solutions and problem-solving. The rationale is to stimulate innovation and to arrive at a joint understanding of solutions with wider public involvement to ground the research and make it more applicable to the real world. Many UK Universities have been required to embrace such a widening of their research engagement beyond academic partners as funding regimes such as the UK *Research Excellence Framework* (see [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)) now require submissions for funding to have 'Impact Case Studies' that demonstrate this wider public engagement and application of academic research to real world problems and their solution, through a myriad of approaches. The UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2009) *Science for All* report summarised the process of public engagement as three interconnected points on a triangle comprising: *Collaboration* (e.g. through co-created research and consensus building with public audiences); *Transmission* (e.g. communicating knowledge to diverse audiences through press releases, public relations campaigns, podcasts and social media) and *Receiving* (e.g. collecting feedback, input to the research process by the public through surveys, consultations and interviews). More specifically, the public engagement process can be targeted at different groups, either individually or a mixture of them including community engagement, government policy, business activities (including policy and strategy) and working with the third sector, namely charitable bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (e.g. see Sieber, Robinson, Johnson, & Corbett, 2016 for an example). From a practical perspective, the process of public engagement may have four distinct outcomes for researchers: *Informing* wider publics about your research (information sharing); *Consulting* them about what you are doing to see what they think about your research; *Involving* people in the research to understand their priorities and views on specific issues and lastly, a *Delegated* function, where your research can give the public and stakeholders direct control over their own destiny. The skills to engage wider publics are somewhat different from the education and research function which many academics are employed in and critics of such an approach to research sometimes question the theoretical rigour and complexity in such research. This is because it involves simplifying the nature of the academic attributes of studies to communicate the aims and objectives in simple and unambiguous ways. In the most extreme cases, such research is labelled descriptive and 'near to market' and not subject to the same intellectual rigour as peer reviewed journal articles. This poses new challenges for researchers in balancing the academic rigour of the research and its academic outcomes as peer reviewed outputs with the need for relevance, application and the critiques highlighted in certain disciplines around applied research (see Hall & Page, 2014 for these tensions within the context of applied geography).

This case study is developed from a public engagement perspective, where the underlying research aim was to, through a process of co-creation of research knowledge with tourism entrepreneurs, to identify the potential growth opportunities for the tourism sector globally through a focus on an expanding niche market – *wellness tourism*. The paper commences with a discussion of the recent expansion of the literature on wellness tourism, emanating from health research, positive psychology and established thinking on medical tourism that has both medical and

tourism research antecedents. After outlining the concept and recent literature on wellness tourism, the paper examines the evidence of developments in this sector within one UK coastal resort from the findings of an action research study embedded in a public engagement research strategy.<sup>2</sup> The methodology, analysis and findings from the action research project have significant implications for national and global development of this field, particularly the salience for small business development as a potential new growth sector. The study aimed to stimulate local businesses to take fuller advantage of the well-being tourism market and so is of value for the wider development of this theme globally, drawing upon the lessons and management implications for destinations.

## 2. Wellness and tourism: a new growth sector for the global tourism industries?

Wellness tourism is an expanding niche market globally, providing specific business opportunities through products that promote or maintain health (Kelly, 2010; Rodrigues, Kastenholz, & Rodrigues, 2010). The number of international wellness tourists in 2010 was 17 million, equivalent to 2% of international tourist flows and the value of the business was estimated at 106 billion US\$. This is double the volume of medical tourism travel that has been a significant feature in the medical and tourism literature (Global Spa Summit, 2011). Wellness tourism is forecast to grow by approximately 5–10% per year (Rodrigues et al., 2010), due to a numbers of factors, including an ageing world population, increased public awareness over health issues, conventional medical systems facing funding issues which has seen people turn to private sector solutions embedded in the process of globalization (Voight & Pforr, 2014) where international tourist travel for medical treatment is blending tourism and well-being within the wellness concept. Whilst wellness and tourism are not a new concept within tourism, the two themes have a long history of association in stimulating tourism development (e.g. Durie, 2003; Walton, 1983), where well-being and visitor wellness was the principal focus of the development of spa tourism and the early development of inland and coastal tourism resorts in many countries (i.e. taking the waters or specialised treatments through to hydrotherapy). A number of recent studies (e.g. Chen, Huang, & Petrick, 2016; Konu, 2015; Pyke, Hartwell, Blake, & Hemingway, 2016; Rutty & Scott, 2014) have developed the wellness and tourism resort development theme further creating a valid line of research inquiry.

Wellness is the antithesis of illness (Kirsten, van der Walt, & Viljoen, 2009), assuming a continuum between positive and negative health (wellness and illness) upon which improvement may be addressed through treatment or an intervention. Wellness tourism targets healthy people with a proactive interest in maintaining or enhancing their health, offering them treatments at spas or therapy establishments (Brooker & Joppe, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2010) although historically this declined in the post-war period as mass tourism and advances in medical care reduced the reliance upon these traditional forms of wellness via state and private sector organisations providing such treatments as the treatment of respiratory diseases shifted from sanatoria for the more affluent to universal health care systems.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it was not until the

<sup>1</sup> According to the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, 'A high quality *Pathways to Impact* will include explicit awareness of principles and practices of knowledge exchange - including the application of principles and practices of co-production - as opposed to dissemination' (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/developing-pathways-to-impact/>).

<sup>2</sup> An action research project can be described as a piece of research to solve an immediate problem although in this context, the process of co-creation involved the development of communities of practice, namely a group of people to engage in the process of collective learning throughout the research study to create a series of outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> The exception to this is the former Soviet Union with the state sponsored sanatoria which have been described more like a health farm than the western predecessors – see Vetitnev, Kopyrin and Kiselva 2016.

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