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Abstract

Austria is a highly developed country in terms of tourism industry. Nevertheless the educational system within the field of tourism increasingly fails to provide the industry with the workforce needed. The main reasons for this negative development is that, on the demand side, tourists have increasing travel experience and expect perfect service during their leisure time and, on the supply side, young Austrians strive for higher education, as apprenticeships have an image problem in general and especially within the field of tourism, where the association is “hard work, high need for mobility and modest wages”. The result: a lack of young motivated apprentices willing to learn and deliver professional service to the experienced tourist that calls for fundamental modifications in the Austrian educational system.

Keywords

education for tourism industry, Austria

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CHALLENGES FOR TOMORROWS

TOURISM EDUCATION – THE CASE OF AUSTRIA

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ABSTRACT

Austria is a highly developed country in terms of tourism industry. Nevertheless the educational system within the field of tourism increasingly fails to provide the industry with the workforce needed. The main reasons for this negative development is that, on the demand side, tourists have increasing travel experience and expect perfect service during their leisure time and, on the supply side, young Austrians strive for higher education, as apprenticeships have an image problem in general and especially within the field of tourism, where the association is “hard work, high need for mobility and modest wages”. The result: a lack of young motivated apprentices willing to learn and deliver professional service to the experienced tourist that calls for fundamental modifications in the Austrian educational system.

Key Words: education for tourism industry, Austria

INTRODUCTION

“The tourism field is ill-prepared to be the world’s number one industry because it has relatively few innovative thinkers, leaders and high quality education and training courses and programs to cultivate the talent required to deal with critical issues and thereby to ensure the long-term prosperity of tourism as a part of broader society.” (Go, 1994)

It is obvious, that education is the most fundamental basis of success for a country’s tourism industry. As compared to large companies, the education issue is for more complex on the national level with a small- to medium-sized industry that needs support in this field. A number of publications concerning the issue of education in tourism were published in the last decades, describing and comparing different educational systems or reporting on industry survey results. Unfortunately, few recommendations can be found on how a nation’s education system could best possibly support the tourism industry. This paper will not fill this gap, but it aims at taking one step into this direction by briefly describing the Austrian system of tourism education, discussing the major difficulties resulting from it and finally listing a number of measures that would improve the system, without radically reorganizing it.

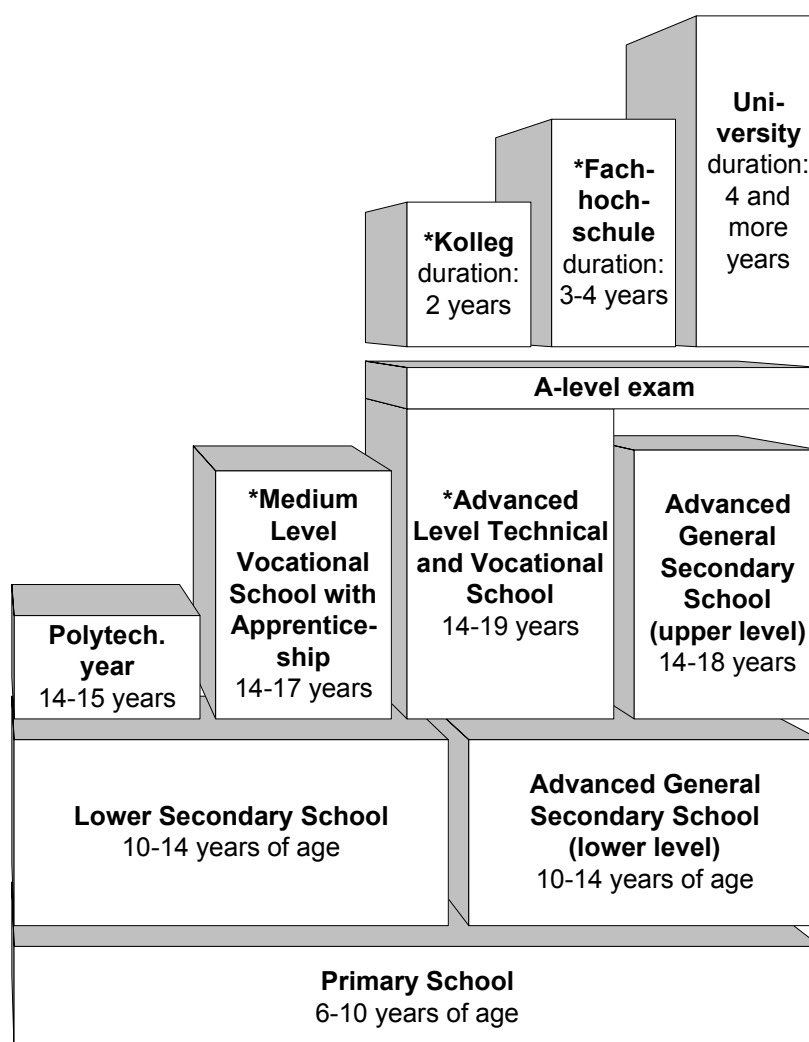
THE CASE OF AUSTRIA

In Austria, tourism has a very long history and so does tourism education. There are numerous tracks of education within the field of tourism in Austria. First of all, the apprenticeship as most fundamental education including the trades cook, restaurant specialist, system gastronomer, hotel and restaurant trade commercial assistant and travel agency assistant. Starting at age 15 the program takes 3 years. The main emphasis is on the vocational training in the industry. One day a week the pupils go to vocational school. Vocational education in schools includes the "medium level vocational school" (age 14-17, takes 3 years and includes two three-month periods of training on the job) and the "higher technical and vocational school" that emphasizes theoretical contents to a higher extent (age 14-19, takes 5 years, includes four two month periods of training on the job and entitles alumni to study at university level). Post-secondary education offers include the so-called “kolleg for

tourism” (typically students start at age 18, takes 2 years, one three month period of training on the job) and the so-called “fachhochschule” (again, students typically start after finishing school at age 18, the program takes 3-4 years and leads to an academic degree, although “fachhochschulen” are not at university level). Finally, two universities in Austria offer a tourism track as part of the business administration program. In the last years, a wide variety of additional programs have emerged, mostly organized by associations or companies themselves.

Table 1

The Austrian education system – special tourism programs available when marked with a *



Two major challenges force countries like Austria to monitor changes in the tourism industry permanently and adapt the weighting of priorities within the educational system:

- Tourists have become experienced and thus very well know, what service they can expect. This means that is not sufficient anymore to offer an average product for the average customer and treat the guest in an average manner. On the management education level it becomes more and more important to enable personnel in leading positions to think and act strategically. On the staff level service- and guest-orientation has to be the golden rule, an attitude that needs to be taught, not hoped for. Market orientation and the service attitude were identified as being among the top recommendations of tourism industry to program directors in a empirical study conducted by Lefever and Withiam (1998).
- As more and more young people aim for higher vocational education, a lack of good and well-educated staff on apprentice-level occurs. This is clearly a malfunction of self-selection in education that needs to be accounted for by government in order to assure a sufficient amount of qualified personnel for the tourism industry .

MEASURES TOWARDS REDIRECTION

In November 2000 the Austrian Association of Applied Research in Tourism organized a symposium on the issue. The Austrian tourism experts agreed upon a number of measures to improve the education system within the field of tourism in Austria (Dolnicar, 2001).

Two fundamental issues cannot be classified into one of the two categories mentioned above: First, the image of the tourism industry as employer has to be dramatically repositioned in order to attract interest in

general. Second, and this is certainly not exclusively true for the tourism industry, young people should first of all be taught to learn and to change (Mazanec 2001, Haywood 1989).

A number of recommendations primarily concerns the issue of market- and service-orientation: (1) the attitude of everyone working in tourism has to shift from the product-oriented attitude towards the market-oriented view, (2) professionalism of staff has to be increased - a demand that was emphasized strongly by Pollock & Ritchie in their 1990 publication - , (3) there has to be a priority shift towards language training (interestingly this very operational issue was most commonly agreed upon among possible components of the “internationalisation and globalization” issue, the keywords of tourism education in the 90ties (Formica, 1996), (4) more education in the field of core-competences as communication, motivation skills etc. are absolutely necessary and finally (5) the ability to work with new media is indispensable.

Finally, a number of measures could be taken to ameliorate harmonization of market demand and “education output”: (1) more cooperation between industry and educational organizations including more internships as tool of automatic adaptation, (2) creation of new professions requiring apprenticeships to stimulate education in fields with a lack of qualified personnel, (3) increasing mobility of female staff, (4) permanent educational market research to monitor needed change (as already demanded by Haywood in 1989) and finally, (5) image building to make apprenticeships in the field of tourism more attractive to pupils in their decision phase.

CONCLUSION

Austria has a sophisticated and complex system of tourism education. Nevertheless there is a number of weaknesses, which do not necessarily stem from the system structure itself. Some recommendations were listed to overcome the difficulties, the most central both on governmental and individual level seems to be ability and willingness to change. More operational managerial implications include the absolute necessity to strengthen the

cooperation between industry and educational organizations and the permanent effort to build a positive image of tourism industry as employer in order to turn negative self-selection into positive self-selection, making young people proud to work in the field of tourism. On the government level, new professions within the field of tourism would certainly have the potential to stimulate demand, measures to increase mobility of (especially female) staff would relax the problem of seasonal demand for professional and experienced staff and finally market research should be conducted on a regular basis in order to detect malfunctions as soon as possible and enable early interventions. To sum it up: a nation's education system has to be monitored permanently in order to stay up to date and both motivate and enable young people to cope with tomorrow's challenges of the industry. Although this case example focused on Austria, the implications for less developed tourism destinations are clear: learn from the difficulties the "older" tourism destinations encounter nowadays and try to take all measures recommended earlier and in a more gentle way than it has become necessary in Austria now. Image of tourism as an employer is very fragile. It can be ruined much faster than it can be restored and the consequences are dramatic for the entire industry!

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