Academic Papers

Academic perceptions of quality and quality assurance in undergraduate hospitality, tourism and leisure programmes: A comparison of UK and Taiwanese programmes

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study explores and compares academic perspectives of quality assurance and its procedures to evaluate undergraduate hospitality, tourism and leisure programmes (HTLPs) in both the UK and Taiwanese higher education systems. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted to identify academic key concerns and issues about HTLP quality. Additionally, a questionnaire survey was used to assess academic perceptions regarding the quality of HTLP provision in the aspects of strategic planning, curriculum and instruction, faculty, student achievement, resources, and administrative management. The results indicated that overall HTLP quality was perceived as satisfactory in both countries. The specific areas of 'curriculum and instruction' and 'resources' were commonly perceived as good quality, while relatively poor sub-dimensions such as 'alumni feedback' and 'teacher performance' were identified as areas requiring special attention for improving programme quality. The implications of this study provide useful insights into quality improvement and enhancement in HTLPs.

1. Introduction

Given the growing demand for skilled personnel at all levels in the hospitality, tourism and leisure industries, numbers of undergraduate hospitality, tourism and leisure programmes (HTLPs) and enroled students have expanded substantially in both the UK and Taiwan. In 2007, UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) data revealed HTLPs as a whole to be among the fastest growing course category in UK higher education (HE), where over 150 HE and further education institutions offered awards as part of their portfolios of taught programmes (QAA, 2008). Likewise, the number of HTLPs in Taiwan has increased significantly from 64 to 182 between 2002 and 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2010). Majoring in HTLPs has increased in popularity in numerous countries (Kim, Guo, Wang & Agrusa, 2007). To prepare for future global challenges, institutions that provide HTLPs have had to become more aware of the quality and standards of each programme and academic award, particularly in the international context in which they operate (Horng, Teng, & Baum, 2009; Robbins, 2005).

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HTLPs in different countries adopt very different educational models to fit local practice, with diversity in level, content and structure (Baum, 2004). Consequently, more evidence regarding comparison of HTLP quality among countries is necessary to identify fundamental differences and similarities in philosophies and approaches used to assess programme quality. Given the historical and cultural differences between the UK and Taiwanese HE systems, exploring quality issues in HTLPs at an international level is of particular interest, and is essential to international HTLP development. These issues are significant to decision makers and HTLP members, especially for those who like to establish overseas programmes, as they can provide valuable information on cross-cultural evaluation and standard requirements for quality assurance (QA). Furthermore, the UK was the first country in Europe to introduce formal QA systems into HE (Westerheijden, Brennan, & Maassen, 1994). As such, its QA systems can provide useful models for HE in countries such as Taiwan which are having to develop culturally appropriate QA systems and procedures in the fast-growing area of HLTP. The investigation of Taiwan aims to provide insight into the challenges presented by the growing popularity of HTLPs in some Asian countries (Kim et al., 2007), in addition to providing information on the development of international QA strategies in HTLPs.

Previous studies have recognised the need to pay greater attention to academic views regarding HE quality (e.g., Mertova & Webster, 2009). As faculty members are key stakeholders and "insiders" in HE, their perceptions should be valued as they can reflect on and further improve programme quality. Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold. First, this study intends to identify academic concerns about quality assurance and procedures to ensure the quality of HTLP provision in each country. Second, this study attempts to understand how academics in both the UK and Taiwan rate the quality of HTLP provision in terms of different quality standards. The implications of this study are important to HE policy makers, programme managers and faculty members seeking to continually improve and enhance programme quality to achieve international competitive advantage in HE.

2. Literature review

QA in both the UK and Taiwanese HE systems exhibits several common and distinct characteristics. The following sections briefly introduce the development of interest in quality in HE and outline current QA practices in HE in both countries.

2.1. Quality in HE

Quality has been firmly placed on the HE agenda in many countries (Becket & Brookes, 2008). Numerous factors have been identified as contributing to a greater focus on HE quality, including political and financial controls of national governments over HE, and the growth in the number of students and their expectations of HE (Mertova & Webster, 2009). To address these issues, external quality monitoring has become a key mechanism for governments to ensure the quality of HE. Thus, the introduction of QA and quality management systems in HE as quality monitoring mechanisms has been a global phenomenon which is strongly influencing global HE development and education reform (Hoecht, 2006).

Many scholars advocate the need to clearly define and establish standards for HE quality to provide appropriate judgements in this area (Brooks, 2005; Horng et al., 2009). Quality standards for HE have been defined as statements that elaborate institutional educational philosophy and systems, and which incorporate elements such as administrative management, faculty, student, teaching resources and professionalism (Houghton, 1996). In many countries, governments (via designated national QA agencies) have initiated and devised national QA procedures to regulate academic standards to improve HE quality for the benefit of the public, parents and students (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). As government policy-makers and QA agencies have gradually exerted more control over the discourse on quality and determined the funding of HE institutions, these institutions are required to present themselves in language that quality evaluators understand and value (Hoecht, 2006). Accordingly, such institutions increasingly emphasise measuring outcomes of educational provision in response to government financial incentives (Sneed & Carruth, 1988), which have in some instances been criticised for focusing on accountability rather than on quality enhancement in HE (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Mertova and Webster (2009) indicated that the management-driven mechanisms and systems for HE institutions have become trends in HE quality across numerous types of HE systems. TQM (total quality management), commonly employed in business, has been adopted in HE institutions as a quality monitoring approach that provides management standards for HE (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Horng & Teng, 2011). The TQM approach stresses management functions for self-assessment, peer evaluation and the use of performance indicators in measuring HE quality to help achieve excellent performance. However, the TQM approach has been identified as an accountability-led QA approach that provides HE institutions with some degree of autonomy in return for being quality-audited (Hoecht, 2006). Still, this approach has been widely recognised as providing a useful framework that incorporates the key functions of HE and offers systematic feedback for continuing quality improvement (Badri et al., 2006; Winn & Cameron, 1998).

2.2. Current QA practices in UK HE

Although QA was introduced into UK HE institutions (the former polytechnics) in the mid-1960s, official QA practices became prevalent only in the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s (Woodhouse, 2004). The establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997 was the first step in rationalising QA practices in UK HE (Robbins, 2005). Initially, during