



Tourism Education: Global Issues and Trends

Developing Student Engagement in China Through Collaborative Action Research

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Chapter 9

DEVELOPING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN CHINA THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract: As its market and society open up, China has transformed itself from a closed agrarian socialist economy to an urban state and an economic force. This has released accumulated tourism demand, led to the development of a diversified industry, and the spread of university and vocational courses in this field. However, the industry faces challenges to recruit and retain staff, with tourism education in higher education blamed for the shortfall in numbers and quality of candidates with suitable purpose, knowledge, and passion to serve. This chapter provides a background to the development of and problems facing tourism education in China, and suggests how to support student engagement and hence the future workforce.

Keywords: Student engagement; China; education; collaborative action research

INTRODUCTION

Since the opening up of China by Deng Xiaoping, reformist leader of the People's Republic of China from 1978 to 1992, tourism has become a pillar industry. Using a range of policy measures relating to conservation and environmental protection, infrastructure and tourism facilities, management, operation, entrepreneurship, marketing and promotion, policy, planning, administration, education, training, human resources (Xiao, 2000), domestic tourism was worth US\$426.4 billion in 2013, up 15.7% from 2012. The number of domestic tourists increased to 3.3 billion, a growth of 10.3% over the previous year. In addition, the United Nations World Tourism Organization noted that China was the third most popular destination in the world in 2012, with a total of 58 million arrivals. By 2020, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, China will become the largest tourist-receiving country in the world and among the largest for overseas travel (UNWTO, 2013). As occurred in the United Kingdom (Dale & Robinson, 2001), the growth in tourism demand has been mirrored by a growth of education in this field, which was spurred by a 1999 decision to accelerate the pace of expansion in the tertiary education sector (Altbach, 2007; Bai, 2006; Gu, Kavanaugh, & Cong, 2007).

The number of tourism higher education programs in China has increased rapidly due to the fast growth and maturation of the industry and facilitating policies, with tourism education, in theory, making a valuable contribution to the industry and the country's sustainable development (Du, 2003). While the increase in higher education programs should in theory meet the supply of job openings in areas such as research, consulting, management, and frontline jobs (Jiang & Tribe, 2009), the emergence of tourism education, training opportunities, and tourism jobs has not been accompanied by tourism students seeking jobs in the industry (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Lam & Xiao, 2000; Zhang & Wu, 2004). While previous studies have focused on Chinese tourism higher education curricula, comparisons of this and those of other countries, and on student attitudes toward the industry (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Wang, Huyton, Gao, & Ayres, 2010), this study evolved as the study explored the introduction of a new English-language curriculum at a large university in North Eastern China as perceived by instructors, staff, and students.

Two initial focus groups with tourism students and a focus group with teaching staff revealed that there was widespread disinterest in tourism both as a subject and career with a decline in students' engagement as they progressed through school (Jacobs, 2002). As the authors resumed normal

teaching duties, these concerns became amplified, and low levels of engagement were noted. This led to a broader faculty-led discussion after an alumni office report indicated that despite an employment rate of 97% among 2012 graduates, only 3% had jobs connected with the industry.

During the focus group with staff, they believed that complying with international teaching and learning standards was more important than complying with the needs of the industry. While the staff felt they had no influence on student engagement, disengagement was not an issue as long as it did not lead to behavioral problems, poor academic performance, or dropping out. As lack of engagement is an important precursor to students not seeking jobs in the industry, the authors felt the need to explore the nature of the problem and improve the situation. While “reforming” teaching and learning to engage students is difficult to define and quantify, the institution provided them with the opportunity for a collaborative interactive inquiry that also facilitated reflection and dialogue about the authors’ own practices.

The study engaged in data-driven collaborative action research to understand the drop in engagement amongst students in years two, three, and four and take action to improve behavioral and cognitive engagement. While many studies have described the situational, political, cultural, and social issues that have created concerns about tourism education in China, this study is focused on action research engaged by colleagues who shared an interest in a common problem and sought practical outcomes (Wallace, 1991). Using collaborative action research as a scheme of study to address the major problems of student engagement with tourism as a subject, the objective of this project is to study the effectiveness and advantage of lecturers introducing new teaching and learning tools at a higher education level in China, and their impact upon student engagement.

TOURISM HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA

Travel and tourism in China generated 22,756,500 jobs directly (3% of total employment) in 2012, with the total wider contribution to employment (including wider effects from investment, the supply chain, and induced income impacts) worth 63,779,000 jobs in 2012 (8.3% of total employment). By 2023, travel and tourism is forecast to support 89,550,000 jobs or 11.1% of total employment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2013). Given the scale of these numbers and reported shortages of trained tourism professionals, the industry has been confronting the problem of

attracting, training, and retaining skilled employees (Penfold, Liu, & Ladkin, 2012). This may seem paradoxical given the number of higher level institutes that offer tourism programs in China. From well-established institutes such as the Tourism College of Zhejiang, Tourism Institute of Beijing Union University, and Shanghai Institute of Tourism to new institutes such as the Guilin Institute of Tourism, the growth of tourism has been reflected in the growth of tourism schools and colleges.

While there were only 27 universities and colleges offering hospitality and tourism programs in 1986, the number had increased to 1,097 in 2012. In addition, the number of secondary vocational schools with tourism programs, which stood at 252 in 1993, increased to 1,139 by 2012. Taken together, the 2,236 universities, colleges, and vocational training institutes have 107.34 million enrolled students, a considerable increase from 936 institutions and 221,504 students in 1996 (China National Tourism Administration, 2013).

In theory, these numbers show that the development of tourism education is keeping pace with industry growth (Lam & Xiao, 2000), with Du (2003, p. 105) noting that “higher tourism education has become one of the fastest growing sectors in China’s higher education, with every province, autonomous region, and municipality with its own tourism institutions.” However, volume is not the same as quality, with Du (2003, p. 106) arguing this expansion has often come from “poorly ordered, low-standard and crude scale expansion, and is inefficient in terms of economy of scale.” While the challenges facing China’s government, tourism businesses, and the education sector have been recognized, few steps have been taken to address them. If not addressed and overcome, consumers, students, and the sustainable development of the industry will be impacted (Jiang & Tribe, 2009; Min, 2004; Wu, 2013). The impact will fall heavily on the educational system, with businesses blaming tourism education.

Zhang and Wu (2004) argue that the current state of tourism education is not meeting the industry’s expectations, while Lam and Xiao (2000, p. 291) argue businesses believe “the poor quality of service providers in China is due to lack of visionary education and training plans provided by the government.” However, studies have shown the complexity of the issue, with researchers noting poor service ethic and skills, substandard institutes and vocational training schools, poor teaching materials, lack of quality teaching staff, the one-child policy, overemphasis on rote memorization, a top-down instructional style, over expansion, over reliance on exams to evaluate progress, corruption, poor language skills, political indoctrination, a lack of entrepreneurial creativity, poor salaries, and resource limitations

(Cheuk, 2005; Du, 2003; Min, 1994, 1999, 2002, 2004; Zhang & Fan, 2006). While many of these issues are common in other disciplines, the most frequently mentioned problems in tourism education mentioned by industry representatives and teachers are the outdated curricula, poor quality staff, and students.

Curriculum Issues, Staffing and Student Issues

Poorly designed and outdated curricula that create a poor educational experience for students is a recognized issue (Lam & Xiao, 2000; Penfold et al., 2012; Zhang & Wu, 2004). Du (2003, p. 107) argues that poor program setups have produced students with “a narrow scope of knowledge, irrational knowledge structure, incapability of comprehensive analysis and coordination as well as poor adaptability to tourism-concerned occupations.” Institutions do not work closely with the industry, creating mismatches in the labor market as curricula have not adapted to market conditions. Zhang and Fan (2005) point out that the relationship between universities and industry is still far from close, consistent, or regular, with Du noting that some of the programs and their educational objectives are “established at random, and curricular designs are kept apart from practical needs” (2003, p. 106).

Businesses also argue that there is a lack of quality staff, with the demand for tourism instructors in higher education outstripping the supply of qualified professors and instructors (Gu et al., 2007). Lack of qualifications (and no assistance to gain higher ones), subject specialism, training, practical experience, and language development are also noted. Zhang and Fan (2005) note that professors of tourism programs are often poorly informed about current issues and most of their research achievements remain only academic. Wang (2010, p. 429) notes that “the problems that prevail in tourism education, such as out-of-date content and old-fashioned and didactic teaching methods, demonstrate that most tourism educators’ levels of expertise need to be raised.” Given the emphasis on staff as an issue, businesses argue that it is crucial to establish a mechanism of teacher cultivation and development that meets the demand for talent.

Most criticism from industry and teachers is that students themselves are not fulfilling industry expectations and needs (Gu et al., 2007; Penfold et al., 2012; Zhang & Wu, 2004). It is argued that they lack practical experience, suffer from lack of familiarity with service skills, have a negative attitude toward service roles, lack strategic direction, have low job loyalty, and

lack clear career goals. However, the main issue for businesses is that “university graduates were unwilling to enter the industry and that there was a gap between what was taught and the realities of the industry itself” (Zhang & Wu, 2004, p. 424). The issues are complex, given Chinese culture, values, and the educational system in China (Zhang, Lu, Hu, & Adler, 2010). Jiang and Tribe (2009) found barriers to entry such as personal reasons, nature of tourism jobs, human factors, educational factors, and management factors. Wu (2013) found similar barriers, noting how personal pursuits, family and social pressures, educational factors, the nature of tourism jobs, and the benefits of working in the government-created barriers when students decided on a post-tourism degree career.

It is within these contexts that the authors collaboratively sought to understand student disengagement, and implement research-based instructional practices to improve student engagement with tourism as a subject and career. Since research should not focus on controlled experiments removed from real conditions (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2013), an empirical study using a form of action research was utilized, providing an empirical study of researcher-practitioner engagement that is still quite novel in China. The action research process is dealt with in more detail in the following section.

Study Methods

While based at a large public university in North Eastern China with a significant tie-up to a university in the United Kingdom and with a favorable environment for teacher autonomy (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeo, & Barch, 2004), the authors initiated an ethnographic study involving students and lecturers to investigate the introduction of a new English-language curriculum. However, without the researchers’ direction during focus group interviews with students, negative attitudes to tourism as a subject were repeatedly made.

The three focus group results evolved into a discussion at a faculty meeting about the barriers to student engagement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). Engagement is “the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newmann, 1992, p. 12). Engagement is linked to attendance, academic performance, effort, persistence, self-regulation, and learning, and is associated positively with desired academic, social, and emotional learning

outcomes (Klem & Connell, 2004). While engagement can be narrowly defined through its behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements, one uses engagement more broadly to refer to energized, directed, and observable actual interactions with tourism as a broad subject and career.

Collaborative action research was adopted as a methodology to examine the educational practices and their accompanying effects (Calhoun, 1993). Action research, aligned with the interpretive paradigm, is predicated on a belief that there is not one reality “out there,” but social worlds which emerge as a social process, constructed by those who inhabit it, including the researchers themselves, are potential variables in the enquiry. An important area not only in education and educational research, Noffke (1997, p. 306) likens action research to a “large family” in which “beliefs and relationships vary greatly.” It allows educators to collaboratively examine a particular problem while learning about and improving their own practices as well as disseminating that knowledge with other educators (McNiff, 2007; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003; Noffke & Somekh, 2009). By studying a particular problem to learn about their own practices, practitioners of action research can develop a deeper understanding about what is needed in a school with the aim of improvement for both education and industry (McNiff et al., 2003).

Action Research Steps

Practitioners use different steps or processes to conduct action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990; Sagor, 1992). Calhoun (1994) defined action research as having five steps: selecting the area of focus, collecting data, organizing data, analyzing and interpreting data, and taking action. Sagor (1992) outlines seven steps, which include selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking informed action, all of which should become an endless cycle.

Based on two initial focus groups with five students each relating to curriculum development, one faculty focus group, faculty conversations, and classroom engagement, the initial steps led the authors to explore problems with students’ engagement. Further investigations indicated that graduates often changed their major to accounting, finance, or other business subjects when applying for postgraduate courses, while those who entered the workforce entered careers outside tourism. Sustained interactions with second, third, and fourth year students were held over six months, with the purpose

of identifying initial issues, beliefs, values, feelings, concerns, and thoughts so that focused questions could be asked. After this initial engagement, one hundred self-administered questionnaires were distributed to third and fourth year classes, with an 86% completion rate. The questions related to their motivations in joining the degree program, their opinions on tourism as a subject and tourism as a future career choice. After each new element introduced in the class (i.e., guest lectures), feedback forms were distributed, while 10 students at the end of their induced placement were interviewed. At the end of the semester an additional focus group, with 10 students was held.

The study found that students lacked technical skills and workplace experience, were insufficiently informed of the nature of the industry, and were unable to develop interests and realistic expectations. The curriculum, which was modern, focused on classroom instruction and exam results, while ignoring practical skill development and real-life experiences (Zhou, 1991). According to students in the two initial focus groups, this stifled creativity, innovation, passion, and purpose; and initiated a search for careers outside tourism from second year students onwards. Students also noted that parents were happy with students after searched for alternative careers. According to some of those focus group student participants, their parents believed that entry level jobs were lesser positions considering their status as graduates of a prestigious university. Students also expressed the belief that tourism education did not provide useful knowledge, in comparison to an accounting qualification. For example, one student said, "We don't learn professional and practical skills throughout the tourism program. I mean, the tourism management program is not as useful as technological skills like accounting." Chinese students value job "stability" (Wan, Wong, & Kong, 2014), with Jaw, Ling, Wang, and Chang (2007) indicating how job stability relates to financial stability in China. Students were concerned that tourism jobs were for high school or vocational graduates rather than for university graduates.

Actions to Develop Engagement

While many factors contribute to a student's level of engagement; teachers have little control over many of these factors (Lumsden, 1994; Thaliah & Hashim, 2008). However, during the spring and summer of 2013, the authors, who were employed in the same faculty, trialed a number of teaching and learning techniques inside and outside the classroom environment.

These practices were identified by them after research and discussion with students and faculty. The objective was to contribute to students' interest and level of engagement in learning about tourism as a subject and career. The authors sought to imagine, implement, and evaluate research-based instructional practices on a trial basis by bringing in guest speakers from the industry, taking students on tours to international hotels, and organizing summer placements for students. These were voluntary activities and were not assessed via graded assignments or credits.

The first guest speaker represented an international five-star hotel at a managerial level. In standard Chinese Mandarin, she shared her difficulties and tough times until she entered a managerial program at the hotel. The second guest speaker was a general manager of a five-star hotel. Born and educated in a western country, he had worked throughout the world before coming to China. The third speaker became a human resource department manager after taking a tourism degree in China. She started working as a waitress at a hotel upon graduation, even though many of her colleagues were high school or vocational school graduates. She worked hard until promoted to a managerial position in a department of an international hotel. The fourth guest speaker worked at a five-star hotel for two years at an entry level position, before promotion to the communication/marketing manager position.

Students were provided with feedback forms after each speaker, and were invited to an open focus group session. Both through the feedback forms and the focus group, students argued that they did not want to go through tough times before promotion and were not prepared to take an unskilled entry level position upon graduation. They were alarmed by how much time and effort they would need to spend in achieving promotion to a managerial position. While impressed by hard work, resilience, toughness, and perseverance (吃苦 or a willingness to "eat bitterness"), they were not motivated to follow a similar path. However, the students were engaged by the second speakers' "life" experiences and high position. Many of the students requested internships immediately after the lecture. The students also noted the fourth speaker's quick managerial journey, and her focus on the need for language skills in her career development.

The authors took a group of volunteer students to an international five-star hotel for a tour and provided opportunities for students to interact with hotel managers and staff. Students appreciated the opportunity, and asked to take up placements there over the summer vacation. The institute at that time had no policy or documentation regarding placements. Placement provision in semester seven depended on students' and

companies' needs with no staff supervision or site inspections. The students did not keep internship journals and often limited their internships to 2–3 weeks in an unrelated industry connected to a family member or used “practical” experiences as a substitute (such as a entrepreneurship competition).

Ten third-year students, after a competitive interview, were chosen and worked for seven weeks over the summer break in 2013. The content of the placement was designed by the industry partner in conjunction with the authors, and mentored by them, to support positive learning. As a bridge between theory and practice, placements can complement theoretical knowledge (Ge & Wu, 2005). Velde and Cooper (2000) noted how the students grasped “hands on” experience as a “head start” to their career when provided the opportunities. The 10 students were interviewed post-placement and all noted that they learned a lot and were eager to gain more practical experiences to survive in the “real world.” Based upon the authors' classroom observations, these students were more engaged in class and in classroom discussions.

Findings and Reflections

In follow up research to evaluate the practices and generate new questions, the authors gathered 86 self-administered surveys from students, which included open-ended questions about motivations in joining the course and future feelings about a career in tourism. The survey tool was only used as a part of the ethnographic study including participant-observation and interviews, not as a primary data source. The surveys were distributed in class in June, 2013. When asked why they joined the tourism program, the majority (61.1%) said they chose the tourism program simply “because of my score for the university entrance exam,” with many students feeling the course provided an access to a degree from a good university rather than as a means to an end. Fifty percent of the students agreed that the guest lectures were helpful (“Agree”: 50%; “Neutral”: 37.2%), while students hoped to have more foreign teachers in the tourism program because they felt foreign teachers are open-minded and use more dynamic teaching methods.

Given that the foreign teachers were mostly trained in Western Europe and America, they had preservice (pedagogical) training while at university (Fan, 2007), which can enable them to continually investigate their own teaching and assessment practices as well as their students learning.

Students associated positive values to foreign teachers not trained in an authoritarian and didactic manner (Ho, 2001; Zhu & Liu, 2004). After analyzing the comments in the questionnaire, the comments primarily addressed three areas, correlated with the final student focus group.

One, practice opportunities: “We need more guest lectures, internship opportunities, and more foreign teachers”; “tourism industry has many opportunities and there are a lot of different ways to solve the tourism problems, not like the eternal correct answer in quotes” “provide us an opportunity for working at least for a short-term and learn more reality of tourism industry. We can contact with the real working environment and to communicate with the managers who are working in tourism industry”; “teach us more about practice and let us know what we can do in the future”; “I want more opportunities to contact with the industry. It will be good to have guest speakers from industry in classes or we can visit hotels or other sites”; and “I hope we can gain practical experiences in daily working in hotels or tourism-related companies. I think it is the limitation of Chinese education.”

Two, international instructors: “They never look down upon any students who might be considered as ‘bad’ before. Also, I saw the world through them, in the past, I feel we are isolated from the outside world. However, it is through them that I know what the USA, European countries are like. Because of them, I am more determined to go abroad to experience it by myself.” Three, societal recognition: “My mom told me if you are working for a hotel you are wasting your time”; “my mom always tells me to change my major to business”; and “many people say this major is not good.”

Before arriving in China, the authors were led to believe that students were primarily passive learners. After becoming teacher-researchers (rather than expert educational researchers) by focusing on their own teaching practice and accepting the students’ point of view, they changed themselves. This study is in agreement with over 90 action research projects that have disproved the common assertions that Asian students prefer passive learning and resist teaching innovations (Kember, 2000). In sharing their findings with faculty, the authors also challenged staff perceptions of students, the role of active learning, interesting teaching practices, and the need for realistic and structured placement opportunities that involved working with industry partners, theoretical knowledge, and mentors. The authors argued for changes in the relationship with industry partners, longer and earlier industry placement experiences, student tours, and industry guest speakers.

Recommendations

China's labor force is predicted to peak at 751 million in 2015, with fewer, young workers replacing those retiring (Lafraniere, 2011). The need to recruit and retain quality tourism staff is already and will continue to be a central issue, requiring teaching reform as well as industry reform and societal change. While higher tourism education in China plays an important role in supporting tourism development, institutions are often only pressured to ensure the continuous supply of human resources to meet industry demand (Lam & Xiao, 2000). Driven by the authors' concerns about student disengagement, and concerns over their own practices, this paper found that action research allowed both them and students to be more confident and knowledgeable. "Informed reflection" (Furlong & Salisbury, 2005, p. 61) impacted teaching practices, colleagues, faculty, and students; and helping the authors "in their ability to promote student learning, to become more proactive in dealing with difficult situations that arise in their teaching, and to acquire habits and skills of inquiry that are used beyond the research experience to analyze their teaching" (Zeichner, 2003, p. 318). Given action research offers teachers "the belief that we may develop our understandings while at the same time bringing about change in concrete situations" (Carson, 1990, p. 167), it changed the author's perspectives of themselves as teachers and their students.

This study highlights the need for teachers to engage in the processes of action research to critically influence the future of teaching and learning. Oja and Pine (1989) argue doing so, would enable teachers to become more critical and reflective about their own practices, with Beaty, France, and Gardiner (1997, pp. 84–85) advocating it as "an experiential learning cycle that fuses research, development and evaluation into a dynamic process." While Bai (2009) noted that action research was introduced to China in the 1980s, there is little evidence to suggest there is widespread support amongst institutions to implement an action research approach to teacher training (Bai, 2009; McNiff, 1993). As this study took place in a transnational institution (Helms, 2008), it provided the space as well as the financial, physical, and human resources. Abrahamsen (2012) notes that it is private entities, experimental middle schools or colleges with ties to foreign universities in China, do the heavy lifting of educational reform. Many other third level institutions under various ministerial, provincial, and state controls do not have the regulatory, cultural, and logistical leeway to change the curriculum or even commit to researching students' experiences and evaluating teaching practices.

Cain and Milovic (2010) believe action research has tended to flourish mainly in cultures where flexibility and constructivism are embedded. The latest educational reforms outlined in a plan called the “State Guidelines for Medium-to-Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan” (2010–2020) may help in providing that flexibility and autonomy as well as the need for educational research methods training in preservice teacher education. Brown (2002) argues that teachers can no longer afford to ignore their role in leading society through the challenges of present and future educational trends. As action research can be imported (Cain & Milovic, 2010), foreign faculty members in China, at least in the short term, will play an important role given the “Thousand Foreign Experts program” launched in 2011 expected to attract up to 1,000 foreign academics and entrepreneurs (Gooch, 2012).

The educational authorities, tourism administrations, higher educational institutions, and the industry need to work together to create favorable conditions for education development in this field. Curriculum design and mapping should ensure learning outcomes are aligned with teaching and assessment strategies. Program reviews and revision processes in collaboration with employers, students, and administrative staff should ensure a student-centered orientation that develops the skills and knowledge demanded by students and the attributes demanded by industry. Given that many “programs and curricula were developed from the educational backgrounds of educators and the previous origin of educational institutions” (Shen, 1998, p. 32), educator-centered practice has restrained the sustainable development of tourism education in China (Xiao, 2000). For institutions, it means encouraging practitioners to “participate more widely in consultative meetings on the future development of tourism education” (Dale & Robinson, 2001, p. 34) and design more innovative teaching strategies.

Rather than allowing the needs of the economy to define their relationship with higher education, industry needs to be encouraged to provide guest speakers, academic exchanges, and communication. It includes training teachers with industry placements, shadowing, and secondment to tourism businesses. The industry must also engage with society and various elements of the public about its scale, size, and scope. Few tourism associations or businesses are willing to promote a tourism career as a means for creative expression and career development. This requires tourism programs and industry to concentrate on skill and career development with more emphasis on practical training that does not exploit or manipulate students; with the issue of poor placement conditions an on-going concern.

Appealing placements and internship positions are effective recruitment strategies and could address “both the concerns of young people and of their parents” (Wong & Liu, 2010, p. 98). Action research should not be tied to concrete “outcomes” or “targets” as demanded by industry—an intervention that could potentially constrain learning and distort the research process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Finally, both university and administrators need to increase society’s understanding of the industry and build positive perceptions to mitigate parental disinclination to support their child’s pursuit of a tourism career (Wong & Liu, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Despite the large number of graduating students, tourism education in China has not yet entered a golden era, with institutes merely addressing the industry’s need for more workers, without intervening critically and creatively in tourism education. While Chinese policy changes and infra-structural investment will create the world’s greatest inbound and domestic tourist markets, educational reform has by and large not taken place, with the authors noting the decline in student engagement with tourism as a subject and career at a large tourism program in North Eastern China. While traditional research methods (quantitative data analyzed by statistical methods) have been used in educational research, action research involves instructors, administrators, supervisors, other staff members, students, and often parents thinking together.

While not concerned with generalizability or seeking the ultimate truths behind teaching, the researchers, in their concern over engagement, found that students within their program expressed their belief that field trips, guest speakers, and internship opportunities not only helped generate a more realistic picture of contemporary tourism, but also motivated them to reflect and explore the generally held assumptions and stereotypes about a career in tourism. The authors, in their evaluation of their informed action or “action planning,” found that the barriers to a career can be broken down. While specific to a tourism program in China, this study offers some findings concerning the Chinese social, economic, and political transition. Without curriculum and school reform by local government officials, administrators, instructors, and others, students will continue to fail to enter the industry, which in the medium to long term will put the sustainable development of the industry at risk.

To move forward, systematic changes are recommended, including facilitating the supply of qualified professors and instructors, and encouraging those who study and teach tourism abroad to return with the creativity and innovation that Higher Education in China requires; fostering world-class tourism faculties and institutes, with a broader focus on research as well as strengthening technical and practical capacities (these faculties need to encourage and facilitate more doctoral degrees related to tourism and experiment with seminars, extracurricular activities, workshops, and electives in growing niches); reducing pressure on university administrators to seek high enrollments to maximize profit and facilitating students' entrepreneurial creativity and practical experience by working with the industry; increasing pay for professors and facilitating preservice (pedagogical) training; facilitating the internationalization of tourism education and allowing for a higher degree of university autonomy in academic freedom, admissions, and degree awarding powers; improving the attractiveness of vocational tourism education as well as university degrees; and promoting tourism as a knowledge and technology intensive sector, with long-term career prospects.