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The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the (Un)popularity of Higher Tourism Education in Poland

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Abstract

Along with the development of tourism activities, universities educating students in the fields of tourism and recreation take over the responsibility for preparing a qualified and skilled workforce that can provide the society with high-quality services. The aim of the article was to attempt to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the popularity or unpopularity of tourist faculties at Polish physical education universities. Five out of six public universities of physical education in Poland, which offer undergraduate and graduate studies in tourism and recreation were asked to provide data on the number of students who enrolled in the first and second cycle studies in the field of tourism and recreation in the last six years, as well as the number of students who resigned during the first year or after its completion. The results showed a decline in interest in studying tourism and recreation after the 2016/2017 academic year, which covers all physical education universities in Poland. Although there may be many reasons for this, it is necessary to try to find a solution to the current problems and restore interest in studying tourism.

Key words: tourism, recreation, higher education, COVID-19, Poland

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected tourism and recreation and related industries (Škare et al., 2021). The unprecedented scale of the spread of the disease has increased research in the area of the disease, taking into account various dependencies, such as the impact of a pandemic on the tourism industry (Sigala, 2020). The world in which the phenomenon of overtourism was noticeable as one of the trends in recent years (Dodds et al., 2019), naturally due to the imposition of lockdowns and other restrictions related to security issues in individual countries, had to reorganize itself and adapt to the current situation at that time (Yeh, 2021). Reorganization also had to be carried out by the higher education system, which in Poland first switched to a completely remote formula, and then to a hybrid one. So far, however, there has been little scientific reflection on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the interest of students in tourism education by studying tourism and recreation at universities. In the case of a pandemic lasting for years, many students, due to natural reasons limiting the development of tourism, would have to develop their careers in other industries, moving to alternative professional sectors.

Hsu (2018) criticized the current traditional model of tourism education in his research and concluded that the tourism sector requires radical transformations in order to meet the needs of the market. Handler and Tan (2021) examined whether the tourism programs offered by the higher education institutions in Japan address the aspect of sustainability and corresponding concerns and challenges faced in the tourism industry. The findings highlight a major shortage in addressing the concerns found in the analysis which, shows that there is a need for the higher education institutions in Japan to revamp their existing curricula. There are strong critical voices that call for necessary reforms in management practices to include collaboration with residents. Given the importance the Japanese government has placed on the role of tourism for invigorating the economy and revitalizing rural communities, a lot must be done in higher education for tourism to be successfully, and sustainably managed.

The serious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affected educational institutions offering tourism programs and students' perceptions of their future career in the industry. The study by Benaraba et al. (2022) determined and compared the career perceptions of tourism management students in Philippines before and during the COVID-19 pandemic with the end view of providing significant inputs to the development of programs for the tourism students

in relation to their career opportunities. The study proved that there is a significant difference in the student career perception before and during the pandemic. The study findings revealed that the tourism industry as a major business sector was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; the students perceive their career opportunities in the tourism industry during this pandemic as full of uncertainties; implementing a relevant and timely program that will address the students' wants and needs must be put into action to help the students adapt to the current situation. Accordingly, higher educational institutions are encouraged to provide the students a more comprehensive career opportunity program that will address the changes in student career perceptions and uncertainties on their future career opportunities in the tourism industry.

In the 2020/2021 academic year, most UK universities have developed educational materials as part of the transition to blended education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier literature suggests that there are advantages and disadvantages to virtual-only and blended-only learning methods that may affect student satisfaction. The study by Finlay et al. (2022) provided the data on students' perceptions of sport and exercise related learning in blended and virtual learning in a global pandemic setting. Students highly appreciated the access to face-to-face teaching despite the social distancing measures used.

Though a lot of studies have analyzed the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry and several suggestions have been made to revive the sector, tourism education is largely overlooked. Tourism and cognate courses offered by higher educational institutions are essentially a part of the tourism system. The study by Tiwari et. al (2020) suggests that ambidextrous management in tourism education be adopted in post-COVID-19 phase. Educators must become adept at the delivery of courses in a variety of modalities that would enable them to cope with the short and medium-term impacts of teaching in a COVID-19 (incremental innovation), while providing by anticipation of future demands (from industry and students), and implementing cutting edge curriculum (radical innovation).

COVID-19 caused significant disruption and creates challenges for international student recruitment while raising questions about the future attractiveness of tourism careers. To identify if, how and why the perceptions of tourism education and careers have changed, interviews were conducted by Reichenberger and Raymond (2021) with students currently enrolled in a tertiary tourism management degree at two New Zealand universities and explored through the theory of planned behaviour. Interestingly, disruption induced by COVID-19 predominantly strengthened students' commitment to their previously selected career. Prepared to find alternative employment options throughout the initial recovery period

due to a perceived lack of behavioural control, the ability to utilize their degree to induce positive change and make a lasting difference to redesign tourism for the better overrode increasingly negative subjective norms and initial doubt and anxiety. As a result, investigated students held predominantly optimistic attitudes towards future tourism careers and perceived a potentially higher future value of a tertiary tourism degree.

The aim of the article was to attempt to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the popularity or unpopularity of tourist faculties at Polish physical education universities.

Methodology

All six public universities of physical education in Poland (in Warsaw, Krakow, Wroclaw, Poznan, Katowice and Gdansk), which offer undergraduate and graduate studies in tourism and recreation, were sent an e-mail informing about this research project with a request to provide data on the number of students who enrolled in the first and second cycle studies in the field of tourism and recreation in the last six years, as well as the number of students who resigned during the first year or after its completion. The positive interest in the project was shown by five out of six universities that sent the data necessary for the research via e-mail. The results in anonymized form are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

Tab. 1. Number of students who started their studies in the field of tourism and recreation in a given academic year at the 1st and 2nd degree studies.

Academic Year	University 1		University 2		University 3		University 4		University 5	
	I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.
2021/2022	136	73	185	84	200	-	32	28	-	-
2020/2021	72	73	287	119	219	112	83	22	81	39
2019/2020	106	71	278	128	207	102	90	45	102	65
2018/2019	106	81	281	161	206	105	78	43	104	75
2017/2018	108	74	251	153	208	121	76	54	124	59
2016/2017	185	133	312	194	270	149	165	77	177	109

“-“ means no data.

Tab. 2. Number of students who resigned from studies in the field of tourism and recreation during the first year of studies (1st or 2nd degree) or who did not continue their studies in the 2nd year of studies after completing the 1st year of studies.

Academic Year	University 1		University 2		University 3		University 4		University 5	
	I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.	I d.		I d.	II d.	I d.	II d.
2020/2021	14	36	112	42	60	47	38	6	12	-
2019/2020	34	15	85	39	79	24	33	13	27	6
2018/2019	37	23	92	54	74	39	27	6	22	6
2017/2018	33	17	82	42	107	49	15	8	25	2
2016/2017	43	22	107	38	119	42	35	27	42	11

“-“ means no data.

The obtained results, visualized in Table 1 of the studies, indicate that in the enrollment for studies in the 2020/2021 academic year, which was preceded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, two out of five universities (numbers 1 and 5) recorded a significant decrease in the number of students starting undergraduate studies compared to the previous year by approximately 32% and 21%, respectively. The next academic year brought an improvement in the first university, as the number of students enrolled in first-cycle studies increased by 64 people. The second university, despite the researchers' requests, did not decide to provide the latest data, which may have been the result of poor recruitment and reluctance to present the results to the public. It turns out, however, that the remaining universities (numbers 2, 3 and 4) recorded a decrease in the number of students enrolled in undergraduate studies in the current academic year compared to the previous one by 102 people, 19 people and 51 people, respectively. On the other hand, the results showed that the 2016/2017 academic year was the best in all terms in terms of recruitment for each of the universities, as all surveyed units then achieved the largest number of students, both at the 1st and 2nd cycle studies.

After analyzing the data in Table 2, it should be noted that there are no discernible relationships between the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the resignation from studies by students during the academic year or the lack of continuation of studies after the end of the academic year. The figures and their verification in the form of a percentage conversion show similar trends to the period before the pandemic.

Discussion

One of the aspects that is immediately noticeable after the analysis of the above data is the outflow of interest in studying tourism and recreation after the 2016/2017 academic year, which covers all physical education universities in Poland. Although there may be many

reasons for this, it is necessary to try to find a solution to the current problems and restore interest in studying tourism at least at the level of five years ago. One of the possible concepts to strengthen the field of study in the field of tourism and recreation is to establish a priority for education in the field of challenges contained in the Resolution of the General Assembly A/RES/70/1 initiating the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by all 193 member states of the Organization of Nations States on September 25, 2015 in New York. The document indicates 17 sustainable development goals, in which particular emphasis is placed on such challenges as hunger, poverty, education, health, social justice, responsible consumption and production, climate change and access to clean water and energy (United Nations, 2015).

However, given this, it must also be taken into account that the tourism industry as a whole is interested in growth in the broadest sense rather than in sustainability, which is not unique when we consider the industrial sector. The growth of tourism, which today underpins the development aspirations of many low- and high-income societies, reveals all the drama of how tourism operates in a situation of environmental crisis, both locally and regionally. In tourism, high visitor numbers and spending on tourism are almost always considered good from the point of view of the policies promoted by national authorities, even though there is growing awareness of the inadequacy of many economic measures of consumption that do not measure its environmental impact. There is an overwhelming tendency to equate growth with prosperity, and by using GDP as a measure, whether by political entity or per capita, there is an implicit assumption that all economic activity is well (Hall, 2011). Many national and regional tourism organisations continue to present figures on the growth of international tourist arrivals and the economic contribution of travel and tourism without a broader assessment of their socio-cultural costs and impact on the natural environment. It is widely assumed that the more we travel, the better for the wellbeing of both the individual and the collective (Aall et al., 2019).

Paying attention to the quantitative intensification of practical classes in the form of workshops or field exercises may in turn contribute to the transfer of theoretical knowledge to professional skills and develop the willingness to offer internships in the field of tourism by entrepreneurs or other professionals working in the industry. Workshops may be conducted to ensure the transfer of theoretical knowledge into professional skills. These workshops can develop reflective practices among tourism professionals (Fedler et al., 2005). Field exercises, in turn, must include learning about natural resources and values, not only those formed without human interference, but also non-natural resources and values. It is necessary to make

students who are going to enter the potential job market in the tourism sector aware that nowadays being a responsible tourist goes hand in hand with care for preservation of landscape attractions for the next generations of tourists and one cannot be indifferent to the state of their degradation.

The tourism sector should expect specific work skills requirements from workers during a pandemic, taking into account changes in work styles, and appropriate prioritization or industry expectations. For this reason, the near future will require some kind of transformation of tourism, rethinking it and redefining it by adapting to changes in consumer behavior (Wen et al., 2020), assuming that the vision of Baum et al. (2020), who suggested reducing the role of tourism and the enhancement of ‘normal business activities’. In this case, the trend of the demand for employees with higher education, which has been noticeable at least from the beginning of the new millennium, will surely continue in tourism and related sectors (Groot et al., 2000). This is certain as the United Nations World Tourism Organization has indicated that tourism-related higher education has the potential to improve competitiveness in the industry and ultimately achieve a higher level of tourist satisfaction (Ayikoru et al., 2009), and a well-trained workforce can help the industry transition through each crisis and adapt to a new context (Ayerterey Odonkor et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Along with the development of tourism activities, universities educating students in the fields of tourism and recreation take over the responsibility for preparing a qualified and skilled workforce that can provide the society with high-quality services. To obtain useful support for industry, tourism education must evolve at the same pace as the industry. It is important that despite the pandemic hit by the travel and tourism sector, students still perceive it as a potential place of employment, although they are also aware of greater competition in the jobs concerned and greater safety risks, not only for their own but also for those using tourism services. For this reason, universities should adapt their curricula on an ongoing basis to the current needs of the tourist labor market and pay attention to direct voices of students informing about their potential jobs.

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