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Tracing the Sustainability Components in the Indian Tourism Curricula: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Tourism for its intrinsic character of people, planet and profit has been an enduring area of research for sustainable policy and practices. Planning and implementing sustainable tourism in India are largely shaped and groomed in the classrooms. Currently, over two hundred universities across the country offer tourism programs. The current study involves a two-stage process. Available literature was first summarized into items of sustainability components required of a program structure such as sustainability aspects; viz. socio-economic, environmental, and business, case study approach, interaction with stakeholders, research & practices in local settings and timely update of the syllabus. Such components in the second stage of the research formed the basis of the questionnaire used for qualitative research involving senior academics responsible for designing the syllabi. Findings present a model on the effective integration of sustainable tourism theories and practices into tourism curricula.

Keywords: Indian tourism education, sustainable tourism education, tourism curricula.

Introduction

United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development declared the years from 2005 to 2014 as a decade of “Education for Sustainability” (EfS). EfS highlighted the need and importance of implementing the sustainability pedagogy at all levels and categories of education in every country. Further, it has been argued that this requires a change in the behavior, perception and approach towards the curriculum, teaching and learning (Appleby, 2005; Salite et al., 2021; Gavinolla et al., 2022). In this regard, several studies pointed out that the integration of sustainability aspects into the curriculum will create more awareness and understanding of the various characteristics related to the environment, economy and society (Albinsson et al., 2011; Maude, 2020; Bedford, 2022). Learning and teaching on sustainability influences the teachers and students to take up innovative, creative and leadership roles in combating global issues (Galea, 2007; Rieckmann, 2018). For instance, a study conducted on implications of the sustainability-related curriculum influenced the students to adopt the sustainable lifestyle and concern over future sustainability (Fien et al., 2002).

However, research conducted on how the sustainable development principles imbibed in the tourism curricula (Benckendorff et al., 2012; Suneeth et al., 2021), more precisely the research in the context of India, is scant. India, being the largest country with improved connectivity, tourism facilities and amenities and diverse destinations and products, emerged as one of the leading countries in tourism for past several years (Kaushal et al., 2019). Therefore, there is an increased number of universities and institutes offering various courses in tourism. With the increased tourism in India, there are several positive impacts of tourism, while there are several negative effects due to unsustainable ways of managing tourism (Gavinolla et al., 2021). There is a criticism over the present practice of education as “compete and consume rather than to care and conserve” (Sterling, 2001; Suneeth et al., 2021). Understanding the views of the students and teachers can provide the potential to make necessary changes in the curricula (Elshof, 2005; Dias et al., 2022; Salite et al., 2022). Moreover, to meet the requirement of the tourism industry, the graduates are also been taught about the notion of sustainable development (Jurowski, 2002; Cotterell et al., 2019).

It has become increasingly crucial to improve access to quality tourism education for the sustainable development of the industry (Hales & Jennings, 2017). Sustainable development demands knowledge, skills, values and behaviors, and the need is to apply it at all levels and in all social contexts (Hofman-Bergholm, 2018). Academic courses must include issues, such as climate change and biodiversity degradation, which would encourage students to be responsible individuals and help them in tackling challenges, along with the development of a respectful mindset towards cultural diversity and, hence, contribute towards creating a more sustainable world (Anyolo et al., 2018; Valackienė & Kairienė, 2019).

In this background, the aim of the paper is twofold: (1) to study the state of the sustainability aspects of the curriculum of higher tourism education in India, and (2) to gain insights from the Indian tourism educators’ perspective on integrating the sustainable concepts and principles in tourism education. The present study involves a two-stage process. Available literature was first summarized into items of sustainability components required of a program structure into social, economic, and environmental aspects (Mohammadnia & Moghadam, 2019). Such components on the second stage of the

research formed the basis of the questionnaire used for qualitative research involving senior academics responsible for designing the syllabi, with the aim of knowing the opinion on the integration of sustainable tourism components in to the curriculum (Ghorbani et al., 2018).

The present study is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the conceptual framework of the study mainly focusing on sustainability in higher education in general and tourism in particular. The second part deals with the contextual framework of the study by highlighting the state of higher tourism education in India as a study area. The third part provides an overview of the methodology adopted to conduct the study. At last, the results and conclusions are provided.

Conceptual Framework

Sustainability in Higher Education

The Talloires Declaration, endorsed by 22 university leaders and published in 1990, was one of the initial notable efforts to instil sustainability in universities and higher education as a whole. This declaration encourages universities and institutions to be global leaders in establishing, implementing and supporting sustainability (Zutshi & Creed, 2018). As of February 2021, around 519 universities from across the world have signed the Talloires Declaration (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 2021). The sustainability assessment criteria developed by the University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), on the other hand, intend to evaluate the degree to which sustainability is incorporated into specific courses as well as campus greening (Cotterell et al., 2019). Several assessments of sustainability pedagogy in universities, according to Boyle (2015), reveal a similar picture of triple bottom line frameworks guiding the sustainability process at universities.

Eventually, the third wave of sustainability has emerged, focusing on education and pedagogy rather than the two movements of curriculum integration and campus greening (Wals & Blewitt, 2010). Similarly, Scarff Seatter and Ceulemans (2017) emphasized the need for a shift towards sustainability teaching and learning, which involves pedagogies like transdisciplinary learning, critical thinking and transformative learning. However, Millar and Park (2018) and Wu et al. (2015) highlighted the resistance from staff and student members in integrating the sustainability concepts into the tourism courses. Wilson & Heidt (2013) found that due to curriculum crowding and a lack of awareness on the conceptualization of sustainability, tourism courses had limited integration of transformational approaches to teaching and learning about sustainability. Furthermore, their research revealed that there was no evidence of EfS in tourism and business courses.

In the twenty-first century, EfS acts as a compelling rationale for teaching and learning. It is an overall method of inquiry that blends existing teaching and learning practices with the available content, core competencies, and cognitive skills that students need to successfully engage in building a sustainable future (Cloud, 2014). Education for sustainable development (ESD) is widely accepted as an important tool for transformation, empowering students to take the decisions and make the actions necessary to ensure a fair and economically stable society that respects both cultural and environmental diversity (Mulà et al., 2017). As a result, the UN 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) prioritize education for sustainability, while target 4.7 of SDG-4 is directly addressing the ESD aspects (UNSECO, 2016).

As the significance of sustainability grows around the world, the tourism and hospitality sectors will need to place sustainability at the center stage through corporate responsibility activities (Jones et al., 2014). Since students will be future leaders, it is extremely essential to prepare them to deal with the ever-changing challenges that this dynamic industry faces (Boley, 2011). Even though tourism and sustainability strongly intertwine, only a limited consideration has been given to EfS in tourism (Mansour & Abd El-Kafy, 2018). Consequently, integrating sustainability concepts into the tourism and hospitality curricula is considered a commendable topic to debate (Barber et al., 2011).

Sustainability in Tourism Education

Tourism is considered a perfect phenomenon for critically exploring topics such as unsustainable development, as well as issues of social justice and equality for host communities (Acha-Anyi, 2020). Tourism researchers and scholars have emphasized the value of a future-oriented and holistic approach in designing tourism curricula that empowers the students with sustainable thinking and creative aptitude (Deale & Barber, 2012; Airey et al., 2015; Liasidou et al., 2019; Renfors et al., 2020), and its implications on entrepreneurship and businesses in the amid Covid-19 pandemic times (Deale, 2022).

Despite it is a pressing topic to integrate sustainability principles into the tourism curriculum, research reveals that incorporation of sustainability concepts in both business and tourism degrees has been sluggish and minimal (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Benckendorff and Zehrer (2017) state that the problem is that existing conceptualizations of sustainability retained by educators, as well as those brought to the classroom by learners, pose an obstacle. Therefore, while developing tourism curricula, these two things should be taken into account.

The complexities around defining the concept of sustainable tourism are one of the difficulties of teaching for sustainability through tourism education (Busby, 2003). The United Nations World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities” (UNWTO, 2005). The concepts of Sustainability, Sustainable Development and Sustainable Tourism are closely linked with the concept of Triple Bottom Line (TBL). The term TBL describes a destination’s economic, social, and environmental accountability (Stoddard et al., 2012). In addition to the classical TBL concept, a quadruple bottom line has also been proposed, with the inclusion of “cultural heritage” (Kariithi, 2013), urging destinations to integrate the conservation and preservation measures along with climate change actions into their decision-making to practice tourism in a sustainable manner. Geopolitical sustainability, described as the positive impact of travel on political relationships between regions or nations, has recently been proposed as a significant component of the quadruple bottom line (Weaver, 2010).

There are several complex interpretations for the concepts of sustainability, sustainable tourism, and sustainable development (Cernat & Gourdon, 2007). However, it is clear that the viability of tourism destinations is heavily reliant on strategic planning

and human resources education so as to support the sustainability of the environment, local economies, and the host communities (Kişi, 2019). This will necessitate significant reform of both the destination managers and the destination itself, such as adapting to unforeseen change on a constant basis and taking a constructive approach in training employees and visitors (Kachniewska, 2006).

This ensures that the administrators and managers must take up constant interventions through the ongoing governance and management, alongside educational interventions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Universities can help aspiring tourism professionals by training and enhancing the learners' skills to cope up with complex problems, think holistically, and are committed to participating in and managing responsible and highly sustainable tourism activities (Pearce & Zare, 2017; Hussain et al., 2023). While the paradigm shift considered appropriate in tourism education, for many, the question is when and how to integrate EfS in tourism curricula (Deale et al., 2009).

Contextual Framework

Tourism Education in India

Tourism and hospitality education in India began in the early 1950s with the establishment of the Institute of Hotel Management, Catering Technology, and Applied Nutrition in Mumbai (Sarkar & George, 2019). The All-India Women's Central Food Council established it, claiming it to be the first of its kind in South Asia (Kumar, 2014). Tourism-specific education began in 1983 when the Ministry of Tourism founded the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM) as a registered society in New Delhi (Sarkar & George, 2019). In India, Master's degree programs began to be offered by various universities at the beginning of the 1990s (Singh, 1997). In 1991, Kurukshetra University in Haryana initiated one of the first Master's degree programs in tourism, the Master in Tourism Administration (Jithendran & Baum, 2000). Singh (1997) notes that, by the end of the 1990s, there were around 30 universities offering postgraduate programs in tourism management across India.

In India, tourism education is still evolving, and Indian academia has yet to play a significant role in the ongoing debates (Kumar, 2018). Campus sustainability in India is still in its infancy, with several of the country's most prestigious institutions failing to acknowledge it (Bantanur et al., 2015). Nonetheless, leaders in India's tourism education have been convening conclaves and think tanks to address pressing issues such as curriculum designing, stakeholder integration, incorporating sustainability, and the development of future tourism educators (George, 2013; Suneeth et al., 2021). The Indian government has taken tourism education very seriously because, despite its incomparably superior natural and cultural heritage, the country does not appear anywhere on the list of major tourism revenue recipients (Sarkar & George, 2019). Educational institutions have gradually started to adopt a marketing orientation to their curriculum design and implementation in order to retain the best students and ensure their job placements (Aithal & Kumar, 2015). Despite these issues, there are many pricking problems afflicting tourism higher education in India. Some of these problems are noted internationally as well, while the rest are very India specific (George, 2013).

Methodological Framework

With regard to the design of the research, both content analysis and semi-structured interviews were used. Content analysis was used to systematically analyze the data obtained during this study (Stough et al., 2018). In academic research, content analysis is perhaps the most frequently used model, increasingly in conjunction with other approaches such as surveys, focus groups, and experiments (Mazzoleni, 2015). Scott and Kosslyn (2015) highlight that content analysis involves approaches that concentrate on message content, such as pictorial images, graphical objects, moving images, nonverbal actions, music, and sounds, as well as text analysis, which is the systematic study of written text or transcribed speech.

In tourism research, content analysis is adopted by a huge number of scholars and researchers (Kim et al., 2009; Livina et al., 2021; Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2018; Vitouladiti, 2014). Particularly, many authors employ content analysis in the tourism education research to understand the aspects, such as integrity of the tourism curricula etc. (Daniel et al., 2017; Kervankıran & Sardag, 2019; Moreeng et al., 2020; Ndou et al., 2019; Seyitoğlu & Çakar, 2017).

For this study, to conduct the content analysis, the authors considered secondary information such as the institute/university websites for the course/program details, prospectus, syllabus books and academic instructions. Further, a qualitative approach was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted. A qualitative approach was used by several researchers (Anderson & Sanga, 2019; Bikse & Gavinolla, 2021; Edelheim, 2020; Hajli & Lin, 2014; Mei, 2019; Qian et al., 2018; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015) to identify the gaps in the tourism education issues. A total of 15 ($n = 15$) semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads of concerned coordinators dealing with the tourism courses in various institutes in India. The authors approached the respondents over the phone as the authors had known many of them personally or professionally.

The interviews over the phone were conducted in English and the responses were recorded as handwritten notes and transcribed accordingly. Interviews lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes each, and it was easy for the authors to conduct the interview as many of the respondents were known personally. Interviews were conducted between March 2022 and May 2023, as per their convenient time with prior approval. Interview questions focused mainly on respondents' opinions on the state of tourism education in India, opinions on the syllabus being taught at their institute, consideration of sustainability aspects in the syllabus, sustainability thinking abilities of the students and opinions and suggestions on incorporating sustainability aspects in the curriculum. The questions were discussed with the experts to know the validity of the questions.

Findings

Study findings were presented in two parts. In the first part, the question was raised on the state of the existing curriculum with reference to the sustainability aspects. As mentioned above, the authors used a content analysis strategy to know the state of sustainable tourism components in the curriculum.

The higher education scenario of India is mainly segregated into four levels of education institution hierarchy: Central University (CU) (funded by the Central Government), State University (funded by the respective state Government), Institute of National

Importance and Deemed to be Universities. Out of 53 CUs, only 10 offering undergraduate and/or postgraduate degrees in Tourism Management (there are different nomenclatures) were assessed for the sustainability quotient in the curriculum based on the availability of the secondary data.

It was discovered that 66 % of universities incorporated the sustainability quotient in their curriculum, while 3 universities (33 %) did not. Out of 367 registered state universities, only 28 state universities were assessed, in which only 6 universities had components of sustainability in the curriculum. Three sector-specific institutes highly inculcated sustainability components at both graduate and postgraduate degrees, in theory and practice.

The second part deals with the questions on the opinions of the concerned heads or coordinators on the integration and the teaching of tourism curriculum.

Tourism Education Scenario of India

In order to understand the sustainability components of the existing curriculum, it is important to know the status of the tourism education scenario of India, and the same was asked to the respondents. In response to this question, all of them expressed the following:

“Tourism education in India is younger than its other contemporaries such as history, political science etc. However, our subject of tourism is one of the most dynamic subjects; hence, it requires evaluation and revision regularly”.

The majority were also of the opinion that the curriculum was not updated regularly and it required a strong commitment and lengthy process to do it. This might be the reason that majority of the universities did not include the sustainability components in the curriculum. However, there were some changes incorporated in the curriculum accordingly. It was also mentioned that “in theory everything is perfect; on the ground it is a different game that needs a lot of improvement”. One of the respondents elucidated further that “the Indian tourism education system needs to be revamped, with not only academics and scholars, but also industry figures coming in to sit and reflect on what is being taught and will be taught in order to foster a cohesive growth, as although students are theoretically prepared, they are not completely ready in practice”.

Opinion on Syllabus Being Taught as Part of the Curriculum

Private institutes are more flexible in incorporating the current trends in our syllabus to prepare our students to face the industry prepared. The majority of the government institutes are following the traditional courses of travel and tourism, in which the sustainability components are not the focus of the curriculum. Further one of the respondents mentioned that:

“The syllabus being taught at my university has not changed much from the time I was a student in the same department about 8 years ago. So, a huge gap emerged between the university courses and the current tourism industry requirements. However, we are bridging the gap by inviting a series of industry experts as guest lecturers to give our students the practical insight into the tourism industry”.

Sustainability Components in the Curriculum

Sustainable development components such as environment, economy and people can be achieved through various alternative approaches to tourism. These include eco-tourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism and so on. Further, they are in the planning, development and management-related subjects. In this regard, we asked the respondents to explain how they integrated the sustainability components in the curriculum. A majority (about 70 %) of the institutes have a dedicated subject on sustainable tourism, which covers all the major sustainability components. Few of the universities have a subject with the title of eco-tourism, eco-tourism planning. Only one respondent mentioned that they incorporated the sustainability components throughout the curriculum in all the subjects.

Opinion on the Importance of Teaching Sustainability in Tourism Education

Respondents were of the opinion that this was a chance to provide the upcoming demographic with all of the skills and information they would need to deal with the upcoming social and environmental changes. Hence, it is most crucial to have sustainability components in the degrees. Another respondent said that sustainability would not only allow students to work for the well-being of the resources of the environment and society but also for their wellbeing. Hence, we should be approaching all subjects as an educator. Others mentioned that its significance would be unavoidable. Even though it was previously part of various subject areas, it now needs to be included as a central focus. It is either now or never.

Sustainable Thinking Abilities of Students

We further questioned if they had ever assessed the sustainable thinking abilities of the students, for which the majority answered “no”. Further, they responded that there was a need to include practical courses or modules that could provide hands-on experience on sustainability issues which would not only develop the sustainable thinking abilities of the students but also help the educators to develop a sustainable-oriented pedagogic approach.

Suggestions to Integrate the Sustainability Components in the Higher Tourism Education System in India

Before asking the suggestions, we asked the respondents whether they were willing or interested to incorporate sustainability components, for which everyone said “yes”. Further, we asked the suggestions for the same. The summary of the suggestions includes: training and upgrading the tourism teacher’s skills and knowledge as an essential component, and conducting regular faculty development or management development programs. Recruiting industry professionals as guest lecturers or inviting them to teach some of the topics will solve half the quality graduates’ issue that our industry is facing. There should be more research towards teaching and learning sustainability components in the Indian context. Engaging the teachers in research projects and also undertaking a

project in collaboration with the industry experts will lead to practical exposure and understanding of the issues at the ground level. Providing the opportunity for the students to engage in wider sustainability-related projects or internships is also another way. There is also a criticism from the social sustainability aspect, that the majority of the graduates are underpaid in tourism and its allied sectors and also the graduates from non-tourism background have the equal weightage in the job market, though they have not studied any tourism courses.

Discussion and Implications

It has been proved that integrating the sustainability aspects will enhance the understanding and responsibility for a better sustainable future (Fien et al., 2002). In this regard, the present study elucidates further that the EfS is an important aspect of tourism and its allied areas. Tourism as one of the leading and largest socio-cultural & environmental resource-dependent industries provides both positive and negative impacts (Livina & Reddy, 2017; Kaushal et al., 2019). To mitigate the negative impacts and maximize the positive ones, it is important to educate the future leaders of tourism on sustainability. India being one of the most diverse and largest countries that depends on cultural and natural tourism attractions needs to practice the sustainable tourism principles, for which education and awareness are important aspects (Gavinolla et al., 2021). This study aimed at understanding the state of sustainability components in the Indian tourism curriculum. It was found that the majority of the institutions do not have sustainability components in the curriculum. Therefore, as suggested by Boley (2011), it is important to increase the academic discussion, enhance the industry and academic interface to understand the demand side, and also involving the industry representatives in the curriculum preparation will certainly solve some of the issues. Majority of the programs are offered at the university level and the universities in India offer various programs by various departments. In this connection, it is important to increase the multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary learning opportunities and have collaboration with other concerned departments to provide wider options to expose the students to understand the various aspects of sustainability (Moore, 2005). For example, state or central university tourism departments can collaborate with environmental science or social science departments to understand the social and environmental issues at an in-depth level. However, there will be a challenge for the sector-specific institutes as they do not have multi-disciplinary departments in their institutes. In this situation, it may be important to involve the practitioners in teaching the sustainability components, as well as to engage specific subject experts who will enhance the understanding of the sustainability aspects (McGrath et al., 2020).

Findings revealed that the students' sustainability thinking was below the expected level. This might be because of a lack of awareness and understanding of sustainability issues. Simulations or workshops and taking them to the field visits and enhancing their critical thinking abilities will change the situation (McGrath et al., 2020). Further, sustainability components alone cannot provide the broader option to implement the sustainability principles in tourism education. In fact, as Velazquez et al. (2005) mentioned several challenges to the integration of sustainability, such as a lack of interest among the business community, profit-making, fear of change, lack of long-term vision, and the

lack of standard policy. Certainly, the industry should have a long-term vision to achieve the goal of sustainability in their businesses and the same should be inculcated in the curriculum. Most importantly there should be continuous evolution and assessment of the curriculum, and the certification bodies or standardization institutes should look at the sustainability aspects while giving the accreditation in the country (Roorda & Martens, 2008).

Conclusion

India is one of the fastest emerging countries of the world ranked among the top fifty tourism destinations of the world. Tourism provides several benefits to the stakeholders such as employment, revenue generation and recreation etc. Tourism as an important product depends on the natural and cultural resources of the destination. To cater for the needs of the industry, over 200 tourism institutes mushroomed in the last two decades. While tourism provides several benefits, if not managed properly, it can lead to several negative impacts. For this to end, managing tourism in a sustainable manner requires skilled and trained human resources with a better understanding of the sustainable development concepts. To do so, the tourism curriculum plays a major role in educating the students on sustainability. In this regard, the study aims were to understand the state of the tourism curriculum in relation to sustainability. Study results revealed that the majority of the central universities integrated the sustainability components, while the majority of the state universities did not incorporate them and sector-specific institutes integrated fully the sustainability components. The majority of the educators are of the opinion that the curriculum is not updated regularly. The majority of the institutes have a separate course or subject of study on sustainable tourism, which covers all the major sustainability components. Few of the universities have the course with the title of eco-tourism, eco-tourism planning. Student thinking abilities on sustainability issues are poor at the universities due to various reasons. Several suggestions are provided to integrate the sustainability aspects and, in the curriculum, to overcome the issues and challenges.

Our study mainly focused on the higher educational institutes but did not cover vocational programs. Future studies should focus on whether there is a difference in the job market or the sustainability practices of the programs that have already covered the sustainability aspects in the curriculum. Teacher's exposure or experience of understanding the sustainability aspects can also be studied in the future.

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