

The Role of Permanent Learning and Human Capital in the Sector of Tourism

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Abstract

Human capital is a key factor in the development of sustainable tourism. In the sector of tourism, the quality of the provided services receives an important role: the permanent learning and the continuous renewal accompany the development of touristic regions. When examining lifelong learning, the focus of the research is put on experts working in tourism: providing touristic services that need living labour mostly; especially nowadays, tourism can be more and more seen as consuming experience, a service providing experience, in which human capital has a determinative significance. An online questionnaire survey was carried out in the framework of a regional research, among accommodation providers, in the framework of a random sampling (n=376). In this survey, learning in non-formal environment was put into focus. Special attention was paid to autonomous learning and learning initiated by the individuals. The questioned experts of tourism can be categorized from the points of view of getting into the sector and the continuous (lifelong) learning. In connection with the practical implementation of lifelong learning and professional development, a structured range of proposals confirmed with examples were also compiled from the answers about learning.

Keywords: *lifelong learning, adult learning, tourism, accommodation.*

Introduction

“One of the main factors in progress of any tourism industry component is the development of human capital.” (Kurdashvili, Meskhia, 2016, p. 25.) (cf. Nickson, 2007). The human capital is a more and more valuable resource in the sector of tourism as well. It is the result of mental activities and includes the knowledge and skills of people. Beside professional knowledge, it is inevitable to define and continuously develop the competencies which are required by the specific jobs.

The improvement opportunities of associations that are able to adjust to the continuously changing social and economic environment are much larger than those of the inflexible associations that are unable to react to external changes.

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Human capital is made up of the following elements:

- work related experience and knowledge;
- association related experience and knowledge;
- educational level that influences current and future qualifications;
- personal competencies;
- innovational skills and willingness of employees and leaders and
- attitude to work etc.

Such a learning culture is in the focus of lifelong learning that includes the development of general knowledge and social competences through the continuously renewing professional knowledge too. In this spirit, learning spreads to all ages, every learning level and way, as well as the not conscious, random learning based on experiencing is also a part of it. What is meant by a non-formal learning environment in this paper is the learning environment that is different from the formal one. A learning environment that is different from the formal one can be some work experience, participation on an open course or the self-training itself. For measuring knowledge, mainly the school qualification or professional qualification is used, but this cannot give an authentic picture about knowledge and skills gained in non-formal learning environment.

When examining lifelong learning, the focus of the research is put on experts working in tourism. Providing touristic services needs living labour mostly. Especially nowadays, tourism can be more and more seen as consuming experiences (cf. Cuffy, Tibe, Airey, 2012; Schulze, 2008), a service providing experiences, in which human capital has a determinative significance and continuous learning is getting into the focus. The course books of trainings on tourism and the materials of professional conferences also mention the expectation that professional knowledge is especially important in the sector. At the same time, they draw up the desire for further development. (cf. Blešić et al., 2011; Cantoni et al., 2009; Dredge et al., 2014; Sigala, Baum, 2003; Tribe, Liburd, 2016). Among others, for example, the 9th principle of the Hague Declaration (1989) also drafts the expectation towards the continuous learning of the workers of tourism: *“The quality of tourism as a person-to-person business depends on the quality of the personal service provided. Therefore, the appropriate education for the general public starting at the school level, education and training of tourism professionals and the preparation of new entrants in the profession are essential for the tourism industry and the development of tourism”*. (cf. WTTC, 2015)

This empirical research is seeking the answer to the following questions:

- How does lifelong learning appear in practice among the workers of tourism, and inside, in the case of accommodation providers?
- How do the workers of the named sector modernize and widen their knowledge?
- In what way does the number spent in the sector influence the views about learning?

Methods and data

To answer the research questions, a survey was prepared for accommodation providers (commercial accommodation and accommodation provided by private persons). All respondents were selected by random sampling. The intersectional examination that is presented in this paper was carried out in 2016, in the framework of a regional research, in the North-Hungarian touristic region (n=376). The region is in the North-Eastern part of the country. The ques-

tionnaire part of the data collection was done with the help of an online available and fill able questionnaire. It did not address organizations but individuals, taking care of the anonymity and volunteering of those who filled it in. The questionnaire was recorded in the SPSS programme and this database was used for counting and analysis. During the analysis the author examined how the opinion of the tourist experts questioned can be categorized from the points of view of getting into the sector and the continuous learning, the questions were suitable for running factor analysis on the basis of the KMO and Bartlett's Test. During the cluster analysis we made three main types and named these after the factors. It can be stated that on a five percent significance level the established groups are significantly separated from each other from the points of view of all three factors (those who started their jobs in the area of tourism, those who started in another service providing sector, and those who got into the tourism sector from a totally different area). We formed such groups which are inside rather homogeneous, but they can be well differentiated from each other.

Since the research cannot be torn out of its environment, the features of the selected region will also be presented briefly. In the examined region, tourism has a significant role and it fills an important role in its image. Its features make it possible that visitors with lots of motivation come to the destination (culture, health, religion, gastronomy etc.), so it is a popular touristic target (cf. Saarinen, 2017).

The questionnaire can be divided into three main parts. Following the explaining variables (gender, age, the highest qualification, job, practical experience etc.), the features of adult education were also examined, that is, the following topics were considered:

- the various forms of lifelong learning
- questions concerning self-training
- relationship to learning
- the most important employee competences, etc.

In the survey, the learning in non-formal environment was put into focus. Special attention was paid to autonomous learning and learning initiated by the individuals. Based on the answers, it can be concluded that the permanent learning and knowledge widening are essential parts of their jobs. Almost 75% of the people questioned support permanent learning. Mainly those who work in jobs that require lower qualifications are the ones who experience the need for learning less.

More than half of the people questioned had been working for at least ten years in the sector of tourism, and gained experience in various jobs, functions. It was found that there is a difference between those respondents who gained their experience mostly in the area of tourism and others, who worked in another profession earlier.

It can be stated that among those who had worked in other places earlier (n=227), and this is mainly true for private accommodation providers, 50% had worked in jobs that required dealing with people even before their present jobs (in libraries, trade, education, beauty industry, health care, consultancy etc.).

During the analysis, it was examined how the opinion of the questioned experts of tourism can be categorized from the points of view of getting into the sector and the continuous learning. The questions were suitable for running a factor analysis on the basis of the KMO and Bartlett's Test. During the cluster analysis, three main types were found and named after the factors. It can be stated that on a five percent significance level the established groups were significantly separated from each other from the points of view of all three factors:

- Those who started their jobs in the area of tourism.

- Those who started in another service providing sector.
- Those who got into the tourism sector from a totally different area.

Such groups were formed which are rather homogeneous inside, but they can be well differentiated from each other.

In the case of the certain types, the opinions were analysed connected to learning and its topic in the circle of the people questioned (Table 1) . Here are some details from the results:

Table 1. *Typology among the respondents in the sector of tourism*

TYPES	RATE OF RESPONDENTS	ANTECEDENTS OF STARTING TO WORK IN TOURISM	FEATURES OF KNOWLEDGE WIDENING
People working in the area of tourism from the beginning	40% of the people questioned belong here	Their studies can also be connected to tourism mainly	In the framework of training courses and internally organized trainings, but also the autonomously done knowledge widening is significant.
People who started in another service providing sector	30% of the people questioned belong here	Respondents worked in the service sector, but in different fields of services (beautician, librarian, health care worker etc.).	They gained tourism knowledge on different organized courses. Self-training is also very significant in their case.
People coming from a totally different sector	30% of the people questioned belong here	Most of them act as private accommodation providers, and hope for an additional salary or an activity after retiring. They started to deal with providing accommodation due to the features of their house or settlement.	They obtain up-to-date information on the Internet and through their tourist associations.

People working in the area of tourism from the beginning

This group includes 40% of the people questioned. These people have been working in the sector of tourism from the beginning, at the average of 24 years. Their studies can also be connected to tourism mainly. Their qualifications show a really colourful picture, from vocational school/skilled worker qualification to labour force with many degrees. As for their ages, the picture is mixed. 70% of those belonging here experience lifelong learning in their own jobs, in the framework of training courses and internally organized trainings, but the autonomously done knowledge widening is also significant. They find it especially important to:

- learn foreign languages;
- develop their IT knowledge;
- acquire good communication skills.

„The advanced trainings and the high level professional knowledge of colleagues can help a lot.” (M, 42) „Courses, conferences, exchange of experience, self-training.” (F, 38).

They obtain up-to-date information from the following sources:

- mainly from the internet;
- through newsletters;
- from professional journals;
- exchange information among colleagues.

At the beginning of the start of their jobs, they usually considered their basic knowledge suitable. 60% of those belonging here agreed that not only that knowledge can be valued the gaining of which ends/ended with a certificate or a degree. People working in tourism for many decades think that when they were younger, it was unimaginable not to go along the so-called promotion of seniority, since every field of work has its own feature and only that person can be a good leader, or a responsible colleague, who can make good use of his experience gained in many areas.

People who started in another service providing sector

Here belong 30% of the people questioned. Those belonging to this group, have a significant work experience as well, but they gained their experience not only in the area of tourism. However, what can be said as common in many cases is that they all worked in the service sector, but in different fields of services (beautician, librarian, health care worker etc.). They are mainly middle-aged women. As regards their highest level of education, they usually have a school-leaving certificate at least.

On average, they have been working in the sector of tourism for 7-10 years. 80% belonging here experience lifelong learning in their own jobs. They gained tourism knowledge on different organized courses. Self-training is also very significant in their case. Those belonging here find it extremely important to learn and complement the suitable professional knowledge, beside gaining and developing different competences.

„There are a lot of possibilities to learn almost everything, but, in my opinion, the learning material is still too “theory-focused”, there are too few possibilities to gain practice, especially in adult education.” (F, 33)

„I think the training choice is really wide; those who want can find the training suitable for them.” (F, 38)

They obtain up-to-date information mainly on the Internet and the common conversations with their colleagues also get an important role. (cf. Cantoni, Kalbaska, Inversini, 2009) At the beginning of the start of their jobs in the tourism sector, 60% considered their basic knowledge little. 60% of those belonging here answered that they would even finance their own studies and they preferred practice-oriented trainings. 70% of those belonging here agreed that not only that knowledge can be valued the gaining of which ends/ended with a certificate or a degree.

People coming from a totally different sector

Here belong 30% of the people asked. A significant amount of those belonging here saw a kind of possibility in tourism. Most of them act as private accommodation providers, and hope for an additional salary or an activity after retiring. Earlier they did not work in service-providing jobs, they started to deal with providing accommodation due to the features of their house or settlement. Most of them are women, over 50. As regards their highest school qualification, the picture is mixed, but they have a school-leaving certificate at least. Since earlier they had not learnt about this field, 80% of them have a strong need to learn and collect information.

They obtain up-to-date information on the Internet and through their tourist associations. At the beginning of their activities, they usually considered their basic knowledge little. 60% of those belonging here answered that they would even finance their own studies, especially the ones that promote gaining professional knowledge. Most of those belonging here agreed that not only that knowledge can be valued the gaining of which ends/ended with a certificate or a degree.

„My opinion is that I have to do everything in a way as I would expect if I were a guest at any accommodation. Where I learnt a lot in connection with this was during my journeys, I always went with open eyes and stored and used my positive experiences.” (M, 57)

„I train myself mainly online, but also with the help of associations.” (F, 53)

By analysing the three groups, the following conclusions can be made:

- Most of the people asked totally agreed that not only that knowledge can be valued the gaining of which happens in organized frames.
- The less professional knowledge an individual had at the beginning of their jobs, the more they represented this view (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V:0,205).
- The more popular the trainings outside school were, this result was, however, corrected by the place of residence and the school qualification. Namely, the higher school qualification the people asked had (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V:0,144), and the more inhabitants the settlement the person worked in had (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V:0,205), the more the above mentioned statement applied.

There is also an agreement that life experience and work experience largely help work, in which the way how to join the tourism sector was also influencing and determinative: the people considered their existing knowledge more to be widened the less proficiency they had in this sector. This, however, depended mainly on qualification: those having a higher qualification, were more opened to learn. (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V:0,321) The people asked also emphasized the importance of a certificate, mainly from the point of view of the employer: “the paper certifies us”; “we are ranked on the basis of this”; and such answers were also given that “it is important for the employer and proves the past results, but does not reflect our present knowledge”. During the detailed answering of the question on learning, the qualification was decisive: the higher qualification the person had, the more detailed answer he/she gave to the questions. (sig: 0,000; Cramer's V:0,110) It must be noted that our research results confirm that in general, those having a lower qualification, avoid detailing their learning. In their case, it can be seen that they cannot localize learning. They gave “I am interested in everything in the world” type of answers (Tót, 2006).

The survey was seeking the answer to what extent the idea of “learning society” prevailed among the respondents at the moment of filling the questionnaire. In the form of a simple multiple choice question they were asked whether they were learning anything then. 40% of the respondents answered yes. Special attention was paid also to autonomous, self-initiated learning. The interpretation of Juhász (2012) is close to the conclusion of this study. She defines autonomous learning in a research as follows: “*Autonomous learning is when learners initiate learning on their own and they realize an independent, self-directed learning program. They investigate things that they cannot remember well, check their existing knowledge, refresh their earlier acquired knowledge on their own free will*” (Juhász, 2012. p. 153.) Almost 70% of the people were continuing studies at the time of asking. They widened their knowledge in an autonomous way, mainly in the framework of journals and forums available on the Internet. They aspired to gain knowledge to be used in their everyday work:

- they improved their digital competence;
- learned foreign languages;
- improved their knowledge that is necessary for the world of business, such as marketing, legal rules, protocol information and so on.

Conclusion

In connection with the practical implementation of lifelong learning and the continuous professional renewal, a structured range of proposals confirmed by examples was compiled from the answers given about learning. Among others, the comments emphasized the following:

- The importance of preparation for lifelong learning: „Raise the interest and the wish to learn in the students and a closer relationship with the practicing touristic service providers.”
- The acknowledgement of learning in a non-formal environment: „Better communication between the world of work and training, the acceptance of informal and non-formal training forms in Hungary.”
- Practice-oriented trainings: „Giving lifelike, usable knowledge, in the framework of practice-oriented training.”
- The role of curiosity and motivation: „Curiosity is important, because what a curious man does not know, he looks it up. At most, it takes time until he finds the real source.”
- Further help to professional self-training: „Digital study halls, post trainings. (...) Presentation series with professional lecturers.”

Respondents have been asked which knowledge contents and competences the professionals find the most important. In the first five places, the following knowledge and skills were considered the most important:

- Foreign languages;
- Communication skills;
- ICT competences;
- The knowledge about the country;
- Marketing skills.

The problem-solving skills and the treatment of the guests (hospitality) were mentioned. It can be stated that the results are tightly connected to the so-called key competences. The 8 key competences are the following:

- Communicating in a mother tongue;
- Communicating in a foreign language;
- Mathematical, scientific and technological competence;
- Digital competence;
- Learning to learn;
- Social and civic competences;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship;
- Cultural awareness and expression (see Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning).

Knowledge expansion through Internet is getting more and more into focus, which urges such utilization of the surface more. Thanks to the spreading of technological devices, as well as the Internet services today, the areas and possibilities of lifelong learning have broadened (see Web 2.0). The professional use of community sites can be realized in many forms. The open and closed groups that can be established on the surface, offer different possibilities for common activities. There can be a possibility for generating community contents as well (sharing, commenting documents in open or closed communities, sharing video and sound files

and so on). In the case of a touristic enterprise, human resource is especially determinative since the knowledge, experience, professional knowledge etc. the persons have, also form part of the organizational asset and can also be seen as an organizational strategic resource. Individual learning becomes organized knowledge if the members of the organization publish it for each other by sharing it, that is, if learning becomes part of the organizational culture.

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