

A change process for the Tourism Undergraduate Programme of the University of Malta

Presentation at the Concluding Seminar Of the Periodic Programme Review of BA (Honours) (Tourism Studies)

January 2020

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Executive Summary

Success in tourism depends on having tourism practitioners who are well prepared. The ITTC is instrumental in preparing Malta's tourism practitioners of the future. The ITTC prepares practitioners who will be able to work in tourism, culture and related industries.

The Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) has recently concluded the Periodic Programme Review (PPR) for the tourism studies undergraduate programme. In this brief report, we explain the process. We also highlight some of the main issues that emerged and explain how these were addressed.

The thinking on PPR was guided by feedback and comments received. Consultations is an essential component. Consultations were held with ITTC academics, with students and with the industry.

In the initial phases of the PPR process, the study-units were subdivided according to 'areas of study' as follows: A) Tourism Business and Management, B) Tourism Destination Management, C) Cultural and Heritage Tourism, D) Travel, Tourism and Hospitality, E) Structure of the tourism industry, F) Business and academic skills for tourism.

During the PPR process, twenty one learning objectives for the undergraduate tourism programme were developed. These were developed on the basis of ITTC academics' experience over the years, backed by PPR consultations.

The PPR will bring important changes to the curriculum. Study-units for the curriculum are carefully chosen in accordance to the knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire for their own self-development and for eventual use in the work place. A wider choice of elective subjects will make it possible for students to choose subjects according to their interests and aptitudes. Radical changes will be made to work placements to make them more effective for student learning.

As the PPR process progressed, it became evident that some changes were urgent and could not wait for the completion of PPR. New study-units were introduced, the most important being two new study units on events and another on food tourism. Moreover, elective study-units were introduced in second year and third year.

The revision of the curriculum was the main focus of the PPR but inevitably all matters relating to the delivery and content of the undergraduate programme were up for discussion. This gave rise to other changes that brought about improvements to the programme and to the student's learning experience.

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Offered by the

Institute for Tourism Travel and Culture

At the

University of Malta.

24 January 2020

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Introduction

Success in tourism depends on having tourism practitioners who are well prepared. The ITTC is instrumental in preparing Malta's tourism practitioners of the future. The ITTC prepares practitioners who will be able to work in tourism, culture and related industries, in Malta or in any other tourism destination. One objective of the Periodic Programme Review (PPR) is to ensure that our students, upon graduating, will be equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies that will be required in their places of employment.

There is increased competition at undergraduate programmes for tourism studies, with many universities across the UK and the EU offering programmes in tourism and related studies. The ITTC is aware of the competition and hence eager to use the PPR process to make the programme more interesting and more of a learning experience for students. This will make it more attractive for local and overseas students.

The Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture (ITTC) has recently concluded the Periodic Programme Review (PPR) for the tourism studies undergraduate programme. In this brief report, we explain the process. We also highlight some of the main issues that emerged and explain how these were addressed.

It is a requirement of the University of Malta that all its programmes are reviewed every four or five years. The recommended PPR procedures are set out in the university's regulations.

The PPR process was started on ITTC's own initiative in September 2016. The process took longer than expected because of various circumstances. The final report was submitted to the ITTC Board in May 2019 where it was very well received.

The report was subsequently submitted to the University's Academic Programmes Quality & Resources Unit (APQRU) for endorsement. Today's seminar concludes the process before submission to the University Senate for final endorsement.

Consultations

The thinking on PPR was guided by feedback and comments received. Consultations is an essential component and that is why so much time was dedicated to it in the PPR process. Five separate consultation exercises with students were held. An innovative approach was adopted using both verbal and written feedback, while at the same time safeguarding student anonymity as much as is practicable. Consultations were also carried out with the industry by means of a focus group with the participation of individuals from different sectors of the industry, including tourism, hospitality, culture and events. Feedback was also collated by means of an online questionnaire as well as ad hoc meetings by the ITTC Director with various stakeholders.

ITTC resident academics and visiting lecturers are important stakeholders in the review process. Consultations with academic staff took various formats including meetings, seminars and distribution of reports. Inevitably this gave rise to many fruitful discussions on the undergraduate programme and on measures that are needed to improve it. Many ITTC lecturers have experience of the tourism industry and/or the cultural sector. Their knowledge of the sectors is supported and reinforced by research.

ITTC's academics input, coupled with the feedback from students and from the industry, were essential in ITTC's efforts to improve the quality of teaching and the quality of the programmes that we offer.

A record of all consultations were kept and are included in the final PPR report.

Approach to Programme Review

A holistic approach was adopted. Study units were not seen in isolation but were considered as part of a whole. The revision of the curriculum in particular required a lot of time and effort to look at the content of each study unit and relate it to the overall knowledge and skills that the undergraduate students are expected to acquire.

In the initial phases of the PPR process, the study-units were subdivided according to 'areas of study' as follows:

- A) Tourism Business and Management,
- B) Tourism Destination Management,
- C) Cultural and Heritage Tourism,
- D) Travel, Tourism and Hospitality,
- E) Structure of the tourism industry,
- F) Business and academic skills for tourism.

The programme was then evaluated to check whether there was too much focus on any one or more areas. The intention is to have a balanced programme with no one study area taking precedence over others.

During the PPR process, twenty one learning objectives for the undergraduate tourism programme were developed. These overarching statements were collated from the feedback provided by ITTC academics' experience over the years, supported by the various consultations carried out, as reported in the relevant sections and addenda of this report.

The undergraduate programme learning objectives are as follows:

1. Understand and explain tourism within broader **cultural, environmental, political and economic dimensions of society.**
2. Evaluate and assess **tourism practices** for their implications locally and globally.
3. Interpret and evaluate tourism as a phenomenon and as a business system.
4. Explain the diverse nature of tourism, including **culture and place**, global and local perspectives.
5. Identify and assess relationships and networks relative to building tourism capacity.
6. Apply relevant **technology** for the production and management of tourism experiences.
7. Plan and organize resources for effective and efficient **management of tourism organisation** and operations.
8. Create, apply, and evaluate **marketing strategies** for tourism destinations and organizations.
9. Develop and evaluate **tourism policy and planning** initiatives.
10. Identify trends and potential for more effective **management of a tourism destination.**
11. Develop an understanding of the role of **culture and heritage** in the tourism activity.
12. Create and implement innovative **hospitality** concepts, taking into account the requirements and challenges of modern service management.
13. Exhibit clear understanding and commitment to **ethical practices** of tourism.
14. Practice empathy and respect for diversity and **multicultural perspectives.**
15. Apply principles of **sustainability** to the practice of tourism in the local and global context.
16. Have a basic understanding of **research methods** commonly used in the context of tourism.
17. Select and use task-appropriate methods of **oral and written communication.**
18. Value and practice active listening, **critical thinking**, and critical reading.
19. Distinguish and produce methods of communication relevant to academia, business, government, and industry.
20. Work collaboratively in groups, both as a leader and a team member, in diverse environments, learning from and contributing to the learning of others.
21. Plan and manage their own continued personal **learning strategies** and methods.

It is not uncommon for tourism studies graduates to take up middle management jobs in sectors other than tourism. The learning objectives listed above illustrate how the tourism studies programme provide

skills and knowledge that professionals working in other sectors would also find relevant and useful. In the PPR process, the multi-disciplinary nature of tourism studies is acknowledged and reinforced thus making our graduates able to work in any field, and not just tourism.

PPR Changes to Curriculum

Work Placements: Tourism studies students are required to do work placements in both the first and second year. The ITTC consider the placement as an important part of the programme because of the learning that students can derive from it. Thanks to feedback received and the internal discussions, radical changes will be introduced to work placements.

The current curriculum provides for two work placements of 100 hours each, one in first year and another second year. The revised curriculum will include only one placement in the second year for a total of 200 hours. More importantly, instead of having one day a week throughout the semester there will be a block of 5 or 6 weeks in May /June. This would necessitate a reorganisation of the taught study-units in the second semester of the second year.

Careful selection of units: Study-units for the curriculum are carefully chosen in accordance to the knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire for their own self-development and for eventual use in the work place. Moreover, repetition of material was avoided, not only by careful selection, but also by careful evaluation of the content of each study-unit. Past experience shows that repetition across different study-units is demotivating to students.

Extension of elective study-units: ITTC wants to offer students the possibility of choosing study-units according to their aptitudes and interests. For this reason the revised curriculum will include elective study-units in all three years of the programme.

Ongoing Changes to Curriculum

As the PPR process progressed, it became evident that some changes were urgent and could not wait for the completion of PPR. Consequently, a number of short-term amendments were proposed, always in-line with the overall spirit of the PPR.

With APQRUs endorsement, new study-units were introduced, the most important being two study-units on events management and another one on food tourism. The need for these was evident from the consultations. Moreover, elective study-units were introduced in second year whereas the choice of elective units in third year was extended and rationalised.

ITTC's experience recognises the PPR journey as a dynamic process with long term objectives, but with the possibility of bringing about short-term changes.

Other Changes The core objective of revising the curriculum offered opportunities to explore other aspects related to the delivery of the programme. Furthermore, the revision process generated opportunities for self-reflection and a means for evaluating pedagogical practices.

Better use of study-unit descriptors: Consultations with academics revealed the need to sustain better use of the study-unit descriptors. Study-unit descriptors (made available on the UM's website) provide the basic framework to guide both lecturers and students during the period of study. Strict adherence to this framework is imperative, especially since study-unit undergoes rigorous scrutiny by the University's programme validation board and consequently has a direct effect on the Institution's quality assurance.

Lecturers are now constantly being encouraged to 'take ownership' of the study-unit descriptors for which they are responsible. They are expected to update them regularly to ensure conformity between the delivered lectures and the study-unit descriptors.

Third year long essay/ dissertation: Third year students are required to prepare a long essay which is a major piece of research work similar to a dissertation. The PPR process identified measures how to support student learning in this regard. As a result the long essay guidelines were revised and new guidelines for tutors were drafted. More guidance to students is being given, in the first and second year, on the skills required to successfully complete a research project. Another identified need is having an academic with the specific responsibility of Student Research Coordinator, for all ITTC's programmes and not just the undergraduate. The Coordinator is a reference point for any difficulty that may arise, if and when such difficulty cannot be handled by the respective tutor. The Coordinator oversees all matters related to research, including assessments. This new position is also needed to provide for greater consistency in the way students are guided and assessed.

Assignments as a measure of student learning: Assessments are an essential tool to measure student learning. One important form of assessment are assignments, normally involving the drafting of a report or essay. Assignments can be made more effective for student learning if the lecturers provide meaningful feedback on the students' work. ITTC introduced various improved practices in this regard.

Enhancing soft skills: In the PPR consultations, various stakeholders emphasised the importance of transferable skills. The industry requires individuals who are flexible and adaptable to the dynamic nature of the work environment. This necessitates the improvement of soft skills such as analytical skills; critical thinking; written communication; verbal and presentational skills; and reading and general research skills. The ITTC is constantly exploring ways how to enable students to enhance their skills. There are three or four study-units that are specific to soft skills (critical thinking, communication, research methods etc.). The delivery of these units has been revised and improved. Moreover lecturers are being encouraged to integrate soft skills development within their respective knowledge-based units.

Conclusion

The Periodic Programme Review marks an essential component in the ITTC strategy of sustaining growth while offering quality learning experiences for our students. Motivated by such common goals, the process generated an unprecedented opportunity towards a collaborative experience among lecturers, students and industry stakeholders. Coordinated by the authors, this report is the result of the collective effort of several groups and individuals who also share our passion.