

## Tourism Academia: A Horizon 2050 Paper

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of this paper is to chart the history of tourism academia and offer observations as to its future development in the twenty-first century.

**Design/ methodological:** This paper uses a limited review of the literature and the authors' personal reflections as its main approaches.

**Findings:** In reviewing the multi-generational history of tourism academia, it became apparent that whilst we have become a more scientifically rigorous community of scholars, a challenge for the academy going forward will be how best to cultivate a spirit of understanding amongst different parts of the academy when presented with viewpoints that do not appear to coalesce with one's understanding of 'truth'.

**Originality/value:** This paper contributes to scholarly debates over the history and future of tourism academia by challenging the academy to reflect critically on its increasing diversity and how to incorporate diverse viewpoints into the tourism knowledge canon.

**Keywords:** Tourism Academic; Knowledge; Values; International Academy for the Study of Tourism.

**Paper type:** Perspective article

### Introduction

Over the last 80 years, tourism academia has grown in importance, establishing itself as a rigorous source of knowledge on a variety of research topics related to the practice of tourism management (Beck et al., 2019; Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023) and as a mechanism for the dissemination of knowledge to future generations of student leaders in a myriad of tertiary institutions (Schweinsberg et al., 2022). Airey (2008) has described the study of tourism as 'mature', noting its capacity to encourage students to challenge existing conventions and ideas, as well as possessing the internal capacity for academics to be "self-critical and aware of the nature of the truths of their work" (p. 102). Such trends have been evident in, for example, efforts to use critical theory to deconstruct sustainability in tourism education (Boluk et al., 2021), and to critically assess and debate the future merit of tourism growth and other established twentieth-century tourism developmental paradigms (Butcher, 2021; Butcher, 2022; Higgins-Desbiolles & Everingham, 2022).

However, while leading tourism scholars are being recognised nationally and internationally, the number of tourism degrees being offered in countries such as China continues to grow (Bao & Huang, 2021; Liu & Lin, 2020), and tourism scholars are collaborating with international scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds (Correia & Kozak, 2022); the often vocational nature of tourism education has made it a target of those who seek to criticise its legitimacy as a scientific discipline or field of study (Sharpley, 2011). Debates over the legitimacy (or not) of tourism have extended to academic debates over tourism's disciplinarity. Tribe (1997, p. 646) has for instance observed:

To legitimate tourism studies by packaging, it up as a discipline not only fails on logical grounds (i.e., tourism studies does not pass the test), but [it –the test] is also an empty and fruitless one (i.e., disciplines are not the sine qua non of knowledge production).

Discussions over what constitutes tourism study over recent decades are taking place alongside the tremendous growth of tourism publications, which has led to more significant opportunities for the publication of research drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives (Kozak, 2019; McKercher, 2020). However, criticisms have also been raised around the narrow and often repetitive approaches to the formulation of our choice of research designs (Dolnicar et al., In press) and a lack of gender diversity in senior leadership positions within the academy and in tourism editorial boards (Lockstone-Binney et al., 2021; Munar et al., 2017). Also, whilst research fields such as critical tourism (encompassing 'Tourism/ Tourist Imaginaries'; the 'New mobilities Paradigm' and the 'Academy of Hope' in Tzanelli, 2022) have been projected as new modes of thinking about tourism's relationship with the natural and social world (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023), concerns have been raised over the need for more attention to be paid to the application of critical tourism doctrines to tourism policies and planning documents/strategies in destinations (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2023).

The global tourism industry has also often looked at tourism academia dismissively, describing us as living in an ivory tower with little to no relevance to the practical needs of the sector. In recent years, there has been evidence of academics coming to terms with the need to critically assess their research impact (Thomas & Ormerod, 2017). One of the key themes emerging from discussions over academia's impact on industry is our ability to cultivate relationships – working with other stakeholders but not allowing our critical examination of theory to be dictated to by powerful sectional interests (Lovering, 1999). This brings us to the issue of the sustainable development goals (hereafter SDGs) that are the focus of this special edition. The SDGs represent one area where the tourism industry and other related stakeholder groups are recognised as being able to make a positive contribution to societal and environmental well-being as we approach 2050 and beyond (Buhalis et al., 2023). Academics have an essential role in such debates, developing partnerships, challenging other stakeholders including other academics to move beyond the status quo (Schweinsberg, 2018) and advocating for evidence-based decision-making around sustainability issues. However, challenging others to move beyond the status quo can be complicated when questions about our legitimacy are raised. Here, tensions can include: “balancing structure versus openness and flexibility; academic obligations of truth and accuracy; resisting typical notions of what counts in academia; and expectations vis-à-vis measuring the impact of [tourism-based research]” (Boydell et al., 2016, p. 682). In recent years, such questions have manifested themselves in public debates over the relationship between tourism and climate change and discussions over tourism growth in a post-COVID-19 world (see Schweinsberg et al., 2021).

The presence of competing academic perspectives on wicked problems facing the tourism industry stems partly from tourism academia's increasing diversity and the evolution of new paradigms for interpreting the world (e.g. Ateljevic, 2020). Gone are the days when tourism scholars wrote passionately for the development of tourism without apparent qualification or critical consideration (Hacking, 1946). Today, in contrast, we are a diverse community of scholars drawing insights from different time periods, countries of origin and forms of doctoral training. From a generational perspective, for example:

The first generation were the ‘true pioneers of the field’; the second generation were those with ‘strong intuitive knowledge of the practice of tourism’ responsible for the expansion of standalone tourism degrees; and the third generation extends to most academics who have been trained in dedicated tourism doctoral programmes, dating back to the late 1990s (Pernecky, 2023, p. 560).

As each generation has proceeded, the relationship between the world of tourism, the tourism knowledge forcefield and the knowledge we produce has also evolved. As we proceed to 2050, we must recognise that our diversity is our strength and that our legacy will be based on our ability to see

the knowledge we create through the lens of our own experiences and the experiences of others (Schweinsberg, In press). However, we must consider several important questions to be an inclusive academy. For example, how can we adhere, on the one hand, to scientific orthodoxy, which is central to our scholarly legitimacy and our ability to attract research funding competing against STEM disciplines (Huang et al., 2019), whilst on the other hand, be open to engaging with other viewpoints that we know are often present in broader society but have not thus far been considered within the tourism knowledge landscape or are in some cases opposed to how our tourism academic contemporise view formulate scientific research (e.g. Schweinsberg, 2023a, 2023b)? Does the presence of contrary viewpoints in the academy represent an attack on our sense of self? Alternatively, is it a pathway to engage with viewpoints in a new light and challenge us to understand other opinions and justify pre-existing ideas in a new light?

### **Past Developments 1940-2020**

Over the last eighty years, tourism academia has evolved from a variety of foundational disciplines including geography, sociology and anthropology (Nash et al., 2012; Smith, 2010). The inaugural professional chair in the study of tourism was instituted in Austria in the 1930s (Jafari, 1990), and the world's first tourism journal, *Tourism Review* (formally *Tourist Review*), was published in 1946. However, it was not until the 1960s and 70s that scholarly journals such as the *Journal of Travel Research*, *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Tourism Recreation Research* appeared that the study of tourism in its various early disciplinary guises (sociological, economic, geographical and anthropological etc. in Jafari, 2001) became more extensively disseminated and the role of tourism academics as critical advocates for the study of tourism more widely recognised (Xiao et al., 2013).

Throughout its history, the legitimacy of the academy has been aided by the formation of scholarly institutions. The first, the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism (AIEST), founded in 1951, “is [still] dedicated to improving the world travel and tourism industry through analysis of trends and latest developments in tourism and farsighted solutions for problems as they arise” (AIEST, 2023, online). The 73<sup>rd</sup> AIEST conference will occur in Bolzano, Italy, in 2024. The second was the International Academy for the Study of Tourism in Spain in 1988, first conceived by Jafa Jafari (Butler & Wall, 1988). The aim of the academy, which is now articulated in the Academy Bylaws, refers to “furthering scholarly research and the professional investigation of tourism, to encourage the application of findings, and to advance the international diffusion and exchange of tourism knowledge” (International Academy of the Study of Tourism, 2021). Other academic associations have been developed outside these organisations, including the Council of Australian Universities Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE), the Tourism Education Futures Initiative and the Critical Tourism Studies Community. The Travel Research Association (TTRA) was established to increase the links between academics and industry, and the Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET) has continued to grow (Schweinsberg & Darcy, 2022).

Developed at a particular historical point, academic associations have helped frame an academic community’s sense of identity and mission (Butler & Wall, 1988). At the same time, however, questions have been raised over existing associations e.g. their member composition and research agendas (Dann, 2009). In recent years, criticisms have been made around the apparent gender imbalance within the academy (Pritchard & Morgan, 2017), a trend observed in the composition of tourism journal editorial boards (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015) and the promotion prospects of women in higher education (Gewinner, 2020). Higgins-Desbiolles (2020a) has argued that the academy must embrace diversity in all its forms if it expects to educate future tourism leaders, which are increasingly

being found in tertiary institutions outside of the Anglosphere in countries such as China and India (Bao & Huang, 2021; Gangotia et al., 2022). In addition to pursuing diversity in our approaches to research through our engagement with local communities and other often marginalised stakeholder groups (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022; Thakur et al., 2023), there is also a response to consider what future tourism academics expect by way of diversity and inclusion. We know that tourism academia is a multi-generational entity, but to what extent are we allowing ourselves to be dictated by the views of earlier generations and their doctrines/truths through the peer review process and PhD training (McKercher & Prideaux, 2014)? This is not to say that earlier generations of scholars cannot continue to play an important leadership role in the academy (see Schweinsberg et al., 2018). Many contemporary mindsets around issues like critical tourism in fact parallel the arguments put forward by first-generation scholars over the evils of the 'golden hoards' and tourism's impacts on the societies and environments in the 'pleasure periphery' (Ateljević et al., 2018). However, are we limiting ourselves by adopting an overly Western-centric perspective and ignoring indigenous viewpoints or those from other areas of the world, including Asia and the Middle East, where tourism academia is gaining momentum?

Recognising our collective sense of self is essential because the tourism knowledge forcefield, which includes person, position, ideology, rules, and ends, plays a role in making progress in tourism knowledge (Tribe & Liburd, 2016). As academics, we view tourism through our knowledge forcefield but also use that forcefield to critically assess knowledge written in other times and places. Throughout its history, the study of tourism has been subject to periodisation and the publication of scholarly works that represented commentary on the critical topics of the day, as well as on the study of other issues that were intended to challenge the status quo (see chronological history in Vukonic, 2012). Driven by evolving tourism knowledge platforms and progressively more sophisticated conceptual models, tourism academics have been able to consider issues of the day with increasing levels of intellectual precision. On the back of advocacy, cautionary, adaptancy, and knowledge platforms (Jafari, 1990), scholars have advanced into bodies of knowledge that emphasise sustainable development and ethics (Macbeth, 2005), which has more recently been formulated into an expanding consciousness (Fennell, 2019) or global consciousness platform (Lew, 2018). This more contemporary perspective on tourism studies research encompasses "ethics, sustainability, rights, justice, care, responsibility, compassion, and respect" (Fennell, 2019, p. 12).

As the sophistication of the tourism academy has evolved, earlier perspectives can often be seen as uncritical and naive concerning their whole-hearted advocacy of the merits of tourism growth and development. Also, gone are the days when one needed to account for the various impacts of tourism or its links to wicked problems such as climate change and sustainability. Today, tourism academics must also account for the merits of their choices and how they position themselves within the problem space and the industries they are discussing (Higham & Font, 2020). They are also required to assess when it is right to dissent from a commonly accepted position in the academy or society at large (Schweinsberg et al., 2021) and the degree to which one should allow one's values and beliefs to guide research agendas based on academic activism (Hales et al., 2018)? Higgins-Desbiolles and Everingham (2022) have argued that "scholarly debate ensures that the tourism academy secures sound understandings of phenomena in the interest of thriving futures". However, as we reflect on COVID-19 in the next section and future developments to 2050 in the section after that, the question becomes: Which future(s) should be the goal?

## COVID 2020-2023 and Lessons Learned

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic became a global concern for the tourism industry in late 2019 and early 2020, it has threatened the mobility of travellers and the economic viability of tourism destinations and industry sectors worldwide (World Tourism Organisation, 2024). Over the last four years, tourism academics have played a role in advocating for the importance of tourism to governments, assisting the industry in managing responses to a once-in-a-century crisis event (Buhalis, 2022) and upskilling future generations of tourism professionals through the critical examination of the COVID pandemic in undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Tiwari et al., 2021). Although it is not possible to generalise the impact and recovery of tourism across all geographies and jurisdictions, the secretary general of the UNWTO recently commented that on a macro-level, "the latest UNWTO data shows that tourism has almost completely recovered from the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 with many destinations reaching or even exceeding pre-pandemic arrivals and receipts" (Richeter, 2023). Going forward, the question for tourism academia is whether or not such a recovery is, in fact, a good thing. We must acknowledge not only the debates over the ethical and social justice issues in the global tourism industry prior to the pandemic (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020b) but also the efforts of some tourism academics to argue for a new normal for the sector, one which draws on principles of critical tourism, a departure from growth imperatives and a focus on lived values in tourism education (e.g., Lew et al., 2020). Were the sentiments expressed in this and other writings representative of the more comprehensive academy, or have they gained traction in the wider academy and tourism industry? Only four years from the onset of the pandemic, such questions are impossible to answer. Previous evolutions in academic thinking around sustainability and climate change often take decades to coalesce and enter academic and industry thinking. Also, as Jafari (2001) has argued, the development of a new knowledge domain, such as the evolutionary paradigm, which has been applied to tourism post-COVID-19 (Kock et al., 2020) does not negate the benefits in earlier knowledge domains; all platforms coexist simultaneously. Butler (2023) suggested that we need to think carefully about our motivations for refocussing tourism:

- Why rethink tourism?
- Why rethink tourism now?
- Who could/should do such a rethink?
- Moreover, for whom or what would a rethink be aimed (Butler, 2023)?

Such questions do not suggest that there was no reason for a fundamental rethink after COVID-19. Instead, the challenge for the academy is to carefully consider the motivations of such a rethink. Is it simply for ourselves, our motivations, values, and ideals? Or is a change premised on achieving a fundamental betterment of society (Butler, 2023)? Have we accounted for the diversity our changes will cause for better or worse throughout the tourism system? Moreover, how can we practically achieve change to benefit people of all situations today and the future?

## Future Developments

If we look at popular opinion pieces on the question of what academia is, we see a range of words that will be familiar to readers. Academics are 'teachers', 'thinkers', 'researchers', 'communicators', 'innovators', 'leaders' and 'mentors'. Such words describe aspects of every tourism academic reading this paper as you fulfil your scholarly duty in universities, government, private practice, and even in retirement. However, none of these characteristics fully defines us. Yes, we are all these, but more fundamentally, tourism academics are people motivated enough to want to make a difference in the

world around us, even if this means subjecting ourselves to constant critique from other members of the academy and the public. As we develop new knowledge, we are like the escaped prisoner in Plato's cave who, after escaping, is instructed to go back into the cave, re-adjust his or her eyes (i.e., understanding) to the shadows that still exist within the cave with a view to 'rescuing' his fellow prisoners (Plato, 2012). When he does, Plato acknowledges that the prisoner's greater understanding from his time above ground will equip him to discern reality more effectively than the other prisoners who have not yet escaped, as evidence of one's ontological freedom (Thomson, 2001). At the same time, however, he or she will be ridiculed by those who continue to live in the shadows as delusional and must recognise the limits of one's logoi. Plato is thus reminding his audience that,

True knowledge is the ability to recognise these logoi's inherent ambiguities and interpret what is being said despite this uncertainty. Shadows are not to be escaped or avoided, but rather, they are an integral part of philosophical discourse and the knowledge that it hopes to uncover (Sommers, 2017, p. 132)

As tourism academics, it is easy to see the attraction of a Platonic view of knowledge concerning issues like climate change, sustainability, growth/degrowth, and religion – issues that are both scientific/rational and subjective. Through reasoning and evidence, we can come closer to a proper understanding of reality – the *forms* – that can be distinguished from “the visible world-the world of the senses, a world of opinions” (Boucoulas, 2002). However, as we strive to bring our understanding of tourism to other academies of knowledge and the wider world (i.e., the shadow), we must recognise how reliant we are on the community of scholars that make up the tourism academy.

The authors of the present paper have both experienced the benefits of enlightened academic leadership from members of the academy and a willingness to allow dialogue between different academics to encourage critical reflection of ideas and opinions. By way of example, the lead author of this paper recently observed that whilst there is a long-standing body of knowledge on the management of religious tourism, little had been said on whether and how an academic's religious beliefs should impact his or her scholarly work (references to be inserted after peer review). When recently reflecting on the process of writing these papers, the author was struck by the sentiments expressed by some that he was 'courageous' in writing papers that proudly affirmed his Christian beliefs and reflected on the degree to which faith should be allowed to impact academic work. Leaving aside what a reader may see in the merits of the arguments in the papers above, the success of a paper is as much a testament to the editors and reviewers as it is to the author. It is through the merging of knowledge creation and curation that a scholar can communicate honestly and that new ideas can be floated, tested, and accepted.

A similar experience in a different knowledge domain was experienced by the second author when his research on the use of animals in tourism approximately a decade ago was met with cynicism. In one case, a referee of one of his papers argued that we could summarise all we need to know about animal ethics in one paragraph, around the same time that his sole-authored book on the topic was published. In another case, and around the same time, graduate students at other universities who attended his lectures wondered whether he should be nervous or fearful about embracing this study area. Several years later, the animal ethics subfield has grown as much as any sub-field in tourism research (Fennell, 2022). In reflecting on the growth in our understanding of animal ethics or other new bodies of knowledge, we are convinced that tourism scholars cannot be wedded to ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and methodologies that are static and devoid of meaning for the world around us. Anthropocentric, utilitarian, and instrumental thinking must be replaced with more holistic agendas that push us out of conventional thinking to impact our world.

Before 2050, the tourism teaching environment will evolve, and new lines of scholarly inquiry will present themselves that will influence the direction of tourism academia. Rather than seeking to articulate these futures, many of which are specific niche areas and are alluded to elsewhere in this special edition, the end of this paper will instead make a few observations on tourism academia, which we argue will help underwrite its future educational and research successes. The first concerns the importance of leadership. Historically, leadership in tourism academia has been top-down, with senior professors and adjunct/emeritus professors who have roles on the editorial boards of journals and tourism academic associations signalled out for their leadership impact. Whilst such people continue to play a positive role in guiding the direction of scholarly research and education (indeed, they need to play an active role in our further development as a field), we must also find ways to involve other members of the academy, e.g., PhD students, and marginalised members of the academy in supporting diversity and inclusion, as we move towards 2050. PhD students represent tourism academia and industry's history, present and future (Pearce, 2005). Over recent years, whilst the pool of candidates has expanded, the neoliberal and commercial character of tourism education has led some students to identify "unhealthy levels of competition, questionable supervisory practices and quantitative measurements of output that discourage intellectual engagement and creativity" (Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022). Furthermore, our adherence to the sustainable development goals is intergenerational and underpinned by principles of equality and social justice (Buhalis et al., 2023). Such principles must extend beyond the relationship between tourists and host communities to also encompass the academics who research and practice the study of tourism.

When tourism academics reflect on their legacy, they often identify that they wish to be remembered for the students they have nurtured. Whilst many individual scholars have been very successful in this regard, where is the academy's attention to nurturing leaders of tomorrow? We often see individual tertiary institutions, journals, and academic associations training and acknowledging tomorrow's future leaders. Whilst such initiatives will continue to be necessary, how might the academy also play a role in fostering leadership? One strategy that could be implemented is forming PhD, early career, and mid-career representation in an existing organisation of excellence in tourism scholarship (AIEST, Tourism Academy, or other such organisation). In the case of the Tourism Academy, full membership as 'fellows' should continue only to be available to academics who are deemed by a majority of existing fellows to have made an "outstanding contribution to the field of tourism, and they have made a presentation at an Academy conference as an invited scholar" (International Academy of the Study of Tourism, 2021). However, at the same time, efforts should be made to consider how the evolving and often transient community of more 'junior' scholars can be better represented. These scholars, drawn from an increasing array of nationalities and backgrounds, will ultimately define the study of tourism in 2050 and beyond. We must recognise their concerns about their representation in scholarly decision-making processes and demonstrate an ability to adapt to the times.

Another strategy might be establishing formal (or informal) mentoring programs within the academy to allow emerging scholars from emerging areas, nations, or regions precluded from gaining access to senior academics due to personal disadvantage to put their ideas and approaches in front of key decision-makers. One mechanism to achieve this would be creating a variation of the popular Trinet (Tourism Research Information Network). Fennell (2021) cited TRINET in the context of knowledge translation to benefit the tourism industry, i.e., building a more vital bridge between theory and practice, connecting back to our discussion in the Introduction on the necessity of making our research more relevant.) In addition to using this platform for facilitating "an open exchange of ideas, information, and opinions that are relevant to tourism scholarship, including theory, research, education, policy development, and operational matters", the platform could provide templates for emerging scholars to raise project ideas, works in progress, teaching challenges or concerns with senior

scholars and to elicit buy-in or advice from across the academy. Such a platform, which would work best if supported by multiple tertiary institutions and the international associations, would likely grow organically if made user friendly and both senior and junior staff can see the rigorousness in its application and the benefits of further knowledge and its dissemination.

We further argue that the evolution of tourism academia must also include a discussion of universities' excessive dependence on international students to finance their operations in the face of severe national or regional budget cuts. While international students have long been a feature of tourism programs, the finance model has switched to relying on international students in significant numbers who must pay as much as four times (perhaps more) the tuition as domestic students. The second author recalls petitions circulated by domestic students over tuition hikes for international students as far back as 1982. How sustainable this model is for the future of tourism programs and universities is a question of considerable weight. However, if we accept international students and charge them four times the tuition, there must be mechanisms in place that allow these students to flourish in the face of cultural challenges, as well as language, mental and physical health, pedagogy, housing, support, and financial issues (Akanwa, 2015). There are also challenges for tourism faculty as professors are asked to do more because of reduced staff numbers. For example, retired professors have yet to have their positions replaced by new faculty, in many geographical contexts. Furthermore, professors are now being asked to do much more because of reduced administrative support, adding to more pressure in the face of scholarly output demands. Future studies should investigate successful programs (funding, resources, scholarly output, and so on) and compare these against programs that are resource-poor in achieving a better grasp of the future of tourism studies.

## **Conclusion**

Over the last 80 years, the tourism academic community has grown from a small group of pioneers working on the boundaries of psychology, anthropology, geography, and sociology to a coordinated scholarly community characterised by research and educational associations and growing numbers of scholarly journals (McKercher, 2020). Tourism PhDs, representing the next generation of academic leaders, continue to graduate from all parts of the world and tourism academics can engage with a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives. As tourism academics move towards 2050, we must see diversity as a strength. To achieve diversity, we must find ways to conduct respectful open dialogue with other academics and industry on contentious issues. It is only then that we will be able to better 'understand' the tourism phenomena.

Developing collegiality in tourism academia is, however, often easier said than done. Not all academics agree over the future of tourism or the relevance of new disciplinary perspectives to its study. On the first of these issues, we have already commented on the fracturing of parts of the academy over the impacts of COVID-19. When new paradigms for understanding tourism are proposed they will also not necessarily be seen by more established voices as being relevant or legitimate. On this, we are reminded of the words of the philosopher John Stuart Mill who once observed; 'Every great movement must experience three stages: ridicule, discussion, adoption' (Regan, 2013, p. 179). However, rather than close our minds to new ideas we must recognise that the inclusion of new modes of thinking gives us the opportunity to continue to grow our field into an ever more rigorous scholarly community. In doing so, we must not be afraid to put contested ideas forward, and it is the responsibility of the academy to listen to these ideas without prejudice.



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