Premier’s Xstrata Coal Rural and Remote Education Scholarships

The education of Hospitality students in rural and remote areas of South Africa and Botswana with a focus on Eco Tourism and Environmental Sustainability

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Introduction

‘Government commitment to sustainable development will ultimately be judged by actions not words’

- Friends of the Earth

*‘Leading the way – learning for sustainability’*

- Education Week slogan (2010)

It was this Education Week maxim that inspired me to seek further information on best educational practise in South Africa and Botswana. Educators have a responsibility to teach the next generation how to put sustainable practices in action.

Since 2009 there has been an emphasis on the explicit teaching of environmentally sustainability within the Tourism and Hospitality educational systems. Whilst portions of earlier syllabi did contain content relating to environmental sustainability, this was usually covered only briefly and required no specific, real world research to be undertaken by the students.

The purpose of this study tour was to examine and compare the education and on the job training of Hospitality students and trainees, specifically in relation to environmental sustainability. Primarily, the study was a comparison between current practices in Australia and best practice in rural South Africa.

The importance and significance of Eco Tourism in NSW and specifically the Singleton region can be seen in the following points:

* Sustainable nature tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the Australian tourism market and New South Wales is well placed to share some of this growth. Nature tourism is a key driver of economic activity and sustainable employment, particularly in regional New South Wales (Tourism NSW, 2010).
  + The Accommodation and Food Services industry is the sixth largest employer in the Hunter Valley (Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism, 2010), employing 7.7 % of the workforce (approx. 17,000 people) within the local council areas of the Hunter Valley (ABS, 2006).
  + With an employment base of more than 1.3 million people, the Hospitality and associated industries are preparing for an additional 325,000 new jobs. The Hospitality industry is an important part of the Australian economy, contributing significantly to the gross domestic product (GDP)”.
  + (Department of Education and Training Hospitality Curriculum Framework Rationale, 2009).
  + Training increases and improves the value of the environmental experience for the visitor (D.E.C.C NSW, 2010)
  + In February 2010 Singleton High School was used as a pilot school to implement an Early Stage 6 Hospitality Course. The official opening of the Hospitality Trade Training Centre (TTC) saw Singleton Educational Precinct become one of the best-equipped Hospitality training environments in N.S.W.

The study tour, consisting of 32 days, allowed me to visit vocational colleges, schools and on the job training centres in South Africa and Botswana to observe and discuss best practice in Eco Tourism training courses. Also interaction with students and staff members took place to compare their experiences to those of students studying similar courses in Australia. The study tour allowed me to observe education programs and consider how they may be implemented in my programs.

It’s impossible to separate the issue of environmental sustainability from those of social and economic development. Without proper environmental management, our world’s fragile climate patterns and eco-systems will collapse.

Tourism

By definition the act of being hospitable is the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors or strangers with liberality and goodwill. In general, the food and hospitality industry in South Africa refers to any position of service dealing largely with tourism. Therefore, you'll regularly find that the food and hospitality industry and the travel and tourism industry overlap.

South Africa's food and hospitality industry has experienced exceptional growth over the past five years. The government has played a major role in contributing to this development by exposing the industry; at a high level, using various Tourism and Hospitality bodies of which there are many. This exposure of South African hospitality to international markets was at its greatest during the FIFA World Cup in 2010.

Education Systems of South Africa and Botswana

The education system in South Africa is very similar to that of Australia. There are three bands of education recognised by South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF);

* 1. General Education and Training, NQF Level 1, (equivalent to Australia’s Grade 0 to 9)
  2. Further Education and Training (FET), NQF Levels 2 to 4, (Australian Grades 10 to 12)
  3. Higher Education and Training, NQF Levels 5 to 8 (University and adult training, equivalent to Certificate courses through to Masters and Doctorates)

At about 5.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 20% of total state expenditure, South Africa has one of the highest rates of public investment in education in the world. Education in South Africa is compulsory between the ages of seven to the age of 15 years old. The matriculation (Year 12 exam) pass rate was as low as 40% in the late 1990s but has improved considerably. A total of 61000 sat the matriculation exams in 2010, 60.6% of whom passed.

In state-funded public schools, the average ratio of pupils to teachers is 31.5 to one, while private schools generally have one teacher for every 17.5 scholars.

Illiteracy rates currently stand at around 18% of adults over 15 years old (about 9-million adults are not functionally literate), teachers in township schools are poorly trained, in some cases in the more remote areas delivering classroom teachers have no formal training what so ever, and the matric pass rate remains low.

While 65% of whites over 20 years old and 40% of Indians have a secondary school or higher qualification, this figure is only 14% among blacks and 17% among the coloured population.

The government is in particular targeting education for the poorest of the poor, with two notable programmes. One programme is fee-free schools (known as Category C schools), institutions that receive all their required funding from the state and so do not have to charge school fees. These have been carefully identified in the country's most poverty-stricken areas, and will make up 40% of all schools in 2011.

Subject selection in Further Education and Training (FET) is not dissimilar to that in Australia as well. Core subject content and duration is similar as is the number and duration of elective subjects. However the subject of Tourism appears to be much more popular than Hospitality in the areas I visited. Sources within the education system of South Africa claim that this is because of the disadvantage that students face when trying to gain placement in Tertiary Education Institutes as Hospitality is poorly weighted compared to Tourism.

Learnerships (defined as work placements or internships in Australia) are much lengthier in South Africa compared to Australia. Most Hospitality related courses in Australia require a total of two weeks to achieve Certificate II level however most courses in South Africa require the students to complete a minimum of one month and in some cases 3 months. This extended period is possible as Certificate II and III courses are only available to full time tertiary students.

To fill a position in this industry requires the self-possession which results from being highly responsible and committed to performing one's personal duty. The main activity of the hospitality industry is the sale of accommodation, food and beverages. This provides an entire ‘*casserole’* full of job opportunities.

One key concept I found both engaging and significant was the term of 'flexible generalists' (SAQA) (Ball, 1996). 'Flexible generalists' are people equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to adjust readily to multiple career changes and make, through their own personal development, a significant contribution to the life of South Africa and the world. The shift in thinking is from education for employment - developing the ability to do a specific job - to education for employability - developing the ability to adapt acquired skills to new working environments. The education and training system must be able to support the notion of an adaptable workforce. However one host employer discussing a Tourism trainee who attended a Malaysian sponsored school claimed she was shocked how little they learn in tourism schools and how little they are prepared for the real world out there.

In South Africa this practice is evident across many areas, not just Tourism education, and the unified support mechanisms in place to sustainably support them, are not as clearly in place across Australia. Specifically the lodge staff at the remote areas of northern Botswana are multi skilled, skills not just restricted to the service industry directly. In some cases the lodges are 2 hours flight from the nearest significant support mechanisms and they become quite self-sufficient in many ways.

The lack of technology used in the classroom was surprising. Some schools utilise generators for their primary power source, others have limited, disrupted, internet access which is not conducive to quality learning. In addition to this teacher’s claim that less than 10% of the student body would have access to the internet at home.

Educational premises are not overtly as environmentally friendly as comparable schools in Australia. They are beginning to incorporate sustainable work practices in the more affluent schools, but the basic, unsubsidised, schools are yet to have the resources to achieve any significant progress towards sustainable work practices. There are school-based programs such as the ‘Eco-schools Program’, ‘Living Local Incentive’, ‘Learning for Sustainable Living’ and ‘My School – My Village – My Planet’, however resources, time and alternate programs take priority in the basic schools.

Course fees create a restriction on choice when bursary (government financial assistance) is not available for students. Interestingly in Botswana a family’s assets are measured in the number of goats and or cattle the family own, this is the formal measurement of family wealth. Government incentives to continue on in the area of study once formal studies are completed include Red Door program, (an incentive for members of the black population to create their own business to create employment) Youth Development Fund, BEE incentive (Black Economic Empowerment) which provides subsidies to assist the black population, some junior schools have introduced business clubs that introduce students to business opportunities in the corporate world, therefore linking them to incentives to follow sustainable work practices.

One program that I came across that interested me greatly was a national youth training program titled TheUmzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth*.* There are numerous others including the ‘Umsobomvu Youth Fund’ and the ‘Tourism Learnership Program’.The Umzi Wethu Training Academy is a dynamic intervention model that offers skills development and job placement to youths who, despite incredibly adverse circumstances, have shown resilience and ambition. Denied opportunities to access training and jobs due to circumstances generally beyond their control, Umzi Wethu transforms these youths, many of whom have been orphaned as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, into highly employable young adults.

The programme, established by the Wilderness Foundation, has achieved initial success within the hospitality and eco-tourism industry, but has been designed to benefit a far wider spread of industries. By harnessing the economic promise of eco-tourism, the Foundation hopes to break the cycle of poverty and unemployment. The Umzi Wethu program was piloted within the food and beverage side of the eco-tourism sector, specifically training junior chefs and waiters but has now spread its scope to training field guides and rangers.

Of interest is the lack of tracking of post-graduation progress of the student body. None of those in the education system I spoke to could provide information on how successful their students were in gaining related long term employment in the years after the students had completed their formal studies. There was data to show that the ‘Learnerships’ (work placements) the students undertook were a gateway to immediate employment, but this usually corresponded to the high season in most tourism areas and may have represented casual employment for the short term.

Grassroots educators commented on the lack of career guidance given to the students of South Africa. This inadequacy is recognised by Department executive and is being addressed in 2012/2013. At present if a student requires any form of career guidance they are directed to the school counsellor who has a similar role and training to school counsellors in Australia.

Sustainability

In July 2008, the South African Cabinet passed the National Framework for Sustainable Development (NFSD). The NFSD is designed to “initiate a broad framework for sustainable development in South Africa that can serve as a basis from which to develop and consolidate a national strategy and action plan”. The NFSD proposes a national vision, principles, trends, strategic priority areas, and a set of implementation measures that are intended to enable and guide the development of the national strategy and action plan.  
The NFSD discusses the various environmental and social risk areas facing South Africa and maps out five strategic priority areas:

* 1. Enhancing systems for integrated planning and implementation.
  2. Sustaining our ecosystems and using resources sustainably.
  3. Investing in sustainable economic development and infrastructure.
  4. Creating sustainable human settlements.
  5. Responding appropriately to emerging human development, economic and environmental challenges.

The NFSD states that in order to embark on the journey (‘to a sustainable, economically prosperous and self-reliant nation’) it needs various things – a robust institutional framework, an action plan or roadmap to make sense of the five strategic priority areas, and “to ensure that everyone is on board and stays on board …for this we need ongoing consultation and communication”. Critics say that South Africa does not actually have a nationally co-ordinated policy on sustainable development. It’s still on its way to developing one.

Part of this NFSD, or more so supporting it, is the introduction of Green Taxes. Somewhat topical in Australian politics in 2011. Carbon taxes were implemented in South Africa early in 2011 and further research is being done to expand environmental taxes and levies for the fiscal year 2011-12. Deductions can be made against these taxes in respect to environmental expenditure or environmental conservation and maintenance undertaken by tourism operators. Small business operators have government incentives in the form of the ‘green leaf eco standard’ to follow and utilise as promotion of sound work practices.

Okavango Delta

The Okavango Delta of northern Botswana has become an important international tourist destination. The mixed terrain found in the seasonal swamps, which combines shallow wetland environments with densely forested islands, is a particularly popular region for safari lodges, and most of the lodges have been built in the dense, riverine forest on these islands. The majority of lodges obtain their water from boreholes on the island close to the lodge, and wastewater is treated and disposed of by means of septic tanks connected to soak-aways, also close to the lodge. Lodges typically accommodate between 16 and 24 guests, and the ratio of staff to guests is usually about 2 to 1, so that at full occupancy, a lodge may entail a community of up to 75 people. Most lodges dispose of organic refuse in pits in the general camp area. These pits are typically about 2 m deep, and close to the water table.

The remoteness of these areas affects the schooling of the youth of the area in an unusual form. The workers in the lodges work on a usual roster system of 50 days on, 25 days off. Many of the workers have school age children, and these children, who many fend for themselves in the absence of their parents, therefore are reluctant to attend school during those 50 days while their parents are away. The priority of education in the remote areas is the core subjects, Mathematics, English and Setswani (the official second language of Botswana).

Much of the initial education in the more remote areas of Botswana is provided in an informal way. Outdoor classrooms (It is illegal in many areas to construct any permanent structure due to seasonal flooding and a way of maintaining the cultural history of the area) with students using the sandy soil as a blank canvas and their finger as the writing implement are not unusual. Instruction is provided by a village elder who may or may not have formal training themselves. This form of education may take place up until the age of 8 or 9 and will be delivered in Setswani (the official second language of Botswana). After this age students will move to a larger village to stay with an extended family member or friend, this could be in excess of 5 hours drive from their homes in some instances. Here they will begin to learn English, all educational instruction in Secondary school is given in English, although Setswani is a compulsory subject throughout the child’s schooling.

Conclusion

The study of stand-alone, course specific, environmental sustainability (Eco Tourism) does not exist in the curriculum and assessment policy statement (Hospitality) of the Department: Basic Education Republic of South Africa (2011). More so the practice of environmental sustainable work practices in tourism stems from an ingrained psyche that can be explained by the following observation by Bock and Johnson (2004) “children’s play is widely believed by educators and social scientists to have a training function that contributes to psychosocial development as well as the acquisition of skills related to adult task performance.”

Many related courses take on a much more holistic approach to training youth for roles within the tourism sector, specifically a core subject unique to South Africa titled ‘Life orientation’.

The study tour changed my perception of the quality of education, particularly Hospitality education, in Australia. Education in Australia is value for money when compared to South Africa but despite their attempts to create ‘flexible generalists’, anecdotal evidence shows that students in urban areas are less able to transfer their theoretical knowledge to outside the workplace outside the school environment while students in rural and remote areas have a more holistic approach to their education.

As a result of my time in South Africa and Botswana I have a deeper believe that the classroom extends beyond the four walls and that environmental sustainability should, and can successfully be, taught in the quadrangles of our schools, in the homes of the learners, through our actions as educators and responsible citizens. Good practice should be modelled and rehearsed as much as in our actions just as much, if not more so, as what we say.

The undertaking of this study tour will allow me to create a number of case studies which the students of the Hunter Central Coast region may use to understand eco-tourism. A digital resource will be created to give students a deeper understanding of cultural diversity on display in the southern part of Africa. I will speak at the annual Technology Educators Australia annual conference in July 2012. Contacts made during the trip will be followed up in an effort to provide students from the Hunter Central Coast region to explore career and volunteer opportunities in South Africa and Botswana.

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