

# Lifelong Learning for Tourism in Croatia – a “nice to have” or “must have”?

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*This paper examines the importance of education and lifelong learning for tourism in the Republic of Croatia, a country that heavily depends on tourism. It reports on the current state of tourism education in Croatia and aims at suggesting a more effective and systematic approach to building a strong tourism platform for future. The paper uses secondary research data and proposes several approaches and possible solutions for further consideration.*

## Introduction

Most research on education in tourism focuses on higher education. This paper suggests a shift of focus to lifelong perspective. Tourism is vital for Croatian economy and future competitive position in the European Union. The importance of human element in tourism interactions is often described as the most influential one and any tourism dependent country should pay much more attention to its development.

This paper argues that the best approach to developing skilled and willing labor force is to start from an early age with a careful design of learning opportunities available to all citizens of Croatia.

## Lifelong Learning in EU

According to the European Commission, in a knowledge based, rapidly changing world with an overall aging population, the concept of lifelong learning becomes a priority. Lifelong education (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974; Dave, 1975) involves formal, non-formal and informal education and learning activities. Lifelong learning aims at achieving higher employability rates, economic prosperity and active participation of diverse citizens making them more engaged as workforce (European Commission, 2012).

There are a lot of challenges in designing valid lifelong tourism educational programs. The International Federation for IT and Travel and Tourism (2012)(ITFITT) is highly supportive of the idea of lifelong learning in tourism. In June 2012 they issued an *e-Tourism Curriculum* ready to be adopted by any stakeholder. The European Commission states that there are certain requirements for successful implementation of lifelong learning. The first one is that there has to be an atmosphere of partnership among many stakeholders on diverse levels (local, regional, national). The second is that there has to be a careful design of needed skills development to match the future labor demands. The third can be found in abundant investment options in the lifelong learning activities. The fourth prerequisite is that lifelong programs should be available easily to all citizens at all stages of their life cycles. The fifth one is the creation of a learning culture and the sixth one is the creation of standards to assure quality lifelong learning programs (European Commission, 2012). Among the member states of the EU there is a growing evidence of the importance of implementation of lifelong education in tourism. Gallu program in southwest Wales, UK developed in 2004 aims at up-skilling the workforce, improving the quality of visitor experience and increasing competitiveness by increasing knowledge, sharing best practice and providing subsidized non-statutory training. Leipzig LernT; Germany and North West Tourism Skills and Employment Network, UK are another

two programs that successfully implemented the lifelong tourism education approach.

Ben Walker in his article „*Start Them Young*“ shares an initiative undertaken by the Edmund Waller primary school in London, UK. The school recognized the need to introduce the hospitality industry to children at an early age. The author supports the idea that it might be too late to teach children about the importance of this industry at the secondary (high school) level. The program introduced at the Waller school aims at not only teaching the skills of the „know-how“ but also gaining a deeper appreciation for hospitality industry and its importance for the development of a country (Hospitality, 2012).

## Lifelong learning and tourism in Croatia

According to the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports of the Republic of Croatia, the educational system in the Republic of Croatia consists of the preschool education, elementary education, secondary education and higher education. Tourism education in Croatia is to be found on the level of secondary and higher education only. Academically, little support is found on the importance of introducing lifelong learning in tourism education. Baldigara and Brajdic (2010) agree on the importance of tourism and education for Croatia's competitiveness.

However, the authors focus on secondary and higher education tourism education and the need to make these levels more structured and competitive.

Tourism is very important industry for Croatia. A new tourism development strategy report under the title of "*Croatian tourism and competitive surroundings*" shows that tourism participated in Croatia's GDP with 8.3 per cent, more than in any other tourism oriented country in the European Union. For example, in Spain tourism amounts to 6.3 percent of GDP, in Austria 5.4 percent and in France 4 per cent.

When the entire economic activity influenced by tourism is taken into consideration, the share in GDP grows to 14.4 percent (Republic of Croatia Ministry of Tourism, 2011). One interesting fact about the Croatian touristic offer is that out of the total accommodation 43 per cent goes to private accommodation. This paper aims at drawing the attention to a growing need to enhance the quality of tourism by introducing lifelong learning activities for tourism.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### References

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The purpose of this paper was to explore the need to introduce more opportunities for life-long learning for tourism in Croatia. The paper argues that currently the learning about the importance of tourism is limited only to the secondary level education and offered mostly through the formal educational programs.

The author of the paper presented some of the trends in life-long learning in the European Union as the supporting evidence why similar programs should be introduced in Croatia as well.

The fact that Croatian tourism relies heavily on the private accommodation sector and the quality of its service can be helpful in pinpointing one of the possible solutions: developing life-long (informal) programs specifically designed for private owners. The program can be structured to offer the basics of customer service, further development of skills to as much as gaining a deeper understanding of why excellent service delivery is a must for the private owners. These programs should gain the support from many stakeholders and would require a shift from local to national cooperation between different tourism stakeholders.

If the need for life-long learning is recognized as a necessity for Croatian tourism to grow and prosper the author of the paper strongly believes that the awareness of the importance of this economy has to start from an early age. The primary school children can participate in activities that would be designed towards achieving a more positive image of the hospitality professions and careers. Starting from an early age would contribute to creation of a learning culture which is one of the prerequisites for successful implementation of life-long learning activities.

Regardless of the approach to life-long learning for tourism, whether formal or informal, it is clear that Croatia depends on delivering an excellent tourism offer. The only way how Croatia will differentiate itself on the global tourism market is by investing in people who are providing the service and helping them achieve the excellence.