

INTRODUCTION

THE ROLE OF E-LEARNING APPLICATIONS WITHIN THE TOURISM SECTOR

The tourism industry, one of the world's leading economic activities, represents 5% of GDP and employs one in every twelve people in advanced and emerging economies. As explained by the OECD in the document from 2000 "Measuring the Role of Tourism in OECD Economies. The OECD Manual on Tourism Satellite Accounts and Employment. OECD", despite the importance of the human factor in characterizing tourism-related industries, little attention traditionally appears to be given to training and education. This is especially true due to labour conditions such as seasonal work, high proportions of part-time workers, high labour turnover, and poor or limited career opportunities. E-learning can contribute to increasing the interest and motivation of tourism employers and employees in improving knowledge and skills, overcoming some of the difficulties caused by current labour conditions.

Since the beginning of the Internet, the number of e-learning courses has increased year after year, offering new solutions - and new challenges - for distance teaching/learning within schools and universities as well as outside of them. Learners take advantage of e-learning because it gives them the opportunity to organize their time and overcome distance barriers when accessing to their virtual classrooms. E-learning has fostered a new paradigm for teaching and learning where technologies offer alternative ways to learn and to share and transfer knowledge. In the knowledge economy, education and training have also become an important asset for professionals and companies in becoming more competitive, where e-learning is increasingly used to teach new professionals and to train current employees, improving their professional development. Not surprisingly, tourism academic curricula and tourism organizations use e-learning platforms in training and educating tourism professionals.

This special Issue, dedicated to e-learning in the tourism industry, includes six research papers explaining and analyzing several cases of e-learning applied in the education of new professionals and the training of employees in the tourism sector.

The existing e-learning courses dedicated to the tourism and hospitality sector have been classified by Cantoni, Kalbaska and Inversini in their paper from 2009, "E-learning in tourism and hospitality, a map", into four groups, depending on their providers. In the first group we find academic courses; in the second one, courses offered by Destination Management Organizations (DMOs); in the third, corporate courses; and, in the fourth, independent courses. In this special Issue we will see cases belonging to three out of those four groups.

The first two papers deal with academic e-learning courses offered in bachelor's degree curricula for students who want to graduate in tourism. The first one, by L. Villarejo, F. González, O. Miralbell & J.M. Gomis, studies the case of an online course in which augmented reality is used to study the promotion and use of cultural heritage as a tourism resource. In a strategy of "learning by doing", students improve their skills in the use of Information and Communication Technologies

(ICT) while at the same time learning how to master the analysis of natural and cultural heritage by analyzing the landscape and the integration of the information into augmented reality tools. The second paper, written by M. Iglesias, presents the use of ICTs to improve the acquisition and mastery of English as a foreign language for bachelor's degree tourism students. The study explores new areas of application in language learning such as: decentralization of the classroom, autonomy of knowledge acquisition and lifelong learning, and the incorporation of competences to foster knowledge transfer in a professional environment. The research deepens the motivation and involvement of the students in their own learning process and the development of their competences when using ICTs.

The next two papers in this issue are related to the study of the use by DMOs of e-learning for sharing knowledge about destinations with their partners and commercial agents. The third paper, written by A. Adukaite, N. Kalbaska & L. Cantoni, deals with e-learning offered by tourism destinations in order to train travel agents about a destination. This paper presents the case of the online training course *Ticino Switzerland Travel Specialist*, with an explanation of goals and structure of the course and a detailed description of the evaluation process. There is a special focus on the experiences and perspectives of the participants, proving that travel agents who complete the course prefer to attend it during their working hours. The fourth paper, by N. Kalbaska, explores the e-learning course created by the National Tourism Organization, e titled the Switzerland Travel Academy- for the education and certification of its travel trade partners from a managerial perspective. It reviews the overall course design cycle, as well as the goals and motivations of the organizers of the training platform.

Focusing on the study of e-learning courses offered by independent providers oriented towards different tourism service professionals, and on different issues such as catering, ecotourism, hospitality management, tourism sales, etc., the paper by M. De Rose, E. Marchiori, N. Kalbaska & L. Canton analyzes the different offers available online and reflects on possible quality indicators for such independent courses. Finally, the sixth paper, by O. Miralbell, studies the factors which influence the use of social networking sites for personal development, analyzing the virtual communities of tourism professionals created inside social networking sites for knowledge exchange and generation. The study shows that social networking sites are useful in overcoming traditional communication barriers between tourism organization and are perceived as very useful for knowledge exchange. However, they lack some features that would make social networking sites efficient for informal learning and for knowledge generation.

This special issue of the ELC Research Papers Journal contributes towards a better understanding of the use of e-learning in the education and training of tourism students and professionals. As the use of ICT increases among the people globally, and they use such tools normally to communicate, exchange information and knowledge, they become more and more familiar with this networked communication environment, improving their skills for accessing and sharing knowledge with peers. Thanks to the globalization of production and markets, ICTs are playing an important role in employment development in the tourism sector, so employees need lifelong training to be competitive and must have good skills in the use and mastery of ICTs in their professional activity. E-learning can help meet these market requirements of the while providing much-needed knowledge to tourism professionals for their work-related tasks.

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