

# In Search of the Best Practices' Model for Croatian Tourism Education\*

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Traditionally, Croatia is a tourism oriented country. The growth of tourism activities in recent years confirms that Croatia is on the path towards fostering tourism as an inevitable generator of its further economic development. In this sense, higher education and/or training programs for tourism professionals should continuously offer more competitive, quality, and valuable subjects in order to maintain and improve their skills. The development of tourism studies can be progressed through the creation of additional new programs and/or through the revalidation and updating of existing provision.

Radical changes in Croatia's higher education system made after July 2003 introduced a significant expansion of courses offering tourism majors primarily in Economics and Business, both in public and private sector. Further diversification of tourism programs in Croatia will continue to change the tourism and hospitality scene by upgrading university and professional education and training to a West European level with comparable qualifications.

This paper attempts to analyse present tourism education programs in Croatian higher education, concentrating particularly on the development of curricula, best practices' models and 'knowledge transfer' projects that should be adopted/adapted for implementation into the Bologna framework.

## 1. Introduction

The Bologna Declaration and the documents related to the Bologna process are aiming to achieve common goals in higher education in the European Union and also accession countries participating in its implementation (for an extended review see: Krbec, 2004). Presently, higher education institutions in Croatia (universities and autonomous faculties belonging to them, polytechnics, and private schools of professional higher education /colleges) are undergoing radical transformation from conservative (or traditional) to modern and innovative, which means socially more effective.

As tourism matures as an academic subject (see more in: Airey and Tribe, 2005), the interdisciplinary nature of tourism enhances the students learning

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environment. Over the last ten years in Croatian higher education (current “new” study programs inherited more or less the “old” ones implemented in 1995/1996. when the previous educational reform at universities took place, op. D.K.), the development of tourism programs has continued to change the tourism and hospitality scene. Although the number of study programs offering tourism majors primarily in Economics and Business haven’t increased, there is an evidence of the provision of more diversified tourism degrees today.

Traditionally, Croatia is a tourism oriented country. The growth of tourism activities in recent years confirms that Croatia is on the path towards making tourism an active generator of its economic development. Tourism itself – and international tourism particularly - transforms into „new“ tourism rapidly also in this tourism oriented region. The necessity for changes introduced „the concept of the 'best practice' [which] refers to the set of principles and ingrained common sense that guide the everyday practices profitability and competitiveness of the travel and tourism industry“ (Poon, 2003:133).

In this sense, higher education and/or training programs for tourism professionals should continuously offer more competitive, quality, and valuable subjects in order to maintain and improve their skills.

Among ten main strategic goals for tourism development, the Ministry of Tourism Republic of Croatia stated two ‘educational’-ones: “education of all management and other staff in tourism“and „more efficient distribution and use of modern trends in communication and marketing“. The issues „must be approached from all levels. The education system for the tourism employee must be planned and coordinated on a national scale, because without the support of educational and scientific institutions, local authorities and investments in education, positive effects will not take hold. Getting an education requires careful planning and must accommodate the needs of each employment position in the hotel and catering business. It is explicitly important that the structure of the education is conceptualized so that it includes contemporary disciplines, knowledge and skills, and also that practical education accounts for a large portion of the curriculum“ (Ministry of Tourism, 2003:15, 20 ).

This paper reviews tourism education in Croatia at undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels, in order to elaborate the diversity of provision and regional distribution. It summarizes the challenges Croatia’s higher education studies in general - and tourism studies in particular - are facing, and in conclusion, it explores development trends of programs’ offering products/services for its future.

## **2. Higher education policy's framework**

In July 2003 the Croatian Parliament passed The Act on Science and Higher Education, to which a number of amendments were added in July and November 2004. The Act with amendments forms the legal framework for starting and implementing reform activities in the field of higher education in general.

According to the Education Sector Development Plan 2005-2010, higher education improvements have to be carried out by achieving four fundamental goals:

- implementation of the Bologna process;
- functional integration of universities;
- strengthening of professional (polytechnic) studies through binary system development, and
- establishing a systematic monitoring and quality control mechanism for higher education teaching and scientific research work.

In addition to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, the National Council for Higher Education and the Agency for Science and Higher Education, which includes the National ENIC/NARIC office, will also work within the public administration in order to achieve the above goals (MSES, 2005).

Currently, Croatia has 131 higher education institutions in total: seven public universities with faculties (as higher education entities participating as autonomous units), art academies, professional schools (colleges) of higher education, separate university departments and university studies, five polytechnics, six independent public higher education colleges (business schools), and accredited private business schools and colleges. The higher education institutions in Croatia employ a total of 9,800 employees, of whom 6,000 are teaching staff. The total number of students in higher education in academic year 2008/2009 is 170,000; 12,000 students are enrolled in private higher education institutions.

The evaluation procedure in Croatian higher education and according to the Bologna process's requirements addresses both national and international assessment and includes a number of institutions and individuals, of whom all were engaged in enhancing the quality of higher education. The mixture of internal and external benchmarking was supported by European experts. There is still a need to optimize the impact of structural change on curricula in order to introduce the innovative teaching and learning processes. The procedure of evaluation and accreditation of new higher education institutions and programs is one of the main tasks of the National Council of Higher Education (in Croatian: NVVO).

### **3. Changing nature of higher tourism education**

Croatia is a small country with a long tradition of hosting tourists. Croatia has high levels of tourism intensity (regarding both international and domestic tourist movements) when measured in terms of number of tourists or in terms of tourism services provided to them. This is certainly only one of the reasons of a long tradition and evolution of tourism education and training under different social conditions (e.g. Croatia's War in 1990's) and changing market conditions and pressures.

According to the tourism economic function, education and training of professionals with diverse (basic and advanced) qualifications are crucial for development and management of the tourism and hospitality industries. Jafari (2002) elaborated principles of quality education and professional training in tourism where the difference among 'Education in Tourism' and 'Training' (for middle and lower ranked personnel in tourism) exists. The mission of HEI in developing tourism-related programs is to educate students to have a sense of responsibility, high ethical standards and team spirit, and to meet the management needs of an ever-changing global hospitality and tourism industry.

The past period of higher tourism education has witnessed the gradual ascent of tourism and leisure as recognized fields in social sciences. This ascent supplements modules and research groupings organized around economic theory, sociology, management, geography, history, anthropology or ethnology on undergraduate courses. But, most staples of the tourism and leisure core curriculum are now pursued in the context of recognition the themes in contemporary social life. In 2007, tourism educators and industry leaders organized the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) and articulated core values that should be implemented in tourism education. In 2009 White Paper the TEFI participants presented their vision:

*“Students entering the uncertain world of the future and in particular, the vulnerable tourism sector, need different skills, aptitudes and knowledge to succeed. Educational systems need radical change to meet the challenge of the next few decades (Wallis and*

Steptoe, 2006). *A fundamental re-tool and re-design is necessary; not incremental change but change in the nature of what is taught and how it is taught. Skills and knowledge sets must be redefined, structures and assumptions need to be questioned, and old ways of doing things must be transcended.*“ (TEFI, 2009:5)

Under the influence of social, economic, business and overall developmental conditions, programs should have the following characteristics:

### *3.1. Orientation towards quality and sustainable tourism*

Tourism has the potential to contribute greatly to economic development, employment creation and the protection of the environment. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) tourism development should not be left to growth coalitions. Consideration of the general concept of sustainable development, the special position of tourism and agreements reached at the international level could help to set an agenda for more sustainable tourism at local and national level.

Cooper points out that „there is a clear synergy between the adoption of sustainable tourism principles and the disciplined, long-term perspective provided by the strategic planning and visioning of destinations“ (Cooper, 2002:1). If so, the purpose of creating a tourism program (course) is to provide an opportunity for students interested in tourism and current tourism industry employees to further develop a knowledge base and gain requisite skills to lead successful careers in the tourism and hospitality industry.

The achievement of more sustainable forms of tourism, and the potential use of tourism in achieving more sustainable development requires tourism educators to engage also with nontourism stakeholders and educators, students, organizations and communities outside the ``world of tourism`` (TEFI, 2009:17).

### *3.2. Interdisciplinarity of the study programs of tourism*

Formal tourism education in universities and colleges requires fundamental and constant change in its approach to studying tourism as a separate subject or even – in some study programs – a pseudo-discipline. Traditional disciplines such as economics or geography (often as „unique“ related to tourism and leisure courses' offering) should serve as valuable roots for new programs' shaping and developing.

Re-construction from a “pure” economic approach toward sociological, psychological and other social sciences’ can be defined as “all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside of the school” (Smith, 2000). Diversification of main curriculum leads to an interdisciplinarity of the tourism courses rather as ‘process’ that is just a ‘product’ or ‘knowledge transfer’ (for example see: Barron and Whitford, 2004).

Analysis confirms that Croatia’s reform process already introduced a range of academic and vocational courses presented at various universities and schools (colleges) as well as by distance, by web and in country in collaboration with local institutions.

### *3.3. Re-orientation from current knowledge*

Knowledge transfer in tourism higher education, usually referred to as hotel or tourism businesses management (micro-level tourism courses), has to focus on what is considered to be a combination of knowledge and skills in contemporary tourism (macro-level tourism courses). The curriculum has to be designed using the combination of approaches with input from (tourism) industry leaders, researchers and

educators. Three major variables currently impact contemporary tourism curriculum development:

- how tourism is defined (national tourism policy, the country's presence and active participation in international organizations, etc.),
- the level of education and training (professional, undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate); and
- issues surrounding an academic discipline (often a question of main discipline and formal requirements related to the HEI program's mission).

All these principles complement each other – they entwine and in the long run result in changed structure as well as changed principles of the educational system in tourism, encouraged by the acceptance of the Bologna Declaration and its introduction into the system of higher education in Croatia, a process that began five years ago.

#### **4. Tourism in Croatian Higher Education**

Tourism has developed at undergraduate and postgraduate levels during previous decades of continual economic and social changes within higher education institutions, and trying to follow contemporary structural demands influencing tourism and hospitality scene.

For Richards, the major driver for change in former East European Countries (CEE) “has of course been the transition to a market economy and increasing diversification and specialization of tourism products that this has stimulated” (Richards, 2006: 53). Associates of the Institute of Tourism in Zagreb recently discussed political and economic factors that were of the dominant influences on tourism diversification (Ateljević and Ćorak, 2006:289). Consequently, there has been an expansion of tourism education programs (curricula) on universities and schools of professional higher education – both public and private – since 1993 when privatization activities took a place also in Croatian education system.

However, as “the number of undergraduate tourism, hospitality and leisure programs has risen rapidly around the world” (Horng, Teng and Baum, 2009:38), Croatian higher education experienced growth in the number of such a programs too.

Following several higher education reforms since the last one started in 2003, there is a general agreement that tourism has to be identified as a discipline featuring important characteristics such as:

- a well-established course presence in universities and colleges, including the procedures of appointments of professorial positions;
- establishment of formal institutional structures of university departments and coordination of their academic and professional activities;
- activities and support for both academic and professional publications (books, handbooks, journals, newsletters, Web sites etc.);
- in Croatia's case, professional and non-governmental (NGO's) collaborative activities on the research projects' realization (in cases of both scientific and commercial projects).

Institutionally, in Croatia, one distinguishes between universities, which offer academic programs such as Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure, and establishments which are legally involved in other higher education fields offering academic and/or professional programs. Students are selected according to entrance requirements. Different forms of competitive entrance exams are presented also at some universities, but more often private colleges implement the procedures which are typically composed of interviews combined with structured exams. Independent higher education institutions such as private colleges or special professional programs are approved by the appropriate ministry. For example, the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport approves programs in the fields of university or professional

higher tourism education, and the Ministry of Sea, Tourism, Traffic and Development approves professional (non-university) programs for tourist guides and management of tourist agencies.

Much of the growth in university and college education in tourism occurred because of the importance of the tourism industry and services in the Croatian economy, and also the increased awareness by governmental bodies of tourism and related academic disciplines as tools for sustainable economic development and employment creation (from the Scientific Research Project “Sustainable Tourism in Croatia” 2007-2009, the principal investigator: Prof. D.Krbec).

Parallel to these processes, an effort toward the quality of education and training of professionals and organizational staff in Croatian tourism has arisen in new academic and professional study programs. In the fields of tourism, hospitality, tourism organization and management and others sub-specializations, there is a need to diversify three main developments:

- Education and training programs for tourism professionals;
- Education and training programs for organization staff specialized for different types of tourist services, such as congress tourism, cultural tourism, maritime tourism, health tourism etc.; and
- Education and training programs for community and exclusive and/or rural tourism development staff in regions such as Istria, Dalmatia or Slavonia).

### **5. Tourism as a Subject: programs' perspective**

Prior to recent higher education reforms and introduction of new curricula, tourism as a subject has focused on the existence – or possibility to fulfill formal requirements – of a core curriculum. Current tourism, hospitality and leisure programs are “a multifaceted area of research and scholarship to which numerous disciplines and specializations may contribute” (Meethan 2001, in: Hall 2005:4). Based on the assumption that the selection of ‘best approaches’ to tourism study programs have been made at Croatian universities and colleges during the last five academic years, and furthermore examining a presence of the ‘indiscipline’ of the field of tourism studies, analyses of accredited academic and professional programs in tourism show a wide range of courses and other teaching activities such as round-tables, seminars, and workshops.

Tourism studies in Croatian higher education vary from complete degree programs to a few elective courses. In Table 1. tourism study programs are presented according to three main purposes of a higher education curriculum’s standardization, and according to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport Republic of Croatia (MSES) accreditation:

1. higher education institution (HEI) ownership:
  - 1.1. public or
  - 1.2. private;
2. regional distribution (local administrative division of the state’s authorities):
  - 2.1. county (*zupanija*, in Croatian) or
  - 2.2. city (*grad*, in Croatian); and
3. programs’ main characteristics:
  - 3.1. title,
  - 3.2. level,
  - 3.3. length of the study, and
  - 3.4. grading (ECTS).

**Table 1: Review of Tourism Study Programs in Croatia**  
(Academic Year 2009/10)

HE Institution	Study Program Title	Level	Length, years (ECTS)
<b>Public</b>			
<i>County of Istria</i>			
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Department of Economics and Tourism	Business Economics / Tourism	U	3 (180)
	Business Economics / Tourism and Development	G	2 (120)
	Business Economics/ Tourism	Post	3 (180)
	With Knowledge Toward Competitiveness in Istrian Agro Tourism	LL	0,3 (3)
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Interdisciplinary Program on Culture and Tourism	Interdisciplinary Course / Culture and Tourism	U	3 (180)
<i>Primorsko-Goranska County</i>			
University of Rijeka, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management Opatija	Business Economics in Tourism and Hospitality / Entrepreneurship in Tourism and Hospitality, Tourism Management, Hospitality Management International Tourism and Hospitality management, Event and Free Time Management	U	4 (240)
	Business Economics in Tourism and Hospitality / Entrepreneurship in Tourism and Hospitality, Tourism Management, Hospitality Management International Tourism and Hospitality management, Event and Free Time Management	G	1 (60)
	Small and Medium Entrepreneurship in Tourism and Hospitality / Management, Finance, Tourism, Hospitality, Gastronomy and Restaurant, Business Communication	P	3 (180)
<i>Zadar County</i>			
University of Zadar, Department of Information and Communication Studies	Culture and Tourism	U	3 (180)
	Culture and Tourism/Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Public Relations, Entrepreneurship in Culture and Tourism, Ecology in Culture and Tourism	G	2 (120)
<i>Split - Dalmatian County</i>			
Sibenik College	Management / Tourism management	PU	3 (180)
	Management / Tourism management	PG	1,5 (90)

HE Institution	Study Program Title	Level	Length, years (ECTS)
University of Split, Faculty of Economics	Tourism	U	3 (180)
	Tourism and Hospitality	G	2 (120)
	Tourism Businesses	P	2 (120)
<i>Dubrovnik County</i>			
University of Dubrovnik, Department of Business Economics	Business Economics / Tourism	U	3 (180)
	Business Economics / Tourism	G	2 (120)
<i>Zadar County</i>			
University of Zadar, Department of Information and Communication Studies	Culture and Tourism	U	3 (180)
	Cultural Heritage and Tourism	G	2 (120)
<i>Viroviticko-Podravaska County</i>			
Higher Business School of Tourism Management and Informatics, Virovitica	Tourism Management	PU*	3 (180)*
<i>City of Zagreb</i>			
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Agriculture	Ecological Agronomy and Agro Tourism	G	2 (120)
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Economics	Business Economics / Tourism	U	4 (240)
	Business Economics / Tourism	G	1 (60)
	Tourism Businesses	P	2 (120)
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Science, Department of Geography	Heritage and Tourism	G	2 (120)
<b>Private</b>			
<i>City of Zagreb</i>			
Higher Business School of Tourism and Hotel Management "Utilus" Zagreb	Tourism and Hospitality Management	PU	3 (180)
VERN Zagreb School of Management	Tourism and Hospitality Management	PU	3,5(210)
	Management of the sustainable tourism development	PG	2 (120)
<i>County of Istria</i>			
Higher Business School "Manero" Višnjan	Tourism Management	P	2 (120)
	Tourism Management	PU	3 (180)
	Tourism Management	PG	2 (120)

Source: Author's analysis (based on the MSES's review of accredited HEI: Sept 16, 2009)

**Legend:**

*University degree:* P = Professional; U = Undergraduate; G = Graduate; Post = Postgraduate (Master or Ph.D.); LL = Lifelong Learning

*Professional (Business School) Degree:* P = Professional; PU = Professional Undergraduate; PG = Professional Graduate

\* In the process of accreditation (2009/2010 admission's data)



Preliminary curriculum design analyses (Krbec and Krajnović, 2006) undoubtedly suggested further student experiences with different curriculum framings will result in students graduating with, as Tribe pointed out, various “perspectives”, “attitudes”, “appropriateness” and “competences” (Tribe, 2003). While tourism study programs were traditionally organized in specialized schools, new or innovative study programs have recently started to be offered and ‘indiscipline’ courses targeted to selected groups for business or professional purposes. This finding will certainly lead to another discussion of what the term ‘tourism education’ or ‘training’ should incorporate.

Though there are similar courses in all the important tourism programs, every study program places emphasis on different aspects of tourism. For example, course titles include geography of tourism, tourism marketing, economics of tourism, tourism entrepreneurship, tourism&public relations, sociology of tourism, special interest tourism, and tour operations.

According to the Act on Science and Higher Education (2003) colleges are supposed to provide much more practical education than universities, so it is not unusual that college programs, especially at the start of a process of accreditation, have included courses like promotion materials' creation, conventions management, and food and beverage management, instead of tourism development policy or impacts of tourism. University-level education has always been more theoretical (sometimes, even too theoretical), so tourism planning or policy issues have always been considered as essential in these programs. Consequently, university-level programs are suitable for general tourism and management studies, with topics such as strategic management, risk management, human resources' management, event management. College-level programs are more specialized, with courses such as hotel management, tour operation/travel retail, tourism agencies' organization and business techniques, business ethics, and animation.

## **6. Tourism education at the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Department of Economics and Tourism**

In May 2005, the University Department of Economics and Tourism in Pula (known as the Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula until December 2006) gained the MSES's accreditation for the new economic programs/departments by the European standards. The study programs of Economics and Business Economics, with specialized courses in Tourism, Finance and Accounting, Marketing, Management and Business Informatics, were recommended in their proposed form by the National Council for Higher Education to the Ministry; admissions for the new courses started with the academic year 2005/06. Current efforts for changing teaching and learning organization and methods are result of a radical transformation of the FET's curricula. Because the tourism study program was never completely detached from other study programs until 2005, it couldn't have fully contributed to a complete development of the discipline and students may not have been provided with adequate knowledge and the skills needed to apply them. The teaching program's organization led to the creation of eight departments: Economic Theory and Sociology, National and International Economy, Tourism, Economics and Management, Business Finance and Accounting, Marketing, Mathematics, Statistics and Computer Sciences, and Foreign Languages.

Working on the application procedure during late 2003 and 2004, the best practices approach has been elaborated. Reform activities started with a decision by the institution to adopt the following five-stage strategy:

- Identification of best practices;
- Implementation of best practices;

- Institutionalization of best practices;
- Internalization of best practices; and
- Dissemination of best practices.

After completing the procedural stages of application, public presentation, revision, and adoption of new or reformulated study programs, today's curriculum of the Department of Economics and Tourism (the OET, in Croatian) fulfills the objective of adapting the program to tourism development trends. The introduction of courses such as contemporary tourism, tourism entrepreneurship, special interest tourism and ecotourism became the prospective future shape of higher education/tourism industry interface. But, because of the curriculum's teaching organization, where the main economic courses cover the first two semesters, the heritage of traditional higher education is also obvious. During their compulsory studies, students receive a thorough education in methodological subjects, economic theory and history, but various aspects of management/business and interdisciplinary studies are missing. For example, operations management, strategic management, human resource management, behavioral studies, communications, including ICT applications and similar subjects are taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The courses of the tourism module at all university's levels are the following:

- a) Undergraduate course (Tourism, 180 ECTS):
  - Economic Core Subjects:* Introduction to Economics, Mathematics for Economists, Economic Informatics, Commercial Law, Business Accounting, Statistics, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Marketing, Organization, Monetary Economics, Croatian Economy, International Economy, Business Finances, Quantitative Methods of Business Decisions, Management (mandatory)
  - Body of Tourism Knowledge*
  - Core Tourism Subjects:* Introduction to Tourism, Tourism Economics, Tourism Marketing, Tourism Law, Tour Operators and Tourist Agencies, Practicum, Business Foreign Language (English, German, Italian, French) (mandatory)
  - Elective Courses:* Workshop, Seminar, Methodology of Scientific Research, Economic History, Second and Third Business Foreign Language (one or two in every academic year)
- b) Graduate course (Tourism and Development, 120 ECTS):
  - Economic Core Subjects:* Microeconomic Analysis, Labor Economics & Human Potentials, Economics of the EU (mandatory)
  - Body of Tourism Knowledge*
  - Core Tourism Subjects:* Sociology of Tourism, Tourism Development's Governance, Tourist Destination, Environmental Ecology & Tourism, Special Interest Tourism, International Tourism, Tourism Practicum (incl. International Tourism Practicum), Master's Thesis (mandatory)
  - Elective Courses:* Economic Development, Tourism Transport, Quality Management (Tourism Applications), Market Research in Tourism, Cultural Tourism\*, Postmodern Tourism\*, Managing of Hospitality and Tourism Firms, Tourist Mediation, Entrepreneurship in Tourism, Event Tourism and Public Relations (one in every academic year)
- c) Postgraduate Doctoral Study (Economics, Module: Tourism; 180 ECTS):
  - Economic Core Subjects:* Methodology of Scientific Work, Economic Philosophy, Theories of Management (mandatory)

### *Body of Tourism Knowledge*

*Core Tourism Subjects:* Analysis of Tourism Development, Tourism Resources Management, Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Environmental Management and Tourism, Ph.D. Thesis (two of four courses should be elected and focused to Ph.D. Thesis and research works' obligations)

*Elective Courses:* depend of Ph.D. Thesis and related research works

- d) Lifelong Learning Course (approved by the MSES, 3 ECTS) :  
“With Knowledge toward Competitiveness in Istrian Agro Tourism”

By comparing previous the OET tourism study program developed until the 2003 Act HE reform's implementation, the most distinctive difference between tourism programs/courses and tourism majors, within university's or related degrees, involves the expansion of a number of relevant, contemporary topics treated as discrete units with more integrated tourism courses. These topics are more likely to be undertaken as part of a more general units such as Contemporary Tourism, Special Interest Tourism, Postmodern Tourism and similar in these programs.

However, to what extent that clarifies the Croatian tourism needs about what kind of knowledge assists in education or ‘forming’ a prospective professional in the tourism industry is a result of overall OET's study program's future orientation. Clearly, these tourism courses/programs which are now extending the OET's knowledge base intend positioning it as the leader in the area of tourism university-based education. Another aspect should also be positioned with respect: Istria is a leading Croatian tourist region with more than 40% of Croatian tourism market which are to respond both to academic developments and the changing needs of businesses and society.

#### *6.1. Teaching methods and assessment*

The teaching methods include lectures (unfortunately, due to the high number of students in first half of the course, and especially in the compulsory economic courses), seminars, workshops, practicums and practical training (especially in tourism organization of tourism city boards, tour organizations and agencies, and promotion), involvement of students in surveys for the industry, city government, and science institutes.

Assessments are typically organized in the forms of grading both activities and written (rare oral) examinations and essays/papers, but in practical courses students are assessed by their performance during the semester.

#### *6.2. Business practicum as an innovative “best practices” learning model*

European as well as accession countries are now „reorganizing their educational systems to enable people to learn continuously and to acquire new skills in the application of knowledge throughout their entire working lives“(Švarc and Lažnjak, 2004:31). Following the rationales of new higher education policies, HE institutions are constantly forced to change their traditional, passive role in transmitting knowledge, and use more competence-based methods of *producing* and *applying* knowledge. Namely, as was already said, HE institutions should be encouraged and enabled to develop and pursue their own distinct internationalization profiles, based on choices that fit their strengths, particular characteristics, environment and their own steering models (e.g. more or less centralized, more or less competitive approaches) (CHEMS et al., 2004:3).

The Global Business Practicum at Rollins and the collaboration between Rollins College, Winter Park (FL, USA) and the OET, University of Pula provide

numerous illustrations of what can be learned about international business by students participating in work-directed projects. After completing the first ten years of both academic and professional experiences of this unique program's collaboration, it's confirmed that this form of collaborative activity provides insight into the problems facing the Croatian academic community as it attempts to modernize the system of higher education and to innovate teaching and learning experiences as well.

The Global Business Practicum (further: GBP) is an international consulting project that allows students *to earn credits* and *gain international experience*. Students work on real-world projects whose success depends on their intellectual and practical application of key business concepts.

Experiential learning assignments in business classes (as the GBP at international level) are more likely to:

- develop students' interpersonal and communication skills,
- lead to an understanding of course concepts,
- promote teamwork and team building,
- improve listening skills, and
- improve critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.

According to proponents of experiential learning, the expected net effect is that students become more interested and engaged, retain the information better and for longer periods, and learn how to apply otherwise elusive theoretical constructs (Krbec and Currie, 2009a).

A number of learning outcomes can be directly attributed to the GBP's as they relate to international business education.

First, students learned to *interact and communicate in a cross-cultural international setting with top governmental officials and business constituents*. Meetings include discussions with various officials and business people.

Second, the *students developed intimate knowledge, both tacit and explicit, of a foreign market, namely Croatia*. In structuring the report to the company, the students had to develop an understanding of the drivers of Pula's economy, and then write a summary of the Pula economy and culture in addition to analysis of the tourism market in Istria which was the primary goal of several analyses from 2002 to 2008.

The third student outcome is *learning how to work as a team on an international project*. The total involvement in each others' lives, the day-in day-out interaction with one-another, is a source of additional stress not encountered in a classroom setting, but it also brings awareness and education beyond what is obtained in the classroom. This immersion requires from the students and the supervising faculty a greater level of flexibility, patience and maturity.

Finally, students *learn how to write a professional business report that is presentable to top managers* in a real company.

The report writing stage begins prior to the international trip through background research and ends after several iterations are completed after students return and are able to digest the materials that were collected during the trip (Alon, 2004).

The learning outcomes from an international business practicum complement the traditional class setting and give the students perspectives which are difficult to bring into the classroom. The students value these experiences because they provide an element of realism which is difficult to emulate in the classroom and allow the students to synthesize and apply the courses they have already taken. Given the positive outcomes that are possible, graduate programs (or MBA in the US) are advised to develop experiential international business education curriculum to their

students in order to prepare them for managerial positions in the global business environment of the future.

## 7. Concluding remarks

In accordance to the 2003 Act, two-cycle and three-cycle study programs were introduced in the academic year 2005/06. Consequently, all higher education institutions in Croatia were expected to adapt their study programs (curricula) and their internal organization to the new system.

In comparisons of “old” tourism study programs developed from 1995 and the new ones implemented according to the Bologna Process and the 2003 Act HE reform's requirements, the most distinctive difference between tourism programs/courses and tourism main subjects - within university's or related degrees-involves the expansion of a number of relevant, contemporary topics treated as discrete units with more integrated tourism courses. New or innovative study programs have recently started to be offered and ‘indiscipline’ courses targeted to selected groups for business or professional purposes.

Based on the assumption that the selection of ‘best approaches’ to tourism study programs have been made at Croatian universities and colleges during the last five academic years, and furthermore examining a presence of the ‘indiscipline’ of the field of tourism studies, analyses of accredited academic and professional programs in tourism confirmed an expectation of different study programs, modules and courses, as well as diverse forms of teaching activities.

These findings will certainly lead to further researches and public (business and professional) discussion of what the term ‘tourism education’ or ‘tourism training’ should incorporate.

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