

## Paradox of Accessibility: Rethinking academic tourism programs for future relevance

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Tourism education faces a growing legitimacy challenge as a pathway into the industry. Despite tourism's sustained economic importance and global relevance, European higher education institutions report declining enrolment in tourism-related degree programs. Recent scholarship suggests this trend reflects a deeper structural and symbolic crisis rather than a temporary effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. A key paradox emerges: while tourism offers relatively open access to employment without formal academic credentials, this accessibility undermines the perceived necessity and value of higher education in the field. Students increasingly make risk-aware educational choices, and tourism degrees are often associated with low income expectations, limited job security, and weak returns on investment in entry-level positions.

At the same time, responsible and regenerative tourism has gained prominence as a climate-adaptive strategy and a driver of sustainable innovation. Yet destinations continue to struggle with infrastructure pressures, environmental degradation, and shortages of skilled professionals—factors that hinder the implementation of sustainable solutions. This paper examines the evolving innovation landscape in tourism, focusing on sustainable and regenerative practices. Through a literature review, we identify competence gaps among tourism professionals and businesses and explore how higher education can offer a counter-narrative: signaling education as a driver of purpose-driven work, environmental responsibility, and improved social impact.

The central research question guiding this study is: Which competence gaps in the tourism industry reflect misalignment between tourism education and students' value orientations? Analytically, the paper investigates open and collaborative innovation processes involving businesses, governments, researchers, and communities, and how these actors interpret and enact sustainable development within local innovation ecosystems. Finally, we offer insights for curriculum reform in higher education, highlighting how knowledge, skills, and competences can be refined to meet emerging industry needs.