

# ATTITUDES OF THE STUDENTS AT THE HIGHER SCHOOL OF TOURISM PROFESSIONS OF RHODES REGARDING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## **Annotation**

*In recent years, the constant degradation of the natural environment has led the consumers to make more environmentally friendly choices. Therefore, in the field of tourism, the tourists have turned to more environmentally friendly vacations by choosing accommodation that respects the environment. Tourism professionals and students at tourism schools should be informed about sustainable development through the training they receive to form the attitudes to promote it.*

*In the present study, research data revealed a discrepancy between the knowledge of first-year students and third-year students, proving that in the previous levels of education there was no information about sustainable development. In addition, it seems that third-year students can recognize the value of sustainable development for the operation of hotels.*

**Keywords:** attitudes, higher education, Rhodes' Tourism school, students, sustainable development.

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, environmental compliance is considered as an element that increases the quality of the tourism product and has an economic value for the consumer (Sánchez-Ollero et al., 2012). The increase in environmental awareness has resulted in a shift towards goods and services that are environmentally friendly (Ludevid, 2000). The fact is that the environment is the main factor for tourists that will determine their decision on the holiday package (Hillary et al., 2001). Thus, regardless of the purpose of the trip, it is observed that more and more tourists are turning to hotel choices that have developed actions and practices that aim to reduce the burden and degradation of the environment while maintaining a low environmental footprint.

In this context, the scientific community has focused its attention on the relationship between the education provided in higher tourism vocational schools and sustainable development and the environment. According to Boley (2011), the integration of the concept of Sustainable Development in the curriculum implies a better level of curriculum and a better preparation for the demanding field of hospitality.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Sustainable development**

Sustainable Development (SD) combines the satisfaction of the needs of the human beings and the improvement of their quality of life with the responsible use of all natural and non-natural resources (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Due to its complex and multidimensional nature, SD has been met with intense criticism and questioning, both for its theoretical orientation and for its prices and goals. Harisson (2000, p.99) emphatically describes SD as the Holy Grail, which does not exist. It is a legend, a myth. With a critically pessimistic view, the author believes that SD not only cannot be precisely defined but cannot be defined as a social goal, which in practice influences formal policy and individual initiatives. In a similar critical light, Lélé (1991) considers that the conventional approach of SD fails to address the problems of poverty and environmental degradation and does not clarify the role of economic growth and the human factor.

In general, although the critical voices are many, SD does not stop capturing a way of life, thinking, governing, and doing business. It is also an approach to the design and implementation of plans, programs, and actions, not with a narrow environmental orientation but also with a socio-economic character. In short, it tries to guide today's choices in order to maintain and continue to have tomorrow's choices (Cooper & Vargas, 2004).

### **Higher tourism education and sustainable development**

Tourism as an economic and social phenomenon has grown rapidly over the last 70 years. However, the emphasis seems to have been on mass tourism, i.e., the concentration of many tourists in one destination, promoting mainly the sun-sand-sea triptych. Mass tourism, with its inevitable environmental, economic, and social consequences, has therefore brought to the fore the need for a more environmentally friendly tourism policy, while recognising that environmental education and tourism are two interdependent and interrelated concepts.

This fact highlights the necessity of linking environmental education and education with tourism, through the contact of students with sustainable development courses and sustainable ways of professional development and management.

The importance of sustainable development is reflected in its inclusion in the educational curricula of university students (Vasconcelos et al., 2022). The interest of the scientific community has turned to the relationship of education provided in tourism professions with sustainable development and the environment (McGrath et al., 2021; Mínguez et al., 2021). According to Boley (2011), the integration of the concept of Sustainable Development in the Curriculum implies a better level of study but also appropriate preparation for the demanding field of hospitality.

Universities around the world are called upon to meet a range of societal expectations related to environmental, economic, cultural, and social issues that threaten the well-being of the human species and the sustainable treatment of the rest of the planet (Blewitt & Cullingford, 2013). The students at the tourism schools are future professionals in the field of tourism and have a responsibility to apply sustainable development practices in their field. In this context, there are scholarly voices (Inui, Wheeler and Lankford, 2006), that call for the shift in training provided from the narrow professional context to more liberal perspectives.

Regardless of the purpose of the trip, more and more tourists are turning to hotel options that have implemented environmentally friendly practices, which aim to reduce their environmental footprint. The environment is for tourists the main factor that will determine their decision for the vacation package (Hillery et al., 2001).

### **Research problem, goals, and objectives**

The research question that arises is whether the students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes have knowledge on issues of sustainable development and if they adopt environmentally friendly attitudes. This research is focused on the examination of the attitudes of the students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes aiming to contribute to the collection of important information, which will enrich the existing literature on the principles of sustainable development in higher education. The research objectives were to explore the attitudes and perceptions about sustainable development of the students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes and to compare the first-year students' attitudes with the third-year students' attitudes towards sustainable development. It was supposed that the third-year students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes would have more thorough knowledge and more favorable attitudes regarding sustainable development than first-year students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes.

### **Research methodology**

A cross-sectional study was conducted in Greece applying the survey method.

### **Research tool**

An electronic questionnaire (via Google Forms) was selected as a research tool, and it was distributed online. The questionnaire consisted of several closed-ended questions such as "I am aware of the environmentally friendly practices used by hotel companies" and "Tourist-customers are attracted by hotels that adopt environmentally friendly practices" (measuring the cognitive component of the attitudes towards sustainable development), but also "The adoption of environmentally friendly practices by hotels gives a substantial benefit to them" and "The adoption of environmentally friendly practices by hotels gives a substantial benefit to society" (measuring the evaluative component of the attitudes towards sustainable development). Each question was answered on a point scale from Strongly Agree to totally disagree.

Questionnaire design and its structural organization took into account the basic criteria for formulating questionnaires in order for the questions to reflect the bibliographic review (all questions were formulated on the basis of literature review reflecting the ideas by Fishbein & Ajzen, 1972, Mbasera et al., 2016), but also to serve the objectives of the research.

### Sample

The sample consisted of 90 students at the higher school of tourism professions of Rhodes. Their gender and school-year distributions were almost equal - 41 (45.6%) were men and 49 (54.4%) were women; 45 students (50%) in the first year and 45 (50%) students in the third year.

### Analysis of research data

The statistical program SPSS 23.0 for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used to process and analyze research data. Statistical analysis is divided into two stages, the descriptive statistical analysis for the nominal variables, where frequencies and percentages are recorded, as well as the mean and standard deviation for the classified variables, and the inductive statistical analysis, where the relationship between the variables under investigation, an independent variable and a dependent variable, is tested. In the inductive analysis, first, a normality test of the set of values of the inter-rater variables on a Likert scale was carried out using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov criterion, in order to determine whether the values of these variables follow a normal or not, so that the corresponding parametric or non-parametric statistical criterion could be used. The findings showed that the normality conditions were not ensured ( $\text{sig} < .05$ ) therefore non-parametric criteria were used.

Specifically, the  $\chi^2$  criterion was used for cases in which both the independent and dependent variables were categorical and the Mann-Whitney U-test criterion was used for cases in which the independent variable was categorical, and the dependent variables were graded on a likert scale.

### Results

The most notable research finding was related to the statistically significant differences between the attitudes and views of students in the first year (A') and those in the third year (C'). Specifically, in the sentence "I am aware of the environmentally friendly practices used by hotel companies" ( $U = 698.000$ ,  $p = .013$ ) the first year (average: 2,93 and standard deviation: 1,189) significantly differentiates its position from the third year (average:2.31, standard deviation:1,104).

In the proposal "The adoption of environmentally friendly practices by hotels gives a substantial benefit to them" ( $U = 767.000$ ,  $p = .034$ ) the views between A '(average: 2.02, standard deviation:0.866) and C' (average: 1.64, standard deviation:0.773) are differentiated.

In the proposal "The adoption of environmentally friendly practices by hotels gives a substantial benefit to society" ( $U = 677.000$ ,  $p = .002$ ) the views between the first year (average: 1.820.912, standard deviation:0.504) and the third year (average: 1.29, standard deviation:0,506) are differentiated.

In the proposal "Tourist-customers are attracted by hotels that adopt environmentally friendly practices" ( $U = 620.000$ ,  $p = .001$ ) the first year (average: 2.02, standard deviation:0.917) significantly differentiates its position from the third year (average: 1.48, standard deviation:0.902).

### Discussion

The third-year students adopted more favorable attitudes towards sustainable development and its practical manifestations than the first-year students. This conclusion is in line with the research of Barth and Timm (2011), who after studying German university students concluded that the students who better understood the concept of sustainable development and who agreed with the values that it stands for, they showed more dedication and respect for the actions and lessons that promoted it. The positive contribution of university institutions in promoting sustainable thinking and favorable students' attitudes towards sustainable development and environment protection has been reflected in the research conducted by Fernandez-Manzanal et al. (2007). The positive contribution of universities to the promotion of sustainable thinking is further confirmed by the research effort by Cotton and Alcock (2013), who concluded that participation in university studies was more associated with a positive commitment to the principles and values of sustainable development than other post-secondary educational options.

### Conclusions

The statistical analysis and processing of the results led to very useful conclusions regarding the attitudes and perceptions of the students at the higher school of tourism professions on issues of sustainability. The research reflected the fact that the Rhodes Higher School of Tourism contributed to the adoption and development of more sustainable attitudes and perceptions, as well as knowledge about the environmentally friendly practices of hotels.

This is due to the fact that third-year students clearly had more favorable attitudes towards sustainable development compared to first-year students. Shortage of knowledge of the first-year students on sustainability issues reveals the absence of education for sustainable development in the Greek school context.

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