

CAREERS IN TOURISM: a passport to travel the world

Growing up in a small village in Ireland I remember very clearly my first engagement with the tourism industry. My parents packed us into the car and we headed to the West Coast of Ireland, incidentally very close to where I now live. The purpose of the trip was the annual family holiday, the destination was deep in the heart of the 'Gaeltacht', the Irish-speaking part of the west of Ireland. My mother was determined to immerse us children in the Irish language, music and dance and my Dad simply agreed, maybe for a quite life. However it was that initial family holiday, as a young five year old when I first encountered 'Irish hospitality' and the experience was magical. We were in a local hotel, sitting obediently watching the server manage the bar, serve food, chat to customers and take money, she was a multi-talented hero in the eyes of a five year old because she was smiling at everyone and made you feel so welcome, our arrival was not an intrusion for her but a welcome part of her busy day. At the age of twelve my Uncle Chris returned home for a visit, we did not know exactly where he lived but it sounded mysterious and ever so glamorous. On this particular occasion the encyclopaedia came out and we gazed in amazement at this wondrous place he was working in - Sun City in South Africa. Postcards of this magnificent property introduced a new tourism concept, five star hotels and the opulence they can bring. Suddenly I started to dream.



Cáit Noone

Tourism

is one of these industries that can provide workers with a passport to travel and work all over the world, I should know having travelled to no fewer than 30 countries over the last twenty years. I know of few careers that provide such an opportunity and I find myself sharing that and other stories with young industry professionals on a weekly basis.

Yet, in today's industry we are struggling to find staff across the globe, some countries are finding it difficult to find good servers and managers and chefs are notoriously difficult to find. So I have to ask, why is this happening? What has happened to our glorious, vibrant, bustling industry that now struggles to find the right teams to lead us into the next chapter of experiences and dreams?

Recently in Ireland the former president of the Irish Hotels Federation Michael Vaughan who runs Vaughan's Lodge in Lahinch, Co Clare said the industry was experiencing "serious difficulty" recruiting suitably qualified craft and entry level staff. He said three out of every four hotels and guesthouses, or 75 per cent, had reported similar difficulties in hiring trained workers to fill entry level positions within their businesses. This compared with 64 per cent who reported difficulties the previous year.

In the UK many leading award-winning chefs are changing business practices in order to maintain staffing levels. Nottingham's two-Michelin star Restaurant Sat Bains announced that, from November, it will only open for four days a week, in order to recruit and retain the best chefs – acknowledging that even the glamorous end of the in-

dustry is now struggling to find talent. Daniel Clifford, chef-owner at the two-star Midsummer House in Cambridge, agreed, warning that if the chef shortage is not addressed, "we are going to lose the industry we love". Meanwhile, writing in the food periodical Lucky Peach, Noma's René Redzepi bemoaned a macho, abusive kitchen culture that drives away gifted young chefs. "I've been a bully for a large part of my career," he confessed.

When the great and the good of this vibrant industry start to share such stories it really is time to ask – do we have a problem and if so, how can education help?

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I have worked in higher education for over twenty years and always in the Tourism and Hospitality sector. One detail I have learnt very quickly is that tourism can succeed anywhere if a culture and people support it. I lived in Switzerland for three years. In this wonderful alpine country it was very clear that all careers are equal, if you are a server in a local auberge or the town pharmacist you are seen as equal by all citizens and yet serve society for different reasons. On a recent visit to Gozo this summer I had the privilege of eating in a family-run restaurant close to the waterside. The owner welcomed us with real joy and charm, her young son filleted the fish and served us: everything

about the experience reminded me of Switzerland. However this attitude does not extend across the globe and I fear such culture and attitude is harming this vibrant industry of ours. Would our staffing challenges be different if we all lived as the Swiss and Gozitans do?

I am privileged to be in a position where I meet people across the world annually and we frequently discuss this topic. Annual conferences and forums provide opportunity to engage in dialogue and share feedback. I do believe in learning from best practice and sharing examples of the same. Lately I often hear industry colleagues tell us that we need more training courses and I have to ask, why? Do we not offer enough courses? Are our programmes too long or short? Are we teaching the wrong material? From Malta to Milan, from Ireland to Iceland you will find leading Tourism and Hotel Schools offering programmes to meet our industry needs but are we meeting these needs if our industry needs more staff? What is going wrong?

I guess the first place we have to start is with our programmes and have we got it wrong? Anyone working in Hotel Schools throughout the world knows how very important it is that your programmes are industry-relevant and current: without this your students are not industry-ready when they graduate.

In GMIT we have worked diligently with our many stakeholders over forty years to develop awards relevant to industry needs. We have built partnerships with hotel groups, restaurant organisations, food entrepreneurs, retail outlets, event management companies, beverage operators. Our work with these colleagues has ensured that our programmes are current and industry focused. But is everyone doing the same?



week and spend the remainder of the week working in industry. This ensures they can continue to earn a salary and learn at the same time. This type of learning supports the employer while allowing the employee time to enhance their skills and knowledge and gain a qualification. It also reinforces the concept of life-long learning.

It is also worth sharing that today's tourism students are not just eighteen years old and leaving high school. Many are careers changers or mature students and quality of life is important to them. In the past some of us worked 70 hours-plus a week - this does not mean it is fine to expect that from every employee. However I do believe that there will always be visionary places of work where long hours are required. But balance is essential in order to maintain a creative and healthy workforce.

In GMIT we are under no illusions as to how tough the industry is, and we share this insight with our students daily. But we also have to lead by example and share the good-news stories with students. How are we expected to recruit learners to these programmes if the bad-news stories just keep coming? I therefore urge all hotel and tourism bodies to please keep working with your local hotel school or tourism education provider; together you can succeed.

In Ireland we have a vibrant professional hotel organisation, the Irish Hotels Federation which works closely with GMIT and other tourism education providers. Having a strong partnership ensures that we work together when developing new programmes, when modifying curriculum, when meeting students to discuss work placement and graduate opportunities. The partnership we have formed serves all parties well. In Malta the industry has the Maltese Hotel and Restaurant Association.

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Having worked with the MHRA over the last six months I see many similarities with this association and the Irish body and I know we will work very well together to plan and see progress in the new Mediterranean Institute of Tourism Studies coming to Malta soon.

The new Mediterranean Institute of Tourism Studies is a development I am very excited to be part of. I see how important tourism is to the islands of Malta and Gozo and the hospitality on both islands is simply outstanding. Malta is most definitely the jewel in the Mediterranean.

To have the opportunity to collaborate with other leading schools and colleges from around the world, to develop a world class tourism education school which will engage learners from all over the world is beyond exciting and invigorating. Not only will these graduates serve the needs of the tourism industry globally, I am confident that these students and this school will put Malta on the tourism education map and let's see how that influences and supports the next generation of tourism leaders. ■

From an Irish perspective I believe we are based on feedback from my colleagues, all who work closely across the sector in Ireland. As a result of this working practice our partners know exactly what our students are exposed to in terms of learning and skills and knowledge and as a result they have every right to expect only the best from GMIT graduates. I should add our graduates are getting jobs in industry prior to final exams so that for me is one form of confirmation we are doing a lot right. But we can always do more.

Through developing many new awards we listen to our industry partners and understand the challenges they face. As a result we adopted a variety of blended learning approaches and this has resulted in providing new opportunities for some learners who may not have engaged with education in the past. Blended learning is a term used to describe the way e-learning is being combined with traditional classroom methods and independent study to create a new, hybrid teaching methodology and it does suit many working in the tourism sector. In GMIT some learners come to us for maybe one or two days per