



Research Paper

Tourism Education in Greece: An Overview of Current Trends and Training Programs

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ABSTRACT: *Tourism education is crucial for developing a competent workforce capable of meeting the ever-changing needs and demands of the tourism sector. The quality of services in the tourism industry is directly linked to the education and training of human resources, which ultimately enhances the industry's competitiveness. This article presents the various options available to individuals considering studying tourism in Greece. Specifically, it outlines the tourism specializations offered at the secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary levels. Furthermore, it evaluates the current situation and explores the potential for the future internationalization of Greek tourism education and training.*

KEYWORDS: *Tourism education and training; internationalization; Greece*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a global phenomenon with extensive economic, social, and environmental impacts, shaped by the participation of tourists and for their benefit. It is one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide, generating billions of dollars in revenue and creating millions of jobs annually. Tourism also plays a crucial role in fostering cultural exchange, enhancing international understanding, and preserving natural heritage. As such, tourism acts as a dynamic and vital force, contributing significantly to both global and local economic growth.

A review of the literature reveals numerous definitions of tourism, highlighting its complexity as a phenomenon. Initially, tourism was understood as a set of phenomena related to travel and staying in a place by non-residents (Hunziker & Krapf, 1942, as cited in [2]: 15), as a shift in purchasing power impacting the economy [3], as a system defined by relationships and phenomena arising from travel and the associated stay (Kaspar, 1975, as cited in [4]) and involving the activities carried out along with facilities provided to meet tourism needs [5]. Tourism is therefore a multifaceted social and economic phenomenon affecting various sectors. Specifically, tourism activity influences numerous sectors of the economy, such as transport (e.g., air travel and bus transfers), accommodation (hotels or other lodgings), dining (in restaurants or bars on or off-site), entertainment (including sightseeing) and consumption in shops. Tourism integrates multiple sectors within a country's social and economic framework and is regarded as a potential catalyst for promoting environmental, cultural, and social awareness [6].

Tourism in Greece has deep historical roots, dating back to antiquity when the country served as an important center for philosophy, theology, and other academic disciplines, as well as international trade and commerce. Over time, Greece has become renowned for its rich cultural heritage and breathtaking landscapes, attracting millions of tourists from around the world, solidifying its position as one of the most popular travel destinations. Notably, tourism has been a key driver of the country's economic growth and revenue generation. During the economic crisis, tourism served as a barrier to recession and unemployment, playing a crucial role in Greece's economic recovery. However, the global pandemic and the measures taken to curb its spread resulted in a sharp decline in tourism, severely impacting the economies of tourist regions and the broader economy. The rapid recovery of tourism in 2021 and 2022 led to a similar rebound in GDP and economic activity in tourist areas, further establishing Greece as a world-class tourist destination. Additionally, the tourism sector has shown a remarkable ability to attract investment [7].

To further enhance Greece's tourism industry and increase the competitiveness of its tourism offerings, a coordinated effort from all stakeholders is necessary. Given the critical role that qualified human resources

play in improving organizational efficiency, it is essential for policymakers to prioritize education as a key issue. This focus will promote innovation and competitiveness in the tourism sector [8].

The objective of this paper is to present the options available in Greek public tourism education and training and to evaluate the current situation. Moreover, it seeks to explore the potential for internationalization, considering the ongoing need for extroversion and constructive collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. The structure of this article is as follows: Section 2 provides a brief history of tourism education, while Section 3 outlines the structure of tourism education and training in Greece. Finally, the paper assesses the current situation and the potential for internationalization of Greek tourism education and training, concluding with recommendations.

II. TOURISM EDUCATION

Tourism education is a key element within the broader tourism framework, encompassing activities such as study, teaching, and fostering interpersonal exchanges. Its primary goal is to sustain, expand, enrich, and disseminate knowledge of tourism in society [1].

The field of tourism education dates back around 80 years, when it was first introduced in higher education. However, it wasn't until about 50 years ago that tourism education emerged as a distinct and separate field of study [9]. In Europe, its initial development focused largely on technical and vocational schools, where the emphasis was on acquiring fundamental skills, particularly in areas like hospitality and hotel management [10]. As the tourism sector grew, tourism education was gradually recognized as an academic discipline within higher education and as a field of scientific research [11].

The growth of tourism education is closely tied to the exponential expansion of tourism, which began after World War II and continues today. Alongside this growth, organizations such as airlines, hotel chains, and travel agencies emerged to meet the increasing demand from tourists. The professionalization of tourism services further drove educational institutions to create tourism programs that addressed the industry's growing needs and opportunities.

In the early 1990s, tourism was globally recognized as a subject of serious academic research. This period saw a major expansion in tourism programs across educational levels, alongside a deeper understanding and scholarship of the field, demonstrated by a surge in tourism literature [12]. Today, tourism education and training continue to gain momentum, with a wide variety of programs offered at different levels. This expansion is fueled by the recognition of tourism's socio-economic importance by policymakers, including governments and public and private institutions. It is widely acknowledged that the delivery of quality services in tourism—and in all industries—relies on the employment of well-trained, professional human resources [13]. However, differing perspectives on curriculum design and teaching methods persist within tourism education ([14]; [15]; [16]). This ongoing debate highlights the dynamic nature of tourism education and underscores the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation to meet the sector's evolving needs.

III. STRUCTURE OF TOURISM EDUCATION IN GREECE

Initially, tourism education in Greece was largely informal, relying on apprenticeships and on-the-job training as the primary methods of instruction. As tourism grew into a more significant economic force, it became clear that a structured educational approach was necessary to support its expansion.

The first vocational school for tourism in Greece, the School of Tourism (STE), was established in 1937. Its main goal was to provide individuals already working, or planning to work, in the tourism industry with short but intensive training programs. Over time, tourism education has undergone considerable changes, with the aim of fostering tourism development and enhancing the quality of services.

The Greek education system is divided into three distinct levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. In addition, there is an unclassified post-secondary level offering vocational training. The Ministry of Education, Research, Religious Affairs and Sport (YPETHA) oversees all levels of education managing public schools, developing curricula, appointing staff, and administering funds. While tertiary institutions are autonomous, YPETHA controls their funding and student admissions.

Other stakeholders also contribute to tourism education and training in Greece. Various representatives at all educational levels beyond compulsory education (junior high school or gymnasium) play a role in advancing tourism education, although there is room for improvement. The following outlines the current state of tourism education in Greece at different educational levels.

A. Secondary Education

Vocational Secondary Education provides tourism education through occupationally focused programs. These programs emphasize practical skills and industry knowledge. Specifically, students in the 3rd grade of Vocational High Schools (EPAL) can specialize in Tourism Management Assistant. Upon completing EPAL programs, graduates receive two diplomas: the National Baccalaureate (the main secondary education diploma

in Greece) and the Vocational High School Diploma in Tourism (Level 4 of the European Qualifications Framework, EQF). Graduates can also pursue a Vocational Degree in Tourism (Level 5 EQF) by participating in a one-year internship program, which combines paid work with one day of academic study per week.

EPAL degrees equip graduates with the skills necessary for employment in related fields. EPAL graduates are also eligible to take National Examinations for admission to Higher Education Institutions. Graduates specializing in tourism may apply for a variety of economics and management programs, or they can continue their vocational training at Schools of Higher Vocational Training (SAEK).

B. Post-secondary education

High School and EPAL graduates may enroll in public or private Schools of Higher Vocational Training (SAEK) (former Institutes of Vocational Training (IEK)) in specializations related to tourism. With regard to public institutions, it should be noted that there are a number of agents involved in the SAEK, namely YPETHA, DYPA (Ministry of Labour and Social Security), and the Ministry of Tourism. These institutions focus on hands-on learning and real-world experience.

SAEK training programs last five semesters, after which students receive a Vocational Training Certificate. Graduates are also awarded a Diploma of Vocational Specialization, Education, and Training (Level 5 EQF) after passing certification exams. They then have the opportunity to enroll in higher education programs related to their specialization, subject to qualifying exams administered by higher education institutions. Table 1 lists the tourism-related specializations offered by public SAEK institutions.

Table 1. Tourism specializations in each type of Public SAEK

SAEK of YPETHA	SAEK of DYPA	SAEK of Ministry of Tourism
<i>Management and Financial Sector</i>	- Hospitality Business	- Hospitality Unit Executive
· Administration in Touristic Management and Finance	- Bakery and Pastry	- Culinary Technician - Chef
	- Culinary Art–Chef	- Bakery Technician - Pastry Chef
<i>Agronomy Sector</i>		- Travel and Tourism Executive (Experimental specialization)
·Agrotourism Technician		- Hospitality Executive with specialization in Room Management (Experimental specialization)
<i>Tourism and Hospitality Professions</i>		
·Tourist and Hospitality Unit,		
- Tour leader,		
- Specialist In Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Tours,		
·Bakery and Pastry Technician,		
·Culinary Art Technician – Chef		
<i>Other Sectors</i>		
- ICT in Travel Industry (V.I.C.T. Travel)		

Furthermore, the Schools of Tourist Guides, which were closed in 2010 and reopened in 2017 (in Athens, Thessaloniki, Corfu, Rethymno, and Rhodes), are post-secondary vocational institutions offering a two-year programme run by the Ministry of Tourism. To complete the programme, students must attend 945 hours of compulsory classes and participate in 35 days of educational excursions to museums and archaeological sites. Admission to the school is based on a single application process, following an invitation from the Ministry of Tourism. Applicants must demonstrate proficiency in two foreign languages and hold at least a high school diploma. Additionally, there is a quota system: 70% of positions are reserved for graduates of general/vocational high schools, while 30% are allocated to graduates of higher education institutions.

Individuals aged 18 or older, holding at least a Junior High School diploma (Gymnasium) or an equivalent qualification, and up to 29 years old, may also choose to enroll in the Vocational Schools for Internship of the Greek Public Employment Service (EPAS DYPA), under the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, which operates 50 schools across Greece. Established in 1952, EPAS DYPA follows an apprenticeship model, combining theoretical and practical training with paid apprenticeships in private and public sector enterprises. The program lasts two years (four semesters), with students attending classes in the afternoon and working as trainees in the morning.

In the field of tourism, EPAS DYPA offers specializations in Hotel Business, Bakery and Pastry, and Culinary Art. In 2021, seven new Tourism-Hospitality Experimental Vocational Apprenticeship Schools (PEPAS) were launched in Athens, Heraklion, Crete, Rhodes, Mytilene, Patras, Thessaloniki, and Corfu, offering specializations in Culinary Technician, Food Service Technician, and Hotel Receptionist. The PEPAS

initiative is a collaboration between DYPA, the Hellenic-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Institute of the Greek Tourism Confederation (INSETE), which provides expertise in tourism and vocational training. PEPAS ensures apprenticeship placements for all trainees in 4- and 5-star hotels, enhancing their prospects for professional advancement upon graduation.

C. Tertiary education

At the higher education level, university departments and Higher Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE) offer comprehensive programs in tourism, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. These programs cover a wide range of topics, such as tourism management and sustainable tourism practices. Admission to these institutions is determined through national examinations.

In 2017, three new undergraduate departments specializing in tourism were established, addressing a long-standing gap in Greek higher education. These departments are located at the University of the Aegean, the University of Piraeus, and the University of West Attica. In 2018, the Hellenic Open University also introduced a tourism department offering distance learning. The higher education landscape in Greece underwent significant changes in 2019 with the abolition of all Technological Educational Institutes (TEI), many of which merged with universities or contributed to the establishment of the new Mediterranean University of Crete. Consequently, higher education in Greece is now exclusively provided by universities, which has led to a complete restructuring of the sector, including tourism studies. Table 2 presents an overview of the current tourism departments in Greek tertiary education.

Table 2: Tourism Departments of public Universities in Greece

	Tourism Department	University	Website
1	Department of Tourism Economics and Management, School of Business	University of the Aegean	https://www.tourem.aegean.gr/en/
2	Department of Tourism Studies, School of Economics, Business and International Studies	University of Piraeus	http://tourism.unipi.gr/
3	Department of Tourism Management, School of Management, Economics & Social Sciences	University of West Attica	https://tourism.uniwa.gr/en/homepage/
4	Tourism Management	Hellenic Open University (Distance learning)	https://www.eap.gr/en/undergraduate/tourism-administration/
5	Department of Tourism	Ionian University	https://tourism.ionio.gr/en/
6	Department of Business Administration & Tourism	Hellenic Mediterranean University	https://bat.hmu.gr/en/home/
7	Department of Organization Management, Marketing and Tourism, School of Economics and Management	International Hellenic University	http://ommt.ihu.gr/en/welcome/
8	Department of Tourism Management	University of Patras	http://tourism.upatras.gr/?lang=en

In addition to the aforementioned departments, the Advanced Schools of Tourism Education (ASTE) in Crete (Agios Nikolaos) and Rhodes offer tertiary-level education and training in tourism. The ASTE in Rhodes is the very first Tourism School in Greece, and its design was based on the Hospitality School of Lausanne.

At the postgraduate level, various tourism-related programmes have been offered for several years in universities, as well as interdepartmental and inter-institutional programmes. Table 3 presents a comprehensive overview of postgraduate programmes available from Greek public education for the academic year 2023-24 in Greece.

Table 3: Post-graduate programs available from Greek public education for the academic year 2023-24.

	Tourism post-graduate programmes	University	Website
1	"Strategic Management of Tourism Destinations and Hospitality Enterprises", Interdepartmental Programme of Postgraduate Studies, of Department of Tourism Economics and Management, Department of Business Management, and Department of Environment	University of the Aegean	https://tourism-pms.aegean.gr/index.php
2	<i>Digital Technologies in Hospitality and Tourism Management</i> , Interdepartmental Programme of Postgraduate Studies, Department of Informatics - Department of Tourism	Ionian University	https://tourism.ionio.gr/ditour/gr/
3	MSc in Business Administration – Tourism Management” (MBA – Tourism Management) of the Department of Business Administration	University of Piraeus	https://mbatourism.unipi.gr/en/
4	MSc in Hospitality and Tourism Management Programme, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Economics	University Center of International	https://www.ihu.gr/ucips/postgraduate-programmes/htm

		Programmes of Studies of the International Hellenic University	
5	MSc in “Advanced Management Systems” with specializations: a. in “Services Business Management and Local Development”, or b. in “Tourism – Health and Wellness”, Interdepartmental Programme of Postgraduate Studies– Department of Tourism – Department of Accounting and Finance	University of West Attica	https://mscams.uniwa.gr/
6	Master of <i>Tourism Business Administration</i>	Hellenic Open University	https://www.eap.gr/en/tourism-business-administration/
7	MSc in “Religious and Pilgrimage Tourism”, School of Social Theology and Christian Culture of Faculty of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki & Department of Organization Management, Marketing and Tourism of the School of Economics and Management, International Hellenic University	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki & International Hellenic University	https://msc-religioustourism.web.auth.gr/
8	Master in “Tourism and Regional Development” with specializations in a. “Tourism and Regional Development”, or b. in “Environment and Sustainable Tourism”, or c. in “Cultural and Religious Tourism” of School of Economics, School of Forestry and Natural Environment, School of Agriculture, School of Spatial Planning and Development, Department of Theology, and Faculty of Law	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki	https://msc-tourism.econ.auth.gr/
9	Master in “Sports Tourism, Event Organization, Dance” with specializations in: a. Sports Tourism and Leisure, or b. Organization of Sports Events, or c. Dance of the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science	Democritus University of Thrace	https://stourdance.phyed.duth.gr/
10	MSc in “Nutrition and Dietetics” with specializations in: a. Mediterranean Diet and Tourism, or b. Sports Nutrition, or c. Clinical Nutrition, of the Department of Nutritional Sciences and Dietetics	International Hellenic University ¹	https://nutr.ihu.gr/en/frontpage/about-en/msc-en/
11	MSc in “Tourism and Cultural Planning and Development”, interdepartmental post-graduate program of the Department of Planning and Regional Development & the Department of Economics	University of Thessaly	http://tourismculture-pms.uth.gr/en/
12	MSc in “Hospitality and Tourism Business Management”	Hellenic Mediterranean University	https://master-in-tourism.hmu.gr/

The current state of Greek tourism education and training demonstrates that considerable efforts have been made to equip students with the skills required for careers in various sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry. It is also worth to be mentioned that significant reforms are currently underway in vocational and tertiary education in Greece, which may impact tourism education and training. Furthermore, available data indicate that undergraduate programmes in tourism within tertiary education are still in their infancy. This is due to the fact that a significant number of departments were either newly established (in 2017 and 2018) or evolved from existing departments within Technological Education Institutions (TEI). In contrast, faculty members are experts in various, including business administration, shipping, trade, finance, management engineering, international and European studies, with specializations in tourism management, marketing, finance, business administration, politics, and information technology. Postgraduate programmes in tourism education in Greece are much more established, with the first such programme, "Tourism Planning, Management and Policy" at the University of the Aegean, operational for over 25 years. Initially, tourism studies in Greece were viewed as a branch of business administration. The curriculum emphasized advanced topics related to tourism policy and management, reflecting the growing need for qualified managers in the tourism industry.

At the same time, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions responded to the demand for personnel in lower-level positions. After considerable effort, Greece succeeded in addressing the educational gap and introduced undergraduate studies in tourism. The focus of vocational secondary education has shifted towards specializations in tourism, which were originally centered on hospitality and have been available since 1985 at the Technical-Vocational Lyceum (TEL). These specializations are now offered at EPAL and have evolved to become more tourism- and hospitality-oriented.

Students can also opt for vocational training at EPAS DYPA or the one-year internship program at EPAL to gain hands-on experience in tourism-related fields. Graduates from these programs can work in the tourism industry as low- or middle-level personnel. However, there is significant fragmentation in the provision of tourism education and training at the post-secondary level, as multiple entities offer the same specializations. Despite this, the integration of an apprenticeship year in post-secondary vocational education is a positive and encouraging development. It provides EPAL and SAEK graduates with the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and gain professional experience in the tourism industry, preparing them for the labor market [17].

¹ The International Hellenic University (IHU) is Greece’s first public university where specific programmes are taught exclusively in English.

Internships play a key role in transitioning students from the classroom to the industry. Their importance should not be underestimated. According to Ruhanen, Robinson, and Breakey [18], internships allow students to gain practical industry experience and enhance classroom learning. By providing practical skills, they help students transition smoothly into the industry. However, the quality and usefulness of internships vary widely, and their impact on students' preparedness requires further evaluation.

Students have also expressed concern about the lack of organized information on current trends and needs of the business sector, combined with a lack of interest from both companies and universities. Furthermore, there appears to be a gap between the knowledge graduates possess and the practical knowledge and soft skills necessary for integrating into the tourism industry ([19]; [20]; [21]). Tourism teaching and evaluation is another important issue affecting both student perspectives and knowledge, which should also be considered [22]. Extended research in the tourism sector could support the forthcoming changes in Greek tourism education and training.

The key challenge lies in bridging the gap between theoretical teachings in the classroom and the practical skills required by the workforce. Many studies have shown a significant disparity between the knowledge taught in tourism programs and the skills needed in the industry [23]. As a result, graduates often need additional training after being hired, leading to higher operational costs for businesses.

Aligning tourism education in Greece with industry standards has been a major focus ([24]; [25]; [26]). Continuous assessment and adaptation of methods are vital to strengthen the connection between academia and industry. The rapidly evolving tourism sector may not adequately prepare students for the labor market if education remains static.

Digital technologies are transforming education globally, and tourism education is no exception. The rise of online learning platforms, virtual reality simulations, and digital marketing courses offers flexible and innovative learning opportunities for current and aspiring tourism professionals ([27]; [28]; [29]).

Taking into account the aforementioned issues and the fact that the tourism industry is constantly changing due to rapid technological advancements and shifts in consumer behavior, educational institutions must regularly update their curricula to ensure that graduates possess the skills required to thrive in this fast-evolving environment.

Furthermore, adopting a multidisciplinary approach within tourism education can foster a holistic understanding of the industry and its stakeholders, facilitating the implementation of more effective and sustainable tourism practices.

IV. TOWARDS INTERNATIONALIZATION

Tourism-education programmes are offered globally with significant diversity and fragmentation, , resulting in a lack of homogeneity and common orientation ([30]; [1]). To ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education, 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999. As a result, a cohesive and coherent European Higher Education Area (EHEA) began to form through extensive and intensive changes in the education system [31], which also impacts tourism education.

However, since that time, the Greek educational system has been undergoing reform. On one hand, it needs to become more competitive to equip human resources with contemporary knowledge and skills. On the other hand, it should broaden its scope to position Greek education within the European or global educational arena.

Therefore, tourism education and training in Greece require a coherent strategic plan. It is essential to provide students with up-to-date knowledge and skills to prepare future employees for the tourism sector. The importance of highly skilled, qualified, and trained personnel, capable of innovation and meeting productivity demands for economic growth and success in the tourism industry, has been recognized [10]. To achieve this, all stakeholders—public and private—must coordinate and collaborate [32]. This collaboration could lead to a clear and coherent national tourism education policy, considering global trends and practices [14].

By fostering constructive national and international collaboration and optimizing European structural resources, the development of tourism education and training may be realized. Essential to this development is the integration of education and the tourism industry, accounting for national tourism policies, educational policies, and the broader economic, political, sociocultural, and environmental contexts ([14]; [33]). Empirical research must involve education and industry stakeholders to actively participate in and co-create the new policy.

Given Greece's traditional reputation as a leading leisure destination, there is an opportunity to leverage this for educational purposes as well. Greece could become an ideal location for international students studying Tourism and Hospitality, offering a range of tourist facilities, a rich cultural heritage, beautiful beaches, and stunning landscapes.

To internationalize tourism education, several changes should be implemented:

(a) Establish more English-speaking programs to attract international students, as currently, all undergraduate programs are in Greek, and only a few postgraduate programs are in English;

(b) Develop flexible programs that support both synchronous and asynchronous learning, allowing students to balance studies and work;

(c) Integrate appealing internship programs into undergraduate tourism programs;

(d) Offer cutting-edge specializations and new curricula, including alternative tourism, to foster information literacy and knowledge management competencies, making Greece a competitive destination for tourism studies.

In addition to the advancement of Greek tourism education and training, the Greek economy and local communities may also benefit from the contributions of new students, who may be located in various departments or schools.

Advancing Greek tourism education and training could also benefit the Greek economy and local communities through the contributions of new students. This transformation requires political will and changes in the legal framework to establish a new perspective on tourism education, including legal, organizational, and institutional arrangements. The Ministry of Education (YPETHA) is the primary coordinator and regulator of educational issues in Greece. Tourism education and training need a new approach to evolve and maintain a competitive edge.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The goal of tourism education is to enhance, develop, and transfer tourism knowledge within society, thereby boosting the competitiveness of tourism products. In Greece, tourism education and training are offered at secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary levels, with a variety of hospitality and tourism specializations. The Greek educational system is undergoing reforms, including in the tourism sector, to provide the industry with qualified employees.

To improve Greek tourism education and training, a more effective and outward-looking approach is needed. There is a pressing need for a unified and coherent strategy that aligns industry and education to transform and adapt the country's intellectual resources in a competitive manner, contributing to growth and societal benefits [34]. As we live in a knowledge-based globalized world, developing human resources is crucial for enhancing tourism services and competitiveness.

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