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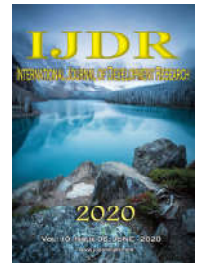
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE AND VIEWS OF STUDENTS OF THE HIGHER SCHOOL OF TOURISM OF RHODES

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ABSTRACT

The rapid developments in transport, communication, technology and economy during the last fifty years have unavoidably led tourism in an uptrend. More and more people are becoming travelers and "collectors of experiences", engaging in a continuous mobility that has both positive and negative effects. The realization that tourism can relegate the place of destination both socially and environmentally, has resulted in the conception of the term of Sustainable Tourism, as an activity respecting the social fabric and promoting socially and environmentally friendly touristic practices. Within this framework, this specific research aims at investigating whether the attitudes, the knowledge and the beliefs of the male and female students of the Higher School of Tourism Education of Rhodes (better known as ASTER), echo the notion of Sustainable Development. Keeping in mind that this school has been the first solely tourist school, then this research gains additional importance. The research data revealed an inconsistency between the knowledge of the male and the female students attending the first year and those that attend courses of the third year, proving that the school contributes to the evolution of their sustainable way of thinking. Additionally, it seems that the male and female students of the third year display an environmentally-friendly lifestyle, which is demonstrated by the habits they adopt in their daily life.

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INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Framework

It is an indisputable fact that in recent years there has been a significant change in the behavior and attitude of people, in that they show greater sensitivity towards the problems of the natural environment. A large percentage of people seem to have adopted ecological attitudes and turned to environmentally friendly choices in their daily lives. At the same time, an important change has taken place in their preferences regarding their holidays and in particular in the way they are choosing their destination and their accommodation, as well as in the final choice of their holiday type. These changes, as well as the shift to environmentally friendly goods and services, are the result of an increase in environmental awareness (Ludevid, 2000). The environment constitutes for tourists the main factor that will determine their decision on the holiday package will opt for (Hillary *et al.*, 2001). The fact that environmental issues have begun to interest consumers has resulted in a diversification of the products and services offered, in the light of ecological sensitivity.

After all, environmental compliance is seen as an element that increases the quality of the tourism product and has economic value for the consumer (Sánchez - Ollero *et al.*, 2013). In this context, the interest of the scientific community has turned to the quality of education provided at the Higher Schools of Tourism Education. According to Boley (2013), incorporating the concept of Sustainable Development into the Curriculum entails a better quality standard of studies and better preparation for the demanding field of Hospitality.

Sustainable Development in Higher Education: University institutions worldwide are invited to respond to a variety of social expectations associated with environmental, cultural, economic and social issues that threaten the well-being of mankind and the sustainable treatment of other beings on the planet (Blewitt & Cullingford, 2013). The sustainable redefinition of universities requires the integration of Sustainable Development (SD) values into their Curriculum. Research at an international level has highlighted many different ways of integrating the concept of SD into university curricula. By introducing sustainable issues in different disciplines, with a purely opportunistic purpose and moving towards more organized approaches to the incorporation of sustainable values in lectures, the university community seems

to have begun to recognize the importance of SD. Many universities consider sustainability-oriented courses as prerequisites for obtaining a degree, while others create additional SD courses. Through the adoption of successive teaching practices, universities try to create those learning conditions that will help students realize their place in the socio-political changing environment of today and the future (Denby & Rickards, 2016).

Environmental Education and Tourism: two associated concepts: Massive tourism, with its inevitable environmental, economic and social implications, has highlighted the need for more environmentally friendly tourism policies, while acknowledging that Environmental Education (EE) and tourism are two interdependent and associated concepts. Rhodes, as the island that houses the Higher School of Tourism Education of Rhodes (ASTER) is mainly a destination that attracts mass tourism with enormous hotel infrastructure and an all-inclusive policy. According to data released by Fraport Greece, the company that manages Rhodes International Airport, the number of visitors who used the airport increased by about 9% in 2018 compared to previous years. A total of 4,254,700 tourists visited the airport in the nine months from January to September 2018 compared to 3,941,740 in the same period in 2017. If the number of domestic passengers is added to this number, the number of travelers approached 5 million. (Bussinessnews.gr, 2018). All the above statistics prove the necessity of the interconnection of Environmental Education with tourism, through the contact of students with EE courses and sustainable ways of professional development and management. ASTER students, as future tourism professionals who can potentially work in large hotel units, whose environmental management is a difficult task, should be guided by the requirements, values and characteristics of *Sustainable Tourism* (ST) and can in practice implement environmental management practices.

Tourism education and sustainable education: Characteristics and potential: A quick look at various scientific databases shows that SD, as a concept in general and as a practice in particular, enjoys a prominent place in academic thought, as there is a plethora of articles on it. However, the association of EE and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with the education provided in the tourism professions does not seem to have received the necessary attention from the scientific community (Busby, 2003).

Tourism Education: (hereinafter TE) is considered a relatively new educational stream, as its profile, goals and content are still under development. From a first basic approach, TE is understood as an activity that promotes and cultivates the acquisition of those professional skills required in the tourism industry, contributing to the creation of effective executives who can potentially fill a wide variety of positions (Athanassiou, 2004). Both during and after the studies, the tourism schools assign tourist duties to the students, which may affect the community in which they work. Within this context, there are scientific voices, such as those of Morgan (2004, in Inui, Wheeler and Lankford, 2006), who call for a shift in training provided by the narrow professional context to more liberal perspectives. It is important for TE to incorporate the humanitarian values that will characterize the successful director of the future. The need arises at this point to link TE with EE and ESD. In order to move away from the narrow and

sterile view of tourism as an economic activity, TE must realize and consequently integrate its social, political, cultural and ecological extensions into its Curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

The previous literature review highlighted the fact that the SD, as the central pillar of the subject under investigation, has occupied the scientific community to the fullest extent, being a subject not only of specializations related to the environment but also of economists, sociologists, teachers and lawyers. The interest of this research is focused on examining the attitudes and opinions of ASTER students, acknowledging the fact that they are potential employees in the tourism sector. In practice, the degree they will receive from their school secures employment rights that cover a wide range of positions. Therefore, ASTER students should not be treated as current undergraduate students, but as future professionals in the field of tourism such as reception workers, catering managers, as well as hotel managers and travel agents, who should think and act with a sustainable orientation. Finally, this paper will try to investigate whether there is a relationship between attitudes and perceptions on Sustainable Development and Sustainable Tourism and the year of study.

The following research questions are therefore reasonable:

1. To what extent do students know the concept of SD and how is it reflected in their daily lives?
2. Is there a correlation between the year of study and the knowledge and attitudes about SD and ST?

The general objectives of the present study and the more specific research questions hope to contribute to the collection of important information, which on the one hand will enrich the basic existing literature on ASTER and on the other hand will shed light on the attitudes and perceptions of future professionals in the tourism section regarding SD.

Research tool: The chosen research tool was the questionnaire, which was created with the help of google forms and was distributed online. The design and organization of its structure took into account the basic criteria for formulating questionnaires, proposed by Papanastasiou and Papanastasiou (2014), in order for the questions to reflect on the one hand the literature overview, but also to answer the research questions and serve the objectives of this research. At first glance, it proves that the questionnaire as a whole consists of closed-ended questions, as the participants in this research are asked to choose between specific options given to them for each question. Describing its structure in more detail, the questionnaire includes a total of 17 questions, 7 of which are of demographic interest. All questions aim at the collection of research data concerning the knowledge of the participants, the values they represent and more specifically what they consider correct and useful and finally their attitudes and beliefs (Papanastasiou & Papanastasiou, 2014).

Population and sample description: ASTER students comprise the sample of this research. More specifically, a total of 90 students participated in this research. Of these, 41 (45.6%) were men and 49 (54.4%) were women. Regarding the year of study which the students of the sample attend, the sample is divided. In particular, 45 students (50%) attend the first year and 45 (50%) students the third year. Regarding the

scores of the sample, only 9 (10%) students had a score of 5-6,5, 31 students (34.4%) had a score of 6.6 -7.5, 21 students (23.3%) had a score of 7.6-8.5, while 29 students (32.2%) had an average score of 8.6-10. Regarding the participation of the sample in an environmental group, 19 (21.1%) answered yes while 70 (77.8%) answered no. There was also 1 person who did not answer this question. In relation to attending an environmental program within the school, 28 (31.1%) answered positively while 61 (67.8%) answered negatively, and there was also 1 person who did not answer this question.

The process research data analysis: The statistical program SPSS 23.0 for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used in order to conduct the necessary processing and analysis of the research data that emerged from the questionnaire (Halikias, Manolessou & Lalou, 2015). The statistical analysis is divided into two stages, the descriptive statistical analysis for the nominal variables, where frequencies and percentages are recorded, but also the average and the standard deviation for the ordinal variables and the inductive statistical analysis, where the relationship of the variables which under question, one independent and one dependent, is tested. In the inductive analysis, in particular, a normality check of the total values of the ordinal variables was performed with Likert scale, using the Kolmogorov - Smirnov criterion, in order to determine whether the values of these variables follow normal distribution or not, in order to use the corresponding parametric or non-parametric statistical criterion. The findings showed that the normality conditions ($\text{sig} < ,05$) were not met, so non-parametric criteria were used. In particular, the χ^2 criterion was used for the cases in which both the independent and the dependent variables were categorical and the Mann-Whitney U-test criterion was used for the cases in which the independent variable was categorical and the dependent variables were ordinal in Likert scale (Howell, 2007). In checking the reliability of the values of Likert scales, the measured values show high levels of internal consistency reliability. In particular for the variables of the group a (a1-a15) the reliability index Cronbach's Alpha is $\alpha = ,862$, for the variables of group c (c1- c33) the index is $\alpha = ,754$, for the variables of group e (e1-e33) the index is $\alpha = ,794$, for the variables of group f (f1-f5) the index is $\alpha = ,787$, while for the variables of group g (g1- g15) the index is $\alpha = ,487$. However in this case, if g6, g8, g9 and g11 answers are removed the index becomes $\alpha = ,703$ which is acceptable.

RESULTS

The statistical analysis and processing of the results led to very useful conclusions regarding the attitudes and perceptions of the students of ASTER on sustainability issues. The most remarkable research finding is related to the statistically significant difference between the attitudes and opinions of students who study in the first year and those who are in the third year of their studies. A first general assessment of these findings reveals that during their studies at ASTER, students come into contact with the concept of SD, recognize its importance for tourism and the operation of the tourism industry and inevitably modify their daily behavior. However, further analyzing this finding, it is reasonable to ask how it is possible to promote the concept of SD, in a School whose Curriculum does not include any environmental and sustainability orientation courses. The possible answers, however, are many and cover a wide range of special

educational and practical conditions prevailing in ASTER. In this context, the difference in the views and attitudes of the students of the first and third year stems from the following factors, which are related to the educational part but also to the internships, in which the students participate during the summer. Initially, although there are no environmental orientation courses at ASTER, the research findings show that the integration of SD into other subjects, such as courses in Economics or Business Administration, is evident. After all, the research of Mintz and Tal (2014), who studied the subjects offered in 13 undergraduate courses, argues that the introduction of the concept of SD in courses of different orientation promotes students' theoretical knowledge, at a different level though. The reversal of attitudes, as they are reflected in the answers given to the question of the questionnaire regarding the main risks faced by tourism can be attributed to this parameter. While in the first year 44.4% of the sample consider that the biggest threat to tourism is terrorism, with the second threat being the economic crisis (28.9%) and the third an ecological disaster (24.4%), in the third year, students do not consider terrorism to be a great threat to tourism (17.77%). On the contrary, working in a more sustainable context, they have begun to understand the environmental consequences and economic implications of this activity. As a result, it is extremely interesting that 48.9% of students, distancing themselves from an excessive fear of terrorism, present environmental threats as a very significant threat to tourism.

It could therefore be said that at ASTER, there is a "*Hidden Curriculum*" which is consistent with the Official curriculum. In essence, the Hidden Curriculum captures the distinction between "what needs to be taught" according to educational design and the education system and what is actually being done by teachers and students, helping to modify the formal Curriculum and create a new one, which everyone accepts as "de facto" (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Taking a look at ASTER's Curriculum, it is easy to see that it is extremely rich and with a broad cognitive orientation. However, the researcher expresses a concern about whether strict adherence to it could lead to the development of sustainable thinking and behavior, like the behavior that is documented in the present study with regards to third-year students. After all, the research of Dawe, Jucker and Martin (2005) revealed that the oversaturated Curriculum of some universities is one of the obstacles to the promotion of sustainability. Therefore, if we consider that the reversal of the attitude and behavior of students in the third year is a result of the strict adherence to the Curriculum, then it seems that the view of the Curriculum as oversaturated and non-sustainable is reflected in this research. Another factor, which is seen as an obstacle to the introduction of SD in the university's offered knowledge, according to Dawe, Jucker and Martin (2005) is the lack of training the teaching staff receive on sustainability issues. However, in the present research this does not seem to be the case because the fact that the students are on a positive path towards sustainability is clearly due to the knowledge they acquire from their studies at the School. The statistically significant difference between the attitudes and opinions of the students who are in the first year and those who are in the third year of their studies could of course be attributed to the behavior of the students themselves. The consistently improved sustainable behavior and the more environmental perceptions displayed by third-year students are considered to be the result of the positive attitude they adopt towards the

concept of SD and its practical manifestations. This conclusion is in line with the research of Barth and Timm (2011), who studied a German university and concluded that the percentage of students who had a more substantial understanding of the concept of SD and who agreed with the values that it advocated, showed commitment and respect for the actions and lessons that promoted it.

It is therefore extremely encouraging that for a tourist school, which does not include ST and SD subjects in its Curriculum, it nevertheless provides environmental education. It is indicative that third-year students have clarified the concept of sustainability in their minds and state that they are ready to apply it in their daily lives. While the findings of the questionnaire show that only 35.6% of first-year students know and understand the concept of sustainability, this percentage increases to 88.9% for students studying in the third year. Similar conclusions emerge from the answers given regarding the understanding of the term "ecological footprint". While in the first year 71.1% declare their ignorance regarding this specific concept, this picture changes positively, as in the third year 60% of the participants recognize the term. Both of these findings are particularly important as they support the fact that environmental knowledge coexists with other forms of tourism specialization provided at ASTER. The lack of knowledge of the concept of sustainability in Higher Education was also found in the research of Maki (2017). Having students of the Pedagogical Department of Primary Education of the University of Ioannina as a sample, the researcher concluded that future teachers consider sustainability as a purely environmental condition, ignoring its social and economic implications. As in the case of ASTER, the students in the sample did not attend, at least officially, any course related to SD, although in contrast to ASTER, an elective course is provided. Therefore, in the future, it is doubtful whether these teachers will incorporate the concept of sustainability into their educational approach and teaching. Another study, which captures the social orientation of the concept of SD in professional life and practice of hotel workers, is that of Goh and Jie (2019). As in the present study, in the research mentioned above, it seems that there are several employees / interns in the tourism industry who experience sustainability through a more social perspective. Therefore, Goh and Jie (2019) captured the ethical hesitations faced by employees at the hotel's restaurant regarding whether they should throw away food, citing the quality of the food offered or reusing some ingredients in new foods. It is typical that many employees report guilt when they have to throw food in the trash, considering the large number of their fellow human beings who suffer from hunger in developing countries.

Conclusions

The research showed that ASTER contributes to the adoption and development of more sustainable attitudes and perceptions. The fact that newly arrived students come to school knowing little about sustainability, a fact which changes positively over the years, creates new data for the School's teaching environment. It is considered necessary to introduce purely sustainable subjects in ASTER's Curriculum, so that SD will not be a section of other courses, such as Economics, but a subject in its own right. Essentially, it is proposed to convert the Hidden Curriculum to a Visible one, for the better professional preparation of students. Ideally,

ASTER itself could adopt some of the environmental management practices implemented in large hotel complexes in order to operate in practice as an SD entity. For example, it could reduce the amount of paper it uses to issue results per semester or simplify registration procedures. Electronic management of secretarial duties, as well as the reduction of energy consumption on school premises could be a very important step towards sustainability. As a result of this research, there is a need to establish an internship for students on environmental management and sustainability practices. It is very important that tomorrow's tourism employees in a country with a "loaded" tourism industry, which hosts millions of tourists, especially during the summer, know and incorporate the requirements of ST into their knowledge and professional philosophy. The incomplete knowledge of the students of the first year on issues of sustainability reveals the absence of EE and ESD from the Greek school context. When students are integrated into a Tertiary School, they inevitably bring with them the previous cognitive patterns they have acquired in their fourteen-year schooling. It is a common secret, however, that the Greek education system downplays the importance of EE, considering it a "second class" subject, which must be taught in the context of other subjects, such as Environmental Studies in Primary Education or Geography and Biology in Secondary Education. Undoubtedly, ASTER has been providing a high level of tourism education for the last sixty years. However, its sustainable reorientation is necessary in order to follow the developments proposed by the introduction of ST. After all, a sustainable ASTER will lead to sustainable graduates, who will be better trained and more efficient.

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