

Student Guides as Mediators of Institutional Heritage and Personal Experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the role of student guides as mediators between the institutional mission and heritage of their university and visitors to the historic campus. Drawing on a longitudinal study undertaken at two historic universities in the west, the authors establish that a small cadre of elite, competitively-chosen guides at these institutions perform a role of openness and democracy on behalf of the increasingly complex and hybrid modern university. The chapter considers how student guides are able to navigate their own pride at such privileged engagement and how this privilege impacts on tours offered to visitors, where campus tours become a negotiation based on internal and external influences and are constructed and reconstructed according to the imagined or actual demands of different tour groups. By managing risk at the point of employment, and by encouraging free reign in tours, there is limited risk involved to host universities as student guides offer an informed, personalised heritage experience to both domestic and international tourists.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst there is an established corpus of work on the role of the tourism guide in general (see for example Cohen, 1985; Dahles, 2002; Salazar, 2005; Salazar, 2006; Gelbman & Maoz, 2012; Tucker & Carnegie, 2014; Mesaritou, Coleman, & Eade, 2016; Farkic, 2018), the topic of students as tour guide, presenter and interpreter of university heritage and ambition remains under-researched. Indeed, the subject of campus tourism in its broadest sense is something that has received limited attention as an area of aca-

demographic investigation, even though in many destinations university campuses can form an important part of the tourist space (see for example Connell, 1996; Ming 2007; Shaw & Fincher, 2010; Schofield & Fallon, 2012; Woodward, 2013).

In the UK, towns like Durham, Cambridge and Oxford promote themselves as cultural destinations mainly because of the heritage associated with their universities and colleges, whilst in the USA the presence of Harvard University, Auburn University and the University of Virginia (UVa) in Cambridge, Mass; Auburn, Alabama and Charlottesville VA are key reasons for tourists to visit those locations. Other destinations where universities form a major part of the tourism experience include the streets around the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter of Paris, France; Heidelberg in Germany with its iconic student prison (studentenkarzer) and Alcalá de Henares in Spain. In his overview of the importance of the historic university campus in contemporary tourism, Woodward states that “*the historic buildings associated with centuries of learning provide an iconic and attractive physical presence that helps the destination build its sense of place*” (2013:265). In a review of the contribution of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to city branding, Popescu argues that “*a ‘consumer’ of the university, either student or academic staff becomes, in most cases, a ‘consumer’ of the city in which the university is located*” (2012:494). It is contested in this chapter that the reverse can also be true, namely that a visitor to a university or college town can also become a ‘consumer’ of the HEI in either its tangible or intangible form, and that to make the most of, the visitor or consumer needs an informed guide.

This paper seeks to fill part of the existing knowledge gap on campus tourism and particularly on the role of tourist guides by exploring the role of student guides as intermediaries between campus visitors on the one hand and the host university on the other. The situation can at times be challenging, since a university is on the one hand an elite organization (i.e. a community of people) but also a physical space on the other, and thus can present multiple identities to the visitor with no previous affiliation to, or knowledge of, the institution and its estate. The findings discussed within this chapter are drawn from a longitudinal research exercise carried out over several years at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, USA (hereafter UVa) and at the University of Durham in the North East of England. It should be noted that both of these study locations are located within World Heritage Sites, which brings an additional layer of heritage value into the equation.

BACKGROUND

As indicated above, the role of campus tourism in the contemporary tourism experience has received comparatively limited attention in the literature. Connell (1996, 2000) and Woodward (2013) explore in outline the varying functions that universities can play within a destination’s product, with Ming (2007) exploring the Chinese experience in particular. More specifically, the role of the university and college campus as public space, and thus part of the wider destination product, has been reviewed by, *inter alia*, Gumprecht (2003, 2007) and Bromley (2006) whilst the contribution of students (and their presence in a destination) to placemaking in their host communities has been explored by Shaw & Fincher (2010) and Pereira Brando Albino (2015).

Universities are powerful place-based organisations, with a global reach in research terms, staff and students. Often major landowners, universities can be viewed as contributing to or exacerbating troubles of communities such as a lack of affordable housing for local people, through their own development strategies intended to co-exist side by side with, rather than as part of, the communities in which they are

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