

## **Bridging Theory and Practice: Lessons and Directions**

**Marcella De Martino**

Institute for Research on Innovation and  
Services for Development (IRISS), Italy

**Mathilda Van Niekerk**

University of Central Florida, USA

**Noel Scott**

Griffith University, Australia

There is global interest in and need for enhanced knowledge about the effective development and operation of tourism as a socioeconomic sector. Effective operation means ensuring that tourism is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable and, significantly, contributes both to the host community's quality of life and to tourists' experience. This volume in the *Bridging Tourism Theory and Practice* book series (comprised mostly of papers presented at the 2015 t-Forum conference in Naples, Italy) has examined issues of knowledge transfer to and among sectors of the tourism industry in order to provide demonstrative examples of current as well as desirable practices or processes in this field. This final chapter synthesizes and identifies some of the presented themes for *sin qua non* bridges between the fields of practice and halls of academia. In general, this need was also in evidence in discussions at the 2015 World Tourism Forum Lucerne where an "academia meets industry" meeting was introduced as an official side-event:

Industry representatives agreed that there are significant knowledge gaps that need addressing and acknowledged that academics are the right people to address them.... to provide value to industry, it needs to be presented in a manner that enables industry to have a comprehensive understanding of the results, what they mean for their industry and how they can be applied practically and effectively. It was deemed essential that the knowledge is translated in a style that can be understood by industry. These style requirements conflict with those by academic journals—the primary publication outlet for academic research. Relying on the press to translate the work of academics was considered potentially problematic due to the risk of the key points of relevance being lost (Walters, Burns and Stettler 2015, p.492).

This position captures a typical summary of industry's view of research conducted by tourism academics. It may be useful but there is a need for translation to improve clarity, and to identify applicability, and relevance to tourism businesses. Such arguments target not only tourism but also perceptions of academic research in general and are reflected in calls for academics to report the impact of their research in a more accessible manner (Hall & Page, 2015). Another question relates to what quality research is (Mårtensson, Fors, Wallin, Zander, & Nilsson, 2016). It is clear that some academics do not consider that their role should be applicable to the industry. This volume attempts to promote a bridge among those academics who are interested in interaction with the industry and those stakeholders who see value and usefulness in the knowledge that academics possess. It is the opinion of the editors that bridging this gap should not be a choice but a bilateral obligation—for the advancement of knowledge and informed development of the industry. This privilege is implicit in an applied field of study such as tourism, where the research outputs may affect the livelihood of operators and the activities of tourists either directly or through government policy choices. Academics need to learn the networking, writing, and broadcasting skills needed if they are to take part in the public presentation of their research findings (Melissen & Koens, 2015). Indeed, some researchers have worked with the mass media collaborators to better communicate their ideas.

The value and usefulness the involvement of academics in a wide variety of industry projects is demonstrated in the case studies featured in this book. Analyses across these cases indicate that universities have an important role in developing collaboration and partnerships and that this is an important factor in successful tourism project outcomes. Many of the cases are from developing countries where tourism academics provide a repository of useful knowledge *per se* and also of the processes that generate collaboration. However, it appears that the cases indicate such knowledge cannot be simply shared without reference to the mechanism by which transfer takes place. Knowledge transfer requires building trust, a collaborative ethos, and a supporting organizational structure. In many of the cases in this volume, it is not pre-existing knowledge that is transferred from academics to industry stakeholders that provide value, but instead the mediation, support, critical thinking, and reflection that academics provide that is their most valuable contribution. This type of contribution is often noted in the chapters of this volume dealing with less developed countries.

How can one evaluate the chapters of this volume presented in this volume where there is no evidence of collaboration with industry? It is arguable that tourism knowledge production can be conducted without industry participation and yet still be valuable to them, and indeed that it is important for some investigations to be of value to academics only. In areas such as consolidation of academic knowledge for teaching purposes, creating knowledge about usefulness of new technology, and measuring the impact of the tourism industry, academics may perform a useful role in developing and collating knowledge for transfer to the industry.

Some of the academic generated knowledge, such as measurement of advertising effectiveness or the sustainability of tourism, may best be communicated to government officials with a particular interest in policy. An example drawn from the transportation field concerns the need for defining framework and sets of social, environmental, and economic indicators for the evaluation of “policy actions” for introducing less polluting modes. This may be knowledge that some recalcitrant parts of industry do not want developed, but is needed in order to address issues of carbon pollution. Therefore, some academic knowledge may not be appreciated by practitioners but still have a value. This type of knowledge should be targeted at government stakeholders. It appears that there are different tourism knowledge types produced by academics and it must be transferred to appropriate users. By the same token, the importance, means, and ways of transferring know-how of knowledge from the industry to the academia is yet to be outlined.

This book has laid the foundation for the bridge building required for transferring knowledge to and within tourism. Some of the areas that still need to be investigated can be identified. For certain types of knowledge production and transfer processes, academics concerned with transfer effectiveness should engage the industry stakeholders in their research from the beginning. One of the editors of this book is a reviewer of academic grant proposals. . In a recent round it was noted that a number of academics had stated their work would be of interest to industry participants without having discussed this with the stakeholders who may be the logical users of the results. Such lack of any attempt at consultation arguably reduces the effectiveness of the research. Engaging community, government, academic, and industry stakeholders can sometimes be a frustrating and difficult process for all involved. It also requires learning and demonstrating relationship skills, some of which are discussed in this volume. Its chapters suggest that the time is well spent.

One of the lessons from Chapter 2 is the value that comes from rethinking how academics and industry partners work together in conducting research projects. In its project, the research objectives were jointly agreed by the academic researchers and industry managers. Such a process reduces (but does not eliminate) the likelihood of problems to arise during the collaboration. In any investigation, there are issues of interpretation of the problem and translation into a research question, subsequent data collection followed by re-translation into academic speak. Both academic and industry participants should not underestimate the time needed for understanding each other. It may be that knowledge transfer which requires communication to numerous small businesses could use videos or social media to summarize and communicate research results in an easily communicated format.

A number of the chapters have also highlighted the local destination management organizations role as knowledge brokers and boundary spanners between the destination stakeholders and academics who are generating and disseminating knowledge (Sheehan, Vargas-Sánchez, Presenza, & Abbate, 2016). This role is related to innovation and is not often considered part of the core role of a destination management organization. However, cross fertilization is not restricted only to academic researchers and industry. The nature of tourism is that it is an application area for many types of research and involves many sectors. One of these is transport and opportunities for cross-fertilizing tourism and, for example, seaport literature, especially on the specific topic of stakeholder relationship networks for competitiveness. This can favor the spreading of practices and can create a collaborative environment to solve problems that cannot be addressed by one sector alone, and in addition may avoid “reinventing the wheel”. In particular, it is believed that the knowledge transfer among different industries on specific and challenging topics can really contribute to the sustainable development of modern society. The ultimate aim is to identify and promote common tools for the sustainable development of both tourism destinations and transport in the city.

Again referring to transfer within the academia, there is a need to advance the state of research on the role of knowledge mobility for tourism innovation. In particular, attention should be devoted to the contribution of the theoretical frameworks and practices of the service innovation field. Service innovation research has distinctive features which readily apply to tourism. In both, the distinction between product and process innovation is unsatisfactory,

organizational innovations are particularly evident, and customers (tourists) are an important source of new ideas and co-producers of innovations. zzz

Some roadmaps are already sketched in this book and some instances are noted in this final chapter. But what is needed is a continuous traffic of knowledge or know-know to create a synergy or unity between the academia and the industry. Due to the nature and scope of tourism, knowledge transfer should not be limited to the bipolar academia/industry picture often painted. Tourism knowledge need to be between and within many sectors or institutions which are directly or indirectly involved in tourism. This traffic of knowledge would vary from one place to another, but still there are some universal players or bridge builders in tourism. For example, governments or public agencies are involved in tourism everywhere. The traffic of knowledge or know-how can be among them as well as between the public and many private sectors in tourism.

What is quite evident is that tourism is caught between its two disconnected banks of knowledge and practice; if bridged, the traffic remains sporadic. It is crucial that this on-and-off flows between the academia and the industry are sustained for continuity. In order to changes occasional attempts to continuous patterns of tourism knowledge formulation and implementation, a number of measures need to be firmly installed. The formation of the Tourism Intelligence Forum (the t-Forum) is a single step in this direction. At the core of the t-Forum is the mission of sprouting Local Action Groups, made up of local academia, tourism businesses, and the destination.

The t-Forum adopts a localized view of university/research-industry knowledge flows, focusing on the process of building linkages between the academia and the industry to encourage and facilitate the knowledge transfer process. This approach allows for iterative, highly personalized knowledge transfers among universities, destinations, and tourism businesses (Figure 1). These transfers occur on a local basis, which underscores the significance of geographical proximity for the knowledge transfer process.

The t-Forum may undertake many types of knowledge transfer activities depending on the intended scope, scale, and nature, including transnational and European initiatives, whose scope will be to foster knowledge transfer among different countries/institutions, and tourism businesses through collaborative research/consortia, public and private partnerships, satellite laboratories, or sharing of the best practices; national initiatives whose scope is to foster

knowledge transfer in the nation/region and within tourism, covering public-private laboratories, technological parks, diffusion of best practices, education, and training programs; individual knowledge transfer projects supported by specific tourism businesses, covering contract research, individual projects, and training programmes; supporting activities for new firm/business creation, covering spin-off, start-up companies, manager, and researcher mobility; or supporting activities for academics overing conferences and new journals.

Figure 1 about here

A number of such bi- or tri-partite cases are featured in this book and are in practice elsewhere. Some industry sectors or academic institutions have taken the lead, as several chapters of this book and outside cases illustrate. For example, in Mallorca, Spain, where the idea for the formation of the t-Forum was nurtured, a cluster with its own roadmap has brought its local government, tourism sectors, and university together. The resulting melange of knowledge/know-how has supported Mallorca as a prominent destination. At the same time, the island has become a “laboratory” for professors and students.

On the education side, some institutions have initiated their own versions of bridging concept/practice. For example, the University of Central Florida in the United States, another founder of the t-Forum, couples education and industry practices in many ways, including weekly “Meet & Greet” events at which top industry executives visit with student individually; professors are paid by the university to work in hospitality and tourism enterprises for a semester; industry executives spend a teaching and/or research sabbatical at the college; student mentorship are offered by selected industry executives; advisory boards composed mainly of industry leaders guide the curriculum; administrators and faculty members sit on numerous industry boards; professors and graduate students conduct research projects that directly benefit the industry; and professionals are employed as adjunct professors.

As another instant, oceans apart, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in China has been engaged in somewhat similar bridge building and trafficking acts, including having “Professor for a Day” from the industry; integration of teaching and research in its own full service hotel (Hotel ICON); mentorship options for students; work integrated education program for undergraduate students; industry attachment program for its faculty members; student admission

interviews conducted jointly by professors and industry executives; and dissemination of research results to industry via the magazine regularly published by the school.

Despite these initiatives, knowledge sharing and collaboration activities remains few in number. Since the beginning, the academic and the industry have been moving forward like two rivers of knowledge and practice side by side without really connecting, to be consumed into one. Much is lost by both because of this unfortunate disarray or discontinuity in tourism. Permanent bridges need to be built, particularly at destination levels, to unfold the combined synergy to untold opportunities. Such movements need to have believers and followers to finally lead tourism to a new height, rooted in theory, blooming in the fields of practice, bearing fruits for all. The founders of the t-Forum are among these believers whose populations is destined to increase.

**Figure 1. Knowledge Transfer Realms of the t-Forum**

