

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Bendigo — 27 June 2007

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Dr C. Lade, lecturer, school of sport, tourism and hospitality management, faculty of law and management, Bendigo campus, La Trobe University.

The CHAIR — I welcome Dr Clare Lade, lecturer at the School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Faculty of Law and Management at La Trobe University. This is an all-party parliamentary committee. We are inquiring into rural and regional tourism.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege under the Constitution Act, the Parliamentary Committees Act and also the Defamation Act, but any witness giving evidence outside the building is not afforded such privilege.

Before you start, Clare, if you could simply state your name and address and the organisation which you represent and then leave a bit of time at the end of the presentation for some questions, that would be great.

Dr LADE — Clare Lade. I am representing La Trobe University.

I would just like to take this opportunity to raise and discuss a few issues which a few of my colleagues and I have been speaking about in the past which always seem to come up — and I noticed that today they have come up as well — and then more issues from an educational and research perspective.

Just to provide you with a bit of background, as I mentioned before I am a lecturer. I have also been conducting research for the university as well as private regional consultancy organisations in the past. Up at the university we have a three-year undergraduate business degree which majors in tourism and hospitality, just to give you an idea of the educational component. We have recently celebrated our 10 year anniversary. The initial development of the actual degree and the program was well researched. Pretty much we went out to industry and said, ‘What is it you want in order to provide graduates in those skills?’, which I will speak about briefly a little later with regard to skills shortage.

One major issue which I would like to reiterate is the lack of resources for research and data collection. We, through a number of consultancies, have identified that a number of particularly small-medium enterprises are indicating to us that they lack the resources in order to gather this research. We at the university, I guess, are trying to address this in a sense that within our program we are trying to incorporate a number of research projects which not only help our students in gaining experience in that area but also assist the local tourism and local council organisations in gathering this type of information.

Just an example of some of the tourism-related data that we have collected — ascertaining Bendigo residents’ attitudes to tourism development in Bendigo, which was conducted in conjunction with the Bendigo Trust and Bendigo Tourism. Also auditing the Bendigo visitor information centre and developing a plan to make the centre more interactive, investigating the potential expansion of nature-based tourism in the Bendigo region, analysing the sustainability of festivals — again raising the importance of festivals such as the Bendigo Easter Festival — and also devising a marketing plan for the historic joss house. As I said, we are trying to incorporate those sorts of programs into our overall degree program. As I said, it not only benefits obviously the local tourism organisations and local council but also provides experience for our actual students as well.

Briefly on a number of other issues which have been raised: as I said, a number of staff at the university are also involved in a number of consultancies, particularly in regional development, which have also been raised, particularly a lack of cooperative behaviour within regional tourism. I guess it sort of comes back to competition versus cooperation. In theory it sounds great if we could all work cooperatively together but we have identified, again in research, a number of barriers which go against that. Perhaps more of a focus on not only this region but I guess the state as a whole, concentrating on trying to attract visitation to the actual state.

Once we get the tourists here, then it is up to each region to try and entice them to their actual region and to spend money and to increase the yield within these regions as well. Also, increasing

visitation to rural areas from urban entry points. Again, trying to get the tourists out of Melbourne and Sydney, for example, trying to increase the yield within regional areas as well, particularly within the Bendigo region.

That goes hand in hand with trying to extend the length of the stay from day trips to overnight visitation, and also incorporating cooperative marketing techniques, which again I know have been brought up previously. I guess trying to emphasise the importance of complementary visitor attractions. Again, trying to incorporate that touring group, for example. A number of the regions are benefiting as well. And again trying to increase visitor expenditure and increase the yield obviously.

Just going back on the previous remark in relation to lack of skills, again we are in the business of education so we are trying to provide our graduates with the skills that the industry is seeking. We are aware that there is a skill shortage, particularly that has been identified through a number of small-medium enterprises and also the related sectors. Also, particular emphasis on sustainable management techniques as well and how they can be incorporated.

I know Bendigo Tourism has been very active in creating a number of workshops to try and combat that and try to increase the training within these particular areas as well, which the university is more than happy to enforce as well — to try and complement if possible.

I guess one thing particularly for the university is also to have our students incorporated into the local industry as well. As I said, not only assisting the local industry but also trying to get our students up to speed with what is actually going on in the industry and gaining that experience before they actually step out in order to enter the workforce within the tourism areas. We have also had a number of students emphasise that they are more than happy to stay in regional areas once they graduate.

They are not all thinking, 'We are going straight to the major cities', which is great to hear, particularly for the regional areas. We have approximately 85 to 90 students enrolled over the three years so there are quite a number of students and out of that quite a percentage are more than willing to stay in regional areas. They are probably the main issues that I wanted to make a comment on. Perhaps if there are any questions, that might draw out a few more.

The CHAIR — There will certainly be some questions. The course that you actually do with the 85 students, is it mainly hospitality or is it evenly spread between hospitality and tourism?

Dr LADE — It is actually a business degree so the students are doing accounting, marketing, economics, all those sorts of things, and then their major area is in tourism and hospitality management. Rather than just working in the industry as such, more of an emphasis on local business enterprise and that sort of development. We also have an agreement with the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE. They do the hospitality component because, as you are aware, hospitality is more hands-on. What we have been hearing back from the industry is that those qualifications that they learn through the TAFE are much more substantial than we can offer at the university, so we have that agreement.

The CHAIR — Do you know if anybody has ever done viability research into possibly linking the rail system from Tullamarine to the Bendigo region — trying to entice that international visitor? Has that ever been done?

Dr LADE — I am not aware of it being done. I think it would be worthwhile looking into, definitely, and a way to try and increase the visitation rather than, we have already mentioned, the Yarra Valley or down to the penguins — it is sort of in-and-out-type visitation. That would definitely be one way of trying to increase visitation up this way.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thanks very much for the submission. Whereabouts do you see the growth in rural and regional areas for tourism? Do you think it is in particular regions or do you think that there are particular areas or events, is it ecotourism?

Dr LADE — I think we will find overall there will be an increase in regional tourism development, purely just the change in consumer demand. It is changing all the time, particularly in special interest tourism-type groups. Rather than the mass tourists we are finding in general, and this is a general comment, that people are preferring to do more independent-type travel. They are branching off into small categories of what we call special interest tourism groups.

A number of these types of activities are within regional areas: food and wine tourism, for example, which again incorporates festivals and events as well. I personally think there will be a huge growth, and we are finding that there is a growth already. We are just finding that really comes down to time constraints, how much money people want to spend and the particular interest they want to sort of home in on.

Ms DARVENIZA — So you think it has to be built around events?

Dr LADE — I think that plays a very important part with the natural component for sure. I think there is always going to be that demand to visit those natural sites but that incorporates, I guess, a whole new area in relation to sustainability and trying to maintain those resources at the state that they currently are in and trying to monitor the visitation in order to maintain those sites and resources.

Mr NORTHE — Just touching on your interest in the marketing of regional events, I guess, and festivals, can you give me an example of an event or festival that has been successful, and in your opinion why — what have we done successfully to market that event?

Dr LADE — Within this particular — —

Mr NORTHE — Wherever. It does not necessarily have to be Bendigo.

Dr LADE — I actually worked quite extensively with the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz in terms of its marketing. I am not sure whether you are aware but it has quite a unique development process. Basically we decide that we want an event to attract visitation, and they have obviously done their groundwork to make that successful. I think that is an ideal example of a festival that has been developed basically to increase visitation to that particular region.

It has been a couple of years since I have done some research for them. However, I do believe they have expanded into the rest of the region as well. They have also incorporated the Milawa area. The time of year at which it is held is prior to the Melbourne Cup so now on Monday they class it as 'family day' so they incorporate the number of different wineries as well, obviously incorporating the jazz theme and festival as well. It has sort of grown from just the focus on the jazz to incorporating a number of different events within a region. I think the Bendigo region could do something similar.

Mr NORTHE — How did they initially market that particular event, though?

Dr LADE — Basically I think from memory they went through the channels of the jazz theme and those who were high up in the world of jazz. They also conducted quite a lot of feasibility studies, as well as within the local areas, the local newspapers, also *The Age*, those sorts of publications as well.

Ms TIERNEY — I have a number of questions in relation to your graduates. I suppose the first question I have is, just generally, whether you specialise in regional tourism in your direct degree course?

Dr LADE — We do. The course is similar to the Bundoora course, for example. The emphasis we focus on here in Bendigo is regional and rural tourism development.

Ms TIERNEY — And do you track your graduates in terms of where they do secure employment, and do you have a relationship with them on an ongoing basis with your alumni surveying them so that they can provide you with more feedback about what is happening in regional tourism at a very practical coalface?

Dr LADE — As far as I am aware the alumni does conduct research as soon as they graduate and follow it up, I think it is five years' time, to see where they are and what they are doing. In terms of where our students end up, and I am only saying this by what I have heard, graduates getting back to me, where they are working and that sort of thing, there are a number that go into the hospitality stream, although I tend to find that in five years they are looking elsewhere and trying to perhaps look in terms of tourism and swap in those sorts of industries even though they are interrelated.

We have had quite a few that take up positions with major hotels, for example. We have had quite a few in local restaurants here particularly. In terms of tourism, a number of our students last year submitted some of their work in relation to the Tourism Alliance awards. As a result of doing quite well in that they were given work experience with Tourism Victoria, and a number of them are working in that area as well.

Overall I would have to check to see the actual percentage, but I guess by speaking to students, getting towards the end of their degree a lot of them ideally would like to stay in regional areas. Whether that is the actual case, whether they can get employment in regional areas, that is another case.

Ms LOVELL — Clare, tourism and hospital is an area where people demand a very high level of service, and we hear right around the state that there are skills shortages, so obviously courses like yours are desperately needed. I often hear as I travel around the state that there is a lot of criticism of the TAFE system and of the particular students that TAFE place in their tourism courses: basically, 'If someone does not fit in any other course we will just put them into tourism and hospitality', so we are not necessarily getting people who have a passion for that industry or for the service that is needed. People are very unhappy with the TAFE system of training. What do you see as the future, and how can we address those issues?

Dr LADE — I completely agree with you. One way particularly that La Trobe has tried to address that in the past is rather than, like you said, just have a tourism and hospitality focusing on how to wait on tables, how to make coffee, all that sort of thing — although students obviously need to gain an understanding of that — it is a business degree. They do a number of economics subjects, marketing subjects, HR subjects, management — it is more of an emphasis on management — then they major in the tourism and hospitality components.

In terms of the hospitality component, they do three units, which is as I said conducted at the TAFE, primarily because they have the facilities that we do not: they have the large kitchens, the actual restaurant, that type of thing. In terms of the management side of things, that is obviously what we take care of. I think that is one way we are particularly trying to address that problem and make it more of a credible qualification and try to move from, like you said, that past reputation of tourism and hospitality related graduates and try to increase the expertise and the professionalism associated with a business degree, as well as providing the industry with what it wants. As I said, that course was developed as a result of quite a deal of research into that area.

Mr EREN — Just in relation to the past 10 years and that particular degree, I suppose there would be a fluctuation of interest. Has there been an increase in enrolments for that degree?

Dr LADE — At the moment we are probably down on numbers. We have found that we have had quite a few deferrals, particularly this year. It is like any area: in some years there is a

huge boost, in some there is not. Overall, it has remained quite steady, but, as I said, I have noticed in the last couple of years that there has been more of a tendency for students to defer as opposed to continuing on. We are finding, even though they do defer, that we are retaining still quite a number of them as well.

Mr EREN — That would obviously create a problem in terms of expertise? I know that you have covered some of that. Therefore, in terms of over the next four years and La Trobe University researchers, what would they be focusing on in terms of rectifying some of the problems that may be prevalent here?

Dr LADE — In terms of?

Mr EREN — Retention, expertise?

Dr LADE — I guess continuing the research into what the industry wants, but also what the consumer is demanding as well. As you know, we tend to swap and change what we actually want as well. Also, I guess it comes down to what is viable for the university as well: whether we have got the numbers to increase the facilities, whether we have got the numbers to increase what we offer. I know personally there are a number of areas which I would like to branch the course into, but we just lack the finances and the resources in order to do that as well.

The CHAIR — Clare, just a couple of things: I see you have been doing some work with Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement. It is interesting that they have the actual showpiece there, and yet their numbers over, say, a 25-to-30-year period have actually declined. There are many other communities in regional Victoria that would love to have that. Do you think the downturn that we are currently seeing is driven by poor marketing, inability to clinch the deal, inability to make the booking, or is it the fact that we do not have enough places that actually have a pioneer settlement in the first place?

Dr LADE — I think it is a combination of marketing, particularly in the case of the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement Museum, also the change in consumer demand. That is one thing that I have particularly found with them. One of the key areas that they are concentrating on is surveying, particularly Bendigo residents, to see what are the barriers to visitation. Is it just the lack of interest? Is it the fact that the museum perhaps needs some attention, needs to be upgraded; does it need complementary activities as well? Are people just going to go there to visit that, or once they get there they are really interested in seeing that museum but they would like to incorporate a number of other activities as well? I think that is a real issue.

Particularly in the case of the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement Museum, marketing is an issue for them. Again, lack of resources and the expertise in order to do that effectively and make the most of what tourism marketing dollars that they do have. I definitely think that the change in consumer demand is a huge challenge for a lot of these establishments.

The CHAIR — Can you expand on those consumer demand changes?

Dr LADE — As I said, we are finding that there is more of an emphasis on special interest tourism groups. I forget the figures I was looking at recently of the number of people who have not used up their annual leave, but I guess there is more of a focus on four-day weekends, short stays, as opposed to going away for two, three, four weeks of the year. Is there that interest or demand for the interest in these contemporary-type museums and that history? I am not saying that it is not a great asset for Swan Hill to have, for example, but is that visitation demand there?

The CHAIR — Thanks, Clare. It has been great to get through so much information in such a short time. Thanks very much for giving your evidence. We will give you a copy of that evidence in a couple of weeks, and you will be free to make any typographical corrections.

Witness withdrew.