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Citation:

Thomas, R and Thomas, H (2014) 'Hollow from the start'? Professional associations and the professionalisation of tourism. *Service Industries Journal*, 34 (1). 38 - 55. ISSN 0264-2069 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2013.763346>

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# 'Hollow from the start'? Professional associations and the professionalisation of tourism in the UK

*Occupations as diverse as nursing, journalism and marketing have strengthened their claim to professional status and current research suggests that professional associations played a critical part in the process of professionalisation. Following a review of three conceptual approaches to understanding contemporary professionalisation strategies, this paper examines the case of British tourism. It traces the historical development and assesses the current practice of the two main professional associations in the sector. The analysis shows that the 'professionalisation project' has largely failed and argues that contemporary frameworks for understanding professionalisation strategies are somewhat deficient when applied to tourism.*

Keywords: Professional associations; Tourism; Professionalisation; Corporate professionalism

## **Introduction**

Studies of professional work have encompassed a range of service sector occupations such as nursing (Hampton and Hampton, 2004), journalism (Elsaka, 2005), social work (Anleu, 1992) and

specialist business functions including marketing, management consultancy and executive search (Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Current research suggests that each of these occupations has strengthened its claim to professional status and that professional associations played a critical strategic role in the process of professionalisation (Broadbridge and Parsons, 2003; Hooley and Cowell, 1985; Lounsbury, 2002; Teather, 1990). By contrast, there has been relatively little serious examination of professionalism in tourism, even though professional associations have been actively promoting occupations in the sector for decades. This paper addresses this deficiency.

The literature on the professionalisation of occupations can be divided broadly into three strands. The first, and the one that has been utilised almost exclusively when examining tourism, focuses on the essential characteristics of professions and assesses the extent to which they are prevalent in particular occupations. The second, and until recently the most prominent sociological approach, concentrates on the strategies of occupational closure and occupational control used by professional associations to secure the professional status of particular occupations. Finally, most recent theorising has shifted attention towards the potential role of corporate entities in the process of professionalisation. Each of these strands is discussed before the findings of an empirical project that examined current and past strategies of British professional associations in tourism are reported.

### **Conceptual perspective one: The characteristics (or traits) of professions**

In the period up to and including the 1960s, a considerable amount of sociological effort was expended in drawing up lists of characteristics, or traits, which supposedly define professionalism. While lists vary in their detail, the core elements have included the following: possession of a unique expertise based on a body of technical knowledge; the expertise is validated by the professions themselves, organised as professional associations; the knowledge and expertise are deployed in the public interest; ethical behaviour by professionals is regulated by the professional association; and society's reward for this altruistic deployment of knowledge and expertise is high

social status and, usually, high income (Johnson, 1972; McNamee et al., 2001; Middlehurst and Kennie, 1997).

In a study of tourism, Sheldon (1989) follows this trait approach and distils twelve dimensions of professionalism from fourteen definitions. The characteristics described above are evident in her list: long training or education; a code of ethics; organisation/association; complexity; altruistic service; body of knowledge; people-oriented; licensed; high prestige; competence tested; self-employed; high income. McNamee et al (2000) commend a very similar list of key characteristics, based on their reading of Bayles (1988) as does Harris (2004) (see also Haywood-Farmer and Stuart (1990) for a discussion of the characteristics in a professional service context).

Burgess (2011) provides the most recent illustration of the application of the trait approach when she uses it to assess the professionalism of hotel (financial) managers. In explaining her aim, she summarises the approach clearly as follows:

(the aim) is to consider whether the traits that define a professional can be applied in hotels ...(the findings of) a recent research project will be used to determine whether the traits can be applied... and hence whether they can be considered as a profession (Burgess, 2011: 682).

Data for the study were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews with senior practitioners from hotels or those operating at group level. These were complemented by insights from interviews with two recruitment consultants. The suggestion from her analysis is that hotel financial controllers do not display enough of the required traits to be considered professionals. The professional association, in this case the British Association of Hospitality Accountants (BAHA), has an 'open' approach to membership, does not insist on professional updating to retain membership and enjoys limited support to advance its goals from commercial or public sector

organisations. These data are pertinent to discussions of professionalisation but as will be discussed below, the trait model is itself flawed.

Formardi and Raffai (2009) provide a fascinating analysis of the professionalisation of events management in Hungary, which adopts a broadly similar approach to Burgess. They argue that the characteristics of a profession are emerging in that country, largely led by professional associations, to the extent that 'the events management sector ... is being recognized throughout the country as a professional field ... (and) the prestige of the field is growing' (Formardi and Raffai, 2009: 88-89). The profession, in this case, is constructed around notions of specialist knowledge relating to crowd dynamics, public safety and associated matters. This results in higher financial rewards for those engaged in this work.

Studies such as those cited above offer valuable insights into working practices in the sector but the trait approach has limitations as a framework for examining the professionalisation of tourism. Perhaps most notably, the traits referred to are often assumed to exist rather than demonstrated. Generally, empirical research has emphasised the perspectives of those with an interest in promoting the process of professionalizing particular occupations. There is a danger, therefore, of sociological analysis simply repeating, and legitimising, professions' own self-serving self-images (Thomas, 1991: 35). Thus, by way of example, examinations of the actual work of professionals has shown that the degree of specialised knowledge and expertise deployed – a key trait of professionalism in all accounts of this kind - is often negligible (Johnson, 1972). As Johnson (1972) pointed out some time ago, this raises questions about the social benefits of professional work and how such work comes to be regarded as professional (see also Abbot, 1988; Bureau and Suquet, 2009). There is also an apparent inevitability about the process; thus, accounts such as Fleming's (1996) of leisure professions sets out a 'natural history' of stages which an occupation must go through to professionalize.

The characteristics which these kinds of approaches emphasise are not selected arbitrarily. They reflect a blend of commonly held views of what constitutes an ideal of professionalism and professional self-images. To that extent, they can be regarded as the kinds of claims which occupations must try to substantiate if they wish to legitimise their claims to certain material rewards by reference to professional status (Robson et al, 2004). But this legitimation may not coincide with the real social dynamic involved in the professionalisation of an occupation.

### **Conceptual perspective two: The process of professionalisation: an exercise in control**

This perspective shifts the focus away from attempts to distil a set of essential characteristics that define professions to assessments of occupational closure and control. It recognises that many occupations have sought to improve their status, material rewards and influence over public policy by attempting to professionalize. The process of attempting to professionalize an occupation, rather than the outcome, is therefore a better analytical focus for understanding the social dynamics of professionalism. This process is often understood to involve a twin pronged strategy that seeks occupational closure and an increasing degree of occupational control. The former refers to attempts at controlling entry to, and advancement within, a particular part of the labour market (Larson, 1977). Ap and Wong's (2001: 557) study of tour guides in Hong Kong highlighted the perceived benefits of occupational closure in that sector for, as they note, many 'were very much in favour of the licensing system because they can use it to have greater bargaining power with employers (travel agents/tour operators) if they are licensed'. Occupational control, the other important element in this perspective, is the degree of influence over the entry, content and delivery of the services offered (Johnson, 1972).

The 'classic' model of a qualifying association, developed in Britain, the USA and the ex-British colonies during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, achieved these two strategic goals by setting up an organisation controlled by members of that occupation (Johnson, 1972). Occupational entry was regulated by setting (technical) entry examinations, policing the

competence of professionals once admitted, and claiming influence in governmental policy and day-to-day professional practice by virtue of the specialised knowledge of which it was supposedly the guardian (Watkins, 1999). In doing this, it reduced the influence and legitimacy of other individuals or organisations who might have felt that they had an interest in a particular activity. The professionalisation of town planning in the UK illustrates the point. The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), an association of people interested in planning but not necessarily employed as such, has been pushed to the margins of government policy-making by the professional association (the Royal Town Planning Institute or RTPI) (Cherry, 1974; Shepley, 2003).

Clearly, setting up a qualifying association is merely the first step in this kind of approach to professionalisation. The bigger challenge is to ensure that potential entrants, clients, employers and the government accept the legitimacy of the association. Some occupations have benefited from the opportunities offered for occupational closure by the growth of public sector bureaucracies, especially in local government and the British National Health Service (Thomas, 1998; Pattison et al, 2010).

Like any other social struggle, strategies for professionalisation must adapt to a changing institutional and socio-political context. In the UK, the growth of higher education, with a particular increase in technical and vocational degrees, initially created tensions between qualifying associations and universities. These have gradually been resolved in most, though not all, professions by professional associations becoming distanced from detailed curricular control. For some years, occupations seeking professional status have needed to persuade universities that a vocational degree for their occupation is both intellectually and financially feasible. Once this is established, the occupation's representative body (its 'professional association') can negotiate some kind of influence over the degree, for example by 'accreditation', which universities may feel

could boost recruitment (see Watkins (1999) and Harris and Jago (2001) for a discussion in the context of tourism).

The significance of organisations for professional work – and particularly the governmental bureaucracy and the profit-seeking corporation – has long exercised sociologists of the professions. Early discussions focused on the potential for a clash of values between professionals and their managers and this remains an interest of many (Pattison et al, 2010). For over a decade, changes in the management of the public sector have been analysed in terms of their effects in reconstituting the very nature of the professionalisation 'project' in many occupations (eg Laffin, 1998). More recently, there has been increasing attention paid to commercial organisations, as the main employers of professionals, and the role they play in - and the benefits they derive from - the professionalizing of occupations (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006). This focus retains the significance of control but takes account of structural changes in the supply of professional work, which is now concentrated in larger firms. This, it is suggested, will provide a more insightful account of the professionalisation of newer occupations. The approach is distinctive enough to merit being regarded as a third strand of the literature on understanding contemporary professionalisation.

### **Conceptual perspective three: Corporate strategies of professionalisation**

Within this perspective, two possible developments have been observed in the literature. Perhaps most typically, organisations that employ professionals use their power to shape the values and practices of the profession. In this case, often termed 'corporate professionalism', the independence of professionals – notably in terms of how they deliver and evaluate their occupational activity – is reduced or lost (or there is a failure to professionalise). Alternatively, and perhaps in fewer instances, the values and knowledge created by professions via their professional association may strengthen their status, influence and material rewards. Muzio and Kirkpatrick (2011) illustrate the latter by reference to research in the museums sector where, in the United



States, models of service delivery were developed by the professional association and had the effect of re-shaping employment practices and museum design in the collective interests of professional museum managers.

Project management, management consultancy and executive recruitment have been used recently by Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock and Hall (2011) as case studies to illustrate and develop the explanatory value of corporate professionalisation. In spite of historical differences and contrasting occupational structures, they identify features of professionalisation that are common to all three. Their starting point is to identify the challenges facing occupations seeking to professionalise, where 'professionalising' is understood as elevation of the knowledge required for effective performance of professional work. Professionalism is, according to Kipping (2011), used in this context as a resource; it enables occupations to present certain positive images of themselves that advance their commercial interests. To establish their claim to professional status, occupations must first create a collective identity. This requires them to overcome a somewhat fragmented knowledge base that is often client or context specific and, therefore, difficult to convert to a coherent body of knowledge. In addition, as those providing particular services utilise different approaches, it is hard to compare providers for competency and quality.

Muzio et al (2011) argue that to overcome these difficulties, new strategies of professionalisation have been developed which emphasise a sensitivity to markets and corporations and their values. Though not manifested in precisely the same way in each case, the three sectors they examined provide confirmatory evidence of the value of their framework. Four important elements of the model of corporate professionalisation are worthy of comment here. First, the issue of specialist knowledge has been overcome by 'developing alternative types of credentials which emphasise competences, transferable skills and industry knowledge and experience' (Muzio et al, 2011: 451). Professional associations have also sought to develop

bodies of knowledge and a set of formal qualifications allied to the occupation. However, progression through the levels is often assessed in a variety of ways that encompass evaluation of CVs and experience, self-assessments, projects and references rather than formal tutelage and assessment leading to qualifications.

The second aspect of the new strategy for professionalisation has involved the development of fluid multi-level entry systems of membership. This accommodates a range of experience and knowledge possessed by prospective members. Muzio et al (2011) argue, however, that the most significant development has been the incorporation of companies into membership. Such members subscribe to the association's code of conduct and ethics and are expected to comply with other professional standards. Indeed, this shift away from exclusively individualised membership implies that the corporations will also police the implementation of these standards and can expect, in return for their participation in the 'project', a higher degree of influence than might otherwise have been the case (Muzio et al, 2011).

**Table 1.** Key characteristics of 'corporate professionalization' compared to more 'traditional' models

	Old 'Collegial professionalization'	New 'Corporate professionalization'
Knowledge-base	Reliance on an abstract body of knowledge	Co-production of knowledge with industry, situated knowledge, focus on competences
Market	Statutory closure via Royal Charter	Market closure via corporate practices ('embedding professional membership' in tendering and procurement processes)
Legitimacy	Legitimized by public benefit	Legitimized by market value
Composition of association	Individual membership Single-tier membership structure	Individual and organizational membership Multi-level membership structure
Relation to state	Licensed/regulated by state	Not licensed/regulated, state acts as (significant) stakeholder/consumer of services
Relation with clients and employers	Arm's length	Close engagement
Jurisdictions	National	International

Source: Muzio et al (2011: 457)

The legitimacy claims of professional associations, the third element of the model, comes not from any regulatory privileges enjoyed but from the commercial benefits that accrue to companies and government departments should they engage with the association or with its members. These benefits flow from the commercial sensitivities of members who recognise the importance of using the latest techniques and adopting best practice to gain competitive advantage. In this light, Evetts (2011) suggests a 'new' professionalism, by which she means a change of conceptual focus away from professions and professionalisation to professionalism, which emphasises organisational values. The essence of her argument is that in such circumstances, managerialism, commercialism and the control of work within organisations become prominent features of the engagement of professionals within large commercial and non-commercial settings. Other contributors, such as Noordegraaf (2011), have suggested that this has led to a change in perspective among professional associations who have 'remade' their membership to reflect the importance of organisational contexts.

The final element of the model relates to the shift from national to international orientations. As Muzio et al (2011) argue, this provides new opportunities and constraints for strategies aimed at those operating in global markets. Table 1 above summarises some of the core dimensions of corporate professionalisation compared with earlier models. The emphasis on commercialism rather than public service represents the main point of departure. As Muzio et al (2011: 458) point out in the context of the sectors they examined:

Accordingly, the reference point here is no longer an increasingly neoliberal and budget-conscious state (except in its increasingly relevant capacity as a large consumer of expert services) who is sceptical of professional claims and practices, but the market, with the building of market consensus rather than the achievement of statutory recognition as the

key strategy for professionalisation. In other words, these associations set out to build a critical mass of consensus around their project and activities by persuading a sufficiently large number of employing organisations and consumers of the commercial merits and safeguards associated with professional membership, accreditation and regulation. The idea being that once a sufficiently large share of the market has been won over and professional qualifications become embedded in corporate tendering processes, professional affiliation would be routinely expected and indeed requested by both clients and employers in their procurement and recruitment strategies; thus, de facto, delivering a market form of occupational closure.

The hitherto dominant perspectives on professionalisation appear to have cast only partial light on what is happening in tourism. The model of corporate professionalism appears, prima facie, to hold out the possibility of greater insights. It offers a valuable lens to examine developments within tourism; a non-statutory policy domain in the UK that has emphasised partnership with the private sector and, although it remains characterised by small firms, has also experienced trends towards concentration in at least some sub-sectors, notably travel (Thomas, Shaw and Page, 2011).

### **Professional associations and the professionalisation of tourism in the UK**

There are two main professional associations concerned with tourism in the UK: The Institute of Travel and Tourism and The Tourism Society. The Tourism Management Institute, until recently the third major association (though its membership was much smaller than the other two) became incorporated in to the Tourism Society on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2010. The Institute of Travel and Tourism is the larger of the two remaining associations. With some three thousand members, it has almost three times as many members as the Tourism Society. It is also the most established, having been in existence for more than fifty years. An examination of the membership profile of each

association shows that the Institute of Travel and Tourism is concerned primarily with the travel sector (some ninety per cent of members) and the Tourism Society with attractions, destination managers, the education sector (academics and students) and consultants. The Tourism Management Institute was oriented towards local and central government officers (some eighty per cent of members). Both associations has grades of membership from entry level student membership up to the status of a fellow after ten years. Senior level experience may accelerate progression.

The remainder of this paper examines the activities of these associations and their attempts to professionalize tourism in the UK. It presents an historical analysis, an approach that has been illuminating in relation to a number of other professionalizing occupations (for examples see: Abbot, 1988; Elsaka, 2005; Kipping, 2011). This is followed by an assessment of the extent to which corporate professionalism - encompassing the four characteristics highlighted above - provides an appropriate framework for understanding the professionalising strategies of associations (or their outcomes) in the UK tourism sector.

Following comparable studies (e.g. Muzio et al. 2011), data were gathered exclusively from those responsible for the formation and delivery of each association's strategy and from historical records that would illuminate strategies of the past. This exclusive focus on professional associations, rather than considering the perceptions of wider stakeholders, reflects a concern to examine the meanings they give to their actions and to assess the extent to which they understood processes of professionalisation.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight key informants. These comprised the chief executive officer of each association (though each had a different title) and other senior officers and Directors. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and were recorded and transcribed for ease of analysis. The chief officers were interviewed twice (in the case of the

Tourism Society they were different people because of staff turnover). The first focused mainly on the development of the association and the second on current perspectives and practices in more detail. Internal correspondence, newsletters, web sites and information about association events enriched the interview data. One association also provided full access to comprehensive archive material. As each association is a company limited by guarantee, data held at Companies House – the UK’s official register of companies – were also examined. The analysis was broadly structured to reflect the third conceptual perspective considered in the literature review.

### ***Formation and development***

The Institute of Travel and Tourism was set up in 1956 as the Institute of Travel Agents. It incorporated ‘tourism’ into its title in the mid-1970s in response to the proposed creation of a ‘Tourism Institute’ (which later became the Tourism Society). As one of those interviewed who was active in the Institute of Travel Agents at the time noted, the argument was that the aspirations of those planning to set up the Tourism Institute could be accommodated by extending the remit of the (existing) Institute of Travel Agents. The minutes of a Scottish Tourism Consultative Council Working Party, a forerunner to the Tourism Society, provide the following confirmation of the Institute of Travel Agents’s defensive position:

Mr Gray expressed, on behalf of the Institute of Travel Agents, a particular interest in the concept of an Institute of Tourism. He very ably reviewed his Institute’s comprehensive National Training Plan in travel and tourism and its regional programme of activities. He referred to the cost of implementing any effective and professional scheme of education and suggested that his organisation should perhaps be called ‘Institute of Travel and Tourism’. This was a view which, he said, the many people involved shared. There were very real grounds for discussion here, Mr Gray noted, and he added that his organisation would be most interested to feel that they were catering for the industry as a whole. The Institute of Travel Agents had

the recognition and support of education and of a major part of the tourist industry, Mr Gray concluded. It, too, was interested in unity for the benefit of all (Tourism Society, 1974a).

As subsequent events show, the argument was insufficiently persuasive. An analysis of newsletters and other documentary sources produced since then shows that although the Institute of Travel Agents did change its name to incorporate tourism, the change to the Institute of Travel and Tourism did not fundamentally alter the focus and orientation of the organisation. It was created and remained (and remains) primarily concerned with travel agents, tour operators and – to some extent – the transport sector, notably airlines and airports. Although membership profiles confirm this, perhaps the most conspicuous illustration is to consider the Institute's web site or the programme of speakers at its events; almost all relate to outbound travel (see ITT, 2011)

The Institute of Travel Agents emerged during the post war-period when travel was becoming a major growth industry. The official history of The Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA, 2000) shows that ABTA had been created with a regulatory as well as representative function and with a deliberate focus on business membership. The Institute of Travel Agents, with the support and influence of ABTA, was to represent individuals and seek to raise standards of professional practice (ABTA, 2000). The ITA never aspired to be a qualifying association; its focus was on improving standards as a strategy which had a commercial return for its members. This is, arguably, a precursor of one element of corporate professionalism, and cautions against too mechanical an understanding of the changing dynamics of professionalism in the sector.

The Tourism Society (initially proposed as the Institute of Tourism) was created in a different era, and had a different focus. The prime movers were active local authority members of the Scottish Tourism Consultative Council. Their intention was to address the perceived deficiencies in existing provision of a unified authoritative body to promote standards, values, and the status of

those working in tourism. A letter sent by the Secretary to the Steering Committee of the Working Party inviting attendance at one of the inaugural meetings of the emerging Institute stated that:

The excellent work of existing bodies dealing with the various sectors of tourism is recognised. This has gone a long way in establishing standards ... But there is no British Institute of Tourism which ...would bring together those who are actively involved in ANY sector of the widely disparate industries which constitute tourism (Tourism Society, 1974b, original emphasis).

An exchange of letters between members culminated in a paper being tabled at the Council in July 1974, which noted the ‘..increasing number of tourism officials ...and the need for an independent, widely representative and professionally authoritative organisation concerned with tourism’ (Tourism Society, 1974c). A series of meetings later that year, and in 1975, started to identify what were to become core principles of the new association. These also established who should be involved in its formation. Two senior academics from the University of Surrey (one of the two universities with courses in tourism at the time) took on the roles of Chair and Secretary of the working party that preceded the formal creation of the Institute of Tourism in 1977 (later the Tourism Society) (Tourism Society, 1975; 1978).

Though there were more formal aims, by 1979 the members’ handbook captured the flavour of the Society’s aspirations when it stated that professional status meant that members could (i) be recognised as professionals in their work by their peers, by members of other professional bodies, and by the general public, (ii) use designated letters after their name, and (iii) display a membership certificate (Tourism Society, 1979:11). These have clear overtones of the traditional qualifying association model of professionalism, albeit as yet without the crucial elements of significant, education-related thresholds to membership.



The Tourism Management Institute was created in 1997 but its lineage can be traced back to the British Association of Tourist Officers (BATO) of the late 1950s. In interview, a senior official suggested that two issues spawned the Tourism Management Institute. First, there was a sense amongst several influential actors (including some of BATO's Executive Committee) that the organisation was rather parochial and, therefore, less effective than it might be. This, coupled with government changes to the institutional landscape whereby tourism was becoming widely seen as a tool of local economic development, created a stimulus for an organisation to represent (mainly) public sector tourism officers, and to 'professionalize' the sector. Prima facie, it seems that the importance of professionalisation as a strategy for increasing the prestige of local government occupations is pertinent in explaining the founding of the Tourism Management Institute.

Each organisation survived the perils associated with start-up and, according to their financial accounts, usually generate small financial surpluses. Moreover, the Institute of Travel and Tourism and the Tourism Society (which now incorporates the Tourism Management Institute) have enjoyed slight growth in membership over the past decade. These associations have not, however, penetrated their potential markets significantly. According to the UK's Sector Skills Council (People 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011), almost two million people are employed in the sector. Even allowing for flaws in generating such estimates, membership of professional associations has to be considered very marginal when compared with the total number employed by the various sub-sectors that constitute tourism. Neither of the associations studied claim to have membership strategies that will change this situation. To that extent, both appear generally satisfied with current membership levels.

### ***Constructing 'the profession'***

The outlook of those playing key roles within British tourism professional associations and the accounts of their practice are remarkable for their similarity. Conceptualisations of professionalism, the role associations play in professionalising the sector and how these are

operationalised are narrated in a manner which differs only in minor, and relatively unimportant, detail from each other. There are some sub-sectoral issues, for example, which necessitate a focus on particular topics and there are differences of style and taste, for example where and how often events are held, but these do not to reveal any significant differences of substance.

The interviews with senior personnel and the documentary sources show that conceptions of 'professionals' are constructed around words such as 'high standards', ' knowledgeable' and incorporate what are termed 'commercial' values or orientations. These imply ideas of efficiency, cost consciousness and a 'real worldness' that influence how individuals perform their tasks:

That's a very difficult one to answer. I guess it's to do with standards..... it's to do with knowledge and the level of knowledge that staff in our industry have ....(1)

I would say the first key area of that is about the person's attitude, how they come across, how they tackle things, are they flexible in their approach, because I think that defines that person .... their efficiencies around their role, how are they coping with that and if you look at someone in the organisation and you think they're a real professional, then it's someone who's got the right attitude and is doing their job to above the agreed standards (3)

(it is also about ) career development opportunities, opportunities to progress within organisations and to practice to a high level in ... and being successful in a sense commercially ... (4)

The web sites of both associations present similar perspectives. The Tourism Society, for example, is strident in noting that it 'is the professional membership body for people working in all sectors of the visitor economy...with the aim of driving up standards of professionalism in a fast-

growing global industry which can have major social, economic and environmental impacts on communities and nations' (Tourism Society, 2011). The Institute of Travel and Tourism's web site speaks of 'developing and maintaining professional standards for the benefit of its members and the industry' (ITT, 2011).

Occasionally, codes of ethics – though neither association has a formal code - are also mentioned as is illustrated by the following:

High standards in your working role within the industry...A professional isn't only doing their job well and using best practice but doing so in an ethical way. So I think to be a professional you have personal standards, you have to have skill standard and you have to deliver those consistently.....(5)

There is little evidence among the archival material of there ever having been much of a debate between – and more significantly within - each organisation about what it means to be a professional in tourism that deviates significantly from the 'broad-terms' perception outlined above. This flexible conception has few resonances with either the traits approach or the classic conception of a professionalized occupation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the factors identified in the literature review as being important to achieving occupational closure have been recognised at times by the professional associations in tourism. In the formative stages of the Tourism Society, for example, the need to emphasise the specialist expertise of members was articulated clearly; one of the first drafts of their Objectives included the following: '(a) To develop a body of knowledge about national and international Tourism (sic); (c) Education, teaching and vocational training in Tourism' (Tourism Society, 1974d).

Yet, not one of the organisations elected to become an examining body for anything other than basic provision or to help shape and accredit university degree courses in tourism. Neither

has subsequently developed a body of knowledge (the Tourism Management Institute has a rudimentary and somewhat dated document that purports to fulfil this function). The observation of one interviewee that the organisation was 'happy to talk to universities and colleges' reflects a degree of ambivalence in relation to the role of higher education in developing professionalism in tourism and towards the role of formal knowledge (and qualifications) in the professionalization process. The Institute of Travel and Tourism and the Tourism Management Institute will endorse programmes so long as universities become members and comply with very general criteria that will probably be matched by any university offering courses in tourism. Indeed, according to those interviewed, no university programme that had sought approval had ever been rejected.

The maturity of tourism higher education might leave them with little alternative now. However, the links between universities and these associations are weak, apart from in one or two cases where individuals appear to play a very active role. The Institute of Travel and Tourism, for example, had a sponsored professor for five years who sat on their Education and Training Committee and was charged with 'forging closer links between universities and industry' (ITT, 2007:1). This involved a range of knowledge transfer initiatives. Yet, interviews suggest that even in that case there was almost a complete absence of academic research and reflection informing the professionalizing strategy of the organisation. Indeed, there has been very limited, if any, consideration given to conceptualising the expertise a 'tourism professional' should possess. The Institute of Travel and Tourism and the Tourism Society no longer, therefore, speak of a body of knowledge that might be deemed appropriate for the tourism professional. Furthermore, neither of the organisations insists on professional development as a prerequisite to maintaining membership.

There is still less evidence of attempts at either occupational closure or occupational control, and certainly no systematic strategies for the achievement of either. This is understandable perhaps in a sector characterised by fragmentation, and where many occupations are lowly skilled.

However, since the number of graduates in tourism and allied fields has grown substantially over the past twenty years, and some forty universities in the UK now engage in teaching and research relating to tourism (ATHE, 2009; HESA, 2009), the conditions for developing such strategies might have been available, particularly in the public sector. Whereas occupations such as town planning and, to some extent leisure, which are prominent in the public sector have managed to achieve degrees of occupational closure and occupational control, there is no indication that the Tourism Management Institute, for example, had ever sought to convince local authorities that membership of their institute might be a key sign of professional standing. The Tourism Society does not have a strategy for promotion within the public sector or plans to develop one, to change this situation.

There is an ambivalence about the extent to which the sector has been professionalized. As one key informant noted:

... attracting particularly graduates and the higher academic achievers has been a real challenge for our industry and in fact I think it's fair to say we've in the main failed at doing that. It is still a low paid industry and it is still an industry which has difficulty in claiming any form of professionalism. I mean ABTA's only requirement for staffing of retail and tour operating offices is that there must be a minimum of two staff who have two years experience between them, which is not exactly a high level of qualification. (1)

Oh there's no question, it's not a professionalised sector. There is no minimum entry requirement into our sector, much as I would like there to be and indeed standards vary dramatically up and down the country (1)

This should not, however, be read as indicative of a sense of failure among those involved in running the professional associations. Quite the contrary, most are sanguine about their achievements and considers the sector to be much more 'professional' now than in the past,

and they take some of the credit for that. Accounts of the associations' activities appear, at first glance, to sit very comfortably within the more contemporary model of corporate professionalism and professionalisation.

### ***Tourism: A case of corporate professionalization?***

Each of the actors interviewed could point to some structures designed to promote professional development activities across the sector. These were usually in the form of education or training sub-committees, made up of volunteers from various companies. Their emphasis was on entry level skills and promoting the value of accredited training, as well as 'selling' the benefits of the sector to young people rather than initiatives to promote higher level skills and competences. Though tangible, these were of secondary importance to the role of the association in creating networking opportunities for members.

Each association, it was argued without exception, provided access to individuals who could benefit members commercially or via informal knowledge transfer. The Tourism Society, for example, regularly provides a series of themed events. Over recent years, these have included issues to do with the economy, climate change, marketing and finding ways of enhancing the 'visitor economy'. The Institute of Travel and Tourism hosts more general business networking events which are promoted using their platform of high profile speakers who are often the leaders of large travel and tourism corporations (and those from other sectors) as well as senior politicians and regulators.

The contribution networking events make to professionalising the sector is central to their narrative, as is illustrated by the following extracts of interviews:

We are trying to provide or do provide a forum for professionals across all the different sectors of the industry to come together to talk and exchange ideas and information and experience. And the events that we do reflect that, so that

we cover a very wide range of subjects ... so if you come to one of our events you will meet lots of people... people from lots of different sectors, but who have obviously all got a common interest in whatever it is that's being discussed at that event ... one of the stated aims of the society is to promote professionalism within the industry and so our events have to be able to enable that to happen. So yes, I mean, by bringing all these different people together from different ranges as well... members are from students to chief executives. ... So just by bringing a roomful of people together, just to get them networking and making contact and swapping ideas, all goes towards the same thing. (2)

we provide events and conferences which most people in the industry feel they want to be part of, or perhaps put the reverse, that they've missed out if they're not part of it. We are the sort of major forum, I can't think of a better word, networking forum for the industry. (1)

I think the main purpose of the (name of association) is as a networking organisation ... My experience of the (name of association) is not only going to a party and having a few cocktails, which is always good anyway ... But I think being part of the (name of association) gives you a much broader knowledge about what's happening in the retail sector, in the business travel sector, in the tour operators, in the cruise market, which is, I think, very valuable for someone to have. (3)

The role of formal and informal networks as conduits for learning is well documented in the literature (Cooper, 2006; Xiao and Smith, 2006; Thomas, 2012). It is not surprising, therefore, that associations identify an important role for themselves as creators of networking opportunities for their members. What is most striking, however, is that these events constitute the very core of

what is presented as a very sure-footed approach to a new professionalism. In this model, the association plays no part in co-creation, or even co-ordination, of knowledge that might be construed as representing a body of knowledge required to become a professional in tourism. None of the actors, for example, could identify an approach, technique or way of thinking about work in tourism that had been initiated or championed by the association. Further, unlike the corporate professionalism identified in other parts of the service sector such as marketing (Suddaby and Viale , 2011), those leading professional associations in tourism make few claims about the specialist knowledge of their membership beyond the fact that they can count senior industry actors (who have significant stocks of tacit knowledge) among their members. Even then, there is no discernable formal or informal strategy to enhance the status of those working in the sector by creating a narrative concerning a specialist and knowledgeable membership; instead, they simply create opportunities for meeting people with similar interests and orientations which are, presumably, of commercial value to those that participate.

Confirmation of this contrasting approach from those sectors categorised in the literature as being explained by notions of corporate professionalism can be found in the newsletters, web sites and other documentation of the tourism associations. There has been a subtle change of language over the years whereby the term 'professional association' has become 'an association of professionals', because, in the words of one senior official:

.....if you had someone who wanted to increase their knowledge and experience of the industry but didn't quite fit into the category then we were kind of being a bit exclusive which is why the mission statement changed to be a forum for professionals working in, studying or otherwise interested in tourism across the sector. (5)



Further illustration of a shift in attitudes from the exclusivity referred to above – a by-word in the classic professional association - is available from a Tourism Society strategy document from more than a decade ago:

..to enhance professionalism in tourism is still valid – as is an organisation that links the sectors. What is no longer valid is tying this mission to stringent professional qualifications and extensive industry experience in a way that resulted in the exclusion of some professionals and industry people who might otherwise be eligible, and desirable, as Society members. A new vision for the Society is proposed whereby the Society should become the recognised forum for people with a professional interest in tourism as a whole, positioned as a ‘think-tank’ of the industry (Tourism Society, 2000).

In light of the above, it seems that the second dimension of the theorising on corporate professionalism, that which related to multiple entry points of membership and corporate membership, do not apply as well in tourism, in spite of initial appearances. There is greater openness rather than flexibility. Both imply greater access to the association but the latter retains a rhetoric couched in the language of standards and expertise. It is difficult to read the actions of associations in tourism as anything other than a pragmatic market reaction to a previously declining membership. In effect, anyone working in the sector can become a member of either association. One of the key informants interviewed could not recall anyone having an application for membership rejected and, speaking about the other association, a key informant noted:

Pretty much (anyone can join). We don't have any qualifications to join. Once you apply to join, effectively everybody would be considered. How we describe it is the (association) is for anyone who works in the industry directly or indirectly or who has an interest in it, so the tourism and travel industry can just be an area of

the economy that you follow and that you are interested in. It's as simple as that. You don't actually have to be working within it. (2)

Another stated:

We did actually look at every application. We didn't really get applications from anybody who wasn't a professional or a student. So the answer was always 'yes'. The only debate we ever had was whether somebody should actually be fast-tracked to a Fellow or not. (1)

Each association has several membership grades. These are awarded, in practice, largely on length of membership. The extent to which higher grades – members and fellows - are seen as offering significantly enhanced rewards was positive but surprisingly muted:

I would imagine that they would think more of those people because, if they are interested enough in the industry they are working in to have become a member, then that shows that they have taken the industry more seriously and they are prepared to find out more about it and become more involved in it. So, yes, I mean, it definitely should mean something if people see those letters (member or fellow of named association) after somebody's name and that should carry some weight. (2)

.... a fellow of the (name of association) does give some sort of vague recognition that you are a senior player in that sector. (1)

The role corporate members play in shaping the agenda of professional associations has been an important dimension of contemporary accounts of professionalisation strategies. The Tourism Society and the Institute of Travel and Tourism have corporate members. In both cases, this is an arrangement whereby a fee is paid and a small number of nominated employees become eligible for membership. Sometimes, a supplementary amount is paid as sponsorship in exchange for prominent coverage on the web site, at events and in newsletters. The relationships with corporate partners are important financially. They also have symbolic value, demonstrating a close association with leading companies which is seen as positive by the associations. It would be erroneous to presume, however, that corporate partners shape, in an overt manner, the agenda of the associations. Interviewees appeared to struggle more with an apparent lack of interest; one key informant noted that corporate members have never even taken up the opportunity of suggesting topics for events. As another put it when asked whether they had made any efforts to include companies in galvanising support for the professionalisation of the sector:

Oh many efforts, many efforts. I mean I don't want to name names but with all the major players, over the years to say 'look, come on, put your hand in your pocket and let's have...' and not just to one, do it to all of them and say do it together. But none of them felt that their companies would sufficiently benefit from having an industry wide professional standard. (2)

The third element of the corporate professionalism discussed in the literature is the emphasis on commercialism. As has already been illustrated, this fits much more comfortably with how professional associations narrate their 'project'. Even the Tourism Society, and its specialist Tourism Management Institute, which is comprised largely of public sector members, emphasise notions that align value to understanding the commercial 'realities' and the need to demonstrate 'return on investment' in tourism. Even casual scrutiny of the themes of meetings and conferences hosted by each association shows the pre-eminence of the commercial world.

The Institute of Travel and Tourism's flagship conference, for example, always has keynote speakers who are the heads of leading global companies. The Tourism Society's events are often less directly concerned with private sector operations but usually embrace creating the conditions for the private sector to flourish. Alternative narratives, perhaps relating to communities, the environment, or quality of employment are largely left to others.

Each of the associations is conspicuously national in its orientation. The models of corporate professionalism discussed in the literature suggest a shift in focus towards international relationships and standards when other service sector occupations have been examined. Even when prompted, it was clear that while both main associations had members from other countries, these were fortuitous rather than part of any internationalising strategy. The motivations of members resident outside the home country tended to be explained either in terms of gaining access to promotional opportunities (for example, those working in destinations in other countries) or to gaining a certain respectability or cache from being a member of a British association (one suggestion was that this applied to some individuals from developing countries). Little, if any, specific international recruitment activities were undertaken and there were no plans to do so in the near future. Both the Tourism Society and the Institute of Travel and Tourism did not attach any importance to being part of international federations or had given the issue much – if any – thought. Neither were affiliated to international associations or had plans to create any.

## **Conclusion**

If examined using traditional sociological frameworks, attempts at professionalizing occupations in tourism have failed. The strategies pursued by professional associations during their formative years were largely ineffective in delivering occupational closure and occupational control. The more contemporary literature on professionalism shows, however, that occupations seeking to

professionalise have to adapt their strategies and aspirations to the realities of corporate employment and the hegemony of the values of the market. Many may still seek to increase their influence and control over entry and work, but this must be done more indirectly and circumspectly. Recent research has offered valuable insight into the professionalisation of several occupations in the service sector where this has been successful.

Yet the model of corporate professionalism that has been used to such good effect elsewhere has limitations when applied to tourism. Although the sector shows some characteristics of occupations pursuing these corporate professional trajectories, in most other respects it departs from those approaches. This suggests that contemporary accounts of discourses of professionalism may still be incomplete. The concept of corporate professionalism undoubtedly captures significant aspects of the organisation and mode of action of many occupations, but not all. Within the internationally important tourism sector, the evidence from the UK suggests that something rather different has been going on for many decades. The terminology of professionalism in British tourism masks a contrasting – and perhaps more benign - set of motives. The organisations studied claim to be driven by a desire to improve the standards and quality of work – a long-standing justification of professionalisation in most occupations - but have not pursued strategies that would afford them the privileges associated with the professionalisation of the sector. Unlike other instances, where occupations have created narratives about the broad unity of their profession through constructing some core knowledge, concerns and/or attributes – even though in practice there is usually much diversity - tourism associations remain satisfied with a definition of ‘professional’ which amounts to very generalised statements of intent. In that sense, it is little more than what Kipping (2011) calls a linguistic notion. Indeed, one of his conclusions drawn in the context of management consulting, might apply to the case of British tourism: ‘professionalism’ ... was in many ways hollow from the start and hollowed out even further through its history’ (Kipping, 2011: 530).

Finally, this paper has not considered the perspectives of other actors who, with a clearer strategic lead from a professional association, might have played a role in the professionalisation of tourism. Questions on the extent to which public sector employers, notably local government, were (or are) positively disposed to approaches from professional associations have not been asked. Further, the attitudes of major private sector employers has not been examined nor has the role of individual leadership styles and motivations within professional associations. These represent important aspects of an emerging research agenda highlighted by this paper.

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