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State of Leisure Studies in Australia and New Zealand

Authors:

John Tower (Victoria University), Richard McGrath (University of South Australia), Ruth Sibson (Edith Cowan University), Daryl Adair (University of Technology, Sydney), Nadia Bevan (Flinders University), Graham Brown (University of South Australia), Carmel Foley (University of Technology, Sydney), Simone Fullagar (University of Bath), Lyndal Gray (Department of Health, Queensland), Clayton Hawkins (University of Tasmania), Ruth Jeanes (Monash University), Roslyn Kerr (Lincoln University), Kate Martin (Department of Health, Queensland), Hazel Maxwell (University of Tasmania), Katie McDonald (Victoria University), Nicole Peel (Western Sydney University), Arianne Reis (Western Sydney University), Tony Veal (University of Technology, Sydney), Trisha Xing (Brock University), Rachel Yerbury (Southern Cross University), and Jo An Zimmerman (Texas State University)

Introduction

Over many years concerns about the relevancy, position and visibility of leisure studies in undergraduate course delivery and research, has been raised at a number of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Leisure Studies (ANZALS) events, forums and conferences. These concerns that leisure studies is in crisis (Rowe 2002) and needs a distinctive new approach which combines theory, practice and ethics (Rojek 2005) have consistently remained unresolved. In 2015, the ANZALS Board took the initiative of inviting ANZALS Patrons, i.e., the eleven Australian and New Zealand Schools, Departments or Colleges that support ANZALS, to provide a statement about the current role of leisure in their university's curriculum and research. This information was then used as background to inform the State of Leisure Studies (SLS) Workshop held during the 2015 ANZALS Conference in Adelaide. The purpose of these two initiatives was to document the issues and explore strategies for how ANZALS (*and the broader community of leisure scholars*) can better promote leisure studies. This paper provides the analysis of the ANZALS Patron statements and the findings of the SLS Workshop.

Background

Previous ANZALS conferences' keynote presentations have raised concerns about the status of leisure studies from a course and research perspective. At the 2010 ANZALS Conference, Stebbins highlighted the rough road that leisure studies was following. The combination of financial cuts to leisure studies programs, decreasing funding for leisure research and the decline in resources for public leisure services was a symptom of the decline in leisure

studies (Stebbins, 2011). Fullagar (2011) responded to Stebbins with a call for the field to look outward, 'we need to work across disciplines and fields to find the points of connection beyond the established boundaries of leisure studies knowledge. Multiplicity is our strength, but the search for a consensus definition or the all-encompassing theory has been a major distraction' (p.16). In 2013, Rowe (2015) reflected on the complexity of leisure as we strive to prove ourselves by attracting students and research funds and "exhibit high impact through academic citation, policy influence and public visibility" (p.2). Both speakers provided guidance regarding how we should overcome the rough road and address the complexities.

In early 2015, an ANZALS Board planning session reviewed the Association's purposes and recognized that it had not specifically dedicated resources to its aim to "promote high standards in curriculum development and leisure studies education in the tertiary sector" or "to promote the development of post-graduate courses in leisure studies" (ANZALS, 2010, p.2). In fact, there was limited understanding of the state of leisure studies in Australia and New Zealand, nor was there a clear strategy for how ANZALS should go about furthering these purposes. One of the major challenges has been the issue of representing a collective voice for a diverse membership who do not necessarily agree on a set of common principles to guide the development of leisure studies.

The *ANZALS Magazine* provides updates about the activities of the ANZALS Patrons but often does not clearly explain how leisure features in the courses, research and policy impacts that Rowe (2015) indicates as proof of leisure's credibility. Darcy wrote about the University of Technology Sydney in the *ANZALS Magazine* that "the word 'leisure' has disappeared from our degree offerings but is still present in the underlying theory in stream majors." (Darcy, 2015, p.20).

The combination of the issues raised in recent ANZALS conferences, the limited understanding of leisure's status in Australian and New Zealand university courses, and the documented disappearance of leisure from some courses acted as a catalyst for this commentary. The purpose of this paper is therefore to document the state of leisure studies in Australia and New Zealand; and to identify steps that can be taken by a range of leisure

studies' stakeholders to address critical issues influencing the field, and to promote leisure curriculum and research.

Methods

The project has adopted an iterative action research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Initially, the eleven ANZALS Patrons were invited to provide a statement about how leisure featured in their curriculum and research activities. Seven Patrons provided statements which were collated and, along with an introductory statement (Tower, 2015), were distributed to the 2015 ANZALS Conference delegates as a background document to the workshop conducted during the event. Delegates were advised to read the document before the workshop so they were informed about current issues from Patron's perspectives.

The State of Leisure Studies Workshop used a focus group format to gather qualitative insights from participants (n=34) about the background document and to identify issues that would address the project's aim. Participants included senior leisure academics, early career researchers, students from Australia, New Zealand and overseas, and some leisure professionals working predominantly in public health system settings. The workshop used small and large group discussions to explore the following questions:

1. Small group activity to discuss the question – What is your perception about the state of leisure studies based on the statements you have read from the seven Patron contributors?
2. Small group activity to discuss the questions – What does this mean for ANZALS? And, how should ANZALS address its objective to “promote high standards in curriculum development and leisure studies education in the tertiary education sector” and “promote the development of post-graduate courses in leisure studies”?
3. Large group, general discussion to answer the questions – What steps should be taken by i) ANZALS, ii) ANZALS Patrons, and iii) ANZALS members? And, are there any formal recommendations from the workshop for ANZALS to consider in the development of its activities for 2016 / 2017?

The data from the workshop was recorded via written statements from the small group activities and notes were taken from the general discussion. The workshop facilitators thematically analysed both the Patron statements and the data from the workshop (Tower, McGrath & Sibson, 2015) before circulating a first draft of this paper to all workshop participants for their input and review. This final version of the paper includes contributions from all the authors.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are divided into two sections. Initially, the analysis of the statements from the seven Patrons are provided and this is followed by the analysis of the themes from the workshop activities.

Patron statements

Seven Patrons responded to the request to report on the state of leisure studies at their institution. Some Patrons commented that the request was beyond their capacity to respond – it would simply require too much time to provide a meaningful response. In fact, some Patrons, especially those within multi-disciplinary faculties explained that they did not know how leisure featured in subject or course delivery because there may be elements of leisure in a range of different subjects. These responses from some Patrons indicate the delivery of leisure related content is not provided in a coordinated manner, and provides some insight as to how its impact has diversified and expanded beyond the requirements that Hamilton-Smith (1973) identified decades ago.

The workshop facilitators reviewed the Patron statements to identify the following main themes:

- Since their establishment 30-35 years ago, there are no longer any specific Leisure Studies degrees. However, there are still some degrees which still retain the word Recreation as a component of a degree, whether in the degree name or in the subjects taught.
- Leisure programs have now been largely reconceived in Business Schools in areas of Events, Tourism and Sport (and in some Hospitality and Music) – both in degrees and in subjects (exceptions to Business Schools are Lincoln University, Lincoln, NZ –

Department of Tourism, Sport & Society and Victoria University, Melbourne, AUS – College of Sport & Exercise Science).

- Leisure theory and concepts are explicitly included in the content of some subjects within a number of degrees, and in other subjects there is a more contextual, rather than conceptual focus. The word leisure remains in the title of a small number of subjects.
- These changes appear to be driven by a desire to achieve vocational, business/employability skills objectives in a way that is more marketable to students and more easily justifiable – there is more emphasis on the use of management theory and techniques.
- Leisure theories and concepts are also now present in subjects on the “social psychology of wellbeing” (Lincoln University) and in a proposed new sociology “work and leisure” unit in the School of Humanities (Griffith University, Queensland, AUS).
- Research (including PhD student work) continues to be undertaken using leisure theory and concepts, and staff in sport, tourism and hospitality publish in leisure journals as they are listed in the Australian Business Dean’s ranked journal list.
- The impact and use of leisure studies theories and concepts by staff has lessened.

The decline in leisure studies as a distinctive field of study in Australia and New Zealand is irrefutable. Leisure studies was established in Australia as an initiative of the Whitlam government. Hamilton-Smith’s (1973) policy guidelines provided the framework for the establishment of relevant courses in higher education that have evolved and been updated over the decades. It would seem that the focus on recreation or leisure has proceeded through a product life cycle that may have peaked in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Sibson, 2010) and has gradually declined to the point that the undergraduate courses no longer exist. Henderson (2010) suggested that the social sciences such as sociology and geography were the precursors of leisure studies and that the development of tourism, sport management and therapeutic recreation fields of study have evolved as the successors of the leisure studies degrees.

The Patron statements provided the background to the 2015 conference workshop. The following section identifies how delegates to the conference workshop interpreted the state of leisure studies and the directions that could be taken to address the decline.

State of Leisure Studies Workshop

Thirty-four of the ANZALS Conference delegates participated in the workshop. Nineteen of this original group agreed to continue their involvement through their contributions and feedback to this paper. The workshop progressed through three stages: first, reviewing and commenting on the patron statements; second, reflecting on what this means for ANZALS; and, finally through a general discussion, suggestions were made by participants about what needs to happen next.

What is your perception about the state of leisure studies based on the Patron

statements? The data from the small group discussions of their perceptions about the state of leisure studies based on the Patron statements were reviewed and analysed to identify the main themes. The main themes were i) stability of leisure studies; ii) growth of leisure studies; and iii) decline of leisure studies.

Eight specific statements related to leisure studies being stable. Examples of these statements included “Leisure exists everywhere – tourism, economics, etc.” and “Alive and well from a journal perspective”. Interestingly there were three statements that were coded to the theme of leisure studies growth, e.g., “ageing = more time for leisure” and “Leisure studies stronger in UK”. However, the overwhelming majority of statements related to the decline of leisure studies. The sub-themes related to:

- the shifting career options for students – “sexiness’ of events, tourism, hotel management, etc. vs “leisure” and the relationship with overall health and wellbeing
- leisure scholarship – “decrease in blue sky scholars”
- influence of business schools – “Leisure studies incorporated in Business Schools reject Sociology”
- changed social context – “the way leisure is valued in society has changed”

- competition from other courses – “is being morphed into Tourism studies event management etc ...”
- concept of leisure – “Is the term ‘leisure’ old fashioned?”

Although the majority of the comments related to the decline of leisure studies, it is worth noting the contrasting views that suggested leisure studies is in a stable or even a growth phase. This scenario provided the context for the workshop participants to reflect on what this means for ANZALS.

What does this mean for ANZALS?

Following a whole of workshop discussion concerning their perceptions about the state of leisure studies based on the Patron statements, delegates were again placed into small groups and asked to discuss and document actions they perceived ANZALS could pursue in regard to the state of leisure studies.

Overall the feedback from participants focused on the need for ANZALS to consult and collaborate with a variety of potential partners both within academia and with non-academic groups, e.g. Parks and Leisure Australasia. Delegates indicated that these collaborations should be as broad as possible. Delegates indicated the need to develop links with broader academic fields such as sociology, e.g., The Australian Sociological Association and health, e.g, Australian Health Promotion Association. As identified above, the perception that leisure is embedded with many broader academic fields was seen as both an advantage and an issue. As a consequence, delegates’ advice was for ANZALS to engage with the diversity of broader academic fields through developing ongoing networks and collaborations. An example of a potential ongoing collaboration was for ANZALS to initiate an annual ‘Great Debate’ about aspects of leisure scholarship. The debate could be between selected ANZALS members and other similar organisations members (e.g., Council for Australasian Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE) and Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand (SMAANZ).

Delegates also indicated a need for ANZALS to develop and sustain strategic networks with practitioners, particularly local government authorities as well as leisure professionals.

There was the notion that ANZALS needs to play a role in ensuring leisure studies data/evidence is promoted to wider society. To aid in the dissemination and promotion of leisure studies research delegates indicated the need for ANZALS to establish and maintain close relationships with practitioner organisations as well as government agencies. Delegates indicated there was a need for a wider dissemination of leisure research beyond the traditional academic communication methods (i.e. conferences and journals). A strong focus of feedback concerning the dissemination of information (closely linked to the need to develop broader network linkages) was for ANZALS to encourage and promote leisure research to practitioners and policy makers (this may also require some reframing of the term leisure to fit with policy agendas around healthy communities, physical activity or arts participation).

Another theme identified from delegate feedback was the need for ANZALS to work with its membership to encourage tertiary students to promote leisure studies at events such as university open days. This idea was closely interlinked with the previous notions in regard to promotion of leisure studies to non-academic audiences as well as dissemination of leisure studies research. This is particularly the case in terms of people's wellbeing as well as health. If people see evidence that leisure is psychologically beneficial and worthwhile, then they are more likely to value it. Delegates indicated the need for ANZALS to assist members with materials and/or support in regard to promoting leisure studies within the tertiary sector across Australia and New Zealand.

In relation to ANZALS working directly with the tertiary sector one delegate group put forward the idea of an 'Enhanced engagement' strategy. This strategy would include:

- 'ANZALS Roadshow' to member universities to promote the organisation, its journal as well as leisure studies as a field that underpins many academic and professional career paths,
- ANZALS President to meet with various Head of Schools to promote leisure studies as an underpinning academic discipline,

Delegates were then asked to discuss and provide feedback concerning how ANZALS could address two key constitutional objectives: “promote high standards in curriculum development and leisure studies education in the tertiary education sector” and “promote the development of post-graduate courses in leisure studies”.

Feedback from delegate groups focused primarily on the need for ANZALS to collaborate with others, particularly in the tertiary sector but also with policy makers. Delegates reiterated the need for ANZALS to proactively engage with a variety of stakeholder groups to enable the organization to fulfil these two objectives.

What steps should be taken by ANZALS?

In bringing all the workshop activities together, a final whole of group discussion was held to address the overarching question of “what steps should be taken by ANZALS”?

Analysing the individual responses indicated that there were two main areas in which participants thought the association could contribute. First, is to recognise the foundation of leisure studies and the active academic research which is being conducted from a diverse base, acknowledging that the depth and breadth of leisure studies is its strength. For example, participants noted that “closing a leisure studies department doesn’t mean that leisure is closed” and that “there are a handful of leisure journals which are alive and well. We don’t have leisure studies departments any more but many people are putting the ideas of leisure into their areas. We need to recognise that we have many active researchers around the world”. Or as another delegate stated “[leisure] incorporates all sorts of things, that is the strength of leisure studies”. The recognition of leisure as a human right (Veal, 2016) and acknowledgement of the health and wellbeing benefits this provides individuals and communities are messages that need to be promoted more effectively.

Second, and following on from this recognition of the past and current state of leisure studies research, is to consider how leisure studies is defined to make it relevant and more easily shared and then promoted to schools, universities, employers, practitioners and the wider community. As one participant stated, we need to “decide what leisure studies is – we need to know what it is”. The focus of participant comments centred on ensuring that

leisure studies as an academic field of enquiry is defined in ways which are relevant to these different groups. For example, “we need to think about relevance and think about what students are looking for” and similarly, we need to “make leisure studies relevant to young people”. In focussing on industry professionals, another delegate asked, “is the term leisure relevant? Academics use it but practitioners rarely do (e.g. professionals use the term recreation)”. Further, it was argued that “we may need a new term...leisure is a dead duck as a term. We need to reconfigure it as twenty-first century – entertainment studies – ‘leisure-tainment’”. Although, as noted above, caution to both these suggestions was advised by other delegates who indicated that both the foundation and diversity of leisure studies research risked being “thrown out” or “lost” in seeking to make leisure “trendy in a vocational sense” or “thinking of leisure as entertainment only” or acknowledging that leisure continues to have a significant role within various health settings for therapeutic purposes. The question of leisure as a public good was also identified in relation to current policy challenges relating to ageing and health. A range of suggestions were also made in regards how the concept of leisure and leisure studies could be introduced, shared and promoted, including: “going into schools”; “considering a promotional DVD”; and “using TED talks on YouTube”.

Although there were no formal recommendations to emanate from the discussion there were two separate suggestions for ANZALS to consider outside of the areas outlined above. One was for “ANZALS to fund a research project or work with World Leisure to collect global data on the state of leisure studies”, and the other was to consider whether “we open up ANZALS to Australasia, not just Australia and New Zealand”.

Summary

The purpose of this paper has been to document the issues and explore strategies for how ANZALS (and other leisure scholars) can better position and promote leisure studies. The data and analysis within this paper was derived from submissions from ANZALS Patron statements and the findings of the State of Leisure Studies workshop conducted at the 2015 ANZALS Biennial Conference, Adelaide.

Overall it appears that the current state of leisure studies is that it has become a diverse and disparate field within academia. What once was for a period of time, is no longer. While the establishment of leisure studies as an academic field provided an opportunity to centralise a group of scholars within tertiary institutions as well as the ability to craft and develop core leisure studies subjects, this is no longer the case. It could be argued that due to the success of leisure studies, particularly within a critical sociological framework, the field has become divergent and more focused on elements within leisure, both in focus (eg. recreation, sport, arts, tourism) as well as across domains (for example management or health). On the other hand, the move towards the managerialistic approach of business schools with an emphasis on what the vocations of tourism, hospitality, sport and events require of a graduate, has meant that the foundation and critical elements of the leisure studies curriculum past have largely been “lost” from undergraduate study in these areas.

It is clear that a challenge exists in relation to working across disparate foci and domains to “promote high standards in curriculum development and leisure studies education in the tertiary sector” as well as “to promote the development of post-graduate courses in leisure studies” (ANZALS, 2010, p.2). Feedback from the 2015 State of Leisure Studies conference workshop clearly indicates the need for organisations such as ANZALS to develop and maintain collaborative networks with a variety of stakeholders, both within the tertiary sector as well as amongst practitioners, a position previously put forward by Fullagar (2011). There is also a need for ANZALS, with its stakeholders, to recognise and acknowledge the past but to ensure it has a future by examining how leisure studies can be defined for relevance and reach beyond those already involved.

Challenges of this nature cannot be overcome quickly or through the efforts of a few. We argue that to enable leisure studies to remain pertinent within academic and broader society will require the effort and support of all those involved in the field. Essentially there is a need for a ‘Call for collective action’ by all those involved in the field of leisure studies to champion and actively support the promotion and development of leisure studies as an academic pursuit. While organisations such as ANZALS can provide avenues for dissemination of information and support networking opportunities, it cannot be expected to do it alone.

'United we stand, divided we fall' (Aesop 6th Century BC).

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