



Rosen Research Focus | Stephen Pratt

# TOWARD RE-EXAMINING TOURISM EDUCATION

Tourism education has its fair share of tenets—cornerstone beliefs emerging from and perpetuated by academia. Many are myths, and tourism educators are failing students—and the sector more broadly—if they don't encourage students to challenge them. Research by Professor Stephen Pratt and co-authors point to widespread belief in these myths by students as well as a worrying psychological phenomenon—the Dunning-Kruger effect. They urge educators to rethink how tourism concepts and theories are taught.

**T**he allure of the tourism sector often paints an idyllic image etched with the promises of economic prosperity, cultural revitalization, and environmental stewardship. Unfortunately, this image is, to a degree, a mirage built upon a foundation of persistent myths masquerading as truths within the academic realm.

A significant and sobering study by 20 senior tourism researchers, headed by Professor Stephen Pratt of UCF Rosen College of

Hospitality Management, critically examines these so-called truths that have long been held sacrosanct in tourism education, and urges educators to rethink how tourism concepts and theories are taught.

Anchored in a rigorous analysis of the tourism curriculum and student perceptions, their research illuminates the myths perpetuated through generations of scholarship and explores the cognitive biases that hinder critical thinking among students. This uncomfortable fact, far from being a disincentive to venture

into tourism, is an invitation to question, reflect, and innovate.

## **EDUCATORS ARE FAILING THEIR STUDENTS**

Research is critical for the hospitality and tourism sector. It ultimately shapes perceptions, policies, and practices. Therefore, the sector's health and sustainability depend on research founded on fact. Unfortunately, like research elsewhere, it is not immune to infections of will and hopeful supposition. These can take root and



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dogma—anathema to scientific research—and if they find their way into tourism management training curricula, educators fail their students.

For Pratt and his co-authors, investigating how students understand and perceive tourism knowledge is necessary to inform curriculum design and how the next generations should be taught. So, they designed a study to assess individuals' capacity to question supposed 'truths' alongside self-perceptions of critical thinking skills. At the heart of the study is a psychological phenomenon that illuminates a curious and often counterintuitive aspect of human cognition and self-awareness.

### THE CURIOUS DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT

It makes sense that having limited knowledge or experience in a particular area is a cause for reserving judgment or action in that area. However, in 1999, two American psychologists, David Dunning and Justin Kruger, suggested people are often not bothered by such logic. They described a phenomenon where people possess an inaccurate assessment of their abilities or knowledge in a particular area to the point that if they perform poorly at a task or lack knowledge of skills in an area, they are less likely to realize they are underperforming. The result is that they overestimate their ability. Widespread evidence of this phenomenon—from university debate teams to mainstream politics and major-league

policymaking, it can lead to policies based on incorrect assumptions around complex issues. Within a career context, people may not recognize the need for further learning or skill development if they believe they are already competent.

Therefore, educators and trainers must be aware of the Dunning-Kruger effect when designing curricula that help learners accurately assess their abilities and knowledge. This is why Pratt put tourism education under the spotlight.

### MYTHS FROM ACADEMIA

Here are some familiar statements: tourism is always good for the economy; tourism leads to cultural preservation; tourists seek authentic experiences; and carrying capacity works in tourism. Such statements seem self-evident. However, they are not valid. Accuracy depends on context, and absolute statements ignore context—tourism can be good for an economy, but not always.

Such so-called 'truths' in tourism aren't marketing slogans; they emerge from academia. Research encourages the belief that tourism is an industry, it revitalizes culture, and that special interest tourism is the mainstream. But these are myths. To what degree tourism students believe such myths and how they assess their own capacity for critical thinking point to the robustness of tourism education. Pratt and his co-authors set out to measure this.

They designed an online survey centered around 30 pre-identified tourism myths. Because they wanted to examine the prevalence and variations of the Dunning-Kruger effect across different cultural and educational contexts, they made the survey available in multiple languages to cater to a diverse group of tourism and hospitality students from first year through to postgraduate level, drawn from 22 universities across 16 countries.

The myths covered a wide range of topics concerning the economic, cultural, and environmental impacts of tourism, among others. Common threads were the belief in tourism as a panacea for economic woes, a catalyst for cultural rejuvenation, and a harbinger of environmental conservation. Participants were asked whether they agreed with the statements.

## ACCORDING TO THE STUDY, THESE 'TRUTHS' HAVE BEEN REPEATED SO MANY TIMES THAT THEY HAVE BECOME PLATITUDES, FREQUENTLY RECITED BY STUDENTS AND ACADEMICS ALIKE.

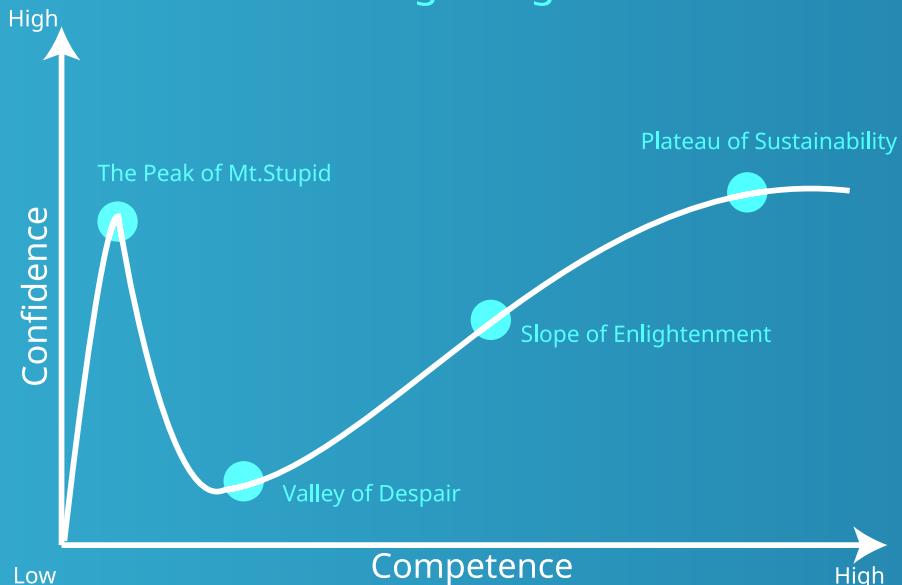
flourish as accepted foundations of tourism knowledge—even indisputable truths. According to Pratt and co-authors, these 'truths' have been repeated so many times that they have become platitudes, frequently recited by students and academics alike.

However, robust tourism research requires constant critical re-examination. It must be fully understood that nothing is indisputable and that even foundations can be completely overturned. Unquestioned assumptions and long-adhered ideas are cornerstones of

sports—encouraged its recognition within social psychology to the degree it now carries Dunning and Kruger's names.

The Dunning-Kruger effect can produce unfortunate outcomes. If people lack critical thinking about their own capabilities, it can encourage overconfidence in decision-making and unqualified risk-taking. In team settings, individuals who overestimate their competence may dominate discussions and decision-making processes, potentially leading to suboptimal outcomes. In politics and

## The Dunning-Kruger effect



**THE STUDY WAS NOT JUST AN ACADEMIC EXERCISE; IT IS A MIRROR REFLECTING THE INTRICACIES OF HUMAN PERCEPTION AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNCHALLENGED ASSUMPTIONS.**

The response options provided were 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'It depends'. The first two responses were less accurate because they didn't consider context; 'It depends' did. They were also presented with a series of science myths, such as 'humans only use 10% of their brains'. This helped highlight whether the tendency to believe myths was limited to tourism.

After responding to the statements, participants were asked to estimate how many responses they believed they had answered correctly. This self-evaluation was crucial for measuring the Dunning-Kruger effect, as it directly assessed the participants' ability to evaluate their own performance. Furthermore, they were asked to estimate their rank compared to their peers and the average score they believed other tourism and hospitality students would achieve. This allowed Pratt and his co-authors to analyze how participants viewed their own knowledge in relation to the broader community.

### WORRYING FINDINGS

Unfortunately, as hypothesized, a significant number of students agreed with widely held but potentially inaccurate beliefs about tourism, including myths regarding its economic benefits, cultural impacts, and environmental effects. Across different cultures, tourism students generally tended to accept these myths at face value without much critical scrutiny.

On average, students believed that they answered 20 of the statements correctly; in reality, they answered (accurately) 'It depends' on only 12 of the 30 tourism myths. Yet, they ranked themselves better than 66% of other students. The results of the science myths were quite similar.

The study substantiated the presence of the Dunning-Kruger effect. Students with lower actual knowledge or competence in tourism were more likely to overestimate their knowledge and abilities. Conversely, the more knowledgeable

students tended to underestimate their comparative performance.

The study also showed that students who exhibited higher confidence in their understanding of tourism often had lower actual knowledge. This overconfidence was particularly pronounced among students who accepted the myths as true. These students were also less likely to appreciate the complexity of the issues and were more resistant to reconsidering their views.

### PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The practical and theoretical implications of this study are profound. It urges educators to rethink how tourism concepts and theories are taught. In a discipline marked by complexity and dynamism, fostering an environment that encourages critical thinking and skepticism towards accepted norms is paramount. This work serves as a clarion call for a pedagogical revolution in tourism education that should embrace complexity, cultivate critical thinking, and prepare students not just as professionals but as thinkers capable of challenging and reshaping the industry's future.

The study was not just an academic exercise; it is a mirror reflecting the intricacies of human perception and the consequences of unchallenged assumptions. As we navigate the complex landscape of tourism, Pratt and co-authors beckon us to tread with caution, armed with the knowledge that true wisdom lies in recognizing the extent of our ignorance. It is a journey from illusion to enlightenment, charting a course toward a more sustainable and introspective future for tourism scholarship and practice.

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Stephen Pratt and co-authors investigated the prevalence of commonly held tourism myths among tourism students worldwide, and aimed to validate the Dunning-Kruger effect among these students.

## REFERENCES

Pratt, S., Pan, B., Agyeiwaah, E. et al. (2024). Tourism myths and the Dunning Kruger effect. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 104, [doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103620](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103620).

## PERSONAL RESPONSE

### **How can tourism educators encourage the requisite critical thinking among students to minimize the Dunning-Kruger effect?**

Thinking skills: Begin by teaching students the fundamentals of critical thinking, including how to analyze information, evaluate sources, recognize bias, and construct well-reasoned arguments.

Incorporate real-world case studies into the curriculum that challenge students to apply critical thinking skills to complex tourism-related issues. Encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and possible solutions.

Encourage students to question assumptions, challenge conventional wisdom, and seek out evidence to support their arguments. Create an environment where curiosity is rewarded, and students feel empowered to explore different viewpoints.

Engage in Socratic dialogue: Use the Socratic method to facilitate discussions in which students are encouraged to critically examine their own beliefs and assumptions. Ask probing questions that prompt students to defend their positions and consider alternative perspectives.

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