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Report on the Annual 'Tourism and Hospitality Research in Ireland' Conference (Thric) – 'Smart Thinking in Tourism' – Athlone, Co. Westmeath, Ireland, 14-15 June 2011

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REPORT

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REPORT ON THE ANNUAL 'TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY RESEARCH IN IRELAND' CONFERENCE (THRIC) – 'SMART THINKING IN TOURISM' – ATHLONE, CO. WESTMEATH, IRELAND, 14-15 JUNE 2011

The seventh annual Tourism and Hospitality Research in Ireland Conference was held on the 14th and 15th of June 2011 and was devoted to *smart thinking in tourism*. The conference was hosted by the Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Studies of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) as a part of its fortieth anniversary celebrations.

The aim of the conference was to accentuate the significance of smart thinking in tourism, which in the current, challenging economic climate can be perceived as a chance for development. In this respect, the greatest opportunities are seen, among other things, in high competitiveness, creating a good value for money tourism product, and improving access on a national and regional level. It is also of pivotal importance to discern the interrelations between human, physical and natural resources in the tourism industry.

The conference was launched with a meeting that took place on 14th June in Athlone Civic Centre. It provided the international delegates from academia and the tourism industry with an opportunity to get to know each other and network. The official welcome ceremony for the event was conducted by Sheila Buckley Byrne, the mayor of Athlone, Dr Marian Fitzgibbon, the Head of School of Humanities at AIT and John O'Hara, the Head of Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Studies at AIT.

The conference proceedings on 15th June took place in the Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Studies building at the main Athlone Institute of Technology campus. The official opening of the event was by John O'Hara, Sheila Buckley Byrne and Professor Ciarán ÓCatháin, the President of AIT.

The keynote speakers of the meeting were Dr. Melanie Smith and Barry Chandler. Dr. Melanie Smith, representing the Corvinus University of Budapest,

a tourism academic for about fifteen years and a chair of International Association ATLAS (Association for Tourism and Leisure Education), addressed the topic of *Smart thinking in special interest tourism*. During this speech the emphasis was placed on the necessity of creative thinking in tourism, seen, above all, in creating high-quality tourist experiences within different forms of niche tourism.

The second keynote speech was delivered by Barry Chandler, one of the representatives of tourism industry, working mainly on the Irish, British and American markets. Barry Chandler is a founder of *Interactive Hospitality*, a digital marketing agency providing consulting services in the field of promotion and advertising for hospitality and gastronomy businesses. His speech, entitled *Smart use of social media in hospitality: how to engage customers, influence experiences, and profit from your online activities* was focused on maximizing business profits with the use of online marketing, without reliance on traditional, capital-intensive advertising.

Apart from two keynote speeches, the conference consisted of three parallel theoretical sessions within which 26 speeches were given. Each session was further divided into three subcategories of topics according to which between two and four speeches were made. The first session comprised three themes:

– *New approaches in tourism and hospitality education*, where attention was devoted to the necessity of implementing changes in the education process within the two domains of knowledge. The key issues are creative and interactive approach in the teaching process, the priority of which is entrepreneurship.

– *Festivals and events*, within this topic the methodological issues concerning the measurement of the economic, social and environmental impacts of

festivals were argued along with the question of their funding.

- *Creative thinking in tourism* - the areas discussed, among other things, included the topic of maximizing tourism through the development of cycling networks, as well as the issue of building new, cultural tourism products on the basis of mythology.

The second theoretical session comprised the themes of *Niche tourism*; *Food perspectives* and *People in tourism*. Within the first theme different forms of niche tourism, in particular film-induced tourism and religious tourism were considered. The predominant focus was on the critical success factors in special interest tourism and on the changing profile of tourists. Discussing the future of gastronomy, attention was given to the current trends prevailing in Ireland in this respect and to the requirement for developing and supporting hospitality-driven direct-supply-chain food networks and their significance in regional development. The topic of people in tourism included the matter of the relation between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the decision-making process in choosing hotels applying its principles, was discussed.

During the third theoretical session the following subjects were under discussion: *Marketing in tourism and hospitality*; *Case studies in tourism* and *Sustainable tourism*. The first group of topics comprised the direction of the dominating tendencies in the gastronomy sector of the hotel industry in Ireland, including their influence on the activities of businesses. The second group was presented by students and referred to three different case studies in tourism, on the basis of which changing the image of a city through sport, the tourism use of the archaeological potential of Ireland, and authenticity in tourism were debated. Within the theme of sustainable tourism, the focus was on the demand for and perceptions of 'sustainable' tourism destinations in Ireland.

The detailed inferences, in relation to each of the topics raised by the conference speakers, concerned theoretical and research aspects, as well a practical approach with business applications within the realm of smart thinking in tourism, were included in the publication issued in an electronic format. It comprised nine 'volumes' using as titles the themes described above, covered during the theoretical sessions.

The next stage of the conference was a panel discussion. The group of experts, in addition to the two keynote speakers, comprised Tracey Coughlan from Fáilte Ireland (the National Tourism Development

Authority of the Republic of Ireland), Jim Deegan, Professor of Tourism at the University of Limerick, Mary Mulvey, CEO 'The Greenbox' and Liam Scollan, Chairman Ireland West Airport. The panel was chaired by Tadhg Carey, the editor of the Westmeath Independent and the Offaly Independent. The discussion touched on numerous issues of global and local significance. Amongst the addressed areas were the general state of tourism and the hotel industry in Ireland and worldwide, the cardinal importance of education within the domains of tourism and hospitality, the quality of service in tourism and the hotel industry, and finally the necessity of greater collaboration between the members of academia and business. One of the inferences drawn from the discussion was that in times of economic crisis the future of tourism and hotel industry should be seen in imagination, creativity and innovation, in other words in 'smart thinking'.

Altogether over one hundred participants attended the 'Tourism and Hospitality Research in Ireland' Conference from several countries including Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Sweden and the United States of America. Naturally, the most numerous were delegates representing various academic institutions in Ireland, e.g. Dublin Institute of Technology, National University Ireland in Galway, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, University of Limerick, Limerick Institute of Technology, Shannon College of Hotel Management, Institute of Technology Sligo, Waterford Institute of Technology.

Attention needs to be drawn to the fact that conference catering was provided by the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The dishes were prepared by the students of Advanced Certificate in Professional Cookery (National Apprentice Programme & Total Immersion Chef Programme), and the guests were served by Diploma in Restaurant Management students. This gave the conference participants an insight into the high standard of AIT students' preparation for work in the industry from practical perspective.

The formal close of the conference was made by John O'Hara, the Head of Department of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Studies, who thanked all the participants and presented an award for the author of the best conference article to Tomás Mangan, entitled '*An evaluation of attendee experiences of the 2011 Galway St. Patrick's festival parade: An ethnographic observation*'.