

Tourism Education as a Tool for Engendering Socio-Economic Development in Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Abstract: This study explored tourism education as a tool for engendering socio-economic development in Rivers State, Nigeria, emphasizing its significance, challenges, and prospects. The paper acknowledged that tourism education is pivotal in fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and cultural exchange, crucial for sustainable tourism development, preserving cultural heritage, generating employment, and stimulating economic growth. It was based on this premise that the paper provides an overview on how tourism education engenders socio-economic development in Rivers State. The paper therefore, examined conceptual clarification of tourism, tourism education and its goals in Rivers State, development and socio-economic development. However, tourism education as a veritable tool for socio-economic development, was also examined. The paper revealed the challenges of tourism education such as inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, obsolete curricula, lack of competent lecturers, inadequate industry partnerships, regulatory framework, and cultural and language barriers. Despite these challenges, tourism education offers prospects such as cultural heritage preservation, economic empowerment, skill development, community engagement, environmental sustainability, and policy framework. The paper further affirmed that by leveraging tourism education, Rivers State can unlock its tourism potentials, drive socio-economic development, and become a leading destination for cultural and environmental exploration, and ultimately improve the well-being of its citizens and contributing to the country's sustainable development. The paper recommended amongst others that: Rivers State government, in collaboration with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), should develop sustainable tourism practices that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This can be achieved by incorporating environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community engagement into tourism development.

Keywords: Development, Socio-Economic Development, Tourism, Tourism Education.

Introduction

Rural communities in Rivers State often serve as havens, attracting urban residents seeking leisure and relaxation through tourism. Despite their resilience, these communities face challenges in sustaining socio-economic development due to fluctuating global demand for resources, economic downturns, and limited opportunities for diversifying their economies. However, tourism has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth and social development worldwide, with its impact reaching far beyond the immediate hospitality and travel sectors (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). Rivers State's rural and urban communities hold immense potential for tourism-driven socio-economic development. According to WTTC (2019), tourism constitutes about 10% of global GDP and accounts for millions of jobs worldwide. In Nigeria, tourism development is vital for economic diversification, particularly in the face of fluctuating oil prices and the need for sustainable development.

Undoubtedly, Rivers State is blessed with rich cultural heritage and diverse natural resources, including vibrant cultural festivals, historical landmarks, and breathtaking landscapes. Anlerobe and Majebe (2017), acknowledged that Rivers State is one of the states in Nigeria that is blessed with abundant natural resources with different ethnic and rich cultural heritages that equally serves as tourism attraction that should be beneficial to community inhabitants and the state in terms of socio-economic development. In the same vein, the report of Guardian newspaper (2021), indicated that Rivers State Government repeated its dedication to grow the tourism industry in the state, describing the state as a destination for hospitality and cultural heritage. Rivers State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is blessed with human and material resources, and a rich diverse environment and cultural heritage for tourism attraction across the state.

The report of the Niger Delta Budget (2018) explained that most communities in Rivers State are blessed abundantly with some community natural resources like crude oil, natural gas, aquatic resources, forest reserve, amongst others. The report also acknowledged that a new tourism destination may emerge in Rivers State, as most of the areas will become a haven of viable investment opportunities through its natural community resources if developed for the benefits of community inhabitants and the state at large. The Rivers State tourism hub has the potential to compete with the top-rated tourist attractions of the world, create a viable alternative source of revenue for Rivers State and turn around the economic fortunes of the people to join the league of economically buoyant States in West Africa.

Rivers State is endowed with huge potentials in culture, fishing, wildlife, beautiful beaches and landscape. These are usually unlocked and showcased at Carnivals and diverse festivals across the state yearly especially in festive seasons. The aesthetic landscape of some areas in Rivers State is such that its beautiful Atlantic beaches are overlooking with its rich wildlife reserve housing Elephants, Hippopotamus, Antelopes, Monkeys, Leopards, Buffaloes, Chimpanzees, Cheetahs, Crocodiles, Wild Turtles, and so on. Recently the people of Ikuru town in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State had the opportunity to see an elephant once again as it strolled from the forest reserve into the community. This is supposed to be a major tourist destination if fully harnessed by appropriate authority in Rivers State. This same location is known for having a high population of sword fish. The location has the largest fishing Port in West Africa called 'Oyorokoto' in Rivers State. 'Oyorokoto' is a fishing settlement located in Andoni, and is often referred to as the largest fishing settlement in West Africa sub region. A large dolphin which attracted both locals and international conservation groups was caught by a fisherman at 'Oyorokoto' in the year 2020. Similarly, Opbo/Nkoro in Rivers State is known for its preservation of monuments of Ancient King Jaja of Opobo, forest products, river banks, cultural festivals, traditional artifacts, waterfalls amongst other tourists' attraction across Rivers State. Lack of proper tourism education hinders the state's ability to fully harness its tourism potentials. Based on the expected growth of tourism, there is an immense hopefulness for sustainable rural tourism in Rivers State, and this can only be achieved through proper tourism education to educate and train the community on tourism best management principles and practices.

Undeniably, the Nigerian government has launched initiatives to integrate tourism studies into the national curriculum (Federal Ministry of Education, 2024). Though, implementation at the local government level remains inconsistent and often inadequate. However, research has shown that targeted tourism education programmes can increase community participation and improve local livelihoods (Eja, 2023). From the above assertion, it implies that tourism education can create new employment opportunities, reduce youth unemployment, and stem rural-urban migration. On the other hand, tourism education encompasses hospitality management, cultural heritage preservation, environmental conservation, and community development. Tourism education is critical in equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to develop and manage tourism resources sustainably (Moscardo, 2023). The educated people who take part in tourism development would depict better quality of life for both Tourists and local people at the destination (Anukratis, 2019). By integrating tourism education into local curricula and community programmes, regions can create a skilled workforce capable of driving tourism growth while preserving local cultures and

environments. It was based on this background that this paper focused on exploring the potential of tourism education as a tool for engendering socio-economic development in Rivers State, by addressing the gaps identified. By examining current educational practices and analysing successful models, this research aimed at contributing to the body of knowledge on tourism education and development not only as it pertains to Rivers State but in Nigeria as a whole.

Conceptual Clarification:

Tourism

Tourism is a multifaceted socio-economic phenomenon characterized by the movement of individuals from their places of residence to other destinations for various purposes. A standard definition of tourism that is often used today is that of the United Nations World Tourism Organization: Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes” (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 1995; Fuchs, Fredaman & Ioannides, 2015). Tourism implies travelling a distance from home, also seen as a composite of activities, services, and industries that delivers a travel experience to individuals and groups travelling fifty miles (about eighty kilometres) or more from their homes for purposes of pleasure, education, leisure, business, or recreation (World Tourism Organization, 2010). Tourism also constitutes a rapidly expanding global industry, serving as a primary source of foreign exchange revenue for numerous developing nations (MOFINews, 2001; Omang & Asu, Ojong & Bullem, Godwin & Kujoh, 2021). Historically relegated to a luxury, tourism has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis in recent decades, becoming an integral component of contemporary life. The burgeoning demand for travel can be attributed to a confluence of socio-economic factors, including economic globalization, demographic shifts, and cultural changes. The transition from agrarian economies to industrialised nations, coupled with the liberalisation of borders, has facilitated the emergence of dual-income households, nuclear families, and a consumer-oriented culture. Simultaneously, the rise of multinational corporations and the evolving dynamics of human resource management have amplified the significance of travel for business purposes (Pinky & Mridula, 2012). The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) asserted that the sector's contribution to global GDP increased from 11% in 2002 to 12% by 2010. Furthermore, tourism accounts for a substantial portion of the global workforce, with approximately 1 in 12.8 jobs attributed to the industry. The sector's economic impact is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where it serves as a significant source of foreign exchange earnings and employment opportunities (Pinky & Mridula, 2012).

Tourism Education

Tourism education encompasses a wide range of programmes and courses designed to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary to succeed in the tourism industry, it represents a pivotal sub-sector within the complex ecosystem of tourism, exerting a direct or indirect influence on the overarching industry. Tourism education refers to the process of teaching and learning about the tourism industry, its operations, and its impacts. According to Afolabi (2018), tourism education aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to succeed in the tourism industry. This includes understanding tourism principles, practices, and trends, as well as developing essential skills in areas such as hospitality, customer service, and destination management (Ogundipe, 2019).

Undeniably, effective tourism education requires a holistic approach that incorporates theoretical and practical learning experiences. Ibikunle (2021) notes that tourism education should focus on developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity skills, enabling students to adapt to the dynamic tourism environment. Moreover, tourism education should emphasize sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and environmental awareness, preparing students to contribute to responsible tourism development (Akinyemi, 2020). Tourism education can take various forms, including formal degree programmes, vocational training, and continuing

education courses. Ezeah (2020) highlights the importance of industry partnerships and collaborations in tourism education, ensuring that students gain practical experience and industry-relevant skills. Furthermore, tourism education can benefit from innovative teaching methods, such as experiential learning, gamification, and digital technologies (Kolawole, 2022).

Ultimately, tourism education plays a vital role in developing tourism professionals who can drive industry growth, sustainability, and socio-economic development. As emphasized by Manyara (2022), tourism education should prioritise lifelong learning, adaptability, and innovation, enabling tourism professionals to respond to emerging trends and challenges. By investing in tourism education, governments, and stakeholders can enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism industry.

Goals of Tourism Education

The goals of tourism education are designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge required to thrive in the dynamic tourism industry, while also promoting sustainable practices, cultural awareness, and contributing to socio-economic development. According to Ibikunle (2019), goals of tourism education include the following:

- i. **Enhance Tourism Knowledge and Skills:** Tourism education plays a pivotal role in enhancing the tourism knowledge and skills of community members, thereby empowering them to effectively participate in and benefit from the tourism industry. Through targeted education and training programmes, community members can acquire essential skills in areas such as hospitality, customer service, and destination management (Afolabi, 2018). For instance, tourism education can equip community members with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and manage community-based tourism initiatives, such as ecotourism projects, cultural festivals, and local tours (Ogundipe, 2019). By empowering community members with tourism knowledge and skills, tourism education can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to improved tourism experiences and sustainable community development.
- ii. **Promote Cultural Preservation and Sustainability:** Tourism education plays a vital role in promoting cultural preservation and sustainability, ensuring that the rich cultural heritage of communities is protected and conserved for future generations. Through comprehensive education and training programmes, tourism education instills in stakeholders the importance of preserving cultural traditions, customs, and practices (Ibikunle, 2019). This includes educating community members on the significance of their cultural assets, such as historical sites, festivals, and traditional crafts, and empowering them to manage and showcase these assets sustainably (Ogundipe, 2019). By promoting cultural preservation and sustainability, tourism education contributes to the conservation of community identity, supports intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and fosters responsible tourism practices that benefit both local communities and tourists.
- iii. **Foster Entrepreneurship and Innovation:** Tourism education fosters entrepreneurship and innovation by equipping individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and mindset to develop and manage innovative tourism businesses, products, and services. Through experiential learning, mentorship, and incubation programmes, tourism education encourages students to identify and capitalise on emerging opportunities in the tourism industry (Afolabi, 2018). This includes developing entrepreneurial skills in areas such as tourism marketing, product development, and service quality management, enabling individuals to create sustainable and competitive tourism ventures (Ogundipe, 2019). By fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, tourism education contributes to the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), job creation, and local economic development, ultimately enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism industry.

- iv. **Improve Tourism Infrastructure and Services:** Tourism education plays a crucial role in improving tourism infrastructure and services by developing skilled professionals who can design, manage, and maintain high-quality tourism facilities and services. Through comprehensive education and training programmes, tourism education equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, develop, and operate tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation systems (Ezeah, 2015). Additionally, tourism education focuses on enhancing service quality, customer satisfaction, and destination management, enabling tourism professionals to provide exceptional experiences for Tourists (Kolawole, 2017). By improving tourism infrastructure and services, tourism education contributes to increased tourist satisfaction, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth, ultimately enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism industry.
- v. **Enhance Economic Development and Job Creation:** Tourism education plays a pivotal role in enhancing economic development and job creation by equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in the tourism industry. Through comprehensive education and training programmes, tourism education fosters entrepreneurship, innovation, and small business development, leading to increased economic activity and job creation (Manyara, 2014). Moreover, tourism education develops skilled professionals who can manage and operate tourism businesses, attractions, and services, thereby stimulating local economic growth and contributing to the reduction of poverty (Ezeah, 2015). By enhancing economic development and job creation, tourism education contributes to improved living standards, reduced unemployment, and increased economic stability.
- vi. **Develop Tourism Professionals:** Tourism education plays a vital role in developing tourism professionals who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to succeed in the rapidly evolving tourism industry. Through comprehensive education and training programmes, tourism education equips students with a deep understanding of tourism principles, practices, and trends, enabling them to effectively manage and operate tourism businesses, attractions, and services (Manyara, 2014). Moreover, tourism education develops professionals with expertise in areas such as tourism marketing, hospitality management, and destination development, preparing them to take on leadership roles and drive industry growth (Ezeah, 2015). However, by developing tourism professionals, tourism education contributes to the growth and sustainability of the tourism industry, enhancing its capacity to drive economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation.

Development

The concept of development in the context of tourism refers to the process of improving the economic, social, and environmental well-being of a destination through sustainable tourism practices. According to Kolawole (2017), tourism development involves the creation of tourism infrastructure, products, and services that meet the needs of Tourists while also benefiting the local community. This concept is closely tied to socio-economic development, as tourism can contribute significantly to a country's GDP, create employment opportunities, and improve living standards (Afolabi, 2018). Undoubtedly, effective tourism development requires a balanced approach that considers the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism. Ogundipe (2019) notes that sustainable tourism development should prioritise the needs of local communities, preserve cultural heritage, and protect the environment. Moreover, tourism development should be aligned with national development goals and priorities, ensuring that tourism contributes to broader socio-economic development objectives (Akinyemi, 2020).

However, tourism development can have positive socio-economic impacts, including poverty reduction, improved healthcare, and education (Ibikunle, 2019). On the other hand, it also poses challenges, such as cultural homogenisation, environmental degradation, and displacement of local communities (Ezeah, 2018). By adopting this approach, tourism can become a powerful tool for socio-

economic development, improving the lives of individuals and communities while preserving the cultural and environmental heritage of destinations.

Socio-economic development

Socio-economic development refers to the process of improving the economic and social well-being of individuals, communities, and societies. It encompasses various dimensions, including economic growth, poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and social equality (Afolabi, 2018). According to Ogundipe (2019), socio-economic development is essential for enhancing the quality of life, increasing life expectancy, and reducing income inequality. Effective socio-economic development strategies prioritise human-centered approaches, focusing on the needs and empowerment of local communities. Socio-economic development is closely tied to sustainable development, as it seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives (Akinyemi, 2020). Ibikunle (2021) noted that socio-economic development should prioritise environmental sustainability, social justice, and human rights. Moreover, socio-economic development requires active engagement from multiple stakeholders, including governments, private sector operators, civil society organisations, and local communities (Ezeah, 2020).

The benefits of socio-economic development are numerous, including improved living standards, increased access to education and healthcare, and enhanced social cohesion (Kolawole, 2019). However, socio-economic development also faces challenges, such as inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation (Manyara, 2022). To address these challenges, socio-economic development strategies must be context-specific, evidence-based, and tailored to the unique needs of each community. Ultimately, socio-economic development is critical for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promoting human well-being (UNDP, 2020). However, by prioritising socio-economic development, governments and stakeholders can create inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies, where individuals and communities can thrive. As emphasized by Ibikunle (2021), socio-economic development requires long-term commitment, collaborative effort, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Tourism Education as a Veritable Tool for Socio-Economic Development in Rivers State.

Tourism education encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including hospitality management, cultural heritage preservation, environmental conservation, and community development. By integrating tourism education into local curricula and community programmes, communities can create a skilled workforce capable of driving tourism growth while preserving local cultures and environments. Tourism education emerged as a critical tool for socio-economic development in Rivers State, Nigeria, offering numerous benefits for individuals, communities, and the nation. According to Afolabi (2018), tourism education equips young community inhabitants with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to succeed in the tourism industry, thereby enhancing their employability and socio-economic prospects. Moreover, tourism education fosters entrepreneurship, innovation, and small business development, contributing to Rivers State economic growth and development.

The tourism industry has significant potential for socio-economic development in Nigeria, with the sector contributing approximately 5.5% to the country's GDP in 2020 (Ogundipe, 2020). Ibikunle (2021) noted that tourism education can enhance Rivers State's competitiveness in the global tourism market, attracting foreign investment, and generating revenue through tourism exports. Furthermore, tourism education can promote cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and community development. Undoubtedly, effective tourism education requires a holistic approach that incorporates theoretical and practical learning experiences. Akinyemi (2020) emphasized the importance of industry partnerships and collaborations in tourism education, ensuring that trainees or participants gain practical experience and industry-relevant skills. Ezeah (2020) highlights the need for tourism education to focus on sustainable tourism development, incorporating modules on environmental sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement. The author furthered that tourism education can also address Nigeria's socio-economic

challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality. On the other hand, Manyara (2022) noted that tourism education can provide training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups, including youth and women. Kolawole (2022) acknowledged the potential of tourism education to promote social cohesion, cultural exchange, and community development.

By training individuals in key areas such as hospitality management, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism, tourism education prepares community inhabitants for new job opportunities in the tourism sector. This shift reduces Rivers State's dependence on primary industries, creating alternative income sources that contribute to poverty alleviation. Tourism education also empowers local communities to engage in economic activities that improve their quality of life while promoting long-term economic diversification. As one of the fastest-growing global industries, tourism plays a pivotal role in both developed and developing countries, contributing to economic diversification and sustainable development (Manzoor, Wei, Asif, Haq, & Rehman, 2019). In Rivers State, this approach can reduce unemployment and improve household incomes, particularly in areas historically underserved by broader economic development initiatives.

Tourism education also plays a vital role in preserving and promoting Rivers State's rich cultural heritage. The state is home to a vast array of unique festivals, traditional dances, and local crafts that have the potential to attract Tourists from around the world. By promoting cultural tourism through education, local communities learn to value and market their cultural heritage as a key tourism asset. Some researchers argue that cultural tourism, supported by education, helps communities safeguard their traditions while promoting them to external audiences in a sustainable way. Through tourism education, locals acquire the skills needed to present their culture in ways that enhance its value to both the community and Tourists, ensuring its preservation for future generations. This is corroborated in the Brundtland Report:

'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Kobani & Alozie, 2019).

Additionally, tourism education would contribute to job creation in Rivers State. The tourism industry, being a significant source of employment and income in both formal and informal sectors, relies heavily on a skilled workforce. Due to the rapid growth of the tourism industry, there has been an increased demand for competent personnel, which has led to the expansion of tourism education programmes in recent years (Hwang, Lee, 2018), in response, the proliferation of tourism education programmes has grown significantly in recent decades aiming to meet the evolving needs of the workforce (Daniel, Pita, Costa & Costa, 2017). By equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge, tourism education helps build a workforce capable of supporting and growing the industry, leading to job creation in sectors such as hospitality, travel, and event management. Incorporating environmental sustainability into tourism education is also essential for the long-term success of tourism in Rivers State. The State is endowed with rich natural resources, including rivers, forests, and diverse ecosystems, which are valuable both ecologically and economically. Through tourism education, local communities can learn sustainable tourism practices that promotes experiences on environmental conservation and responsible resource management. This education helps to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism, such as pollution and habitat destruction, while maximising its benefits. Tourism education contributes to environmental stewardship by instilling in learners or community members an understanding and responsibility of the need to balance economic activities with the protection of natural ecosystems. This approach can lead to the development of eco-tourism initiatives in Rivers State that protect the environment while supporting local livelihoods. This is also corroborated in the words of Boutrous Ghali, former United Nations Secretary General, who describes sustainable development as choosing production processes that have the least adverse impact on the environment (Kobani & Alozie, 2019).

A typical example of this situation is tourist destination, Bodo, in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. The Bodo Creek which has been the biodiversity, fish food and economic backbone for the local inhabitants, supporting thriving

fisheries, cassava fermentation, mangrove wood production, transportation, recreation and municipal waste discharges (Onwugbuta-Enyi, Zabbey and Erundu in Pegg and Zabbey, 2013), sadly in recent years, has suffered increased vulnerability to all kinds of risks since the oil spills in this area. Thousands of people in Bodo depended largely on fishing, fish farming, shellfish harvesting or fish trading for their livelihoods. Thousands of others, however, fished occasionally or seasonally for income or food supplements. Powell, Hart and Deekae in Pegg and Zabbey, 2013), reported that most of the periwinkles traded in major Ogoni markets in Bori and Onne originated from Bodo Creek. In terms of their contribution to rural development, mangroves provide local communities with several free goods and services. These include supplies of fish, shrimp, crabs, wood, honey and traditional medicine. They also provide shoreline protection and are grounds for fish breeding. Mangrove bark is used for colouring cloth, net preservation and glue production, and its branches are used as net mending sticks and handles for axes. At least twenty-four different mangrove goods and nine services have been identified (Ronnback, Crona and Ingwall in Pegg and Zabbey, 2013). The estimated economic value of mangrove forests to the local community is in the range of US\$27,264–35,921 per hectare (ha) per year (Sathirathai and Barbiar in Pegg and Zabbey, 2013).

These people also became increasingly vulnerable to risks as they lost smaller shares of their income, suffered indirectly as the trade in oil bunkering increased rapidly after 2009, had to forego eating fish and/or use polluted water for drinking or bathing. The Bodo oil spills also contributed significantly to lowering local residents' levels of education and health. One of the most immediate consequences of the loss of fishing-related income was families pulling their children out of school in order to avoid paying school fees (Kpandei; Kuru and Kuru in Pegg and Zabbey, 2013). The health implications of these spills, remain understudied (Pegg and Zabbey, 2013). This is evidently an area in Rivers State, in the Niger Delta region which would have contributed even more significantly as a veritable tool to socio-economic growth and development of the nation if properly harnessed through tourism education.

Finally, economic growth is another crucial outcome of tourism education. Economic growth is defined as the process of quantitative, qualitative, and structural changes that positively impact an economy and the population's standard of living (Leszek Balcerowicz; Haller, 2012). Researchers have posited that countries like Korea have experienced significant economic growth due to the increase in tourism, particularly in specialised sectors like elderly tourism (Malik, Chaudhry, Sheikh, Farooqi, 2010). Similarly, developing states such as Rivers State can generate substantial foreign exchange from tourism which can fuel sustainable growth and development (Ekanayake, Long, 2012). Tourism education, by equipping individuals with skills in tourism and hospitality, helps to create job opportunities, stimulates entrepreneurship, and encourages the development of tourism-related businesses. This in turn boosts the local economy by generating income, increasing employment, and attracting investment. A well-trained workforce in the tourism sector can improve service quality, enhance the visitor experience, and increase foreign exchange earnings, all of which contributes to Rivers State's overall economic development.

Challenges of Tourism Education in Rivers State Nigeria

Tourism education in Rivers State encounters several significant challenges, limiting its effectiveness in fostering socio-economic development and equipping people with the skills necessary for the rapidly evolving global tourism industry. According to Oyedele (2018), some of the challenges of tourism include:

1. **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Inadequate infrastructure poses a significant challenge to tourism education in Rivers State, hindering the effective delivery of quality education and training. According to Afolabi (2018), many tourism education institutions in lack modern facilities, equipment, and technology, making it difficult for learners to acquire practical skills and knowledge. For instance, inadequate lecture halls, libraries, and information technology facilities limit the capacity of institutions to provide comprehensive

tourism education. Similarly, Ogundipe (2019) noted that the absence of standard tourism training facilities, such as hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies, denies students hands-on experience and exposure to industry operations.

2. Insufficient Funding: Insufficient funding poses a formidable challenge to tourism education in Rivers State, severely impacting the quality and sustainability of tourism education programmes. According to Ezeah (2015), inadequate funding affects the development of tourism education infrastructure, limiting the availability of modern facilities, equipment, and technology necessary for effective learning. Ogundipe (2016) noted that insufficient funding also hinders the recruitment and retention of qualified lecturers, compromising the quality of instruction and research. Moreover, Manyara (2017) emphasised that limited financial resources restrict the scope of tourism education programmes, making it difficult to offer specialised courses, conduct field trips, and provide students with industry-relevant training. Furthermore, Kolawole (2017) acknowledged that insufficient funding affects the accreditation and recognition of tourism education programmes, as institutions struggle to meet regulatory standards due to financial constraints. This funding shortfall ultimately undermines the competitiveness and employability of tourism graduates, hindering Rivers State's ability to develop a skilled and knowledgeable tourism workforce.

3. Obsolete Curricula: Obsolete curricula pose a pervasive challenge to tourism education in Nigeria where institutions struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving tourism industry. According to Afolabi (2018), outdated curricula in Nigerian institutions, fail to incorporate critical areas like sustainable tourism, cultural heritage management, and digital marketing. Similarly, Ibikunle (2020) noted that in Northern Nigeria, particularly in states like Kaduna and Kano, tourism education curricula often neglect practical and vocational training, focusing instead on theoretical foundations. Ogundipe (2022) noted that this disconnection between curriculum content and industry requirements results in graduates lacking essential skills, such as entrepreneurship, innovation, and problem-solving. Furthermore, Adedoyin (2023) avowed that the lack of regular curriculum review and update processes, coupled with inadequate stakeholder engagement, perpetuated this problem, ultimately compromising the competitiveness and employability of tourism graduates in Nigeria's growing tourism industry.

4. Lack of Competent Lecturers: Lack of competent Lecturers poses a significant challenge to tourism education in Rivers State. According to Okoro (2018), the scarcity of experienced and qualified Lecturers in tourism-related disciplines hampers the quality of instruction and research in all states in Nigeria including Rivers State. Similarly, Uche (2020) acknowledged that the absence of specialised Lecturers in areas like tourism marketing, hospitality management, and sustainable tourism development limits the breadth and depth of curriculum offerings. In the same vein, Nwosu (2022) asserted that this shortage of competent Lecturers compromises the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills among tourism students, ultimately affecting their employability and competitiveness in the industry. In addition, Ezema (2023) stated that the brain drain of qualified Lecturers to other countries, coupled with inadequate faculty development programmes and poor working conditions, exacerbates this challenge, undermining the capacity of tourism education institutions to produce graduates equipped to drive states tourism development.

5. Inadequate Industry Partnerships: Inadequate industry partnerships pose a significant challenge to tourism education in Rivers State, hindering the relevance, quality, and effectiveness of tourism education programmes. According to Oyedele (2018), the lack of collaborative relationships between tourism education institutions and industry stakeholders results in a disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical application, limiting students' opportunities for experiential learning and industry exposure. Similarly, Akpan (2020) noted that inadequate industry partnerships restrict access to resources, expertise, and networking opportunities, compromising the development of essential skills and competencies among tourism students. Ogunbiyi (2022) emphasized that weak industry linkages also impede curriculum development, accreditation, and quality assurance processes, undermining the credibility and recognition of tourism education programmes. Furthermore, Adeniyi (2023) avowed that inadequate industry partnerships worsen the brain drain of tourism professionals, as graduates lack the industry connections and job

opportunities necessary to retain them in the sector, this action ultimately affecting Rivers State tourism development and competitiveness. 6. Regulatory Framework: Rivers State's tourism education faces significant challenges due to its regulatory framework. According to Ekechukwu (2014), lack of clear guidelines and policies hinders the growth and development of the industry. Similarly, Ojo (2015) explained that inadequate regulations compromise the quality and relevance of tourism education programmes, limiting the industry's potential. Moreover, Adeniran (2016) avowed the absence of clear policies and guidelines for tourism education institutions, inadequate accreditation processes, and insufficient industry partnerships as major obstacles. Additionally, Alabi (2017) emphasized that the regulatory framework's failure to integrate international best practices, human rights, and environmental considerations exacerbates these challenges, undermining the sector's contribution to Rivers State's economic development and cultural preservation.

7. Cultural and Language Barriers: Cultural and language barriers pose significant challenges to tourism education in Rivers State. According to experts, these obstacles hinder the growth and development of the industry. Cultural barriers include differences in customs, traditions, and values that may not be aligned with the tourism industry's requirements, making it difficult for students to adapt. For instance, Oyedele (2018) noted that cultural differences limit the effectiveness of tourism education programmes, while Akpan (2018) explained the need for culturally sensitive curricula to address the diverse needs of multi-ethnic population. Language barriers also play a crucial role in hindering tourism education in Rivers State, Nigeria. Eze (2019) acknowledged the regulatory framework's failure to account for regional variations in language, compromising the industry's ability to showcase Nigeria's rich cultural diversity. Additionally, Ogunbiyi (2019) stressed that language barriers restrict access to international tourism education resources, limiting the sector's potential for global competitiveness.

Prospects of Tourism Education in Rivers State, Nigeria

Tourism education serves as a catalyst for Rivers State's socio-economic advancement, presenting vast opportunities for progress and revitalisation. As noted by Ojo (2020), tourism significantly impacts economic expansion, fostering wealth creation and job opportunities. Within Rivers State,, tourism education has the potential to tap into the state's diverse cultural and natural resources, driving sustainable development and growth by preserving cultural heritage, driving economic empowerment, developing skills, engaging communities, promoting environmental sustainability, and establishing a supportive policy framework.

- i. Cultural Heritage Preservation: Tourism education through cultural heritage preservation presents a promising prospect for Rivers State's socio-economic development. By incorporating cultural heritage preservation into tourism education, Rivers State can safeguard its rich cultural legacy and promote cross-cultural understanding. According to Eze (2020), cultural tourism has the potential to showcase diverse cultural heritage, generating revenue and creating employment opportunities. Similarly, Ojo (2020) noted that cultural heritage preservation can foster community engagement and participation in tourism development, ensuring that local communities benefit from tourism initiatives. Furthermore, Nwaigwe (2022) avowed that tourism education focused on cultural heritage preservation can equip individuals with the skills needed to manage and conserve cultural resources, thereby promoting sustainable tourism practices..
- ii. Economic Empowerment: Tourism education puts forward a promising pathway to economic empowerment in Rivers State, unlocking opportunities for entrepreneurship, job creation, and revenue generation. According to Oyedele (2019), tourism education can equip individuals with the skills needed to start and manage tourism-related businesses, stimulating local economies and contributing to national economic growth. Similarly, Akpan (2020) noted that tourism education can foster entrepreneurship and innovation, enabling individuals to tap into the vast potential of tourism

industry. Furthermore, Adeniran (2021) acknowledged that tourism education can enhance the employability of graduates, providing them with the competencies required to succeed in the tourism sector and contribute to economic development. By harnessing the potential of tourism education, Rivers State can empower its citizens, stimulate economic growth, and reduce poverty.

- iii. **Skill Development:** Tourism education offers a vital pathway to skill development in Rivers State, equipping individuals with the competencies required to succeed in the tourism industry. According to Akpan (2020), practical training and hands-on experience are essential components of tourism education, enabling students to acquire industry-specific skills and adapt to the dynamic needs of the sector. Similarly, Eze (2020) noted that tourism education can foster skills development in areas such as hospitality management, tour operations, and cultural heritage preservation, thereby enhancing the employability of graduates. Furthermore, Ogunbiyi (2022) emphasised that tourism education can develop soft skills, including communication, customer service, and problem-solving, which are critical for delivering exceptional tourist experiences and driving industry growth. By prioritising skill development, tourism education can produce a workforce capable of driving Rivers State's tourism industry forward.
- iv. **Community Engagement:** Tourism education provides a transformative way to community engagement in Rivers State, encouraging collaborative relationships between local communities, tourism stakeholders, and educational institutions. According to Ogunbiyi (2022), community-based tourism education empowers local communities to take ownership of tourism development, ensuring that benefits are equitably distributed and cultural heritage is preserved. Similarly, Adeniran (2021) acknowledged that tourism education can facilitate community engagement through participatory approaches, enabling local residents to contribute to tourism planning and decision-making processes. By prioritising community engagement, tourism education can ensure that tourism development aligns with local needs and aspirations.
- v. **Environmental Sustainability:** Tourism education promotes environmental sustainability in Rivers State by cultivating a new generation of tourism professionals equipped to mitigate the industry's ecological footprint. According to Fennell (2020), tourism education can integrate sustainable tourism practices, environmental conservation, and eco-tourism principles, empowering students to develop environmentally responsible tourism initiatives. Similarly, Eze (2020) noted that tourism education can foster environmental awareness and stewardship among local communities, thereby promoting the conservation of community's rich biodiversity and natural heritage. Furthermore, Okpobono (2023) explained that tourism education can address climate change, waste management, and sustainable resource utilisation, ensuring that tourism development aligns with national sustainable development goals. By prioritising environmental sustainability, tourism education can ensure a resilient and eco-friendly tourism industry in Rivers State.
- vi. **Policy Framework:** Tourism education in Rivers State, Nigeria stands to benefit significantly from a well-crafted policy framework, guiding the development of a robust and sustainable tourism industry. According to Adeniran (2021), a comprehensive policy framework can harmonise tourism education with national development goals, ensuring alignment with economic, social, and cultural priorities. Similarly, Ojo (2020) noted that policy frameworks can establish standards for tourism education, accrediting institutions and programmes to guarantee quality and relevance. Furthermore, Nwaigwe (2022) stated that effective policy frameworks can facilitate collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders, fostering a cohesive approach to tourism education and development. By establishing a supportive policy framework, Rivers State can unlock the full potential of tourism education.

Conclusion

The discussion on the paper so far has exposed the facts that tourism education is a transformative force for Rivers State's socio-economic revitalisation, harnessing the state's rich cultural and natural resources to drive sustainable growth. By integrating tourism education into Rivers State's development strategy, the State can unlock vast opportunities for progress, empower its citizens, stimulate economic growth, and reduce poverty. Effective tourism education fosters cross-cultural understanding, entrepreneurship, innovation, and eco-friendly practices, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for Rivers people and cementing the State's position as a leading destination for cultural and environmental exploration. Moreover, a well-crafted policy framework harmonises tourism education with national development goals, ensuring alignment with Rivers State's economic, social, and cultural priorities. Therefore, prioritising tourism education is crucial for Rivers State's socio-economic development, as it equips the nation with a resilient and skilled workforce, poised to drive the tourism industry forward and contribute meaningfully to the state's economic growth and sustainable development.

Recommendations

1. Rivers State government, in collaboration with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), should develop sustainable tourism practices that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This can be achieved by incorporating environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and community engagement into tourism development.
2. Educational institutions, with support from the government and private sector, should establish tourism education programmes that focus on entrepreneurship, innovation, and skill development. This will equip students with the necessary skills to succeed in the tourism industry.
3. Local communities, with support from government agencies and NGOs, should promote community-based tourism initiatives that showcase Rivers State's rich cultural heritage and natural resources.
4. Rivers State government should invest in developing tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, transportation systems, and recreational facilities, to enhance the Tourist experience.
5. The government should foster public-private partnerships to promote tourism development, attract investments, and create jobs.
6. Rivers State government, in collaboration with international organisations, should establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the impact of tourism development on socio-economic growth.

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