



2012

## Is there a Future / Career for Tourist Guides?

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### Recommended Citation

Melia, D.: Is there a Future / Career for Tourist Guides?. EuroCHRIE Conference. Lausanne, Switzerland, October 2012

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## **Is there a Future / Career for Tourist Guides?**

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### **Abstract**

Tourist guides are the essential interface between a tourism destination and its visitors, and are very much responsible for the overall impression and satisfaction offered by a destination. However, despite the prominent role that tourist guides play in the system of tourism, fairly scant scientific attention has been paid to them to date. Tourist Guides create a link between the visitor and the host country. Yet, of the small amount of literature devoted to them, very few studies have asked tourist guides their views and opinions, and have built up a profile of the tourist guide. This paper is an attempt to redress the balance.

Primary research for this paper was carried out with a focus on the Tourist Guides of Dublin, Ireland as this destination contains the largest number of tourist guides on the island of Ireland. Some of the study's findings are surprising. Many of the conditions of the job, characterised universally in the existing literature as negative, actually suit Dublin tourist guides. A large majority of both tourist guides and tour operators are optimistic for the future of the tourist guiding industry in the city. Is there a future/career for professional tourist guides in the industry? The answer is yes, although, at the moment, that future is seasonal and part-time.

**Key Words:** Tourist Guides; Tourism, Career, Seasonal, Part-Time, Tour Operators

## **Future Career for Tour Guides**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourist guides are the essential interface between a tourism destination and its visitors, according to Ap & Wong (2001), who go on to state that guides are very much responsible for the overall impression and satisfaction offered by a destination. Their views are echoed by Zhang & Chow (2004) who maintain that 'Tour (sic) guides are the front line staff who provide the 'moment of truth' for tourists, and can make or break their trip' (p.81). However, Scherle and Kung (2010) point out that despite the prominent role that tourist guides play in the system of tourism, fairly scant scientific attention has been paid to them to date. Tourist Guides create a link between the visitor and the host country. Yet, of the small amount of literature devoted to them, very few studies have asked tourist guides their views and opinions, and have built up a profile of the tourist guide. This paper is an attempt to redress the balance.

The study arose as a result, in part, of a report prepared for the Irish Tourist Industry Confederation (ITIC) which stated that the job of the tourist guide is 'unattractive to many due to its seasonality, unsocial hours, relatively low pay and frequently very demanding working conditions and tourists' (ITIC, 2008:28). Comments made by an outgoing President of the Association of Approved Tourist Guides of Ireland (AATGI), Ms. Georgina Boylan, at the association's annual general meeting to the effect that there was a perception that tourist guides were aging and that there was a difficulty in retaining newly qualified guides within the industry (AATGI, AGM minutes 2009 (unpublished)), further prompted the need to study the tourist guide industry. The aim of this paper is to investigate the claims made by Ms. Boylan and made in the ITIC study of 2008 in order to understand the impact these might have on tourist guide careers and to answer the research question: Is there a future/career for professional tourist guides in the tourism industry?

The objectives of the research were as follows:

- To establish the age range; educational attainments; availability of work; and remuneration of professional tourist guides.
- To ascertain the views of tourist guides on a range of issues such as: pay; status; seasonality; self-employment; and career path.
- To explore and evaluate a variety of potential threats and challenges to the future of tourist guides including threats posed to the industry by unqualified guides and from new Information Technologies.
- To ascertain the views of tour operators in relation to: the employment of tourist guides; the profile of tourist guides; and the future of tourist guiding in Ireland.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The research presented in this paper focuses on the literature on the tourism industry in Ireland and examines the role of the tourist guide as part of the tourism product.

Tourism is an essential contributor to the economic well being of Ireland. However, this decade has seen a mix of fortunes for the tourism industry in Ireland. After a prolonged period of uninterrupted growth from the 1980's, the impact of the SARS virus, the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., and the subsequent Iraq war, all caused a stalling of growth in the period 2001 to 2003 (Tourism Policy Review Group, 2003). This was followed by a steady increase, year on year of visitor numbers from 6.2 million visitors in 2003 to just 7.7 million in 2007. This growth was matched by an increase in total foreign exchange earnings from €3.6 billion in 2000 to a high of €4.9 billion in 2007 (Fáilte Ireland, 2009). According to the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC), the main driver of the growth in demand up to 2007 was primarily economic prosperity in source markets, coupled with supply side factors such as the expansion of the range of attractive holidays on offer, new routes and cheaper airfares, and aggressive marketing (ITIC, 2010). Following 6.2 million visitors in 2000, there was a decrease in 2001 and it took until 2004 to surpass the 2000 figure. There was steady growth until a high in 2007 and a decline in numbers since then (Failte Ireland 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009a).

Just as visitor numbers have fallen back since 2007, so also have foreign exchange earnings, totalling €4.8 billion in 2008 and €3.9 billion in 2009 and a provisional 3.4 billion in 2010 (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). The worldwide economic recession has caused a slump in international travel, resulting in almost 1.2 million fewer foreign visitors to Ireland in 2009 than in 2007, and a further drop of 690,000 in 2010 (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). However, preliminary figures for the first six months of 2011 indicate an increase on the same period of 2010. Quarter (Q) 1 (January to March) figures show an increase of 8.6%, while Q2 (April to June) show a 15.6% increase on the same periods in 2010 respectively (Central Statistics Office, 2011a). The 2010 visitor numbers

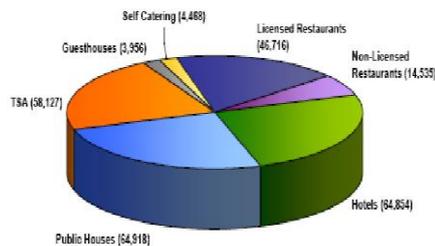
suffered as a result of the difficulties brought about by the volcanic ash cloud, and 2011's increase, which translates to some 300,000 more visitors than 2010, is still 300,000 down on the same period in 2009 (Carroll, 2011).

Nonetheless, tourism continues to be a very significant sector in Ireland. When the domestic tourism expenditure of €1.25 billion is added to the foreign exchange earnings; there was a total tourism expenditure of €4.7 billion in 2010, which represented 3% of GNP (Central Statistics Office, 2011b).

Employment in tourism is divided into a number of different sectors as follows:

Hotels; Public Houses; Tourism Services and Attractions; Guesthouses; Self-catering; Licensed Restaurants; and Non-Licensed Restaurants. These sectors and the numbers they employ are shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: Overall Tourism Employment 2008**



Source: Fáilte Ireland (2009b: 8).

Figure 1 shows the breakdown in actual employee numbers. In percentage terms: Hotels and Public Houses each command 25 percent of the total; with Tourism Services and Attractions (TSA), accounting for 23 percent. Licensed Restaurants equal 18 percent and non-licensed restaurants six percent. The self catering and guesthouse sectors account for two percent each. Bearing in mind the adjusted figures to allow for local business, the largest sector of tourism industry is made up by TSA. It is into this sector that tourist guiding falls.

McDonnell (2010) states that, given that tourist guides are ubiquitous in most areas of tourism, it is surprising that the subject has received so little attention from the academic tourism community. This view is echoed by Weiler and Ham (2002) who opine that tourist guiding has been the subject of very little scholarly enquiry, let alone rigorous research. They say that this may be due to the guide's lack of profile and status and therefore visibility to researchers. Scherle and Kung (2010) point out that despite the prominent role that tourist guides play in the system of tourism, fairly scant scientific attention has been paid to them to date.

The European Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (FEG) and the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) have both adopted the definition of tourist guide laid down by the EU under EN 130809 of the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) as follows:

**Tourist Guide:**

*'A person who guides visitors in the language of their choice and interprets the cultural and natural heritage of an area which person normally possesses an area-specific qualification usually issued and/or recognised by the appropriate authority.'*

**Source:** World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (2010)

This is distinct from a tour manager defined by CEN as follows:

**Tour Manager/Tour Director or Escort:**

*'A Person who manages an itinerary on behalf of the tour operator ensuring the programme is carried out as described in the tour operator's literature'*

*and sold to the traveller/consumer and who gives local practical information.'*

***'Note:*** *Tour managers may or may not be tourist guides as well. They are not trained or licensed to work in specific areas unless they have the proper requirements or legal right, depending on the region.'*

***Source:*** *World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (2010)*

The EU uses the designation 'tourist guide' as opposed to 'tour guide' to underline the differences between tour manager, defined above, who does not need special qualifications, and tourist guide, who is required to be licensed or recognised by the appropriate authority, in Ireland's case, Fáilte Ireland.

A seminal work by Cohen (1985) classifies the modern tourist guide as having its origins as either a pathfinder or mentor. The Pathfinder is one who finds a path through an unfamiliar environment for travellers, the latter, more of a personal tutor or spiritual advisor. Both these roles, Cohen argues, have now developed in leadership and mediatory roles. Under the leadership role, the guide must give direction to the tour, must control the group, and is responsible for the social component which involves tension management within the group, serving as an integrating force, maintaining morale and providing animation. The mediatory role sees the guide as a 'middleman between his party and the local population'; he interposes himself between the party and the environment and thus makes it non-threatening to his party. Communication is one of the guide's principal roles under the mediatory sphere, influencing his group by the objects of interest he selects to point out and the information and interpretation he provides (Cohen, 1985).

Building on Cohen's (1985) analysis, Pond (1993) identifies five roles for the guide: leader; educator; Public Relations representative; host; and conduit. Pond also differentiates between types of guides. Mancini (2001) adopts a similar type of classification. Both classifications are set out in table 1 below:

**Table 1: Types of Tourist Guides**

<b>Pond (1993)</b>	<b>Mancini (2001)</b>
Urban guide Government Guide e.g. in The White House Driver-Guides (illegal in some areas)	City Guides – on coaches or on foot; for groups or individuals On-site guides conducting tours in a specific building e.g. St. Peter's in Rome
Business or Industry Guides (for private industrial facilities)	Specialised guides e.g. for white water rafting
Adventure Guide / Interpreter	Guides employed by large companies e.g. Greyline
Dept. of State Escorts (for Official Foreign Visitors)	Guides who work for cruise lines or ground operators such as DMCs or Incentive Houses
Docents/Volunteer Guides	

Bearing in mind Cohen's (1985) framework and the variety of roles identified by Pond (1993) and Mancini (2001), researchers have some observations to make about tourist guides. Ap and Wong (2001) suggest that tourist guides are the essential interface between the host destination and its visitors. In fact they are front-line employees who are very much responsible for the overall impression and satisfaction with the tour services offered by a destination. Scherle and Kung (2010) state that tour guides play a crucial role in the tourism system and that according to their professional self image, tour guides operate between cultures like almost no other professional group in tourism. Hence in the course of their professional activities they naturally play the role of intercultural mediators.

A discordant note, however, is sounded by Reisinger and Steiner (2006), who espouse Authentic Tourism and suggest:

*First, the suggestion that tour guides enhance tourist experiences seems to assume that tourists are not capable of interpreting the alien worlds they visit or will have a less rich or incorrect experience if someone does not explain what they are experiencing. Second, the mere existence of tour guides assumes that the meaning of tourist experience can and should be constructed outside the experience rather than emerge from within it (p .485).*

While Authentic Tourism has a following, there seems to be no research to suggest that it has impacted on the job prospects of tourist guides.

According to Pond (1993) qualifications and educational standards for guiding vary substantially throughout the world. She states that some guides are educated to university degree standard, especially in Europe, while others have no qualifications whatsoever.

McDonnell (2010) concurs, when he says that the training requirement can vary from one that is tightly regulated, for example in Cyprus, where the Cypriot tourism organisation controls tourist guides, and where one must be a Cypriot national in order to qualify as a guide, to Australia, where anyone can set up as a tourist guide without any qualifications. McDonnell goes on to say that an accreditation system has recently been introduced based solely on guides' on-the-job experience, but is not mandatory.

Ap and Wong, (2001) and Zhang and Chow, (2004) state that tourist guides in Hong Kong also do not require any formal training. However, both papers recommend the introduction of a licensing system based on attending and successfully passing a training course.

ITIC (2008) states that: 'the job is unattractive to many due to its seasonality, unsocial hours, relatively low pay and frequently very demanding working conditions and tourists' (p.28). Pond (1993) concurs by stating that guides are most likely to work freelance with few job benefits and for meagre wages. She also mentions the issue of seasonality, saying that the seasonal and part-time nature of the work in most regions imposes limitations on the amount of work and income available through guiding.

Many of these issues are also highlighted by Weiler & Ham (2002) who state that tourist guiding is a low-status profession, which is characterised by low pay, poor working conditions, casual employment conditions and seasonality. Ap and Wong (2001), albeit writing about guides in Hong Kong, maintain that their work is often of a seasonal, freelance and part-time nature thus resulting in their visibility, stature and income being low. They add that, due to the self-employed nature of the job, guides lack the resources to further their profession's own collective self interests. Widtfeldt Megeed (2010) expands on the point that guides are essentially freelancers and self-employed.

Unqualified guides and a lack of a defined career path are further challenges identified by Weiler & Ham (2002) who point out that in many countries, qualifications are not required, that those with qualifications are not remunerated in any special way, and that there is no career path, so over time good guides may move on to some other occupation. McDonnell (2001) suggests that it is somewhat strange that tourist guides, who may have the greatest impact of all on the satisfaction of an international tourist, are virtually the only elements of the tourism industry in Australia which are not regulated. Ap and Wong (2001) echo this challenge of non-regulation when they state that 'unhealthy tour operator practices such as use of unqualified tour guides...pose a threat to the sustainability of the profession and industry' (p. 556).<sup>1</sup> They also mention the lack of a career path. Zhang and Chow (2004) recommend that all tourist guides in Hong Kong be regulated and licensed in order to upgrade professional service standards.

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<sup>1</sup> *It should be noted that tourist guiding in Ireland is not regulated. Therefore, while the state runs training courses and approves qualified guides, it does not require that all guides be qualified. It is not illegal in Dublin, as it is in Rome, for example, to guide without any qualification.*

Pond (1993) mentions the threat of driver-guides, that is, one person doing the job of both the driver and the guide. She says that this practice is illegal in some areas.

Another challenge to tourist guides is the development of Information Technologies (IT) for tourism. Baum (2007) points out that the role of the tourist guide is changing or diminishing in part, by being superseded by flexible, electronic alternatives at tourism sites, allowing choice of language and giving visitors different perspectives on events and on the site itself. Not only can information be obtained in specific sites but also 'on the move'. Dublin Tourism announced in September 2010 that 'Dublin is the world's first city to provide a pointing technology-enabled Smartphone application (app), which allows users to point their mobile phone at a building or object in the real world and retrieve information about it' (Dublin Tourism, 2010). The phrase used by Mary Hanafin, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, was that the app 'delivers Dublin in the palm of your hand' (Dublin Tourism, 2010).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Primary research was carried out with a focus on the Tourist Guides of Dublin, Ireland as this destination contains the largest number of tourist guides on the island of Ireland. An on-line questionnaire was chosen as it had the ability to reach a large number of respondents in an effective and efficient manner. The questionnaires were sent to all tourist guides registered on the AATGI and Failte Ireland databases. A total of 191 were sent, and the number of responses received was 86, representing a 45% response rate.

Following on from the questionnaire survey a number of in-depth interviews were carried out. These interviews were conducted with tourist guide employers, Tour Operators, and Tourist Guide Agency Owners. A total of seven in-depth interviews were carried out, five were tour operators, one both a tourist operator and a tourist guide agent and one a tourist guide who acted as a broker in passing on tours to other tourist guides. These respondents were chosen to provide as broad a representation of the industry as possible. Between them, they cater for the following types of tourism businesses: incentive, leisure, business, free independent travellers, cruise and conferencing for a variety of markets, particularly, the US, the UK, France, Germany and Italy.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents an overview of the main findings from the two phases of the research and then goes on to discuss the themes that emerged from the analysis of the results.

### *Overview of the Survey Questionnaire Findings*

The survey was emailed to a database of 191 respondents and the number of responses received was 86, representing a 45% response rate. Of the respondents 89.5% were working as tourist guides, the remaining 10.5% indicated that they were no longer working in the industry.

A profile of a 'typical' tourist guide is presented. She is female (the ratio is 3:1 female to male responses); aged fifty or over (76% of respondents are in this category); has been guiding more than ten years (51%); earned €10,000 or less in 2010 (63%); and guiding is her primary occupation (73%). She works predominately in the Dublin region (as opposed to nationally) (60%); has a 50/50 chance of having retired from a previous career; typically works for four or more employers (55%); mainly works from April to October (these months scored 51% or over in the survey); and is educated to a Bachelor degree level or higher (71%).

Traditionally, perhaps because of the part-time and seasonal nature of the job, the profession has been dominated by females. For perhaps the same reasons, tourist guiding appeals to an older age group and the salary scale would not be sufficient for many younger people who are trying to make a living. The salary scale is, perhaps, somewhat surprising with only 20% earning €20,000 or over, given that 73% said that guiding was their primary occupation. When that 73% were asked if they supplemented their income by any other paid employment, 72% of them stated that they did not. This would seem to suggest that they must have some other form of income, e.g. a pension, or a partner with an income, as it would be very difficult to live on €10,000 or less per annum. There was no pattern to the occupations of the 28% who said that they did supplement their incomes, but working for a tour operator; teaching/tour guide training; and paid charity work were mentioned twice.

All respondents were asked if they had retired from a previous career, 50% indicated that they had. There was a variety of previous occupations mentioned, however, once again, teaching was the top answer with a score of 29%, and working for Aer Lingus scored 14%. Perhaps, some of the skills used to teach are easily transferable to guiding, also, many Aer Lingus jobs require people skills, a pre-requisite for tourist guiding.

The fact that 55% of the respondents work for four or more employers is an indication of the freelance nature of the job. A guide must pay his/her own tax as a self-employed person and provide his/her own insurance. This may be one of the reasons that 82% of the respondents are members of AATGI, who provides insurance cover as part of membership.

When asked the question 'Do you get enough guiding work?' 59% of respondents said that they did, while 35% said that they did not. However, when a similar set of statements was made to the effect that 'there is/is not enough guiding work', 57% disagreed that there was enough work, while 56% agreed that there was not enough work. This set of results seems to suggest that, while a majority of individual guides feel that they personally get enough guiding work, there is not enough guiding work in general.

Tourist guides like the challenge of, and the variety in, their job, both of which is understandable. Given the precarious nature of a freelance career, it is, perhaps, more surprising that 84% of guides like being their own boss, and 64% disagreed that they would prefer to be employed by one employer. 67% of the respondents disagreed that guiding was well paid, with 59% agreeing it was badly paid.

Interestingly, given that the hours worked by guides are often seen as unsocial, 55% indicated that working early mornings or late nights was not a problem for them, and a corresponding 59% disagreed that it was a problem. Seasonality, another often mentioned issue for the tourism industry, does not pose a problem for a small majority of respondents, 53% agreed that they liked working fewer hours in the wintertime, and a corresponding 55% disagreed that they disliked the seasonality of guiding. Unqualified guides are perceived as a threat to their livelihood by 59% of respondents, while 55% disagreed that unqualified guides were not a threat.

Forty-three percent of respondents agree that the job of a tourist guide is prestigious, while 43% disagree that it is not prestigious. More than 30% neither agree nor disagree with both statements, indicating that there is no clear cut majority one way or the other. The other issue that did not provide a consensus was the question of whether there is a career path for guides as they become more experienced. 44% disagreed that there was a career path, while 34% neither agreed nor disagreed. 50%, however, agreed that there was no career path, this time 25% neither agreed nor disagreed.

When respondents were asked the open-ended question, 'What would you change about the job of a tourist guide?' the most popular response was that guides should be regulated by the State and that only licensed guides would be legally able to guide. Qualified tourist guides are trained and approved by a State body. The second most popular change that respondents would like to see is the introduction of on-going training and on-going assessment of tourist guides. Other issues raised were: increased pay; a higher standard of professional training i.e. to University standard; that the season be longer; that cancellation fees be payable; and that all itineraries would be feasible. The issue of driver-guiding being made illegal was only mentioned by two respondents, perhaps indicating that this issue is largely invisible to guides, given that the driver-guiding is conducted within a coach and, where the tourists are brought to visitor attractions, the driver-guide is either perceived as an unqualified guide, or, if he/she is wearing a badge, as a qualified guide and not seen as a threat.

69% of tourist guides believe that there are challenges and threats to the future of the professional tourist guiding industry. Non-regulation of the guiding industry was seen as the greatest threat, as this was mentioned twenty-three times in an open-ended question, and so, clearly, this is a pressing issue for respondents. App and iPod technology was the next most common answer, while the availability of free walking tours; cost cutting by tour operators; and the recession were all identified as a challenge or threat to the industry.

Forty-three percent of respondents did not perceive that technology would replace guide services in tourist sites visited by them; 17% did not know and 39% indicated that they had seen this happen. It would appear that, among respondents, the perception of technological replacement seems greater than the reality.

Respondents were asked about optimism for the future of tourist guiding in Dublin, and, in spite of the threats and challenges mentioned, two thirds, 67%, declared them to be optimistic; 20% didn't know; while only 12% were not optimistic. This would seem to be a ringing endorsement for the future of tourist guiding in the city.

### *Overview of the In-depth Interview Findings*

Seven tour operators or tour brokers were chosen for this phase of the research. Companies were chosen which represented a broad spectrum of tourist businesses, which employ tourist guides. The findings revealed that,

on some issues, there was a great deal of consensus, but on others, there was a range of views among employers. The main themes to emerge from the in-depth interview findings are discussed in the following section.

The number of tourist guides employed by the interviewees varied greatly from six or seven a week to as many as forty on an individual day. Interviewees agreed that the season runs from April to October, albeit with peaks at various times for different markets, particularly May and June for the French market. In general, though, there was a policy among interviewees to employ qualified (badged) guides whenever possible, recognising that there was a lack of availability of suitably qualified language guides at different times of the season.

When presented with the questionnaire finding that 76% of respondents were aged 50 or older, the interviewees generally agreed with the finding. Two agreed that English speaking guides had such a profile, but that language guides tended to be younger. When asked if this older profile impacted upon their business, five indicated it had no negative impact, in fact two felt that it was positive, that clients and tourists often equated age with experience. The other two interviewees indicated that the age profile did impact on their business, particularly in the provision of more active tours. The difficulty in keeping younger guides in the industry was mentioned by some of the interviewees, who said that they understood why younger guides left the industry; because of seasonality it was almost impossible to make a living solely out of guiding. Clearly the age profile did present problems for a number of the interviewees; however, they recognise that the situation is unlikely to change if the pattern of seasonality remains as it is now.

The findings of the questionnaire had shown that 59% of respondents agreed that tourist guiding was badly paid. The interviewees were asked to comment. Five of the seven felt that guiding rates were relatively fair, albeit that there had not been an increase in three or four years, and they pointed out that, from the beginning of 2010, value added tax (VAT) at 13.5% had been added to guiding fees, making the employment of tourist guides a more expensive proposition for employers.

There were, however, two dissenting opinions who agreed with the tourist guides about pay. Not surprisingly, one of these was a tourist guide herself, the other, was the owner of the tourist guiding agency and a tour operator. While he agreed that tourist guiding was badly paid, he stated that the price of excursion tickets for tours was very low in Ireland, as much as 50% lower than prices in mainland Europe, and, as a result, the rate of pay for the guide would also remain low. It would appear that on the issue of pay rates there is a fundamental difference between guides and their employers. The recession has meant that profit margins have been cut across the board and many tourism businesses are struggling to remain viable. On the other hand, tourist guides working for some companies, who have passed on the VAT, have had a de facto reduction in their guiding rate.

The issue of unqualified guides was important for respondents to the questionnaire. However, employers, while understanding how guides would feel threatened by unqualified guides, identified other threats and challenges which they believed were more pressing. The threat of driver-guiding was highlighted by two of the interviewees, who stated that there would be much more work for tourist guides in the city of Dublin, should this practice be outlawed, as it is in several European countries. Two of the other interviewees also mentioned this issue, seeing it as a threat to the safety of all.

Other threats identified by the interviewees included the threat of training too many English speaking guides, while still having a scarcity of language guides at certain times and the fear that as older guides were retiring, that they were not being replaced. These threats seem to be contradictory, but were articulated by different interviewees, working in different tourism markets, and so reflect their individual beliefs.

The threat of technology replacing tourist guides was discounted by all of the interviewees. Some felt that the introduction of technology could enhance some visitor attractions, or could provide information such as tour times, which would improve business, especially for the free independent traveller (FIT) market. All felt that the personal touch and human contact provided by a tourist guide could not be replaced by technology.

Six of the seven interviewees were very positive that there was a future for professional tourist guides in Dublin. Only one, stated that there was possibly a future for a fewer number of guides, if they wanted to make a living out of it. A number of interviewees indicated that too many English speaking guides were being trained.

Interviewees were then asked what changes among tourist guides they would like to see to facilitate their (the interviewee's) business. Tour operators would like to see guides being more flexible and pro-active; having a greater understanding of the business; and keeping current with information. Knowing what employers require would help tourist guides to remain as employable as possible, thus maximising their career prospects. The

employers concluded by expressing very positive views about the contribution that tourist guides make to their businesses.

It is clear that the findings of this research make a significant contribution to the knowledge in the field of tourist guiding. The results of this research, the first of its kind in Ireland and limited internationally, support and extend existing knowledge, as well as making a number of unique contributions to the understanding of tourist guiding in Ireland.

Fáilte Ireland (2011) outlines how the recession has affected tourist numbers to Ireland negatively over the last four years. This has affected every facet of the tourism business, not least, tourist guides. This is an issue that was mentioned by both respondents to the questionnaire and by interviewees, yet was not high on the list of threats to the future of tourist guiding.

The primary research findings of this study in relation to the nature of the job of tourist guide do not concur with much of the literature. This research found that:

- Tourist guides liked working fewer hours in the wintertime, so seasonality is not an issue for them.
- A majority of the guides indicated that unsocial working hours did not present a problem for them.
- An overwhelming 97% said that they liked the challenge of their jobs.
- 83% liked being their own boss as a freelance.
- On the issue of status, there was no definitive finding from the respondents, with the 40% agreeing that the job was prestigious and a further 35% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

The literature characterises the job as unattractive due to:

- Seasonality (ITIC, 2008; Pond, 1993; Weiler & Ham, 2002; Ap & Wong, 2001)
- Low pay (ITIC, 2008; Pond, 1993; Weiler & Ham, 2002; Ap & Wong, 2001)
- Demanding conditions (ITIC, 2008; Weiler & Ham, 2002)
- Freelance nature (Pond, 1993; Ap & Wong, 2001)
- Unsocial working hours (ITIC, 2008)
- Casual employment (Weiler & Ham, 2002)
- Part-time nature (Ap & Wong, 2001)
- Low status (Weiler & Ham, 2002)

The findings of this research from tourist guide responses agreed with claims of low pay, but most of the employers did not. However, as can be seen above, all of the other negative factors identified by the literature are refuted by this study. Tourist guides enjoy the seasonality; the challenge; the part-time nature of the job; and being freelance. These conditions suit the people who are working in the industry.

Reflecting the work of McDonald (2001); Ap and Wong (2001); Weiler and Ham (2002) and Zhang and Chow (2004) all of whom highlighted the threat to professional tourist guiding from unqualified guides and non-regulation of the industry, the findings of the questionnaire established that this was the greatest change desired by tourist guides in Dublin. The employers (and a few guides), however, saw a greater threat in the practice of driver-guiding, which was only mentioned in the literature by Pond (1993).

Ap and Wong (2001) and Weiler and Ham (2002) described the lack of a career path in tourist guiding, and 50% of respondents agreed that there was no career path for tourist guides to follow as they become more experienced, a less than overwhelming response.

Finally, there was little or no evidence to support Baum (2007) that the role of the tourist guide was being diminished or superseded by technology at tourism sites. Certainly there was a perception among some guides that guiding services were being replaced, but little concrete evidence to support this. Employers had no experience at all of this practice and felt that tourist guides would never be replaced by technology.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Arising from this research, it is clear that a major issue for tourist guides is the lack of regulation of the industry, and, as a result of non-regulation, the number of unqualified guides working within it. Regulation would guarantee a minimum standard of guiding within the industry and an increase in employment for qualified guides. However, this issue is political. In order to change the status quo, there would have to be a political will to do so. Issues of enforcement would be of paramount importance, in the event of a legislative change. It

would have to be agreed what state agency would be charged with enforcement and what sanctions would be applied to those who guided without a licence. The tourism industry has suffered in the recession, as seen by the huge drop in tourist numbers visiting the country. There could well be a fear from some tourism industry quarters that regulation of the tourist guide sector could be a disincentive to tourism, given that an obligation to use a qualified guide would add to the cost of a tour in these price conscious days. In addition, tourist guides' lack of visibility, and lack of resources to further their profession's own collective interests, means that they do not have the political strength to put the issue on the political agenda.

Another issue is the up-grading of the tourist guiding qualification to University standard. At the moment, given the evidence from the research that tourist guiding in Dublin is not a full-time, year-round career, it is very difficult to make the argument that the investment of the time and resources necessary would be justified. Nonetheless, if the industry wishes to be taken seriously, then these issues must be addressed in time.

Legislation to ban the practice of driver-guiding, on health and safety grounds, would seem to be easier to achieve, although this issue has been on the agenda of tourist guide representative bodies, particularly AATGI, for decades. Again, there are sections of the tourism industry who would oppose a legislative change, on the grounds of cost. However, if tourist guides can make this issue about safety, not employment for themselves, then there is a good chance, given the political will, that this change can be achieved. It is a recommendation of this study that driver-guiding should be made illegal.

The issue of on-going training and assessment of guides emerged from the research. This would ensure that tourist guides remain up-to-date with information and that guiding skills remain sharp, which in turn, would result in an improved product for the visitor. This study recommends that such on-going training and assessment be introduced, even if Fáilte Ireland, the body presently tasked with the training of guides, is under financial strain due to cuts in public spending.

Finally, there is a further issue which can be addressed to improve the sustainability of the career of professional tourist guide. The 'over-training' of English speaking tourist guides should be addressed immediately. This study recommends that any future training courses should respond to shortages of specific language guides, and try to cater to the emerging so called BRIC nations of Brazil; Russia; India and China, and not produce yet more English speaking guides who may well have real difficulty finding work, remaining in the industry and building a viable career.

The image of the tourist guide from the literature is of someone who is badly paid; who suffers from low status; who works unsocial hours; has poor employment conditions, particularly in relation to being self-employed; whose work is usually part-time; and who must cope with seasonality and a lack of a career path. All of these factors are portrayed as negatives. This research has indicated that Dublin tourist guides would like to be paid better and they are unlikely to be living solely off guiding income. However, there are many more positives than negatives to emerge from the study. From the research, the Dublin tourist guide is someone:

- Who likes working as a freelance;
- Who enjoys working fewer hours in the winter;
- Who does not mind working early mornings and late nights;
- Who is not overly concerned with the status, or lack thereof, of guiding,
- Is not overly concerned with whether guiding has a career path;
- Who is optimistic about the future of the tourist guiding industry.

In short, the job suits the majority of the people working in the industry. This is a major finding and contributes to the existing knowledge in the field of tourist guiding.

However, anyone, who wished to work full-time in the industry and not supplement their income with other paid employment, either inside or outside of the industry, would find it very difficult to make a year-round living.

While this research was extensive and has achieved the aims and objectives it set out to do, nonetheless, there are gaps. A future study should be undertaken to quantify the attrition rate, if any, from training courses, run over the last decade. The reasons for this attrition rate should be explored and the recruitment policies for the training course modified to reflect the reality of the career, i.e. seasonal and part-time, particularly, if it is found that scarce resources are being used to train tourist guides (albeit that participants pay some of the cost of the course) who have an expectation of a full-time career, and which expectation is not met on completion of the course, when the newly qualified tourist guide goes out into the industry to try and secure employment.

This research concentrated on Dublin tourist guides, however many guides work nationally in Ireland, with Dublin as just a part of their work. A nationwide study should be undertaken to gain an overall view of the state of guiding in the country as a whole. Issues that should be addressed include:

- Do national guides make more money than city guides?
- Is the job more sustainable year round?
- Are there threats and challenges that are unique to national guides?
- Does the fact that many national tourist guides work also as tour managers in the course of their jobs have any bearing on the sustainability of the job?
- How does the issue of driving-guiding impact on the future of the industry?

These issues could be addressed in one large study or could be broken down into a series of studies.

It is clear that the findings of this research make a significant contribution to the knowledge in the field of tourist guiding, as well as making a number of unique contributions to the understanding of that industry in Ireland. The research question 'Is there a future/career for professional tourist guides in Dublin?' can now be answered. Yes, there is a future/career for professional tourist guides in Dublin, but that career, at the moment, is seasonal and part-time.

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