

The Flemish master in tourism: a profile

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

The Flemish Master in Tourism is a partnership that consists of K.U. Leuven (general coordination). In this article program director Dominique Vanneste presents the core education of this master. She starts off with discussing the necessity of a training continuum, after which she develops the quality guidelines and the main focus of the program. At the end she also mentions the main standards for quality control and gives an overview of the internationalization possibilities. The article ends with some final remarks regarding the current status and future of the Master in Tourism.

Le MA en tourisme à la KU Leuven (qui en a la coordination générale), se développe en partenariat avec KH Bruges-Oostende, KH Malines, Univ. Ghent, Univ. Brussels, "Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen", "Erasmus Hogeschool Brussel", "Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen", "XIOS Hogeschool Limburg". Dans cet article la directrice, Dominique Vanneste présente le noyau du programme. Elle insiste sur la nécessité d'une continuité dans la formation, après quoi elle développe des lignes de conduite qualitatives et la vision majeure qui soutient le programme. A la fin elle mentionne aussi les standards de contrôle et esquisse un aperçu des possibilités d'internationalisation. L'article termine par quelques remarques sur le statut actuel et futur du MA en tourisme.

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Tourism education: necessity of a training continuum

Professionalizing a sector or domain means educating professionals and the more this sector is dynamic, demanding and complex, the more professionals with an education in line with the requirements are needed. This is certainly the case in tourism. Tourism has become one of the leading economic sectors in the world but also a domain of action and experience that is characterized by a remarkable impact on – vulnerable – communities and places (Butler, 1980). Therefore, the new conditions of tourism markets with increasing tourists' numbers and divergent attitudes and expectations generate an extended demand for properly educated professionals by tourism businesses and institutions.

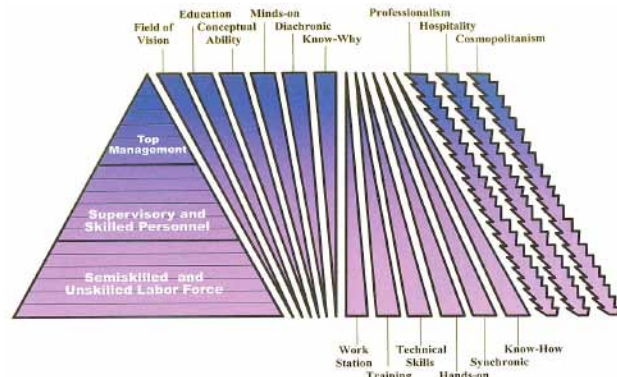


Figure 1: The training continuum in Tourism Education (Jafari, 2000: 30).

Facing this new demand, many countries' and regions' educational systems in tourism have to adopt: the basis of the educational pyramid (for semi-skilled labour force) and its centre (for supervisory and skilled personnel) are well represented but the top of the pyramid (for education of top management), is rather weak.

The implications of this deficiency can be easily retrieved by referring to the Training Continuum (Jafari, 2000), also related to the principles of the Tourism Education Quality Certification System of the World Tourism Organization. A strong basis and centre of the pyramid mean a strong representation of know-how with technical skills and hands-on training – which are important without any doubt – but the top of the pyramid implies 'knowing-why' with conceptual abilities and 'minds-on' development of vision which are as important today (Figure 1).

Flanders was among those where the top of the pyramid had to be strengthened in a sense that several attempts to put in place an advanced study in tourism on an academic level didn't last until a few years ago. A long tradition of tourism education on a high school level exists with tourism as an option in technical high school training as well as on the level of poly-technical institutes for higher education or university colleges. Their sections on Tourism and recreation management and Hotel management did and still do a very good job in educating very versatile and skilled professionals. Nevertheless their students are not trained on the level of research and analysis as to develop holistic insights into effects that certain decisions in the domain of tourism may imply. The 'thinking ahead', proceeding from a multidisciplinary framework, is less focused on than immediate productivity in front and back offices.

One can not say that the top of the pyramid was lacking, since several attempts (2) to put in place advanced tourism studies on an academic level can be enumerated. All of them started from the organizational viewpoint that the advanced studies should address candidates who obtained an academic degree earlier; therefore, graduates from poly-technical institutes or university colleges were not allowed. In 2000, this principle was changed and two elements were put forward: 1) a double inflow of academic as well as professional bachelors and 2) a collaboration structure among all stakeholders in education and tourism as to combine the available expertise. This was, among others, due to a Sharp awareness and willingness to fill in the gap on the policy level.

The reference to the educational pyramid can be literally found in the Advisory Note from the Flemish Council for Tourism of June 14, 2000 and in the "Policy Document 2000-2004" from the minister responsible for tourism at that time (R. Landuyt),

stating that there could be found a deficiency in the tourism education system in Flanders at the top of the pyramid and that an incentive had to be taken, paralleled with research and "outlined as a partnership between the Flemish university colleges and universities" (Advisory Note, June 14, 2000: 4).

In 2001 consultations among these stakeholders started as to elaborate objectives, organization, program etc. Finally, nine educational institutions for higher education (3) agreed on a structure for a master in tourism together with some representatives of important tourism organizations in Flanders such as the Flemish Board for Tourism ("Toerisme Vlaanderen") and the Flemish Centre for Tourism Policy Studies ("Steunpunt voor Toerisme en Recreatie"). This approach guaranteed a broad basis of support and mobilization of expertise in tourism for the new educational program in tourism. Under these conditions, the (Flemish) Master in Tourism was set-up for the first time during the academic year 2004-2005 and has turned out the first group of graduates in February 2006. It does not seem interesting to go further into details about the 'building process' of the Master in Tourism – although the specific step-by-step procedures with an involvement of all stakeholders contributed and still contribute to its success – but to focus on the 'building' itself: program, collaboration with the tourism industry, quality control, internationalization and international exchange, carrier perspectives.

Quality guidelines of the program

As mentioned above, the focus and the outlines of the program were negotiated by a working group with representatives of all Flemish universities, all university colleges with (professional) programs on tourism and/or hotel management and some experts from other tourism organization. A study group went into further detail and created an educational reference framework for this educational program that was based on three sources of quality guidelines.

First, the general requirements of the TedQual were taken into account which means that the educational structure and program was meant to deal with: increasing complexity of demand, globalization and flexibility, pressures from and on the environment, responding to real needs of the market. The World Tourism Organization's guidelines are especially meant and useful for governments and industry "as it gives them an opportunity to check the capacity of their human capital" (World Tourism Organization, s.d., TedQual Certification System, Vol.1:4).

The research element is particularly stressed by a second source: the 'Dublin' descriptors for master's awards, first proposed in March 2002. These guidelines are not specific for tourism but, on the contrary, specify different general statements of the expected attributes of a master student. These are independent of the precise nature of the educational process; they, in turn, are meant to fill in the requirements for succeeding in the Bologna process which is "to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their [of the EU member states] higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile." (JQI meeting, Dublin, 23/03/2004PC). Particularly for a master, the following elements are underlined:

- knowledge and understanding: a master study provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas often in a research context;

- applying knowledge and understanding: a master study stimulates problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts;

- making judgments: a master study demonstrates the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgments with incomplete data;

- communication: a master study allows communication of conclusions and underpinning knowledge and rationale (restricted scope) to specialist and non-specialist audiences;

- learning skills: a master study is a study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous. (JQI meeting in Dublin, 23/03/2004 – Draft 1.31)

Finally, the third pillar and source of quality guidelines is very much related to the second one since it is a translation of the Dublin descriptors to the Flemish and in particular to the K.U.Leuven educational practice by the notion of Guided independent learning.

Guided independent learning forms a guiding total educational concept. The concept was developed in line with recent scientific insights in the area of learning and teaching in higher education and is the translation of what 'good education' in an international context means. Guided independent learning presupposes that education should be scientifically underpinned and that students' participation

in research is characteristic for university education. The concept Guided independent learning determines which goals are characteristic for university education and what responsibility instructors and students have, concerning education.

Guided independent learning focuses on the close relationship between research and education. That is why Guided independent learning explicitly states that the following goals should be aimed for in each study program:

- to have knowledge of the results of scientific work situated in time and space;

- to have insight in the way in which research results come about;

- to be able to independently give meaning to new information;

- to be able to provide an active contribution

- to the knowledge development processes;

- to be able to come to an underpinned judgement on the basis of critical insight in the underlying processes and in that way take well-reasoned social attitudes.

Focus of the program

The program is stressing an interdisciplinary approach which is translated I) by the background of staff members (economists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, psychologists etc., all specialized in tourism), ii) by the content of courses and iii) by the subjects of seminars and project work and the didactical teams that supervise them. Nevertheless, two main pillars can be found in the composition of the program:

1) economics and management – policy: marketing studies, competition analysis, strategy, organizations and policy (on all levels),

2) social, spatial and cultural disciplines: behavioural patterns, sociology of leisure, mobility patterns, impact on the environment.

In other words, the interdisciplinary approach and insights concentrate on the aspects people' (or the social context of tourism) – 'place' (or the environmental context) – 'product' (or the dynamics of the tourism industry and market) – 'policy' (the context of management, measures and legislation).

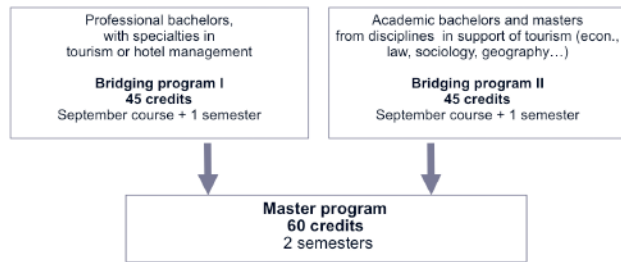


Figure 2: The three components of the Flemish Master in Tourism program.

| MASTER PROGRAM | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Part 1 | |
| (Semester 2- program*) | |
| Management and tourism 15 credits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic significance of tourism • Strategic management in tourism • Marketing in tourism • Legal aspects in tourism • Tourism organizations and policy | Society, place and tourism 15 credits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism Environment (Lectures Urbain Claeys Fund for the Master in Tourism) • Mobility and transport in the perspective of tourism • Culture and tourism • Sociology of leisure |
| Assessment | |
| Part 2 | |
| (Semester 3- program*) | |
| Analysis of integrated cases from a tourism practice 15 credits Option: Firm and management or Option: Public organisations and policy Assessment | Master proof 15credits |

Figure 3: Program of the (Flemish) Master in Tourism. For semester 1 see bridging programs.

The double inflow of professional bachelors and academic bachelors and masters aims at strengthening this multi- and interdisciplinary by combining the different backgrounds and approaches of the students in teamwork.

The educational program tries to offer a suitable balance between knowledge and skills. These skills are not only, and even least, hands-on or technical skills but especially the skills that are related to the development of research capacities that aim at constructing new knowledge and insights. Therefore a variation in teaching methods – (guest) lectures, exercises, seminars, teamwork for problem oriented projects, oral and written reporting, master proof etc. – are embedded in the program with a progressing and growing appeal to independency and creativity.

Finally, the collaboration with the tourism industry is one of the main concerns that is put in practice by several means.

First, the sector participates in the steering committee for the Master in Tourism via representatives of the Flemish Tourism Board (Toerisme Vlaanderen), the Office of the Minister for Tourism, the Flemish Centre for Tourism Policy Studies (Steunpunt voor Toerisme en Recreatie), the Committee for Tourism of the Socio-economic Council of Flanders (Sociale en Economische Raad van Vlaanderen) and the Study Group for Tourism of the Union of Independent Entrepreneurs (Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers). Second, the tourism industry is sponsoring a fund, the Urbain Claeys Funds for the Master in Tourism, as to stimulate the internationalization of the master which implies the exchange of expertise in tourism via guest lectures and research collaboration on the condition that the sector can participate in these activities as a form of return (see section 6).

Finally, the problem-oriented project work (Seminar on integrated cases from the tourism practice and the Master proof) is mostly based on inquiries suggested by the sector and relates to issues that are complex and characterized by a lack of insight or information, e.g. in need of a fieldwork approach. Therefore project work is not only relevant but also responding to the needs of the market. One the one hand, one could wonder why ‘sustainability’ is not mentioned but on the other hand, one could hardly expect an educational program not to take this aspect as a leitmotiv. Nevertheless, things are not that simple (yet) and all lecturers have the implicit task as to stress responsible entrepreneurship and policy.

The structure of the program

The overall framework shows the marks of the double inflow as is illustrated in figure 2.

Since there is no academic bachelor in tourism, students who start in the Flemish master have different backgrounds. This is a deliberate choice since this diversity is seen as part of the multidisciplinary approach and an added value to the program. Nevertheless, this diversity needs management, in other words, one can not put all these students together without fostering a common denominator. Therefore, two bridging programs are elaborated, one for professional bachelors (specialty of tourism or hotel management) and one for academic bachelors and masters. The former know the basics of tourism but are not very acquainted with an academic or research based approach nor with the (more theoretical) principles of some supportive disciplines for tourism, which is what their bridging program stresses; the latter got a research based training and have a degree in one of the supportive disciplines for tourism without knowing much about tourism sensu stricto, which is the focus of their bridging program. These bridging programs take a summer school and one full semester after which, a common basis of knowledge, communication, understanding and approach should be established.

This common basis allows them to enter the master program that continues the education in tourism on a more specialized level and expecting from the students an increasing independency and creativity. This is reflected, again, in the master’s program (Figure 3).

The program aims at offering these specialized courses in tourism from an economic angle on the one hand and from a place and society perspective on the other hand (see section 3). In part 1, the stress is still largely on contents although exercises, papers and book reviews are part of the lecturing practice; in part 2 the emphasis shifts further to the ability of conducting independently a study in the field of tourism management, tourism market analysis, tourism policy, sustainable social and spatial development etc., linked with independent learning.

The Seminar about integrated cases in tourism practice generates the first corner stone of this independent learning; it fits a ¼ work load of a full academic year.

For this seminar, students choose a case topic. Topics for the project are announced in advance via the internet. The list of topics changes every year; most if not all of the topics

are suggested by the tourism industry. Each topic implies a research question in tourism from an economic or company perspective, from a policy or institutional perspective or both that is elaborated by working all the way through a research set-up, a short literature review and an empirical analysis with desktop research and fieldwork. Since this seminar aims also at stimulating attitudes such as collaboration with peers, giving feed back or/and taking it into account, presenting and defending one's viewpoint or approach etc. it is organized as a project teamwork that is supervised by didactical teams of minimum three lecturers from different disciplinary backgrounds.

As to give some idea about the subjects dealt with, the topics of the academic year 2007-2008 are enumerated here:

- Sustainable tourism and media (by Toerisme Vlaanderen or the Flemish Tourism Board)
- Narratology and the role of intermediaries (by the Flemish Centre for Tourism Policy Studies)
- Accessibility of tourism infrastructure (by Horeca Partners which is the Flemish Association of Hotels, Restaurants, cafés)
- Tourism and the use of public transportation (by De Lijn which is the Flemish Bus & Tram Company)
- Tourism policy on the commune level (by VVSG or the Flemish Municipalities Association)
- Perception of the tourist of Brussels South Charleroi Airport: an impact study (by the Charleroi Airport Authority of BSCA)
- 'Hotel only' or what about the traditional package formula (suggested by Thomas Cook)

The collaboration with the industry is subtle in a sense that the industry can suggest the subject and enumerate their expectation as well as delegate an observer in the didactical team but there exists in no way an obligation as to follow a certain research trajectory or obtain a certain result. The research set-up is completely the students' work and purely explorative.

Beyond contacts between the didactical team and the students within the group, plenary sessions offer opportunities to present the project in different stages to peers and other staff members, to get into discussion and to defend the project. At the same time, one gets informed about the other projects (their content, methodology, timing, problems and opportunities).

This seminar is an excellent basis for international student exchange. Foreign students from other tourism educational programs and institutes can be included in whatever group (topic) they choose. In such a case, the activities within the group are conducted in English instead of in Dutch. This possibility of shift in language and composition of the group is seen as an added value to the learning process and training.

The second corner stone as to put the principle of Guided independent learning in practice is the master proof. The number of credits (15 ECTS according to the European credit system) is quite low compared to other educational programs in tourism as well as in other disciplines. Nevertheless this corresponds with ¼ work load of an academic year.

The student can:

- choose a master proof subject from a list or
- indicate a particular subfield (strategic management, tourism-policy, heritage and cultural tourism, eco-tourism, marketing & branding, transports, etc.) and/or a particular spatial research area (region of Flanders, country of Belgium, European Union); in that case, a tutor will formulate some suggestions or- suggest a personal title that can be accepted if the project corresponds to the requirements of a personal and creative research on an academic level (see section 2). All these options open possibilities for fieldwork on a regional, national or international level. When related to subjects about sustainable tourism in developing countries, scholarships from the Interfaculty Council for Collaboration on Development (IRO) can be obtained.

The master thesis is elaborated on an individual basis, coached by one supervisor (in some cases two, when interdisciplinary or complementary expertise is considered an added value). The tutor comments on the structure and content of the thesis, reviews texts and helps the student with practical issues. The evaluation is based on a report of about 80 to 100 pages and a presentation. This part of the program is also open to foreign students.

Of course, the internationalization of the program is stimulated by far more than offering only international subjects. The Master in Tourism participates also in the EU Erasmus/Socrates program that allows sending Flemish students abroad for a semester as to substitute the last semester (part 2 of the master program) by courses at a partner university. Choosing for exchange means that the

student accepts to work on a topic related to tourism in the region of the partner university. For a student from a partner university coming to Leuven goes the same. Fully in line with the EU requirements, no supplementary registration fees are asked and exchange students enjoy the same facilities as their local peers.

The Master in Tourism tries to export this model to partner universities outside the EU. This is not an easy task since non-EU countries are not familiar with this kind of international collaboration – that may be extended even to staff exchange – but the advantages are obvious when the exchange occurs on the basis of equal numbers and when there is a clear understanding between partner universities about requested level and about supervision and coaching of students for e.g. their master proof (see also section 6 about internationalization). Exchange is established with some partner universities in North and South America. Contacts in Africa and Asia make international exchange ‘works in progress’.

Quality control

The quality control on goals or objectives, program, staff, learning environment, (international) standards, assessments etc. are essential for the future of any educational program. In the collaboration agreement among the nine organizing educational institutions, it has been stipulated that the quality control should be executed according to the system of the coordinating institution. Since the K.U.Leuven is an officially accredited and financed institution for higher education – the same goes for all the other collaborating partner institutions – the national directorates are applicable as well as the international, since K.U.Leuven was one of the founding institutions of the Bologna Agreements.

Of course, the assurance of quality requires the cooperation of everyone who is involved in education. At the K.U.Leuven this cooperation takes shape in Teaching Commissions (TC). Every study program has someone responsible for the TC, lead by a program director and consisting of professors, assistants and students. Their duty is to guard the curriculum and permanently oversee the quality of the education. Concretely this means that the TC is responsible for the development of a curriculum that is coherent in content and organisation, goes beyond the specific domain and gives the necessary attention to value development. It also fulfils a key role in initiatives that are directed to educational innovation. We do not go further into that since this is neither new nor specific for the master in

tourism. Worthwhile mentioning is the role of the Steering Committee in the quality control. It is not surprising that this committee consists of representatives of all educational institutions that collaborate as partners in the Master in Tourism; beyond these, representatives of the tourism industry and tourism policy are taking part as well (see section 3). Some critics do not consider this a positive aspect referring to the principle that industry normally focuses on (technical) skills and immediate usability (know-how), classifying the know-why and the academic approach often as too academic and theoretical. The experience in this case learns that the involvement of the industry creates a broader basis of support and understanding and a better tie-up between education and labour market demands. This facilitates also collaboration in other ways (see next section) while interference in educational matters can be avoided by the partition of votes if necessary. Nevertheless, one prefers to avoid voting and to reach a consensus.

Another pillar concerns the evaluation of the whole study program on a regular base. This consists of a periodically internal and external curriculum evaluation which form the hinge point between the internal quality assurance on the one hand and the external quality assurance on the other hand. It offers the TC, and all the people involved, an opportunity to thoroughly look at their own programme and the material that is needed to set up a self evaluation report. This report is in preparation for a ‘visitation’ which means that an external commission of experts who are not involved in the program and therefore neutral and open-minded. Since about all tourism expertise in Flanders is involved in the program, this system implies an evaluation from experts (academic and from the sector) from outside the Flemish educational system (especially from Wallonia or the French speaking part of Belgium and from the Netherlands since knowledge of the Dutch language is imperative). This super-regional and international involvement has proven to be very adequate and stimulating (4). This visitation commission sets down its finding in a visitation report. One year after the publication of the visitation report the TC informs the academic authorities about the way in which the follow-up of the curriculum evaluation and visitation will be organized and implemented.

Internationalisation

We mentioned already several elements that stand for the internationalisation of the Flemish Master in Tourism (see section 4) and that count as a beginning since the master program is still young and its international collaboration in progress.



Figure 4: The topics of course 'Tourism Environment' 2006-2007, sponsored by the Urbain Claeys Fund for the Master in Tourism.

The collaboration with the tourism industry also covered internationalisation. More than thirty (policy) organizations in tourism (such as tourism departments of cities and regions, sector associations) and private companies in tourism (tour operators, carriers, insurance, etc.) contributed to a fund (5) which principle goal and mission is to stimulate the internationalisation of the master program. A special course was developed (see Tourism Environment, Figure 3) with a concept that not only serves the internationalisation of the program but guarantees a return to the sponsors and to the industry as a whole.

It was chosen to organize a series of mini-colloquia (during evenings as to allow professionals from the tourism industry to be present) with a foreign academic expert and a foreign expert from 'the field', dealing with one specific topic. For the students, these guest lectures are accompanied by an introduction ('setting the scene'), a final discussion with conclusions and an assessment consisting of a paper about one of the topics dealt with. Even professionals can obtain credits (via a so-called credit contract) when they get up the courage for an assessment. Figure 4 gives an idea of the approach and topics in the academic year 2006-2007.

Some finale remarks

The Flemish master in Tourism is growing towards its final aims as to offer an educational framework for executives at middle and higher levels in companies and policy organizations in the tourism sector, preparing them for functions related to management, market research, policy or research with focus on analysis of trends, causes and consequences of recent trends and development of (sustainable) strategies.

A first, preliminary investigation of the labour market and the experience of graduates on this market show some elements that are going beyond the educational program:

- "thinking ahead" or contributing to the knowledge (knowing-why) about tourism is still considered 'too academic' by some actors in the sector; while others expect a creativity as if the graduates have an answer to all sustainability problems that have developed over the years; graduates often complain that they have to start at the bottom of the pyramid; they consider the aim of the program "educating executives at middle and higher levels" and lack the confidence that they will move up (fast); some stakeholders in the industry may not be aware yet that these graduates have other capacities and therefore other expectancies. It is important that they highlight other (further) carrier

perspectives. This is especially important since other sectors –paying higher wages – have more experience with this kind of educational level and are quicker in recruiting these graduates. More important than wages may be the perspective that the employer is willing to deal with the 'people-place-product-policy' entity in a sustainable way.

Until now, the (Flemish) Master in Tourism seems to fulfil its vocation and all stakeholders are motivated to continue to do so in the future: contributing to the professionalisation of the tourism sector by training students as to take into account the complexity of tourism and tourism related issues and problems in a spirit of sustainability.

Notes

(1) The following advanced studies in tourism can be mentioned: at the University of Ghent (1991-1993), at the University of Hasselt (former LUC, from 1990-1996) and at the University of Antwerp (UAMS, in collaboration with LUC en K.U.Leuven from 2001- 2004).

(2) Catholic University of Leuven (K.U.Leuven) with the function of co-ordinating institution, University of Ghent (UGent), University of Brussels (VUB), Katholieke Hogeschool Mechelen, Katholieke Hogeschool Brugge, Erasmushogeschool Brussel, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen, Xios Hogeschool Limburg, Plantijnhogeschool Provincie Antwerpen.

(3) It has been applied to the master In Tourism since K.U.Leuven is responsible for the general co-ordination and quality control of the Master in Tourism.

(4) The Master of Tourism has been 'visited' in May 2007. The visitation commission consisted of 2 academic experts from the Dutch universities of Wageningen en Utrecht, an academic expert from the Free University of Brussels (ULB), an expert from the sector and a student, studying tourism at a Dutch university.

(5) Urbain Claeys Fund for the Master in Tourism

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