

Feature Article

Service-learning tourism in Hong Kong

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1. Introduction

The tourism industry along with the financial services, the professional and producer services as well as the trading and logistics are dubbed as the four pillars of the economy of Hong Kong. In 2018, the tourism industry in Hong Kong accounted for about US\$ 16.3 billion and employed about 257 thousand people, which were equal to about 4.5 % of the gross domestic product (GDP) and about 6.6 % of the total employment, respectively.

After the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the total number of visitor arrivals in 2019 significantly decreased by 14.2 % as compared with that in 2018. Misfortunes never come singly, the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused severe challenges to everyone and every economy.^(1,2) In 2022, because of the COVID-19, the total number of visitor arrivals was only 605 thousand, which was equivalent to a drastically drop of 98.9 % as compared with 56 million in 2019.⁽³⁾ As a labour-intensive industry in Hong Kong, the boom and bust cycles of tourism have seriously affected the local labour market in recent years. Namely, the unemployment rate increased from 2.82 % in 2018 to 5.32 % in 2021, which further hurt the economy of Hong Kong.

With the commercialization of COVID-19 vaccines, the number of visitor arrivals in Hong Kong started to rebound from 7 thousand in Jan 2022 to 499 thousand in Jan 2023, representing a growth of 71 times.⁽⁴⁾ It is anticipated that the rate of growth will accelerate, and the number of visitor arrivals will return to 100 % of that before the pandemic in 2024.

Hong Kong's later reopening from stringent COVID-19 restrictions than Singapore, Japan, Korea and other major cities makes its outbound travel rebounding faster than its inbound travel. With the full reopening of Hong Kong's border with Mainland China, and the unconditional lifting of vaccine requirements for all visitors, the city aims to reclaim its crown as the tourism hub in Asia. Meanwhile, Hong Kong Government is giving away 500 thousand free air tickets, worth around US\$ 255 million in total, in 2023, hopefully reviving its tourism industry to the pre-pandemic level by 2024.⁽⁵⁾ Sit back, relax and

do something! It is high time to identify, develop and promote a new form of tourism for Hong Kong.

In 2017, Hong Kong Tourism Commission devised the Tourism Development Blueprint depicting strategic development plans for Hong Kong's tourism industry. It not only described a wide variety of short-term, medium-term and long-term tourism initiatives, but also identified four development strategies as summarized below:⁽⁶⁾

- Strategy 1:
To develop a diversified portfolio of visitor source markets for Hong Kong, with a focus on attracting high value-added overnight visitors.
- Strategy 2:
To nurture and develop tourism products and initiatives with local and international characteristics, including cultural tourism, heritage tourism, green tourism and creative tourism; and to consolidate and enhance Hong Kong's status as a travel destination for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism, regional cruise hub, and Events Capital of Asia.
- Strategy 3:
To develop smart tourism.
- Strategy 4:
To upgrade the service quality of tourism industry and encourage the trade in adopting good trade practices.

Service-learning is a powerful teaching pedagogy to enhance educational experience for secondary school and tertiary college students. Essentially, it combines the learning goals and the community service in such a way that it can simultaneously benefit both the students and the community. In recent years, both secondary schools and tertiary colleges in Hong Kong have actively incorporated this teaching pedagogy into their curricula so that students can learn how to reflect on their work experiences and how to develop their critical thinking skills.

Hong Kong is a well-developed metropolitan city, which has a human development index (HDI) of 0.952 in 2021, ranking

the fourth in the world.⁽⁷⁾ Since the HDI is a summative assessment of three key factors: long & healthy life, knowledge, and decent standard of living, it implies that Hong Kong people desire a high quality of education and a decent quality of life. As service-learning is a well-accepted pedagogy to improve the quality of education while traveling is an effective way to improve the quality of life, their organic integration should be explored for Hong Kong tourism industry.

The main objective of this article is to identify and discuss the service-learning tourism in Hong Kong. In Section 2, the service-learning tourism will be coined with clear definition. In Section 3, among the secondary and tertiary education sectors in Hong Kong, the key features of service-learning tourism will be described. Some case studies in Hong Kong will be discussed in Section 4. Moreover, the pros and cons of service-learning tourism will be elaborated in Section 5. Finally, in Section 6, a conclusion on the service-learning tourism in Hong Kong will be drawn.

2. Definition of service-learning tourism

Service-learning is generally defined as a type of experiential education in which learning is resulted from action and reflection so that students can provide meaningful service for the community and achieve better understanding for themselves.^(8, 9) In simple words, service-learning enables students to learn through tackling real-life problems in their community. At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, service-learning is also defined as an experiential learning pedagogy incorporating community service into learning and reflection, hence achieving the desired learning outcomes as depicted in Figure 1.^(10, 11) Its three main components are briefly described below:

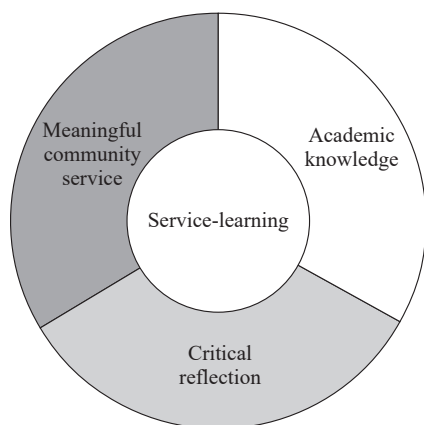


Figure 1: Key components of service-learning

- Academic knowledge: Students can gain academic knowledge from the service experience and apply it to community service.
- Critical reflection: Instructors can provide students opportunities for critical reflection on academic content and civic engagement.
- Meaningful community service: Community partners in-

volving both the school/college and the community can collaborate to provide meaningful community service which addresses realistic needs.

Consequently, service-learning can enhance students’ civic responsibility and sense of empathy, which will ultimately be beneficial to society.

Volunteer tourism, dubbed voluntourism or volunterrism, is an emerging type of niche tourism in which tourists participate in voluntary work, typically for a charity, in a destination that is predominantly considered underdeveloped or developing. Relevant volunteering activities are generally temporary attempts to address extreme poverty, inadequate education and healthcare facilities, and brutal environmental concerns.^(12, 13) There are many organisations, which offer a range of different volunteer tourism projects generally located in least developed countries such as Ethiopia, Cambodia and Nepal as well as some developing countries such as Fiji, Mongolia and Thailand.

“Traveling ten thousand miles, reading ten thousand books.” This is what Chinese scholar-painter Dong Qichang (1555-1636) of the Ming dynasty summing up that both are equally important and necessary for painting.⁽¹⁴⁾ Over the years, it has become a Chinese proverb which says, “Traveling ten thousand miles is better than reading ten thousand books,” indicating that Chinese has a long history on learning through traveling, and is paying more and more attention on educational traveling.

In 2003, Ritchie et al. defined educational tourism as “tourist activity undertaken by those who are undertaking an overnight vacation and those who are undertaking an excursion for whom education and learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip. This can include general educational tourism and adult study tours, international and domestic university and school students’ travel, including language schools, school excursions and exchange programmes. Educational tourism can be independently or formally organized and can be undertaken in a variety of natural or human-made settings.”⁽¹⁵⁾ It means that education may be the primary reason for tourism, but may also be a secondary motive for tourism. Moreover, education may not be the reason or motive for traveling, but it may be a consequence of travel.^(16, 17)

As depicted in Figure 2, the aforementioned service-learning, volunteer tourism and educational tourism can be interlinked by three sectors: education, service and tourism. Namely, the intersection between the education and service sectors is the service-learning, the intersection between the service and tourism sectors is the volunteer tourism, and the intersection between the education and tourism sectors is the educational tourism. Consequently, the intersection among all three sectors is the service-learning tourism.

The strategic development of service-learning tourism aligns with the aforementioned Strategy 2 in such a way that it can incorporate service-learning tourism products with international

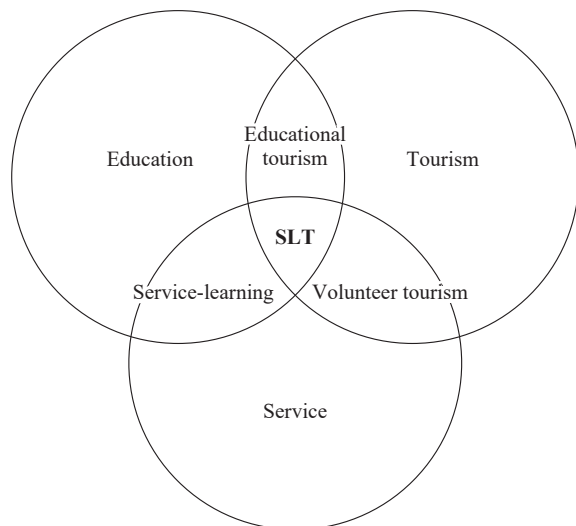


Figure 2: Structure of service-learning tourism (SLT)

characteristics, and can enhance the international status of Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the aforementioned Strategy 4 can be realized by improving the service quality of tourism industry when providing meaningful community service.

3. Features of service-learning tourism in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is the world city of Asia with the GDP per capita equal to 352 % of the world's average, leading to one of the world's wealthiest cities. The government expenditure on education in the 2022-23 estimates is US\$ 14.3 billion, which is equivalent to 13.8 % of the total estimated government expenditure. Because of the population of 7.5 million, there are 510 secondary schools in the 2022-23 school year. Among them, there are 54 international schools and 7 private independent schools (PISs), offering non-local curricula. In particular, most of these international schools and PISs are offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which enables students to transfer from one school in one country to another school in another country with fewer academic problems.

Service-learning has been identified as one of the five essential learning experiences by the Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong.⁽¹⁸⁾ It is also advocated as a key element to promote moral and civic education, hence providing invaluable opportunities for students to develop civic responsibility and sense of empathy. Thus, over 90 % secondary schools in Hong Kong organize various community service activities for their students to engage in service-learning. Increasingly, service-learning is highly championed by the IB curriculum, and formally recognized as the service requirement that every student has to complete as part of the IB curriculum.⁽¹⁹⁾

In 2021, there were around 326 thousand secondary school students in Hong Kong. While there are about 90 % secondary schools offering service-learning, if there are 30 % of their students taking outbound travel with an average annual expense of US\$ 2000 for service-learning, the resulting service-learning tourism cost will be about US\$ 176 million. This can

be considered as an additional outbound tourism market, on top of the initial estimates of US\$ 483 million in 2022 and US\$ 1088 million by 2032.⁽²⁰⁾

In Hong Kong, there are 22 tertiary institutions with degree awarding powers, and 22 post-secondary institutions offering various sub-degree programmes. Among them, there are 11 tertiary institutions holding the university status: The University of Hong Kong (HKU), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), Lingnan University (LU), Hong Kong Shue Yan University (HKSJU), City University of Hong Kong (CityU), Hong Kong Metropolitan University (HKMU), The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK), and The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (HSUHK).⁽²¹⁾ As summarized in Table 1, all universities in Hong Kong have various service-learning activities. Some of them are managed under the university-level or college-level units, while some are absorbed into their platforms, programmes or courses. For instance, two oldest universities in Hong Kong with high rankings of internationalization, namely HKU and PolyU, have their individual units, namely the Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) and the Service-Learning and Leadership Office (SLLO), to coordinate the service-learning activities, respectively.

Table 1: Service-learning in universities in Hong Kong

Name	Foundation year ⁽²²⁾	Most international rank ⁽²³⁾	Service-learning
HKU	1911	1	Yes
PolyU	1937	6	Yes
HKBU	1956	–	Yes
CUHK	1963	17	Yes
LU	1967	–	Yes
HKSJU	1971	–	Yes
CityU	1984	4	Yes
HKMU	1989	–	Yes
HKUST	1991	5	Yes
EdUHK	1994	–	Yes
HSUHK	2010	–	Yes

In 2021, there were 93 thousand full-time undergraduate students in Hong Kong. Differing from secondary school students, undergraduate students are relatively busier in their academic curricula such as conducting training and internship during the summer holidays. Meanwhile, they prefer more meaningful overseas service-learning activities such as applying their professional knowledge to help the needy in underdeveloped countries. If there are 30 % of them taking outbound travel with an average expense of US\$ 2000 for service-learning, the resulting tourism cost will be about US\$ 56 million. This will be another additional outbound tourism market, on top of the aforementioned outbound tourism market of US\$ 176 million

for secondary school students.

4. Case studies of service-learning tourism in Hong Kong

The English Schools Foundation (ESF) is the largest English-medium international school organization, which consists of 22 schools providing kindergarten, primary and secondary education. Among 7 secondary schools, Island School was founded in 1967 as the first one of the ESF organization. The school is an IB world school offering IB programmes to their students. Apart from taking 6 courses from 6 areas: Studies in Language and Literature, Language Acquisition, Individuals and Societies, Sciences, Mathematics, and Arts as well as the Theory of Knowledge and the Extended Essay, IB students need to take the co-curricular Creativity, Activity and Service (CAS). In order to fulfil the CAS requirement, students need to provide documented evidence of participating in various experiences and at least a month-long project with a good balance of creativity, activity and service. These should involve measurable outcomes, personal challenge, and thoughtful planning as well as critical reflection on learning outcomes.⁽²⁴⁾ In particular, the service activity should be beneficial to the community while providing a learning experience to students.

In Island School, Quest Week is not only an important component of the school curriculum, but also a key aspect of school life. It involves a diverse range of experiential learning opportunities for all students. In the week, there are no classroom activities so that students can participate in local or overseas trips to further their learning through expanding their view of themselves and the world around them. In particular, this Quest Week plays a key role to facilitate students in service-learning. Examples of Quest Week activities are taking care of stray dogs in Hong Kong, teaching in rural areas in China and establishing facilities in Mongolia. These activities are reviewed and reflected in accordance with the learning outcomes for CAS. Table 2 summarizes the overseas trips for Quest Week

Table 2: Overseas trips in ESF Island School in Hong Kong ⁽²⁵⁾

Trip	Average cost	Days
Bali Service & Community Insight	US\$ 2509	7
Borneo Wildlife Conservation	US\$ 2896	7
Jungle Conservation in Malaysia	US\$ 1771	7
Philippines Scuba Diving & Service	US\$ 1815	6
Surf & Service in the Philippines	US\$ 1530	6
Taiwan - Spirited Away	US\$ 1769	6
Service in Orchha - A Journey to the Heart of India	US\$ 2218	8
Northern Vietnam Service & Adventure	US\$ 2650	8
Vietnam Service & Community Insight	US\$ 2009	7
Thailand Marine Conservation	US\$ 2438	7
Maekok River Village, Thailand	US\$ 1518	7
Community Centre Service in Chiang Mai	US\$ 1757	7
South Thailand - Dolphin Bay Experience	US\$ 1592	7

in Island School in 2023. It can be observed that these trips involve various service activities in underdeveloped areas where students can conduct their service-learning in 6-8 days. The corresponding tourism average cost is US\$ 1518-2896, which agrees with the aforementioned assumption of US\$ 2000.

One of the most successful and meaningful service-learning activities developed by Island School is the Baiwan Charity, which was established in 1998 and last for over 20 years.⁽²⁶⁾ Baiwan is a rural area located in Qingyuan, China where young adults leave the area to work in cities while teachers prefer to work at schools in cities. Consequently, many children in Baiwan are looked after by their grandparents, and cannot receive adequate education—not to mention the possibility of receiving quality education. The Baiwan Charity help arrange Island School students to teach English for Baiwan children during the Quest Week in November each year. These students have the responsibility to prepare and conduct their teaching seriously. For instance, they need to attend planning sessions and conduct teaching practices before the visit, and are encouraged to devise appealing ways to make the children learn English more effective and enjoyable. Figure 3 shows a teaching lesson in an underequipped classroom in a Baiwan trip in 2018. Although Island School students aim to teach the Baiwan children as community service, they are benefited by improving their sense of community, social skills and self-esteem—truly reflecting a well-known ancient Chinese proverb “Teaching others teaches yourself.”

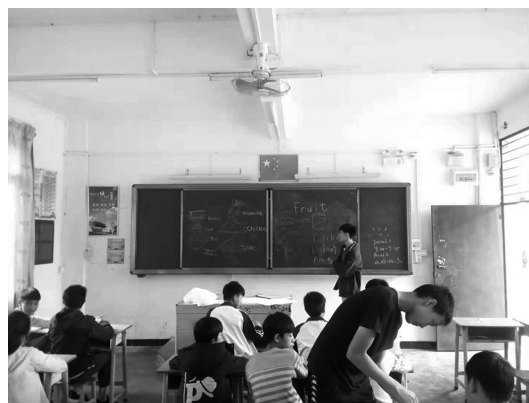


Figure 3: Service-learning trip in Baiwan, China

Mongolia is one of the largest landlocked countries in the world, which is located in Northeast Asia bordering Russia and China. It is also one of the least densely populated countries in the world, where the capital Ulaanbaatar contains almost half of the total population. Island School organized the Mongolia, Service and Exploration on the Steppe during the Quest Week in November 2019. Students could learn fascinating history of Genghis Khan, explore astonishing Buddhist monasteries, appreciate the world’s finest cashmere, and experience one of the Mongolian traditional “three manly sports”—archery, which starts ahead of the other sports during the Naadam Festival.⁽²⁷⁾ Figure 4 shows a Mongolian archery lesson in a Mongolia trip



Figure 4: Service-learning trip in Mongolia

in 2019. Apart from learning and exploration, Island School students served to help renovate a school in Ulaanbaatar, involving wall painting, wall retiling, window repair and floor restoration. They would work as a team to face various challenges and enjoy invaluable satisfaction.

5. Pros and cons of service-learning tourism

From the perspective of education, service-learning is definitely advantageous and promising, which can provide invaluable opportunities for students to learn how to reflect on their experiences as well as to develop their critical-thinking skills, civic responsibility and sense of empathy. They are encouraged to think outside the box and thus handle the issues or solve the problems that cannot be neatly defined. Making use of heterogeneous grouping, service-learning can enable students from a variety of strengths, weaknesses and cultures to work as a team on real-world problems that can promote equity and foster cultural diversity.

From the perspective of tourism, service-learning tourism is a new kind of business—niche tourism.⁽²⁸⁾ Governments of many countries and areas including Hong Kong are developing various strategic planning initiatives around niche tourism in order to strengthen their tourism competitiveness. As aforementioned, tourism is a labour-intensive industry, the boom and bust cycles of tourism will significantly affect the local labour market and hence the unemployment rate. Service-learning tourism can be considered as an additional sizable tourism market, which not only significantly increase the GDP, but also effectively reduce the unemployment rate.

From the perspective of service, students may cause more harm than good for the community that they provide service in spite of good intentions.^(29, 30) Themes of neocolonialism, namely the indirect control of less-developed countries by developed countries, may unintentionally occur and cause many negative impacts. For instance, buildings and roads constructed by students may become burdens on the community which cannot afford repair or maintenance, condescending or demeaning behaviour of few students may offend the needy that they help, and community service if not well planned may take

away local jobs, impair local initiatives and create unnecessary dependency on foreign help.

Therefore, taking account of all three sectors (education, tourism and service) constituting the service-learning tourism, the instructors and students should be well prepared and trained for providing meaningful community service while the community partners and tourism officers should well plan and organize the service-learning and tourism activities in order to create successful and sustainable service-learning tourism.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the service-learning tourism has been coined, which is the intersection among three sectors: education, tourism and service, or the intersection among three subsectors: educational tourism, service-learning and volunteer tourism. The service-learning tourism for the secondary and tertiary education sectors in Hong Kong are analysed with some case studies, revealing that it can create an additional sizable tourism market. Moreover, both the pros and cons of service-learning tourism are discussed from different perspectives, which indicates that the instructors and students should be well prepared and trained while the community partners and tourism officers should well plan and organize the activities in order to successfully achieve sustainable service-learning tourism.

Notes

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