

Public policy and business development in tourism, with particular reference to small firms

Submitted by **Rhodri Wyn Thomas** to the University of Exeter for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Publication in Management Studies, August 2015.

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Abstract

The integrative chapter of this thesis explains how the nominated papers, when combined, meet the University of Exeter's assessment criteria for the award of PhD by Publication. It argues that a coherent contribution to knowledge emerges from the three strands of research discussed, namely: (i) examinations of research and innovation policy, notably via the work of tourism academics and the knowledge exchange practices of practitioners; (ii) investigations into the practices of small businesses in tourism, particularly in relation to their articulation with public policy at a local level; (iii) an assessment of the professionalization of tourism, via the conceptual lens of corporate professionalization. Collectively, these publications explain important aspects of business, notably small business, dynamics in tourism; my contribution has been to provide new conceptualisations of tourism organisations and explanations for their behaviour that advance existing academic accounts. The theoretical contributions made offer public policy-makers greater scope for developing interventions to more effectively influence business behaviour than at present. The chapter also reviews, briefly, the range of methods of enquiry used in my research and my philosophical position in relation to knowledge construction. Finally, the limitations of my work and my current research agenda are discussed.

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Chapter 1

THE NOMINATED PUBLICATIONS

The publications listed below, when combined with the integrative chapter (Chapter 2), represent my claim to meeting the criteria for the award of PhD by Publication. Where papers have been produced in collaboration with others, my percentage contribution has been discussed with co-authors and identified below. The University of Exeter does not require verification beyond my declaration. However, in all but two cases, I have been able to obtain signed statements confirming my percentage contribution to each paper and these are provided in an appendix, alongside qualitative information about my role in each project. For one of those two cases, my contribution is confirmed by one of the co-authors. I was not able to trace my co-author for the other. Individual papers are reproduced in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis.

Publication*	My percentage contribution
Innovation, knowledge exchange and research policy	
Thomas, R. and Wood, E. (2015). The absorptive capacity of tourism organisations. Annals of Tourism Research , 54, 84-99.	70
Thomas, R. and Wood, E. (2014). Innovation in tourism: Re-conceptualising and measuring the absorptive capacity of the hotel sector. Tourism Management , 45, 39-48.	65
Thomas, R. (2012). Business elites, universities and knowledge transfer in tourism. Tourism Management , 33(3), 553-561.	100
Thomas, R. (2011). Academics as policy-makers: (Not) researching tourism and events policy from the inside. Current Issues in Tourism , 14(6), 493-506.	100
Thomas, R. (2013). Research and scholarship with impact: A British perspective. Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes , 5(3), 277-282.	100
Thomas, R. and Harris, V. (2001). Exploring connections between teaching and research in hospitality management. International Journal of Hospitality Management , 20(3), 245-257.	75
Small tourism firms and public policy	
Thomas, R., Shaw, G. and Page, S. (2011). Understanding small firms in tourism: A perspective on research trends and challenges. Tourism Management , 32 (5), 963-976.	65
Thomas, R. (2015). Small firms and sustainable tourism policy: Exploring moral framing. In Gössling, S., Hall, C.M. and Scott, D (Eds.) The Routledge handbook of tourism and sustainability . London: Routledge, 397-406.	100
Thomas, R. (2007). Tourism partnerships and small firms:	100

power, participation and partition. International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation , 8(1), 37 – 44.	
Thomas, R. and Thomas, H. (2006). Micro-politics and micro-firms: a case study of tourism policy formation and change. Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development , 13 (1), 100 - 114.	75
Thomas, R. and Thomas, H. (2005). Understanding tourism policy-making in urban areas, with particular reference to small firms. Tourism Geographies , 7(2),121-137.	65
Thomas, R. and Hind, D. (2007). The self-catering accommodation sector in Yorkshire, England. International Journal of Hospitality Management . 26 (2), 328-335.	75
Thomas, R. and Long, J. (2001). Tourism and economic regeneration: the role of skills development. International Journal of Tourism Research , 3(3), 229-240.	65
The corporate professionalization of tourism	
Thomas, R. and Thomas, H. (2014). 'Hollow from the start?' Professional associations and the professionalization of tourism in the UK. The Service Industries Journal , 34(1), 38 – 55.	70
Thomas, R. and Thomas, H. (2013). What are the prospects for professionalizing events management in the UK? Tourism Management Perspectives , 6, 8-14.	70

* Papers are listed thematically, to reflect the discussion in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

THE INTEGRATIVE CHAPTER: Public policy and business development in tourism, with particular reference to small firms

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains how the nominated papers meet the University of Exeter's assessment criteria for the award of PhD by Publication. As is probably common with this kind of submission, the papers were not planned as a programme of research, still less as a collection that might one day be submitted for an award. Had they been, the connections between my outputs may well have been much more obvious. However, I suspect that greater forward planning and isolated work would also have prevented me from taking up opportunities to research topics (and produce papers) that, I will argue, enhance my contribution. As the title of the thesis suggests, all of the projects discussed are concerned with illuminating aspects of business behaviour with the intention of strengthening the effectiveness of public policy interventions relating to tourism.

The publications selected are drawn from a wider body of work that reflect a long-standing interest in small firms and tourism policy (see, for example, Thomas, 1992; 1994; 1995; 1998; 2000). Some of these outputs will be referred to where they help explain the wider context of the specific claims I will be making in this thesis. I have excluded other publications for one of several possible reasons: (i) I played a minority role in the research or the work was shared evenly (e.g. Thomas and Wood, 2003; Wood and Thomas, 2006; 2008; Wood, Robinson and Thomas, 2006; Li, Blake and Thomas, 2013), (ii) the paper reported doctoral research that I had supervised and helped prepare for publication (e.g. Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003; Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson, 2006; 2012; Sampaio, Thomas and Font, 2012a; 2012b; Fu, Long and Thomas, 2014; 2015; Koens and Thomas, 2015); (iii) the paper was the product of a consultancy project and did not necessarily fit the argument I will develop in this chapter (e.g. Thomas and Long, 2000; Eaglen, Lashley and

Thomas, 2000a; 2000b; Thomas, Parsons, Berry, Rowe and Walsh, 2007); (iv) the publication is an extended editorial (e.g. Thomas, 2004; Thomas and Bowdin, 2012; Thomas, Mulligan and Li, 2013), or (VI) I was 'translating' research for a practitioner audience (e.g. Thomas, 2003; 2005; 2012a; 2013).

In disciplinary terms, the submitted papers reflect a personal move away from what I see as the constraints of economics - my initial training - towards interdisciplinary study. This is not unusual for academics who work within tourism departments. Although the status and orientation of the field remains the subject of some debate (cf. Leiper, 1981; Tribe, 1997; 2000 and more recently Ateljevic, Morgan and Pritchard, 2012), tourism studies is now characterised and, I would argue enriched by, its relatively long-standing shift towards inter- and multi-disciplinarity (Darbellay and Stock, 2012; Echtner and Jamal, 1997; Weiler, Moyle and McLennan, 2012). Thus, my papers draw on concepts and theories from business and management studies, sociology, economic geography and public policy – notably planning – studies, as well as those in tourism. Acquiring the requisite disciplinary knowledge has involved extensive reading but I have also benefited from working collaboratively with colleagues who share at least some of my interests. Clearly, for a submission such as this, it is essential not to gain credit for their expertise. To guard against this, I state explicitly that I took a leading intellectual role and was responsible for most or all of the data gathering and analysis and most of the writing for each of the papers submitted. I have documented my percentage contribution in Chapter 1 and provided agreed qualitative accounts via the signed statements of co-authors (which are reproduced in an appendix).

Following an outline of my philosophical position in relation to knowledge creation and a commentary on the range of research methods that I have used in my research, the main discussion will be organised into three thematic sections. The first will review my recent work on knowledge exchange and innovation. Much of this was funded by two Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grants (grant references RES-186-27-0015 and RES-189-25-0205). This will be followed by consideration of investigations into the dynamics of small businesses in tourism, particularly in relation to their articulation with public policy at a local level. Studies that contribute to an understanding of

(corporate) professionalization of tourism represent the third theme. Much of this was made possible by utilising my strong relationship with organisations such as the Institute of Travel and Tourism (ITT), the UK's largest tourism professional association. In order to demonstrate the academic standing of my nominated publications, I will periodically draw upon commonly used metrics such as citations (according to Google Scholar as at July, 2015, my work has been cited 1352 times by fellow academics) or other indicators of academic recognition, as well as explaining how my work has advanced knowledge. A concluding section will draw together the strands of my argument to emphasise the coherence of the collected works.

Figure 1 provides the policy context within which my contribution might more easily be understood. It is designed to show that there are several major policy domains concerned with influencing the behaviour of tourism businesses. Each of these generates a set of interventions that reflect official understandings of business dynamics. My work has often challenged these perceptions and, thereby, provided alternative conceptualisations which might be used to shape public policy more effectively.

Figure 1 The policy context and indicative related research questions

Policy domain and indicative forms of intervention	Rationale for action	Indicative research questions
<p>Research policy: research funding priorities and mechanisms; knowledge exchange initiatives.</p> <p>Innovation policy: knowledge exchange initiatives</p>	<p>Intervention is required to ensure that knowledge created by academics is made accessible to practitioners. This will lead to more optimal decision-making and greater innovation.</p>	<p>How do businesses acquire and use knowledge for competitive advantage? (Papers in Chapter 3)</p> <p>Why are some businesses more receptive to knowledge exchange initiatives than others? (Papers in Chapter 3)</p>
<p>Tourism policy: local partnership and participation in policy formation, notably by SMEs</p>	<p>Destinations will become more competitive if small firms are enabled to participate in local networks and influence local policy formation.</p>	<p>How should small business engagement at a local level be theorised? Does local context matter? (Papers in Chapter 4)</p> <p>How do individuals 'organise' to improve their influence and material rewards? (Papers in Chapter 5)</p>

I have been concerned to undertake research in a manner that is alert to the dangers of 'policy distance' (Markusen, 2003) by producing work that recognises the worlds of the actors (Van de Ven, 2007). However, I have also strenuously avoided what Lovering (1999: 279) called the temptation of producing 'theory led by policy'. In other words, of identifying and framing my research questions and approaches in a manner that is dictated by the vagaries of practitioner developments rather than academic debates. One consequence of this, discussed later in this chapter, is a mixed record of (practitioner or 'user') impact.

2.2 Research methods and methodologies

As the research design and methods used for each project is explained and justified in the submitted papers, I refer readers to the papers themselves. It is appropriate here, however, to discuss briefly my perspective on, and experience of, several dimensions of the research process. In addition, I will outline my philosophical position in relation to research and knowledge construction.

The papers contained in this submission demonstrate my familiarity with a range of qualitative and, to a lesser extent, quantitative research methods. At various points, I have used semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, historic and contemporary policy documents and institutional archives as sources of data, depending upon their appropriateness for particular projects.

I have tended to use purposive sampling more than other forms because the research questions addressed have usually required insights from selective vantage points. For example, when examining knowledge acquisition among business elites (those who manage very large tourism enterprises), the main challenge was to gain access to those who were genuinely part of that constituency. I was able to interview highly prominent and influential business leaders by exploiting my relationship with one of the sector's largest professional associations, the Institute of Travel and Tourism (who for a period of five years sponsored my professorial post). To have attempted to construct a database of all possible interviewees and then select business elites randomly from that source would have been naïve and, crucially, not yielded any better insights. Comparable types of samples, justified on similar grounds, apply to most of the projects discussed in this submission.

Some of the pragmatic decisions implied by my opening remarks to this section reflect a degree of philosophical, and perhaps more precisely, epistemological ambivalence. Although I am not persuaded by the certainty of positivism, and tend to reject reductionist 'scientific' perspectives that emphasise notions of objectivity, I am also uncomfortable with an over-emphasis on relativism. Indeed, some of the 'tests' of good research that emerge from positivism - such

as 'validity' and 'reliability' - are useful in modified form for all empirical research and I am guided by such concerns in my work.

I have also found aspects of social constructionism and critical realism appealing (e.g. Burr, 2003; Camargo-Borges and Rasera, 2013; Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). The relativism of the former and its requirement to recognise my 'positionality' have been important influences. My judgements on research design and methods are, therefore, inflected with ideas of reflexivity (Steier, 1991; Maynard Perry, 2010). Yet, I am also attracted to realist perspectives, and suggestions that the social world might be influenced positively by academic research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). The corollary of this is that I do not consider the inflexible adoption of a philosophical stance as being important to the quality of my research output. I recognise that some will question the compatibility of my position, so it is reassuring that this pragmatic outlook is far from unique (see, for example, Baert, 2005a, 2005b; Feilzer, 2010; Watson, 2013). Indeed, recent debates in the tourism literature, for example that between Botterill (2014; see also Platenkamp and Botterill, 2012) and Pernecky (2012; 2014) on the extent to which 'varieties of constructionism can be both relativist and realist' (Pernecky, 2014: 295), are emblematic of my reluctance to label my philosophical position.

Like the vast majority of fellow academics, I appreciate the importance of research ethics. Thus, my work conforms fully to institutional or funding council requirements. More importantly, I take seriously the principles and values on which the regulations are based and seek to place the welfare of participants – and all that is implied by that – at centre stage. In recent years, however, I have become concerned that the consequentialist model of research ethics that has become endemic in British higher education (Lo Piccolo and Thomas, 2009; Israel, 2014) virtually excludes discussion of other, potentially more appropriate, approaches such as virtue ethics (where the emphasis is on the researcher rather than the project) (Hammersley, 2009; Taylor, 2009). My fear is that a somewhat formulaic and bureaucratic approach to documenting ethical issues will potentially stifle research approaches and may encourage researchers to shy away from what Lee (2003) terms 'uneasy ethics'. I discuss some of these

issues in Thomas (2011), especially as they influenced (constrained) a research project that I had intended to pursue.

2.3 The research projects

This section of the chapter discusses three inter-related strands of my research that converge to represent a coherent contribution to greater understanding of how public policy might influence business behaviour. The first will review my recent studies that contribute to debates in the literature on research and innovation policy. I do this mainly in relation to the work of tourism academics and the knowledge exchange practices (especially with universities) of practitioners. The second strand reports investigations into the dynamics of small businesses in tourism, particularly in relation to their articulation with public policy at a local level. The final strand of my research contributes to an understanding of the attempts made to professionalise tourism by several associations, via the conceptual lens of corporate professionalization. Greater understanding of the professionalization process offers the possibility of public policy-makers engaging with a sector that is more receptive to interventions designed to enhance sectoral competitiveness.

2.3.1 Innovation, knowledge exchange and research policy

Official concerns to increase the competitiveness of the British economy (e.g. BIS, 2012) - in this case with reference to the tourism sector (e.g. DCMS, 2011) - by strengthening knowledge exchange between universities and practitioners (e.g. ESRC, 2015), has been the subject of my most recent research efforts. The rationale for this aspect of research policy is that relevant academic research leads to the kind of knowledge that, if harnessed appropriately, enhances innovation and competitiveness among tourism enterprises. I have challenged several aspects of this perspective and, in light of empirical research, revealed what, I argue, is a more nuanced analysis that will be useful for academics, policy-makers and other practitioners.

The first paper (Thomas, 2012b) examines the process of knowledge acquisition among business elites (or very senior managers of large enterprises) drawing on conceptual insights from the innovation and adult

learning literatures. The premise of the research was that by understanding more about how practitioners acquired knowledge and approached their own learning, more appropriate interventions that involved universities could be created. The particular focus on actors who led major companies - some of those interviewed were responsible for businesses with multi-billion pound balance sheets – was justified by their disproportionate ability to influence the culture of organisations and company policies towards working with universities. Moreover, the somewhat iconic status of the companies concerned also meant they influenced discourses in the sector more generally.

The project was funded by the ESRC (RES-186-27-0015) and supported by the Institute of Travel and Tourism (ITT) who organised access to the business elites interviewed. The project also attracted an ESRC follow-on grant (RES-189-25-0205). This enabled me to explore the results with senior academics and a network of business elites via three seminars, and an additional symposium with academics. The former were concerned with exploring the utility, as judged by business elites, of recent academic research on a variety of business related topics. The focus of the latter was on taking stock of the current state of knowledge on business engagement in the tourism sector.

In theoretical terms, the project utilised a conceptual framework that was informed by current research on knowledge transfer and Mezirow's (2003; 2009) work on transformational learning. The findings suggest that routine ways of learning among these actors take place informally within social networks and within reasonably well defined communities of practice. Evidently, academics are not usually constituents of these communities; academics operate, instead, within spaces that are imbued with contrasting values and practices. More importantly, most of the ten business elites interviewed tend to learn within their own 'meaning perspectives', in spite of exhortations to the contrary. As a result, current initiatives designed to strengthen collaboration are not likely to be sustainable unless academics become part of practitioner networks (and possibly vice versa) and transformational learners can be identified. Strategic investment of time and other resources on gaining access to such networks and working with individuals who are susceptible to learning

differently is far more likely to create sustainable knowledge exchange than the generally less well defined approaches that currently obtain.

More recent papers (Thomas and Wood, 2014; 2015) pursue the connection between external knowledge and organisational innovation. In this case, the theoretical and empirical work on absorptive capacity that is prominent in the business and management literature is reviewed critically and found wanting because of its emphasis on, and antecedents in, the manufacturing sector (see Cohen and Levinthal, 1990, and subsequent refinements by, *inter alia*, Patterson and Ambrosini, 2015; Todorova and Durisin, 2007; Zahra and George; 2002). Although several commentators have drawn attention to the inter-relatedness of knowledge and innovation in tourism (Cooper, 2006; Hall and Williams, 2008), none have undertaken rigorous research that is centrally concerned with absorptive capacity in this sector. Thus, as Shaw (2015: 46) noted recently, it remains 'a particularly neglected area of research within tourism studies'. This is surprising and perhaps make these contributions more significant, especially since there is growing evidence that tourism enterprises are particularly dependent on external sources of knowledge (Williams and Shaw, 2011; King, Breen and Whitelaw, 2014).

Following others, notably Zahra and George (2002), the papers conceptualise absorptive capacity as a dynamic capability and, for the first time, draw on an analysis of empirical material gathered from the British hotel sector, suggesting that mainstream theorising of absorptive capacity is deficient when applied to tourism. The paper offers a refined conceptualisation whereby notions of potential and realised absorptive capacity are dispensed with and its components simplified to acquisition and use. Relational sources of knowledge are emphasised, notably informal networks, and 'triggers of activation' (those things that prompt organisations to become concerned with external knowledge) are re-theorised as playing a more important role in acquisition rather than use.

Thomas and Wood (2015) extend the theoretical understanding of absorptive capacity by offering a reconceptualisation developed via a study of the international meetings industry (business tourism). Utilising a blend of qualitative and quantitative data, it explains how absorptive capacity manifests

itself in this context. The model proposed emphasises the informality characterised by management in this sector, the critical role played by creative leaders with high levels of tacit knowledge and the relative unimportance of regimes of appropriability.

An important contribution arising from these theoretical advances, which is particularly relevant in the context of this award, is the opportunity they create for policy-makers to measure levels of absorptive capacity in their destination and to devise interventions accordingly. As I will also argue below in the context of small businesses, there are dangers (which my research helps overcome) of policy interventions resting on premises that do not reflect the dynamics of the sector and being sub-optimal as a consequence.

Arguably, an exclusive focus on how senior managers or organisations acquire and use knowledge is partial and potentially underplays factors affecting the supply of 'relevant' knowledge by universities. Notwithstanding business engagement via consultancy projects, policy-makers recognise that much of the *academic* research produced by (tourism) academics will not necessarily resonate with practitioners and that academics will not necessarily consider working with 'stakeholders' as an important, or even legitimate, dimension of their work. For this reason, and in common with other developed economies (see, for example, <http://www.oecd.org/innovation/policyplatform/48136600.pdf>), British research policy has for some time emphasised the notion of engagement and, especially, impact (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>). This has resulted in a series of measures, from knowledge transfer partnerships to ESRC's Impact Acceleration Accounts, to incentivise and reward academics who can demonstrate that their insights are valued by 'users' (Research Councils UK, 2012; <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration/knowledge-exchange/opportunities/ImpactAccelerationAccounts.aspx>).

As debates in the business and management literature illustrate, the relationship between academic research and practice is problematic (Nicolai and Seidl, 2010; Beech et al, 2010). Some, for example Kieser and Leiner (2009; 2011), question the extent to which the 'rigour-relevance gap' can be bridged because academics and practitioners operate within contrasting social

systems. Others, such as Pettigrew (2011) and the Association of Business Schools (Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2013), are more sanguine and welcome the kinds of official interventions that promote knowledge that can be used, in this case, by businesses to improve their practice.

This debate has not taken place to any significant extent among tourism academics. I have argued that the literature which appears to take it as axiomatic that tourism research is 'useful' but is not recognised as such by enough practitioners, is unsatisfactory (and somewhat naïve) (Thomas, 2013). This paper also suggests that knowledge transfer (or exchange) requires more active intervention on the part of academics if they are to achieve this goal.

By contrast, in Thomas (2011), I attempt to make a more substantive contribution and stimulate debate on the connection between academic endeavour and practice. Prompted by my tenure as a Non-Executive Director of Yorkshire Tourist Board (now Welcome to Yorkshire), I examined the influences that shape academic practice and the kinds of questions that are considered worthy of research. I identify three overlapping influences that serve to circumscribe the kind of critical comment that might be made by tourism researchers: (i) official exhortations for universities to become more entrepreneurial - to be commercially 'savvy' and not to 'rock the boat'; (ii) the perceptions of senior university managers that institutions have common interest with other major organisations in promoting positive images of localities; (iii) in the context of funded projects, some research opportunities may require the acceptance of certain frames of reference (those of the funder) about what constitutes important (and unimportant) questions and 'appropriate' methods. Each of these can emasculate academics' capacity to lead independent academic enquiry. Contrary to advocates of 'engaged scholarship', such as Van de Ven (2007), I argue that these circumstances are detrimental to the potential social and academic contribution of tourism academics.

Knowledge transfer or exchange via teaching is widely recognised by universities. Indeed, one of the perennial debates in higher education is the extent to which students are exposed to research-informed teaching and whether this enhances their learning (Boyer, 1990; Jenkins, 2004; Brew, 2006;

<http://trnexus.edu.au/>). Arguably, until the creation of the Higher Education Academy in 2004 (www.heacademy.ac.uk/), excellence in teaching was not regarded as highly as excellence in research and promotion relied on the latter rather than the former. Regardless of whether this has remained the case, the elevation of teaching as an activity spawned academic discussion about teaching quality and potential connections between teaching and research. I made a contribution to that debate in Thomas and Harris (2001) by exploring the experiences of tourism and hospitality students. The somewhat complex picture that emerged suggested that research active academics tended to be especially enthusiastic about their subject and that had positive effects on the student experience.

2.3.2 Small tourism firms and public policy

In addition to a state of the art review of small business research in tourism (Thomas, Shaw and Page, 2011), several papers reporting conceptual advances and empirical projects on small businesses in tourism will be discussed in his section. These encompass a conceptual paper where I propose a novel framework for examining the sustainability practices of small firms within the sector (Thomas, 2015), a baseline study of a very neglected subsector (self-catering) (Thomas and Hind, 2007), the ability of small tourism firms to engage in local partnerships and influence local policy formation (Thomas and Thomas, 2005; 2006; Thomas, 2007), and the utilisation of skills for competitive advantage among that constituency of businesses (Thomas and Long, 2001).

Thomas, Shaw and Page (2011) sought to consolidate the current state of knowledge of small firms in tourism by assessing critically the various contributions made on the topic and mapping out a research agenda. Seventeen papers that I had written wholly or in part were included in the review which I also hope contributes positively to a perspective on my credentials for this award.

Few would argue that the work of Shaw, Williams and Greenwood (1987) in Cornwall was anything other than seminal. Their re-theorising of small firms in

tourism as potential forms consumption precipitated a stream of research – including my own – which focused on the diversity or heterogeneity of the sector. As I suggested some time ago (Thomas, 2000), gaining clarity on some fundamental conceptual issues associated with small business behaviour - such as their motivations, resources and capabilities - is essential if public policy designed to influence their behaviour is to be effective. Yet, far too often this is not the case. By way of illustration, when policy proposals to strengthen small business partnerships and local networks are advocated, they usually rest on the premise that small firms have the capabilities necessary to make a useful contribution to these activities and to gain from the process. This is, however, dubious. Similarly, an appreciation of the complexity of small firms, including an understanding of the prominent policy discourses that see small tourism firms as aspiring for growth, is not likely to yield the intended changes to business practices. My empirical research and theorising on these two issues are contained in three of the publications reproduced in this thesis (Thomas, 2007; 2015; Thomas and Thomas, 2005; 2006). While the papers provide detailed accounts, a synthesis is appropriate here, paying particular attention to how they contribute to a more coherent understanding of public policy in relation to small tourism firms.

Researchers have long examined power-relations in tourism (e.g. Cheong and Miller, 2000; Church and Coles, 2006; Macleod and Carrier, 2010), some of which has been in the context of tourism planning and policy-making (e.g. Hall, 1994). With some notable exceptions (e.g. Keen, 2004; Jones and Haven-Tang, 2005; Getz and Carlsen, 2005), there has been surprisingly little consideration of the role of businesses in policy formation. This is an important omission because there is a substantial literature that advocates the involvement of stakeholders, presumably including small businesses, in local tourism governing decisions (e.g. Dredge and Jenkins, 2006; Hall, 2007; Nunkoo and Smith, 2015). Many of these rest on pluralist assumptions of (local) political power that do not, it is argued in the submitted papers, stand up to careful scrutiny.

Thomas and Thomas (2005; 2006) and Thomas (2007) addressed, *inter alia*, the following questions: how might small firms in tourism influence the local

policy-making process? To what extent were they able, for example, to get tourism on the local policy agenda when it became a victim of the vicissitudes of local policy priorities? Were they able to mobilise resources to effect change to their advantage?

Thomas and Thomas (2005) provided a critique of the often implicit theoretical perspective on power and politics that inform official partnership models of local economic development via tourism. The novelty of the paper lay in (i) its advocacy of an alternative conception (regime theory) and (ii) its focus on small firms as a specific category of interest group. Thomas (2007) extended the analysis by arguing that in addition to its pluralist foundations, official conceptualisations failed to appreciate the prominence and complexity of informal economic relations, and how this influenced small businesses' propensity to engage in official tourism partnership activity. The paper proposed the need for new ways of theorising small business participation, suggesting potentially rewarding avenues for future investigation. Some aspects of what was proposed in terms of an assessment of how power relations operate at a local level were examined empirically in Thomas and Thomas (2006) via a case study of Saltaire, Bradford.

Saltaire is a model industrial village which is now part of the city of Bradford. It is a world heritage site and attracts visitors to the area, though there are no reliable figures available of the volume of visitations (Tate, 2012). The local authority has been somewhat capricious in its commitment to tourism; at times, it has seen tourism as central to its local economic development strategy while, at others, it has been seen as unimportant. When tourism fell off the political agenda, several businesses in Saltaire sought to influence local politics with a view to attracting resources for its promotion and development. The paper outlines a conceptual framework that incorporates the motivations of smaller businesses to act collectively and the resources required to influence change. Drawing on detailed interviews with the small businesses themselves and a range of other key informants, the paper argued that while structural aspects are important, it is also possible to identify the conditions necessary for small businesses to effect change (agency). The paper, therefore, provides

theoretical advancement on processes of local tourism policy formation and change, as well as an historical insight into developments in Bradford.

My openness to working with users of research, and a Vice Chancellor that promoted participation in regional governance bodies, led me to become a Non-Executive Director of Yorkshire Tourist Board (now Welcome to Yorkshire) during the mid-2000s. My appointment was intended to help shape the direction of regional tourism policy and was not a research project. Nevertheless, 'towards the end of my tenure, I reflected rather more on the potential for using my experiences to illuminate what I consider to be interesting insights into ... tourism governance and the exercise of power' (Thomas, 2011: 494). After all, it is unusual for an academic to be able to gain insights from the inside; most analyses of policy formation in tourism – and urban politics more generally – have been undertaken from outside the central institutions involved. Although there were evidently important ethical issues to be considered, I reasoned that these could be overcome if an appropriate ethical stance were adopted and I exercised responsibility.

Contrary to this ambition, Thomas (2011) explains why I could not write such a paper. It analyses the socio-political environment within which academics operate and describes the constraints that follow. Moreover, it emphasises the implications for knowledge construction for those who work in increasingly neoliberal universities. The paper concludes by calling for further debate on the role of the tourism academic.

My most recent contribution to understanding how public policy-makers might influence the behaviour of small firms is in the area of sustainability. In Thomas (2015), I advocate the use of a novel framework for interrogating the behaviour of small tourism businesses. This builds on earlier work (Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). The starting point of the paper is to note my dissatisfaction with the prominent policy and academic discourse in this field which promotes changes to business behaviour in terms of self-interest; the so-called 'win-win' i.e. that sustainable practices can serve the private interests of business owners (usually by saving money on energy bills) while simultaneously making a contribution to society (in this case by reducing negative externalities

associated with high energy consumption). Public policy in these circumstances becomes a process of selling a set of measures to the private sector which are presented mainly in terms of the private gain that accrue to operators.

Such approaches are problematic as foundation stones of policy because they tend to imply that sustainable practices do not involve additional costs and adopt a conception of small firms which is crude and empirically unjustified. The assumed simplicity of decision-making, with its emphasis on cost-cutting, belies the more robust theorisation of small firms reviewed in, for example, Thomas et al (2011). Perhaps more significantly, such approaches have had little impact on the practices of small firms (Sampaio, Thomas and Font, 2012a and b). The paper advocates the use of a novel framework for explaining why some small firms engage in sustainable business practices and others do not. Prompted by the contribution of Kreps and Monin (2011), it suggests that considering the moral frameworks of owner-managed businesses potentially yields more valuable insight than the seemingly ubiquitous reductionist economic models that are often promoted. Instead of ascribing a homogenous set of motives related to profit growth, the framework differentiates businesses theoretically according to how, and whether, they moralise their business practices. The argument is that by understanding how small businesses frame issues morally (and what are not considered moral issues), a more nuanced approach to policy-making may be developed.

Distinctions are drawn in the paper between public moralisation and private moralisation. The former embraces communicating its moral stance to those outside the business. For some this is seen as offering leadership, whereas for others it may simply be a means of communicating messages that are more to do with promotion of the business; an apparent (insincere) public moralisation. In other cases, silence in public on particular issues may conceal a private moralisation reflected in a set of practices ranging from higher than average staff pay rates to using certain kinds of suppliers, which are not trumpeted. Drawing on a review of published qualitative studies, the paper highlights evidence to support the existence of each of the categories it identifies. The paper does not take a normative position on these categories but argues that

their existence could assist policy-makers in re-thinking the kinds of relatively ineffective policy interventions that prevail at the moment.

2.3.3 The corporate professionalization of tourism

Routine claims made in the academic and practitioner literatures about the professionalization of tourism are examined critically in two recent publications (Thomas and Thomas, 2013; 2014). Two related sectors were examined; tourism and the burgeoning events sector (business tourism).

Each of the two papers contains a critical review of existing analyses of the professionalization process in tourism and events. They argue that the classic approach to explaining the professionalization of occupations, with its emphasis on a social contract which results in professionals becoming the guardians of the public interest, is inadequate in these cases. Further, the most common approach used in tourism – the traits approach (see, for example, Sheldon, 1989; Burgess, 2011; Getz and Wicks, 1994) – tends to assume rather than demonstrate the existence of particular traits; it, too, is therefore deficient as an analytical framework for explaining the professionalization of occupations. The more recent sociological literature of the professions (e.g. Noordegraaf, 2011; Kipping, 2011) offers more fruitful conceptualisations by highlighting how social struggles to professionalise modern occupations such as nursing (Hampton and Hampton, 2004), journalism (Elsaka, 2005) or specialist business functions such as management consultancy, marketing and executive search (Suddaby and Viale, 2011) have played out. Following this literature, the two studies (Thomas and Thomas, 2013; 2014) advocate the analytical lens of corporate professionalization to understand the attempts made to professionalise tourism and events, and why they have failed.

Corporate professionalization emphasises the role of the private sector in professionalising occupations. The commercial context within which much professional work now takes place is emphasised rather than the regulatory regime which accords privileges of occupational closure (the power to determine who is allowed to practice) and occupational control (the authority to decide what members must do to retain their right to practice) to professional

associations. Briefly, the argument is as follows: for modern occupations to professionalise, they must demonstrate the existence of a body of knowledge that service providers possess which differentiates them from other (non-professional) service providers. Professionalism, seen this way, is a resource that attracts a higher price than services provided by non-professionalised occupations. To achieve this status, a collective identity must be forged among practitioners and, initially, mechanisms for recognising tacit knowledge are required as part of the development of the credentials needed to practice professionally. The legitimacy claims of these new professions, made via the professional association, rest not on notions of public good – though ethical practice is usually included – but on the commercial benefit to the users of professionals.

Data for the projects were collected entirely by me because of the relationships I enjoy with professional associations in tourism and events (I served as a co-opted Board member of the Institute of Travel and Tourism for more than five years and recently became a Board member of the Association of Professional Conference Organisers or ABPCO). It was these associations that enabled access to the key informants interviewed. In all, seventeen senior officers (usually the Chief Executive Officer) were interviewed, sometimes twice, and the archives and other material such as web sites, records held at Companies House, and association newsletters, were also analysed.

As the papers reproduced in this thesis show (Thomas and Thomas, 2013; 2014), there is very little difference of strategy or outcome among the major associations in tourism and events. In spite of their rhetoric, tourism and events professional associations have failed to professionalise the respective occupations by not understanding (or being able to implement) strategies of corporate professionalization. Membership numbers are very low, identities are fragmented (associations do not represent 'tourism managers' or 'event managers' preferring to differentiate each along various lines such as travel, heritage, culture, or sport), and they have failed to convince governments or employers of their merits.

The papers demonstrate the value of modern sociological perspectives (e.g. Evetts, 2011; Kipping, 2011; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011) to understanding developments in tourism and events but also suggest theoretical refinements are required. Prompted by the practices of the associations studied, the papers argue that – especially in the case of tourism – a more benign set of motives from those usually associated with corporate professionalization now obtain. Having failed to professionalise, the narratives and strategy statements of the associations have changed whereby ‘professionalism’ amounts to little more than a relatively benign linguistic notion rather than a means of exercising power and gaining material benefits for its members.

It is rewarding that the research I have published on the three themes discussed in this chapter has generated academic interest internationally. In addition to the citations mentioned earlier, I have been pleased to accept invitations to make keynote presentations at various international academic conferences. These are listed in Table 1. I hope this academic approval helps persuade examiners of the level-worthiness of my submission.

Table 1 Invited keynote presentations at academic events by theme

Theme	Conference details	Date
Innovation, knowledge exchange and research policy		
Event evaluation and innovation in difficult times.	Evaluating the Impact of Events: Directions for research conference, London Metropolitan University.	2011
Knowledge exchange in tourism: Strengthening the links between academic research and practice.	III International Conference on Tourism Recreation (ITCR'13), Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, Portugal.	2013
Working with the leisure sector: Challenges for academics and universities.	12th China International Leisure Development Forum, 2014, World Leisure Organisation and Zhejiang University, China.	2014
Absorptive capacity and the sustainability practices of events and tourism businesses: Implications for university research centres.	Inaugural conference of the Sino-UK Centre for Research in Events and Tourism, Yunnan Normal University, China.	2014
Small tourism firms and public policy		
The politics of local events and festivals policy: What role for small firms?	Association of Spanish and Czech Management Academics, University of Seville, Spain.	2007
Small firms and destination competitiveness.	Regional Studies Association Tourism Conference, Aalborg University, Denmark.	2008
Evidence, emotions and expediency: The case for clarity and rigour in events tourism policy formation and evaluation.	Events, Business Travel and Tourism conference, Sun Yat-Sen University, China (in collaboration with University of Queensland, Australia).	2008
Moving and shaking: Urban tourism and events policy formation.	Regional Studies Association Tourism Conference, University of Warsaw, Poland.	2009
The corporate professionalization of tourism		
The professionalization of event management: a critique.	10 th annual AEME conference, Bournemouth University.	2013

2.4 A note on impact

As current UK research policy elevates the importance of research impact, it seems appropriate to discuss briefly how I have sought to enhance the influence of my work on non-academic audiences. As I have noted earlier, I am not entirely comfortable with this direction of policy because of its potential to distort research agendas and value certain kinds of research over others

(Thomas, 2011). Nevertheless, few would argue that publicly funded academic work – notably that which makes claims in relation to policy and practice, as mine does – should not be tested for its utility. Demonstrating impact is, of course, notoriously difficult (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2014). Though beyond the scope of this chapter, my recent experience of evaluating the impact of three major investments made by the ESRC and undertaking two projects on the valuing of social science, confirmed the challenges involved in demonstrating impact, even for research centres with international reputations in their fields¹. The following paragraphs explain my approach over recent years to enhancing the impact of my research.

The role of professional and social networks in knowledge exchange is widely recognised in the literature (e.g. Shaw and Williams, 2009). This suggests that shared understandings and trust developed through social interaction play an important role in the circulation of knowledge between actors. Over recent years, I have attempted to build strong practitioner networks in order to gain access to key actors for my own research purposes and, more informally, to understand how I might work with practitioners more effectively. During my tenure as Non-Executive Director of Yorkshire Tourist Board (Welcome to Yorkshire) between 2005 and 2009, I made attempts at influencing policy (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N42TMkqNtS4>)², but my impact was marginal. That said, I gained valuable insight into regional policy making in practice and, informally, how the work of universities as ‘stakeholders’ was perceived by the officers and other Board members, most of whom were senior managers in tourism and non-tourism enterprises. This proved useful in helping

¹ Between 2013 and 2014, I was Co-Principal Investigator for two ESRC funded impact evaluations. I was also a member of a third project (an evaluation of WISERD). These involved assessing the impact of BRASS at Cardiff University, and three economics centres (Parsons, Thomas, Fletcher and Kachel, 2013; Parsons, Thomas, Strange and Walsh, 2014). Tracking back and tracking forward methods were used to examine how significant a contribution academic work made to developing particular policies or practices. At the time of submission, the report of the first project on valuing social science research has recently been accepted and I continue to work on the second. Policy recommendations for improving impact were made and there are informal indications that at least some of these will be taken up.

² In addition, I organised a series of projects for academic colleagues which resulted in an edited book (Thomas, 2009). The intention was to stimulate interest beyond place promotion among policy-makers regionally. The book launch attracted significant interest among senior practitioners; production of the book was supported financially by Welcome to Yorkshire and the book launch was hosted by the Tourism Society. It would be misleading to suggest, however, that the initiative resulted in a change of direction for the regional tourist board. My impression was that support for the project enabled the tourist board to demonstrate its embracing of regional stakeholders encompassed universities as well as other, more predictable, parties.

me refine my future approach to engaging with senior practitioners.

Although I would not wish to exaggerate my impact elsewhere, I had greater influence on the direction of the Institute of Travel and Tourism's (ITT) education policy. The ITT attracts very senior practitioners - the industry's 'movers and shakers' - to its membership and events, notably its annual international conference (which is capped at 400 delegates). During the mid-2000s, I gained sponsorship for my chair at Leeds Metropolitan University in exchange for providing regular insights into current academic research and helping to improve the profile of the ITT with universities. This created significant opportunities to develop my practitioner network. These were used to help secure two ESRC grants; one to research (Thomas, 2012b) and another (a follow-on project) to increase the impact of that research. Being able to provide a reference from the CEO of Thomas Cook, one of the world's largest travel companies, made my case for follow-on funding much easier. This enabled me to host very senior academic-practitioner seminars, including one at the ITT's international conference, and to help shape a strategic change of direction. Many of the initiatives for knowledge exchange with universities continue even though my sponsorship has ended. I have recently been appointed to the Board of the Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO) which extends my practitioner network considerably. It creates avenues for continued research (access) and potential opportunities to effect change.

In recent years, I have been fortunate to have been given opportunities to address practitioners at various industry and policy-makers' events. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Invited keynote presentations at practitioner events

Topic	Conference	Date
Absorptive capacity and innovation in the meetings industry (provisional title)	International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) annual conference, Buenos Aires.	2015
Being entrepreneurial: What does research suggest that small businesses in tourism should do?	Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) international conference, Malta.	2013
Professionalising professional conference organisers.	Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO) Annual Chairman's lunch.	2013
Understanding the economic impact of planned events in city economies.	Best Cities Global Alliance, Shanghai, China.	2013
SMEs and the tourism growth agenda: Networks, learning and innovation.	OECD Tourism Committee and Secretariat, Paris.	2013
Major events and the politics of regional tourism policy-making.	European Cities Marketing Conference, Sweden.	2009
Professionalism in the festivals and events sector.	International Festival and Events Association (IFEA) Europe annual conference. The art of growing: Lifecycles of festivals and events, Athens, Greece.	2007
Professionalism, professionalization and the travel industry.	Institute of Travel and Tourism (ITT) international annual conference, Gran Canaria.	2007
The role of the placement.	Tourism academics and employers conference. The first co-hosted event by Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), the ITT, and the Tourism Society, London.	2007

Each of these has given me the opportunity to share the fruits of my research with diverse audiences and to implement some of the principles of communicating with practitioners that I have advocated (Thomas, 2013). Clearly, speaking at these events does not demonstrate impact but is a reasonable demonstration of engagement.

2.5 Conclusion: My contribution and future research agenda

2.5.1. Academic contribution

As the foregoing discussion has shown, a fundamental error common to many public policy interventions in tourism is the failure to recognise the complexity of organisations in the sector and to differentiate between them. It seems

axiomatic that unless the dynamics of organisations are understood, public policy designed to effect change - be it to make them more innovative, sustainable or to work more closely with universities – is likely to be sub-optimal. My contribution has been to provide alternative and more nuanced conceptualisations of organisations in the tourism sector that might better inform public policy-makers and other practitioners.

My intention in this thesis has been to explain the research projects that I have been involved with (mainly via the papers themselves) and to make a case for their inter-connectedness. How the heterogeneity of businesses in tourism manifests itself should be much clearer as a result of my work. The context of policy and the related research questions have varied as have the units of analysis. The latter have tended to focus on individual, often small, enterprises though collective efforts to professionalise the sector also reveal important business dynamics in tourism.

The concepts and theories used to inform the papers contained in this thesis usually have their origins in other fields and disciplines. As a consequence, I would argue that my potential theoretical contribution extends beyond tourism. The insights offered on absorptive capacity, for example, provide refinements that help advance the theorising developed in the context of manufacturing to take into account of sectors that do not invest heavily in research and development, do not value technical knowledge and do not, generally, aspire to strong regimes of appropriability. Indeed, demonstrating the limitations of prominent constructs such as ‘potential’ and ‘realised’ absorptive capacity advances theorising on absorptive capacity generally, I would argue, by focusing on tourism.

Similarly, conceptions of small businesses reported in the mainstream small business and public policy literatures are enhanced by the publication of studies that reflect the peculiarities of tourism. Revealing how owner-managers’ attachment to place can influence how they articulate with other businesses and public agencies, as is revealed in some of the papers presented in this thesis, adds to conceptual understanding and offers ways of strengthening studies of local policy formation as well as small firms in other sectors. The introduction of

additional considerations, such as the high incidence of businesses potentially operating at the margins of in the formal economy, may also lead to refinements in the ways of thinking about small firms more generally as well as in tourism.

Finally, the literature on the sociology of the professions is strengthened by taking into account modern occupations that have failed in their attempts to professionalise, rather than simply concentrating on those that have been successful. In addition to casting greater light on the dynamics of the tourism sector, the studies have suggested that in theoretical terms, ideas of corporate professionalization need to be extended to incorporate the relatively benign motives of professional associations in tourism. It is encouraging that my work has been cited by others, including those from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, who are also seeking to advance knowledge on these matters.

A key official premise underpinning much public policy intended to influence business behaviour in tourism is that organisations become more innovative, sustainable or competitive – for example – if they have opportunities to learn from others (including universities). The state has a role to play in enabling this learning, or transfer of knowledge, and it is likely to be more prevalent because of its involvement rather than if left to markets. In small enterprises, the owner-manager is a central actor and, in larger firms, the disposition of senior managers is critical because of their ability to influence organisational policies and practices.

The research I have discussed suggests that the acquisition of knowledge by small business owners and business elites (senior managers of large businesses) tends to be informal and highly relational. Networks are vital conduits for both and there is a tendency for these to be limited to communities of practice that reflect their values and priorities. It has been suggested that this is not always understood by policy-makers and leads to interventions that are less effective at influencing business behaviour than might otherwise be the case. Research in relation to absorptive capacity, the learning of business elites and the knowledge resources required to participate in local policy networks has been used to illustrate this observation. Research reported in the papers contained in this thesis extends the contribution to encompass the

collective - as well as the individual – failure to improve performance and rewards (including profits) by not understanding how other modern occupations have become professionalised. This summary chapter has shown that each of these instances also has implications for how universities might engage with commercial tourism organisations as well as what governments might do to encourage greater collaboration. Figure 2 summarises my contribution.

Figure 2 Summary of contribution to knowledge and policy implications

Policy domain	Contribution	Policy implication
<p>Research policy: research funding priorities and mechanisms; knowledge exchange initiatives.</p>	<p>Explanation for limited take-up and success of knowledge exchange initiatives in certain contexts (theoretical advancement)</p>	<p>Prompts review of research policy relating to knowledge exchange notably between universities and business elites</p>
<p>Innovation policy: knowledge exchange initiatives</p>	<p>Refined model of absorptive capacity (theoretical advance)</p>	<p>New way of thinking about competitiveness and innovation in tourism</p>
	<p>Tool for measuring absorptive capacity at level of organisation and/or destination (methodological advance)</p>	<p>Means of initiating and monitoring change</p> <p>Means of replicating studies</p>
<p>Tourism policy: local partnership and participation in policy formation, notably by small firms</p>	<p>Explanation for failure of small firms to influence local policy-making (theoretical advancement)</p>	<p>Highlights need to develop new ways of engaging with small firms</p>
	<p>Explanation for level of professionalisation of tourism as an occupation (theoretical advancement)</p>	<p>Policy implications, notably for professional associations and policy-makers seeking to influence the development of the sector</p>

Inevitably, my work has limitations. Critics might suggest a more carefully planned programme of research would have made explaining my contribution easier and its coherence more obvious. Nevertheless, I hope I have argued convincingly that what has been presented meets the criteria for the award.

2.5.2 Future research

The degree of fragmentation in my research outputs prompts additional avenues for future work. My intention, therefore, is to continue to research business behaviour in tourism in order to contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of state intervention. In particular, I am currently examining how research policy might be strengthened by attempting to theorise the impact of tourism research on practice more effectively than is currently available. To do so, I am reviewing various competing theoretical perspectives contained mainly in the business and management literature (see, for example, Bastow and Dunleavy, 2014; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009; Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007). My current intellectual ambivalence is frustrating my ability to write a scholarly article on this topic.

The related topic of business engagement is also part of my current research agenda. Having used the theoretical lens of adult (transformational) learning to investigate how business elites might articulate more with universities (Thomas, 2012b), I am now utilising narrative research. More specifically, I am inviting senior event managers – facilitated by my work with ABPCO – to tell their stories. By drawing on the burgeoning narrative research in the business and management literature (e.g. Dailey and Browning, 2014; Gherardi and Murgia, 2014), I am hoping to learn more about how they construct their professional identities and explore ways of engaging more effectively with them in light of this new perspective. By pursuing this stream of research, I hope to continue to make a contribution to knowledge in this field.

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Chapter 3

INNOVATION, KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND RESEARCH POLICY

Chapter 4

SMALL TOURISM FIRMS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Chapter 5

THE CORPORATE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TOURISM

Appendix 1 Signed statements of co-authors