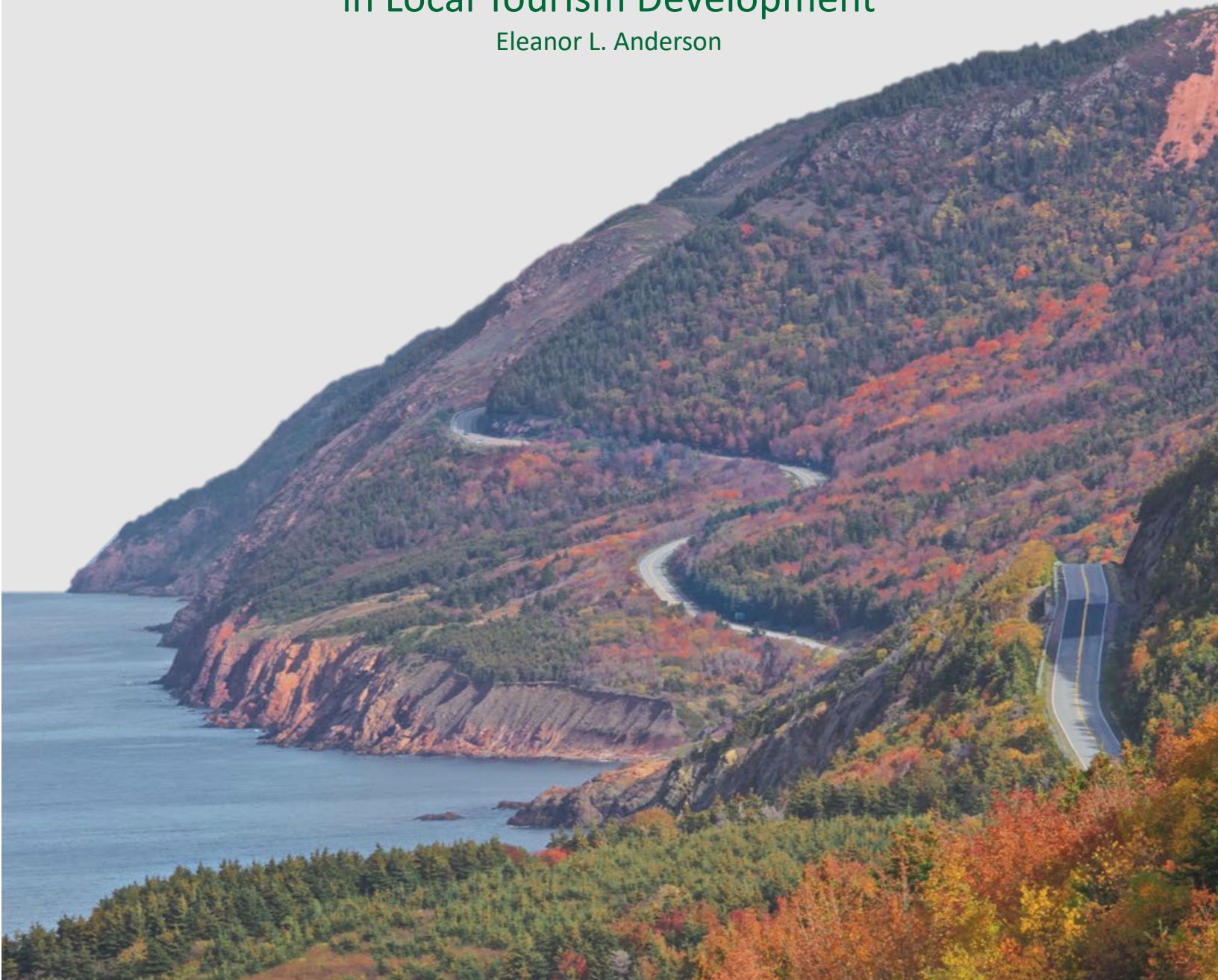




**Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies**  
**Cape Breton University's Tourism Studies & its Role**  
**in Local Tourism Development**

Eleanor L. Anderson



Cape Breton Island has long been lauded as one of the most beautiful Islands in the world. Cape Breton University has delivered well-established tourism and hospitality training for decades and is a leader in the field of such undergraduate training in Canada. The World Tourism Institute (WTI) at CBU is perfectly positioned and timed to leverage, support, and enhance, a growing tourism industry at home and globally.

**The World Tourism Institute (WTI)** was founded at Cape Breton University (CBU) in 2019 with a strong foundation rooted in the depth and diversity of the Cape Breton Island Tourism Sector, the long history of Tourism and Hospitality programming at CBU and the established industry and community relationships.

In 2022, the WTI secured \$2.24 million, 3 year project running February 2022 to 2025, for training and research funding from the Canadian government to stimulate post-pandemic recovery, build capacity and grow opportunities for Cape Breton Island's Tourism Sector. This project is called the **Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network (CBITTN)**.

#### **CBITTN Objectives:**

- Ensure inclusivity in all development activities.
- Work with Mi'kmaw partners to explore, design and implement community-based credit programs in Indigenous tourism.
- Develop a foundation of accessible, timely and credible research which will support decision-making by the industry and act as a catalyst in innovation and entrepreneurialism in tourism.
- Identify training gaps and needs associated with labour shortages.
- Promote education and professional certifications for the tourism industry, including the development of micro-credentials and customized training programs.

#### **World Tourism Institute**

Shannon School of Business  
Cape Breton University  
1250 Grand Lake Road  
Sydney NS B1A 1C2  
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Please note that the accuracy of these case studies is subject to change since the publication date. The individuals interviewed may no longer be affiliated with the respective tourism operations or businesses. Changes in business practices, ownership, and other relevant details may have occurred since the time of writing.



This project is funded in part by the  
Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives



## **CBU & TOURISM - HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

Cape Breton University (CBU) is Nova Scotia's youngest and fastest growing post-secondary educational institution delivering undergraduate and graduate level programming to both domestic and international students. CBU is committed to high quality, accessible education; innovative research; and a vibrant, multicultural future for the Island.

The Bachelor of Hospitality and Tourism Management (BHTM) program is an example of niche CBU programming that builds on the strengths of the institution in concert with Cape Breton Island's tourism industry. The BHTM is a three-year program with courses spanning hospitality, tourism, management, humanities, and social science discipline areas. Each student must complete two 540-hour tourism industry internships (approximately 16 weeks). CBU's BHTM program has a consistent enrolment of between 300 and 400 students. These students represent a much-needed employee pool to help offset the workforce shortage in Cape Breton Island's tourism sector.

According to research completed by the Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network, during the winter of 2023, CBU's BHTM program contained 230 students. Of those, approximately 5% were from Canada while 95% were international students with the largest populations coming from India and China. When asked about their post-graduation plans in Cape Breton, 11.5% of international students responded that they were not planning on remaining in Cape Breton. Conversely, 35% responded that they did want to stay in Cape Breton, while the majority, comprising 53.5%, were undecided on the matter.

Megan Ringer has been the Student Placement Officer for the BHTM program for four years. She is proud of the fact that her role as the Student Placement Officer at CBU includes maximizing opportunities for students to obtain a valuable and well-rounded education. She applies her own blend of post-secondary education and on the job training in Europe as an inspiration for students aspiring to succeed in their tourism focused careers. Megan says that despite the presence of the BHTM program's pool of potential tourism employees, there are challenges to retaining these students in the local tourism workforce. "The BHTM program enrolment is comprised primarily of international students which means they have increased mobility and enjoy lots of employment opportunities."

The Covid-19 pandemic weakened and destabilized the tourism industry, both globally and on Cape Breton Island. On Cape Breton Island many tourism operators experienced pandemic-related workforce shortages. Workforce shortages are being experienced by more than just the tourism sector but operating in a post-pandemic environment, the travel and tourism industry challenges have been compounded by increased market demand and a loss of trained staff. In the winter of 2023, the Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network surveyed the island's tourism site operators regarding their workforce needs. The survey found that 43.6% of tourism

site operators on Cape Breton Island did not have enough employees during the 2022 tourism season.

One potential strategy to address this workforce shortage is through developing and expanding hospitality related training programs. Training is a stabilizing factor for the tourism industry working towards a post-pandemic recovery. Since training boosts employee productivity and retention, trained staff are better able to respond to challenges and will help the tourism industry rebound.

The Student Placement Officer works to match students with volunteer opportunities as well as paid internships. This helps students make connections in the community and provides excellent opportunities to network with employers or organizations which could be useful for the students in future.

Megan says the role CBU can play in assisting with tourism industry pandemic recovery is significant. “Not only can we help supply tourism students to employers for internships, but CBU also has an enrolment of approximately 8,000 students and three Student Placement Officers to help match students to employers delivering mutual benefits. Plus, our BHTM graduates make excellent managers and management trainees which are highly sought after these days.”

### **CAPE BRETON – UNAMA’KI TOURISM WORKFORCE LANDSCAPE**

According to the 2016 census, the Tourism sector in Cape Breton with 5,675 employees and 740 businesses, represented 10.56% of the total employment on the Island which almost exactly mirrored the percentage of the Canadian labour force at that time. The Cape Breton Island tourism industry witnessed unparalleled growth before Covid-19 struck. However, in addition to the loss of tourism revenue because of Covid-19, challenges that were present before the pandemic remained a source of concern post-pandemic for the local tourism industry. These challenges included:

- Tourism operators throughout the Island in the 2018 and 2019 seasons reported chronic labour shortages, forcing some operations to close for periods of the week or offer reduced services to provide respite for employees. The Tourism Industry Association of Canada (TIAC) notes this is particularly challenging for rural businesses growing their shoulder seasons when students are not readily available.
- Cape Breton has an aging population, and a significant portion of tourism operators are contemplating retirement within the next five to ten years. Some of these tourism operators worry about succession plans and how to “pass the baton”.

- The visitor market has become more knowledgeable and discerning. Customer service professional development must be continuous and timely to retain and nurture destination competitiveness.

CBU and its BHTM program supports the local tourism industry by addressing these and other related challenges. In response to shoulder season labour shortages in the tourism industry, CBU reconfigured its BHTM degree to make its students available for work terms until mid-October. Tourism industry succession planning is supported by tourism alumni and CBU graduates who play a supporting role in bolstering the sector long-term as entrepreneurs or investors. Additionally, local tourism businesses that hire CBU students who have chosen tourism and its related sectors as a career, help to boost tourism operations – large and small – as graduates have already experienced and benefited from training.

The growing issue of seasonality in the sector was examined in a 2018 study commissioned by Tourism HR Canada entitled “Seasonality and Labour Challenges in Rural Cape Breton – Meeting the Needs of the Tourism Sector”. While undisputedly the Census figures prove the importance of tourism to the Cape Breton economy, the Tourism HR Canada study clearly drew connections between the labour challenges associated with seasonal business cycles, the impact that labour shortages create in meeting the demands of the customer, and of the effects on immigration. The report stated that “Between 2012 and 2019 there were an estimated 2,096 unfilled tourism jobs in Nova Scotia as a whole. If current labour market conditions remain unchanged, 5,132 tourism jobs could go unfilled by the year 2035.”

The Cape Breton tourism sector is a vital part of the Cape Breton economy. Currently, there is what the Nova Scotia Tourism Human Resource Council (NSTHRC) considers an HR crisis, not only in Cape Breton but across all of Nova Scotia. This tourism workforce shortage is still evident post-pandemic and has been exacerbated by many tourism employees having moved on to other sectors due to tourism businesses closing because of the pandemic.

Megan notes that “Enhanced and increased training in and of itself is not enough – connecting that training to the tourism operators and both the current and potential employee pool is critical to long term industry sustenance and growth.”

### **CHANGING TIMES BRING INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES**

Megan notes that years ago, the BHTM program had a very small, enrolment, primarily consisting of domestic students. Today, enrolment hovers around 300 students annually consisting of 98% international students from approximately 20 different countries. Internationally, CBU has forged Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) and Articulation

Agreements with numerous universities in China, Hong Kong, and India to enable students to transfer into our BHTM program.

CBU has a history of collaboration and currently has numerous active partnerships across the Island. These industry partnerships create career opportunities for its students as well as strengthen CBU's local tourism knowledge and tourism research. CBU's local tourism industry partnerships also help grow and enhance the tourism industry locally, regionally, and globally. Productive examples of local industry collaborations which are nurtured through Memorandums of Understanding include:

1. The Gaelic College (the only one in North America) is dedicated to the promotion and preservation of traditional Gaelic culture, offering instruction in over ten disciplines. It is a cultural destination, celebrating and sharing firsthand the living culture of the Nova Scotia Gaelic Communities.
2. Parks Canada offers numerous opportunities for collaboration with CBU, especially via a relationship with The Fortress of Louisburg, which is a tourism icon as the largest historical reconstruction in North America.
3. Destination Cape Breton and its marketing association provide CBU with research opportunities on one of the best Island destinations in the world.

In addition to significant and prolonged workforce shortages, the origin countries of the BHTM students, and the increased enrolment numbers, Megan Ringer has identified other changes that impact the role the BHTM program plays in strengthening the Cape Breton Island tourism industry. She notes that employers are more competitive in their recruitment and retention strategies. The BHTM program students are highly sought after by employers from across Canada. "If a student is studying hospitality and tourism, chances are that they have that passion, that desire, to work in the industry, plus they have useful skills and knowledge from their coursework." One challenge for Cape Breton tourism operators is that the larger employers act early and quickly offering students contracts prior to the season starting but local employers leave their recruitment until later making it more difficult to secure students employees.

## CONCLUSION

Almost fifty years ago, one of the earliest programs offered by CBU, was a Diploma in Hospitality, which was targeted at the island's local population, to serve the needs of the local tourism industry. As the challenges and needs of the tourism sector have evolved, the BHTM program has grown and adapted to address new and unexpected challenges. Some challenges such as Covid-19 have been sudden and unexpected. Other challenges such as workforce issues, or legacy planning seem to be continuous obstacles for businesses across the island. The objective of the BHTM program is to address these problems while preparing graduates to deal with the complexities of managing organizations within a global and rapidly changing industry. Today, as a three-year degree program, the BHTM has hundreds of students and thousands of successful graduates and the program's reputation, and popularity, continue to grow.

With its decades of quality program delivery and consistent demonstration of its adaptability to the needs of the tourism sector, the BHTM program of Cape Breton University is uniquely positioned to help strengthen the Cape Breton Island tourism economy.

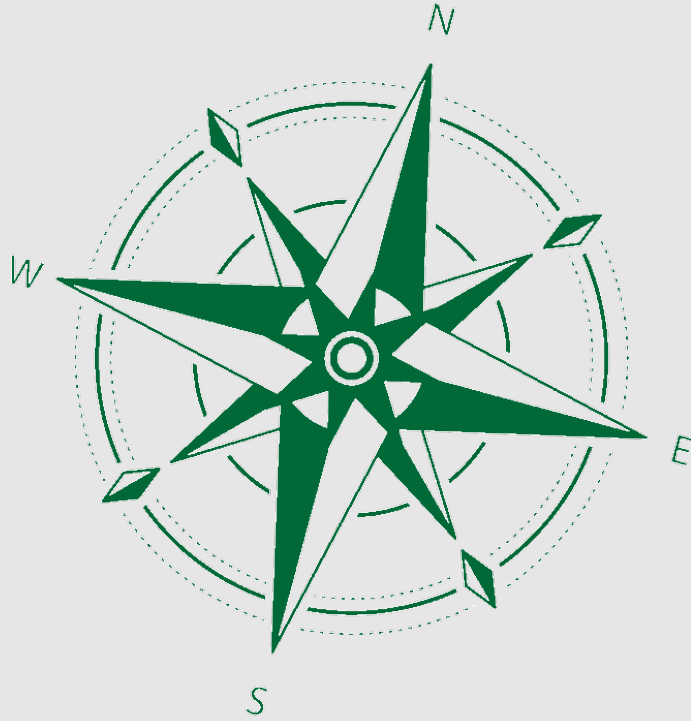
## ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. If the Bachelor of Hospitality and Tourism Management program had worked with industry partners to proactively address the tourism workforce shortages in rural Cape Breton where the market demand is high, this could have retained more student workers on Island and strengthened the sector.
2. The Student Placement Officer could have focused more efforts to the creation a robust volunteer program to meet community needs and value-add the student experience.
3. In line with CBU's 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, the BHTM Program could have diversified student enrolment by prioritizing the recruitment of more domestic students. Adding to this, they could have developed incentives designed to entice graduates to remain on the Island.
4. Since 95% of the BHTM program students are from outside of Canada, the program and the Student Placement Officer could provide support for students wishing to pursue permanent residency including workshops to assist with understanding the permanent residency process and filling out appropriate forms.

## **INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS**

1. Where global conflicts, pandemics, or other unexpected political or social changes could greatly reduce international student enrollment, is the BHTM Program at risk by relying so heavily on international students? If not, why not? If so, how could this risk be mitigated?
2. Is the BHTM Program at risk if it fails to attract a greater number of domestic students?
3. What barriers are there to domestic recruitment for the BHTM program?
4. The Student Placement Officer plays a pivotal role in the educational journey of the BHTM students and are key to connecting them to employers. How can these relationships be optimized to the benefit of the Cape Breton Island tourism sector?
5. What could the Student Placement Officer do to increase the number of BHTM graduates who become employed by smaller, local Cape Breton businesses rather than the larger employers who hire BHTM graduates earlier and quicker?





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