



Student Induction and Employability: The Outdoor Activity Residential Contribution

Case Study

Dr Bill Davies, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Introduction

The outdoor activity based residential is an element of the year 1 Personal Development Planning module for all students entering the undergraduate sports study scheme at University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC). This scheme includes degree pathways in Sport and Exercise Science, Sport Coaching, Sport Development, Sport and Physical Education, Dance, Sport Management, Sport Conditioning Rehabilitation and Massage and an HND in Sport Development and Coaching. It takes place in the first month of the term and for many students is their first contact with the learning environment, context and expectations of Higher Education.

Induction and transition to university has been identified as an important process in the retention of students and laying foundations of successful study at university in review articles by Yorke & Longden, (2008) and Harvey, Smith and Drew (2006) This view has been reinforced by survey reports by the NUS (Student experience report 2008) and Fazackerley and Burrows (The Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey 2008).

The important role of universities in enhancing employability and the part that personal development planning plays in this is well evidenced in the policy and practice literature. Department of Education and Skills (2003) HEFCW (2004) Clegg and Bradley (2006) Stefani, Mason and Pegler (2007) JISC (2008) CBI (2009)

The Confederation of British Industry (2009) suggested that in addition to business or industry specific skills that graduates needed to be able to evidence the development and deployment of skills in self-management, teamworking, problem solving and communication. Within these broad areas were included: acceptance of responsibility, time management, reflective learning, an ability to improve performance based on feedback, respecting others, co-operation and negotiation skills, awareness of interdependence with others, ability to analyze facts and situations and apply creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions, and finally oral literacy – including listening and questioning.

Graduates are also now increasingly aware of the benefits of acquiring and evidencing employability skills:

“It opens doors so you’ll be considered for a job. Now so many people go to university you have to differentiate yourself. “
CBI (2009) p15

The Residential Programme

Each new entrant to the school experiences a two day/ three nights residential held in the first month of their first year, it based at an outdoor activity centre in the Brecon Beacons. The programme is staffed by school of sport staff and specialist activity instructors. During the residential students are encouraged to work in small and large problem solving groups in an outdoor activity context and evaluate their contribution to processes and outcomes of these endeavours.

In formal terms the module aims to promote self awareness and development through personal audit and to raise facility in communication skills and personal assessment (of self and others) skills. It also offers experience of elements of team building, team working and leadership in novel situations. Assessment is continuous and is formal and informal carried out through evaluation of individual performance by staff, the student themselves, and peers. There is built in opportunity for formative self and peer evaluation through staff and student led review discussions.

Each residential comprises 40 students, split initially into 5 working groups facilitated by a member of staff. The programme is an intensive and varied one; the activities of a typical residential are outlined below:

DAY ONE	
1.45 – 2.00 pm	Arrival at Centre Introductory Briefing
2.00 – 5.30 pm	Ice Breakers with Group Tutors
5.30 – 6.30 pm	Evening meal
7.00 – 8.30 pm	Skills Briefings in 5 delegate groups
8.30 – 8.45 pm	Briefing for Day 2 Journey
8.45 – 11.00 pm	Prepare for Day 2 Journey
DAY TWO	
6.30 am	Breakfast
7.15 am	Leave Centre for Problem Solving Journey
6.00 – 7.00 pm	Evening meal
7.15 – 9.15 pm	Team Challenge: Competitive activity
9.15 pm	Briefing on Day 3 whole group activity: Students planning for day 3 activity Make packed breakfast and lunch Students build bivvi shelter for overnight stay
11.00 pm	All students and staff out on bivvi
DAY THREE	
6.00 – 6.30 am	Presentation by students of plan for whole group activity
7.00 – 9.30 am	Activity starts (or earlier if light permits)
9.30 – 10.00 am	Activity debrief
10.00 – 11.30 am	Course debrief with group tutors. Students self and peer assessment, action planning
11.30 – 12.00 noon	Depart

Day 1

The first day is seen a preparatory phase with the initial afternoon spent in icebreaking and warm up activities, as most of the participants have only recently arrived at UWIC and have never before met the staff or other group members this considered to be an important foundation element. The first evening offers groups a series of skills classes to which each group send delegates who will return to their groups suitably equipped with relevant skills for the next days' activities. Skills classes include; basic navigation, climbing and abseiling, the use of knots and lashings in simple construction of bivouacs and other structures, simple campcraft and search and rescue techniques.

Day 2

The second day has three elements. The first is a problem solving journey in which each group and a staff tutor operate independently from the other groups, engaging in a journey around the area, on foot, by minibus and by student built raft. At preset locations on the journey (if student navigation permits!) the group have to employ the skills they have previously learnt in the skill sessions , or already have within the group, to undertake practical tasks using rudimentary equipment. These tasks may include getting team members safely over high obstacles, crossing canals while remaining dry or retrieving objects from a 'minefield'. The group tutor is responsible for briefing students on the various tasks and facilitating a review for each activity, otherwise as far as possible all navigational and problem solving decisions are made by the student group. With the exception of the final aspect of the journey, (the rafting) the journey activities are designed to be cooperative tasks undertaken without reference to the performance of other group. The final activity is a rafting competition between the groups with points being awarded for placings. Groups are also allowed to place rudimentary bets on their anticipated rafting performance for points. All points gained in this activity are carried forward to the team challenge evening activity detailed below

The second element of the day is a team challenge. This is a competition between the groups, all engaging in the same tasks in pursuit of points for achievement. By the evening stage of the day the groups are normally feeling the effects of a long and demanding day in novel circumstances and need to consider their individual and group responses to the pressures of fatigue. The competitive factor, encouraged by staff, normally provides motivation among the sport students to engage their attention.

The third element of the day encompasses feedback on the team challenge in the form of 'the results' the winning team receive additional equipment for use in their overnight bivvi and a 'treat' – usually a box of biscuits. In addition to these results the groups receive a briefing for next day's activities. This requires them to plan a whole group activity – usually a mountain rescue. The group is provided with basic working kit of maps and two limited range walkie-talkies. Additional equipment and advice is purchasable by the whole group using all the points accrued by all groups during the rafting and team challenge. To ensure a working minimum of equipment is

purchasable the cost of additional items is set by staff bearing in mind the total points available to spend.

Once the planning process for the whole group activity is clearly underway each group is given access to material needed to prepare a packed breakfast and lunch for the following day and construct a bivvi shelter in the nearby woods for their use that night. This can pose considerable organisational challenges.

Day 3

The morning of third day focuses on the whole group activity as planned and executed by the students. This activity is normally based around the need to locate and rescue two casualties and offers a contrast to the processes of working in small groups as experienced on the previous two days. Effort is made to minimize the technical aspects of a mountain rescue while permitting a focus on the nature of successful large group organisation. The morning begins with a brief presentation by the students to indicate the plan they have developed in response to the briefing given the previous evening. If necessary, staff will suggest any points for consideration in the plan as presented. This normally only occurs if there is a health and safety concern, perhaps related to bad weather, or the plan seems seriously flawed. After execution of the plan this session concludes with a debrief where the issues for discussion centre on differences between working in large and small groups and the transferability of any learning to other situations.

The final activity of the formal residential is a review of the individual's experience of the residential carried out in the original small working groups, led by the group tutor. This focuses on self assessment, feedback from peers and staff, collection of material for later reflection by individuals leading to subsequent development of a personal action plan for inclusion in each student's electronic personal development profile.

Programme Outcomes

From an informal perspective this residential experience offers a unique opportunity for the students to engage in reflective personal development, begin the engagement with their personal development planning and also to get to know others on the programme at an early stage. This latter aspect is particularly important in the development of social support networks at an early and transitional stage, particularly as the School of Sport undergraduate intake is over 450 students across 8 programmes. The beginning of a new period of study, often away from home, is a time of potentially uncertain transition; the academic, social and personal demands individually and in combination may be complex, novel and stressful. For many students this a time of considerable doubt and stress in isolation away from the support of previously developed family and social networks. Therefore the informal purpose of the residential is to provide an opportunity for students to hothouse social networks, provide an active induction period which builds confidence in the ability to deal effectively with the challenges and experiences that lie ahead.

Anecdotal reporting suggests that the experience has had a significant positive and preventative impact on individual withdrawal decisions

Feedback from students suggests that they find this a challenging and useful part of the module. End of residential evaluations are consistently positive. Students are asked to indicate which, if any skills they feel they have gained or developed that will help them both in the rest of their study and in future employment.

The sort of attributes gained that are consistently identified by students include:

- an appreciation of the need for planning and time management,
- improved confidence in communication and listening skills,
- problem solving as teams,
- recognizing and working with strengths and weaknesses of others.

In addition the following comments are taken from reflective accounts written at the end of the first term for inclusion in PDP e-portfolios in response to an open question "How has your UWIC experience been so far?"

- *I made some good friends and learnt some valuable skills regarding working in groups and dealing with responsibilities. (...as a result of the residential)*
- *The residential encouraged me to be confident, adventurous and most importantly to be independent, these qualities being rather important when coming to university.*
- *I believe this trip was a new beginning to my life at Cyncoed campus.*
- *On departing Brecon I was left with some really good information on what sort of person I am. It highlighted to me that I need to let other people voice their ideas more, also I need to think more before I act and speak.*
- *I found it very hard to fit in during the first few weeks. Fortunately the outdoor pursuits trip to Brecon helped me banish that feeling of not fitting in, and I had a very enjoyable, memorable experience. By being in small groups I was able to interact with fellow students. I was taken out of my comfort zone and had to adapt, which I feel I did well*
- *The trip to Brecon was an astounding experience, as it taught me a lot about myself.*

It is consistently apparent from formal and informal evaluations that the residential do achieve their stated objectives and provide both support for the transition into university and a clear stimulus for the development of employability skills.

References

Clegg S. & Bradley, S. (2006) Models of personal development planning: practice and processes. *British Educational Research Journal* 32,1,57 – 76

CBI (2009) Future *fit* available online at:

http://highereducation.cbi.org.uk/uploaded/HRE_091_Future%20Fit%20AW.pdf

Department of Education and Skills, (2003) *The Future of Higher Education* (Cmd. 5735). Available online at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/pdfs/DfESHIGHEREDUCATION.pdf>

Fazackerley, A. and Burrows, S (2008) *The Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey*. Summary report available online from:

http://uk.sodexo.com/uken/Images/ULS%20Summary%202008_tcm15-185165.pdf

Harvey, L., Drew, S. with Smith, M. (in print). *The First Year Experience: a literature review for the Higher Education Academy*. York. HEA available from

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/archive/first_year_experience_full_report.pdf

HEFCW (2004) *Learning and Teaching Strategies 2003/04* – Summary available online:

http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2004/w0451he.pdf

JISC (2008) Effective Practice with e-Portfolios

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/effectivepracticeeportfolios.pdf>

NUS (2008) *Student experience report*. Available online from:

<http://www.recordingachievement.org/news-and-events/most-recent/127-nus-student-experience-report-2008-.html>

Stefani, L., Mason, R. & Pegler, C. (2007) *The Educational Potential of e-Portfolios*. London: Routledge.

Yorke, M. & Longden, B. (2008) *The First-year Experience in Higher Education in the UK: Final Report* York: HEA. Available online from:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/exchange/FYEFinalReport.pdf>