

Title - Enhancing Employability within Sport and Leisure Management Degree Programmes

Keywords - Curriculum Development, Employability, Personal Development Planning

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Group - Level 2 Sport and Leisure Management students

Activity - Using an industry-specific learning diary whilst on placement

Aim -

To enable students to utilise a learning diary that permits an understanding of their current level of 'employability'.

Context / Background - The issues of Employability and Experiential Learning continue to attract substantial attention within the hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism subject areas (see, for example, Link issue 11). In addition, there is concern over the extent to which graduates are prepared for industry and the skills gaps which exist. Placements are considered one way in which to develop the abilities of graduates in enhancing 'employability'. The Government is keen to tackle 'skills shortages' - broadly and ambiguously defined as existing 'when there are not enough people available with the skills needed to do the jobs which need to be done' - and has created and empowered strategic agencies like the Learning and Skills Council, Sector Skills Councils and the Development Agencies in carrying out this task at local, regional and national levels. The Government's over-riding aim is to increase the nation's economic competitiveness and it recognises that by possessing a highly educated, highly skilled and flexible workforce such a policy can be achieved.

At the local level, a team from the Chelsea School Research Centre recently worked on projects concerning workforce development for the sport and recreation sector. The research conducted found that 75% of sport and recreation enterprises in Sussex have identifiable training needs. The areas most lacking were generic management skills, information technology, and basic communication (both between staff and between staff and customers). Characteristically, and common to other service industries, the sport and recreation sector is immature, lacking effective mechanisms of communication between the needs of employees, employers, training providers and communities.

Example - The Learning Diary is just one of a series of tools and support structures embedded in the placement process; the diary is the focus of this case study, but is not the only element within the process.

Previous approaches to addressing skills shortages and the requirements of economic sectors have over-stressed the concerns of employers and training providers. This has been achieved through numerous consultations and survey analyses. However, the learning diary utilised has been developed for students on placement and provides a partial corrective by assessing the needs of individuals within the sector 'on the ground'. It is an innovative mechanism and powerful research tool for helping students to gain knowledge and understanding of the types of demands and capacities required by the sector. The diary is designed to help students to assess and reflect upon the theoretical and practical needs of the sport and leisure industries.

Completion of the learning diary provides a greater understanding of the learning needs of those managing and supporting employees in sport. The diary is used in order to record thoughts and feelings on the numerous attainments, successes, boredoms and frustrations (amongst other things) that students face in supporting and developing management skills, knowledge, understanding and abilities through their placement. An integral part of the process, and of work practices in general, involves knowledge of strengths and limitations, and awareness of the same qualities within work colleagues and peers. The diary offers an opportunity to analyse, through the process and practice of critical reflection, how individual knowledge, understanding, skill and ability contribute to the success of 'live' projects within a professional setting.

In particular, learning diaries can offer:

- A focus for employer/trainer/educator communication;
- A focus for identifying training needs, and, further to this, possible commercial spin-offs as those needs are fulfilled;
- A chance to assess the adequacy of staff development programmes;
- A constructive exercise in which employees can learn, through reflecting on their experiences, about the need for high levels of competence across different task areas.

Completing the Learning Diary

Students are encouraged to see the learning diary as a mechanism in becoming a successful learner within a professional environment. With confidentiality assured, students need to be honest about actions, motives, thoughts and feelings, not covering up or avoiding uncomfortable issues, and not indulging in false modesty.

In a support workshop two-thirds of the way through the placement process, students look back at their entries with the benefit of hindsight and are prompted to consider: what the entries are say about them; what they are learning; how they learn best; the work-based activities they are using from which to learn, and what they suggest as possible ways to improve any or all of these.

Students are provided with the following reminders:

Remember, your learning diary is:

- *Private and confidential*
- *About you*
- *A place for reflection*
- *A way of learning about yourself*

To get the most benefit from your diary you need to:

- *Make regular entries*
- *Reflect honestly on an incident or issue*
- *Think about what it means for your learning*

The Learning Diary assumes that you have had an experience from which you wish to learn. It is designed to help you:

- *Review the experience*
- *Reach conclusions*
- *Plan a potential course of action to enable you to do your job better or differently*

Use the following procedure each time you make an entry:

1. *Start by thinking back over an experience and selecting part of it to focus on in your log*
2. *Write a detailed account of what happened during the period of activity that you have chosen to focus on*
3. *List the conclusions that you have reached as a result of thinking about the experience*
4. *Finally, decide which learning points you want to implement in the future, focusing upon specific skills you may require to achieve it.*

Results / Feedback - As might be expected, some students have taken to the process better than others. Nevertheless, the large majority of students have found the Learning Diary to be very useful in developing their awareness of their own knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. For example, some of the students stated that they became more independent, improved their leadership ability, learnt about customer contact/service, enjoyed working with children and that they work better in certain situations.

All students have thought that using the learning diary had enhanced their understanding of key issues in sport and recreation industries and have cited, for example, the importance of meetings, funding, the place of dual-use facilities in local communities, the importance of communication and identifiable elements of common practice between leisure and non-leisure organisations.

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