

Title - Student group work as real 'live research': applied leisure research on an MSc in Sport and Leisure Management

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Activity - In groups, students conduct 'live research' in leisure. The Applied Leisure Research module is a capstone unit which brings together the theory and practice of the previous and current semesters.

Group - All students on the MSc in Sport and Leisure Management

Aim - The intention is that, while topics and appropriate research vehicles change each year, the module Applied Leisure Research should develop student understanding of:

- the role of applied research in recreation management
- the range of quantitative and qualitative research vehicles
- implementing applied research in recreation contexts
- data analysis, interpretation of findings and making management recommendations in appropriate formats e.g. verbal and/or written presentation of findings

The module Applied Leisure Research is a double-weighted unit. It is intended to be a capstone unit, bringing together the theory and practice of the previous and current second semester course taught in the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences and the Business School.

The key skills encouraged through the module are: managing self-learning, communication, information technology, numeracy and teamwork.

Context / Background - The MSc in Sport and Leisure Management has been running for 35 years and was originally called Recreation Management. It has always been a practical fieldwork and analysis-based course for a live client contingency willing to engage student researchers at a fraction of what a consultancy would charge, but with satisfactory results.

Example

Stage 1: The tutor trawls for possible projects 6-8 months in advance; sometimes organisations contact the tutor. The tutor negotiates what he/she believes is a feasible set of objectives and timetable, and sketch out only the broadest methods and fieldwork plan.

Stage 2: This is outlined in the course handbook given to students in week 1 of semester 2. The tutor also asks for an audit of research/analysis/presentation skills and experience, and who has transport they are willing (and insured) to use for field trips. If necessary the tutor provides extra lectures/ tutorials to supplement this knowledge (some of it gained in semester 1 lectures and workshops).

Stage 3: In Weeks 1-2 the tutor provides background lectures on the topic, and basic documentation from the organisation; the students also make a familiarisation trip to facilities, if appropriate. An officer of the client organisation gives a familiarisation lecture/ seminar and discusses details with the students. This is also intended to give students a feel for the issues and to realise that the end product is not just an outcome of an academic process.

Stage 4: The students elect a chairman to oversee the project, a secretary/ progress chaser, presenters and an editor for the final stage. The tutor explains his/ her moral obligations to each other to do work to time and quality as if they were employed i.e. they are now 'Loughborough Leisure Consultants'. The students have to decide a programme of work, the methods and instrument they will use, and break themselves up into working groups for each stage. Hereafter the tutor stays in the background as much as possible, and only steps in if he/ she thinks the group is making unrealistic decisions about the work they will do, timetables or outcomes.

Stage 5: Fieldwork and analysis: The tutor meets with the chairman and secretary and sub-groups as necessary. Meetings of the whole group are held periodically. The tutor tries to persuade students to get all the fieldwork completed before the Easter break; rarely is this possible when Easter is early; often it is not managed when Easter is late! Coursework submissions loom larger in students' eyes - the end of the job in May seems far off.

Stage 6: Presentation and reporting (week 12). The group of presenters scream and shout for data, and often get it late; they prepare a Powerpoint presentation and run it before the whole group, while the tutor goes through it with a fine-toothed comb for content and visual and verbal presentation; it is modified, sometimes twice and then presented to the officers of the client, with handouts, and a question and answer session. This is an act of gross brinkmanship, often completed only the night before the formalities! The client responds in a few days with requests for further analysis or comments.

Stage 7: The report and an executive summary are drafted in sections, and a student editor does a first edit. It is copied to students to help with the individual assignment, which the students hand in week 15 or the first week of the vacation.

Stage 8: The tutor does a second edit before presenting the report to the client in July or August.

By the time the students come back after Easter the reality of the volume and complexity of the work and the shortage of time hits the students, and they buckle

down to group working, which is often less rigorous in the winter period. They complain bitterly at the workload and the deadlines. Since these are self-imposed, the tutor smiles sweetly (!), unless some modification of programme is needed. There is always an element included that can be jettisoned without damage to the core e.g. visits to comparable schemes elsewhere.

To give a fuller idea of the work involved, here is a synopsis of two recent projects; however, the second proved to be a little bit too complex:

1. Leisure for disabled people in the City of Leicester (1999)

Aim: to review the effectiveness of C of L policies for leisure for disabled people.

Methods: review of policy documents; 639 postal responses from Passport to Leisure holders listed as disabled; audit visits to 17 sites/ facilities; interviews with 18 managers in the Department and facilities, and discussions with people attending day centres/ clubs for blind and deaf; comparison with 1989 consultants' study.

Output: Powerpoint presentation; report of 53pp plus appendices plus executive summary - recommendations about transport, new sessions, publicity, signage, a Disability network and better links with Education and Social Services.

2. Feasibility of a Residents' Card for Aylesbury Vale (2000)

Aim: to assess the feasibility of introducing a RC scheme in this prospering district, one of only 14% without such a scheme

Methods: supervised questionnaire survey of 1283 residents and 237 visitors at 10 sites; 449 postal (newspaper) questionnaires; postal/ telephone questionnaire to 620 businesses; review of 5 rural/ small town LS schemes in other authorities; review of hardware and software available.

Output: Powerpoint presentation; report of 65pp plus appendices; recommendations -proceed with a scheme (93% of residents in favour); but extend to commercial and arts/ leisure provision to ensure a wide enough base; identified list of concession groups; use Flex systems because owned by SERCO who will operate new pool and act as agent for the scheme.

Other examples of Applied Leisure Research case studies are:

- City re-imaging and leisure strategy appraisal
- A review of the effectiveness of policy and provision for leisure for disabled people
- Barriers and opportunities for junior ethnic swimming in and out of school

Student input is meant to be about 200 hours. Teaching methods include chalk and talk, workshops, visits, computer input and statistical analysis, library and documentary work, mostly self-directed.

The key skills encouraged through the module are:

1 Managing Self Learning - individually and in groups, to a tight timetable

- Assessing strengths and weaknesses
- Setting and meeting targets
- Reflecting on knowledge and progress
- Managing own and colleagues' time
- Solving problems
- Reading for information

2 Communication

- In written form
- Orally - in groups and a formal presentation
- Visually in presentation and report

3 Information Technology

- Searching for information
- Producing and processing information - using e.g. SPSS, Access
- Communicating through technology

4 Numeracy

- Collecting and recording numerical data
- Understanding and interpreting numerical data
- Presenting numerical data
- Tackling numerical problems
- Plotting and interpreting graphs

5 Team Work

- Contributing to team activity
- Promoting good working relationships and organising the whole group and subgroups to tight deadlines

The assessment is wholly by coursework, and comes in three forms:

1. the feedback from the clients to the presentation (for the tutor the most important in terms of professional development)

2. the group project report comprises 60% of the total, and this is subdivided into a common element for the quality of report and presentation shared by all students (75%), and 25% which is weighted for the effort and extent of each person's contribution to the project as assessed by the person and the subgroups to which they contributed, and moderated by the tutor, as internal examiner

3. the individual assignment of 2500 words (40%) is used to assess firstly the student's self-reflection on how well the process went and how their own or the group's handling could have been improved, and a chance to comment on the conclusions and recommendations and make any additional personal suggestions.

Results / Feedback - This is hard work, not least to keep a group of 20-25 working more or less equably when self-directed in small groups; inevitably there is a wide range of effort marks. The students complain about the volume and pace of work. However, after the event is it one of the things they best remember from the year, and value as a preparation for going into the job market (unlike the first 20 years of the MSc degree, most have come straight from a wide range of undergraduate courses).

Adaptations have been made due to two changing situations. First, the intake is getting increasingly international (in 2001-02 students from UK, Greece, France, Spain, Netherlands, Taiwan, Japan, China) so choosing an issue that is likely to be a reality in a wide range of countries is important. Second, increasingly few students have done an undergraduate dissertation or such groupwork, so much thought has to be given to organising interviews or other face-to-face work, and they have to learn the importance of keeping to agreed schedules for the sake of group solidarity and achievement, and not because the tutor says so. Learning cultures vary widely across Europe and the world. The module is rewarding, not least because to date and without exception, clients have been delighted with the quality of work and value for money the students have produced.

As someone who has worked as a professional researcher and planner, I enjoy the yearly challenge; the contemporary material feeds into teaching and publication, and I certainly feel I've earned my summer vacation!

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